

## **Reorientationverse**

**Title:** Unforeseen Consequences

**Author:** Scribblesinink

**Rating:** Adult

**Characters:** Beck/Jake, Goetz, Hicks, OCs

**Labels:** First time, AU, canon levels of violence

**Spoilers:** 1.12 *The Day Before*

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**Author notes:** The story that ate my soul. Starting out as a simple bingo fill for the hooker!fic square (previously published as *Tipping Point*), the story quickly took on a life of its own until, 75,000 words and many months later, I realized I'd written an AU slash novel for *Jericho*. I can't thank Tanaqui enough, who has done duty as my beta-editor, enabler, co-plotter and enthusiastic cheerleader. Without her, this story would never have been finished—or at the very least, would've been so much less.

**Summary:** In a world where the bombs don't go off, Jake leaves Jericho and keeps running—from Ravenwood, Agent Hicks, and the disapproval of his own family. When Hicks destroys Jake's identity by invalidating his social security number in an attempt to flush him out, Jake's life spirals even further downward. Until, on a cold autumn evening in Rochester, NY, a stranger in a bar makes him an offer he thinks he should refuse.

## **Unforeseen Consequences By Scribblesinink**

### **Chapter 1**

Soon, Jake reckoned, slogging through an October drizzle that gradually seeped through his jacket, he'd have to take the Feds up on their offer, and consequence be damned. He was getting tired of running: tired of sleeping under bridges and in doorways after he sold the Roadrunner; tired of begging for under-the-table work that never paid enough; tired of shoplifting his next meal on those days he failed to find even that kind of job.

The months after Jake had fled San Diego following Freddy's murder had

been among the toughest of his life: no money, no place to go, and both Ravenwood and the Feds were chasing him across the country.

At first, in spite of the sting of his father's brush-off and subsequent refusal to release Grandpa's money, Jake reckoned he'd pull through okay. By the time the last of the San Diego cash ran out, he was working as a ranch hand in west Texas, where his skills on horseback were appreciated. But the ranch work had dwindled during the winter and he'd been kindly told he should move on.

And then Jake had discovered how much worse his life could get.

Agent Hicks had used the time to work the system and Jake's status had gone from *person of interest* to *persona non grata*: his pilot's license revoked on some trump charge; bank accounts and credit cards frozen; social security number marked as invalid.

Jake was aware the Feds could've wiped out his existence entirely if they'd wanted. The fact they hadn't, sent him a clear message: *help us, and maybe we'll help you in turn.*

He hated the idea, hated letting Hicks win. But it was starting to look attractive. Because, as if to add insult to injury, at times he couldn't even blame Hicks for his troubles, only sheer dumb bad luck. He'd come to Rochester, New York, hoping to get work at the marinas—maybe with one of the charter companies operating on Lake Ontario. He was soon told he was too late: the season was coming to an end and there was no work to be had. All he'd had to show for his trouble so far was another wasted morning wearing out the soles on his shoes and asking for jobs that didn't exist.

Tired, chilled from the wind that howled across the water, bringing cold air and rain from Canada, he aimlessly wandered the streets of the riverfront district, hunched deep in his old army jacket. A *Help Wanted* sign in one of the dirty windows as he passed a bar drew his eye. Warily, he made a beeline for the door to ask for the job.

An hour past noon, the place was deserted. The round-bellied bartender, stocking up shelves, looked up expectantly at Jake's entrance. Jake indicated the sign, and the man blinked, as if surprised. "Sorry, pal." Setting down the bottle he was inspecting, he brushed past Jake to yank the sign

from the window. "Position's been filled. Ain't got 'round to takin' this down yet."

Jake turned on his heel without another word, too beat to be upset, and headed back out into the cold. It had started to rain harder, and he pulled up the collar of his jacket. The sign in the window had given him an idea, though: there were other bars in the streets near the river. Perhaps he'd have more luck elsewhere.

He wandered from one gloomy saloon to another for the rest of the cold afternoon, reassuring the managers he'd turn his hand to anything if only they'd give him a job. Despite his perseverance, the gods didn't smile on him: while nobody chased him right back out, nobody had any work to offer him, either.

It was growing late, dusk falling early under the gray sky, and Jake still had no idea where he'd be spending the night, by the time he pushed through the door of the eighth—or was it the ninth?—bar. He rattled off the same litany he'd now uttered so many times he could've recited it in his sleep.

The bartender, a large black man as bald as an egg, held up his hands before Jake had gotten halfway through his spiel. "Can't help you, buddy." He shrugged in sympathy. "Times're hard for everyone."

Jake gave a tired nod of acceptance, his shoulders sagging. What had he expected?

"Hey, why don't you sit down for a sec?" The barman's invitation stopped Jake from trudging away. "Warm yourself up some?" Jake peered up at him, and the bartender offered another one-shouldered shrug. "You look about ready to fall flat on your face."

Jake huffed a quick, humorless laugh. It was true; he hadn't eaten in a while and, after the cold outside, the heat of the bar was making him dizzy. He pulled himself up on the nearest bar stool; it was a relief to be off his feet.

"Here, drink up." The bartender set a glass down in front of Jake, pouring a measure of a colorless liquid from an unlabeled bottle into it. "Warm your guts." He pushed the glass in Jake's direction. "Don't worry, it's on the house."

Jake considered refusing, both his pride and mistrust about what the catch was cautioning him. But heck, he better learn to accept charity where he found it. He hadn't many choices left: no job, no place to stay, a few crumpled bills in his pocket all that remained from selling the Roadrunner.

He drew the glass closer, accepting the drink with a quick nod. The barman wandered off to the other end of the bar to make a hushed phone call, leaving Jake alone with his thoughts.

He knew his options were growing more limited by the day. If he didn't come up with the means to get more money soon, he was gonna have to pick one of the alternatives he'd been trying to avoid for the past weeks, all of them hard and unpleasant. He ran them down in his mind.

One: give in to Hicks and try to bring Ravenwood down—something that'd likely get him killed the same way they'd murdered Freddie.

Option two: take a page out of Jonah Prowse's book and resort to a life of crime. Not the kind of petty hauling of less-than-savory goods he'd done back in the day, but the real stuff: truck hijacking and robbery—which was what had gotten Chris killed and sent Jake running in the first place.

Or, behind door number three: go home. Back to Jericho. And pray Dad wouldn't turn him away again.

For the tenth time in as many weeks, Jake considered going to Kansas, and, as he had every time he thought about it, he dismissed the idea right out of hand. He'd tried that, and gotten the door slammed shut in his face for his trouble. His mom would be happy to see him, sure, and she'd be willing to take him in and spoil him with pie. But Dad....

Jake shook his head and took a sip of his drink, grimacing at the way the raw alcohol burned his throat. No, his dad would demand he grovel and own up to the fact he'd screwed up yet again. He could picture Dad's expression: the mixture of disappointment and contempt that seemed to have been reserved solely for his eldest son ever since Jake turned sixteen and Jonah gave him the Roadrunner. He wasn't about to submit himself to that again.

Deep down, so deep Jake didn't want to acknowledge it to himself, he knew it wasn't pride that kept him from going home. It was shame. If he went back, the full truth would come out. And if his father discovered what Jake'd *really* been up to all those years.... If he knew about those jobs flying 'cargo' to and from Venezuela and Colombia.... Found out about Saffa....

Jake uttered a brief snort, audible only to himself. It'd be the ultimate screw-up, result in the final rejection.

As long as he didn't return to Jericho, going home remained an option. A choice he could make. Even if he never made it.

The small bell over the bar's doorway jingled, startling Jake from his introspection. A gust of wind rustled in, accompanying a new customer. Jake glanced over his shoulder. Dark hair, broad shoulders, on the short side. And, although he wore jeans and a leather jacket rather than a uniform, he carried himself with the kind of confidence Jake instantly recognized as military.

The soldier's gaze swept around the room, landing on Jake for an instant—a ghost of a smile twitched his lips—before it took in the rest of the clientele. Taking a seat two stools down from Jake's, the man ordered a whiskey. "The good stuff." He looked pointedly at the barman and gave a curt nod at the glass in front of Jake. "Not that rotgut."

Jake let out a laugh. *Rotgut* was about as accurate a description as could be; Bailey's would've been ashamed to serve it to its customers, even as a freebie.

Thinking of Bailey's made Jake's throat constrict in an unwelcome way, and he tossed the rest of the liquor back. It burned a trail in his gullet. Tears sprang into his eyes, and he coughed, swallowing hard; he noticed the soldier had half-turned on his stool and was watching him with an amused little smirk.

"That bad, huh?"

Jake croaked a "Yeah," and the guy motioned for the bartender to get Jake another glass and fill it from the same bottle as his own.

More charity.

Once the barman was done, Jake raised the glass in salute. "Thanks." He took a sip of the amber liquid, relishing the velvety feel on his tongue, so different from the sharp tang of the moonshine still churning in his belly. Drinking on an empty stomach wasn't the smartest thing to do, but he couldn't bring himself to care. "Jake," he added by way of introduction after he'd swallowed the whiskey.

"Edward." The other man contemplated his own drink a moment before turning toward Jake fully, his gaze raking him up and down. "You don't really strike me as a man willing to risk his liver with Bo's poison."

Jake huffed ruefully, though he didn't say anything. He wasn't sure what the guy was aiming at.

"So, let me guess." Undeterred by Jake's silence, Edward cocked his head, and there was that slight smile again. "Down on your luck?"

"That's one way to put it."

Or the understatement of the decade. Jake had been 'down on his luck' for six years, and the future didn't appear any brighter. He didn't enjoy the prospect or the thought of discussing it with a stranger, so he stared into his drink, not offering up any further explanation.

Edward finished his scotch and gestured at the barman for another, as well as directing him to refill Jake's glass. Jake shifted on his stool, uncomfortable with the offer. One drink was a friendly gesture; anything more was.... Well, he wasn't quite sure what it was. In any case, he'd had enough; he could already feel the alcohol working on him. He shook his head at the bartender.

Seeing Jake's refusal, Edward let out a soft sigh and switched over to the stool beside Jake's. He twisted around until he could face Jake. "Look, Jake...." He paused, making sure he had Jake's attention. "I believe we can help each other."

Jake raised an inquiring eyebrow, wariness settling on his shoulders. What was Edward talking about?

"I have something you need." Edward planted an elbow on the bar, his gaze intent. "And you have something I want."

Still none the wiser, Jake shook his head. "I've no idea what—."

Edward pushed up off his stool, tossing his drink back and setting the glass down on the bar's surface. "I'll be blunt: I want you to come with me."

Jake gaped in confusion, and Edward continued, "I'll make it worth your while. And tomorrow, you go your way, and I go mine. Nobody any the wiser." He tilted his head, scanning Jake's face. The earlier amusement was gone; he looked deadly serious. "What do you say? Beats sitting here rotting your gut out with worry and bad whiskey, penniless and miserable, doesn't it?"

Did he really...? Jake's jaw dropped as the full meaning of Edward's offer sank in. He should be offended, he reckoned, but he couldn't muster the energy, and the humiliation of being solicited conflicted with the lure of easy cash. He couldn't decide whether to laugh in Edward's face, or say yes.

At last, noting his voice was rough, he said, "No. Thanks, but no thanks."

Edward held Jake's gaze, disappointment in his expression. "Okay. Fair enough." He gave a sharp nod and turned away to pay for their drinks.

It wasn't until the door had closed on Edward's heels, shutting out the momentary howl of the wind again, that Jake noticed the key lying on the stool Edward had been sitting on. He stared at it, his mind still whirling.

Despite growing up in rural Kansas, Jake didn't have strong objections to men having sex with other men. The concept wasn't new, either; it had been going on at Embry-Riddle, where male students outnumbered female ones five to one, and again in Afghanistan and Iraq. *Don't ask, don't tell*, wasn't that what the army called it?

At least it explained why the guy had come to Rochester, miles from the nearest military base: less chance of bumping into someone who'd recognize him. If his superiors found out, it'd ruin his career.

The key, the name of a by-the-hour motel Jake remembered seeing a few

blocks down the road written on the plastic tab, glinted dully in the bar's low light, beckoning him. He could do worse, he thought: Edward appeared to be fit and healthy, and as a serviceman—an officer, Jake guessed—he'd have every interest in keeping their... encounter... quiet. Nobody need find out, ever.

Jake snuck a glance around. Nobody was paying him any attention; the bartender was now busy polishing glasses at the far end of the bar. Not letting himself talk himself back out of the idea, Jake snatched up the key and stuffed it in his pocket. It sat hot and heavy against his thigh.

So this was what rock bottom looked like.

After another minute passed, he slipped from his stool. Outside, it had started to rain in earnest, and the wind had picked up strength, hitting him with its full force. He leaned into it, trying to empty his mind and not think about what it was he was about to do. He focused instead on what he'd gain: a night in a halfway decent bed, money for a proper meal....

Hell, he might even get to buy himself a bus ticket back home.

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Although it was only a short walk to the motel, Jake was chilled to the bone by the time he got there. Droplets of rain dripped from his hair, trickling wetly down his neck, and he wiped them off absently. He was slightly nauseous, from nerves or fear, or maybe just bad booze on an empty belly.

The motel was one of those blocky two-story affairs with rooms opening directly into the parking lot. Edward's room was on the first floor; as Jake hid from the rain under the shelter of the landing that gave access to the floor above, he hesitated. *Last chance to turn back.* But turn back to what? Another night risking pneumonia under a bridge? The choice between spending the last of his cash on something to eat or scrounging through dumpsters for a meal?

Jake squared his shoulders. He'd made up his mind when he'd snatched the key from the bar stool; all this second-guessing wasn't going to make him change it. He shoved the key into the lock.



The room was dark, a single bedside lamp casting a small circle of yellow light, leaving the rest in shadows. Jake was surprised to find the room deserted; he'd expected to see Edward.

It was hot, too, and the heat after the cold walk took Jake's breath away. When he could suck in air again, he discovered it was filled with the smell of melted cheese and tomato sauce—*pizza*, his brain translated. His stomach growled in response, rumbling audibly in the quiet room.

