

Indecent Proposal

By: Scribblesinink

o0o

Present day

Cursing the old Ford for being so slow, Jake trundled home from the airfield. He'd touched down on Jericho's small airstrip about an hour ago, and he just wanted the trip to be over. He couldn't wait to kiss his wife and hug his infant son.

Finally, the ranch house came into view, and Jake turned onto the track leading up to the yard, the Ford's wheels sending up a tail of dust in its wake. Jake was glad to see Charlotte parked in front of the house: it meant Heather would be home, and not still out running errands or visiting a friend.

He was really longing to see her again.

He parked next to Charlotte, snatched his overnight bag from the truck, and climbed up the porch. As he opened the door, Deputy Dawg bowled into him. Yapping excitedly, the dog jumped up and tried to give Jake a welcoming lick. At six months old, the puppy, boisterous and happy, had nearly grown into his full size.

"Down, Dep." Heather's soft but firm command made the dog settle back on his haunches, though he kept on gazing up at Jake expectantly, panting and quivering with the effort to obey while his short stub of a tail swished back and forth. Jake chuckled, reaching down to scratch the dog behind the ears while he glanced up at Heather. She was descending the last of the stairs, and the way she smiled at him made his heart flutter. It felt like he'd been gone far longer than a few days.

Dropping his bag and abandoning the dog, he closed the distance to her in a few large strides, fully intending to kiss her soundly. Then the memories of the past few days intruded, dampening his joy and making him hesitate. He ended up giving her a quick brush of lips against lips instead. She shot him the sort of look that told him his last-second pull-back hadn't gone unnoticed, but thankfully she didn't ask.

"I missed you." He gave her a half-shrug, before he peered around the living room and changed the subject. "Where's JJ?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I just put him down for the night." Heather gave him an apologetic grimace. "He was tired and—." She broke off, letting out a quick chuckle. "He's discovered himself."

Jake raised a puzzled eyebrow, not understanding, and Heather explained, "In the mirror. He's *fascinated* by his own reflection."

"Ah." Jake smiled. JJ was growing up so fast, making discoveries and learning new sounds and gestures almost daily, that three days away from him was like a lifetime. "I'll go up and take a peek, okay?"

"Sure." Heather nodded. "Just be careful you don't wake him."

"I'll be quiet," Jake promised as he tiptoed up the stairs. Behind him, Heather disappeared into the kitchen, ordering Deputy Dawg to follow her to make sure the dog wouldn't go after Jake and wake the baby.

A few minutes later, after Jake had snuck a peek at his sleeping son from the doorway—he hadn't dared walk further into the room since the floorboards were old and creaky—he joined Heather in the kitchen. She was busy at the counter, chopping bell peppers for dinner.

"How was your trip?" She glanced up from the task as Jake ducked into the fridge to grab himself a beer.

"Too long." He didn't elaborate, although he'd racked his brain the entire flight back from San Antonio on how he could possibly explain to her what had happened.

Heather shot him a sympathetic smile before she directed him to take care of the tomato sauce, which was bubbling on the stove. "And Emily and Mack? How're they doing?"

Jake grabbed a spoon to stir the sauce. The trip had been set up as a quick cargo run to Texas, with a brief side visit to say hello to Em and Mack. Or at least, that was what Jake had thought it would be....

oOo

Two days earlier

The hot Texan sun beat down on the arid landscape, making the road ahead of Jake shimmer in the heat. On the car stereo, some country singer was warbling melancholically about broken hearts. Jake reached over to turn it off before lowering his window, letting the warm, dusty air wash over him and ruffle his hair. Though the rental car had the luxury of air conditioning, he'd learned to

appreciate the charms of an open window over the cold dry blast from an a/c-system.

Following the directions Mack had given him when he'd called from the airport, Jake found the turnoff from the highway easily enough. He grinned to himself as he passed through the gateway: a big-horned cow skull hung from the arch that spanned the drive, empty sockets glaring down at all who dared enter the Davies ranch.

The ranch complex itself was another half mile down the track: a sprawl of low-slung buildings that gleamed white in the bright sun. Jake whistled appreciatively when he saw it; he'd known Mack's family was well-off and that Mack wasn't dependent on his army pension once he'd retired, but this was something else. The main house on its own dwarfed Em's old place in The Pines.

A couple of large cows—presumably part of the prize-winning breed Mack had taken up rearing—gawked curiously at Jake across the fence of a nearby corral as he got out of the car. Before he'd taken two steps towards the house, the heavy front door swung open, and Emily rushed out to throw herself in his arms. "Jake!"

He hugged her in return. "Mrs Davies."

She laughed and punched him lightly in the shoulder. "You're still allowed to call me Emily, you know."

Jake grinned back, and leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. Pulling away, he held her at arms' length, looking her over. Her hair was shorter than he remembered, and her skin glowed with health. She seemed happy and more relaxed than he'd seen her in a long time, even before the September bombs. "You look great," he told her.

"Thanks." She smiled, apparently pleased with his compliment, and looked him over appreciatively in turn. "So do you. Come, let's go in." She led him into the house. It was cool inside, the tiled hallway wide and shady, with a banistered staircase curving up to the second floor.

"Jake Green!" Mack's voice boomed across the tiles. "So you finally decided to grace the Double M Ranch with your presence." He strode up, grabbed Jake's hand, and pumped it vigorously. "Welcome to Texas. In much better circumstances than before, I'm glad to say."

Jake nodded, sobering for a moment. Three years had gone by since he'd made that desperate run for Lackland with the bomb. A few days later, he'd met Mack, then a Texas army colonel, and returned with him to Jericho to fight the ASA's occupation.

"Well, come on. Don't stand there in the hallway." Emily grabbed Jake's hand and pulled him after her into a sitting room, where she directed him to a huge upholstered sofa. "You must tell us all about everyone." She took a seat in a nearby armchair herself. "How's Heather? And Gail? And Stanley and Mimi? Don't roll your eyes at me, Mack Davies."

The last words were directed at her husband, who had indeed been making a wry face at Jake, thinking his wife couldn't see. His mustache trembled with suppressed laughter as he shook his head in mock-despair and uttered in a stage whisper, "She knows me too well."

Jake couldn't help but grin back. It was good to listen to Em and Mack squabble good-naturedly, and he was glad to see that life in Texas seemed to suit Emily.

"So, how is everyone?" Emily repeated the question. "Please, tell me."

"They're all well." Jake settled into the firm cushions of the sofa and crossed one ankle over the other knee. "Mom sends her regards, and Heather's sorry she couldn't come along." He shrugged. "With the baby still so small...."

There hadn't been room in the plane, anyway. Jake had needed to take out the extra seat from the Air Tractor in order to be able to stash all the cargo that he'd been hired to fly to Texas.

"How *is* JJ?" Emily leaned forward eagerly. "Oh, did you bring a picture?"

"Of course." Jake laughed and dug for his wallet. He handed her a snapshot of JJ taken a few weeks after he was born. "He's already gotten a lot bigger than that, though."

Emily studied the picture. "He's got your eyes." She gave him the photo back with a slightly wistful smile. "God, Jake, you have a son. I can't quite believe it...."

Jake put the photo away, unsure what to say. At times, he still had trouble believing it himself, although the broken nights of the first couple months, and the subsequent bruises under his eyes reflected back from the mirror in the morning offered more proof than he might've asked for.

"So, what can I get you, Jake?" Mack, busying himself at the drinks cabinet, broke the somewhat uneasy silence that had fallen over the room. "Scotch? Bourbon? What's your poison?"

