

New Day Rising

by Tanaqui

Jake watched the building super waddle away down the hallway, jangling her keys, before he pushed open the door to his apartment. The room had the musty smell of somewhere that had been shut up in the heat for too long. Almost a year since he'd been here—or just five days. Five days since the creature Gabriel, inhabiting Bill's body, had yanked his younger self out of here and into the future, and sent him—the Jake who had lived through the September attacks, and fought a war with New Bern, and flown Hawkins' bomb to Texas—back in his place.

Jake closed the door behind him and crossed the room to slide open the balcony door and let in some air. Turning back from the window, he paused for a moment to stuff the rent receipt crumpled in his hand into the washed-out peanut-butter jar on top of the TV, adding it to the stack of yellowing papers already crammed in there.

The handful of bills Jake had offered to the super—a few day's early, even—when he'd made his request to be let in to his apartment had certainly improved her suspicious attitude. Not that providing him with a handout to tide him over hadn't been the least Hawkins' paymasters could do, Jake thought. After all, he had saved millions of lives, and given the CIA enough intel to roll up not just the terrorist cells but those controlling the network—and their friends who would benefit: John Smith, Thomas Valente, John Tomarchio, half the J&R board.

Next stop on Jake's journey was the fridge, to grab a beer. As his hand closed around the bottle, he found himself chuckling at how easy it was to fall back into old habits. A week ago in his personal timeline, being able to open the fridge and take out a cold beer would have seemed as unlikely as flying to the moon. As would hot showers, the ball game on TV, air conditioning: he glanced around the apartment and considered how many things he'd taken for granted before the bombs. Some of which he'd be glad to reacquaint himself with, and others he suspected they'd maybe been better off without.

And not all the changes created by the bombs had been for the worse.

He was suddenly assaulted by the memory of Heather's hand in his, the feel of her in his arms as he held her close, the taste of her as she returned his kisses, her lips parting under his. He closed his eyes, aching with need for her—but she'd said it herself: how could their happiness outweigh the lives of millions?

Just his happiness, now, though. Because, back in Jericho, there was a Heather who scarcely knew he existed, much less that he loved her. Who'd arrived home last night from that field trip with her class perfectly safe, if a little late. And who had probably only ever heard of Jake Green as the no-good, black-sheep son of Mayor Green. Because all the other hard-won gains of the past year were gone too: his father's respect, his brother's friendship, Stanley and Mimi's love. Forty million people were safe, and his life sucked.

Drawing in a deep breath, Jake away pushed the memories—*Heather's scent, her laugh, the touch of her hand on his arm*—and reminded himself he needed to find his spare set of keys. Taking a swig of beer, he rooted in the nightstand drawer, idly wondering what had happened to the set he'd had on him when he'd run from San Diego the day before the bombs. Last he remembered, they'd been somewhere in the mess in his old room back at his parents' house. Bill—Gabriel—had

explained that if he sent Jake one way, he'd bring the other Jake forward so they didn't each face the complication of having two Jakes around. Somehow, Jake doubted Bill had been so considerate about something as trivial as house keys. They'd probably vanished from existence the moment he'd finally convinced Hawkins that he really had been sent back in time, and the two of them had begun taking the first steps to stopping the explosions.

At least he'd had the keys for the Roadrunner on him when he'd been sent back, Jake thought with a wry smile as his hand closed on the spare key to his apartment. Not that it would've been the first time he'd broken into and hotwired a car.

Pushing the drawer closed, he registered there was a crisp white envelope propped between the phone and the answering machine. For a mad moment, he thought that Bill—Gabriel—had left him some kind of directions about what he was supposed to do next. Or maybe his younger self had scribbled a note for him. Then he realized that it was only the resume he'd put together for the charter company. He'd forgotten the exact day he'd originally dropped it off at their offices out at Montgomery Field, but it must have been the day he'd pitched up on Hawkins' doorstep in the middle of the night and they'd frantically tried to chase down enough evidence about Sarah, Valente and J&R to take to Hawkins' bosses.

Jake sat down on the bed and took another drink of beer while he looked at the envelope. He shook his head as he thought about walking away from a job—a pretty good job at that—because of... what? Fear? Shame? He wasn't sure now why he'd made that choice. What was it mom had said? *You're not that guy any more.*

Jake raised his beer in ironic salute to his younger self. Sure, somewhere in a file in J&R's personnel department was a record of what he'd done in Saffa. Goetz had told him as much, and he'd always suspected it. But J&R wasn't going to blab about that to any prospective employer; they wanted it kept quiet as much as Jake did. In point of fact, he didn't think he'd have any kind of problem with the reference they'd give him: they'd tried hard enough to persuade him to stay on when he'd quit after Saffa. And the charter company wouldn't have cared either: J&R was no less respectable than Blackwater or KBR, if you didn't look too closely at any of them. Or at least, it wouldn't be any less respectable until the metaphorical—rather than literal—fallout from the bomb plot engulfed it in the next few days. Even then, as a lowly employee, Jake could hardly be blamed for what was going on in the boardroom.

He'd still have to live with what he'd done in Saffa, of course. Still have to see that girl's face at odd moments—though he realized she'd been crowded out by some of the other things he'd seen since. He wasn't sure if that made it better or worse. And all the lives he'd saved, millions upon millions: they didn't wipe out the lives he'd taken with his own hands. But he was beginning to understand what Dad had meant when he'd said *I know what war can do*. He'd regretted that he and Dad had never managed to have that conversation. Maybe now they could....

Finishing the beer, Jake came to a decision. He'd head to that internet café again and fix up his resume, and then drop off the new version at the charter company. Maybe he still wouldn't get the job—maybe they'd already found someone—but it would be stupid not to try.

Reaching out and picking up the envelope, planning to throw it in the trash along with the bottle, he saw the light on the answering machine was flashing. Getting to his feet, he hit the play button and headed back towards the kitchen area, wondering if there was anything still edible around, or if it had all grown mold.

"Hey, man." Jake stopped and turned at the sound of Freddy's voice, staring at the answering

machine in shock. He supposed he'd known in the back of his mind that Freddy was still alive, just like Dad was alive and Bonnie was alive, but there'd been so much else going on that he hadn't had time to think about it. Well, Freddy had still been alive when he'd made this call. Which was probably a few days ago now.

The rest of Freddy's message confirmed it, his voice coming tinnily through the speaker: "I got us a gig lined up. Call me." First time through, Jake had been at the bar when Freddy had taken the call about the job with Ravenwood. The job that had been bad news from the moment Freddy had answered his phone.

The answering machine gave a short bleep, letting Jake know there was another message, before Freddy's voice once more filled the small apartment. "Hey, buddy. Pick up if you're there." There was a long silence, and then Freddy spoke again. "Call me, okay? Or come by the bar. You won't regret it. I promise."

Jake winced as he listened to Freddy hang up and another beep from the machine. *No, but you might....*

"Hey man. What? You think I got the clap or something? You not talking to me any more? Just call me, okay?"

Even through the hisses and crackles of the recording, Jake could hear the slight edge of panic in Freddy's voice. He guessed Freddy's new friends, with their once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, were growing impatient. He wondered what Freddy had promised them, and what excuses he'd used to fend them off.

Another beep, and now Freddy was sounding seriously scared. "Where the hell are you, man? You're not answering your phone. You're not at the bar. I come by the apartment and you're not there.... Jeez, Jake. Just call!"

Jake was already moving toward the phone when the long double beep told him it was the last message on the machine. Grabbing the handset, he dialed Freddy's cell—he had to drag the number from his memory—and waited, heart in mouth, for the call to connect and Freddy to pick up.

He let out the breath he'd been holding when the phone was answered at the second ring and he heard Freddy's exasperated, "Dammit, man. About frickin' time!"

Jake could also hear relief in Freddy's voice. Which was probably going to be pretty short-lived. Just as long as it took Jake to find out just how much trouble Freddy had gotten them both into, so he could try and figure a way to get them out of it. "Freddy—"

Freddy interrupted him before he could get another word out. "Never mind where you been. All you need to know right now is that I got us a sweet deal lined up. Eight weeks, a hundred G's, all cash."

"No."

"What?" The word came out almost as a squeak.

"I'm not doing it." Jake shook his head, even though Freddy couldn't see him.

"Come on." Freddy sounded disbelieving. "You don't even know what the job is."

Jake snorted. Thanks to Agent Hicks, he knew better than Freddy what Ravenwood was up to. But he couldn't exactly tell Freddy how he knew. Still, he'd guessed near enough first time they'd had this conversation what the job was likely to be. It hardly took a leap of imagination. "That kind of money?" he pointed out. "It's gonna be somewhere I don't wanna go with someone I don't wanna go with."

"So?" Jake could almost hear Freddy's dismissive shrug. "So maybe we have to put up with a little crap.... But in a couple months," Freddy's tone turned persuasive, "you'll be on a Mexican beach, knee deep in bikinis and Benjamins, with enough money in your pocket to open that flight school...."

Jake sank down onto the bed and wearily scrubbed his hand across his eyes. Freddy had talked himself into this knowing full well the only good part was the money—while choosing to ignore the many, many ways in which this was so not a good idea. And he was obviously convinced he could talk Jake into it too. Which probably meant he'd already told Ravenwood that Jake would do the job. "What did you promise them?" Jake asked cautiously.

"That I know the best pilot in fifty states."