A soft chuckle to Jake's left made his heart leap into his throat. Another lamp sprang to life, and he discovered Edward lounging in an armchair in the corner. Jake breathed out, chagrined at the way the other man had caught him off guard.

"Dig in." Edward dipped his head at the pizza box on the small coffee table next to his chair. "I figured you'd be hungry."

Jake's mouth watered, and he didn't wait for the invitation to be repeated. Closing the door behind him, he walked across the room, opened the box, and lifted out a hot slice of pizza, melted cheese dangling from it in long strands. At another nod from Edward, he settled himself into a second chair on the other side of the table, and tried not to wolf down the slice in a single bite. Without another word, Edward pulled the tab from a can of beer and pushed toward Jake. Then he leaned back in the chair, watching in silence as Jake ate.

It was the best pizza Jake had ever had.

He'd finished most of it before Edward spoke again. "Bathroom's over there." He pointed out a door in the far wall of the room that stood ajar. "Why don't you take a shower? Towels are on the sink, and there's soap and shampoo in the stall."

Though Edward formulated it as a question, Jake recognized it for the command it was. And Edward didn't sound like a man who was used to having his orders ignored. A part of Jake wanted to balk against the voice of authority, on principle, but he couldn't blame Edward for preferring him to wash up. He probably stank like a skunk. But dammit, life was *hard* when your bed was a park bench and you had to make do with cold water from taps in public restrooms. Jake swallowed down his first instinct to

refuse and, munching on the final bite of pizza, aimed for the bathroom.

The shower stall was cramped and moldy, and the water not very hot. Still, it was a lot better than what Jake was used to, and he enjoyed the spray, the warmth slowly sinking into his bones and chasing away the chill of the rain and cold wind. After letting the water sluice down his body for a few minutes, he used the soap and shampoo—some brand he'd never heard of that probably came from a big-box store—to lather up and scrub himself clean, before turning off the rapidly cooling stream. Toweling off, he caught his reflection in the mirror, and regarded himself critically. He'd lost weight, he saw. His skin was rosy from the shower, and the shrapnel scar on his hip stood out, a puckered blaze of white skin. He lifted his eyes to meet his own gaze; of all the dumb things he'd done in his life, what the hell had he gotten himself into this time?

Out there, in the other room, was a man willing to pay to have sex with him. Neither had mentioned it in so many words, but Jake wasn't a fool, and he'd known damn well what Edward wanted when he'd slipped that key into the lock of the motel room. He glanced down at the pile of filthy clothes he'd dropped on the floor: what would Edward do if he put them back on and went out and said he'd changed his mind, thanks for the pizza and goodbye?

Jake sighed; he had a feeling the other man wouldn't do anything to stop him.

It was that realization, perhaps more than anything, that made him dismiss the idea of begging off. He'd been forced to give up everything—his identity, his car, his pride—but he still had some sense of honor. What was it Jonah had always said? A man's a man, a word a word? Jake hadn't made Edward any explicit promises, but, like the man's expectations, Jake's agreement was there, unspoken yet loud and clear.

Somewhere in the building, someone flushed a toilet and the sound of water rushing down the drain pulled Jake from his reflection. He stood up straighter and wrapped one of the towels around his hips. Better get on with it, and get it over with.

He pulled the bathroom door open. The room was still dim, lit only by the two lamps. The pizza box and beer can were gone, and the bed had been

turned down. Edward was slouched in his chair once more, although he'd taken off his shirt and shoes and was barefoot in T-shirt and jeans. His sharp gaze raked Jake up and down as Jake walked further into the room, and there was that slight smile around his lips again. Jake couldn't decide if it was smug or relieved, and the intensity of Edward's brown eyes made him shuffle his bare feet uncomfortably, even as something slithered in his belly that he couldn't name.

He swallowed. "Look, I never—" He shrugged, leaving the words unspoken. It wasn't like he was a virgin—hadn't been since that long-ago night by the river with Em—or a stranger to appreciative looks. But those had usually been from women. And while he hadn't lacked for attention after he'd left Jericho all those years ago, he hadn't really been interested.

Edward got up from his seat and padded over toward Jake. As he stopped right in front of Jake, Jake realized Edward was several inches shorter and was forced to crane his neck to meet Jake's gaze. "I suspected as much," he said. He reached up, tangling a hand in Jake's damp hair and pulling his head down for a kiss.

For a moment, Jake was so shocked he couldn't move but, after a beat or two, he responded instinctively, opening his mouth to answer the kiss. It was hard and insistent and Jake found it wasn't nearly as unpleasant as he would've imagined. As Edward let him go, Jake took a shuddering breath. "That was...."

Edward smiled. "Different?" he suggested.

"Yeah." Jake had kissed other people, of course, besides Em, and some had been shy and uncertain, and some demanding like Edward, but a woman's lips *were* different....

While Jake was still considering the peculiarities of kissing a man, Edward's right hand had begun moving down Jake's flank, his calloused fingers lingering on the scar on Jake's left hip that showed just above the edge of the towel. Despite himself, Jake grew tense under Edward's touch, and his breath caught. The other man must have felt him stiffen, because he glanced up to find Jake's gaze again, before he slowly but very deliberately tugged the towel loose.

As it fell away from his hips—Edward's hand hot on his skin—Jake discovered to his own surprise that he was half-hard. His face grew warm in embarrassment, but it only served to widen Edward's smile.

"You know," Jake choked out a laugh, "this really isn't fair?"

Edward blinked, puzzled for an instant. "You're right," he chuckled. "It isn't." He turned away, and a few seconds later he'd shucked his jeans, boxers and T-shirt, making a neat pile of them on the chair.

Jake couldn't help looking Edward up and down, as he himself had been scrutinized. He discovered Edward sported some scars of his own among hard muscle and tanned skin. A jagged white line ran prominently around his right ribcage; Edward noticed Jake staring at it, but he didn't offer an explanation. Jake didn't need one: he'd already figured Edward for a professional soldier, and scars came with the territory. The pale line looked like it had been a bad injury, though, and he reckoned Edward had gotten damned lucky that day.

Moving to the bed, Edward beckoned Jake closer with one hand. "Come here."

As Edward swung further round to face him, Jake got his first look at Edward's cock, thick and engorged, jutting from a patch of stringy dark hair. He gulped. Panic slithered through him: *What am I doing?* He shuddered involuntarily.

"Jake?"

With effort, Jake dragged his gaze up to meet Edward's. Edward must've caught the panic in his face, or perhaps he'd noticed the shudder, because his expression was surprisingly gentle.

Jake swallowed, hard. "Sorry. I've never—."

"I know," Edward interrupted him. "I have. Trust me." When Jake didn't reply, he heaved a sigh. "Listen, if you really don't want to go through with this, that's alright." There was something in his tone Jake couldn't quite place—fear? Disappointment? Hope?

Before Jake could fully consider it, Edward continued. "You can go, I won't stop you." He turned away to rummage through a duffel bag Jake hadn't noticed before, setting a plastic tube of something—lube, Jake thought (hoped)—and a packet of condoms on the night stand. He shot Jake a rueful grin over his shoulder. "I have no interest in an unwilling partner."

Jake hesitated a moment more. Clearly, Edward had come prepared, and it looked as if he knew what he was doing. As Jake's panic subsided a little, he saw something in Edward's expression he'd failed to catch earlier, and suddenly he knew what he'd heard in Edward's voice: he was nervous too, afraid that Jake would bolt. It gave Jake the confidence to shake his head. "No. I'll stay."

The relief that flitted across Edward's face was quickly masked, replaced by the slight half-smile he'd shown Jake before, but not before Jake had noticed it.

"Um... what do I do?" Now that there was no way back, Jake was at a loss on how to go forward.

Edward grinned. "Get up on the bed. Hands and knees works best, usually."

"Right...." Jake did as he was told, feeling very self-conscious as he crawled up onto the bed, the mattress dipping beneath him.

It dipped even more when Edward climbed up behind him and added, "Or grab a pillow. That might help you relax."

Jake couldn't stop a wry chuckle—under the circumstances that was about as likely as him getting Hicks off his tail—but he settled on his hands and knees and tried not to jump when Edward put a hand on his hip to guide him in a better position. Stuffing a pillow under his upper body did help; it took the strain off his arms and shoulders, even if it made him feel very exposed and a touch ridiculous: naked, with his ass sticking up in the air. He began to twist around. "Maybe I should—."

"Shh." Edward nudged him back in position and ran his palms lightly over Jake's shoulders, down his back, along his thighs.... His hands were roughened, but his touch gentle, and gradually Jake managed to let go

some of the tension that was keeping him as tight as a coiled spring. Edward's touch lifted, and Jake felt him shift on the bed. There was a squirty noise; the next instant, something cold and slick dribbled down Jake's ass. He let out a surprised cry and started up.

"Sorry." Edward laughed softly, placing a hand between Jake's shoulder blades to press him back down. "Should've warned you."

Jake felt Edward move again, and then felt him smear the slippery stuff around for a few moments, before he worked something into Jake.

Though he should've expected it, Jake couldn't help himself: he let out another startled yelp and stiffened against the intrusion. The finger—at least Jake thought that was what it was—stopped moving until Jake managed to make himself relax around it. He glanced back over his shoulder. In the low light of the two lamps, Edward was a dark shape behind him, his face hidden in shadows; even so, Jake could see the intense concentration in the set of Edward's shoulders.

Edward added another digit, twisting deeper and stopping whenever Jake failed to keep himself slack. By the time Edward pushed in a third finger, Jake realized he was growing used to the feeling. Even, shockingly, starting to enjoy it. More tension flowed out of him. Edward obviously didn't expect him to do much and, in a weird way, it was soothing not having to carry any of the responsibility.

Finally, Edward pulled away, and an involuntary whimper of disappointment escaped Jake. Edward responded with a low chuckle, and Jake grumbled under his breath, a bit put out. He probably wasn't supposed to enjoy it, was he? He shot another glance backward, and discovered Edward had turned away to reach for the condoms on the nightstand. As Edward tore open a packet, Jake caught another glimpse of his cock. He swallowed, his mouth dry: it seemed to have grown some more and it looked a hell of a lot bigger than a couple fingers. Panic roiled through him: it was never going to fit!

Edward finished rolling on the condom, and shuffled back, arranging himself behind Jake. Leaning over, he grabbed Jake's hips to adjust his position. "This could hurt a bit." His voice was soft as he gave the warning. "There's only so much prep I can do."

Jake nodded, and tried to work up the moisture to swallow again. He'd figured as much. As he braced himself, wriggling into a more comfortable position on the pillow, he discovered to his amazement his own cock was throbbing against the bed.

The discovery that he was aroused was enough to distract Jake for an instant, but then Edward started to push in, and any thought Jake had toward examining his own body's reactions fled right out of his mind. Edward had been right; it did hurt. Jake clenched his jaw to keep from crying out, while he struggled to keep his muscles slack, even as every instinct wanted to rebel against the intrusion.

As if he knew what Jake was thinking, or maybe because he'd noticed the way Jake's fingers were clawed into the sheet, Edward pushed in slowly and steadily, pausing every time Jake stiffened despite his attempts to remain relaxed, and opening Jake up little by little until he was buried deep inside. Bending forward, he covered Jake's body with his own. "You alright?" His breath was warm on Jake's neck.

"Uh huh." The pain had faded, and Jake found himself enjoying the sensation of being full. Of being wanted. It had been so long since anyone had given him a second thought. "I'm okay."

"That's good." Edward brushed a few strands of hair back from Jake's face, startling him with the intimacy of the gesture. He sat back up again, and began moving, slipping in and almost out, slowly at first but gradually picking up the pace. Jake's legs quivered with the effort of bracing himself against the impact of flesh slapping against flesh. Then Edward leaned over again, never once breaking his rhythm, and reached around Jake's hip and under him.

Jake gasped in shock: Edward had wrapped a hand around his cock and started sliding his palm up and down in sync with his movements in and out of Jake. Jake whimpered at the sensation of being stimulated in two places at once. Behind him, Edward was breathing hard, and Jake's own breaths came in rapid gasps as Edward drew him inexorably toward climax.

Jake came first, spurting all over Edward's hand, the room spinning around him with the force of his orgasm. Edward growled wordlessly in his ear in

triumph, before he climaxed himself with a drawn-out shudder that Jake felt all the way to his core. Spent, Edward slumped across Jake's body, panting for air. Jake was already shaking, his knees trembling with the effort of holding him up, and he collapsed onto the mattress under the weight. There was a squishy sound as Edward pulled out and rolled away.

The room was quiet, their combined rough breathing all that broke the silence. Jake wondered, once he'd scrambled his thoughts back together, what he was supposed to do now. Did Edward expect him to leave? Take his money and go?

He twisted around so he could look at the other man, slumped on the bed further down. He was still watching Jake with those dark eyes, his expression unreadable, although Jake thought there was a hint of amusement in there. He offered Edward a rueful grin. "How did you know?"

He didn't need to explain what he meant. Edward shrugged. "I'm good at what I do."

"Huh." Jake huffed out a chuckle, letting his head fall back on the pillow, still trying to catch his breath. Despite the mattress being lumpy, and the sheets stiff and rough, the bed was pleasantly soft beneath him; and the room was warm, his stomach full, and he was so tired....

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Daylight was streaming in through a crack in the curtains when Jake opened his eyes again. For a few moments, he didn't remember where he was. A dull throb in his ass, not entirely unpleasant, quickly reminded him, and Jake started up. Edward was nowhere to be seen. Neither were his clothes: the leather jacket was no longer hanging over the back of the chair, and the duffel with the lube and condoms was gone.

Jake didn't need to inspect the bathroom to be certain: Edward had left. And dammit, he never—Jake caught sight of a rectangular white object on the desk, propped against the base of the lamp. He rolled from the bed and padded over to pick up the envelope. Inside, he found a note, the handwriting firm, wrapped around a handful of bills. Jake counted them, and blinked.



Edward had left enough to buy a bus ticket back to Kansas several times over.