"Um... just soda?" Jake gestured vaguely toward where his car stood parked in the yard outside. "Still need to drive back to San Antonio and—."

"Oh no, you don't." Emily beamed at him brightly. "You'll be staying overnight, of course."

Jake blinked at her. He'd planned to crash out in the back of the Air Tractor for the night and then, with any luck, find himself another load to take back to Kansas in the morning so he wouldn't have to fly home empty and pay for the return fuel himself.

"I'm supposed to take the car back...?" He'd only gotten the rental for the day.

"Mack can have one of the hands do that for you." Em sketched a dismissive wave at his objection. "Or call them to give you an extension." She gave him an pleading look. "I need you here, tonight."

Again, Jake blinked, accepting the drink Mack offered him without really seeing it. What was he missing? He glanced over at Mack, but the former army colonel avoided his gaze, intent on swirling his drink around in his own glass, the ice cubes clinking softly. Jake had a sudden suspicion that maybe he should've gone for the scotch after all.

Emily caught the look he shot Mack, and her eyes narrowed. "Mack didn't tell you?"

Jake sat forward, planting both feet on the floor. "Tell me what?"

Emily directed an annoyed glare in Mack's direction. The tall Texan murmured something about needing to see to one of his prize bulls, before hurrying from the room. Jake couldn't quite blame him for making himself scarce; he remembered that look only too well—usually, with himself on the receiving end.

But when Emily turned back to Jake, her expression seemed to hold more eager appeal than pique. "I've got involved with some charity work," she explained with a shy little smile. "For some of the orphanages that took in kids who lost their parents when, you know..." Her voice trailed off a beat, before she gave herself a shake. "Making sure they have enough school books, that kind of thing. Tonight is my first fund raising event, here at the ranch."

"Okay?" Jake gave a slight shrug to encourage her to go on. He was still clueless as to what any of that had to do with him, or with whatever Mack was supposed to have told him about.

Emily glanced up at him through her lashes, and he knew that look too: he wasn't gonna like what she'd say next.

"I scheduled it for tonight because I knew you'd be here. There are quite a few

people who're interested in meeting you. After all, you are the guy who flew the bomb here and set the ASA's downfall in motion." She gave him a guilty smile. "You're a bit of a celebrity around San Antonio, you know."

Jake rolled his eyes in exasperation. "So?"

"And I was kinda hoping..." Emily cleared her throat and stared down at her hands, "that you'd agree to an auction?"

"An auction?" Jake shook his head, puzzled. "Selling what?"

"You know..." Her gaze met his briefly before it skittered away again. "One night with the hot celebrity pilot...?"

"What...?" The full meaning of what she'd said was slow to sink in and it took Jake a few seconds to grasp it. "What?! No!"

"Come on, Jake," she pleaded.

"No. Sheesh, Em, I can't believe you'd even ask me that." Jake suddenly understood why Mack hadn't dared mention any of his wife's plans. Hell, Jake wouldn't be surprised if Mack hadn't even known all the details of what Emily was plotting.

"Jake, it's—." She peered up at him again, and her eyes widened in shock. "Oh God, not like *that*. It'll only be for a dinner date. Nothing more. I promise."

He puffed out his cheeks, relieved, but his answer stayed the same. "No."

"Jake...." Emily tried a third time, her tone taking on a plaintive edge.

Jake shook his head. "No." Emily met his gaze again, holding it, and Jake knew there would've been a time when she wouldn't have accepted his 'no' for an answer, no matter how often he'd reiterated it. A time when he would've given in to her eventually and done whatever it was she wanted. But those days were long since gone, and Emily knew it as well as he did.

As if to prove it, she sighed heavily. "All right. No auction, then." She pulled up straighter and added beseechingly, "But you'll still be here, right?"

Jake hesitated, finding the appeal in her voice hard to resist. He knew the wisest thing to do was to head back to San Antonio and try to find himself a new job for the morning. He'd only come out for a short visit, after all, to say hello and see how Emily and Mack were doing. But he also couldn't think of a good reason to deny her this. With the auction off the table—Em and her crazy ideas!—he didn't think it could hurt any. While it might not be exactly his idea of a

fun evening, with strangers gawking at him and whispering behind his back, it'd obviously make Em happy. And it was for a good cause....

He nodded. "Alright. I'll be here."

Her features broke into a bright smile, and Jake held up a hand in warning. "No auctioning, though, you hear?"

Emily nodded gravely. "Promise."

oOo

Present day

"Emily wanted to sell you off?" Heather sounded disbelieving as she nudged Jake with her hip to step aside and let her sweep the chopped peppers off the cutting board and into the sauce.

"Yeah." Moving away from the stove Jake reached into the cupboard for the dinner plates and glasses to set the table. "She'd gotten this ridiculous notion that *Win a date with the famous pilot who flew the bomb to Texas* would raise a lot of money for her charity." He snorted in disgust at the thought.

"And what did you tell her?"

"I told her no, of course." Stunned that Heather needed to ask, Jake whipped around to stare at her. But then he caught the twinkle in her eyes and the way her lips twitched as she tried to keep a straight face, and he realized she was laughing at him.

"It's not funny," he mumbled grumpily. Heather wouldn't be laughing if —.

Heather giggled, no longer able to contain her amusement. "Oh, come on, Jake. Be honest: it's priceless." She dropped the spoon back into the sauce and, taking a step towards him, cupped his face with her hand. He leaned slightly into her touch, only half aware he was doing so, as she let out another soft laugh. "It's just so... so *Emily*, to come up with a crazy idea like that, and then drop it on you at the last minute."

Despite himself, Jake chuckled, reaching up to put his hand over hers. "Okay, okay. I guess you're right." Then he remembered what happened after the party. If only Em and the auction had been the worst of it.... Sobering again, he dropped his hand to his side.

"Jake?" Heather must've sensed his shift in mood, because she drew back, her expression growing more serious. She raised a puzzled eyebrow.

Jake shook himself back to the present and dipped his head at the stove, where the sauce threatened to burble over the rim of the pot. "Um...."

"Oh, oops." Heather dashed back to the stove, quickly turning down the burner under the pot before embarking on the last preparations for the meal.

Once the food was ready to serve, Jake helped her scoop it onto their plates and carry them over to the table. He realized as he sat down that he'd have to tell her at some point. Tell her everything: about the deal he'd gained and lost, and... and all the rest of it. But he didn't want to spoil the homecoming dinner she'd cooked. So he kept quiet and tried to enjoy the meal.

He hardly tasted a bite of it.

oOo

An hour later, they'd finished dinner. While Heather went upstairs to feed JJ, Jake cleared away the last of the dishes, and took his glass of freshly made lemonade out to the porch. The summer air was more balmy than hot now the sun had gone down. Insects were buzzing around the lit porch lamp, taking kamikaze runs toward the light; Jake watched them without really seeing them.

A few minutes later, Heather joined him on the wood bench, carrying a moisture-speckled glass of her own. She settled herself sideways, so she could pull up her legs and watch him at the same time. She was silent for a minute, sipping from her glass, before she asked, "Are you gonna tell me what's bugging you?"

He glanced at her and then away, taking a deep breath. Best get it over with quickly. "Remember that cargo deal I told you about when I called you from Em's?"

"Yes—Oh!" Heather started up straight, almost spilling her lemonade as she slapped a palm against her forehead. "I'm sorry, I totally forgot. That man called. Aaron Mcsomething."

