

(Follows You) Back Home

by Tanaqui

Jake locked the Roadrunner and made his way out of the parking garage, nodding at the attendant as he passed. Paying for off-street parking for her was yet another expense eating into the rapidly-diminishing wedge of cash Hawkins had gotten for him when they'd parted company in DC. Jake had concluded it was worth it, though: he hadn't wanted to run the risk of the Roadrunner getting stolen or trashed after he'd fetched her from Denver. He would've hated not to be able to make good on his promise to Freddy and Anna to lend them whatever money he made from selling her. Buying a replacement once she was gone would take most of the rest of Hawkins' cash; he consoled himself with the thought that there'd be a decent paycheck waiting for him at the end of his first month with Saber.

Shoving his hands in his pockets as he trudged the block and a half to his apartment building, he decided it had been a pretty good first couple of weeks. The co-pilot who'd been breaking him in was a nice enough guy and not overly talkative—or inquisitive. The job itself was on the boring side: he really was just a glorified limo driver, ferrying business executives to high-powered meetings and listening to them jabbering in meaningless acronyms in the cabin behind him. But today, he'd taken some technology company bigwigs to Seattle in one of the Cessnas; on the flight back, he'd had the mountains to his left, the ocean to his right and, the last hour, an incredible sunset that had turned the clouds pink and purple, though he'd been too busy talking to the tower to pay it the attention it deserved.

"Jake?"

His stride faltered and he looked up at the sound of his name being called. Then he came to a complete halt, not quite sure if he believed his eyes. "Dad?"

His father was leaning against the hood of car parked next to the curb. The dim light from the street lamps made him seem a little insubstantial. Though they'd spoken several times in the last two weeks, discussing the loan Jake was making to Stanley, Jake discovered that seeing was different to speaking. Last time he'd seen Dad—Jake pushed away the memory of viewing his father's body at the funeral home back in Jericho.

"Son." His father dipped his head in greeting and then hesitated. Even with his father's face half in shadow, Jake caught the frown. "Are you all right? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Jake gave himself a small shake. "Just wasn't exactly expecting.... It's been a while."

"Yes, it has." His father pushed off from the hood. Jake thought for a moment he might embrace him, but it seemed like there was still too much distance between them.

Instead, they stood there uncertainly for a moment, before Jake found his voice. "So what are you doing here?"

His father lifted a hand and Jake realized he was holding an envelope. "Thought I'd use the excuse of bringing you the papers for Stanley's loan to come visit a few of my old army buddies. You know how your mom hates it when we get together."

"Yeah, I remember." Jake also thought his mom had never really minded that much. But he was happy to allow his father the fiction of why he hadn't just fedexed the papers. Looking at the way

his father had dropped his hand back to his side, rather than offering the envelope to him, Jake reckoned he wasn't in much of a hurry to go meet his Army buddies.

He scrubbed a hand through his hair, realizing he felt tired and sweaty and maybe not entirely up to negotiating the minefield that talking to his father was likely to prove. But there never was going to be a good time. "So, uh," he cleared his throat, "I just got in from work. If you're not busy this evening, maybe you could wait for me to grab a shower and we could go eat?"

"Sounds good." His father drew himself up straighter and gestured for Jake to lead the way.

When they got up to the apartment, Jake was glad to see his memory of leaving it looking halfway tidy when he'd headed out the door that morning hadn't been wrong. At least the bed was pulled together, though the breakfast dishes were soaking in the sink and he knew the coffee machine needed emptying. He reckoned there wasn't a lot else for his father to find fault with as he paused in the doorway and looked around.

"You want a beer while I—?" Jake gestured in the direction of the bathroom and the shower he planned to take.

His father hesitated, and Jake kicked himself, wondering for a moment if he should have offered soda instead and avoided looking like he was hitting the booze as hard as he had back in Jericho. Then his father gave him a sly grin. "Just as long as you don't tell your mom. She's got me on some damn fool diet. Dinner's been a mouthful of chicken and a couple green beans. Says I've got to get my blood pressure down ten points. Don't see how I'm going to manage that when she's starving me to death."

Jake shared a chuckle as he handed over the cold beer he'd pulled from the fridge. "Guess you'll be wanting to eat out somewhere you can have steak and fries, then?"

"Damn right I will." His father rolled his eyes as he accepted the beer. Seeing Jake's hands were empty, he gestured with the bottle. "You're not...?"

Jake shook his head. "Later, maybe. Right now, I need that shower. Make yourself comfortable." He indicated the chair in front of the TV.

oOo

When Jake came out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his hips, he found his father watching the news. He glanced up at Jake, his eyes narrowing for a moment, before his gaze went back to the TV. Jake pressed his lips together, forcing down the instinctive urge to ask what he was supposed to have done wrong *now*. He'd learned over the past year—his mind went back to the moment when Dad had handed over Grandpa's Ranger manual—that whatever Dad's look meant, it probably wasn't a criticism.

"Can you believe these guys?" Johnston gestured with his half-drunk beer at the TV.

Pausing as he pulled a fresh pair of jeans, a T-shirt and clean underwear out the dresser, Jake listened to the reporters for a moment and realized they were discussing the latest revelations about J&R. There'd been some new scandal pretty much every day since the story had broken. Today, it seemed to be something about diverting Army rations to the black market. Jake snorted quietly: apparently it was perfectly possible to steal from J&R as long as you thought big enough. Or, more to the point, it was possible to steal from the US Government if you had enough tame senators and corrupt generals on the payroll. Not to mention a few CIA bosses.

"Uh-huh." Jake dropped the T-shirt on the bed and, shedding the towel, quickly pulled on

underwear and jeans over still slightly damp skin. "Saw enough of what they got up to in Iraq and Afghanistan." And right here on US soil, though that was between him and Hawkins.

Towelng off the worst of the wet from his hair, he turned and saw his father was watching him.

"That where you got those?" His father dipped his head and Jake guessed he meant his scars. Most were old and faint, but there were a few more recent ones that still showed pinkish puckered skin.

Jake folded the towel carefully and laid it on the bed before reaching for the T-shirt. "Some of them." He pulled the T-shirt over his head and tugged it down, feeling a little self-conscious, though those weren't the worst scars he'd gotten in the years since he'd left Jericho.

Dad had once told him, in that other life, that Jake could talk to him, that he knew what war did. Jake wasn't sure—for all the ice had melted a little—either of them were ready to have that conversation quite yet.

"You joined up?"

Jake shook his head. "No. I was... hauling stuff. For them." He nodded at the TV screen. Best get it out. Hadn't he decided there should be no more secrets, no more running from his past?

His father let out a faint snort and Jake knew exactly what he was thinking. Scrubbing a hand through his hair, he added quietly, "Yeah, I know. Always did have a knack for finding bad company and being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

His father turned his attention back to the TV screen and took another drink. "Well, I'm sure the troops appreciated those supplies you were delivering. I heard those roads could be pretty rough."

"Yeah. Yeah they could," Jake murmured quietly, mostly to himself. Heading back to the bathroom to hang up the towel and pick up his dirty clothes, he allowed himself a wry grin. He reckoned that was as close to a "well done" as he was ever likely to get from his father. And it was enough.

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A few minutes later, they were heading out. Jake had offered to look over the loan papers and sign them before they ate, but his father had shaken his head and told him to keep them overnight and take his time. "I can pick 'em up tomorrow. Won't be heading back to Jericho for a day or two more. Besides, my stomach is beginning to think your mom's in charge again."

Jake had been hungry enough himself that he hadn't objected. Nor did he mind too much that his father seemed to be finding more excuses to spend time with him. Now he'd gotten over his initial shock, it felt good to have Dad around.

Out on the sidewalk, his father waved a hand in the direction of the car he'd been leaning against earlier. "We'll take mine." He did something with the key and the lights flashed.

"Okay." Jake made for the passenger seat, wondering if his father had seen him drive past earlier. In all the years he'd had the Roadrunner while he'd been in Jericho, Dad had never once accepted a lift in it.

His suspicions were confirmed when, after his father had started the engine and Jake had given him directions, he remarked, his tone cool, "See you're still driving that same old car."

"Uh-huh." Jake hunched himself into his seat. "Only till tomorrow, though. Got a buyer lined up for her."

"Hmmp." His father glanced at him, and Jake wondered if he'd picked up on the hurt he hadn't quite been able to smooth out of his voice. A small part of that hurt was an instinctive reaction to the slight edge of disdain in his father's question—not just for Jake, but also for Jonah, who'd bribed Jake with the car before Jake was old enough and smart enough to know better. Most of it, though, was because, over the past two weeks, on the long drive back from Denver and running out to the airfield and back, Jake had had a chance to learn again how good the old girl felt under his hands. He was going to miss her, for sure. But he still couldn't regret selling her, not really: Freddy and Anna would get the deposit they needed to buy the bar and he would finally put behind him a part of his life that, truth be told, he should've ditched ten years previously when he graduated from Embry-Riddle.

Swallowing down the lump in his throat, Jake directed his father to take a right. They drove in silence for another minute and then his father said, as if the topic was of no consequence, "Would've thought you'd need a car to get to that new job of yours."

This time Jake was the one to glance across, sensing there was more behind his father's words than the simple statement. "Uh-huh. But an old junker'll do that just as well and cost a tenth what the Roadrunner'll get me."

It'd probably need a lot more work on it too, but Freddy had friends with a garage where Jake should be able to fix up the Roadrunner's replacement. The months in Jericho coaxing half-dead trucks and generators back to life had reminded him that working on Jonah's side business—tinkering with cars whose provenance Jake never enquired into too closely—had been one of the reasons he'd enjoyed hanging out with Jonah's crew. That and it was somewhere he was never likely to encounter his father's disapproving scowl.

Besides, it made him feel an odd connection to Heather, knowing she'd be working on Charlotte at the same time, if a thousand miles away. He suppressed a smile at the memory of how his heart had leaped at spotting an old Dodge in the car lot. Tempting though she'd been, she was hardly the most practical choice for the city, and a glance had shown him she was in an even worse state than Charlotte. In the end, he'd settled for a rusty Toyota compact that seemed sound enough to give him a few more miles while he slowly swapped out what needed replacing.

"So why now?" His father's question broke into warm memories of helping Heather change the ignition coil on Charlotte. "You need some cash to tide you over till you get your first paycheck?"

Jake shook his head, realizing with a start that his father might be offering to lend him the money. "No, I'm good. I just... let's just say I owe a debt of honor."

"Hmmp." Again his father snorted and gave a Jake a disapproving look, but he didn't say any more until they reached the steakhouse parking lot.

oOo

Inside the restaurant, they settled into a booth. His father had flipped open his menu and started studying it. "So, how's the new job going, then?"

The question was a shade too casual to be entirely innocent. Jake reached for the glass of iced water the waitress had brought them and took a sip. "Good." He caught his father sneaking a quizzical glance over the top of his menu and added, trying to soften the curtness with which he'd responded, "They seem like a good company."

"Is that so?" His father sounded a little disbelieving and Jake didn't blame him. He was finding it more than a little weird himself that he really did seem to have landed on his feet with Saber. They appeared to be run efficiently and, unlike J&R, actually to give a damn about helping him do his job well; his co-pilots—mostly ex-military, but his time at Embry-Riddle earned him some respect—were friendly enough; and the planes were everything Grainger, the operations director, had promised during Jake's interview. Even the mechanics seemed a decent bunch. He remembered the guy back at Shelby Aviation, who'd been drunk more often than not, so that Jake had spent half his time in the air worrying if the plane would hold together until he landed. Then there'd been the kind of mechanic who was so overprotective about their planes that every time Jake took one out, he felt like he was going to get run off with a shotgun after asking if he could pick up their daughter for a date.