## Chapter 2

Nervous tension thrummed through Beck as he hit the blinker and veered onto the Rochester exit. Navigating the familiar streets, he couldn't help thinking back to the last time he'd been here and wonder: what was he going to discover?

What did he *want* to discover?

The questions had kept him occupied for every mile of the hundred and sixty from Fort Drum to Rochester.

He still had no answers.

Waiting for a stop light to change, Beck caught himself considering driving straight to Bo's, and he grunted in annoyance. What was he thinking? Bad enough he'd lost count of the times over the past two months he'd been tempted to break his own rules and call Bo, hear what the barman could tell him.

*Stick to routine*, he berated himself. Routine had kept his secret safe all these years. And routine dictated he take a room at the Rochester Four Points, where he was as anonymous as could be among the convention goers and businessmen.

Heck, the fact that Beck was back less than two months after his last visit was enough of a break in his habits that it frightened him. He only went to Rochester when the need grew too strong and the burden of his secret too heavy, and he found himself sniping at his subordinates even when they didn't deserve it. Three, four times a year. But the thought of turning around never occurred to him: his desire to know what had become of Jake was too strong to ignore.

At the Four Points, Beck checked in, took the elevator up to leave his bags in his room, except for a small duffel, and went back out. If the weather was bad, he usually took a cab to the marinas. Today was a crisp late-autumn day, and he decided to walk the six or so miles from downtown. He'd been cooped up in his office and stuck behind his desk for the past couple weeks, and the exercise would do him good. He hoisted the duffel onto his shoulder and set off. Maybe it'd also help clear his head.

Near the harbor, he took another room, at a far rattier motel, and paid in cash. After dropping the duffel, he headed to Bo's. This was all still business as usual, he reassured himself: he'd have a drink and catch up with the latest news and gossip, before visiting his usual haunts. A part of him pointed out it was probably best if it stayed that way. He'd pick up a random guy, find the release he sought, and return to base with a penance for his sins and with his physical needs for a while outweighed by the load of guilt. The routine had kept him safe for over a decade. Yet he involuntarily quickened his pace as the neon of Bo's Bar beckoned him closer.

As he entered the bar, the small chime over the door twinkling, he glanced around, unable to prevent a twinge of disappointment at not seeing who he'd hoped to see. Put out at his own reaction, he pulled up on a stool and gave Bo a nod in greeting.

Theirs was an odd friendship. Two decades ago, when Beck had been a mere First Lieutenant in the 10th, Bo had served under him. When it came time for the sergeant to reenlist, he decided against it and instead bought a bar in Rochester—although Beck didn't learn about the latter part until years later, when they ran into each other again. That encounter still made Beck go cold when he remembered it. The place, the situation... it would've been hard, if not impossible, to deny the reason he'd been there, and he'd been certain his secret was out and his career over. But, it turned out, Bo had been harboring a secret of his own during his soldiering years. And instead of blabbing to Beck's superiors, he'd helped Beck keep his. Today, he was one of Beck's most cherished allies.

"Didn't expect to see you so soon." Bo put Beck's customary glass of whiskey in front of him on the bar.

Beck shrugged. "Had some leave coming."

"Hm." Bo made a non-committal noise, and swiped a cloth across the bar—not that it needed wiping; it gleamed like a mirror. "You sure it's got nothing to do with that kid you met, last time?"

Beck shot him a quick glance, expecting to see his old friend grin teasingly, but Bo's face was serious. "Maybe." Oh hell, who was he

fooling? "Yes. Did he—?"

Bo dropped the cloth he'd been using and collected several empty glasses. "Why'd you tell him I could help him get a job?" He dunked the dirty glasses in the soapy water in the bar's sink with more force than necessary. "Do I look like a temp agency?"

Taken aback at the sharpness in Bo's tone, Beck straightened on his stool. "I'm sorry. I thought—."

Bo didn't let him finish. "That boy's bad news. You'd be better off—." He cut his words short, puffing out his cheeks. "Never mind. I suppose you want to know where to find him?" Putting the glasses on the counter, he grabbed a towel to dry them.

Beck mulled it over. He wanted to say yes—wasn't that why he was here, after all?—but... "What do you mean, he's bad news?"

"He's—." At the other end of the bar, someone waved impatiently for service. With a rueful shrug in Beck's direction, Bo set down the glass he was drying and walked off, collecting and taking the caps off two beer bottles as he went.

A few minutes later, he returned. "I offer to get him an honest job," Bo resumed, as if their conversation hadn't been interrupted. "He says he's got no social security number. So I tell him to get one." He gathered up the towel again. "Boy says no can do. I try askin' him why, and he closes up tighter 'n a clam." Bo held up the glass he was working on and scrutinized it in the lamplight, before putting it away. "I'm tellin' you, the kid comes with a history I'm not sure you wanna have a part in."

Beck frowned. There could be plenty of reasons for Jake not wanting to get a social security number. Valid reasons. Like.... He scrambled around for one and came up empty. Then again, he'd already known Jake had hit rock bottom when they met. Hell, it was one reason why he'd left him with a lot more cash than the standard going rate. It wasn't something he did often.

Bo was right about one thing, though: Beck had never gone for the same man twice, never taken an interest in any of his partners beyond a few

hours of physical respite. And Bo had good instincts; while his phonecall had been instrumental in Beck picking Jake up in the first place, Beck would do well to heed Bo's warning if his friend had any misgivings about follow-up contact. "What did you do?"

"What d'you think?" Bo finished with the glasses and turned back to look at Beck. "Got him a job bussing tables over at McMurthy's. Old Jim's not too fussy about the books."

Bo left Beck alone with his thoughts again while he went to serve someone else. Beck pondered the last of his whiskey, trying to make up his mind. Forewarned was forearmed, but he'd never been one to make decisions based on second-hand intel if he could help it; he'd want to talk to Jake before coming to a decision. As Bo came back along the bar toward him, he tossed the last of the liquid back. "McMurthy's, you said?"

Bo gave him a sharp look. "Yep. Down on Dwight Street."

Beck put his glass down and slid from his stool. "I know where it is." He dug up his wallet to pay for the drink. "And Bo? Thanks."

Though Bo looked unhappy, he dipped his head at Beck in acknowledgment, and Beck knew he'd caught on that the thanks were both for setting Jake up with a job, and for giving Beck the warning.

o0o

Beck found McMurthy's, a small diner serving home-cooked fare at reasonable prices, easily enough. After reading the handwritten placard that invited him to *Seat Yourself!*, he slipped into a booth in the far corner. With his back to the wall, he had a good view over the entire room. It was late afternoon, dusk already falling, so the place wasn't crowded. Strings of Christmas lights strung outside the windows cast a soft glow that augmented the light of the old-fashioned lamps hanging over each table.

Beck picked up the menu. He'd eaten nothing beyond a quick sandwich since he'd left Fort Drum mid-morning, and his stomach was rumbling. He'd barely glanced at what was on offer, when he caught sight of Jake, coming out a door that Beck assumed led to the kitchen. His heart flip-flopped in his chest, and desire surged through him, strong enough that he shifted uncomfortably on the vinyl seat.

Stunned as well as annoyed at his own reaction—dammit, he wasn't a hormone-fueled teenager!—Beck observed Jake over the edge of the menu. Apparently not having noticed Beck, Jake began cleaning the dirty dishes off a table at the other end of the room, stashing cups and plates in the bus bin he was carrying. Clad in jeans, T-shirt and a stained apron, he was still a tad on the skinny side to Beck's mind, but he looked far less wretched than the last time Beck had seen him. For one thing, he looked a lot cleaner than when Beck had first laid eyes on him. And—.

Beck lost his train of thought: Jake was about to turn in his direction. Any minute now, he'd catch sight of—.

"What can I getcha?" Beck nearly dropped the menu from shock; he'd been so focused on Jake that he'd completely missed the perky waitress, notepad and pen in hand, approaching his table.

Irritated, he renewed his grip on the menu; his distraction was another sign of how much he wasn't being himself. Maybe Bo was right, and this was a very bad idea.

The waitress was smiling at him expectantly. "Um...." He faltered. He'd had the menu open for several minutes, but hadn't had opportunity to read through it. "A burger." He'd yet to find a mom-and-pop diner that didn't serve burgers.

"Sure thing." She made a note on her pad and asked him another half dozen questions: how he wanted his burger, and should the buns be toasted, and did he want extra fries? Beck answered absently, only half-paying attention to what he was saying. He was more focused on Jake, who had indeed noticed him as he'd turned, and was staring at Beck over the full bin in his arms. His face was expressionless, and Beck couldn't for the life of him make out what he was thinking. He'd hoped—.

"Won't be a minute." The waitress skipped away, and Beck could finally direct his full attention toward Jake. He offered him a slight smile and a nod in greeting. Jake responded by pressing his lips together tightly and giving a start, as if he'd been asleep on his feet. Without further acknowledging Beck, he disappeared into the kitchen with the full bus bin.

Beck furrowed his brows. That hadn't gone as he'd imagined. Though, truth be told, he wasn't sure how he'd imagined meeting Jake again would go.

"What on Earth am I doing?" He muttered the words under his breath, not finding an answer. He considered getting up and walking out, leaving Jake to live his own life. It would be the right thing, the honorable thing, to do. Bad enough that, during all his years, Beck had never succeeded in overcoming his own sinful desires, despite working himself ragged or spending hours on his knees praying for deliverance. But Jake.... What right did Beck have to drag Jake down the path to hell with him?

None, that was what.

Because Jake wasn't like him. Beck had known that from the instant he'd laid eyes on him. The hesitant way Jake had handled himself during the rest of the evening had only proved it. And yet, there was something about Jake, about the way he'd responded to Beck's touch and gone with the flow, although it was his first time, that spoke of an eagerness to learn Beck suspected Jake himself wasn't even aware of. To be honest, Beck had found it terribly appealing.

With a start, he came to the conclusion that *that* was why he'd left Jake the note. Why he'd wanted to see Jake again. Why he'd managed to stay away all of seven weeks, but not longer, and why he was sitting in this crummy diner waiting for heaven knows what dish he'd ordered: he wanted to be for Jake what the stablehand at his uncle's ranch in New Mexico had been for him, that endless summer years and years ago, when he'd been eighteen and first started to admit he wasn't attracted to girls at all.

"Hey." Jake's quiet voice drew Beck from his reminiscing; the window of opportunity for leaving had come and gone, and he hadn't taken it—as, deep down, he'd always known he wouldn't.

"Hello, Jake." He noticed that Jake had left the bus bin behind, but was still wearing a food-stained apron. "How've you been?"

"Okay, I guess." Jake shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans. "I, um, wanted to say thank you. For having Bo get me this job." He hunched his shoulders.

Beck offered him a gentle smile. "You're welcome."

"I hadn't expected to, uh, see you around so soon?" Again, there was a slight hesitation to Jake's speech, as if he wasn't quite sure what to say. "Bo said—."

Beck grunted. "Bo sometimes thinks he knows everything." He gave a nod to indicate Jake's apron. "How long till you get off work?"

Jake glanced over at the clock over the counter. It was ten past four. "Fifty minutes."

"Excellent." That should give Beck plenty of time to finish his meal and get everything ready. He dug into his pants pocket, took out the spare key for the motel, and pushed it across the table toward Jake. "Here. I'll be waiting."

Jake didn't take the key. Surprised, Beck lifted his gaze up to meet Jake's. Jake's brown eyes were glittering darkly with something Beck couldn't quite pinpoint. Beck quirked an inquiring eyebrow at him. "What?"

Jake voice was hoarse with suppressed emotion. "Just 'cause you... paid me, last time—."

"Handsomely, I'd say," Beck interrupted. A belligerent glint appeared in Jake's expression that in turn put Beck's hackles up. If Jake had been one of Beck's subordinates giving him a look like that... Taking a calming breath, he reminded himself that Jake wasn't one of his soldiers. "Which I will do again. I'm not—."

It was Jake's turn to not let him finish. "What d'you take me for?" He put his hands, balled into fists, on the edge of the table, next to the key, and leaned forward. "I got a job now."

"Bussing tables." Beck snorted. "Under the table." He wasn't quite sure where Jake's hostility was coming from. After last time, he'd thought... And not as if Jake hadn't gone to see Bo, decided to stick around. "Don't try to play hard to get with me, Jake. I simply want to see you."

"Fuck me, you mean," Jake spat. "Just because you got your boyfriend to



land me a job doesn't mean—."

"Keep your voice down," Beck hissed back. He shot a quick glance around to see if anyone had overheard. The closest patrons were three tables away; they didn't break off their own conversation, so Beck reckoned they hadn't. "And there's no need to be so rude about it."

"*I'm* being rude?" Jake snorted a harsh laugh. "You come in here, all smug and pleased with yourself, shove that key at me, and you expect me to drop everything and be your fuck buddy? I don't get a say in this?"

Though a part of Beck understood what Jake was saying, another, bigger part of him was too shocked and upset to keep himself in check. Whatever he'd envisaged would happen once he reached Rochester, this wasn't it. "Hang on." Beck's own voice was rising and he struggled to keep his tone moderate, if not his words. "You want flowers and chocolates first?"

Jake blinked at that, clearly taken aback. "No, you—."

"Hey!" The woman working behind the counter, whom Beck guessed was Mrs McMurthy, flapped an angry hand at Jake. "Those tables ain't gonna clear themselves, ya know."

Jake shot Beck a final scowl, before turning on his heel and striding away. He left the key on the table.

Sighing miserably, Beck collected the key and put it back in his pocket. His anger, quick to rise and fast to cool, was already subsiding, even as he tried to process what had happened. While he was still puzzling it out, the waitress brought him his food. He picked at it without eating much. He was no longer hungry.

He shoved his plate away when Jake's rounds took him past Beck's table again. Jake held himself stiffly, pointedly ignoring Beck as he passed by.

"Jake." For a heartbeat, Beck was afraid Jake would pretend he hadn't heard the soft call, but then Jake stopped and angled toward him. Peering up at Jake, Beck wished he could ask him to sit down for this—but one glance at the woman behind the counter told him that wouldn't go down well at all with her. And the last thing he wanted to do was create trouble

for Jake.