Jake allowed himself a wry chuckle. Flattery wasn't going to get Freddy anywhere, and he needed a straight answer. "That's not what I meant. Did you tell them I'd do the job?"

"Come on, man. Why wouldn't you?"

"Because—." Jake stopped. It wasn't about not wanting to go back to Afghanistan now. It was that he could no longer close his eyes to what Ravenwood was capable of. Outside Saffa, they had at least been under fire. Whereas in Rogue River, in New Bern, in the Richmonds' kitchen.... Not that he could explain any of that to Freddy. Instead, he simply asked, "Did you take their money yet?"

"Hey, the money's cool. Moment you say yes, there's a nice fat envelope waiting for you."

Jake grimaced. "That's not what I asked. Did you take any money from them yet?"

Freddy didn't answer for a moment, and Jake closed his eyes, fearing the worst. Then Freddy said, "No. They're waiting on you saying yes."

Jake puffed out a breath. That was something, at least. "Look, just don't get yourself any deeper in with them, okay? I got a few things to do, and then I'll come by the bar and we'll figure it out."

"Jake—."

"Freddy, trust me: we do not want to take this job." Sensing Freddy was still unconvinced, he added, "I got your back, okay?"

"Yeah, I know, bro. Me too."

Hanging up, Jake put his head in his hands. Somehow, saving the whole country had seemed so much easier.

oOo

It was almost dusk by the time Jake made it to the bar. He'd spent the afternoon fixing his resume,

and then slogging across town to drop it off at the charter company's offices. He hoped they'd still be as interested as they'd seemed last time, when he thought the job had been his for the asking—if he hadn't let his stupidity get in the way.

The bar's colored lights were just starting to shine out, and the noise from the patrons had reached the tipping point where everyone would start talking louder and louder just to be heard over each other. Pausing in the entrance and looking around, Jake spotted Freddy at a table with four or five other men. Something about the set of their shoulders and the way they lounged—confident, and yet a little edgy—brought back Anna's words a year ago, when she'd asked him to help Freddy: like soldiers, but not.

Ravenwood.

Jake gritted his teeth. He'd hoped to talk to Freddy alone, and find some way of stalling on giving Ravenwood his answer. Yesterday, Hawkins had told him that, sometime within the next couple of days, J&R and its subsidiaries would be locked down—bank accounts frozen, IT systems blocked, staff told to stay at home—while the Feds tried to figure out just how deep the conspiracy went. And only this morning, Jake had watched gray-faced executives being pushed into the back of police cars on the rolling news playing on a screen in the corner of the CIA's DC office, as half the J&R board was arrested.

Now Freddy had taken the option of waiting for Ravenwood to become impotent out of his hands.

While Jake's mind raced, trying to come up with another plan, a group of guys pushed past him into the bar, bumping him with their shoulders, and he realized he was blocking the entrance. Even as he stepped out of the way, Freddy looked up and spotted him. A relieved grin—yet there was tension in it—spread across Freddy's face. With another word to his companions, he got to his feet and hurried toward Jake.

Jake saw one of the Ravenwood guys twist in his seat to look across the bar after Freddy—and Jake's breath caught in his throat. Without thinking, he reached for his gun.

The gun he wasn't carrying any more.

Maybe that was just as well. Because if Jake'd had his trusty Beretta on him, he might not have been able to stop himself from putting a bullet into the smirking face turned towards him: John Goetz.

The last person Jake had expected to see—and yet, he realized wearily, someone he wasn't really that surprised to be running into.

"Jake, my man!" Freddy's punch in the shoulder dragged Jake's attention away from Goetz. "Finally."

"Freddy...." Jake caught his arm and tugged him a step sideways, though there was no getting away from the expectant gazes of Goetz and his men. Jake turned his head away, grimacing.

He realized Freddy was still babbling at him, a relieved grin plastered on his face, and that he hadn't picked up the warning in Jake's greeting. "—boss flew in this afternoon. Very keen to meet you—"

"Freddy!" Jake hissed his name more fiercely and his concern seemed to get through to Freddy at last. Some of the swagger went out of him, and his expression sobered when his eyes met Jake's.

Jake swallowed. “I said no, and I meant it. And I’m going to go over there and tell them that.”

For a brief moment, he considered whether he should say yes, just to get rid of Goetz for a few hours. But from what he remembered of the original plan, Goetz’s team would already be a day behind schedule, and he had a nasty feeling he and Freddy might get bundled straight onto a plane—or at least be babysat until their departure. No: the way to beat Goetz had always and only ever been to face him down—and better here, in the early evening bustle of the bar, than in some dark alley or empty warehouse.

“They’re not going to like it, man.” Jake could hear the edge of fear again in Freddy’s voice.

“I know.” Taking a deep breath, Jake led the way back to the table.

Freddy darted past him at the last moment and flapped his hand at Jake. “Guys, this is Jake. Jake, this is John Goetz....”

Still sitting, Goetz held his hand out to Jake, a cocky grin on his face. Jake supposed he thought the deal was already done. Ignoring the hand, but meeting Goetz’s gaze directly, he said quietly, “I’m sorry if Freddy gave you the wrong impression, but I’m not your man. I’m not taking the job.”

“Hmmpf.” Goetz made a surprised noise. Tilting his head and giving Jake a falsely pally smile, he said, “Is that so?”

“Yes.” Jake continued to hold his gaze, hoping that would be the end of it—but knowing it probably wasn’t going to be.

“Well, now, I’m disappointed.” Goetz got to his feet and took a step forward, moving close enough to make Jake want to back away. Jake held his ground. They were about the same height, but Goetz was broader, and radiated physical menace. “I’ve heard a lot about you, Jake. Your J&R corporate dossier makes you sound like just the man for a job like this.”

This time, when Goetz brought up the dossier, Jake didn’t flinch. Whatever he’d done in Saffa had been nothing to what Goetz had done: in Rogue River and New Bern and Jericho. And he wasn’t going to let Goetz use it to bounce him into doing something even worse. It was a terrible secret, but it was time to stop running from it.

“I’m not.” Jake tried to keep his voice quiet and level. “Find someone else.”

He saw anger flash in Goetz’s eyes and he was aware, at the edge of his vision, that the rest of the Ravenwood crew were shifting in their seats, readying themselves for action. Close behind him, he could feel Freddy tensing, just like on countless other occasions when Jake hadn’t seemed able to avoid picking a fight. Further away, the swell of early-evening sounds from the bar—music and barks of raucous laughter and the annoying tinny tunes of cellphones ringing—seemed to mute as Goetz squared up to him.

“I really would like find a way to... persuade you to join us, Jake.” Goetz hesitated just enough in the middle of the sentence for Jake to know that the “persuasion” wasn’t going to be a few flattering words, or a speech about how they’d be making the free world safer. He began to wonder just how many ways he would have to say no before Goetz accepted he meant it.

“Freddy? Is everything—?” Jake heard Anna’s voice from a pace or two behind him. She must have picked up on the impending brawl as well.

Cold fear trickled down Jake's spine as he saw Goetz's attention shift over his shoulder toward where she must be standing. The last thing he wanted was for her to get caught in the middle of this.

Not turning his head, not taking his gaze away from Goetz, he said sharply, "Anna, get back behind the bar."

"What—?" He could hear the confusion in her voice: her experience might mean she could spot a fight brewing between drunken frat boys and deal with that, but Jake knew she had no idea what these guys were capable of.

"Now, Anna." Jake didn't have time to sugar coat it. He just hoped she wasn't close enough already for any of the Ravenwood guys to make a grab for her.

"Just do it, baby," Freddy added quietly.

From the way Goetz's eyes moved, Jake knew she'd done as they asked, and he let out a relieved breath.

Goetz brought his attention back to Jake. He must have read Jake's determination in his expression, because he took a slight step back and relaxed a little, letting out a forced chuckle. "Jake, Jake. I don't want a fight with you. Is it the money that's the problem? You know, maybe we can find a little more. Ten, twenty Gs, whatever it takes."

Jake blinked. How the hell—? J&R might have always paid pretty well, if you ignored that most of it was danger money, but they didn't toss their cash around casually. They certainly didn't give someone as far down the food chain as Goetz the authority to negotiate with those kind of sums. Suddenly, he realized how Goetz was managing to make the offer.

"Isn't that going to cut into your take?" He gave a little jerk of the head, not bothering to keep his contempt out of his expression. "Put a dent in whatever you're skimming off the job?"

He knew he'd guessed correctly—that Goetz had intended to pay them less than his bosses had budgeted, and pocket the difference—when Goetz swayed back a little, a slightly shocked expression crossing his face for a moment. From the way his eyes flicked right and left to his men, Jake reckoned they weren't in on the deal.

Jake plunged on, sensing he'd finally got Goetz on the back foot. "Or maybe you're planning to make your money by upping the price of the Stingers once you get them to Afghanistan?"

This time, Goetz did take a step back, as if Jake had punched him, although he rallied quickly enough. "What are you talking about?"

"That cargo you want me to fly?" It was Jake's turn to sneer. "Stinger missiles. Once you get them in country, you're gonna truck them into Zabul province and sell them to the Taliban so they can use them against our guys."

"What?" Goetz gave a little shrug of the shoulders and huffed, as if what Jake was saying was preposterous, but Jake saw the fear in his eyes. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not doing the job," Jake repeated. He hesitated and then plunged on. "And if you won't take no for an answer, then I reckon pretty soon there'll be some interesting new entries in *your* J&R

corporate dossier. We both know J&R don't give a damn about what they sell and who they sell it to, but put your hand in their pocket...."