In fact, the main problem with Saber—. Jake found himself voicing his thought from earlier that evening, from when he'd been on his way back to his apartment. "Even if it is a little boring."

"Hmm." His father closed his menu and put it down on the table in front of him. Not looking at Jake, he remarked caustically, "Well, I guess not everyone's spending their time running questionable cargo of dubious provenance, like Quaker Freight."

Jake huffed a wry laugh at the mention of Jonah's trucking company. If he was honest, that had been pretty dull, too. Sure, there'd been the occasional frisson of fear when a police car had come blaring up from behind with its sirens going—only to zip past in pursuit of some other vehicle—when he'd known that hidden behind the innocuous load detailed on his manifest were those "special deliveries" Jonah asked him to make from time to time. But he hadn't stuck with Jonah after that first summer for the buzz of doing something criminal, or even because it so clearly irritated his father, but because the money was good and because the long nights alone on traffic-less roads were the closest he could get to the freedom of being up in his grandfather's cropduster with just the empty skies around him. An experience that had otherwise seemed very far away after both his father and grandfather had made it clear to him that they hadn't paid for his expensive college education just so he could hang around Jericho dusting crops or teaching hobby pilots to fly.

As for the jobs he'd had since he'd left Jericho.... His time with Shelby—which no doubt Dad would have considered a proper job—had made Jonah look like a minor pickpocket, while J&R—. Jake shook his head: the most respectable-seeming of the lot, and the biggest bunch of crooks. Besides, after the past year, he was looking forward to finding out what tedium was like. Taking another sip of water, he said placidly, "I didn't say boring was a bad thing. I reckon I've had enough excitement for a while."

His father snorted. "You'll tire of it soon enough. Go looking for trouble. You always do."

"Maybe." He couldn't fault Dad for thinking that. He had a knack for finding himself in the middle of things. "Or maybe, sometimes... sometimes you stick with something because it's a means to an end."

His father raised his eyebrows and snorted again, but this time more like he hadn't expected to hear that from Jake. Before either of them could say anything else, the waitress was back, looking to take their order. Once she'd left, there was a moment's silence, and then his father said carefully, as if he was afraid that if he asked the wrong way, Jake would palm him off with some flippant answer, "What end?"

Jake hesitated, not because he didn't know the answer but because he wasn't sure it was the one Dad would want to hear—even though it was clear from the way his father had asked the question that he *did* want the truth. And what was the truth? In the long hours on the Greyhound to Denver, and then the equally long hours in the Roadrunner eating up the miles back to San Diego,

he'd had a lot of time to think about that.

To be with Heather again, of course; to find a way to make her fall in love with him again, even though they weren't quite the same people they'd been in that other reality. Or at least, he wasn't. Heather, he'd realized, had always been brave and strong and capable and cool-headed, even in the first days he'd known her. On the schoolbus or fixing the generator in the fallout shelter—she'd been right about those brushes—or figuring out how to get gas. And she'd always been attracted to the Jake who ran head first into danger when everyone else was running the other way.

Yet being with Heather was only half a life. He'd figured that out not long after he'd driven out of Denver, when the familiar rumble of the Roadrunner as he opened her up on the Interstate had transported him back to his years of racketing around the Kansas backroads with Em at his side. He'd stayed in Jericho after he finished college for a lot of reasons, but partly because he'd thought it was what she wanted and it would make her happy. And what could be more important than the happiness of the woman he loved?

But they hadn't really been happy, had they? Not when he looked at it closely. He'd been drifting, hating himself and hating what he'd become and what he hadn't - and blaming everyone else for it. Sure, Dad and Grandpa had refused to lend him the money to start a flight school—right when he came out of college. *Get a job*, they'd said. *Get some experience, and then we'll talk*. He'd been the one to take their well-meant advice as *never*. To want everything *now*: the flight school and staying in Jericho and being with Em. It wasn't Em's fault, either. Why should she push him to strive for a different life when she was content with the way things were at first: hanging out together and money in his pocket to lavish on her.

He'd made those choices. And now he had to make a different choice. He couldn't build his life completely around Heather, although, God willing, some day he'd be able to build it with her and alongside her. He had to build it around himself. And he still wanted, more than anything, to be able to share the joy of a small plane in the open sky—and that meant a flight school. And a flight school meant startup money, which meant working for Saber on trips that, for all their planes were sleek and beautiful and packed with the latest gadgets, were dull as ditchwater compared to taking out his Grandpa's rickety old Stearman.

He'd had a moment of doubt, somewhere between Cedar City and St George—the names hauntingly familiar from the casualty lists back in that other world—as to whether that was what Heather would want. Would she really want a boring, respectable commercial pilot for a boyfriend, rather than the guy everyone looked to when they needed someone to do something crazy and suicidal? Then he'd shaken his head, dismissing the thought: he had to be himself, didn't he? Or anything they built together would just be on shifting sand.

Jake realized that his father was still waiting for an answer. Fiddling with his water glass, not looking at him, he said quietly, "Get enough money together to open my own flight school."

Another soft snort from his father. "Haven't heard you mention that in a while."

Glancing up, Jake saw his father's expression contained a little surprise but none of the disapproval he'd expected. There'd been much talk last time they'd had this conversation about *getting a proper job with a commercial airline, that's why we paid for you to go to college and get all those fancy certificates...* Jake gave a wry grin. "Yeah, well, after you and Grandpa told me you wouldn't lend me the money to start one..."

"Son—."

Jake didn't let him finish. "You were right." He shook his head slightly and chuckled quietly. "What

did I know? I was a kid straight out of college. It would have been a disaster.”

His father held his gaze. “Maybe not a disaster.... Your grandpa and I would’ve helped keep you straight.”

Jake’s mouth quirked up in a wry grin. “And we’d’ve argued like hell about it.”

His father laughed. “Yes, you’re probably right.” His expression sobered. “But that’s still what you want? To open a flight school?”

“Uh-huh.” Jake shrugged, a little embarrassed that his father was taking such a close interest. It seemed such a pipe dream still—not as if he’d done anything much toward it yet—that he didn’t feel comfortable laying it open to scrutiny.

“You could’ve used your grandpa’s money? Instead of giving it to Stanley?”

His father sounded genuinely puzzled and Jake tried for a second or two to figure out what that meant, because he was damn sure that if he’d asked Dad for the money for that and not for Stanley, he’d have gotten the same answer as when he’d been on the run from San Diego a year ago. He guessed a few things had changed in the two and a half weeks. Dad definitely appeared to be a lot less angry with him than he used to be, for one thing. Mostly, Jake suspected, precisely because he’d asked for the money for Stanley and not himself.

“You really think you’d’ve signed it over to me? For that?” Before his father could answer, he hurried on, “Besides, Stanley needs the money a lot more than I do. If I work this job, I can make contacts, save enough to raise the rest of the capital I’ll need, figure out how I’m going to spend it, what kind of paperwork’ll be involved. Y’know, actually be ready when it’s time....”

“Sounds like a plan.” His father gave him an approving nod. Then Jake saw his eyes light up as he caught sight, over Jake’s shoulder, of the waitress bringing his steak and he knew conversation was probably over for a while. Sitting back in his chair, Jake puffed out a breath. Just as well: talking to Dad might not be as tough as it once was, but it still wasn’t easy.

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Jake watched the Roadrunner disappear up the ramp and out of the parking garage, trying not to feel too regretful. She was just a car. If the last year had taught him anything, it was that there were more important things in life. With a last sigh, he pocketed the cashier’s check the buyer had given him and headed for the exit.

A couple of hours later, he was back home, having picked up the ageing Toyota that was replacing the Roadrunner. On the drive from the used car lot, he’d tried to ignore the various rattles from under the hood, how it seemed to take an age for the car to respond when he pressed down on the gas pedal, and how sluggish that response was when it finally came. He couldn’t help imagining, though, how Heather would have chuckled if he’d turned up in this instead of the Roadrunner—and then rolled up her sleeves to help him fix her up....

A car horn blared from behind him, jerking him from a daydream of himself and Heather bent over a car engine, heads close together, hands deftly fixing and tuning. He realized with a start that the lights he was stopped at had changed. Pulling off, he swore to himself that, somehow, he’d find a way to make that dream a reality again.

Inside the apartment, he kept busy with chores while he waited for his father to swing by and pick up the papers. He’d read them that morning and found nothing to complain about: Dad had done a good job negotiating a deal that made sense from both sides. Stanley was to repay interest and

a token amount of the principal as a gesture of good faith in the first years while he cleared down his debt with the IRS; after that the repayments to Jake would increase. The loan was secured on the farm, although Jake didn't doubt the IRS would get their cut first, but Stanley should be making the final repayment ten years from now. It was all so much more formal than his agreement to Anna and Freddy, which had amounted to no more than 'pay me back when you can'. But even if he never saw a cent back from them, he'd still owe more to Freddy than Freddy owed him.

The schedule of what Stanley had agreed with the IRS—and when, therefore, Jake could expect to start seeing his money back—had been included with the rest of the papers; Jake had spent much longer looking at Mimi's signature appended at the bottom than he had at the figures. He guessed Stanley was just another case to her—and a dumb, hick farmer at that. Moving around the apartment, bagging trash and doing dishes and sorting laundry, he couldn't help glancing at the papers lying on the table from time to time, wondering what it would take for Stanley and Mimi to see again that they were meant for each other. He was afraid the answer was another nuclear bomb.

The apartment was as close to clean as it'd ever be by the time his father turned up, a little later than he'd promised. Jake didn't begrudge him the extra time with his old friends. The offer of a beer was refused—"Already had a few more than your mom'd approve of."—so Jake handed over the papers.

His father took them and then hesitated. "You want to go get something to eat?"

Jake raised his eyebrows. "You're not spending the evening with your Army buddies?"

His father shook his head. "Most of them live a ways away. Take 'em a while to drive home. 'Course, I could start heading back myself, but I thought if you—."

"Oh." Jake raised a hand and scratched the back of his neck. "Um, I'd arranged to, uh, meet some friends at a bar they run." He was going to confirm the good news that he'd sold the Roadrunner and that Anna could start working on closing the deal to buy out the bar.

"Hmm." His father rocked back and forth on his heels for a moment. "Mind if I tag along?"

Now Jake was the one to hesitate. He wasn't exactly sure he wanted to introduce Dad to Freddy: it might easily undo all the progress they seemed to have made over the past few weeks. On the other hand, his father was making such an effort to reconnect that it would be churlish to say no. "Sure."

When they reached the bar, it seemed Freddy had been looking out for Jake. Pushing through the crowd, Jake saw him jump up from a stool from where he had a good view of the entrance and scoot towards them.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Freddy grasped Jake's hand in a complicated handshake and pulled him toward him for a half hug. "So how'd it go?"

"Fine." Jake stepped back and indicated his father. "Freddy, this is my dad. Dad, this is Freddy Ruiz. We used to work together." He had to speak up over the noise of the bar, which was surprisingly busy for so early in the evening. He noted absently that the patrons mostly seemed to be college-aged guys in football jerseys and he guessed there'd been a game earlier.

"Johnston Green." His father held out his hand.

"Jake's dad, huh?" Freddy shot Jake a look as he shook it and Jake knew he was thinking about

the few times Jake had talked about his family. Mostly Jake had been tight-lipped when the subject came up, but he'd said enough that Freddy had gotten the picture. "Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise." Though his father's tone was neutral, Jake could read him well enough to know that his first instincts had been correct. Introducing Dad to Freddy wasn't the best way of convincing him that Jake really had turned over a new leaf.

"So," Freddy swung back to face Jake, "you've sold her? You've got the moolah?"