"What?" Jake's tone was sullen, and Beck bit down on the instinct to snap at him.

"I owe you an apology." He spread his hands placatingly. "You're right, I was being presumptuous. I didn't mean to be." He wryly rolled his shoulders. "Guess I'm too used to ordering people around."

Something shifted in Jake's expression. "Yeah." He hesitated for a second, before taking Beck's plate and glass without another word. Beck watched him go. He'd really messed up, hadn't he? He recalled Bo trying to warn him off: maybe this would turn out to be a blessing in disguise. The thought didn't make him feel any better.

He waved the waitress over for the check and then sat staring out of the window at the sidewalk while he waited for it to arrive, lost in thought. It had grown fully dark, and the streets were empty.

"Um." Jake clearing his throat next to his table startled Beck from his musing. He turned his head and looked up, surprised. He hadn't expected to see Jake again.

"I'm off in fifteen. Maybe—" Jake pulled in a shivering breath, "— you could wait around."

Beck swallowed as Jake made the offer. He could hardly believe his ears. "No." It came out more sharply than Beck intended, and he raised a hand to pre-empt any protest. "No, I go first. You follow. It's better that way." Any accidental observer was far less likely to put the pieces together if those pieces arrived at the motel room separately.

Jake uttered an amused snort, but he nodded. "Okay." He held out his hand, palm up. A moment later, the spare key had disappeared inside Jake's pocket, and he was shuffling off to finish work. Beck found his appetite had returned. He waved at the waitress to cancel his check, and instead ended his early dinner with a large slice of home-made apple pie and cream.

"You should know, Bo's not my boyfriend." Beck put an arm behind his head and gazed up at the ceiling, waiting for his breathing to slow and his heart to settle into a less frantic pace. The room was warm enough that he wasn't chilled by the sweat cooling on his body, and the place reeked of sex. He decided it wasn't a bad smell.

"What?" Jake muttered, still sounding winded.

Beck grinned inside, feeling quite smug at the way he'd made Jake respond to him, even after his earlier churlishness over the way Beck had approached him. And, to be honest, perhaps he had been taking Jake's willingness to come with him a bit too much for granted—although, Beck chuckled silently, Jake had proved to be plenty willing once he'd walked into the motel room and Beck had put the *Do Not Disturb* sign out.

"Bo." Beck twisted round and raised himself on one elbow so he could look down at Jake, lying flat on his belly where he'd collapsed on the bed. "You accused him of being my boyfriend. He isn't. Not my type. Nor am I his."

Jake opened one eye to peer up at Beck blearily. "Oh. Okay." He gave an embarrassed shrug. "Sorry about that. I didn't mean to...." He shifted into a position where he could meet Beck's gaze more easily. "I hope nobody overheard that. I know it'd be bad for you if the wrong people found out." He snorted softly. "Don't ask, don't tell, right?"

Beck started up, alarmed. How had Jake uncovered that? His first thought was that Bo had told Jake more than he should have, but he quickly dismissed the idea. No, his old friend was smarter than that. "You know?"

"Knew you were military right away. Army, I'd say." Jake huffed a laugh, and added, as if it was all the explanation necessary, "I was in Iraq."

Beck lifted a surprised eyebrow. "You're a Vet?"

Jake chuckled self-deprecatingly. "Nah. I'm not very good at taking orders." It was Beck's turn to chuckle, while Jake continued, "No, I was driving trucks for an independent contractor...." His voice faltered, and his expression closed off, as if he thought he'd revealed too much.

Again, Beck recalled what Bo had said, about Jake having a history of his

own. He shifted closer and pulled up a leg for better balance. His knee rested against Jake's thigh, skin warm against skin. "What happened?"

"There was... an incident." Jake gave a small shake of his head and, twisting away, dropping his cheek back on the pillow. "I was in the wrong place at the wrong time." He spoke softly enough that Beck wouldn't have made out the words except for the quiet in the room and the lack of traffic outside.

"I see." Beck had seen the news reports, of course, and heard the gossip about the controversies that surrounded outfits like Blackwater and J&R. Gazing down at Jake's naked back in silence, he wondered which incident Jake had been involved in or whether it had been one of the many that should have made the news but didn't.

He cleared his throat. "Does that have to do with you claiming not to have a social security number?" He kept his tone neutral, trying not to sound accusatory or demanding. "Or refusing to apply for one?" Everyone had secrets they didn't want to share, and he respected that. But he liked Jake, liked being with him, liked teaching him things, and in spite of his misgivings and Bo's warning, he'd already made up his mind he didn't want to give Jake up—unless he had to. So he needed to know how much trouble Jake's secrets could cause him.

Despite Beck's cautious approach, Jake still shot up from the pillow and whipped his head back around, looking at Beck sharply, and perhaps with slight panick.

"Hey." Beck smiled at him reassuringly. "Bo told me."

Jake's brows drew down. "None of his damn business." He rolled over, pulling away from Beck's leg resting against him. "Or yours."

Beck drew himself up into a sitting position. The lamplight played softly over Jake's skin, guardedness showing in every line of his turned-away body. Beck pulled in a weary breath: he wasn't going to get any answers out of Jake like this. The boy was a powder keg, and Beck had yet to learn which sparks would set him off. Still, if he wanted to keep seeing Jake, he needed him to open up.

He tried not to think that his pushing for answers could well be the very

thing that chased Jake off for good.

He went for another, hopefully less sensitive, line of inquiry. "Iraq, huh?" He ran a hand lightly along Jake's flank, feeling Jake's muscles flutter under his touch. To his relief, Jake didn't pull away. "Is that where you got this?" Beck ended with his palm on Jake's hip, stroking the puckered scar he could feel under his fingertips.

Jake gave another shiver and nodded into his pillow.

"What happened?"

"IED," Jake said shortly. "Look, I—." He twisted back around, bumping into Beck, who'd shifted closer. Beck's hand fell away from Jake's hip and brushed over his cock instead. It twitched in reaction to the light touch, and, amazingly, Beck found himself already hardening in response. Jake drew in a sharp breath. "Can we just not talk about it?"

"For now?" Beck's lips curled up wickedly as he closed his fingers around Jake's cock. "Certainly...." He leaned over to kiss Jake, thinking dimly that he could always ask Bo to dig into Jake's background.

oOo

To Beck's delight, Jake was a quick and eager student, and Beck lost count of how many times they both came, in between exhausted catnaps during where Beck reckoned he wouldn't have been able to lift a limb if his life had depended on it. It was an entirely new experience for him; usually on these trips to Rochester, he climaxed once, tried to make sure his partner got off as well, and disappeared into the night. It was enough to take the pressure off, but never enough to fulfill him.

By the time they truly were done, and Beck didn't think he had any more orgasms in him, he was both bone-weary and incredibly sated. He ached pleurably all over, and his limbs lay heavily on the mattress. Yet he couldn't afford to stay any longer: if the weather forecast was to be believed, he should start back to base as soon as possible, instead of spending the second day of his leave visiting museums and browsing art galleries as if that had been his main purpose for coming to Rochester all along. If he didn't leave early enough, he risked getting snowed in by one of the first blizzards of the season.

Not that that would necessarily be a bad thing... Beck smiled at Jake, who was lying on his side, watching Beck with hooded eyes, not quite asleep yet but getting there. His skin was flushed, his features more relaxed than Beck had seen them since he first laid eyes on Jake two months ago.

"Jake...?" Beck waited until Jake looked at him. "I... had a good time. And I'd like to see you again, next time I'm in town."

For a long moment, Jake didn't respond, just went on looking at him. Beck discovered he was holding his breath, and let it out slowly.

"I'll be around for a while." As he spoke, Jake managed to nod and shrug at the same time.

It was rather non-committal, and not nearly as eager a response as Beck had been hoping for. "Good. I'm glad." Reluctantly, Beck dragged himself from the bed, groping around to get dressed and collect his possessions.

"Jake," he paused in putting the lube and condoms in his duffel, "I don't want what happened today—yesterday—to happen again." He zipped up the duffel. "Is there a way I can give you a heads-up?"

"I don't have a phone." Jake raised himself on his elbows, the sheet falling down to his hips. "I could contact you?"

"No!" The thought of Jake calling him at the base made Beck's heart pound harder in his chest. The only person who knew where to get a hold of him was Bo, and he trusted the bartender to only do so if there was a real emergency.

"Oh, okay." Jake seemed flustered at the vehemence with which Beck had refused his suggestion.

"Don't ever try to find me. Understand?"

"Sure." Some of the churlishness crept back in Jake's posture. "Whatever you want."

Beck sighed. He'd already broken many of his own rules, but this one was not negotiable, and it was important that Jake understood that. "It's...." He

hesitated. "I need to be careful, okay? So... just check in with Bo." Beck didn't want to involve his old friend any more than he already was, but short of offering to buy Jake a cellphone or a pager, he didn't know what else he could do. And he didn't think Jake would take well to that idea, anyway; Jake would probably interpret it as Beck trying to have him on call. "Please."

Jake dipped his head again. "Okay."

Beck couldn't quite read Jake's tone and he peered at him intently. "Are we good?"

Jake didn't answer right away. Finally, he heaved a breath and the stubborn slant left him. "Yeah. We're good. Sorry. I do get it."

Beck scrutinized him for another long moment. He figured Jake must be even more exhausted than he was. After all, he'd done a full day's work before Beck had kept him up all night. "You get some rest." He realized he didn't know what else Jake did with his time, other than bus tables at the restaurant. He hoped Jake would have the opportunity to get a couple hours sleep at least. "Room's been paid till noon."

Jake had dropped back onto the pillow, and he gave Beck a languid nod to show he'd heard. He didn't fall asleep, though; he continued watching silently, brown eyes tracking Beck's every move as he put a handful of bills on the dresser and left, shutting the door quietly behind him.

A thin dusting of white covered the motel parking lot, and fat snow flakes were drifting from a black sky. Beck walked quickly through the quiet of the early morning in search of a cab to take him back to the Four Points so he could pick up the rest of his things and his car. Snow clung to his coat. He'd really have to hurry if he wanted to make it back to Fort Drum before the storm hit full force.

## Chapter 3

Jake stared out at the dark night rolling past the bus window. It was difficult to see anything beyond his reflection in the glass. He was the only passenger on the bus; everyone else was at home with their families, eating dinner and looking forward to celebrating Christmas .

At the thought of food, Jake's stomach grumbled. He scoffed quietly, the irony not lost on him: work himself ragged at a diner all day, and go home hungry. Damned Mrs McMurthy and her small-minded morals; she could've displayed a bit compassion and allowed him to keep the food he'd been taking—it was Christmas, after all.

Okay, technically, what he'd done was stealing. But if you'd listened to Mrs McMurthy, you'd have believed Jake had skinned her cat and murdered her husband, rather than scooped left-over coleslaw and a cold burger into a box. Not as if she wouldn't have thrown the stuff into a dumpster, anyway.

Jake had done it before, carried part of the surplus home for dinner. Those extras cut down on his living expenses—the pay at McMurthy's was abominable, and because Jake didn't deal with the customers directly, he didn't get tips—and in any case, good food shouldn't go into the trash.

His stop was coming up and Jake crawled from his seat. "Merry Christmas!" the driver wished him perkily as he hopped off the bus.

"Same to you." Jake hoped her Christmas was more cheerful than he expected his to be.

At least he wouldn't have to put up with Mrs McMurthy's crabbiness any longer. She probably thought firing him was rightful retribution; to Jake it felt like being let out of jail.

He ducked deeper into his jacket against the winter chill as he wound his way through the quiet streets toward the house where he rented a room. Getting fired did create a new problem: he'd have to find another job. He should drop by Hank's room soon as he got home, see if the guy could land him a job at the construction site he worked at. If the contractor would hire an ex-con like Hank, maybe they'd hire a nonentity like Jake as



well. Jake was young and healthy, and not afraid of hard work.

He'd be okay for money for a few days, at least until rent fell due; he'd saved what Edward had given him and—Jake shrugged uncomfortably in his coat as he recalled Edward's reasons for giving him the cash. He preferred not to think about those events too closely.

The porch steps creaked under his weight as he fumbled to insert the key into the lock. The nearest streetlamp had been broken when he'd moved in two months ago and nobody had bothered to repair it yet.

Soon as he got the door open, his nose wrinkled involuntarily at the smell that hit him. Faint cooking odors mingled with damp wood and mildew and moldy wallpaper, a harsh contrast to the cold, clean air outside. Aiming for the stairs to the room at the back of the house that was his, he shook off his disgust. Experience had taught him it was easy to grow immune to bad smells; in another ten minutes or so, the stink wouldn't trouble him any longer.

He unlocked the door to his room and switched on the light, blinking at the brightness of the single bare bulb. He shucked his jacket, although the room was chilly, and dug around for his small camping stove and a can of soup. The day he moved into the room, he'd taken one look at the kitchen he was expected to share with his housemates and instantly resolved to spend some of his first pay on a private stove. That was another reason he'd taken leftovers home from McMurthy's: the camping stove provided enough heat to warm up a bowl of soup or boil water for coffee, but it wasn't sufficient for cooking a decent meal.

While Jake waited for his supper to be ready, he pretended not to hear the ruckus coming from the room next to his. Pam and Charlie, a hooker and her pimp, were having a screaming argument, which included them shrieking accusations at each other at the tops of their voices and the occasional *crash* of some heavy object being thrown. Their fights were a regular feature of the house. The first time he'd heard them going at it, Jake had tried to intervene as peacemaker. They'd both turned on him, and he'd quickly concluded he should let them work out their issues themselves. This evening, from what Jake couldn't help overhearing, it sounded like Charlie wasn't happy about the take Pam had brought home and wasn't buying her protests that it wasn't her fault, that not many johns were looking for a hooker during the holidays.