Jake's chest tightened and he felt the blood draw from his face. "Mcaskill?" he croaked.

"Yes." Heather gave him an odd look.

Oh God, what had Mcaskill told her? What had he said to her about Tulsa? Jake took a gulp from his drink, stalling for time while he tried to make sense of the jumble of thoughts in his mind. Some of the lemonade went down the wrong way, and he started coughing. It gave him something to focus his attention on,

though, as did Heather's hand patting his back to help him clear his throat.

"You okay?"

Jake nodded wordlessly. Once he'd got his breath back, he huffed a silent laugh at his own expense. He was being an idiot. If Mcaskill had told Heather anything about what had happened in Tulsa, she wouldn't have cooked him dinner. More likely he'd have found his clothes in a suitcase on the porch and the locks changed. But if that hadn't been why Mcaskill had phoned, why had he called...?

He realized Heather was still talking, telling him about the call. "Anyway, he was wondering why you'd left so suddenly. He wants you to call him back as soon as possible, so you can discuss the terms of the contract." Her expression turned worried. "Are you sure you're all right? You look as white as a sheet."

Jake frowned, Heather's words finally making it through fully. "The deal's not off?"

He couldn't keep a note of disbelief out of his voice, even though he felt a burst of relief at the news. His elation didn't last long, though. Mcaskill probably just hadn't yet spoken to his wife when he'd called.

The furrow in Heather's brow deepened. "He didn't say anything to suggest that, no. Why would you even think he would?"

"Um..." The lemonade churned sourly in Jake's stomach. He'd give anything not to tell her what had happened, to keep from hurting her. But he also knew that he *had* to. If he tried to keep it a secret, it'd eat at him and she'd drag it out of him anyway. Or she'd find out some other way, and be hurt even more. He cleared his throat. No, he'd just have to tell her. And then hope she could forgive him....

oOo

Two days earlier

"I did warn Emily you wouldn't agree to that insane plan of hers." Mack sidled up to Jake and offered him a fresh glass of scotch. Standing at the edge of the room with his back to the wall, Jake was trying to be as unobtrusive as possible as he observed the wealthy San Antonians mingling with each other, the men in expensive suits and the women dripping with jewelry.

Thankfully, the initial excitement over his presence had died down, and he was enjoying the moment of quiet. The unrestrained attention people had paid him had, as he'd anticipated, made him very uncomfortable. His discomfort was

only exacerbated by feeling rather scruffy in comparison to the well-dressed crowd, despite the nice jacket with slightly-too-long sleeves Mack had lent him.

He huffed wryly at Mack's words, but accepted the former colonel's peace offer of a fresh drink. "You could've warned *me*."

Mack shrugged, his mouth quirking upwards in a self-deprecating grin. "And end up defending her idea to you? Or vice versa?" He chuckled. "No, thank you."

Jake sipped from his drink and nodded in understanding. Tactically speaking, Mack had made the smart decision, and he couldn't really blame him. Still, Jake would've liked to be forewarned about what Emily had planned .

He glanced over to where she was, working the room, laughing and talking animatedly to the people around her. He smiled slightly, despite himself. She was in her element here and, crazy schemes aside, he was pleased to see her so happy.

"Anyway," Mack interrupted Jake's quiet musing, "let me make it up to you some. There's someone I'd like you to meet." Setting down his own glass on a nearby dresser, he took Jake by the elbow and guided him toward two men in another part of the large room who were engrossed in what sounded like a heated debate on bearer bonds.

"Jake, meet Aaron Mcaskill." Mack gestured at the man on Jake's left, a portly figure chewing on an unlit cigar who looked to be in his late fifties. "And John Tucker." Mack indicated the other with a dip of his head. Tucker was thinner and taller than Mcaskill and sported a neat beard that made it hard to guess his age.

They both turned toward Jake, and Mcaskill looked him up and down inquisitively. "So, you're the hero who defied Cheyenne's fighters and got that bomb to Lackland?"

Jake nodded uneasily, wondering what Mack was up to introducing him to these guys. "I guess."

Mcaskill laughed and winked at Mack. "Modest too, I see."

Tucker interrupted them, not giving Jake a chance to reply, and excused himself from the conversation. He pumped Jake's hand in farewell, adding, "Good to've met you, son," before he turned away to find another cluster of business types to talk with.

"I'm—," Jake started, after Tucker'd left, once more thinking he really should've gone back to San Antonio in the afternoon instead of giving in to Emily's request for him to stay.

Mcaskill didn't let him finish. "Mack here tells me you got your own company now?" He gestured with his cigar. "Transportation business?"

"Um, yeah." Jake nodded, shooting a quick, curious glance in Mack's direction. Last year, Mack had been the one to introduce him to the rich oil baron who'd taken the Roadrunner off of his hands. Maybe this meeting was supposed to lead to another good deal. Mack gave Jake a barely perceptible nod, mouth quirking slightly, as if confirming Jake's suspicion.

Jake turned back to Mcaskill. "Flying cargo, mostly."

"Good, good! You might be just the man I'm lookin' for, then." Mcaskill clapped Jake on the back, steering him away from Mack, who watched them go with a pleased-as-punch grin. Jake made a mental note to thank him later. It was hard finding decent work, even though the economy had been slowly picking up again since the end of the war.

"Me," Mcaskill continued, "I'm in the import and export business. Antiques, art, that kind of thing." He sucked on his cold cigar, glared at it, and muttered in Jake's direction, "Tryin' to quit." He stashed the cigar in the breast pocket of his jacket with a shrug. "Anyway, every once in a while, I got something needs transporting fast from A to B. Delicate goods, the kind wouldn't survive getting jostled around in a trailer, and that I wouldn't trust the cargo handlers working for the big firms to handle properly. Understand?"

"Yes sir." Jake nodded, hardly able to contain his growing excitement as he deduced what Mcaskill was proposing.

"I'd require someone reliable for the job." Again, Mcaskill looked him up and down, even though he had to crane his neck to meet Jake's gaze. "Someone trustworthy."

"Of course." Jake put on his most serious expression. "If you hire me, you'll find Ant Aviation to be—."

"Yeah, yeah." Mcaskill dismissed the rest of Jake's reassurances with a flick of his hand. "No need to sell me your services. Your history, and Mack's recommendation, are good enough for me. I'm sure we'll have ourselves a mutually profitable relationship."

"Yes sir." As Mcaskill grabbed his hand and pumped it to seal their agreement, Jake glanced past the Texan's bald crown and briefly met Mack's gaze again, trying to convey his gratitude. Then he directed his attention back to Mcaskill. "I won't let you down, Mr. Mcaskill."

They would need to work out the details, of course, like what locations Mcaskill needed him to fly to, and how often and for what fee, but Jake couldn't wait to tell Heather about the offer. Ant Aviation was still struggling to break even, the odd job he managed to grab here and there barely enough to pay for the fuel and the hangar rental. A regular client would mean a steadier income. Maybe, Jake allowed himself to daydream, he could even begin to think about moving on to the next step: the flight school.

"Aaron, please." The words pulled Jake's thoughts back to Mcaskill as the Texan let go of his hand. "If we're going to be partners, call me Aaron." He dug up his cigar again and put it between his lips.

"Sure, Mr.—." Jake caught himself. "Aaron."

"Good, good." Mcaskill filled his cheeks and blew out a breath. "And now I need another favor from you, Jake."

"Sure." Jake cocked his head inquiringly.

"What are your plans for tomorrow?"