Jake couldn't help casting a glance in his father's direction; as he'd expected, his dad's expression had darkened a little with disapproval. Jake felt a sudden surge of irritation. Sure, Freddy had an irresponsible streak and an unshakable conviction that, whatever happened, things would turn out all right somehow, but he'd hauled Jake's ass out of more than one bad situation, and Jake knew he'd always have his back. If Dad wanted to blame anyone for the way Jake had turned out, he should look to his own damn father: Grandpa had gotten Jake into more trouble—and then somehow sweet-talked the two of them out of it—than anyone Jake knew. Jake was damned if he was going to sacrifice Freddy's friendship on the altar of his father's approval. Dad would just have to learn to live with having only one son he thought was perfect.

Turning back to Freddy, Jake pulled the check from his pocket and held it between two fingers for Freddy to see. "Uh-huh. She's gone." When Freddy reached out a hand as if to take it, Jake snatched it away, laughing. "No way. This is going straight to Anna. Where is she, anyway?" While they'd been talking, he'd been keeping an eye out for her, but he hadn't seen her yet in the crush.

"Around." Freddy waved a hand vaguely. "Come on, let me set you up with some beers and we can celebrate."

He led them across to the bar and waved over one of the other bartenders. While she fetched their order, he turned back to Jake's father. "So, are you in town visiting Jake? You're from somewhere in Kansas, right?" Freddy shot Jake a look as he named the state. Jake couldn't help shaking his head a little to himself: he'd always suspected Freddy had gotten it wrong deliberately to annoy him.

His father took the beer Freddy offered him. "That's right. Jericho. Little place out to the west." He paused and then added, "Jake and I had some business, and I got some old Army buddies live out this way thought I'd look up while I was out here."

"You were Army too? Put it there, man." Freddy held out his hand for a fistbump.

Jake saw his father hesitate for a moment, apparently a little taken aback, although whether by the gesture or the revelation that Freddy was also a Vet Jake didn't know. Then he returned the gesture. "75th Rangers."

Freddy whistled. "Man, that's something. I was just a grunt."

Jake had finally spotted Anna, carrying a tray of dirty glasses toward the bar. Gesturing with his beer, he remarked absently to Freddy as she approached, "Don't sell yourself short. You were a driver, and I've seen you handle pretty much near anything. Hey." The last was for Anna as she got closer.

She slid the tray on to the bar and gave him an awkward hug. "Hey, Jake." As she stepped back, she caught his gaze and he read the question in her eyes.

He nodded. "I got the money. Take a few days for the check to clear and for me to get it to you, but you and Gary can start making a deal."

Her face lit up with a grin and she gave his arm a quick squeeze. "Thanks, Jake. We owe you."

Jake shot a glance in Freddy's direction before he caught and held Anna's gaze. "No. You don't."

A loud crash made them all turn. Over toward the beachfront entrance, a half dozen frat boys wearing different college football jerseys were squaring off. Anna sighed heavily and glanced at her watch. "Already?"

"I'll go sort it out, baby." Freddy slid off his stool and headed over to where two of the guys were now shoving each other and exchanging insults. "Hey, hey, hey. Cool it, guys."

From further along the bar, someone called for service. Anna, with an apologetic shrug of the shoulder, headed away down the bar, leaving Jake alone with his father. Glancing across, Jake saw his father was watching Freddy.

His father gestured with his drink in Freddy's direction. "None of my business, but this deal you're making...?"

Jake pressed his lips together. It wasn't any of his father's business. On the other hand, now that Dad knew, he likely wasn't going to let it go. And, sure, maybe it wasn't the wisest investment in the world, but Jake wasn't going to apologize for doing right by his friends. "Gary's Anna's boss. He owns the place, but he wants to retire. Anna and Freddy are looking to buy him out."

His father turned to stare at Jake. "You sold your car to buy a bar? Thought you wanted to open a flight school?"

The expression on his father's face reminded Jake of the one he'd worn for most of the first year after Jake had graduated from college, when his parents had wanted to know—it had been a staple of Sunday lunch conversation—when he was going to get a real job and start using his degree. *And let's not hear any more about that flight school nonsense. You need to focus, son. Learn to live in the real world.* Jake suspected the arguments were a little different this time. Probably something about *picking a goal and sticking to it*. Still, sometimes seemed like, no matter what he did, he and Dad would be locked in the same old patterns.

Well, Jake thought wryly to himself, they would be if he reacted in the way he always had: by refusing to talk about it. Trying to keep his own irritation out of his voice, he explained patiently, "No, I sold my car so I could lend Freddy and Anna the money to buy a bar." He held up his hands. "I'm not even going to be a sleeping partner."

"Hmmp." His father had gone back to watching Freddy, who'd managed to break up the fight and get the kids to settle down—although Jake wasn't sure about the wisdom of letting both groups order another pitcher of beer. "You trust them to pay you back?"

"Freddy? Not a chance." Jake huffed a laugh. "He'd blow the whole lot on some grand opening party with free beer for everyone. But Anna's got a good head for business. Besides, even if they don't," Jake's voice dropped as he watched his friend continue to joke with the college kids, making sure the thing was properly damped down, "I owe Freddy."

"You do?" Out of the corner of his eye, Jake sensed he was now the object of his father's scrutiny.

"Uh-huh." Jake rolled his beer bottle between his hands. "He had this deal set up that would have gotten him the money, but it fell through 'cause of me. And...." Jake shrugged slightly. "I owe him my life. When we were in Iraq...."

Jake remembered coming to, slumped in the cab of his truck. His ears were still ringing from the shock of the blast. When he'd tried to move, he'd discovered he was coated in a layer of shattered glass and dirt. Then, as he'd attempted to sit upright, the pain had kicked in, a roaring wave. Looking down, he'd seen, with a kind of light-headed detachment, a piece of metal protruding from his hip. He'd shifted again, knowing he needed to get out of the truck, and another wave of nausea had hit him, almost making him black out again.

"Jake? Jesus, man." That had been Freddy, scrambling into the cab from the other side and grabbing Jake by the shoulders. Ignoring Jake's yelps, he'd hauled him roughly out of the cab and into the shelter of the ditch running alongside the road. A moment later, Jake had watched the truck he'd been driving lift off the ground and burst into flames as it came down. It must have been hit by a rocket-propelled grenade fired from somewhere in the flat desert on the far side of the road.

After that, there'd been the sound of gunfire as the soldiers escorting them had driven off their attackers, while Freddy had murmured, "You'll be okay, man. You'll be okay," as he propped Jake against his shoulder.

Coming back to the present, Jake realized he was absently rubbing the shrapnel scar on his thigh and that his father was now watching him closely.

His father dipped his head in slight salute, and his eyes crinkled with warmth and approval. "Uh-huh. Man should take care of his buddies."

Freddy was heading back to them. Watching the way his father greeted him, Jake reckoned Freddy was okay in Dad's book now, and that he wouldn't mind any more than Jake if Jake never saw his money again. And as for him and Dad—they'd be okay too.

oOo

A few weeks later, Jake stepped out of the airport terminal building at Montgomery County Airpark and scanned the pick-up and drop-off zone. This was his third trip to DC for Saber, but the first time he'd made it alone after his month-long probation had ended ten days earlier. He had three or four hours to kill while the defense contractors he'd ferried to the capital met with their Pentagon clients. At first, he'd wondered whether he should try and track down Mimi, persuade her to—to what? He didn't really know. What could he say to her? *Hey, remember that farmer in Kansas you audited? He's crazy about you. Or he will be, once he stops being mad at you. And I know you'll be just as crazy about him if you just give him a chance....*

Besides, he didn't have the time this trip to pay a visit to where she worked and talk to her, though he'd made careful note of her office address when he'd noticed it in the loan papers. Instead, he'd arranged to meet with Hawkins for a few hours.

After a moment, he spotted the other man getting out of an anonymous looking sedan parked near the other end of the building. Jake waved to show he'd seen him and hurried across, hunching his shoulders against the chill early November wind whipping across the parking lot. By the time he reached the car and slid into the passenger seat, Hawkins had already started the engine.

They didn't speak until Hawkins had steered them out the airport and they were heading in the direction of Gaithersburg.

"You okay?" Hawkins flicked a glance in Jake's direction.

"Yeah." Jake suspected he looked rather less ragged these days than when he'd turned up at

Hawkins' apartment in the middle of the night a few weeks back armed with nothing but a great deal of knowledge he shouldn't have had and the determination to use that knowledge to persuade Hawkins he knew how to stop the bombs.

He thought Hawkins looked less strained as well; though he hadn't asked, he'd gathered during the few phone calls they'd had—Hawkins checking up that Jake hadn't gone off the rails and started blabbing CIA secrets—that Hawkins was no longer undercover. Jake couldn't imagine what it would be like to spend five years of your life like that. He'd had enough of it after six weeks, constantly watching yourself to make sure you didn't let the truth slip out.

As if Hawkins knew what Jake was thinking, he asked, "No problems with anyone asking awkward questions? No slip ups after you've had a few too many beers that I should know about?"

Jake shook his head. "'Not since Hicks, no.'" Hawkins had already known about that when they'd talked on the phone, presumably from the mystery voice who'd answered Hicks when he'd called the phone number on the card Hawkins had given Jake. Hawkins had still wanted a full account, though, pushing Jake to tell him everything he could remember about the conversation. Glancing across at Hawkins now, Jake was amazed he'd ever managed to persuade Hawkins to trust him even once, let alone twice over.

The unlikeliness of it was reinforced when Hawkins asked, his tone curt and suspicious, "You sure?"

"Yes." Jake shrugged slightly. "Who'd believe me, anyway?"

Hawkins' only reply was a snort.

They were skirting around the edge of Gaithersburg now. Jake shifted in his seat, turning his head and watching the cars heading the other way: all those ordinary people living their ordinary lives, watching the nightly news and not really knowing how close they'd come to all this ending. Shaking his head, he added "I have to catch myself, sometimes, though—." This time it was his turn to snort. "Someone mentions the president, and it's on the tip of my tongue to ask them which one. Or they say they got family in one of the cities that got nuked and I want to ask if they're okay. Not sure I can live the rest of my life like this."

"You'll get used to it."

There was a hint of bitterness in Hawkins' voice. Jake turned to look at him and caught a momentary flicker of emotion on Hawkins' face, before the other man realized Jake was watching him and the shutters came down again.

They drove on in silence for a few more minutes until Hawkins hit the blinker and swung the car left onto a smaller road. Jake caught a glimpse of a sign. "A park?"

Hawkins shrugged. "Somewhere to go. I don't think we can go to a bar and talk about non-existent presidents and nuclear bombs, do you?"

Jake laughed wryly. "I guess not. Speaking of which: how are things going with the investigation?"

Hawkins gave a slight shrug as he steered the car down a straight road running between open woodland. The sky had grown leaden and shadows were starting to gather between the trees. "You watch the news, don't you?"

"Yeah. I just—." Jake broke off what he was going to say. Either Hawkins didn't know any more

than Jake did, which was likely, since the investigation mostly seemed to be in the hands of the FBI and a dozen other agencies, or he wasn't going to tell. "So what about Valente? And Sarah?"

Hawkins snorted again. "Thought that was gonna get tricky on me for a while. My employers aren't exactly happy to have team members accusing each other of... professional misconduct. But you were right. Sarah wasn't so smart at covering her tracks; turned out there was enough evidence on that handheld thing of hers to show she and Valente were up to *something*. When they showed it to her, she cut a deal and dropped Valente right in it." Jake caught a twitch of his cheek. "She always did look after number one."

They took a turn signposted "public boat ramp" and crossed a bridge over a strip of water that Jake guessed was part of a lake. Hawkins steered them deeper into the park, jolting the last few hundred yards along a dirt track until they reached a deserted car park. He drew the car to a halt at a point where they could look out across the lake and killed the engine.