The soup was bubbling in the pot, steam rising, and Jake switched off the stove and rooted for a spoon. A can of soup made a meager dinner on any day, but especially at Christmas. The Christmas meals of his youth came to mind: Mom would've made stuffed duck or turkey, and mashed potatoes and ham, and her famous blueberry pie for dessert.... Jake's mouth watered, a lump in his throat making it hard to swallow.

Ladling his fast-cooling soup into his mouth, he fought the memories. Best not think of home at all; it only served to make him regret again the things he'd done. He did wish he could call, though. Dad wouldn't want to talk to him, but his mother would have a few kind words and he longed to hear her voice. It was too risky, though; he'd thrown Hicks off his trail but, for all he knew, the Feds were tapping his parents' phone line. He didn't want to alert Hicks he should be looking for Jake in Rochester.

Jake finished his meal, quickly cleaned the spoon and went to throw the can into the overflowing trash downstairs—nobody had remembered to take it out for the collection the day before. After getting rid of the can, Jake ambled further down the downstairs hallway and knocked on Hank's door to discuss his need for a job. Nobody answered. Shoulders hunched, he slogged back up the stairs; even Hank had somewhere better to be tonight.

Bored and feeling sorry for himself, Jake stretched out on the mattress in the corner of the room. His back ached from carrying bins full of heavy plates for eight hours straight, and he had no TV, no radio, and he wasn't in the mood to re-read the tattered copy of *The DaVinci Code* that Pam had given him. "Merry Christmas," he muttered.

Awesome holiday, wasn't it? In Iraq, he'd at least had Freddy and the other guys from J&R to share smuggled-in beer and bellow out-of-tune carols with. In Rochester, he was alone and jobless, a stranger in a strange city.

Unbidden, Jake's thoughts drifted to Edward. Folding his arms behind his head—his hands still carried the faint scent of industrial detergent—he gazed up at the stained ceiling. He huffed dismally; a man had really hit the bottom when the person closest to being called a friend was a guy who'd paid him for sex.

He rolled over onto his side, curling up and resting his head in the crook of his elbow. If he were honest, Jake had to admit Edward had been kind to him—when he wasn't being pushy. Every fiber in Jake's body rebelled at the memory of Edward showing up at McMurthy's and demanding Jake come with him as if he had a God-given right to order him about. Then he'd floored Jake with that apology. Jake couldn't recall the last time someone had apologized to him. Everyone else wanted something from him, things he couldn't or wouldn't give, and nobody accepted *no* for an answer.

But Edward.... The contrite *mea culpa* had been sincere – and it had shaken Jake to his core. Enough to bring him him round to asking Edward to wait until he got off from his shift.

Jake drew up his legs higher. Around him, the house had grown quiet: from the sound of doors slamming a while back, Charlie had left in a huff. A lone siren howled in a distant street. In an attempt to lift the heavy silence and add a bit of holiday cheer, Jake whistled the starting notes of *Jingle Bells*. It sounded awkward and strained, and he stopped after a couple bars.

Why had he gone with Edward the second time?

*Because it was easy money.* The answer came quickly. And because the sex didn't bother him. But if that was true, why had he stuffed the bills through the loose seam in his mattress, instead of spending them?

Instinctively, his free hand reached for the corner of the mattress, checking that the cash was still where he'd hidden it.

Besides, being with Edward might've been better than Jake would've expected, but he wasn't gay. For years, he'd held on to the belief that one day he'd marry Em, and they'd have kids, and—.

He snorted, throwing himself over onto his other side. He'd also imagined he'd be the owner of a flight school, and would have a frickin' *life*. Being hunted by Ravenwood and the Feds sure as hell hadn't featured in his future plans, nor had spending Christmas alone in a falling-down building in north-Rochester, a filthy mattress his only furniture. He definitely hadn't expected to earn money by—.

*You chose to go with him*, a small voice whispered in the back of Jake's mind. *Twice.*

With a groan, Jake silenced the voice. He didn't want to hear it. No, it had been about the money, that was all. If Hank could set him up with another job, he'd tell Edward "thanks but no thanks" next time the guy showed up. Or better yet, he'd tell Bo in the morning to explain to Edward not to bother coming down for New Year's Eve, as the barman had said Edward was planning.

No, Jake was his own man. He didn't have to appease a pimp, like Pam did. Once he'd gotten honest work with decent pay, he wouldn't whore himself out again, no matter how pleasurable Edward had made it. And in the spring, Jake'd leave Rochester altogether. He couldn't afford to hang around any one place too long. Florida sounded good, he decided, imagining feeling the sun beating against his body as the chill of the room slowly seeped into his bones.

With a plan of action in place—a job through Hank; Florida in the spring—he berated himself for his low mood: enough with the whining and the self-pity. Reaching into the mattress, he pulled out the wad of cash. Pining for the past or coulda-beens wasn't gonna do him any good. There was a bar three blocks over; he'd go see if they were open Christmas Eve.

After all, he snorted quietly, stuffing the bills into his jeans, he could afford the good stuff. He slipped back into his jacket, made sure the money was securely in his pocket, and carefully locked the door behind him. At the top of the stairs, he paused, remembering the sounds of Charlie leaving. Should he—?

He ambled over to knock on Pam's door. It took a minute, and then she demanded, "What?"

"It's Jake."

Another thirty seconds, and the latch clicked. Pam peered out at him suspiciously through the narrow gap the security chain allowed, relaxing when she saw he was alone.

"You okay?" Jake asked. She looked all right, if tired. For all the pair's

fighting, Jake had never known Charlie to hit her.

"Yeah. Thanks."

Silence stretched awkwardly. "I, um," Jake scratched his neck, "was gonna get a drink. Bar down the road. Thought maybe, um—."

Pam scoffed. "Christmas sucks, huh?"

"Yeah." Jake grinned at her ruefully. "My treat."

"Alright. Lemme—." She pushed the door shut. A minute later, the chain rattled and she stepped out, hunched in a thick coat, a small purse clutched under her elbow.

They didn't stumble back in until the early hours of Christmas morning. Jake waited to see Pam back into her room before he unlocked his own door and, not bothering to take off his boots, simply collapsed in an unconscious heap on his mattress.

He woke hours later, suffering from the hangover from hell. By the time he felt human again, the weather had taken a turn for the worse, and slogging to Bo's in the sleet and rain, or finding a booth with a working phone didn't appeal. He promised himself he'd ask the barman to pass on a message to Edward later.

The day after Christmas, Hank got Jake a job lugging bricks and lumber at one of Rochester's big construction sites. Working from dawn to dusk, Jake was too busy during the day to call Bo, and too exhausted to move a muscle at night.

And then a blizzard struck, covering large swathes of the North-East in snow and imprisoning Edward at his base, turning the entire point moot. Jake celebrated New Year with Pam and Charlie, and a couple of Hank's buddies, watching the ball drop on the screen in the bar down the road.

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The new year was twelve days old by the time Beck's duties relinquished their hold on him enough for him to leave base for more than a few hours. Packing his bags, he refused to listen to the cautionary voice that

admonished him it wasn't wise to go to Rochester again so soon. He'd been looking forward to spending New Year away from Fort Drum—the holidays were always a useful excuse to divert from routine without risking raised eyebrows—except the blasted snowstorm had forced him to attend the countdown in the officers' mess, instead of in some place and with company of his own choosing. He wasn't about to have his plans thwarted a second time, and he shoved any misgivings to the deepest recesses of his mind.

The roads had been cleared from the blizzard's snowfall in the days since it had passed over, and Beck arrived in Rochester shortly after noon. He'd called Bo as soon as he could be certain the trip was a go, inquiring in what he'd thought was a casual manner if Bo had heard from Jake. He must've been more transparent than he'd have liked: Bo had uttered a dry chuckle before he'd finished the question, and confirmed that, yes, Jake had called in a couple times. Beck's heart had leaped; he asked Bo to tell Jake Beck's plans, at the same time impressing on the bartender that he should refrain from making his desire for Jake's presence sound like an order, or a taken-for-granted fact. Bo had snorted in amusement and sighed excessively, and Beck's face had grown hot as he plowed on with his request. But he had been assured Bo wouldn't muck things up for him.

The last thing Beck wanted was to have another argument with Jake.

So it was equally important, he advised himself, as he navigated off the highway and into town, that he should stick to the plan himself: check in to the Four Points, leave his car in the hotel garage, take a cab to the motel and get a room. It would be entirely foolish to drive down to the river in his own car and grab lunch at McMurthy's for the sole excuse of saying hello to Jake. Jake would've been informed Beck was in town, and he wouldn't take it well if he thought Beck was pressing him.

Regardless, as if by their own volition and discretion be damned, his hands steered the car toward the river north of central Rochester and away from the Four Points, until, finally, Beck turned onto Dwight Street. Pulling into a empty spot across from the diner, Beck caught his own gaze in the rear view mirror. He quirked a sardonic brow at his reflection. *You're a fool.*

He should pull out, run through his usual routine until Jake got off from work, and meet him—hopefully! Beck reminded himself firmly—at the motel. He glanced at the diner, absently taking in the words painted on the

glass: *Soups - Fries - Burgers - Sandwiches.*

His stomach rumbled, his mouth watering. The cooks in the officers' mess were decent chefs, but Beck had a sudden craving for a home-cooked meal, and McMurthy's pie had been worth every cent. He got out of the car and locked up. He'd have a bite to eat, say hello to Jake, and leave. Nothing wrong with a man greeting a friend, was there? Nobody could hold that against him.

With a flutter that had nothing to do with hunger wriggling in his stomach, he swiveled his head left and right, and crossed the street. As he entered the restaurant, he scanned the crowd, the buzzing din of dozens of voices assaulting his ears. Though the hour was growing late, lunch time wasn't over yet and McMurthy's was busier than Beck remembered it. Clearly, he wasn't the only person to have enjoyed the pie.

He secured an empty stool at the counter, the vinyl still warm from its previous occupant, and ordered the special from a harried Mrs McMurthy. While he waited for his order to arrive, he furtively surveyed the diner again. He didn't see Jake, though a number of tables needed to be cleared. Beck reckoned Jake was busy in the back; he'd surely come out soon.

Beck's food came, and he dug in with gusto. Around him, the number of customers dwindled by twos and threes, as people went back to work or weekend shopping. As time passed and Jake didn't show, Beck grew more nervous. The pie he'd had for dessert gradually changed to sand in his stomach: Jake must have spotted Beck while he was busy eating and gotten upset again. Beck should've listened to his instincts.

After what seemed an eternity, and with dirty dishes piling high on the tables, the door leading to the back was shoved open, making Beck start. He ducked his head, peering up from under his lashes. Disappointment raced through him: it wasn't Jake who appeared. Instead, a pimpled kid carried in the bus bin. He was seventeen if he was a day, and skinny, and his pimples didn't hide the bored look of teenagers doing chores everywhere.

Perhaps Jake was having a day off? Beck latched on to the explanation eagerly. He truly was an idiot. Served him right, for being such a fool and dropping in unannounced.

"Hey, kid?" The boy looked up at Beck's hail, his expression turning surly as Beck summoned him with a wave. He wound his way through the tables. "Your, um, co-worker, Jake. Is he off?"

The kid stared back at him. "Don' know any Jake."

Beck's forehead creased. "Tall, skinny guy, brown hair, brown eyes...?"

"Nope." The kid jerked his head. "I gotta...."

"Yes, of course." Beck saw Mrs McMurthy making her way over along the counter, brows knitted together in a glower. "Thanks anyway."

Ignoring Mrs McMurthy's disapproving sniff, Beck watched the boy as he went back to gathering cutlery and wiping table tops. Common sense told Beck he should let things be: get the check, pay for his food, and prepare to meet with Jake later. Plain curiosity, as well as a niggling worry in the back of his mind—wasn't it a touch odd the kid claimed not to know Jake?—were stronger, and he turned toward Mrs McMurthy.

Not giving him a chance to ask any questions, she started ringing up his lunch, and he waited until she swung back, the check clutched between her fingers. Wincing inwardly—have you lost your mind entirely?—he again inquired after Jake, fighting to keep his tone mildly interested, the way one would asking after an acquaintance.

Mrs McMurthy's expression darkened further as Beck mentioned Jake's name. "Yeah, I rem'mber him." She sniffed again. "Kicked out his thievin' ass right before Christmas." She slapped the check on the counter in front of Beck.

"He—. *What?*" Beck tried to hide his consternation by riffling through his wallet in search of ten dollar bills.

"Yep. Ungrateful punk." She accepted the money Beck offered her and counted it carefully. "Give 'em a job, outta the kindness of yer heart, and then they rob ya blind." She dropped the cash into the register and slammed the drawer shut. "As I said to my husband, good riddance. Dammit, Billy!" Her business with Beck concluded as far as she was concerned, she scurried after the busboy, dragging him back to where he'd forgotten a corner booth.



o0o

Beck stared after her for a full minute, trying to process what she'd told him. Jake had gotten fired three weeks ago? For *stealing* from his employers?

Giving a shake, Beck slid from the stool, walking back to his car. Why had nobody said anything to him?

*Because Jake hasn't told anyone.* He started the car and pulled out of the slot into traffic. And he could understand why Jake hadn't: Bo had gone to a lot of trouble to get Jake that job.

But—Jake had been caught stealing? Had Mrs McMurthy called the cops on him? If Jake was a thief, Beck should cut all ties, this very instant, and return to Fort Drum; he couldn't afford trouble with the authorities and—.

Another driver honked angrily at Beck, breaking his train of thought. Beck swore, realizing he'd cut the other man up. He waved an apology; he should pay closer attention to what was going on around him and less to his mental turmoil.

Ten minutes later, and without further incident, Beck descended into the downtown hotel's parking lot, looking for a spot to leave the car. Before he did anything else rash, he decided, he needed to think this over. The diner had employed Jake illegally; they likely wouldn't have involved the police. And Mrs McMurthy didn't exactly come across a charitable sort; Beck should hold off on making judgements until he'd heard Jake's side of the story. Jake had had it rough, and there could be a perfectly logical explanation.

After taking the elevator up to reception to check in, and then further on up to his room on the ninth floor, Beck peered around the sterile, impersonal decor without taking note of it. His mind was on other things. He dropped his overnight bag at the foot of the bed. Wisest thing to do was go back to the river, book into the motel, and leave the room number with Bo. Then he'd wait.