Jake shrugged. "Go back to Kansas, I guess." *Give Heather the good news.*

He pictured her face as he told her about Mcaskill's offer. He considered himself incredibly lucky that she'd supported his dream to have his own aviation business instead of taking up the FAA on their offer, but he hated how hard it still was. She still needed to take on tutoring jobs, next to being the company's main—and unpaid—mechanic, and it wasn't how Jake had imagined providing for her, and for their son....

"No other pressing engagements?" Mcaskill prompted.

Jake shook his head. "No, not really." He wondered where the man was going with this line of questioning.

"Good, good." Mcaskill grinned. "I want to hire your services for the day, then. As a pilot," he clarified at Jake's startled look. "See, my wife," he gestured vaguely across the room to where a gaggle of women were huddled around Emily, their heads close together as they chattered and laughed, "and some of her friends have some luncheon thing to attend tomorrow, in Tulsa." He rolled his shoulders, waving his dead cigar through the air. "Some famous writer or other's gonna read to them from his latest book, I think. Hell, don't ask me, but it's had her all in a tizzy for days."

Jake wasn't about to ask. He glanced again at the group. A tall, lithe woman in a red dress smiled back at him, her teeth unnaturally white. Mrs Mcaskill?

Probably not. She looked more the age Mcaskill's daughters might be, if he had any.

"Anyway," Mcaskill continued, apparently unaware of Jake's distraction; feeling a little guilty, Jake refocused on him, "my regular pilot had himself an accident yesterday. Damned man should never have been on a horse in the first place." He shook his head, dismayed. "Fell off, broke his arm and now he can't fly. I've been despairing how to get Cece to her event in time. If she misses it...." There was another rueful shake of his head. "My life's gonna be a living hell, let me tell you. Then Mack tells me about you bein' here, today. So, see, you coming to Texas was perfect timing."

Jake frowned and started to shake his head. "I'm sorry, Mr.—Aaron. My plane's not equipped for carrying passengers." And why would Mcaskill offer him a job flying cargo in the first place, if he had his own pilot on staff?

"What?" Mcaskill shot Jake a confused look, before his expression cleared. "Ah, haha. No, Jake, we won't be needing your plane." He chuckled again. "Leastwise, not for carryin' my wife around." He puffed up his chest a little, and added proudly, "I got myself a corporate jet for that particular purpose. Gulfstream G150, one of the post-war models. Just need someone to fly her."

Jake blinked, surprised. A Gulfstream was a far more powerful airplane than he'd expect an importer of art and antiques would own or need. It was the kind of business jet used by multinationals. But the way Mcaskill waited expectantly for Jake's reaction suggested the man had a taste for expensive toys. And, truth be told, Jake's own mouth was watering a little at the thought of flying a brand new Gulfstream. He loved his old Air Tractor, truly, he did—if for no other reason than that she was *his*. But she was still a battered, second-hand crop duster, with a door that needed an extra crank before it'd shut properly. With its Honeywell engines and state-of-the-art avionics, the Gulfstream would seem like a graceful swan next to his own ugly duckling.

"So, what d'you say?" Mcaskill peered up at Jake, a hopeful expression on his face.

Jake couldn't think of a good enough reason to refuse Mcaskill's request, and he believed he had every reason to agree to it: it'd be a sign of good will for their future relations; give him the chance to pilot a very fine aircraft for a while; and offer him an opportunity to squeeze a bit more cash out of this run to Texas. Besides, it wasn't as if he had any pressing business waiting for him back in Jericho; his next job wasn't scheduled until Tuesday. The only objection was he'd planned to be home around midday tomorrow and spend some time with Heather and JJ. Jake chuckled ruefully at himself; seemed he was turning into a real squaretoes.

He dipped his head in Mcaskill's direction. "Sure, okay."

"Perfect." Mcaskill clapped him on the shoulder with a flat palm, grinning broadly. "You're a true lifesaver, Jake. Come on." He wrapped an arm around Jake's shoulders, urging him along. "Let's go meet the wife. Cece, honey...?"

Much to Jake's surprise, the woman in the red dress turned around at Mcaskill's hail. She intently looked Jake up and down, in a way that made him awkwardly aware that his borrowed jacket didn't fit quite as well as it should. The smile she offered in greeting was friendly enough, though, her teeth dazzling in the lamplight. Up close, Jake realized she was older than he'd first surmised, nearer in age to Mcaskill than she'd looked at a distance.

"Jake, this is my wife, Cece." Mcaskill turned towards her. "Honey, have you met Mr Green—Jake—yet?" He gave Jake a little nudge in the back to make him take another step forward.

Mrs Mcaskill's smile widened. "Yes, dear, I have." She ducked her head at Jake. "We were introduced earlier. I'm sure you remember."

To be honest, Jake didn't remember, but he was willing to accept her word for it. During the course of the evening, he'd shaken hands with so many strangers, and heard so many names, he couldn't recall half of them. He wasn't about to tell her that, though.

She leaned forward, placing one hand lightly on his chest, and he caught a whiff of her perfume, sweet and flowery, as she tittered in a low voice, "I was most disappointed, Mr Green, that you refused to go along with dear Emily's wonderful idea to hold an auction."

Jake stiffened a little, risking a dark glare at Emily, standing behind Mrs Mcaskill. She gave him a tiny shrug in return. He opened his mouth to speak.

"Well, honey," Mcaskill clucked his tongue, not letting Jake get a word in, "you'll be happy to know that I've done you one better. See, Jake has agreed to take you to Tulsa in the morning. For the, um,.... For that thing you're having."

"The reading?" Mrs Mcaskill's eyes glittered with something Jake couldn't quite place, and she clapped her hands together enthusiastically. "Oh, Aaron, you are the best husband ever."

Over their heads, Jake met Emily's gaze again. She offered him an apologetic little smirk. He suppressed the urge to make a face, already half-regretting having agreed to Mcaskill's request. He found himself thinking, somewhat unkindly, that Mrs Mcaskill came across as a bit of a scatterbrain: all pretty package but not much substance. He shrugged away the thought: his job was to

fly her to Tulsa and back; the rest was none of his concern.

"Don't you forget it." Mcaskill beamed happily at his wife. "Anyway, I'm sure you and your friends are in the best of hands with Jake."

"I'm sure you're right, dear." Mrs Mcaskill's gaze traveled meaningfully over Jake again, down and back up, before she pinned him with her gaze. "So, Mr Green—can I call you Jake? Mr Green sounds so formal, don't you think?" At his somewhat reluctant nod, she added brightly, "Good! You call me Cece. So, Jake, we'll see you at the airport in the morning."

oOo

The next morning, bright and early, Jake said his farewells to Emily and Mack. Emily made him promise before she let him go to give their regards to Heather and the rest of the town.

Once Jake reached San Antonio, he dropped his car at the rental station, checked the Air Tractor was okay to remain where it was for the day, and then took a cab crosstown to Stinson Municipal airport. Saturday morning traffic was busier than he'd reckoned with, and it was mid-morning before he reached his destination. It took him another fifteen minutes to find the hangar that housed Mcaskill's plane. The hangar doors had been opened wide already, and the sparkling white Gulfstream waited on the concrete floor just inside.

Though Jake had started out early enough that he arrived only ten minutes later than the agreed-upon time, he saw, much to his surprise, that Cece Mcaskill was standing next to the small set of stairs that led up to the cabin. Three other expensively-dressed women, clutching purses, chattered animatedly nearby. Even given that he was late, Jake had fully expected to have to wait for them, rather than the opposite. Seemed this event he was taking them to must be more important than he'd supposed.