Silence descended again. After a moment, Hawkins twisted around and reached into the back of the car. Jake tensed, wondering what Hawkins had planned—whether he'd suddenly decided Jake was expendable—but when he turned back, Jake saw he'd simply been reaching for a thermos flask and couple of travel mugs. He puffed out a breath, half amused and half annoyed at his own paranoia.

Hawkins shot him a look as he leaned forward and placed the cups on the dash. Unscrewing the top of the flask, releasing the scent of coffee into the car, he gave a slight shrug. "I come here sometimes. Get away from the city. Get away from—" His lips twitched. "—that life."

Jake chuckled as he accepted the coffee Hawkins had poured. "Maybe you need to go further." Seeing Hawkins' puzzled look, he added, "You still own a house in Jericho, right? Maybe you should pack Darcy and the kids up and take 'em to go live there?"

Hawkins sniffed derisively before he sipped at his own coffee. "I very much doubt Darcy would agree to that."

"Really?" Jake cupped his hands around his coffee and thought back. "She seemed happy enough. Although I guess things were a little different. But she and the kids seemed to settle in okay."

"Huh." Hawkins took another drink. Jake, glancing across, saw that he was lost in thought, his gaze fixed on the lake in front of them.

Jake turned his own attention forward, remembering how, in the weeks when they'd been sneaking around behind Beck's back, he'd thought how lucky Hawkins was to have a woman like Darcy at his side. Eventually, he'd had that too, for a time. For far too little time. Closing his eyes and sipping his own coffee, he vowed again to himself that when he finally went back to Jericho, he'd find a way to win Heather back.

oOo

"So when *are* you coming home, honey?"

Jake was glad his mom couldn't see the face he was making as she asked the same question she always asked during their weekly telephone calls. It wasn't as if he hadn't explained the answer to her every time. Taking a deep breath, he tried again. "I don't know, Mom. I won't get any vacation time until the New Year."

"But surely they'll give you Thanksgiving off?" He could hear the hope in her voice.

"I wish." Jake huffed a laugh. "Gotta fly some hotshot baseball players down to some resort in Mexico." He wasn't much looking forward to having a plane full of half-drunk, testosterone-fueled sportsmen who would probably keep trying to invade the cockpit to offer him drinks. That is, when they weren't asking him if they couldn't just fly the plane for, like, just five minutes. It was, he'd discovered, even worse than being treated like he was invisible, or as if he was some lesser lifeform, by loud-mouthed salesmen metaphorically waving their dicks at each other as they boasted about the size of their latest deals.

"Oh, well, maybe Christmas then." Jake could hear the disappointment in his mom's voice and he guessed she'd been secretly holding out for him coming home for the holiday weekend.

"Look." Jake scrubbed a hand through his hair and padded across the apartment as far as the phone cable would let him go. "I've made a few trips to Denver now for this one company that does regular business there. We've never stayed more than a few hours, so there's been no chance for me to make it out to Jericho, but maybe they'll have an overnight trip some time and I'll be able to drive over."

"That would be nice." He could tell his mom was trying hard not to ask: *When?* "You know your father and I would love to see you if you can make it. And Eric and April, of course."

"Uh-huh." Jake headed back toward the bed and sat down. "How is Eric, anyway?" His brother had managed to see off Gray Anderson's challenge in the mayoral race—just—the week before.

"He's good. Busy." His mother sighed. "April complains she seeing even less of him than before."

Jake made another noncommittal noise in the back of his throat. He wondered how much time Eric was spending on civic business and how much time he was spending sneaking around with Mary. Since he doubted his brother's political ambitions had put an end to that.

"I think he's just a bit overwhelmed, you know?" His mother dropped her voice. "What with winning the election and then of course—oh!" The line went silent for a moment, and then his mother coughed. "Well, they said not to tell anyone, but you're not just anyone, are you? They came to dinner Sunday evening and they had some wonderful news for us. April's pregnant. They're going to have a baby."

"That's...." The words caught in Jake's throat as he remembered April collapsing, remembered dragging Kenchy—reeking of alcohol—from his stool in Bailey's, remembered arguing with him, pleading with him, to just go back in and try—. He swallowed hard and managed to croak out, "That's great. Give them my best wishes. Just... just tell April to take care of herself, okay?"

"I will."

His mother sounded slightly puzzled. Not wanting to give her a chance to pester him with any difficult questions, Jake hurriedly asked, "So what else is going on in Jericho?" It usually didn't take much to get his mom talking about local events and Jake always hoped that, somewhere in all his mother's ramblings, she'd mention the one person he was desperate to hear about. The one person, of course, he had no excuse to bring up, or to even know existed. So far, though, his mother hadn't had occasion to mention Heather. Jake supposed he should be glad for Heather's sake that her life was dull enough not to be attracting the notice of the Jericho gossips.

"Well, let's see." His mother sounded like she was settling herself more comfortably. "Emily and Roger got back from their honeymoon, but Roger was off to Chicago again straight away. I do hope she won't feel too lonely rattling around on her own in that big house out in The Pines, with Roger away so much—."

Jake had heard about the upcoming wedding as soon as he and Mom had started having these weekly calls. He hadn't been entirely clear at the time whether his mother had mentioned it in hopes he'd return to Jericho and do something about it before it was too late or if she'd been warning him off. Either way, it was one of the reasons he was in no great hurry to make it home. After all, what could he do, except cause trouble and heartache? Whether or not Roger could make Emily happy, Jake knew he sure as hell couldn't any more, and he didn't want to raise any false hopes. And maybe once Emily was married, she'd put her feelings for Jake into the past. After all, neither of them had made a move until they'd both, in their hearts, thought Roger was dead.

Mom had told him about the wedding itself, as well—she and Dad had been invited, as old friends—but he'd managed to head her off from giving him too many details. Not because it hurt to hear but because he really didn't care about what flowers there'd been or how many maids of honor there had been or what Emily's dress had looked like. Not as if his mom was going to talk about Heather, although he guessed she'd been a guest too; thinking back, he remembered noticing how she and Emily seemed like they'd hung out together a bit even before the bombs had thrown them all into company. Hadn't she remarked approvingly during the cook-out on Main Street on how Jake had cheered Emily up with the news Roger's plane had landed safely? Jake had, it now occurred to him, provoking a silent snort of amusement, already been far more interested at finding out about Heather feelings than in paying attention to Em's.

Pulling his attention back to his mom, he realized she'd moved on from talking about Emily and was now chattering about how some kids had been playing baseball on Main Street and broken a window in Gracie's, and Dale Turner had gotten in trouble for hitting one of them. "—such a nice, hardworking young man, not like that Henthorn boy. I'm sure he was behind it—"

Listening to his mother prattle away, Jake reached for the bottle of beer he'd fetched himself before he'd called her. He knew he wouldn't be required to contribute much to the conversation for a while, but that even his silent presence on the other end of the line was making her happy.

oOo

It was the last day of November and dusk was starting to gather by the time Jake steered the hire car on to the familiar track that led to the Richmond farmhouse. Stanley was apparently packing up the produce stand as Jake pulled up next to it.

"We're just—" Stanley glanced over his shoulder as he hefted a box of apples and turned toward the barn with it. His face lit up as Jake rested his elbow on the open window and grinned up at him.

"Hey, Stanley."

"Jake!" Stanley dumped the box back on the stand with a careless thud and strode across to the car, hauling open the door and pulling Jake out for a bear hug that lifted him off his feet.

"Hey, put me down!" Jake laughingly thumped him on the shoulder. With a last squeeze, Stanley obliged.

Once Jake was back on his feet, Stanley punched him back, grinning. "Your mom called and said you were gonna try and make it into town today."

"Yeah. Had an overnighter to Denver. They don't need me again until..." Jake spoke the words distractedly, most of his attention focused on scrutinizing Stanley. Somehow, he looked much younger than the last time Jake had seen him. Less stressed, Jake guessed, despite his troubles with the IRS. Of course—a movement behind Stanley drew Jake's attention and his heart lurched

as he realized it was Bonnie. She must have been helping Stanley put away the produce.

He'd known she was still alive, of course, and been more prepared for it than when Dad had turned up outside his apartment in San Diego, but it was still something of a shock. The difference between *knowing* and *seeing*. The difference between seeing her approaching him now, a shy smile on her face, and seeing her blood-spattered body cradled in Stanley's arms.

"Hello, Jake." She blushed a little as she spoke.

"Hi." His hands automatically formed a greeting, before adding, though he was barely aware he was doing so: *Good to see you.*

Her blush deepened. *You too*, she signed back. She hesitated for a moment and then added, *Thank you. For the farm.* She gestured half toward the house, half toward the barn.

Jake dipped his head. *You're welcome.* Reaching out, he punched Stanley in the arm. *Just make sure this doofus here doesn't run it into the ground again, okay? I'm trusting you.*

Stanley's outraged "Hey!" cut across Bonnie's giggle and her signed promise of *I won't.*

When both of them turned and looked at Stanley, he had the good grace to look embarrassed. Clearing his throat, he slapped Jake hard on the back, almost making him stumble. "So, you and I are still going out tonight and catching up, right?"

"Yeah. Mom's cooking me some kind of welcome home dinner. Big family reunion." Jake made a face, though he didn't mind, really. It would be good to be back home again. "But I'll see you in Bailey's later?"

"Sounds good. Hey, Bonnie!" She'd turned away from them to carry on clearing away the produce stand and Stanley picked up an apple and threw it at her. When she turned, he signed, *We got any pies left?*

She grimaced at him, rubbing her arm where the apple had hit her. *A couple, I think.*

She glanced in Jake's direction and he signed, *Please.* His mom had probably already whipped up some dessert of her own once he'd called from Denver to let her know he was on his way home, but he knew she'd always liked the Richmonds' pies and she'd appreciate him bringing her one as a present.

Watching Bonnie disappear into the house to fetch the pie, Jake drew in a deep breath. "Take care of her, Stanley."

Stanley, stacking boxes together again, threw him a puzzled look. "Don't I always?"

"Yeah." Jake turned his attention back to the house, the lamps inside starting to shine out in the deepening dusk, warm and steady and homey. Not like—. He gave himself a shake, throwing off the memory of the flickering blue and red lights of the ambulance parked outside the farmhouse. Some things you couldn't guard against. Some things you couldn't protect people from. But Goetz and his crew were locked up in federal prison, courtesy of Agent Hicks. From them, at least, Bonnie was safe.

oOo

Twenty minutes later, he was having the breath squeezed out of him as his mom hugged him. He let her hold on for a good while, understanding she wanted to reassure herself he really was

there. At last he said, with a chuckle, "You can let go now, you know."

"I know." His mother stepped back and he caught a glimmer of moisture in his eyes. "It's just good to have you back."

He smiled down at her. "It's good to be back." The scent of wood-polish and baking and the indefinable smell of home had enveloped him as he'd stepped through the door, taking him back to the weeks over that long fall and winter when they'd become a family again. Offering her the pie that he'd been holding all the while she'd been hugging him, he added, "I promise it won't be so long between—."

"I thought I heard an annoying voice." His brother's words cut across his own. Turning, Jake saw Eric looming in the doorway. "Hey, brother. Welcome home."

Jake noticed that Eric's smile didn't extend to his eyes and he felt the tension in him as they embraced awkwardly. It seemed like Eric was even less pleased to see Jake than the last time—the first time—he'd had arrived home, and he hadn't been particularly welcoming back then. The reason became clear when Jake felt a hearty slap on his back and heard his father's pleased tones booming, "Here he is. The prodigal son returns at last."

Pulling back from the hug with Eric, Jake glanced in his father's direction. "Hey, Dad." Then he turned his attention back to Eric. Reaching out, he lightly punched his brother on the shoulder. "Congratulations, *Mayor* Green. And Mom tells me I'm going to be an uncle, too."