He saw Goetz swallow. He knew threatening him was dangerous, but after what had happened to Freddy last time, Jake reckoned they were already in a world of trouble. And Goetz would be pissed enough already that Jake knew the details of the job that getting him more pissed wouldn't make much difference.

They locked gazes for a moment and then, with a visible effort, Goetz relaxed and gave a harsh laugh. "You're making a big mistake, Jake." Though he managed to inject a certain amount of menace into the words, there was a beaten air about him.

Jake kept his gaze steady. "Yeah, I'm good at those."

Goetz snorted, and then half turned, waving a hand at his crew. "Come on." He stalked past Jake, deliberately barging him with his shoulder. The rest of his men followed, and Jake tensed, waiting for one of them to land a passing punch or pull a weapon. But they seemed too busy casting black glances at Goetz's back, or exchanging uncertain looks between themselves: seemed like Goetz might have his hands too full with his own crew to bother with Jake for a while.

Only once they were past him did Jake turn around. He let out a breath as he watched them leave the bar.

"Man...." Freddy puffed out his cheeks. "Are you sure about this, Jake? That's a lot of money you just turned down."

"Yeah." Through the crowds knocking back their beers and cocktails, he could see Goetz and his crew had stopped outside, gathered on the boardwalk that ran along the edge of the beach. It appeared that Goetz was detailing a couple of his goons to stay and watch the bar. "Trust me. We do not wanna be around that guy."

Freddy followed Jake's gaze. "I'm not sure we want him this pissed with us, either." Underneath the bravado, Jake could hear Freddy's nervousness, and he remembered the increasingly panicked messages on the answering machine. He reckoned Freddy had gotten a pretty good idea of what Goetz was capable of, even if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes like Jake had.

"Yeah." Freddy had a point, but Jake was still counting on the job falling apart in a few days as the Feds tightened the noose around J&R and its subsidiaries. He reckoned that getting even with the two of them would be the least of Goetz's concerns at that point. He and Freddy just needed to stay out of Goetz's way until that happened.

Trouble was, last time they'd tried that, Freddy had ended up dead. They needed to be smarter this time.

At Jake's side, Freddy was shaking his head. "How d'you even know all that stuff, man?"

Jake snorted. *You wouldn't believe me if I told you.* "I'll explain later," he offered, hoping Freddy wouldn't ask again, or that by then he'd have been able to come up with something that sounded a little less crazy than the truth. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Anna approaching and he turned to face her. "Sorry. I just—."

She shook her head. "It's okay. I get it." She sounded subdued, a little scared, even. She peered over

her shoulder: Goetz and most of his team had gone, but the two who'd been left behind were eyeing the three of them balefully. "Will they be coming back?"

Jake nodded. "Probably." Glancing around the bar, he remembered how Ambassador Travis had smuggled him and Hawkins out the Texas embassy through a neighboring property. He looked back at Anna. "Can we get into the bar next door out back?"

Anna nodded. "There's a service alley runs all the way along."

"Okay. You need to get someone to cover your shift, and then we need to go." Jake squinted out of the front of the bar again, checking that Goetz's goons were still loitering. "Without them seeing us."

"Go where?" Jake could definitely hear the fear in Anna's voice now.

He thought quickly. "The airport. First flight out. Doesn't matter where it's going, as long as those guys don't know where we're headed."

Freddy snorted. "Man. I don't have enough moolah for a bus ticket..."

"It's okay. I got it covered." The bills Jake had handed over earlier for his rent had been just part of the bundle of cash that Hawkins had conjured up from some CIA slush fund, and Jake reckoned they had plenty enough for tickets and a nice hotel somewhere. "We just need to stop by my apartment."

"Since when?" Freddy was looking at him disbelievingly. "Last time I saw you, I had to stand you a beer."

Jake shook his head. "I'll explain later. Just..." He caught Freddy and Anna by the arm and pulled them towards the bar. "Anna, set us a couple beers, make it look like we're staying. Then fix up someone to cover you for a few days. Tell them it's a family emergency."

"Jake, I can't just..." She shrugged off his hand but, much to his relief, rounded the end of the bar and reached for the beers he'd asked for.

"Anna, I'm sorry. We have to get out of town." He caught her gaze and held it, giving her a slight nod to confirm his words. "It'll just be for a few days."

The phrase hung in the air, and suddenly Jake found himself gasping for breath. He turned his head away, closing his eyes and pressing his lips together as he remembered Heather telling him the same thing. And how badly that had turned out.

A wave of longing swept over him as he recalled the feel of her as he'd hugged her goodbye. What he wouldn't give to hold her in his arms again right now. And yet... somewhere out there was a happy, innocent schoolteacher, who would never know hunger or cold or fear, or face the threat of kidnapping and execution....

"Jake?"

Anna's voice brought him back to the present. Drawing in a shuddering breath and swallowing down the lump in his throat, he opened his eyes and looked back at her, forcing himself to concentrate on the here and now. "Please?"

She hesitated for a moment longer, and then nodded reluctantly, before heading along the bar to talk to one of the other bartenders.

oOo

In the end, they got out through the fake Irish pub three bars along. Squinting back over his shoulder, Jake could see the Ravenwood guys anxiously peering into the bar where Anna worked. It looked like they were trying to spot where Jake—the last of them to leave as they’d slipped away one by one—had gotten to. Jake hoped, as he hurried along the boardwalk with Anna and Freddy in tow, that meant the three of them had a good head start.

He led them back to his apartment as quickly as he could. He didn’t really want to go back there at all, but they needed to pick up the rest of Hawkins’ cash. He just hoped Freddy hadn’t told Ravenwood his address, or they hadn’t managed to figure it out on their own.

He remembered that someone else *did* know where he lived when he saw the door to his apartment standing open a crack. With a silent sigh, he pushed it open: he should’ve expected Hicks would turn up right after he’d met with Freddy and Ravenwood, just like he did last time.

“Who—?” Anna’s question was cut off by a startled squeak as another of Hicks’ black-suited goons came up behind them.

“They’re from the NSA.” Stepping further into the apartment and heading for the kitchen area, Jake indicated the weasel-faced man sitting at the table. “This is Agent Hicks. Freddy and I had the pleasure of meeting him when we were in Iraq.”

His tone belied his words; it had been no pleasure at all: Hicks had been riding Jake since the day he’d waylaid him in a J&R cafeteria in the Green Zone and indicated he knew far too much about Jake’s past—and would be quite happy to dredge up enough of it to have Jake hauled back to Kansas to face charges if he didn’t cooperate.

“Freddy.” Hicks’ lips twitched as he turned his attention from Jake to the other two when they followed Jake inside and stopped by the foot of the bed. “And who is this charming young lady?”

Anna edged closer to Freddy; Jake guessed she’d had quite enough of menacing-looking strangers for one day. So had he. “None of your concern.” Jake’s words dragged Hicks’ gaze back to him. He leaned back against the kitchen counter and folded his arms. “What do you want?”

Again, Hicks smirked. “You’ve been making some interesting new friends, Jake.”

Jake snorted, shaking his head slightly. “Not exactly.”

Hicks picked an at imaginary piece of lint on his pants. “Not very nice people, I’m afraid to say. Lucky for you, your timing is perfect. We’re looking to nail Ravenwood.”

Hicks pulled some papers across the table toward him and Jake realized he was about to flip open the file with the photos. He’d only seen them for a few minutes last time, but he remembered they’d been bad enough to turn his stomach. He didn’t want Anna to see—to find out what kind of stuff he and Freddy had gotten tangled up in over in Iraq. Stepping forward, he slammed his hand down flat on the file before Hicks could lift the cover.

Hicks raised his eyebrows a little. Jake tilted his head in Anna's direction and said quietly. "She doesn't need to see."

Hicks raised his eyebrows still further, but took his hand away from the file. Letting out a breath, Jake straightened and backed away. He met Hicks' gaze. "I already told them: I'm not doing the job."

"We know." Again Hicks offered Jake a thin-lipped smile. "I suggest you reconsider. That cargo —."

"Yeah, I know." Jake nodded, his gaze not wavering. "Stinger missiles to sell to the Taliban."

A few feet away, Anna let out a faint gasp—Jake guessed she hadn't heard that part of his conversation with Goetz from behind the bar—and quietly said Freddy's name, disbelief and shock evident in her tone.

Hicks looked across at her, the smirk back on his face as he judged just how to use Jake's evident desire to protect Anna against him. When he spoke, his words were as much for her as for Jake and Freddy. "Not the first time," he pointed out, his tone smug. "And it won't be the last—unless you help us put an end to it. We need someone working for them that they'll consider credible."

Jake let out a humorless chuckle. "Then you need someone else. After what happened earlier, Goetz won't trust me further than he can throw me, even if I do take the job."

Hicks looked back at him. "Oh, you don't need to be drinking buddies with him. Just be there. Just be close enough to get us the evidence we need."

Jake leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms again. He suspected Hicks was going to prove as difficult to dissuade as Goetz had been, but he reckoned he had an ace up his sleeve for Hicks as well. He just didn't much want to use it unless he had to. He shook his head. "No. There's no reason on earth will make me say yes."

Hicks pulled another file from the stack. "Even though you know firsthand what they're capable of?"