Would Jake come? Would he stay if Beck asked him about McMurthy's? And what would he say? Would he lie? Tell the truth? Would Beck *want* to

hear the truth?

Beck groaned at the questions swirling in his mind, questions without answers. The prospect of spending several lonely hours with nothing except his own anxiety for company didn't appeal much.

No. He wasn't going to sit and wait passively, like some grunt in a foxhole. He knew where Jake was staying and it wasn't far from the Four Points. Bo had recommended a transitional house a few blocks from the Four Points to Jake. He said it was a place designed to take in homeless guys while they got their feet back under them. Beck could easily walk the distance. Perhaps the fresh air would clear his mind.

He shrugged back into his coat and collected his duffel, before locking the hotel room behind him and dangling the Do-Not-Disturb sign from the door knob—he didn't want housekeeping to notice he hadn't slept in the bed before he had a chance to come back and mess it up.

On the sidewalk, he slung the duffel onto his back, taking a minute to orient himself. Turning in the right direction, he strode determinedly through the streets. Patches of dirty snow forced him to tread carefully but he refused to be slowed down. A brisk ten minutes later, he reached the location of the house, a three-story building with wooden siding in need of a lick of paint. He was about the walk straight up to the front door, when common sense caught up with him again.

*What the heck am I doing?*

Twisting away from the building at the last minute, he spotted an alley on the opposite side of the street. It'd provide a good view of everyone going in and out of the house without being too conspicuous. Crossing over to the alley, Beck glanced at his watch. Assuming Jake was going to Bo's to hear where Beck would want to meet him, he should be leaving shortly. Beck could wait outside. No need to draw further attention by asking the staff for Jake.

Fifteen minutes became twenty, and then thirty, and still Beck hadn't seen Jake. He slapped his arms around his torso in an attempt to stay warm, stamping his feet where his toes were going numb in his boots. Maybe Jake had gone straight to Bo's from another location and, finding there was no key, was waiting for Beck there. Maybe Bo hadn't succeeded in getting

Jake the message that Beck would be coming at all. Maybe Jake intended to ignore Beck.

Or maybe he was in jail.

Beck could no longer contain his growing impatience and worry: he had to know. He stepped from his alley, trotting across the street to intercept a black man wearing an oversized winter coat and baseball cap who'd come out of the house. "Excuse me."

The man tensed, giving Beck a wary look. Beck spread out his hands, the duffel hanging from his shoulder, to show he was harmless. "I'm looking for a friend, Jake. Is he in?" He dipped his head toward the front entrance of the halfway house.

The other man showed no signs of recognition at Jake's name. He gave Beck the same answer the busboy at McMurthy's had. "Sorry, don't know no Jake stayin' here."

"He's not in any trouble," Beck assured, thinking perhaps the man was trying to protect Jake.

"Listen, I been stayin' here six months." The man huddled his shoulders in his too large coat as a gust of wind beat against them. "Ain't seen no Jake."

Maybe Jake was using another name? Beck described Jake's appearance. The man thought for a moment, and then nodded. "Was a guy looked like that, before. Dunno if his name was Jake, though." He scratched at his head under the cap. "Anyhow, ain't seen him 'round in a while. Guess he's gone on." Raising his shoulders higher into his coat until he all but disappeared into its collar, the man brushed past Beck, scurrying along the quickly darkening street.

Stunned, Beck peered up at the halfway house. Could be the man had lied to him, or had been confused, of course, but Beck didn't believe it. He was confident in his own talent at judging character, and while the other man had obviously been nervous about Beck asking questions, Beck hadn't sensed any lies in his answers.

There was nothing for him left to do here.

Hailing a passing cab to take him to Bo's, Beck realized he'd never asked Bo when the barman had talked to Jake last. A chill that had nothing to do with the frigid air spread through him. He didn't want to, but he needed to consider the possibility that Jake had skipped town. That Jake was gone....

oOo

Half an hour later, Beck trudged into a thankfully quiet Bo's Bar. He was more tired than he could remember being since his last deployment overseas had ended and he'd returned to Fort Drum for a spell of desk work. He dragged himself up onto one of the stools at the bar. Bo'd seen him come in, the bartender's expression quickly changing from mild surprise to genuine concern, and he poured Beck a scotch without being asked.

As Bo set down the glass in front of Beck, Beck muttered, looking down at his hands, "He's gone." He didn't explain who he was talking about. Bo wouldn't need a name.

Wrapping his palms around the whiskey, Beck regarded it without taking a swallow. He'd chased Jake off: pushing too hard, expecting too much too soon. Jake'd tried to warn him, last time, hadn't he? He wasn't a pro—heck, he hadn't ever been with a man until he'd met Beck. Beck should've taken it slow, given Jake more time to get used to the idea.

"How'd you reckon that, then?" Bo snatched the towel he'd flung over his shoulder and wiped an imaginary smear from the bar.

Beck glanced up tiredly, lifting his glass and throwing back its contents. The burn of the liquor going down didn't do anything to dispel the pain in his gut. "He got fired from McMurthy's." He gestured for Bo to pour him another drink. "I went by the halfway house. They said he left."

Bo froze in the middle of pouring another measure of scotch into the glass. "You did *what*?"

Beck shrugged, embarrassed. He tried to tell himself it was better to know than have his anticipation slowly eroded into nothingness; at least this way he wouldn't be waiting in vain for Jake to show up at the motel.

"What the hell is it with you and this kid?" Bo finished with Beck's whiskey

and put the bottle away. As he turned back, he lowered his voice. "You used to be smarter. I'm beginning to regret I ever brought him to your attention."

"I know." Beck almost whispered the words. "I know. It's—." He rolled his shoulders. "I don't know what it is." Looking back, he could see how much he'd been acting a fool. Risking exposure. Risking everything.

He felt Bo's gaze resting heavily on him. Lifting his own eyes, he met the barman's. Bo watched him in silence for a long moment, before shaking his head lightly, as if coming to a decision. "You're still not using your head, major."

"What do you mean?" Beck arched a brow in puzzlement. The accusation stung, in spite of Bo having a point.

"Him bein' gone makes no sense."

Beck's heart flip-flopped as cautious hope kindled inside him. Bo scowled, and Beck knew he'd failed to mask his reaction fast enough for the bartender not to catch it.

Bo didn't comment further, though. Puffing out his cheeks, he rubbed a palm over his skull. "Boy's been callin' me, on and off. In fact, talked to him yesterday, passed on your message. Wouldn't make much sense if he'd gone on, would it?"

No, it wouldn't. Beck sipped from his scotch, not tasting it. "Yesterday? But—."

"I'm not surprised he got canned at McMurthy's," Bo continued, dunking a couple dirty beer glasses into the sink. "Jim's an okay guy, but the wife...?" He snorted to show what he thought of Mrs McMurthy. "Wouldn't have gotten him the job if he hadn't needed something off the books *and* quick."

Beck shifted uneasily on his stool at the reminder he'd put Bo on the spot with the note he'd left for Jake. That first night together, Beck had been getting dressed and ready to leave, and Jake had looked so vulnerable in the large bed, with his too-thin frame and exhaustion written in every

feature, despite the relaxation sleep brought. Beck simply hadn't been able to resist the urge to help beyond leaving Jake an excessive fee.

"What about the transitional housing?" Beck wasn't ready yet to decide he'd jumped to the wrong conclusions.

"That, I don't know." Bo finished with the glasses and got a lemon out from the fridge that he cut into slices, preparing for the evening rush. "But—." The door chimed. Glancing up reflexively, Bo smirked. "Why don't you ask him yourself?" He jerked his head toward the door.

Following where Bo indicated, Beck felt the knot in his chest slowly unravel. Spotting Beck in return, Jake had paused on the threshold. His eyes flicked around the bar uncertainly, before returning to meet Beck's. Then he shook himself, and continued on, the door falling shut behind him with a quiet *thump*.

The initial wave of joy and relief at seeing Jake, at discovering that Jake hadn't left without so much as a goodbye, receded. In its place, helpless anger at the wild goose chase he'd been on surged through Beck, and the first thing to come out of his mouth was, "Where the hell have you been?"

Jake blinked, taken aback by the fury in Beck's voice. He cast a quick glance in Bo's direction. "Wasn't I supposed to meet you at... at the other place?" He hesitated ever so slightly, and beneath his anger, Beck was dimly grateful that Jake had the discretion to not mention the motel out loud.

"Yes, you were." Beck spoke coldly, his words clipped. "You were also supposed to work at the diner, and stay at the halfway house."

Understanding replaced the confusion in Jake's expression and his cheeks flushed. Shame—or embarrassment at being caught, Beck wasn't sure. "You've been checking up on me?" Jake's tone held a note of disbelief that should've signaled to Beck he was on slippery ground, but he was still too angry to pay attention to it.

"Yes, I have." Beck slid from his stool to stand up straight. He didn't give a damn that Jake was taller than he was; he'd stared down plenty enough troops that the height difference didn't intimidate him. "Looks like someone should, as well."

"Major...." Bo's warning was soft but urgent.

"I'm surprised you still dare show your face," Beck went on, the bartender's caution falling on deaf ears. "What am I? An easy mark?"

"Beck!" Bo hissed, shock evident in his muted outcry. Again, Beck ignored him.

Jake's flush deepened. "What?"

"Come on, Jake." Beck's voice quivered with self-righteous anger. "What do you expect me to think? Mrs McMurthy caught you stealing."

"Oh, I see!" Jake barked a bitter laugh. "Guilty until proven innocent, right?" He hitched his shoulders to his ears. "Who gave you the damned right to judge me?"

"Jake...." Oddly, confronted with Jake's anger, Beck discovered his own deflating, fading as quickly as it had flared up.

"Don't bother." Jake shook off the pacifying hand Beck tried to put on his arm. "I know how this goes. Nothing I say will matter. You're just like everyone else: you've already got me tried and convicted."

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" From behind the bar, Bo snapped his towel at them, breaking Beck's focus on Jake.

"Go to hell. Both of you." Jake swung around and stormed off, almost running from the bar in long-legged paces and slamming the door behind him.

For an endless moment, silence reigned and Beck became aware he and Jake had been making quite a spectacle. Thankfully, the evening crowd hadn't gathered yet, and the bar was mostly empty. Still, it was bad enough they'd drawn the attention of the four men playing cards in a far booth, and the blue collar worker nursing a lonely beer near the door.

"Well," Bo commented dryly, bunching up his towel, "that went well."

Beck blinked, shell-shocked. Not bothering to muffle their snickering, the

card players went back to their game. The beer drinker tipped his bottle at Beck in salute before taking a pull. Beck cleared his throat. "I think I should—." He waved vaguely toward the door through which Jake had disappeared.

"Yeah." Bo nodded soberly. "You should."

Ducking his head, ignoring the amused and curious looks directed at him, Beck hurried out. He hoped Jake hadn't gotten too far.

oOo

The cold of the January air threatened to take Jake's breath away as he stormed out of Bo's bar. Instinctively, his feet carried him the two blocks to the river's edge, to where the open space ensured people's expectations and assumptions wouldn't crowd him.

It was one reason he'd loved to fly: to be alone with nothing except the drone of the engine in his ears and the air flowing by. Nobody to make any demands, nobody wanting him to be someone he wasn't. And if Grandpa's plane wasn't available, he'd take the Roadrunner, zip her along Kansas' quiet backroads until the echoes of other people's recriminations in his head had died away.

In Rochester, he had to make do with leaving the busy streets behind and heading for the river, where he could peer out across the murky, fast-flowing waters. Coming to a halt by the shore, Jake discovered his hands had curled themselves into fists inside the wool mittens he hadn't even had a chance to take off. He drew the frigid air deep into his lungs until it hurt, attempting to quiet his racing heart.

Why was it always *his* fault? He'd done everything required to keep within Edward's paranoid rules: checked in regularly with Bo, not tried to go to the motel until the bartender had given him a key or told him which room he should go to, not made any attempt to find out any more about Edward than he was willing to share. And instead he got yelled at for—for what? Stealing those damned scraps of food? Jake still wasn't sure exactly what Edward had been so angry about.

Frustrated, Jake kicked at a tree stump. He'd been a fool to come. He



should've taken Hank up on his invitation to grab a beer and shoot a game of pool, instead of dealing with this crap. What business was it of Edward's how Jake lived his life? Just cause the man'd paid him for using of his body didn't mean he owned him. Arrogant ass....

Dammit, he should've done what he'd resolved to do over Christmas: cut it off. Should've said something to Bo yesterday, never given the bartender the opportunity to mention Edward would be coming into town. Why hadn't he?

Gazing out over the surging gray water, Jake had no answers. He stuffed his fists into his armpits, his fingers stiffening despite the mittens. Enough was enough. He wasn't a child, and he'd be damned if he let Edward treat him like one. He curled in against the chill that was seeping through his coat, chuckling sourly. Maybe Providence was telling him it was high time he moved on. He nodded to himself. Yeah, on Monday, he'd gather the money he'd saved up from his mattress, and tell the construction crew's foreman he quit and ask for his backpay. And then he'd grab the first bus out of here. Florida, Jake reminded himself. Sunny skies, warm air, white beaches. He hugged himself tighter. It had never sounded more appealing.

Jake stepped away from the river to find Edward standing a dozen yards or so behind him, his hands in his pockets, shoulders up against the wind. He looked pale and miserable, and Jake wasn't sure whether to be irritated or glad.

"What?" he demanded. Most of his anger had subsided at seeing Edward's uncertain posture, and it proved hard to insert any fire in his tone.

Edward took the question as an invitation. He joined Jake at the river's edge. "I apologize." He stared out over the water, avoiding Jake's startled gaze. "I was way out of line. I broke my own rules and blamed you for the consequences. It's just—," he pulled one hand, ungloved, from his pocket and gestured with it, "—there's something about you, Jake." He turned sideways, meeting Jake's eyes. "When you weren't where I expected you to be, I thought you were gone. I thought I'd never—." He broke off, drawing a shaky breath. "Listen to me." He offered a single shake of his head and a wry laugh as he looked away again.