"Thanks." The way Eric's guarded smile warmed a little let Jake know he'd done the right thing by turning the conversation to Eric's achievements. That he'd managed, too, to put up a sufficient show of enthusiasm, despite the doubts he entertained about both pieces of news. He wasn't sure a high-profile new job or a baby were what Eric needed at this stage in his life.

"So, is April around?" Jake glanced at the rest of his family.

"She should be here soon." Eric shrugged. "She had a late clinic at the Med Center."

"Why don't you boys go get a drink while we wait for April and I finish making dinner." His mother shooed them out of the kitchen. As Jake followed his father and brother into the other room, she caught his hand and squeezed it, holding him back for a moment. He returned the pressure, almost wishing that it wasn't so easy for her to forgive him or so easy for him to please her. It had taken that other life to make him understand just how much he didn't deserve her love.

oOo

The wine at dinner helped lighten the atmosphere and make the conversation flow, although Jake was careful to watch what he drank—not just because he was aware of Eric's gaze on him when he first picked up his glass but also because he suspected Stanley was going to try and pour a lot of alcohol into him later on in Bailey's. His mom had brought out the good silver and cooked his favorite food. The way Eric's eyes had narrowed as she made a show of placing Jake's plate in front of him and announcing to the table that it *was* his favorite put Jake further on his guard.

Picking up his fork, Jake remembered the way Eric had flung that rebuke at him—*I think you had a few good months!*—when Jake had tried to stop him heading to New Bern. He'd never understood before how much it must have galled Eric that, no matter what Jake did, their parents forgave him and welcomed him back. That no matter how hard Eric tried to be a good son, it never seemed to be enough.

Mindful of his brother's feelings, Jake did his best as they ate to keep turning the conversation

away from himself to Eric, encouraging him to talk about his plans as mayor—until he noticed how restless his father was becoming. Jake guessed letting go of the reins at City Hall hadn't been as easy as it sounded. Sighing inwardly—because apparently negotiating the turbulent waters of his family's relationships hadn't gotten any easier, despite everything—he tried talking to April instead, asking her about her job and whether she planned to go on working after the baby was born.

The baby seemed to be a topic both his parents were more than happy to hear about, while Eric looked only slightly bored. In any case, once he'd set April going, there was no stopping her. Soon she was in the middle of telling Jake about the room they were going to turn into the nursery and how they'd decorate it, appealing to Eric every once in a while for validation of her plans, though she barely listened to his replies. Jake nodded at her, trying to make approving noises in the right places, even if he didn't find the subject half as fascinating as April. He was distracted, too, by memories of fighting the fire that had destroyed that same home within a week of the bombs. It had been the first time he'd worked with Hawkins and they'd made a pretty good team in the end, despite their mutual distrust. Though they hadn't managed to save his brother's house, they'd stopped the fire spreading to the neighboring properties.

"Pie, Jake?" His mother's question, the knife in her hand poised over the pie he'd brought from the Richmonds, dragged him back to the present. He realized that while his mom had been clearing away the dinner plates, April had finally wound down from telling him in far too much detail that they couldn't decide which color to paint the baby's room.

"Please." Holding out his hand for her to pass the plate to him, he added quickly, before April could launch into another baby-related topic, "So have you and Dad gotten your trip to Europe all planned out?"

He heard a quiet snort from his father, sitting to his left, that suggested the topic had already been discussed far more than he would have liked, but his mom either didn't hear it or chose not to, her face lighting up at the question. "Oh yes." Having deposited a slice of pie on a plate, she waved the knife in the air. "We're going to fly to Paris, and then we're going to Italy. Florence, Rome. Naples.... We're going to be there six weeks and we've got it all planned out—."

There was another, louder snort from his father, this one earning him a glare. Turning back to Jake, his mom put the knife down and handed him the plate. "We're going to go to the Louvre and Versailles and the Uffizi and Pompeii...."

Jake picked up his fork and finally looked down at the portion of pie on his plate. "Mom," he interrupted, laughing. "I can't eat all this." She'd served him getting on for half the whole pie.

"Of course you can. You're much too thin." She leaned forward and pinched his cheek, and he pulled back, embarrassed, feeling suddenly like the gawky teenager who'd shrugged off her displays of affection in front of his friends. He guessed he still hadn't regained the weight he'd lost during the long months of rationing and hard work over the winter in that other Jericho. But if it made her happy to see him eat up, he wasn't going to argue with her. God knows, after all he'd done over the years, the least he could do was indulge her a little. With a slight shake of the head and a wry chuckle, he dug into the pie with his fork.

oOo

Pie eaten and coffee refused, Jake had excused himself, reminding his parents of his earlier promise to meet Stanley in Bailey's. He wasn't terribly surprised when Eric had said he'd tag along with Jake: "There's some people I need to speak to."

"Oh, Eric—." April started to object.

"Duty calls, You know how it is." Rising from his seat, he dropped a perfunctory kiss in her hair. "I'll probably be back late. Don't bother waiting up."

Jake could sense Eric's suppressed impatience as he grabbed their coats, shoving Jake's jacket at him and shrugging into his own almost before Jake had gotten to his feet. "Come on. You want to see Stanley, don't you?"

"Sure." Jake dipped his head in his sister-in-law's direction. "It was nice seeing you, April."

"You too, Jake." She shot him a distracted smile, still gazing with a concerned expression after her husband, who was now hovering by the front door.

Jake put a hand on his mom's shoulder in passing. "I won't be back too late."

She patted his hand. "Don't you worry about that. You boys have a nice time."

"Come *on*, Jake." Eric had the front door open, letting in a draft of chilly air. Suppressing a sigh—his brother could be so transparent sometimes that Jake wondered how he'd managed to keep his affair with Mary a secret for this long—Jake headed after him.

He waited until they were in the car and Eric was steering them toward Main Street before he asked, carefully, "So, who do you need to see in Bailey's?"

"Oh, people." Eric waved a hand airily, "Probably no one you know."

"Hmm." Jake wasn't so sure about that, but he could hardly mention the affair without Eric deflecting the whole thing back on him with questions he couldn't answer. Besides, he wasn't sure what he felt about Eric's indiscretions any more.

Back in that other life, he'd thought Eric was a weak fool, caught in the trap of his own indecision and blaming everyone else for it. He wouldn't leave a bad marriage because he was too afraid of what people would think and what their parents would say, but neither did he seem prepared to do the hard work of giving up Mary and trying to fix things with April. And although Jake hadn't been totally convinced, when he'd told Eric to get on with his life, that Mary was the answer, things *had* worked out pretty well between them in the end. Now, though, it looked like Eric had decided he wanted—deserved—it all: to be mayor, which meant sticking with April, even before they knew she was pregnant, yet still fooling around with Mary.

In a way, Eric's behavior reminded Jake of how he'd been himself before Chris had died, with the flight school and Emily and all the other ways he'd been drifting. He cleared his throat as Eric drew the car to a halt in front of Gracie's. "You know, before I skipped town—" He ignored Eric's snort. "—I thought I could have everything. Took me a while to figure out that I couldn't. That I had some hard choices to make. That if I wanted certain things, I couldn't have other things."

Like Heather, if I wanted forty million people to live. The realization swept over him: the Jake who'd run from Jericho after Chris's death wouldn't have made that choice. But then, he wouldn't have been the kind of man that Heather could have fallen in love with in the first place.

Bringing himself back to the present from the memory of the feel of Heather in his arms as he'd made that choice, as he'd made the only choice either of them could respect, he noticed Eric was impatiently tapping his fingers on the steering wheel.

"Is this some kind of twelve step thing you're going through?" His brother's tone was edged with sarcasm.

"What?" Jake looked at him in surprise, trying to follow the abrupt change in the conversation. "No. I just—."

"Because it won't work." Eric grimaced. "Look, just because you've got Mom and Dad fooled into thinking you've gotten your life straightened out doesn't mean I'm taken in by your act, Jake. And it doesn't make up for all the suffering you caused our family."

"That's not...," Jake started, but Eric was already turning away and climbing out of the car. As Eric slammed the car door Jake finished under his breath, "...what I was going to say." He guessed Eric wasn't interested in taking his big brother's advice this time—and he couldn't really blame him for that.

oOo

It was surprisingly busy inside Bailey's, but Stanley quickly spotted them and muscled his way through the crowd to envelop Jake in another bear hug. By the time Stanley put Jake down, Eric had disappeared into the throng. Maybe he really did have someone he needed to—no, over Stanley's shoulder, Jake spotted him talking to Mary at the far side of the bar.

"Mary." Stanley waved at her over the heads of the other patrons as he led Jake along the bar to his usual stool. "Two beers here." He pointed to the bottle that already stood on the bar. A dip of the head indicated she'd heard the order, though she didn't detach herself from her conversation with Eric.

"So, how've you been keeping?" Stanley slid back on to his stool and starting attacking the dish of peanuts in front of him.

"Good." Jake took a seat himself, leaning one elbow on the bar. The wood was smooth and polished, reflecting back the light from a patina gained over years of elbow grease. Last time he'd seen it, Eric had still been working to repair the damage that had resulted from the firebombing by Constantino's assassination teams.

"Your dad tells me you're flying planes, now, huh?" Stanley drained the end of the beer he'd been drinking when Jake came in.

"Uh-huh." Jake settled himself more comfortably on his stool. "Charter company. Executive jets."

"Lots of trips to exotic locations? Private little islands in the Caribbean?" Stanley spoke with the amusement of someone who'd never really wanted to leave the state. Even the much-discussed backpacking trip to Costa Rica had been more idle talk for cold wet winter evenings than a firm plan of action.

"I wish." Jake laughed. "Mostly it's trips to DC and Seattle and Houston, and I'm lucky if I get to set foot outside the airfield. Besides, I could do without the foreign trips if they're anything like my last one."

"Trouble?" Stanley popped a few more peanuts in his mouth.

"You could say that." Jake nodded his thanks at Mary as she set two beers down in front of them, having finally extricated herself from her conversation with Eric. "Had to fly a bunch of baseball players to some resort in Mexico for Thanksgiving. I get to spend two days bored out of my mind by the pool while they fooled about with the local girls. Last evening we're there, things apparently turn ugly, the police get called. We end up flying back into a crapload of news crews and paparazzi when we land back in San Diego."

"Yeah, I remember seeing something about that." Stanley gestured at the TV screen above the bar. "You think they did it?"

Jake shrugged. "I have no idea." It was the truth. As far as he could tell, the evidence boiled down to 'he said, she said', though the way the guys had been behaving beforehand, he could well believe at least some of the allegations had some substance to them. He'd given a curt "No comment" to the news crews who'd hounded him at the airfield for a couple of days after, but he'd also had words with his boss, Grainger, that while he understood absolute discretion was a must, he'd prefer not to fly that particular group again, if it was all the same. Grainger had taken that better than Jake had expected, but the whole trip had still left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Sensing Stanley might be about to probe for more details, Jake hurriedly asked, "So, how are things going with you? Everything okay with the farm now?"

"Yeah. I guess." Stanley took a swig of beer, a frown creasing his forehead. "Well, at least that evil witch from the IRS is back in DC and I don't have to talk to her again."

Mimi. Jake's heart sank as he realized being forced to work together to thrash out a settlement hadn't improved things. "She wasn't very helpful?" he asked cautiously.

Stanley shrugged. "I suppose so. She just made it abundantly clear she thought I was one step up from a cockroach." He shook his head and snorted. "You know, I reckon she works for the IRS so she can pretend *that's* why everyone hates her and not because she's a miserable cow with a stick up her ass." He hesitated for a moment and then muttered to himself, sounding almost cross about it, "Even if it is a cute ass."

"She was hot?" Jake tried to sound surprised, like he didn't expect an IRS agent to be attractive.

"Uh-huh." Stanley picked gloomily at the label on his beer bottle. "Well, apart from the queen bitch from hell personality. But she was...." He waved a hand in the air, describing a sinuous curve. "And, you know, she had a nice smile. *When* she smiled. Which wasn't exactly often...." He sighed heavily.