Jake turned his head away, grimacing. He guessed Hicks had pictures from Saffa; he'd heard rumors that a freelance photojournalist had pitched up there a day or so after the fire—firefight—and, a day or so after that, when the guy had gotten back to Baghdad, his Al Hamra hotel room had been broken into and all his film and cameras stolen. But as the memories—the girl, her dark hair spread around her pale face, eyes closed as if she was only sleeping the most vivid of them—came back to Jake for the third time that day, he knew he wasn't afraid of Saffa any more, and that he wasn't going to let what he'd done there push him into doing worse things.

He faced Hicks again. "Yes. I know what they're capable of. But I'm not your man." Reaching into his back pocket, he fished out his wallet and pulled out a business card tucked inside it. Hawkins had given it to him before he'd left DC: a simple cream rectangle with nothing but a phone number. He handed it to Hicks.

Hicks raised his eyebrows as he took the card. "What is this? A get-out-of-jail-free card?"

"Something like that." Jake nodded at the card. "Just make the call." He tried not to show his fear that whatever the number led to—Hawkins hadn't exactly been specific—it wouldn't work the

magic he was looking for.

Hicks gave him a sneering look, but pulled out his cellphone and flipped it open. His expression turned suspicious when the phone was answered after three rings and whoever was on the other end spoke, though Jake couldn't make out the words, just the faint, tinny sound that told him someone was talking.

Hicks flicked his gaze up to meet Jake's as he answered "This is Agent Richard Hicks, National Security Agency."

There was a moment before the person on the other end responded; when they did, a look of pure shock crossed Hicks' face. He dropped the business card and, groping in his jacket pocket, produced his ID. His voice was a hoarse croak as he confirmed, "Yes, that's my badge number." He had opened the badge and was staring at it as if he was trying to work out how the person on the other end of the line *knew*.

Another question from the mysterious voice brought Hicks' attention back to Jake. "Jake Green," he told the voice. "That is, Johnston Jacob Green." After a moment's pause, he added. "Junior. What —?" He stopped, apparently cut off by a peremptory demand to hold the line.

There was a long silence, and then the voice was back. Whatever it said, Hicks didn't like it one bit. His face darkened, and he tried to interrupt several times. The voice seemed to be having none of it. Eventually, Hicks snapped the phone shut and dropped it on the table. He stared at it for a long time, his lips clamped into a tight line, before he finally looked back up at Jake.

"Well, you *have* been making interesting new friends."

Jake tried to keep his face neutral, not sure what Hicks had been told, and not in the mood to offer his own explanation.

Hicks absently put one finger on the phone and spun it around on the glass tabletop. "Seems you're in the middle of a critical operation for the CIA, and the NSA is not to interfere or take any action that might be prejudicial to that mission."

"What? CIA? Since when, man?" Freddy's surprised question fell into the silence that followed Hicks' words. Jake had been so intent on Hicks—of finding a way to get him off their backs—that he'd almost forgotten about Freddy standing a few feet away with his arm around Anna.

Jake looked across at him and shrugged. "I couldn't let you know," he offered. Which was true enough. Last time he'd seen Freddy, he hadn't even known Hawkins existed, let alone that the man was about to drag Jake into the biggest conspiracy of all time. He looked back at Hicks. "You have your answer. I can't help you."

"Come on, Jake." Hicks was smirking at him again. "Help me out here. Sure, I don't want to tread on the CIA's toes—" He sounded like he'd love nothing better than to throw a spanner into whatever the rival agency was up to. "—but maybe we can work something out, you and I?"

"No." Jake pressed his lips together. He was tired of arguing with people who didn't seem to understand what the word meant. "Forget it, Hicks. Whatever you have on me, it's not gonna work. Not any more. Nobody's going to care what I did in Kansas or Iraq." Not the authorities, at least: Hawkins had promised to get his records cleaned up. Jake dipped his head and added, "Not even my family." He suspected that maybe wasn't quite true yet, but he knew they'd come around. If he took

the chance life had given him to prove himself again to them.

The smirk didn't leave Hicks lips, but Jake saw a touch of tension creep into the muscles around his eyes. "So Ravenwood gets to go on selling weapons that are gonna be used against our troops, and go on murdering civilians?" Hicks tapped the folders again. "Gee. I sure hope you sleep well at night, Jake."

Jake snorted. After what had happened the past year, and after all the frantic activity back in DC—it felt like he'd been up five days straight, thought he'd snatched a few hours here and there—he reckoned he'd sleep like a baby when he finally got a chance.

Besides, he'd helped save forty million people in the past week, and he reckoned there wouldn't be much left of J&R or Ravenwood once the Feds were done with them. He smiled wryly. "You don't need me." He tilted his head toward the TV set. "You must've seen the news this morning. J&R's going down. By tomorrow, they'll have hundreds of Feds crawling all over them and their subsidiaries. You'll be able to get all the evidence you need."

"Outfits like Ravenwood don't leave a paper trail," Hicks countered. "I need eye-witness testimony, Jake. I—." Hicks jumped as his cellphone buzzed. He picked it up and flicked it open. "Agent Hicks...." The next moment, he straightened from his contemptuous slouch. "Yes, sir." His gaze went to Jake. "Yes, sir." Hicks looked increasingly pale as he yessirred several more times in response to the flurry of orders and instructions that were apparently being hurled in his direction. "Yes, sir. Immediately, sir. Sir—?"

Jake could hear the connection go dead, cutting off Hicks' question. Slowly, Hicks lowered the phone and looked around at the rest of his goons, swallowing hard. "That was Deputy Director Inglis. He.... We're to move immediately on the Ravenwood squad in San Diego and arrest them. We—." Hicks looked down and, noticing his cellphone was still open, closed it and slipped it into his pocket. Still seeming dazed, he picked up his badge and stood.

Turning his attention to Jake again, he gave a defeated shrug. "Seems you were right. I don't need you any more." He sounded a little sad about it. "Have a nice life, Jake."

Jake allowed himself a wry smile. "Thank you, Agent Hicks. And good luck with Ravenwood."

oOo

After Hicks and his men left, Freddy steered Anna toward a seat at the table. Jake almost told him to stop, thinking he should keep them at the other end of the room, away from the sliding glass doors that led onto the balcony. But the palm trees outside blocked the view of anyone across the street. Even so, Jake didn't switch on the lights, despite dusk beginning to fall, and he took a coke for himself, determined to keep a clear head, when he fetched a beer for Freddy and a coke for Anna.

Freddy downed half the beer in a single swig before he spoke. "CIA? Man, when did you start working for *them*?"

Jake pondered the question as he headed for the bed, knelt and fished under it to retrieve the case containing the gun Hawkins had given him. He guessed the answer was: ever since that winter's day a few months back—or a few months in the future, now—when he'd ambushed Hawkins and learned about the bomb. "Umm, a while...?" he offered.

Freddy let out an unimpressed snort. Glancing back towards the two of them at the table, Jake noticed Anna hadn't touched her coke yet. She seemed a little shell-shocked by the events of the past couple of hours, her expression uneasy as she watched Jake moving around the small apartment.

He turned back and, still kneeling, set the gun case on the bed and fumbled with the tumblers on the combination lock. As the clasps snapped open, Freddy—who'd apparently been silently digesting the news—spoke up again. "So what did *they* want?"

Jake smiled to himself. Freddy wouldn't believe him even if he tried to tell him. He gave a slight shrug. "A little inside information on J&R." It wasn't so far from the truth.

"What? Like how they hire shitty mechanics and pay their drivers crap? And—. Jeez." Jake heard Freddy suck in a deep breath. "How long have you had *that*?" He'd caught sight of the gun as Jake lifted it out of the case.

"Just since I got back." Jake pulled out the magazine and checked it, before slotting it back in place. He didn't like the Beretta Mini Cougar quite as much as the Beretta he'd carried back in Jericho—a 92FS—but it was better than no gun at all. Picking up the spare clip and shoving it in his pocket, he got to his feet.

"You got a permit for that thing?" Freddy indicated the gun with his beer bottle as Jake headed back toward them, dragging the cane chair from near the TV over to where, when he sat down, he could keep an eye on both the window and the door.

"It's registered to the CIA." Jake rested the gun on his thigh and raked his gaze across the darkening view outside. Absently, he leaned forward and snagged the coke bottle he'd left on the table. The trouble with no one being able to see in was that Jake couldn't really see out, either.

"So, do we still need to leave?" Anna finally spoke, her words quiet and only the slightest tremor in her voice betraying her anxiety.

Looking across at her, Jake saw her gaze was fixed on the gun. He tried to give her a reassuring smile. "I don't think so. But it's probably best you stay here tonight, don't go home. I'm guessing Ravenwood knows where Freddy lives—" That must have been how they'd found him last time. "—and if Hicks doesn't sweep them all up straight away...."

Involuntarily, Jake looked back toward the bed, toward where his old self had once knelt and held Freddy as his friend's life had slipped away, powerless to prevent it. Remembered, too, how Anna had arrived moments later and seen—.

"That's why you've got the gun?"

Anna's question pulled him from the memory. Looking back at her, he reminded himself that it *was* just a memory: Freddy was still very much alive, if somewhat less cocky than usual. His and Anna's baby would grow up with a father. And Jake hadn't just been able to change the fates of millions of people he didn't know but also those of people he cared about.

He nodded at her. "Yes. I don't trust them not to come after us."