Cece had started impatiently tapping her foot and ostentatiously checking her watch as Jake hurried into the hangar. When his shadow fell across the floor in front of her, she looked up, openly acknowledging him at last. "There you are. *Finally.*"

She tripped toward him, her high heels clacking against the concrete, and gave him an appreciative nod as she took in his fresh jeans and the clean shirt he'd gathered quickly from his overnight bag in the Air Tractor.

Today, her own outfit consisted of a dark blue skirt that ended an inch above her knees, and a white blouse, which she seemed to have abandoned buttoning up about halfway through, ensuring it showed off her impressive cleavage. Jake glimpsed white lace against tanned skin, and a memory flashed through his

mind of that day when Heather had put on—.

Catching himself before he could finish the thought, Jake dragged his gaze back up to meet Cece's. He didn't want her to think he'd been ogling her while in reality, he'd been thinking of his wife—even if he was beginning to suspect such ogling was exactly the effect she'd been aiming for.

Though she clacked her tongue and informed him, "You're late," there was a hint of amused satisfaction in her gaze that told Jake she thought she'd achieved her goal. She waved toward the other women and continued, "So, now that we're all here, let's get going, shall we? Time's awasting." Putting a hand with nails lacquered a bright red on Jake's arm, she prepared to hustle him over to the aircraft, while urging her friends to start up the steps with her other hand.

A little annoyed, Jake shook her hand off his arm. "I've got a couple things I need to do first."

She arched an eyebrow at him. "Like?"

He shrugged. "File a flight plan. Take a look at the weather forecast." He dipped his head in the direction of the aircraft. "Check the plane."

Cece made a dismissive noise in the back of her throat. "As you can see," she flapped a limp hand toward the open hangar doors, "it's bright and sunny. And trust me, my husband is extremely fond of his toys." She showed Jake her white teeth again, and added sweetly, "And of me. You won't find a better-maintained plane in all of Texas."

Jake glanced at the Gulfstream behind her. Gleaming dully in the faint light of the hangar, she was all sleek lines and sweetly curved fuselage. Crabbily, he decided Mcaskill had better taste in planes than women.

"We don't want to be late, Jake." Cece tapped the toe of her high-heeled sandal against the concrete once more to underscore her words. Crossing her arms under her breasts, she pinned him with a stern look. Clearly, she was used to getting her way.

"Ma'am," Jake decided it best to ignore last night's suggestion that he should call her Cece, "I'm sure your husband has his aircraft taken good care of. I still need to do my own inspection."

Only an irresponsible pilot would take up a plane on the owner's wife's say-so, or without looking it over himself and personally handling the pre-flight checks. Besides, he wasn't that late. No reason he couldn't follow proper procedure *and* have them at their luncheon with time to spare.

Cece heaved an exaggerated sigh, rolling her eyes. "Oh well, if you insist...!" She dropped her hands and, without looking back at him, joined her friends huddled uncertainly at the bottom of the staircase. Their heads dipped closer together; a few seconds later, a burst of giggles rose up. From the glances the women darted in Jake's direction, he suspected he might be the subject of their mirth.

Shaking his head, Jake shrugged it off, reminding himself that the money Mcaskill offered was generous, and that he needed to stay on his client's good side. His patience was sorely tested, however, while he walked around the plane for his exterior inspection. Before he was halfway done, he'd already fielded a dozen questions about where he'd learned to fly and could he fly the big jumbo jets as well and how well he'd known Emily when she lived in Jericho and what had it been like under the ASA siege. He'd had to explain the function of various bits of the aircraft, and, his personal favorite subject, they'd brazenly demanded to know if he'd been scared when those jets had chased him to Texas while carrying the bomb. Fortunately, before he lost his hold on his temper and could snap back something rude, Cece came to his rescue.

"Come on, girls." She clapped her hands to get their attention. "Let's let our dear pilot be." She gave Jake a smirk he couldn't quite decipher, and started herding her friends back around the plane and up the stairs.

Letting out a relieved breath as the women disappeared from view, Jake quickly ran through the rest of his inspection, as well as the other tasks he'd explained to Cece. It didn't take long—Mcaskill had indeed kept the Gulfstream in pristine condition—though he frowned a little at the forecast the airport meteorologist gave him. A weather front was coming in from the west, with possible heavy thunderstorms later in the day. But a lunch event wouldn't last that long; Jake figured they should make it to Tulsa and back before the bad weather hit.

A small cheer went up from the four women seated around the cabin—Jake absently noted the cream leather seats and the dark wood paneling polished to a shine—when he climbed in, and he offered them a wry grin.

"Are we ready?" Cece asked.

Jake nodded. "If you ladies strap yourselves in, I'll have us airborne in no time." Chattering excitedly, the women did as requested. Musing to himself that, thankfully, Heather never made such a fuss, Jake headed for the cockpit. He allowed himself a moment of envy as he looked over the instrument panel before seating himself in the pilot's chair and making the last of the pre-flight preparations.

Having ensured that everything worked as it should—not that he had expected to find anything lacking—he put on the headset and asked the tower for

permission to take-off. A few minutes later, they were airborne. The Gulfstream handled smoothly and for the next few minutes Jake delighted in the simple joy of piloting a beautiful plane, the engines powerfully yet quietly pushing them aloft.

Reaching cruising altitude, he leveled off and set a course for Tulsa. Their route would take them close to the ruins of what had once been Dallas, but he didn't expect any problems there. Estimating their flying time at a little over an hour, he settled back to enjoy the ride.

These, he decided, were the days he really liked his job.

oOo

They were maybe twenty minutes in when Jake sensed more than saw movement behind him. Twisting in his seat a little so he could cast a glance over his shoulder, he discovered Cece Mckaskill was hovering quietly in the doorway, watching him. Once she saw he'd noticed her, she pushed further into the cockpit.

"Champagne?" She offered him a tall, slim glass half-filled with sparkling pale liquid.

Jake blinked at her in astonishment. What sort of person offered a pilot a drink while he was actually flying the plane?

"No, thanks." Something like that could cost him his license, and the last thing he needed was to have his senses befuddled with alcohol.

She shrugged. "Suit yourself." Settling into the empty co-pilot's chair, she sipped at the champagne. He could feel the weight of her gaze as she studied him over the rim of the glass.

"Jake, I wanted to apologize if I was a bit cross with you, before. Patience is not really my strong suit."

He shot her a startled look before he gave a small shake of his shoulders. "That's alright, Mrs Mcaskill."

"Please." She leaned over, putting a hand on his wrist. "Call me Cece. Mrs Mcaskill makes me feel so... old." She uttered a light laugh.

He glanced down at where her fingers warmed his flesh, her red nail polish standing out starkly against his own tan. He'd have preferred to use formality to keep her at a bit of a distance; he found her overfamiliarity unpleasant. But he also reckoned they were stuck with each other for the rest of the day, and she

had extended an olive branch with her apology. "Sure... Cece."

"Good boy." She laughed again, patting his arm. With a frown, Jake watched as she set her now empty glass down among the valuable instruments. "I'm glad we got that out of the way," she cooed, her hand lightly stroking up his bare arm. "I'd really like us to be friends."

"Um," Jake cleared his throat. "I should—." He pulled his arm out of her grip, and indicated in the general direction of the instrument panel.

"Yes, of course." She smiled as she unfolded from the co-pilot's chair. "No distracting the driver, right?" Brushing close, she started to squeeze herself through the gap between the seats.