"Maybe if you spent a bit more time together...?" Jake suggested tentatively. He was sure that if he could just find a way to get the two of them to see past their initial dislike, they'd be able to fall in love again.

"Maybe." Stanley took another swig of beer. "More likely she wouldn't look at me even if I was the last man on earth."

Jake had to admit Stanley had a point. He and Mimi had only warmed up to each other when the world had effectively ended. But it sounded like Stanley was at least willing to try, if only Mimi would give him a chance. Maybe he needed to try working this from the other end, next time he was in DC....

"So." Stanley slapping him on the back made Jake lurch on his stool and brought him out of his introspection. "Bet you've got a girl, right? Back in San Diego."

"No. No girl." Jake laughed, remembering Freddy's offer—made twice over now—to introduce him to Anna's sisters. Remembering his answer both times. Finally noticing that he'd been unconsciously scanning the crowd, hoping to spot Heather, ever since he'd walked in to Bailey's, although he doubted she'd be in there on a school night.

"You're not still—?" Stanley had turned on his stool and was eyeing Jake carefully. "You know

Emily got married, right?"

Jake nodded. "Yeah. Mom told me. And no, I'm not still hung up on Emily. We—." He hesitated. "That was over a long time ago. And that's cool." He shrugged. "I guess I'm just waiting to meet the right girl." *Again.*

Stanley laughed and clinked his beer with Jake's. "Well, Jericho's not the place to do it. So let's forget about women and you can tell me what the hell you've been up to for the past five years!"

oOo

The next morning, nursing only a mild headache and fortified with coffee and pancakes provided by his mom, Jake stopped off in Gracie's to buy some flowers to lay on his grandfather's grave. He'd planned a quick visit on his way out of town, before he hit I-70 and headed back to Denver.

Halting outside the store, he dug in his pocket for his keys, juggling the flowers. Keys in hand, he looked up, dimly aware that another car had pulled up next to his.

His heart seemed to skip a beat as he found himself face to face with Emily, slamming the car door while she told whoever she was speaking to on her mobile phone, "Love you too. Bye." Roger, Jake supposed. Her eyes met his and went wide with shock. Without seeming to realize she was doing so, she snapped the phone closed. "Hey." Her voice was a little hoarse.

"Hey." Jake reckoned he didn't sound much better himself, even though he supposed he should probably have expected them to meet like this. But it had been a while since he'd had a flash of *deja vu* as the world ran in the same tracks as it had done before. The more time that passed, the less the world was like it had been previously and the less chance of encountering the same situations. Except this was his first time back in Jericho.

They hugged as awkwardly as they had done that first time. When they stepped back, Emily gave him a nervous smile. "Your mom said you'd be coming back soon."

"Uh-huh." Jake cleared his throat. "And congratulations." At Em's raised eyebrows, he added quickly, "Mom told me you got married a few weeks back."

"Thanks." Em hoisted the strap of her bag higher on her shoulder. "I, uh, I know we never officially broke up, but—."

"Em." Jake couldn't help chuckling. "I skipped town and didn't call you for five years. I don't think you need to be the one apologizing." He hesitated. "I hope the two of you'll be very happy together. I really do. I'm sure he's a great guy. And... I'm sorry for what happened before. For how much I must have hurt you. I'm glad to see you happy."

"Thanks," Em muttered again, dipping her head. Jake almost thought she looked disappointed. He guessed it must hurt a little to see the person you'd carried a torch for over many years take the news of your marriage to someone else so calmly. But what else could he say? Surely better to make it clear to her right now that she'd made the right choice marrying Roger, so she wouldn't have any regrets.

After a moment, she leaned back against the car and looked up under her eyelashes at him. "So what about you? You got anyone?"

Jake huffed a wry laugh. "Nah."

"I'm sorry." She didn't sound very sorry.

"It's okay. I—." Jake stopped. Over Emily's shoulder, he could see a gaggle of chattering schoolkids walking up Main Street in an untidy crocodile and at their rear, trying to keep order—

The whole world seemed to slow, fading away at the edges of his vision, the sound of the children's voices muted. For a moment, there was nothing but Jake and there, just down the street—*Heather*.

Looking more beautiful to him than he thought she'd ever looked, though a worried frown creased her forehead as she called out to the children. The way it always had in the daily meetings with Gray and Eric and Beck, when she'd been trying to figure out how to make what they'd decided happen. He'd always had an urge to reach out and smooth away that frown, he realized now. Hated that there'd been times when he'd been the one to put it there. Loved that—.

"Jake? Jake?" Em's voice, close to him, brought him back to the present and he sucked in a lungful of air, the sound of the children's voices and Heather's anxious instructions and the rumble of a truck turning onto Main Street by the Liberty building loud again.

And then it happened. Heather's class had spilled out onto the road as she shepherded them past the Cyberjolt Cafe. They were doing some renovations—an odd echo of the changes made by J&R—and scaffolding covered the front of the building, blocking most of the sidewalk. He heard Heather's plaintive "Ashlee, be careful", even as a girl skipped sideways and into the path of the truck that had just turned the corner. There was a squeal of brakes, and the truck slewed sideways, burying its nose into the near corner of the scaffolding.

For the second time in as many minutes, time seemed to turn to treacle as the scaffolding tottered and then began to fall. Yet Jake was already shoving the flowers he carried into Em's hands and ordering her to "Call the Med Center. Get the deputies out here. Now!" as he pushed past her and ran toward the accident.

He skirted around the truck, absently noting that it was Carl Mead climbing out, his mouth a round "O" of horror, but not sparing more than a passing glance as he frantically sought for Heather among the debris spread more than halfway across the street. He quickly found her near the far end of the fallen scaffolding. Her leg was trapped and she had a hand pressed to her forehead where a bruise was already blooming. He guessed she'd been hit by some of the tools or materials that had been stacked on the higher levels.

He skidded to a halt next to her and knelt. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm—." She was peering past his shoulder, her gaze frantically scanning the mess beyond him. "Don't worry about me. Worry about them."

But Jake was already turning before she'd finished speaking, looking for the same wide-eyed, dark-haired girl he'd helped before, getting that familiar feeling of the universe shrugging itself back into shape around him. He didn't see her at first, but as he started to get back to his feet he spotted her a few yards away, trapped by one of the lengths of scaffolding across her throat. Quickly, he ducked under the top side of the fallen scaffolding, keeping his head low as he made his way to her side. He crouched next to her, careful not to touch the poles around him. "Hey, Stacy." He reached out a comforting hand to stroke her hair. "Just hang in there. It's going to be okay."

She looked up at him, her eyes round with fear. Then she let out a strangled croak of pain and Jake realized the bar across her neck had shifted. Lifting his head, he saw a dozen or more adults had tumbled out of the shops and were trying to help pull other kids out of the wreckage. A quick glance showed him none of the others seemed badly hurt, and that a couple of the adults were

shepherding the ones who hadn't been caught under the scaffolding into a huddle further up the road. Then the scaffolding moved again, no more than a tremor, but Jake knew even a fraction of an inch the wrong way could finish Stacy.

Raising his head, he yelled above the hubbub of cries and sobs, "Stop. Everybody stop. Don't touch *anything*."

There was a sudden silence, or near-silence, only broken by a few childish snuffles. Then the scaffolding shifted again as someone leaned on it or moved underneath it or—Jake didn't know what, but Stacy's eyes became even wider and more frightened, if that was possible.

"I said, stop!" Jake swung his head round, not really expecting to find who'd caused the scaffolding to move, but hoping that somewhere along the way his furious glare had caught them. "We've got a girl trapped here and every time anything moves—" He left the sentence unfinished, not wanting to scare Stacy any more than she already was, but hoping the adults would fill in the blank: she might die.

"We need to lift—" someone in the crowd started to say, but Jake shook his head fiercely.

"No." He'd already seen that one end of the structure was wedged under Carl's truck. They couldn't risk backing the truck off the mangled frame, but they wouldn't be able to lift the whole thing far enough to free Stacy while it was wedged there. His gaze fell on Carl, still standing by his truck with a stunned expression on his face. "Carl, you got a wrench in the back of your truck?"

Carl nodded wordlessly, turning away even as Jake ordered, "Get it and pass it to me. Don't touch the bars." His gaze fell on Bill, standing next to the truck with a helpless, frightened look on his face, while Jimmy puffed up beside him. "Bill, get back to City Hall and fetch the med kit. We're gonna need an icepack. Jimmy, radio the ambulance and tell them they may need to perform a tracheotomy, and then get everyone back."

"Will do, Jake." Jimmy was pulling his radio from his belt with one hand while pushing Bill to get moving with the other. "Go on. Do what he says."

Jake turned back to Stacy and tried to offer her a reassuring smile. "It's gonna be okay," he promised her again. Casting around, he spotted a splayed fan of shingles that he guessed they'd been using to re-clad the front. Leaning forward carefully, he pulled half a dozen toward him and began wedging them under the bar across Stacy's throat, hoping to hold it more firmly in place and off her neck while he put the next part of his plan into action.

As he was pushing a last shingle into place, his muscles bunching as he lifted the bar and all the weight of the rest of the scaffolding just enough to work the shingle in, Carl's uncertain "Jake?" from behind him let him know he'd fetched the wrench. Moving carefully so as not to disturb anything, Jake turned and reached out to take it. While he'd been wedging the shingles, he'd already been looking over the structure, figuring which clamps he needed to undo. As soon as Carl had passed the tool across, Jake scooted along to the first clamp, wanting to hurry, to get it undone *now*, but forcing himself to work slowly.

At first he thought the fixing wasn't going to budge as he tried to force the wrench around. Then, quite suddenly, it gave up the fight, and he had to catch himself from falling forward and landing on the bar. Propping himself on one hand, he quickly loosened the clamp far enough to pull it off, before moving on to the next one. That proved a little easier and he soon had it free.

He was dimly aware of the silent crowd watching him as he crawled back toward Stacy and then over her to reach the other end of the bar. He gave her another smile and nod of the head and an

"Okay?" as he passed. She had tears on her cheeks now, but she almost managed a smile in return. The final clamp proved as tough as the first, or maybe he was just growing tired, but at last it yielded. Glancing up as he loosened the clamp further, he saw the ambulance had arrived and the EMTs, with April standing between them, were waiting for him to finish. Finally, the clamp was loose enough for him to wrench the bar up and sideways, away from Stacy.

"Jake?"

Wordlessly, Jake gave April permission to help Stacy with a wave of his hand. Then he sat back on his haunches, his hands dangling limply between his knees, and closed his eyes, drawing in one deep breath after another. He felt like he'd just run a dozen miles at a dead sprint, the whole way.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there, feeling his racing heart slowing and the chill wind cooling the sweat trickling down his face, while he listened to the calm, reassuring murmurs of the medics as they treated Stacy. Then he heard Jimmy ask, "Jake? Are you okay?"

Jake opened his eyes at last and saw Jimmy was standing peering through the bars at him. "Yeah." Sucking in another deep breath, Jake carefully crawled out, making sure he didn't touch anything, and let Jimmy help him to his feet. Dusting himself down, he looked around and saw the crowd had grown, but was being held at a respectful distance by Bill and one of the other deputies at either end of the street. Several of the children were gathered around the back of an ambulance drawn up next to Carl's truck, apparently being checked over. Turning, Jake saw another ambulance was pulled up by the church. One of the EMTs was wheeling a gurney toward where his colleague squatted next to Heather.

He turned back to Jimmy. "Was anyone else hurt?"

"Only Heather. The teacher." Jimmy gestured in her direction, not knowing the explanation was unnecessary. "Some of the kids have a few scrapes and bruises. Could've been a lot worse."