"Okay." Anna wrapped her arms around herself, but she gave Jake a look that suggested some of her suspicion had lessened, and she trusted him to keep them safe.

Freddy drained his beer. “Man, I don’t know where you went those five days you were outta town, but you’ve changed. I haven’t seen you like this since Iraq. And even then....” He shook his head.

Jake mouth twitched as he suppressed a grin. Freddy was right. And it wasn’t just because nearly a year had passed for him, instead of the five days Freddy thought; it was what had happened in that time. Living under constant pressure; being forced to plan and act and react; being responsible for the lives of others. He wondered if, without all that to drive him on, he’d slide back to what he’d been before: drifting, trying not to get involved, even in his own future. Or whether—his father’s words came back to him—he’d finally become the man he was born to be.

He realized Freddy was still looking at him, still waiting for an answer. He shifted in his chair. “A lot of stuff happened.”

“Yeah. You said.” Freddy left the words hanging in the air, clearly expecting Jake to say more.

Jake looked away: another instinctive check out the window—it was fully dark outside now—and back to the door to the apartment and then back to the window.... He chuckled to himself. The past months really *had* changed him. Turning back to Freddy, Jake saw he was still waiting for an answer.

In the end, Jake got them to watch the news, while warning Freddy he couldn’t tell him any more than what they’d see on screen. He and Hawkins had only just managed to cobble together a credible story for Hawkins’ bosses, and it had relied a great deal on them not having a clue what Jake had been up to in the six months he’d been in San Diego. Freddy would be far harder to fool, but Jake knew he wouldn’t believe the truth either.

Fetching Freddy another beer—he and Anna were gawping at the ticker across the bottom of the screen that screamed “Nuclear attacks foiled. 25 US cities targeted”—Jake touched Anna on the shoulder. “You okay?” She looked up at him and caught his meaning: he wasn’t just asking if she wanted another coke. She nodded back at him.

Handing Freddy the beer, Jake propped himself up at the side of the door onto the balcony and took advantage of the different view to make another scan of the street below and the buildings opposite, or what he could see of them in the pools of light from the streetlamps. He ignored the flickering reflection of the TV screen in the darkened window, though he couldn’t quite tune out the TV anchors and reporters and talking heads in the studio as they discussed the planned nuclear attacks, and how high this might go in the government, in between running profiles of J&R and showing pictures of the executives arrested that morning.

Eventually, Freddy turned off the TV. “Man....” When Jake swung away from the window to look at him, Freddy puffed out his cheeks. “You were really mixed up in all that?”

“Yeah.” Seeing Freddy open his mouth, Jake added hastily. “I already told you: I can’t tell you any more.”

Freddy looked like he wasn’t really buying that, but he eventually gave Jake a reluctant nod. Jake suspected it wasn’t going to be the last he’d hear of it.

“They were going to attack San Diego? And Houston?” Anna’s softly-voiced question drew Jake’s attention toward her. He saw her shoulders were tense and her hands were clasped over her stomach. “My parents are there,” she explained, clearly expecting Jake to ask, not knowing that he

already knew. When he nodded in answer, she added, “So we’d all be dead?”

“Maybe.” Jake wondered what had happened to her, to that other her, after he’d put her on the bus. She hadn’t been due to get in to Houston until long after the bombs went off, so maybe she’d been okay. But there hadn’t really been a chance to find out what became of her in the brief span when Beck and his troops had been in charge in Jericho, especially as Anna was probably somewhere in Texas, and cross-border communication had been pretty limited. He supposed he could’ve tried to get news of her while he was in San Antonio, but he’d had other stuff on his mind. And he suspected he hadn’t wanted to know the answer anyway, just in case.

Anna wrapped her arms around herself again. “But we’re safe now?”

Jake hesitated a moment, because Hawkins had thought they were safe—even if they’d lost their chance to expose the plot—when Cheyenne had gotten hold of the last bomb. And then John Smith had come within a whisker of getting his hands on it. But John Smith—or the man that the CIA was almost certain was John Smith, from the little information Jake had been able to supply, and the other intelligence they’d put together—was in custody now. “As far as I know, yes.” It wasn’t a very reassuring answer, but it was the best he could provide.

“Hey, I’ll keep you safe, baby. You know that.” Freddy put his arm around her and pulled her against him.

Anna managed a small laugh. “Call me a fool, but I believe you.” She and Freddy smiled at each other, and Freddy reached up to brush a loose strand of hair back from her face.

Jake looked away. He was happy to see them together, after what had happened before, but they were a painful reminder of what he’d given up himself. He swallowed down the lump in his throat. “I’ll make us something to eat.”

Shoving the Beretta into the waistband of his jeans, he clattered open the kitchen cupboards. While he pulled out canned tomatoes and pasta—when he’d gone to the grocery store on the next block earlier to pick up food and some more beer, the choice had seemed a little bewildering after the privations of the last year—he tried to ignore Freddy and Anna muttering endearments to each other.

After a few minutes, after Jake had started some sauce and scrubbed out a pan so he could heat water for the pasta, Anna stood. The movement made Jake glance over his shoulder at the two of them.

“I—.” With a blush, Anna indicated the door to the bathroom and headed across the apartment.

Jake took the chance to clear the empty bottles from the table and drop them in the trash. Freddy’s gaze remained fixed on the door once Anna had closed it behind her. After a moment, he said quietly. “That money you were going to use for plane tickets. The CIA give you that?”

“Yeah.” Jake reached for plates from the cupboard.

“Don’t suppose they gave you anything like what Ravenwood was offering us?”

“’Fraid not.” Turning back to the table, Jake saw the anxious expression on Freddy’s face. “Freddy —.”

“We’re gonna get married.” Freddy’s voice was flat as he made the announcement, no joy in his words.

Jake had noticed the ring, back at the bar, when Anna had served them, but hadn’t said anything. Because noticing stuff like that wouldn’t just have had Freddy wondering where Jake had been for five days but asking if he’d been replaced by aliens. He was glad Freddy had told him, though. It was one less thing to watch out for letting slip. Putting the plates down on the table, he reached out and punched Freddy lightly on the arm. “You finally pulled the trigger, huh?”

Freddy turned an anxious look up toward Jake. “I needed that money.” He took a deep breath. “Anna’s pregnant. We’re gonna have a kid.”

“That’s terrific! We should celebrate!” When Freddy’s expression didn’t change, Jake squeezed his shoulder. “Hey, I’m sorry about the money. But, trust me, taking the Ravenwood job wouldn’t have turned out well for you or Anna or the baby.” Freddy gave him a doubtful look. “I’ll figure something out, okay?”

Before Freddy could reply, the bathroom door opened and Anna came back out. She stopped halfway across the room, looking from Freddy to Jake and back again. “What?”

Jake shook himself. He guessed Freddy didn’t want Anna to know about his money woes, although he also suspected Anna hadn’t bought into whatever story Freddy had spun her, because she was a smart woman. But he plastered a smile on his face. “Freddy was just telling me the good news. Congratulations.” He moved towards her and offered her an awkward hug.

“Hey, hey, hey.” Freddy joined them. “I’ll thank my best man to keep his hands off my fiancée!”

“Best man?” Jake tried to sound as surprised as last time.

Freddy grinned at him. “You gonna make me ask? You’re more a brother to me than the one I grew up with.”

“Yeah.” Jake’s smile faded. That was another thing he’d lost: Eric still thought his brother’s life was a joke, and that Jake was an embarrassment. He cleared his throat and, reaching out to grasp Freddy’s proffered hand, managed to croak. “Right back atcha.”

A hiss of water spitting out of the pasta pan reminded Jake that he was cooking dinner and gave him a chance to extricate himself from the conversation. He gestured in the direction of the kitchen. “I gotta....”

Later, while they ate, Jake asked them if they’d set a date, and Anna told him she and Freddy had been hoping to buy out the bar where she worked. The owner was looking to sell; if they could scrape together enough of a downpayment, Anna could get the rest of the asking price as a loan. While Anna talked, Jake thought of the money his grandfather had left him, which would more than cover what she needed—but he reckoned explaining he wanted to lend it to friends to buy a bar, of all things, wasn’t much likelier to persuade his father to sign it over than last time, when he’d refused to say at all why he wanted the money. Best not to mention it, and get Freddy and Anna’s hopes up unnecessarily.

“May I could get another driving job....” Freddy suggested.

“In Iraq? Or Afghanistan?” Anna looked at him miserably. Her expression was confirmation of

what Jake had known all along: that she'd pressured him to go with Freddy only because Freddy was insisting on going, not because she wanted Freddy out there and Jake to watch his back.

Freddy shrugged. "That's where the money is, babe."

"Look—." It had suddenly occurred to Jake that while his grandfather's money had felt like the only option when he was running from Ravenwood and Hicks, it maybe wasn't now. "There's my Roadrunner. I could sell it and—."

"No, man!" Freddy didn't let him finish. "That car's your—. No!"

Jake laughed. "Come on, Freddy. She's been sitting in a parking garage for the past five years. What good's she doing me?"

He could see Freddy wavering. And though selling the old girl would be a wrench, it seemed like exactly the right thing to do. She tied him to his old life: to Emily, and Jonah, and that guy he'd been six years ago who hung out with petty thugs like Mitch Cafferty. A little voice pointed out that he'd also never get to wow Heather with her—he knew she'd liked the car—but, then, he'd have to win Heather back first....