Reaching over to snatch the empty champagne glass from among the switches and dials, Jake coughed meaningfully. Cece twisted back, arching a hopeful eyebrow. Without a word, he handed her the glass. Her eyes narrowed, but he didn't care. There was only so much irresponsible behavior he was willing to accept.

She blew out a long breath, a little exaggeratedly, and left him alone with the heady scent of her perfume, and the sense memory of her fingers on his arm.

When Jake caught himself absently rubbing the spot where she'd touched him, he uttered a wry snort. She wasn't the first woman who'd ever come on to him, of course—although he had to admit she was pretty damned *blatant* about it. He didn't feel the slightest desire to take her up on the offer, though, no matter how much she pressed her cleavage into his face. In fact, the mere thought made him feel slightly nauseous; he loved and respected Heather far too much ever to even consider something like that. So the sooner he could get Cece Mcaskill to understand that, no matter how hard she tried, he wasn't game, the better. Before things got really awkward.

Pushing the thought of the woman from his mind for the moment, he peered out of the cockpit window. The ground, all mottled browns and yellows, slipped by far below while in the distance, a little to the east of his current course, he could see the skyline of what was left of Dallas, and the gap among the skyscrapers that the bomb had created.

Dallas, like most of the bombed cities, had been declared uninhabitable by the Columbus government. Cordoned off, and with the survivors displaced, the cities stood empty until someone would figure out how to deal with the risk of the radiation that lingered among the rubble and debris. Jake suspected it would be a long time before places like Dallas and Denver were rebuilt.

He wondered briefly about alerting his passengers to the sight, but the delighted

chatter and bursts of giggles that occasionally drifted into the cockpit made him reconsider. They probably wouldn't take kindly to him spoiling their fun with something so glum. Besides, it wasn't like there was anything they could do.

Shaking his head to chase the dismal thoughts away, he again concentrated on the instruments, checking his course and speed and altitude. Wasn't anything he could do, either.

A little over thirty minutes after they'd passed Dallas, Jake touched down on the runway at R.L. Jones Jr airport, some five miles south of Tulsa. A limousine, apparently arranged by Mcaskill, was waiting to take Cece and her friends downtown to the restaurant where the reading was taking place.

"Jake, come on, let's go!" Cece indicated the waiting car with a dip of her head.

"Yes, please, do come." One of Cece's friends—a brunette whom Jake thought was called Flora—joined in the attempt to convince him to accompany them to the event. "It'll be fun."

He suspected none of them particularly cared whether or not he'd enjoy the reading; they simply wanted to show him off to their Oklahoma girlfriends. He held up his hands to ward them off. "No, no, go ahead." He shot them a disarming smile, hoping that would take the sting out of his refusal. "There's things I need to do here."

Though it wasn't a straight-out lie—he did need to see to the plane—the mere thought of sitting through some literary performance with a flock of middle-aged rich ladies nattering around him made Jake want to run far, far away. And if he did decide to come, Cece would undoubtedly contrive to be seated next to him, and he could just picture her hands on his thigh, surreptitiously crawling upward....

He shivered, pushing the mental image away, as he watched Cece climb into the limo, casting a last disappointed look in his direction. He blew out a breath once the car had accelerated away noiselessly and left him in peace to wait for the women's return.

oOo

"Ya know, if you're wanting to get back to San Antonio today, I suggest you get goin' sooner rather than later." Tulsa's meteorologist dipped his head to indicate his screen.

Across the man's shoulder, Jake peered at the radar display. He frowned as he saw what the meteorologist meant: the thunderstorms they'd been predicting all day were taking shape as yellow and red splotches on the screen, blooming

rapidly as they headed straight across Oklahoma and intersected his intended course for the flight home.

"Yeah, doesn't look good," Jake agreed. Studying the radar image once more, he reckoned there'd still be enough time for them to make it back to San Antonio before the storms struck if they left in the next half hour or so. He glanced out of the large picture window toward where the empty tarmac sweltered under the hot sun. Trouble was, there was as yet no sign of Cece Mcaskill or her friends, although it was hours past lunch time and their event should've been long over.

Jake thanked the meteorologist for his help and left the office. As he headed back toward the plane, he decided he should best get everything ready, so they could take to the air as soon as the women returned.

But the minutes strung together into another hour, while Jake waited with rising impatience. To the west, he could see the thunderheads growing ever bigger on the horizon, the clouds dark and forbidding. Finally, he decided to find a pay phone to call Mcaskill for advice.

"Oh, the girls probably went shopping, after." Mcaskill laughed off Jake's concern when Jake told him he'd seen no sign of his wife's party yet. "They'll show up eventually, you'll see. Don't worry 'bout it."

Jake made an unhappy noise at the news, and something about the sound must've alerted Mcaskill.

"That's not a problem for you, is it?"

Jake tilted his face up to the sky. Black clouds had started roiling in overhead. "Weather's turning bad," he informed Mcaskill. "From the way it's developing, we might not make it back today."

He judged the Gulfstream could handle the storms—assuming he managed to avoid the worst of them. But there was no way he'd risk taking the Air Tractor into the kind of weather he'd seen on the radar. Which meant that, no matter how the rest of the day went, he'd definitely not get back to Kansas until tomorrow. His stomach twisted in disappointment; he'd been harboring a secret hope of arriving home late that evening.

"Ah. I see. Wanna get back to the wife, huh?" Mcaskill must have picked up what Jake was thinking from his tone, if not his words. "I'm sorry. I should've warned you: Cece can be a bit... spur of the moment." Mcaskill sounded genuinely contrite. He paused for a couple seconds and then added, "Anyway, if you do find yourselves grounded, just grab a hotel. Tell Cece to charge your room to her card. And I'll pay your overtime, of course." He chuckled good-naturedly. "Don't let it be said I don't take care of my people."

"That's not—." Jake stopped. The money wasn't what bothered him the most. It was the thought of being stuck in a hotel in Tulsa with Cece Mcaskill, while he could've been spending that time playing with his son. That wasn't something he could explain to Mcaskill, though, so Jake merely thanked him for the offer, and hung up.

Another half hour had passed and the air had turned still and sultry, the scent of ozone mingling with the ever-present smell of jet fuel, by the time the limousine finally rolled into the lot and drew to a halt next to the plane. The doors on both sides opened simultaneously, and Cece and her friends scrambled out. They were laughing and chattering as they tottered up to Jake, who was waiting near the Gulfstream's stairs.

"You're late," Jake couldn't help grouching, not realizing he was repeating Cece's words from earlier in the day.

Her laughter tinkled in response. "Oh, Jakey, why so glum?" She patted his cheek, and he pulled back. The gesture brought on another fit of giggles, and Jake noticed the faint odor of alcohol from the group. *Seems like they've done more than shop*, he thought crossly.

"Haven't you paid attention to the weather?" He didn't bother to keep the sharpness from his tone.

As if conjured by his words, lightning zagged across the sky, which had taken on a greenish cast. Several seconds later, thunder rumbled in the distance, indicating that the storm was rapidly getting closer. Squeals and shrieks of mock-fear rose from the women, firming up the decision in Jake's mind. Much as he disliked the prospect of staying overnight in Tulsa, there was no way he'd take a plane full of drunk women into a thunderstorm.

Glancing up at the boiling sky, Cece sobered a little. "I guess we can't take off in that, huh?"

Jake pulled up, slightly surprised she wasn't demanding he fly them home right away. Apparently the woman had a bit more sense than he'd so far given her credit for. "No."