"Yeah." Jake was only half-listening to Jimmy. The EMT was blocking his view of Heather's face and he took a step sideways. Her expression was tight with pain, but she was doing her best to smile brightly as she talked to the EMT. His heart lurched at the sight; he knew now how hard he'd fallen for that mixture of courage and cheerfulness. And though the smiles had taken more effort after those first few weeks following the bombs, after he'd hurt her and driven her away, and after she'd been through all that had happened in New Bern, she'd never lost either her strength of spirit or her capacity to make the best of any situation. He ached to hold her close, knowing he couldn't protect her from all the hurts in the world but wanting to do his damndest to try.

"Would've been a lot worse without you." Jimmy's punch on the arm brought Jake out of his stupor. "What the heck happened, anyway?"

Jake rubbed the back of his hand across his forehead, wiping away the dirt he could feel clinging there. He guessed he'd need to clean up properly. "One of the kids stepped out right in front of Carl's truck. He swerved to avoid her and hit the scaffolding instead." He was still watching Heather and suddenly the distance between them seemed like too much. "Would you excuse me for a moment."

"Sure." Jimmy sounded a little surprised. As Jake strode away, he called after him, "I'll need to take a statement..."

Jake waved a hand over his shoulder in reply. The EMTs were lifting Heather on to the gurney as he reached her and he hung back a moment while they settled her. She'd looked up as he approached and when her eyes met his, her smile warmed, banishing the forced cheerfulness of

earlier, though he could tell she was still in pain.

"Hey." He nodded at her, feeling himself grinning back helplessly.

"Hey." Her gaze shifted for a moment over his shoulder and then back to his face. "Is Stacy okay?"

"I think so, yes." Glancing over his shoulder himself, he saw one of the medics laying a backboard next to her.

"Thank you." Heather dipped her head at him as he looked back at her.

"You're welcome." Jake went on looking at her, drinking in the sight of her. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. They think I broke my leg, but other than that..." She gave a slight shrug, before holding out her hand. "Heather."

"Jake." He took her hand, warm and soft in his, feeling again the slight tingle of electricity where his skin touched hers, how *right* it was.

They stood there for a while, her hand in his, him drinking in her face while her expression slowly turned a little puzzled and wary. "Umm..." She tugged her hand gently away from him. With a start he let go, allowing her withdraw it from his grasp with an awkward, husky chuckle that made his heart beat faster. He flushed and cleared his throat, realizing he was probably acting a little oddly—at least from her perspective. They had, after all, only just met.

"What in Tarnation happened here?" His father's voice at his shoulder prevented him from stammering some kind of excuse or apology. "Are you all right, young lady?"

"Yes, thank you, Mr Green." Heather nodded and managed another tight smile.

"I see you've already met my other, no-good son." Though the words might have seemed harsh, there was no rancor in his father's tone as he slapped Jake on the back.

Heather's eyes widened as she met Jake's embarrassed grin. "Your—? Oh."

His father's hand tightened on Jake's shoulder. "Though what he's doing here when he's supposed to be on his way back to Denver, I don't know."

"I—." Jake took a horrified look at his watch and saw that, somehow, nearly three quarters of an hour had passed since he'd stepped out of Gracie's. "Oh God, I need to—."

"Go!" Heather ordered, with a smile. "But thank you. Thank you."

Grinning back, Jake sketched a half salute at her before turning to head for his hire car. A few steps away he remembered something else and turned back. "Dad, I gotta go or I'll lose my job, but tell Jimmy to phone me if he still needs that statement."

"Will do, son." His father nodded.

With a last smile for Heather, Jake hurried away, already figuring in his head how soon he could make it back to Jericho.

Jake stuffed his hands into the pockets of his overcoat and hunched his shoulders against the wind buffeting him as he loitered near the entrance to the IRS office in DC. Despite the chill of the December day, he was warmed by the memory of the phone call with his mom the previous evening: *The Clemons would like to thank you for helping to save Stacy. And Heather Lisinski, she's the teacher, she's asked three times now when you'll be back in Jericho and she can thank you as well....*

Christmas. He'd be back at Christmas. It wasn't far off and, thanks to the generosity of his employers, he'd be able to make it home: when he'd tentatively enquired about the possibility of hiring one of Saber's rarely-used four-seater Mooneys for the trip, his boss had hesitated a moment before giving him a price—though he'd have to pay for his own avgas—that would barely cover the cost of servicing. "Think of it as a Christmas bonus," Grainger had added with a grin when Jake had stuttered his thanks. "You've done a good job impressing our clients and it's as good a way as any for us to show our appreciation."

That the clients liked him seemed to be true enough: several of Saber's customers were now specifically requesting Jake, including the defense contractors he'd just flown to DC for a fourth time. Jake was also glad that his reluctance to handle any more trips for the baseball players didn't seem to have done him any harm in Grainger's eyes; he guessed all the times he hadn't complained when other clients had stepped out of line or simply been rude had paid off.

The freezing wind was still stinging his face but Jake straightened as he finally saw Mimi leaving the IRS office. On the drive back from Jericho the week before, he'd decided he owed it to Stanley and Mimi to try again. Owed it to himself, too: deep down, he was afraid the universe wouldn't be kind to him, that he wouldn't get a chance to win Heather back, if he didn't do everything possible to help Stanley and Mimi rediscover what they'd also had in that other life. And it had been clear to him that Stanley would still be interested if only Mimi would unbend a little. When he'd seen on his schedule for the next week that he was slated for another trip to DC—this time an overnight one—it was as if the universe was sending him a message.

Not that lurking outside Mimi's office trying to catch her as she left work was his favored method. But he'd tried calling in advance to make an appointment and gotten brushed off when he hadn't been able to satisfactorily prove to the dragon-like secretary who'd taken his call that he was either the principal or an advisor on one of Mimi's current cases. So, short of marching in and demanding to see her, which wasn't likely to endear him to her or advance his cause either, that just left a personal approach out of hours.

Mimi had turned away from him once she reached the bottom of the steps in front of her office. Dodging through the flow of other workers leaving, Jake hurried after her. "Mimi Clark?" He reached out and touched her arm. "Miss Clark?"

She turned, her eyebrows arched in surprise. "Yes?"

Jake swallowed. He needed to get this right. Though he'd rehearsed what he was going to say a hundred times over while he waited, his mouth was dry. "My name's Jake Green. We've not met, but we have an acquaintance in common and I was wondering if we could maybe go somewhere for a drink and—"

"Then you were wondering wrong." Only now did Jake realize Mimi had left the office in the company of a colleague: a heavysset guy in his forties who was looking at Jake like he was something unfortunate he'd stepped in. "The lady's got other plans. Beat it."

Jake tried a placating smile. "Please. This won't take long and I really—"

"I said, beat it!" The man stepped between Jake and Mimi and gave Jake a shove in the chest that

made him stagger back a step.

"Greg, there's really no need." Mimi sounded a little startled as she emerged from behind him, stepping sideways so she could see Jake again. She dipped her head apologetically in Jake's direction as he recovered his balance. "I do have plans this evening but perhaps we can—?"

"Or perhaps you can't." Greg snarled. He took her by the arm. "We're going to be late."

Mimi snatched her arm away, glaring at Greg, her face tight with fury. "You know, I don't think I *do* have any plans for this evening." She looked over at Jake. "Perhaps we could have that drink after all."

"Don't be ridiculous, Mimi. You're coming with me." Greg reached for her again, but she took a step back.

"Go home, Greg." She spoke quietly, but Jake heard the calm determination he remembered from the long winter weeks when she'd taken care of the farm and Bonnie while Stanley was in New Bern.

"What?" Now it was Greg's turn to gape.

"Go home, Greg. And please don't call me again." Mimi sounded a little weary.

"What? Now wait a minute!" Greg made to move forward, but it was Jake's turn to step between them.

"I think you should do what she says, don't you?" Jake spoke softly, but there must have been something in his manner—perhaps gained over the year in that other life—that told Greg it would be a mistake to carry on arguing.

"Fine. Fine." He put his hands up and backed off a step. Addressing Mimi over Jake's shoulder, he added coldly, "Don't worry. I won't be calling," before, with a last glare at Jake, he strode away.

Jake turned to face Mimi and saw she was looking a little shaken. "Are you okay?"

"Yes." She was still watching Greg as he marched away, her expression changing to something more thoughtful.

"I'm sorry about your friend." Jake gave an apologetic shrug when Mimi brought her gaze back to him.

She laughed harshly. "Don't be. I think you just saved me from a big mistake." She looked Jake up and down for a moment, before giving him a smile. "So. You wanted to buy me a drink?"

"I—yes. Please." Jake breathed in deeply, aware that the encounter with Mimi's erstwhile date had put him on edge in a way he hadn't been for months. Not since he'd seen off Goetz and Hicks in the same day. He gestured for Mimi to lead the way. "If you'd like to suggest somewhere? I don't really know the area..."

Mimi led him to a bar in a hotel halfway along the next block. They didn't speak—the cold wind was in their faces and would have snatched their words away— but Jake was aware of Mimi sliding him sideways looks as he held open the door for her, pulled out a chair for her to sit down and waved across the waitress while he shucked his own coat and sat opposite. He noticed her taking in the gold braid on his jacket cuffs as he laid his coat across the back of his chair. Saber didn't insist on too much scrambled egg for its pilots, just enough to reassure those customers who liked

their pilots to look like they were qualified, but maybe he should have made the time to change. Or maybe not: Mimi smiled at him when she saw he'd caught her looking. Perhaps his job would give him a little more credibility in her eyes and help him talk her round.

Once the waitress had come over and taken their order—a glass of white wine for Mimi and a scotch for Jake—Jake looked back at Mimi and saw she was watching him again.

"So." She settled herself a little more comfortably and smoothed down her skirt. "I'm afraid that in all that... unpleasantness back there, I didn't catch your name."

"Jake. Jake Green." He ran a hand through his hair, feeling a little self-conscious. The name didn't seem to mean anything to her, though. He guessed either she hadn't been given the details of who'd helped pay off part of Stanley's debts or hadn't paid much attention to them.

"And you say we have a friend in common?" The waitress was back with their order and Mimi picked up her glass as soon as it arrived and took a sip. "I don't think we've met, though?" She leaned forward and set her glass down, looking up at him from under lowered eyelashes. "I'm sure I would remember if we had."

Jake cleared his throat. "Umm, no. And it's more of a mutual acquaintance than a friend. Stanley Richmond."

When Mimi arched an eyebrow, apparently not immediately recognizing Stanley's name either, Jake added hastily, "You audited his farm. In Kansas."

Mimi sat back in her chair, crossing her arms in front of her. "You want to talk to me about one of my audits?" Her tone was cold and Jake's doubts about whether this was a good idea began to creep back.

He cleared his throat again. "Yes. Well, kind of. You see—."

"Wait." Mimi's eyes had narrowed and her tone had grown even icier. "Are you the guy called my office yesterday and tried to make an appointment?"

"Umm. Yes." Jake thought it was best to admit it. Taking a deep breath, he leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees. "Look, I know I have no standing in the case and you've no reason to talk to me. But Stanley's a friend. My best friend. I lent him some of the money he used to help him pay off his debt. And I was just hoping that..." He hesitated, not sure what he was hoping for now. Taking another deep breath, he tried again. "I know he's an idiot when it comes to money, but that farm's been in his family for four generations and he does a great job running it." He saw Mimi's expression begin to darken and hurriedly added, "Apart from the finances, I mean. I was just hoping you could... maybe give him a little extra help? Some advice to make sure he stays on track and doesn't mess up again. I'm not asking you to treat his situation any differently to anyone else's. Just... be nice to him?" Jake tilted his head, hoping his sincerity would win her over, although her face had remained stony while he'd floundered on.