He spread his hands. "It maybe won't get you everything you need, but it'll help."

"Jake, no. You can't. We couldn't." Anna's voice mirrored the distress on her face.

"Yes. Yes, you can." Jake reached out and put his hand over hers for a moment. "You know what Freddy did for me in Iraq. You know I owe him my life. Let me do this. For Freddy, and you, and your baby."

Anna was still shaking her head. "But that's your money. I mean, you need a job just as much as Freddy does."

Jake shrugged. "I'm good for a while. The CIA gave me a little help in return for helping them and..." He hadn't been going to tell them until he'd been offered the job, but he was pretty sure the airline charter would hire him. The guy had practically made him an offer last time, despite the black mark against his name in the State Department's records, and his patchy resume. "There's this pilot's job with a charter company out at Montgomery Field. I'm pretty sure they'll call me for an interview...."

"I'll lend you my lucky tie." Freddy punched him on the arm.

"Thanks." Jake didn't reckon it was the tie that would make the difference, but swallowing his own damn pride. He looked back at Anna. "Look, we'll make a deal. If I get the job, you'll take the money. You can pay me back once the bar's making enough."

For a moment, Anna looked like she was going to carry on arguing, before she smiled at him and dipped her head. "Okay. And thank you."

They talked some more about Anna's plans for the bar while they finished dinner, and while Anna—insisting—did the dishes and gave Jake's kitchen a far better clean than the cursory tidying it normally got. Talking about the bar seemed to cheer both her and Freddy up, though Jake suspected Freddy was just happy his money worries had apparently been solved. And while Jake would have willingly sunk his money into some fool venture for Freddy's sake, because he did owe him, it was

something of a relief to discover Anna really did seem to have a head for business, and to be capable of reining in Freddy's wilder schemes.

After a while, when Jake noticed Anna trying to stifle a yawn for the third time behind her hand, he offered her the bed. Looking a little embarrassed, she curled up under the bedspread, her back to where Jake and Freddy still sat talking quietly.

Looking across at her, Jake thought Freddy was a lucky man. He told him so, later, when he thought Anna had fallen asleep.

Freddy grinned at him smugly. "I know." He leaned back in his chair. "Hey, she's got some good-looking sisters." He wagged his eyebrows suggestively for a moment. When Jake didn't respond, Freddy sighed. "Unless you're still all hung up on that farm girl back in Iowa."

"Kansas." Jake corrected him automatically. He'd never worked out if Freddy always got it wrong deliberately, just to annoy him, or if he really couldn't remember.

"Same thing."

"No, not the same thing." Jake spoke without the rancor of the previous time. He was too busy thinking, *Not the same girl, either*, while the ever-present ache inside him sharpened to an intense need to hold Heather in his arms again.

oOo

Jake woke with a crick in his neck, the gift of a few hours awkward sleep in the chair in front of the TV. After Freddy had joined Anna on the bed a little after midnight, Jake had tried to stay awake and keep watch, in case Ravenwood came calling. But he must have lost the battle some time in the middle of the night: either he hadn't really thought Goetz and his gang were a threat, or the past few days were finally catching up with him.

His hand was still curled around the Beretta, though, where it rested heavily and reassuringly on his thigh, so he guessed he hadn't been that relaxed. Uncoiling himself from the chair, he grimaced and knuckled his back as his spine also protested the night in the chair, before he stepped up next to the window to survey the street outside again. It was early, the sky not fully light, and still quiet: only the occasional car and a single bus rumbled past, while a lone woman hurried along on foot, clutching a briefcase in one hand and a styrofoam coffee cup in the other.

If Goetz or any of his crew were around, they didn't seem likely to make a move in the next few minutes. Putting the gun down on the table, Jake padded quietly to the bathroom. Passing the bed, he saw Freddy was curved around Anna, his hand protectively over her stomach. Jake turned away, trying not to think about what it would be like—how good it would feel—to lie like that with Heather.

Would it have been better or worse, he wondered, looking at himself in the mirror as he washed his hands and splashed water on his face, if he'd figured out what he really felt for Heather, and done something about it, back when he'd first met her? If they'd had months together, instead of days? If he knew for sure what he'd lost, instead of only guessing at missed opportunities?

Drawing in a deep breath, he shook off his gloom. Maybe, one day, he could win her back—but only by getting on with his life, by once again becoming the man she'd fallen in love with.

Back in the main room, he set the coffee to brew, trying to make as little noise as possible so as not wake the others. Freddy always was a light sleeper, though; he'd been half stirring as Jake had come out of the bathroom; by the time the coffee machine was grumbling at its loudest as it sucked up and spat out the final few drips of liquid, he'd hauled himself off the bed and made his way over to the kitchen.

Jake wordlessly handed him a cup of coffee.

"No sign of Ravenwood?" When Jake shook his head, Freddy raised an eyebrow. "You think Hicks got 'em all? That we're in the clear."

Jake shrugged. "I don't know." Goetz had definitely seemed like the type to hold a grudge; maybe they'd never be in the clear. "I—."

"Freddy?" Anna's uncertain question saved Jake from having to give Freddy a less-than-reassuring answer. Peering past Freddy's shoulder, Jake saw she was sitting up, running a hand through her hair, a slightly confused look on her face.

"I'm here, baby." Freddy put his untouched coffee down and hurried over to her. They spoke quietly for a minute or so, and then Anna slipped off the bed and headed for the bathroom.

Freddy wandered back over to the kitchen. Jake had switched the TV on to drown out their conversation and give them some privacy; the news was still focusing on the attacks, although not much seemed to have happened since last night. Jake was only half-listening as he sucked down his coffee and tried to feel less tired.

He dipped his head at Freddy. "Anna okay?"

"Yeah."

Freddy reached for the cup of coffee he'd abandoned. Behind him, the TV had switched to showing a perky blonde news anchor, with a picture of a nondescript chain motel over her left shoulder. "In local news, federal agents here in San Diego last night raided a motel in North Clairemont and arrested ten suspects—."

The image changed to show a number of men being pushed into squad cars by agents wearing flak jackets.

"Freddy...." Jake gestured at the TV as, in the flashing blue and red half-light, he saw Goetz among the men being arrested. His hands were cuffed behind him, and he scowled into the camera as an agent put a hand on his head to guide him into the back seat of a car. In the rear of the shot, Jake caught a glimpse of Hicks with a satisfied smirk on his face.

He reached out and touched Freddy on the arm. "Ten? Was that all of Goetz's squad?"

Freddy nodded. "Yeah. They told me there'd be twelve of us flying out."

He was still watching the TV, while the news anchor continued to talk over the pictures. "—believed to work for Ravenwood, a subsidiary of Jennings and Rall, the government contractor currently embroiled in allegations of a conspiracy to overthrow the Government. Sources close to the investigation say the men were attempting to smuggle weapons to insurgents and terrorists in Afghanistan."

The picture switched back to the studio, where a distinguished-looking gray-haired anchorman seemed to be holding court with a number of reporters out in the field. "So, Bob," the anchor addressed one of the reporters, who was standing in front of a J&R sign, "it looks like there's another charge to add to the J&R rap sheet?"

"Yes, Bill. And with news that FBI and local law enforcement officers here at J&R headquarters in Sacramento have been joined by IRS Agents investigating—"

Freddy started speaking, but Jake wasn't listening. He was too busy fighting down the cold, sick feeling in his stomach as the realization hit him that among all the lives that had gotten reset was Stanley's. And while that meant Bonnie was alive and, God willing, would stay that way, and Stanley would never know the pain of losing her, it also meant that, right now, Mimi was probably preparing a report that would likely see Stanley lose the farm. He'd definitely lose Mimi, just like Jake had lost Heather—although at least he wouldn't know it, the way Jake did....

"Jake!"

Freddy snapped his fingers in front of Jake's face, and Jake came back to the present. He realized Freddy had been asking if it was safe for him and Anna to go home. Jake nodded. "Yeah. It's over."

Once Freddy and Anna left—she'd watched the news for a couple of minutes, but refused coffee—Jake turned off the TV. Pouring himself the end of the coffee, he sat down and, leaning his head in his hands, tried to think.

He'd told Anna before she'd left that he'd get the Roadrunner sold as soon as he could, and that he'd come by the bar to discuss getting an agreement in place once he had an idea how much he'd make. She still seemed a little uncomfortable with the idea, but he knew that if he came up with the money, she wouldn't say no. But now here was Stanley in real trouble. Not just hoping to build a future but in danger of losing his past: the house his grandfather had built; the farm where his great-grandfather had broken the first soil. Didn't Jake owe him, too, just as much as Freddy? But he couldn't help them both....

Suddenly, he sat up straight and snorted to himself, as he remembered there was still Grandpa's money. He'd been so fixed on the idea that his father wouldn't sign it over that he'd put it out of his mind entirely. And he still didn't think Dad would let him lend it to Freddy and Anna. But he might be convinced to let Jake use it to help Stanley out.

He glanced across at the phone on the nightstand. Talking to Dad, persuading him to lend the money to Stanley, wouldn't be easy. He'd have to get past the fact his father still thought he was—what was the phrase he'd used? A stupid little punk, that was it. Not to mention, the last time he'd spoken to Dad....