She brought her gaze back to his. "So, what should we do?"

"I talked to your husband. He said to get a hotel and go home in the morning. The weather should've cleared by then."

Cece worried her glossed lower lip for a second, before her mouth curled up in a lazy smile. "Sleepover in Tulsa. Sounds like a *wonderful* plan to me."

Something about the way she said it, or maybe the way she looked at him as she spoke, made Jake think he'd best make sure his door was locked tight that night.

While Cece informed her friends of the change of plans, Jake helped the limo driver carrying the women's many purchases into the cabin. They stowed everything away safely before Jake secured the aircraft for the night and returned to climb into the front seat of the limousine, its engine idling to keep the a/c running as it waited to take them back to the city.

By the time, some two hours later, they pulled into the driveway of the newly opened Hilton hotel, the skies had made good on their threat and opened up. Torrential rain battered down on the roof while they waited their turn under the canopied entryway, which was full of other luxury cars and taxis. Valets scurried to carry guests' luggage inside. Peering anxiously at the sky through the front windshield, the wipers swishing frantically but not quite up to the job, Jake half-expected to see a twister snake down toward the ground. But though lightning flickered almost constantly and the thunder boomed relentlessly, one deafening drum roll after another, the warning sirens remained blessedly silent.

After they'd sat waiting for ten minutes, Cece lost patience. "Jake, be a dear, and see to our things?" Her breath was warm on his skin and something—her lips?—brushed over his neck.

Shivering involuntarily, Jake jerked around and saw she'd leaned forward, pushing her head into the gap between the front seats.

"I'll get us rooms," she added. She winked at him. "King-sized bed?"

Before Jake could reply, she'd gotten out of the car and was dashing on tiptoe through the downpour toward the revolving doors. An instant later, the other women had followed her lead without a second glance back.

The limo driver, a gray-bearded older man, shot Jake a sympathetic look—*better you than me, buddy*—before he popped the trunk so Jake could retrieve the bags with the newest purchases: on the way to the hotel, they'd made a not-so-brief detour to a brand-new shopping mall not far from the airport.

"To buy essentials," Cece had told Jake. While she had a good point, he'd been somewhat amused to find that essentials included not only a toothbrush and, in Jake's case, a razor, but also make-up, new shoes, and, judging by the logo on a couple of the bags, lots of lingerie.

Water was dripping into Jake's eyes and trickling under his collar by the time he managed to get everything inside. In the lobby, the women descended on him like a flock of birds, twittering as they divided their acquisitions between them.

Once Jake's hands were empty, Cece offered him a key card. "Room 603." She smiled. "Next to mine."

Wet and with cold rain water making its way down his back, Jake was in no mood to deal with her brazen flirting any longer. He accepted the card curtly. "Thanks. I'll see you in the morning."

No longer trying to be polite, he strode off without another word, looking for the elevator. He was the damn pilot, not their personal attendant. And he'd be cursed if he allowed Cece to turn him into her private toy boy.

o0o

The room Cece had gotten for him was pleasant enough, and it quickly soothed his mood. It was big and airy and comfortably furnished—if decorated with little imagination. Glancing around to orient himself between the window, the bed, and the en-suite bathroom, Jake noted there was another door. It looked like a private door to the room next to his. He tried it and found it was locked, but he didn't see a key.

With a weary sigh, and allowing himself the eye roll he'd been suppressing with increasing effort all day, he carried over the desk chair and wedged it under the door knob. He'd bet his Air Tractor Cece's room was on the other side of that door. Testing that the chair was jammed firmly in place, he nodded in grim satisfaction. He'd like to see her try to get in now.

Chuckling ruefully to himself, he put Cece Mcaskill out of his mind. He'd noticed a phone on the desk when he grabbed the chair; he should call Heather and let her know not to expect him home for a while longer.

After he'd hung up, his heart ached with distance, which was a little odd; it wasn't like they'd never been apart before. Yet he longed for nothing more than to hold Heather in his arms as she slept, or to be able to plant a kiss on the crown of his son's head as he put him in his crib.

Well, nothing he could do about it now, and Mcaskill was paying him overtime. Turning his attention to the bathroom, he decided a nice shower was just what he needed. He could figure out what to do about getting something to eat afterwards.

He showered quickly, enjoying the cascade of hot water after the cold downpour outside. His clothes were still a little damp from the rain, so he left them hanging over the rack to try and wrapped a towel around his hips. Too bad, he mused, that he'd left his overnight bag stowed in the Air Tractor. But then, he'd never expected to need it for what was supposed to be a quick

midday trip to Tulsa and back.

Padding barefoot back into the bedroom, Jake realized he was now hungry. He headed for the desk and the phone again, intending to call room service. The curtains were drawn, shutting out the storm he could hear still raging outside and the room was dusky, despite one of the wall lamps casting a soft glow.

Jake scratched his neck, and frowned. Had he...?

oOo

Present day

"Woof!" Deputy Dawg's soft bark interrupted Jake just as he was about to tell Heather the worst of the story. He wasn't sure whether to be annoyed or grateful for the respite.

Heather's attention shifted from him to the dog as she cocked her head, listening. "It's JJ."

Jake didn't hear anything—Heather's hearing was better than his; too many gunfights, he suspected—but he knew both dog and mother were tuned in to hear the slightest peep coming from upstairs. A moment later, however, he made out his son's unhappy wail, JJ rapidly picking up volume.

Heather swung her legs off the bench. "I'll go see—."

"Let me?" Jake suggested. JJ couldn't be hungry; Heather had fed him only a little while before. And she'd been looking after him by herself for the past days, while Jake—.

His mind skittered away the uncomfortable memories of the previous day's events. He couldn't avoid them forever—but he could do with a few more minutes to gather up his courage before he confessed the rest of the sordid tale to his wife.

"Sure." Heather blithely relinquished the task to him, unaware of the thoughts going through his mind and making his palms clammy. "I'll get us a refill in the meantime." She offered to take his glass from him, gathering up her own from where she'd put it on the floor.

"Thanks." Jake fled upstairs, to where JJ was starting to kick up a storm.

It turned out JJ was suffering nothing worse than a wet diaper. Jake soon had him quiet and gurgling contentedly again. Watching his son suck on the knuckles of his tiny fist while he drifted back into sleep, Jake smiled. JJ was such a happy

baby, so full of trust.... Jake's smile soured. He snatched up the dirty diaper and headed downstairs to put it in the trash.

"JJ okay?" Heather handed Jake a fresh glass of lemonade when he joined her out on the porch again.

"Uh-huh. Just needed changing." Jake fell silent, looking out over the paddock where the horses were grazing peacefully, the occasional flick of their tails chasing away flies, wondering how he was going to tell her the rest.

"So, you spent the night in Tulsa...?" Heather prompted after several minutes, while Jake was still trying to figure out how to continue. She knew he had, of course: he'd called to tell her that. But she still didn't know what had happened after he'd made that call.

oOo

The day before

"Why don't you join me, Jake?" The low, sultry voice made Jake nearly jump out of his skin. Heart thumping against his ribs, he instinctively reached for the gun he'd stopped carrying after JJ was born.

The voice had come from the direction of the bed; as his eyes slowly adjusted to the low light after the brightness of the bathroom, Jake noted with horror—if not exactly surprise—that it belonged to Cece. His gaze darted to the dividing door. The chair was still in place. How had she...?

As if she could read his thoughts, Cece chuckled softly. "Such a bad boy, Jake." She held up something small, the light reflecting from it, and he realized it was a key card. "Fortunately, I had the desk clerk give me two of those."