She sat looking at him for a moment, her lips pressed together. Then she drew in a deep breath of her own. "You know, Mr Green—" She reached for her wine glass but stopped, her fingers an inch away from it, before sitting back again without picking it up. She was still looking at it as she carried on speaking, her voice carrying a hint of rebuke. "—it's a good thing you didn't ask me to treat your friend differently. That could have... unfortunate consequences."

A trickle of cold ran down Jake's spine as he suddenly realized she probably meant he would have been committing some kind of federal crime: suborning an official, or something along those lines. That he'd maybe be getting Stanley into more trouble, not less.

Mimi was still speaking and he dragged his attention back to her. "You're right that you have no standing in the case. I'm afraid I have to end this conversation. Please don't try to contact me again." Her voice hitched and, to his surprise, he saw her lift a hand to her face and wipe her cheek.

What the—? Jake frowned at her, wondering why she was suddenly so upset.

He saw her take another deep breath, before she went on, her voice steadier, "The best—the only advice—I can give to Mr Richmond is to keep to his payment schedule and to have his returns prepared by a competent professional." Gathering up her coat, she stood up. She looked down at Jake, an expression of regret on her face. "You should also let him know that sending friends, no matter how charming, as intermediaries is not acceptable."

Jake took a moment to process her words and then it suddenly hit him why she was upset. It was the last thing he'd would've expected, but it seemed Mimi had gotten the wrong end of the stick at the start and thought this was, well, a kind of date. That earlier, when they'd first sat down, she'd been trying to *flirt* with him. So not only had he given professional offense, he'd managed to make her feel like she'd made a fool of herself personally as well.

She was already a few steps away by the time understanding sank in and he leaped to his feet. "Mimi. Miss Clark." She turned back to him, her expression tight with misery. He spread his hands in apology. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. But, please, don't blame Stanley. He has no idea I'm here. This is not his fault."

She nodded wordlessly in acknowledgment, before wheeling on her heel and hurrying toward the exit. Jake watched her go, before he sat back down heavily. Her abandoned wine and his untouched scotch sat accusingly on the table in front of him. Reaching out for the scotch, he tossed half of it back in one swallow. Why did he always have to screw up everything?

oOo

"Hawkins!" Jake again rapped impatiently on the door to Hawkins' apartment. A moment later, he heard it being unlocked. It opened a couple inches and Hawkins peered out.

"Jake? What the—?" There was a heavy dose of irritation mixed in with Hawkins' surprise as he opened the door a little further. Jake reflected that this was still an improvement on the way he'd answered the door on some of their previous encounters: for once, at least, Hawkins wasn't pointing a gun at him.

"I need to talk." Jake bounced impatiently on the balls of his feet, itching to be asked inside, into a place where he didn't have to hide the secrets he was carrying and where he didn't have to pretend that the world now was exactly the way it should have been and always had been. He lifted the brown paper bag he carried, it's contents heavy, to show the other man. "I brought scotch."

Hawkins' nose crinkled. "Are you drunk?"

"A bit," Jake admitted. After Mimi had left, he'd chased down the first scotch with two more. Not much, but he'd been drinking quickly. When Hawkins still hesitated, Jake added, "I could go back to the bar I was in, get more drunk and start blabbing to anyone who'll listen...."

Hawkins snorted and held the door open wider, inviting Jake in. "Were you this much trouble 'before'?" He didn't sound particularly annoyed, more curious, like maybe he was figuring out how the hell he'd trusted Jake back in that other life.

Jake chuckled. "Always." He handed the bottle of whisky over. While Hawkins opened it and fetched some glasses, Jake crossed to the window. The blinds weren't drawn and he could look out over the glittering city spread out below. Half a million people living out the normal, complicated, happy-unhappy lives they'd always had. This was surely the way it was supposed to be, and who was Jake to deny them and forty million others that. And yet—.

"Here." Hawkins handed him a glass with a generous measure of scotch.

"How do you stand it?" Jake asked abruptly as he accepted the drink.

"Stand what?"

"Knowing what you know." Jake waved an arm expansively at the view in front of them. "Knowing what they don't. Not being able to talk about it to anyone." He scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Not being able to *explain*...."

Hawkins gave a slight shrug. "It's what I do." He sipped at his drink. "Hmm, not bad." He tilted his glass a little in Jake's direction.

"I remembered you liked—." Jake stopped, remembering as well *how* he knew that. Walking back from New Bern, knowing there was a war coming. Thinking Heather was dead, though she hadn't been, and not understanding then the ache in his heart that he now understood all too clearly—now that she might just as well be dead for all the chance....

Turning away from the window, he flung himself into a chair. "There's all those people I saved. People I care about, even. But there's so much stuff I don't know how to fix."

"You can't fix everything, Jake." Looking up, Jake saw Hawkins was watching him closely. "What brought this on?"

Jake shrugged and huffed a laugh. "I met Mimi this evening." He saw Hawkins frown slightly. "You know, the IRS agent who audited my friend Stanley's farm. She's here in DC being miserable and Stanley's there in Jericho being lonely and...." Jake dropped his head and sighed. "And Heather's there in Jericho...." He shook his head and took another sip of whisky.

Silence stretched out between them. Jake thought about the feel of Heather's hand in his as she'd lain on the gurney after the accident, and how she'd asked his mom when he'd be back in Jericho so she could thank him, and how—just like Stanley and Mimi weren't the same people they'd become—he and Heather weren't who they'd once been.

How could they ever get back what they'd had?

"That's the price you pay, Jake." Hawkins' words made him start; Jake had almost forgotten he was there. "Sometimes... sometimes there's a bigger picture. Sometimes you have to say yes, even when that means saying no to something else you really want." Hawkins' even tone carried an edge of bitterness, and Jake wondered what Hawkins had needed to give up to save the world. Not his wife and family, that much was surely certain.

"I guess." Jake swirled the whisky in his glass for a moment, before taking another sip. "At least you and Darcy seem to manage okay."

Hawkins huffed. "Not really." When Jake raised his eyebrows, Hawkins added, his face twisted into a wry grimace, "Can't believe she agreed to talk to me for long enough that I managed to persuade her and the kids to come to Jericho with me in the first place."

"Oh." Jake looked back down at his drink. So it did seem like a crap personal life was par for the course if the universe designated you as its savior. Maybe he should just give up all hope of fixing things with Heather after all.

They lapsed back into silence, Hawkins still standing by the window looking out across the city while Jake hunched over in his chair, trying unsuccessfully to push away the memories of Heather that insisted on crowding in. At one point, Hawkins refilled their glasses, the gurgle of the liquid and the click as he set the bottle back down on the table loud in the quiet room.

"What was it like? After the bombs?" Hawkins' question made Jake jump. When he looked up and met the other man's gaze, Hawkins shrugged. "Hey, you said you needed to talk. So talk."

Jake allowed himself a wry laugh. Pulling his thoughts away from Heather, he tried to figure out what to say. "Cold? Hungry?" He shook his head. "No, it wasn't like that until later. At first, we were mostly carrying on as normal. I guess we thought that even if there was more than one bomb, it couldn't be the whole country that was messed up. FEMA would turn up and get things back to normal, right? Except then the EMP fried everything right before the president—or someone—was going to broadcast, and we reckoned we'd be on our own for a while. That was when things got bad. Even worse when New Bern attacked us." He shrugged. "Things were different again once the ASA turned up. More normal but... even more wrong, you know? Of course," Jake chuckled, "things probably weren't the same for you and your family: far as I can tell, you were stocked to the rafters with guns and gas and food. You had... other problems."

"So Darcy and Sam and Allison were okay?"

Jake could understand the question: even if none of it had now happened, Hawkins would want to know he'd taken care of them in that other reality. "I guess?" he offered. It sounded now like there'd been a lot more going on in that family than he'd known about. Though now that he thought about it... "She and the kids did go and stay with Jimmy and Margaret for a bit." Seeing Hawkins frown again, Jake added by way of explanation, "One of the deputies and his wife. So I guess the two of you had some problems. But you seemed to work things out in the end. Hell, we wouldn't have gotten half the evidence we needed to nail Tomarchio if it hadn't been for her."

"I *told* her?" Hawkins sounded incredulous. "About the job? The mission?"

"Hard to keep it from her, I would have thought?" Jake shrugged. "I mean, with the bombs and you having one of them? Besides, you didn't have any reason to keep it from her any more, did you?"

"Huh." Hawkins wrinkled his nose. "I guess not...."

Whereas, Jake reflected, tossing back his whisky as Hawkins asked him another question about the vanished past, there was no way he would ever be able to explain to Heather what she meant to him or why. And, without that, how could he ever win her back?

oOo

It was two weeks later. Jake had somehow made it back to his hotel room—he had a vague memory of Hawkins pouring him into a taxi when it was very, very late—and had managed to sober up and talk himself out of the funk he'd been in by the time he had to fly his clients back to San Diego the following evening. But the despair that had overwhelmed him when Mimi had stormed off still hadn't quite lifted. Even if he was now smiling to himself as he watched from the far side of the beach bar while Freddy and Anna received the congratulations of their wedding guests.

Freddy looked like the cat that had gotten the cream, while Anna was glowing with happiness. From time to time, she unconsciously curved a protective hand across her stomach, but Jake knew the baby was doing well, even if the pregnancy sometimes made her tired and Freddy had to nag her to put her feet up. "But there's so much to do!" she always exclaimed with a laugh, and there was: they'd finally completed the purchase of the bar just a week earlier. The wedding itself had been hastily put together in between making plans for the business, and the reception wouldn't last long. In just a few hours, the two of them would be changed out of their wedding finery and the place would be open once more to office workers holding Christmas parties and gaggles of college students starting early on celebrating the end of term.

Looking at the scene before him, Jake finally buried the last of his disappointment that he hadn't been able to make things work out between Stanley and Mimi. Though he'd failed there, some things he had gotten right, and this was one of them. Instead of Freddy choking out his life on Jake's apartment floor, and Anna departing on that bus to Houston and ending up with god-knows-what happening to her when the bombs went off, here they were: happily married, with their own business, and a kid on the way who would grow up with a father and a mother. What more could Jake ask for?

"Wishing that was you?"

Startled out of his thoughts, Jake discovered one of Anna's sisters—Sophie; she and Paula had been bridesmaids—had sidled up next to him. They were just as pretty as Freddy had claimed. Jake was also beginning to suspect they'd been promised an introduction to *him* by the way both of them had, at various points so far during the day, caught his eye and given him shy, flirtatious smiles. The thought that maybe he was considered a good catch now had amused him greatly—until he'd started wondering if Heather would ever see him that way.

But maybe... maybe now she would. Now he wasn't so much the black sheep of the Green family and he'd won back some of his father's respect. Butterflies fluttered in his stomach as he reminded himself that, in just over a week's time, he'd be flying home for Christmas and he'd see her again. He remembered his mom's words and the way his heart had leaped as he'd heard them: *she's asked three times now when you'll be back in Jericho and she can thank you*. He pushed away the fear that maybe that was all she wanted, to say thank you. That there wouldn't be anything more.

"Jake?"

Sophie's slightly puzzled tone made him realize he still hadn't answered her earlier question. He smiled down at her. "A little."

"Anyone in mind?" Sophie batted her eyelashes at him. *Definitely* flirting now.

He gave her an embarrassed smile. "Yeah, actually. There's someone back home that I... kind of had a thing with before. Wanna see if we can still work things out."

"Oh." Sophie's face fell slightly. "The farm girl in Iowa." Obviously Freddy had mentioned that too.

"Kansas," Jake corrected, automatically but without any heat. Looking across at Freddy and Anna again, and at how happy they were, Jake reckoned the universe did owe him another chance with Heather, a proper chance, just for that.

And when it came, he was going to grab on to it with both hands and not let go.

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