The memory of his father's dying words—*I'm proud of you*—strengthened Jake's resolve. Dad might have a low opinion of him right now, but Jake knew his father loved him, no matter how hard Jake had made things between them. Taking a deep breath, he stood and crossed over to the bed to pick up the phone, glancing at the clock as he did so: Jericho was two hours ahead, but Dad probably wouldn't have left for City Hall yet.

Swallowing down the lump in his throat, Jake dialed home.

"Hello?"

The sound of his mother's voice made Jake's breath catch; for a moment he couldn't answer. When she repeated her greeting, he forced himself to focus and managed to croak, "Mom."

"Jake? Is that you, honey?" She sounded so pleased to hear from him that, again, he found it hard to speak. "Jake?"

"Yes." He cleared his throat. "Yes, it's me, Mom."

"Oh, honey! Are you okay?"

"Yes." He swallowed hard, trying to get his emotions under control. "I'm fine. I...." He hesitated, and then made a promise to himself: *no more lies*. "I'm in San Diego. Everything's fine. Are you and Dad...?"

"Yes. We're fine. Your father and I have both had a bit of a cold, but we're both over it now."

"He's still impervious to mere germs, huh?" Jake's laugh caught in his throat. He guessed that, without all the extra stress of the attacks, his father had shaken off the infection more easily.

"Uh-huh." His mother was silent for a few seconds. "When are you—?"

Jake didn't let her finish. He knew what she was going to ask: the same question she asked every time he called home. "Soon, Mom. I promise." He took a deep breath. "Look, is Dad there? I need to speak to him."

"Sure, honey. I'll just get him." His mom's voice had taken on the slightly flat tone he knew she used to conceal her surprise. Her voice faded—she must be holding the phone out to his father—as he heard her say, "He wants to talk to you." Jake could also hear his dad's unimpressed snort before he came on the line.

"Jake?"

Again, a lump rose in Jake's throat at the sound of his father's voice. He'd thought he'd never hear those gruff tones again. Even though they were frosted with disappointment and contempt for what Jake was, for what he'd made of himself and failed to make of himself. In this world, Jake had yet to make his father proud. But all that would change. It would be harder, but Jake was determined to make it happen. Even if Dad probably wouldn't admit it until he was on his deathbed again. Which, God willing, would be many years from—.

"Jake?" His father's puzzled tones cut into Jake's thoughts. "Jake, are you there?"

"Yeah." Jake swallowed hard. "Yeah, I'm here. Look, Dad, I need to talk to you about Grandpa's money. I—."

"Now, look," his father interrupted, "your grandpa didn't leave you that money to waste on—."

"Dad, will you just let me finish?" Jake couldn't keep the annoyance out of his voice, even though he knew that, right now, his father had every reason to jump to that conclusion. "I don't want the money for myself. I want you to give it to Stanley. He's having some trouble with the IRS. I want to lend him the money to help him get straight. A proper loan, with a repayment schedule, but it'll give him a chance—."

"Stanley? Stanley Richmond?" His father sounded disbelieving. "Are you sure? I saw him yesterday, and he said everything was fine with the IRS."

"Dad!" Now it was Jake's turn to snort. "We're talking about Stanley. He probably hasn't got a clue how much trouble he's in. But, believe me, he is."

There was a harrumph from the other end of the phone that suggested his father wasn't discounting that possibility, though he didn't say anything else for a few moments. Jake guessed he was turning over the situation. At last, his father let out a heavy sigh. "How come you know about this? No one round here's seen you in five years. You've barely called your mother...."

"I—." Jake racked his brains for an answer. Because he sure couldn't explain that he was from the future, and that Stanley had told him about the IRS debt himself, if not in so many words. A memory of Hawkins, who could win a gold medal for evasiveness, flashed into his mind. "Does it matter?"

Even though his father was silent, Jake could sense he remained unconvinced.

"Please, Dad." The telephone was slippery in Jake's hand, and he gripped it more tightly. "Stanley needs our help."

There was another long silence. Jake remembered how he used to think his father was judging him when he did that—and finding him wanting—because it was so obvious to him that his father should be saying yes to whatever Jake was proposing. But he understood now that it was simply that Dad took his time to evaluate things, even when his first instinct was to agree. That he'd learned not to be hasty when making his mind up. Something Jake had learned too, the last year, he realized, even if he sometimes forgot. So he stayed silent, giving his father the time he needed to think it through.

At last, his father heaved a sigh. "All right, I'll talk to him. If you're sure...?"

Jake let out the breath he'd been holding. "I'm sure. Thank you."

His father cleared his throat. "You could lose everything...."

"Yes, I know." Jake didn't let him finish. "Stanley doesn't just need the money; he needs help figuring out how to stay out of trouble."

He needs Mimi, Jake added to himself. Fixing that really would take a miracle: he remembered sitting up all night playing cards with the two of them—it had been the night after they'd buried the bodies they'd found at Bass Lake—and how Mimi had sniped and picked at Stanley back then—and not in a way that suggested she was secretly attracted to him.

"There'll need to be conditions...", his father pointed out.

"Yes." Jake could understand his father's caution. But he also knew Dad would want to help Stanley almost as much as he did. For Stanley's sake. and for Jericho's sake. "Whatever you think's necessary."

Again, his father was quiet for a moment, before he spoke again. "And you'll need to sign the papers. We can mail them, but I know your mother would like to see you...."

Jake held in the wry chuckle that bubbled up within him, because his father was so predictable. And it didn't hurt so badly this time around that Dad couldn't admit that maybe he'd like to see Jake too. Because Jake knew what his father felt deep inside. Knew it would take a lot of work to get his respect back, but that it was possible. That he and Dad weren't a totally lost cause.

Though he wasn't sure he was ready himself to try just yet. Clearing his throat, he offered his father the only answer he could: "Yes, I know. I'll come home as soon as I can."

"Well, I know she'd like it if it was soon." His father sounded a little gruffer than usual.

"I know." Again, there was an awkward pause, before Jake extracted a promise from his father that he'd call Jake back once he'd spoken to Stanley, gave him his phone number at the apartment, and hung up.

oOo

After he'd finished speaking to his father, Jake crawled into bed and crashed for a few hours, the lack of sleep and excitement of the previous few days finally catching up with him. He was woken by the phone ringing. The machine caught it before he had a chance to pick up. Probably just as well, he decided, as he listened to the message and discovered the charter company did want to call him for interview.

The next morning saw him out at Montgomery Field, wearing Freddy's lucky tie and his decent suit. The receptionist directed him to the company's hangar, where he was met by John Grainger, the airline's head of operations.

Grainger walked him through the hangar as they talked, and Jake got a chance to scout the planes. Although a few of the models he'd seen last time were missing, and there were a couple of new ones, the selection was much the same. Most of the planes were Cessna Citations, but Jake spotted some small Learjets, as well as two tiny Mooney M20s. "So these are all yours?" He waved a hand around to encompass the whole hangar.

Grainger, glancing at his clipboard, which held Jake's resume, remarked absently. "Yes. As you can see, we have quite a varied fleet. You won't get bored here, Mr Green."

"No, I can see that." Jake allowed himself a small grin. Though he doubted, tempting as it would be, he'd be pulling any of the stunts in the Mooneys that had been a regular feature of flying his grandfather's similarly sized cropduster. "Nice planes," he added.

Grainger looked up at him and nodded. "Yeah, every aircraft we operate is augmented with custom security and design features you won't find in any other fleet."

He paused, and Jake halted, turning to face him. Grainger gestured with the clipboard. "I see that you're an Embry-Riddle grad. ATP-certified, Sixteen hundred verified FAA hours. Clearly well qualified, Mr. Green."

Jake gave him a smile and dipped his head, and repeated what he'd said last time. "Flying's in my blood. I started working on my grandpa's crop duster when I was ten."

That brought a faint answering smile from Grainger—Jake suspected he was an ex-pilot himself—before his expression turned more serious. "Now you understand that we charter exclusively to top

executives and celebrity clients, so absolute discretion is a must for our flight crew."

Again, Jake nodded. He'd thought about how he was going to handle the interview on the way out to the airfield and decided that, while Grainger probably wanted to see a certain level of confidence from someone he was going to hire to fly planes worth millions of dollars, Jake had maybe been a little bit too cocky in his responses last time. So now he said, keeping his tone a milder and more respectful than previously, "Yes, absolutely. My job's about getting the plane safely from A to B. Anything else is none of my business."

"Good." Grainger glanced down briefly at his clipboard, flipping up a couple of pages to look at something underneath Jake's resume. "Of course, finding out everything we can about the people who are piloting our planes is our business. Your visa records say you spent some time in the Middle East over the last few years. And your resume says you were working for Jennings and Rall during most of that time?"

"Yes." Jake resisted the urge to hunch his shoulders and stick his hands in his pockets.

"Hmm...." Grainger's forehead furrowed slightly as he again looked down at his clipboard.

"Not the best name to have on your resume right now, huh?" Jake found himself saying, as the silence lengthened.

Grainger's lips twitched. "Well, I'm sure you weren't involved in planning to overthrow the government, Mr Green." He looked up and met Jake's gaze. "Or were you?"

Jake forced a laugh. *Not this government....* "No. I was just a very junior employee."

"Hmm." Grainger tapped the clipboard. "But your FAA records don't indicate very many flying hours during your time with J&R. You weren't employed by them as a pilot?"

"No." Jake took a deep breath, wondering how far Grainger would push the topic, and how much he'd have to explain himself. How much he'd have to explain just how messed up he'd been back then. "I was mostly driving supply rigs from Bagram Air Base, and up and down Route Irish to BIAP," he admitted.