Jake groaned inwardly. He should've realized—.

Cece shifted on the bed, keeping him from finishing the thought. "Don't worry, I like it when a man's playing hard to get." She patted the mattress next to her with a slim hand. "Come."

Her voice had taken on a commanding tone Jake didn't much like. He observed with rising dismay that she was dressed in nothing but some kind of skin-tight, black, lacy thing, which pushed her breasts up and otherwise left very little to the imagination. She licked her lips while her gaze raked him up and down hungrily and he grew acutely aware that he had only a hotel towel to preserve his dignity.

"You... should go," Jake croaked, forcing the words out past the fear and guilt

that blocked his throat. If someone had seen her, dressed like that, go into his room...! And what would Heather think?

"Oh, come on." Cece's tone shifted again, back to her more familiar lighthearted teasing note. "Don't be such a spoil sport. We'll have a good time."

"No." The shock of finding her half-naked in his bed was starting to wear off, and Jake was grateful to find his voice a bit more firm. "I'm not interested."

Cece sighed, swinging her legs off the bed and pushing herself up. Jake backed away, his gaze searching for an escape route and finally settling on the bathroom. The door had an inside lock, and, just as importantly, his clothes were in there. He'd likely feel much better equipped to dealing with a horny Cece if he was wearing more than a towel.

Before he could dart over, she'd blocked his way. "Uh-nuh." She wagged her finger at him, grinning, and Jake cursed himself for the panic that had kept him rooted to the spot until it was too late.

As she sauntered up to him, hips swaying enticingly, she continued, "Aaron won't mind, if that's what you're worried about." She reached for the towel, her hand brushing across his stomach and Jake jumped back as if burned. He uttered an undignified squeak, which made her laugh, as if it was all part of a game.

"No," Jake repeated—thankfully without squeaking. He held out his hands to fend off any further attempts to steal his towel, while racking his brain, trying to come up with an argument she might accept. *Her* marriage might work like that, but his damned well didn't. "I'm a married man."

"So?" She arched an eyebrow.

"And...." He struggled to explain. Why couldn't she understand? If he did this—not that a single cell in his body wanted to—he'd hurt Heather, worse than ever. And he'd hurt her plenty already. "And I love my wife," he pointed out firmly. He inched further away, attempting to keep the small coffee table between them, but Cece was relentless in stalking him.

"So?" she asked again as she followed him round the table. "You think I don't love Aaron? He's been good to me. But that doesn't mean," she once more licked her lips, and he realized she'd almost managed to back him into a corner, "I don't enjoy tasting a different dish once in a while."

"Please, just leave." Jake was growing desperate. How the hell was he going to get rid of the damn woman? If they'd both been a little more dressed, he'd have surely removed her from his room physically by now. As it was, he was more

interested in staying out of reach of her grasping fingers. Desperately clutching the towel around his hips, he shoved past her, out of the corner, and hurried toward the other side of the bed.

Turning on his heel, he noted with relief that she'd stopped chasing him around the room. Maybe he was finally getting through to her?

Her expression had taken on an impatient cast. "What do you want, Jake?" She crossed her arms in front of her chest, pouting a little. "I'll pay you, if that's what it takes."

"What?" Unbidden, the memory of his brief stint in Washington flashed through Jake's mind. Some men might not care, might even think it a good deal, but it had made him miserable. Once he'd got out, he'd sworn to himself: never again. He'd managed to mostly forget about those days, until Mimi had reminded him, accidentally letting slip she'd met him before. They'd both quickly agreed that the specifics had best remain buried deep in the past, and now—. Jake felt his face heat up with shame and anger.

"I can make it worth your while, Jake. Or—," Cece's expression darkened into something ugly, and Jake recalled the saying about a woman scorned, "—I can make things very difficult for you. I understand Aaron offered you a job?"

Abruptly, Jake saw the deal he'd struck with Mcaskill, the deal Mack had set up for him, turn to dust. The deal that was going to help Ant Aviation grow into something more solid than a dream....

"Don't care." He swallowed down the humiliation, grasping for the anger and indignation instead, letting it fuel him. He and Heather had survived without Mcaskill's money this far; they could do so a while longer. It certainly wasn't worth his soul—or hurting Heather. He glared at her. "Look, lady, even if I wanted to—which I don't, I'd never betray my wife. So, you best get yourself back to your own room, before you embarrass yourself any further."

Cece pressed her lips tightly together, and Jake noted her cheeks had colored with fury. "I see." Her tone was icy enough to congeal molten lava. "Suit yourself."

She wheeled around—he only now noticed she was wearing stiletto heels with her lingerie—and stalked from the room, slamming the door behind her. Jake bolted over, putting on the door chain with trembling hands. Once he was certain Cece wouldn't be able to make it back into his room, even with the spare key card, he slumped against the door, puffing out a heavy sigh of relief.

This little side trip to Tulsa couldn't be over too soon.

Present day

The sounds of the night seemed loud to Jake as he finished telling his story. The buzz of insects, a soft nicker from one of the horses, Deputy Dawg snoring at his feet.... He gazed down at his hands in his lap, not daring to look up at Heather, too afraid of what he might discover: disgust, anger, pain....

He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry," he muttered.

"What for?" Heather sounded a little non-plussed.

"For...." He gestured helplessly, not even sure what he was apologizing for, just feeling he needed to.

"Is this what's been eating you?" She touched his arm. "Jake, you've done nothing to be ashamed about. "

At her quiet reassurance, Jake glanced up, peering at her from under his lashes. Her face showed none of the hurt he'd expected. Instead, her expression was gentle, with a hint of a smile.

How could she smile after what he'd told her? "You're not...," he shrugged, "mad?"

"About what? That a naked woman decided to sneak into your room?" She shook her head. "No, I'm not mad. Well, not with you, at least." She made a face, and Jake thought it was probably a good thing Cece Mcaskill was hundreds of miles away.

"But the contract—." Despite the relief that had washed over him as Heather denied being upset, Jake couldn't help remind her of what it might cost them.

"Jake...." Heather twisted until she was kneeling before, much to his surprise, crawling toward him and swinging one leg over his knees so she could settle in his lap facing him. Automatically, his hands went to her hips to hold her steady. At his feet, Deputy Dawg blinked up at them sleepily, before he dropped his head back down on his front paws.

Heather dipped her head, resting her forehead against Jake's. "The contract doesn't matter. What matters is you, me, this." She indicated their surroundings with a flap of her hand. "What matters is that I know you'd never do that to me." Her breath was warm on his face as she whispered, "No matter what, I trust you. You know that, right?"

He pulled his head back slightly so he could meet her gaze. Her eyes were dark, honest.

He didn't know that he deserved it, deserved *her*. And maybe if he returned Mcaskill's call in the morning, he'd also be able to still salvage the contract. But one thing he knew for sure: no deal in the world was worth as much as this.

"I—." His voice caught as gratitude for her absolute faith in him surged through him. He swallowed. Not bothering to try to find his voice again, he caught her lips with his, conveying with a kiss what words couldn't say.

Maybe, he thought dimly, in the moment before she kissed him back and all thought fled from his mind, maybe he'd dare tell her about Washington, too, some day. But not today....

Disclaimer: this story is based on the Junction Entertainment/Fixed Mark Productions/CBS Paramount Television series *Jericho*. It was written for entertainment only; the author does not profit from it nor was any infringement of copyright intended. Please do not redistribute elsewhere without the author's consent.