It should be funny: a grown man sounding like a lovesick boy. But Jake

didn't feel like laughing. Not one bit. The last of his anger over Edward checking up on him faded. He shrugged cautiously, unsure what to say in reply.

Edward didn't seem to need a response. He added softly, almost tonelessly: "I never meet the same man twice."

"Oh." It was all Jake could think of to say in answer to the blunt statement. Should he be pleased? Concerned? He didn't know what to make of Edward's confession.

A minute passed. "And," Edward coughed, perhaps embarrassed he'd revealed so much of himself or perhaps simply ashamed he'd jumped to the worst possible conclusions, "I'm sorry I accused you of being a thief and a hustler."

"s Okay." Jake brushed off the apology. It wasn't the accusation in itself that had upset him—he could hardly claim the moral high ground in that respect—but the way Edward seemed to have him convicted without letting him explain. That was so similar to how Dad had always treated him that Jake's response had been knee-jerk.

"Considering the source of the information, I should've known better." Edward's voice was soft, self-deprecating. He turned his gaze on Jake again. "Want to tell me your side of the story?"

"She wasn't wrong, I guess." Jake offered Edward another shrug. It was his turn to peer out over the river, suddenly ashamed. "I took some leftovers home."

"Ah." Edward didn't say anything else, the short word confirming he understood. It contained no judgment that Jake could detect.

Jake snuck a glance sideways and saw that Edward, bare hands clasped behind his back despite the freezing wind, had once more joined him in gazing out across the rippling surface.

"Jake...?" As if sensing Jake peering at him, Edward tilted his head toward him. "Why didn't you tell Bo you'd moved?" This time, the question held mostly curiosity, and none of the recrimination of earlier.

Despite Edward's tone, some of Jake's resentment returned. He didn't appreciate feeling he had to answer for his actions. He also couldn't deny him: Edward had extended an olive branch and the least Jake could do was return the gesture. "Didn't move," he muttered. At the puzzled frown Edward awarded him, Jake sighed heavily. "I went to that place Bo told me about. They demanded to see some ID."

"And you didn't want to show them?"

"No."

Edward didn't ask why. He waited silently, the question in his posture.

"Okay, look." Jake threw up his hands in defeat. "I don't wanna be found, okay? It's got nothing to do with you."

"Fair enough." From the way Edward pursed his lips, Jake could tell he didn't really believe that but was willing to drop the matter. "Will you tell me where you *are* staying?"

Jake growled in frustration; Edward was like a dog with bone. "Why do you need to know so badly?"

"I don't." Edward offered him one of those slight smiles again. "Call me curious."

Jake sucked in air. "Well, if you absolutely must know," he met Edward's gaze challengingly, "I got a room in a house on Eastman Street, off of Lyell."

Edward gave Jake a long look. "Thank you." Nothing changed in his expression. Did he know where Eastman Street was? Jake had expected him to recognize it as being in one of the less savory parts in town.

Another few minutes passed without either speaking, the rustle of the water and the wind through the bare trees the only sounds in the still night. "Come on," Edward broke the silence. "Let's get you a cab home."

Jake started, surprised. It wasn't what he'd expected. "You don't wanna...?"

Edward smiled faintly. "I don't think either of us is in much of a mood, do you?"

"I guess not." Jake shot him a wry grin. "Don't need a cab, though. I'll manage."

Edward arched a brow. "You're sure?"

"I'll catch a bus." Jake cowered deeper in his jacket against a gust that whipped through the trees. "Cabs don't service the neighborhood, anyway."

"I see. Jake, don't take this the wrong way, but—," Edward cleared his throat, hesitating a beat, "—are you okay for money?"

"Yeah." Jake scanned Edward's features. He saw only genuine concern. "I got another job," he admitted.

Edward gave a relieved-looking smile. "Glad to hear that. If—." He broke off, shaking his head. "Never mind. Go home, before we both catch our deaths."

Jake chuckled. It was damned cold at the water's edge. He'd already started away, when Edward called his name. "Jake?" He turned back to meet the other man's intense gaze. "Um, see you next time...?" It sounded hesitant, as if Edward hadn't been quite sure whether to ask a question or make a promise.

To Jake's own surprise, he nodded without taking time to think the matter over. He hadn't forgotten his earlier resolve to leave Rochester, but it no longer seemed quite so urgent. "Sure."

Edward's face lit up. The memory of Edward's delighted expression warded off the chill for a bit as Jake carried on heading toward the bus stop.

oOo

Beck watched Jake walk away, tall and thin, in a jacket too light for Rochester's winter, until he disappeared into the dark night. When he could no longer see him, Beck turned back to the river. He puffed out his

cheeks and let a heavy breath escape. He'd been so sure he'd screwed up, that he'd twisted his fear Jake would be gone into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Fortunately, though Beck had no clue why, Jake was willing to give him a second chance.

*Third chance*, Beck corrected, recalling their argument in McMurthy's. He slowly made his way back to Bo's, his hands deep in the pockets of his coat. In his haste, he'd forgotten his gloves, and his fingers were getting numb with cold.

The bar had grown busier since he left it to go after Jake, and nobody paid him much attention beyond the irked glances of people caught in the draft of cold air that accompanied Beck inside.

Bo was busy serving other customers. Trudging back to his customary stool, his forgotten gloves lying on the bar in front of it, Beck remembered he'd been planning to ask Bo to dig into Jake's past. It had slipped his mind last time in his haste to beat the early December snow storm home. After today, it was more relevant than ever. For his own protection, sure—because he wasn't about to give up on Jake yet, and that made it mandatory he find out if there was anything in Jake's past that could jump up and bite him in the rear.

But also for Jake's sake. The way Jake'd confessed he'd rather stay in a cheap dump off of Lyell than identify himself to the staff of a house designed to help guys like him? How he admitted he didn't want anyone to know where he was...? Jake had sounded scared.

Ambling up the bar toward Beck, Bo held up the whiskey bottle, arching an eyebrow. Beck shook his head. "Just soda, please." He wanted to keep a clear mind; he had a lot of thinking to do.

Curiosity was writ large on Bo's face as he filled a glass and set it on the bar.

"I sent him home." Beck's lip curled in a rueful half-smile. It had been the right thing; they both needed space. Even though he'd struggled not to give his reaction away when Jake told him where home was. That part of town was among the worst: drug dealers, crack houses, junkies. "We're okay, I think."

Bo scanned the room to see if anyone needed a refill. Determining nobody wanted him, he turned back to Beck. "Glad to hear that."

"Um." Beck cleared his throat. "I was wondering... if you can do me a favor?" Bo scowled, and Beck chuckled contritely. "I know. Another one." He was bargaining heavily on their friendship, but Bo was the only one he could trust.

Someone hollered for beer, and Beck had to wait for Bo to carry a half dozen fresh beers over to a booth in the back. The group of men occupying it was growing louder by the minute and Beck watched Bo distribute the bottles, while at the same time sneering the group into submission. He laughed softly; the former sergeant was big and strong, and could be every bit as menacing as he needed to be. Very few people were aware of the quiet empathy beneath the muscular physique.

"What's the favor?" Returning to where Beck sat, Bo picked up their conversation as if they'd never been interrupted.

Beck chewed his lip for a second. "Jake. Is there a way you can find out more? Discover what he's running from?"

Bo whistled through his teeth. "You sure you wanna know?"

Beck let out a rueful snort. "No. But I think I need to."

Bo gave him the long, hard look, the kind that made drunk thugs quail and think twice about stirring up trouble. It took Beck some effort to remain still under its weight. "The boy's really got under your skin, hasn't he?" Bo's expression softened.

"Yes." Beck took a swallow from his water, his mouth dry. "Yes, he has." What he'd told Jake had been the truth: he never had sex with the same man twice. Rarely bothered to ask their name, and definitely never learned where to find them. Jake.... Jake had changed all that.

"I'll see what I can do." Bo rubbed his palm over his skull. "Got a buddy in the Rochester PD, could ask him to do some diggin'. Don't expect results any time soon, though."

"Thanks." Beck drummed his fingers on the bar's surface in thought. "I

won't."

Bo dipped his head, an indication he'd heard, and wandered off to pour vodka-and-lime shots. Beck finished his water and collected his gloves.

He'd return to the Four Points, have dinner, and make sure he got a decent night's sleep. And in the morning, he'd search for a real estate agent who didn't mind working on a Sunday.

Because if he was gonna stick it out with Jake, he didn't want it to be in a by-the-hour motel down at the marina, or a cheap and filthy room off of Lyell.

## Chapter 4

Two weeks after his confrontation with Edward, Jake was informed by Bo that Edward would arrive on Friday instead of the usual Saturday, and, to Jake's surprise, would like Jake to meet him at the bar after Jake got off work. The deviation—yet again—from the agreed routine both piqued Jake's curiosity and unnerved him. For a man so set on Jake sticking to the precautions he'd put in place, Edward was going off script an alarming number of times.

Friday came, and Jake begged off getting a beer with Hank and the guys after work. He hurried home, among good-natured calls ribbing him about young men and hot dates. Jake smiled vaguely, in a way he hoped would come across as enigmatic, hiding his discomfort at the thought of these men discovering what kind of rendezvous he was going to.

Once home, he dashed into the shared bathroom, pretending yet again not to see the mold growing on the shower walls, and washed off the sweat and mud of the day under the lukewarm dribble of water. Having scooted into his spare set of clothing—layering up against the frost—he walked over to Lyell Avenue and caught a bus north.

Entering Bo's a half hour later, Jake discovered Edward already slouched in his usual spot at the bar. He turned on his stool as Jake walked up, his lips twitching, and, as their eyes met, he gave Jake a slight nod. A rush of heat shot through Jake at the careful greeting that nevertheless conveyed Edward's pleasure at seeing him. Attempting to copy Edward's discretion, Jake nodded in return and pulled himself up on the next stool over.

Sneaking a peek at Edward as he waited for Bo to serve them, Jake wondered why he was as eager to meet Edward again as the other man seemed keen to see him. After the call with Bo two days earlier, Jake had had a hard time concentrating on his job, nearly dropping a pile of bricks on someone's foot because he'd been distracted. The foreman had been furious—although Jake suspected that had more to do with the threat of liability than genuine concern for his workers' safety.

Meeting Edward was just a quick way to earn some easy cash, right? Nothing he should get worked up about. But if Dad knew.... The thought of his father finding out Jake'd sunk low enough to sell himself to some guy



made his face grow hot, and Jake quickly tried to concentrate on other things, his thoughts inadvertently shifting to how Edward's delight at seeing him seemed genuine, and that the sex wasn't at all disagreeable.

Surreptitiously toasting Edward a few moments later with the glass of scotch Bo put in front of him, Jake turned a fraction more toward him, taking more careful note of his demeanor. Suppressed excitement sparked in Edward's eyes, while the tight set of his shoulders betrayed nervous tension. Jake didn't think he'd ever seen Edward make his feelings this plain, even in the throes of orgasm. He also didn't think Edward was aware how easy he was to read this evening. Edward's mood was infectious, though, and Jake's own mouth quirked up in response.

Edward tossed back his drink and dipped his head, the little smile he hadn't quite managed to suppress never leaving his face. "Let's go." It was all he said before he slipped from his stool and dropped some bills on the bar. Jake darted a puzzled look at Bo, which the bartender met with a bland expression. Scrambling after Edward, Jake shrugged inwardly. Edward's sometimes direct way of giving orders no longer put his back up quite so badly; Jake knew he didn't always mean them the way they came across.

Thrusting out onto the sidewalk, Jake expected to see Edward walking ahead of him toward the motel. He'd surely want Jake to follow at a discreet distance. Instead, Edward was standing at the open door of a cab he must've flagged as soon as he left the bar. Jake paused, unsure of what was going on. What was he supposed to do? Why couldn't the damn man just tell him what he wanted? Whatever Jake did, as he tried to divine Edward's intentions, he never seemed to get it right.

As if on cue, Edward beckoned Jake closer, indicating he should climb into the taxi. Though puzzled, Jake obeyed, and Edward got in after him. Leaning forward, Edward gave the driver an address Jake didn't recognize. Questions burned on Jake's lips and he grew more nervous by the minute; he'd come to mistrust surprises. But he swallowed his questions and his curiosity—Edward wasn't going to tell him anything while the cab driver was in earshot—and warily settled in for the ride.

It took nearly twenty minutes from Bo's, across a downtown crowded with early Friday night partyers, to reach the address Edward had mentioned. When the cab pulled up next to the sidewalk, Edward shooed Jake out. He

was still wearing that secretive little smile.

Being none the wiser as to what Edward was up to, Jake took in his surroundings while Edward ducked back into the cab to pay the driver. They were in a residential neighborhood, with wide avenues and bare-limbed trees that promised cool shade in summer.

"What are we doing here?" Once the taxi had driven off, Jake lost the battle to contain his confusion.

"Better I show you than tell you. Come." Edward preceded Jake down a flagstone path leading to a four-story apartment building made of red brick.

Jake's perplexity increased as Edward led him up to the third floor, produced a key, and unlocked one of the apartment doors. Were they meeting someone? But who? Edward had always made it very clear they needed to be careful about who saw them and under what circumstances.

Edward walked in as if he owned the place. Jake hesitated on the doorstep. "Why are we here?"

Edward turned and gestured for Jake to join him. "Won't you come in?"

Jake shuffled inside and peered around curiously at the living room, hoping it might provide him with some clues as to the purpose of this visit. The floor was wood, and the room was decorated with a glass-and-steel coffee table, a comfortable looking couch, a couple of easy chairs in black leather, and a small writing desk set against the wall just inside the door. Opposite the door, a large window looked out over the flagstone path and lawn in front of the building. One section of the room formed a kitchen area, with a small dining table and two chairs. "Whose place is this?"

"Mine." Edward sounded smug. "Yours, if you want it."

"What?" Jake whirled around from inspecting the kitchen, and gaped at Edward.