Grainger raised his eyebrows. "With your qualifications, I would've expected...?"

Jake licked his lips. "I... I didn't apply as a pilot." He shrugged. "They don't ask their drivers as many questions, and back then.... Things had gone pretty sour back home. My father and I weren't getting along, and I didn't want my family to know where I was and what I was doing. Even just from someone looking for a reference."

"I see." Grainger gave him a long hard stare, before his expression lightened a little. "Well, we don't get to choose our families, do we?" He looked back down at the clipboard and scrawled a short note—Jake couldn't read it from where he stood—on Jake's resume. "But in between your time with J&R, you had a spell working for an outfit called Shelby Aviation? With several trips overseas? A role more suited to your talents than driving trucks in Afghanistan...?" Grainger's tone invited a response.

Again, Jake breathed in deeply. "Yes, but then I found out some of their clients were... less than reputable, and just what kind of stuff I was flying around for them...." Jake swallowed as he remembered the sick feeling in his stomach when, squinting against the bright sun bouncing off the

tarmac outside a hangar at La Chinita, he'd realized that the carefully wrapped packages being stowed away in the back of the elderly DC-10 contained cocaine.

"Hmm." For a moment, Jake thought Grainger was going to ask, but he either decided to demonstrate some of the discretion he'd said he'd be expecting from Jake, or he had a pretty good idea what had been involved, given Jake's last trip had been to Venezuela. Instead, he lifted a couple of the pages on the clipboard as if to check something else. "State Department has you flagged as a person of interest...."

Again, Jake swallowed. He really hoped Grainger wasn't going to press for details on Saffa. But if he had to tell him.... Well, he'd survived worse. "There was an incident," he admitted. "Iraq's not exactly...." He gave another shrug. "Things happen, and I was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Grainger made another note on Jake's resume. "That seems to happen to you a lot, Mr Green," he remarked absently.

Jake held in a snort; Grainger had pretty much summed up his life so far. Except there had been a few moments in his life when he *had* been in the right place: like when he'd been hobbling along that road just as those kids from Heather's class had been looking for help....

Forcing away the memory of how calm and collected Heather had been on the bus, despite her own injuries, and how much that had impressed him and—though he'd been too foolish to realize it at the time—attracted him, Jake concentrated on the present. "Look," Jake met Grainger's gaze steadily as the other man looked up at him, "I'll be the first to admit that I've made a lot of mistakes in my life. But I'm not afraid of hard work. I'm reliable. J&R will tell you that. And you said yourself that I'm well qualified...."

Grainger nodded. "I appreciate your honesty, Mr Green. Trust is important to us here. We're a small operation and we give our pilots a lot of responsibility. They have a lot of direct contact with our clients." Suddenly, he smiled. "I think you'd be a good fit, and I hope you'll agree to joining us."

Jake gaped at him for a moment. "You're offering me a job?"

Grainger's smile turned amused. "Yes, I am, Mr Green. We'll need to check your references with J&R, there'll be a probationary period, and you'll act as co-pilot for a few weeks while you learn how we do things around here, but we'd like to get you on board as soon as possible. If you—?" He raised his eyebrows.

"Yes." Jake nodded and took the hand Grainger held out for him to shake. "Thank you."

Grainger's smile widened. "Welcome to Saber Airlines, Mr Green. Now let's go see to your paperwork...."

oOo

After he left Saber's offices, Jake thought about heading to the bar to tell Freddy and Anna that the interview had worked out, but decided against it. He'd feel more comfortable dropping by once he'd started making good on his promise to them and made some real progress on fetching the Roadrunner from Denver and figuring out how to get the best price for her.

Not visiting the bar seemed like an even better idea once he got back to his apartment and played

the message his father had left on the answering machine. Best not to be talking to Dad with a few celebratory beers inside him. He reached for the phone but, looking at the clock, decided Dad would be home for lunch in a little while, and he'd be better off catching him at the house.

Half an hour later, having showered and changed, Jake lifted the receiver and dialed home. He smiled to himself while he waited for someone to pick up: while Jericho had always been where he'd come from and where his family was, he hadn't thought of it as "home" in the five years he'd been away. Now? Yes, now it was "home", and there'd come a day—not too far off, he hoped—when he'd make it his home again. His home and Heather's, if he was lucky....

"Green house." Johnston's gruff tones cut into Jake's thoughts.

"Dad, it's Jake. Sorry you had to leave a message."

"Hadn't woken up yet, huh?" It wasn't just the words but the tone that spoke of Johnston's frustration with his son's choices. In the past, Jake had always read it as contempt, but he knew different now. He even felt a little of the same frustration himself when he thought about how he'd been squandering his life. At least these days—.

"I was at a job interview." He tried not to sound too defensive.

His father snorted. "Still wasting that expensive education your grandfather and I paid for?"

"Actually, no." Jake scrubbed a hand across his face and reminded himself he had no right to be irritated by his father's assumptions. After all, given what his father—this version of his father—knew, he had no reason to think otherwise. "It's with a charter airline. Executive jets. I start Monday."

"Hmmp. Well," his father hesitated, before finally offering a begrudging, "I hope it goes well."

"Thanks." Jake grinned to himself. He wasn't sure his father's congratulations would ever get much more fulsome than that. "So, you spoke to Stanley?"

"I did." There was a deep sigh from the other end of the line. "He denied it for a while, said it was no big deal. But I got him to admit it in the end." Jake could almost hear his father shaking his head as he added, "It's a lot of money he owes, Jake. Your grandpa's money won't cover even half of it."

"I know. But it'll help." Jake hesitated. "Dad, I don't want to put more on you, but Stanley needs more than just money throwing at him...."

"Yes, well, I'm going to have a lot of free time on my hands." His father must have sensed Jake's bewilderment, because he went on, "I'm standing down as mayor. Your brother's agreed to take my place in the election. So I'll need something to keep me busy. Well, your mother has some damn fool idea about a trip to Europe, but that won't take more than a few weeks...."

Jake was only half-listening as his father rambled on. The world had shifted under his feet yet again as he tried to reconcile himself to the idea that his father would voluntarily give up being mayor. Dad had always been so wrapped up in the job that it sometimes seemed to Jake that he couldn't remember a time when he hadn't been in charge of Jericho. He did know that most of his really good memories of Dad—like those weekends they used to go hunting together—came from back before Dad had gotten elected. After that, Jake had spent most of his time with Grandpa or with Emily—and conversations with Dad had always seemed to end in arguments....

Jake shook off the memories, though he couldn't help wondering if this had been in the works last time around, before the attacks. If so, neither his father nor Eric had breathed a word.

He realized from the silence at the other end of the line that his father was waiting for a response. "I'm sure Mom's pleased," he offered. He cleared his throat. "And Eric will do a great job." Jake pushed away the thought that, while the man his brother had become by the time Jericho declared its independence from Cheyenne would do a great job, maybe the man Eric had been a year ago wouldn't. Or that his brother might have some trouble squaring standing as mayor with the fact his marriage was falling apart and he was in love with someone else.

There was an awkward silence, which Jake found he was expecting his father to fill with a barbed comment comparing Jake unfavorably to his brother. To his surprise, his father didn't speak.

"So." Jake cleared his throat again. "Stanley.... Get him to let Bonnie help him. She's got a better head for business than he has. And—" Jake caught himself in time from blurting out Mimi's name, "—the IRS agent, too, if you can."

His father made a noncommittal noise. "I'll see what I can do." There was a pause before he added. "I don't suppose you're going to tell me where you're getting your information from? Since Bonnie was, what, twelve, when you last saw her?"

Jake laughed. "Sorry, Dad. No can do. But I really appreciate you helping Stanley out."

"Yes, well, man deserves it." Johnston sounded gruff. "He's a darned fool for getting himself in a pickle, but he's a part of this town, and he's done a lot for Jericho. I'll talk to William Gerrity and get the papers for the loan agreement drawn up."

"Thanks, Dad."

"You'll need to sign them." His father repeated the point he'd made the day before. Jake sensed he wanted to say more, but it was a few seconds before he added, "If you came back to town, I know Stanley'd like to stand you a beer in Bailey's."

Jake scrubbed a hand through his hair. He wasn't quite ready to face going home. He wasn't quite ready—would he ever be?—to face running into Heather again. And anyway: "Sorry, Dad. I'm starting this new job next week, and I have stuff to do. If you mail them...."

"If that's what you want." The slight edge of disappointment Jake could hear in his father's voice brought a lump to his throat. "I know Stanley's offer'll be good whenever you can make it."

"I know."

Jake gave his father his address, and his love for his mother, and hung up the phone. Sitting on the bed, resting his arms across his knees, he reflected it had been quite a week. First helping Hawkins stop the attacks, and then the past forty-eight hours: saving Freddy from Ravenwood; getting Hicks off his back; getting a job—a real job; helping Stanley save his farm....

But there was still so much to be fixed. So much that maybe couldn't be fixed. Stanley and Mimi. Eric and April and Mary. Him and Dad.

Heather....

He ached to be with her again. To be with her right now. But the Heather who existed in this world didn't feel that way about him. And maybe never would. Yet as he got to his feet, planning to head out to the bus station to buy a ticket to Denver for the following day, he thought about how this world had already given him so many second chances.

Maybe he'd get a second chance at this, too?

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