Edward chuckled. "I signed the lease this afternoon." His expression grew more serious. "Jake, that place you're living at—."

Jake involuntarily stiffened at Edward's words. Yes, that house made for a shitty home, but the room was his, paid for with his own hard-earned money. It'd do until he could figure out how to rent something better without having to present an ID or leave a credit card guarantee. He didn't want a sugar daddy, and sure as hell didn't want to be beholden to Edward any more than he already was by living in a place Edward provided.

Edward must've seen Jake's reaction, because he pursed his lips and was silent for a moment, before he offered a conciliatory wave of his hand and tried again. "I thought we could do with a place of our own. I know *I* can. The motel's fine for one-night stands, but you—." He broke off a second time. Jake recalled Edward's quiet confession by the river's edge, and some of his distrust faded.

"If you don't want it, it'll stand empty most of the time." Edward shrugged. "I simply figured you might prefer this over the house on Eastman."

Part of Jake was aware that Edward's arguments, while making sense in themselves, were largely for his benefit, designed to appease his bruised pride. He glanced around again, taking in the gleaming wood floor, the shining stove in the kitchen, the unstained ceiling. That damned pride: it warred fiercely with the desire to live in a better place. A place like this.

"I'll ask that you help pay the rent, of course."

Jake switched his attention back to Edward, who met Jake's gaze with an innocent expression.

Jake snorted. He knew when he'd lost. "Deal."

Edward grinned. "Welcome home, Jake." He tossed Jake a set of keys.

Jake caught them. "Yeah," he croaked. After a moment, he added a muttered, "Thanks." For some reason, something was blocking his throat, making it hard to say more.

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The next morning, hair wet from the shower, Beck pattered barefoot around the kitchen area, opening cabinets and drawers to familiarize himself with his new surroundings. The afternoon before, after signing the

lease, he'd stocked the fridge, so at least they could have scrambled eggs and toast for breakfast once Jake woke up.

Noting the lack of dish towels, Beck added them as another item on the shopping list he'd started earlier. Having discovered when he hopped in and out of the shower that the bathroom was bare, lacking essentials like soap, shampoo and towels, he'd quickly learned the term *furnished apartment* didn't include the kind of amenities even cheap motel rooms offered.

Glancing up from the notepad, Beck's gaze lingered on the open doorway leading to the bedroom, and he paused in his exploration. Jake was lying on his back in the center of the bed, long legs tangled in the sheets—thank goodness the apartment's furnishings had included a set of bedcovers—with one hand splayed on his bare chest and the other stretched out across the mattress beside him. Beck couldn't prevent his mouth curving up with pleasure at the sight.

Getting Jake to accept this new arrangement had gone better than he could've hoped—though, for a second, he'd been afraid he'd messed up yet again, when Jake stiffened at the allusion to his place near Lyell. Recognizing the signs, Beck had quickly backpedaled from that line of argument and tried to remember all the other reasons renting the apartment was a good idea. He'd known Jake wasn't going to accept the offer quietly—or at all—if he pitched it as a favor: in their past few meetings, he'd quickly learned Jake had his pride and didn't take well to suggestions that he interpreted as condescending or an attempt to control him—no matter the intention behind them.

And then Beck'd almost managed to make it sound exactly like the kind of thing Jake wouldn't have wanted. Watching Jake sleep, he thanked God again for the flash of inspiration that had made him bring up a rent agreement. The instant the idea had popped into his brain, he'd known it was exactly what Jake needed—even if Beck didn't require the money to be able to afford the place. He was a single man living on a major's pay check, after all.

He heaved a breath, turning away from the view in the bedroom. Jake would wake up soon, and Beck was already starving. Getting out the frying pan, he dug the eggs and bacon from the fridge. A few minutes later, the

bacon was sizzling on the stove, the smell drifting through the apartment. Beck carefully cracked two eggs into the pan.

"Mmm, smells good."

The noise of Jake stumbling around in the bedroom had already alerted Beck that he'd gotten up, so he wasn't startled by hearing his voice. "Should be done soon." Poking at the bacon, he shot a glance across his shoulder. Jake had put on his jeans and the faded T-shirt he'd been wearing the day before. Beck tried not to laugh when Jake yawned and combed a hand through hair that was already sticking out every which way. He mustn't have been very successful at hiding his amusement, though, because Jake quirked an eyebrow. "Your hair," Beck explained, letting his smile out.

Jake grimaced wryly, dropping his hand to his side. "Right. I'll grab a shower, then."

"You might wanna postpone that for a bit." Beck gestured with the spatula. "No towels."

Jake padded further into the kitchen, making a beeline for the coffee pot that had just finished prattling, releasing the scent of fresh coffee to mingle with the rest of the morning smells. "Then how did you...?" He indicated Beck's still damp hair with a nod.

"I dripped." Beck turned back to the stove to make sure the bacon wasn't going to burn. Behind him, Jake snorted a laugh.

Beck scooped the bacon and eggs onto two plates. "I made a list." He jerked his head toward the notepad on the table.

"A list?" Putting down the two mugs of coffee he'd poured, Jake picked up the pad, scanning the page. His mouth twitched as he peered up at Beck. "You're very... organized, aren't you?"

"I suppose so." Beck shrugged, a little defensively. As a soldier, as an officer, he had to be. People depended on *him*; *lives* depended on him. "Anything you like to add?"

"Nah, it looks good." Jake dropped the notepad back on the table and sat

down to eat. He wolfed down the food Beck had cooked, concentrating so hard on eating that Beck wondered what he normally ate for breakfast—if he ate breakfast. Jake might have fleshed out compared to the first time Beck'd seen him, and the physical labor of his new job had added some muscle tone, but Beck still thought he was too skinny.

He went through his own breakfast at a more moderate pace, finishing the meal off with the coffee Jake had poured. With his hunger sated, Beck leaned back contentedly. He'd have to go soon, swing by the Four Points to ruffle the bed before the maid discovered it hadn't been slept in. It wouldn't be any use to keep up that ruse if he was going to mess up on the details.

He cleared his throat. "I have a few things to do first, but maybe we could go by your old place later. You can pack your things while I see to that list. If—," he held up his hands to forestall any protest Jake might come up with, "—you have no other plans?"

Beck could almost see the cogs whirring in Jake's brain as he considered the suggestion. His thoughts weren't hard to follow: if he brought the rest of his belongings to the apartment, that'd make this arrangement final. It'd also mean he'd accepted Beck's offer to live here without condition, in the full knowledge that Beck could show up whenever he pleased. Beck held his breath. Would Jake trust him enough to realize Beck wouldn't do that? Trust that he'd learned his lesson, that day in McMurthy's, and that he'd call ahead if he planned to visit? That he wasn't expecting Jake to put his life on hold for him?

At last Jake shrugged. "Sure."

Inwardly, Beck smiled. He released the breath he'd been holding.

"It's not much, though," Jake added. "I can handle it. You don't need to bother coming." He sounded embarrassed, and Beck didn't push for details, or for Jake to accept his help regardless. If Jake wanted to keep parts of his life separate from Beck, he wasn't going to force Jake to let him in. Besides, Jake's old place was a part of his life that was over and done with, so it didn't matter any more.

Beck returned to the apartment in the afternoon with the trunk of his car loaded with necessities. Elbowing the apartment door shut behind him, his arms full of purchases, he discovered Jake had beaten him back and was puttering around in the kitchen area.

"Did you get everything?" Beck asked, peering around the main room in search of boxes or bags needing to be unpacked. He saw none.

"Um, yeah." Jake turned, gesturing with a chopping knife. "Put my stuff in the bedroom closet. That okay?"

That explained the lack of boxes. "Of course." Beck trudged on into the bedroom and dumped his armload of purchases on the bed. He quickly divided it according to where it should be put away: spare sheets and towels in the closet; toiletries for the bathroom; the few books he'd been unable to resist buying on the bedside table.

Gathering the sheets and towels, he opened the closet to put them away. He gaped, shocked: Jake's things took up half a shelf in the otherwise empty space. The scruffy messenger bag he remembered Jake carrying lay folded on the bottom, with a pair of rumpled jeans, a couple unironed shirts, some socks and some boxers piled messily on top of it. *This* was everything?

Beck had always reckoned he lived frugally. He mentally tallied the items that filled his quarters back at base: a chest filled with various uniforms for different occasions; the framed photos of his parents and cousins' children on the desk; a small row of books on the shelf. Jake gave a new meaning to the term. Beck's first instinct was to drop everything and take Jake straight to the nearest shopping mall.

He clamped down on the desire; Jake had looked insecure enough about the whole moving-into-the-apartment situation, and Beck didn't want to destroy the fragile connection he was building by appearing too critical.

So he pretended to think nothing of it. He simply stacked the new towels and sheets around Jake's meager possessions, and quietly resolved to devise a way to improve Jake's situation without risking him taking offense.

Sunday at dusk, Jake was alone, roaming through the new apartment as restlessly as a caged tiger. The place was five times bigger than his old room and yet still seemed too small. One glance out of the living room's picture window, into the gray day, made any thought of going outside to explore the neighborhood wither before it had fully formed. A northerly wind was howling around the building—demonstrating that the apartment was far better insulated than the rickety house on Eastman, where cold drafts were pretty much par for the course—and the lead-colored clouds hung low enough overhead that it seemed Jake could touch them if he reached for them. The weather forecast was for a storm, which meant he wouldn't have to go in to work the next day: the building site would be closed down until the wind dropped. Despite the potential loss of pay, Jake decided he didn't mind; he had a fully stocked fridge and a warm, comfortable place to hang out in.

He just hoped Edward would make it safely back to base, before the predicted fresh snow started falling.

He'd left around mid-morning, hours ago, to do whatever he did on his free Sundays. Jake wasn't sure if it was a holdover from his old routine or because he truly had other things he wanted to do before going back to his base. Either way, his early departure had left Jake with too much time on his hands and too little to distract him from his thoughts.

Dismissing the idea of heading out to walk off some energy, Jake flopped on the couch and turned on the TV. Weird, to have a TV again. A TV with a remote that he controlled, allowing him to settle on whatever he pleased. Idly flipping through the channels, Jake quickly discovered not much had changed since he'd owned a TV in San Diego. Every station was still broadcasting similar crap: commercials, reality TV, talking heads spouting nonsense, old re-runs, and scrolling headlines. He watched the news for a few minutes. It was depressingly familiar: bombings in Iraq, drugs-related gang murders in Mexico, an earthquake in a location he couldn't even point out on a map.

He switched off the TV, listening to the whine of the wind and the quiet hum of the refrigerator in the kitchen. The place was silent otherwise: no neighbors arguing, or Hank belting country songs at the top of his voice.



Too testy to sit still, Jake prowled through the apartment again, going from the comfortable living room through the clean kitchen area and then on into the master bedroom and the mold-free bathroom, and back into the living room, as if imprinting the layout in his mind. The stink of decay was conspicuous in its absence, while the lack of drafts made the rooms comfortable enough that Jake had shucked the hoodie he'd taken to wearing even indoors.

Yeah, he'd gotten damned lucky; it was a very nice place. Edward had a good eye. Although—Jake chuckled at the start it had given him when he'd first seen it—the ruler-straight stack of towels sorted by color in the bedroom closet was a bit over the top. Then again, Edward was a military man, and the military liked things neat and orderly. And, matched or not, after trying the towels out earlier, Jake had to admit they were good quality—thick and soft—and nice to use.

Yet, while he'd been secretly amused by Edward's sudden domestic streak, it had also made him a little nervous. What unspoken expectations did Edward have of him? What if he demanded more than Jake was willing to give?

He shook it off; Edward had informed Jake that he'd arranged to have the phone connected soon, and Jake was confident he wouldn't drop in unannounced and expect Jake to be there. Everything else, they'd simply have to work out as they went along.

He went to get himself more coffee, pondering the new arrangements some more. Were he and Edward an *item* now? Edward certainly seemed to think so. As did Bo. Over the phone, a few days before, the bartender had given Jake a veiled warning, reminding him, "Dunno what he thinks he's doin', but he's a good man and a friend. I wouldn't take well to seein' a friend taken advantage of." Bo hadn't said anything else, but Jake had gotten the message anyway. He'd assured the barman he had no intention of doing anything to hurt Edward or put him in danger. He'd meant it, too—and not because of Bo's hidden threat.

Moving out of the room on Eastman had been a simple thing once he'd made the decision: grab his few clothes and stuff them into the messenger bag, drop the borrowed, partly-read books off at Pam's, and give the camping stove and the remaining canisters to Hank. With the well-

equipped kitchen at the apartment, Jake wouldn't need it any more. He'd also asked Hank to pass a letter to the landlord, letting him know Jake quit the room. Cutting off his retreat had been a risk, but one Jake had knowingly taken.

Putting the coffee pot back on the hot plate, he looked at the folded dollar bills he'd discovered tucked under the machine after Edward was gone. That was definitely part of their old routine—if twice could be called a routine—but it didn't mean Jake had to like it.

Because he was no longer the broke and broken man he'd been last fall, the first time Edward had picked him up. He was earning an honest living at the building site, and had everything a guy could need: food, a roof over his head, clothes on his back. Other than the few photographs in his wallet, Grandpa's pocket knife, and his dad's St. Christopher's medallion, which had kept him safe all these years, he had nothing of value he cared about. And he preferred to keep it that way; he'd learned a long time ago that those who owned little also had little to lose. The pain of having to sell the Roadrunner was still an ache in his heart.

Coming to a decision, Jake snatched up the money, folded it into a blank sheet from the notepad and put it into an empty kitchen drawer to await Edward's return. He'd give it back. He didn't want Edward's money. Whatever was going on with him and Edward, it wasn't about the cash any more.

Feeling calmer, Jake returned to the living room, steaming mug in hand. As he passed the desk, his gaze fell on the stack of books Edward had moved into the living room from the bedside table. New books, their spines as yet unbroken. For some reason, their presence made the apartment more homey. Not that Jake was much of a reader: out of bored desperation, and with Pam's help, he'd read more books in the last couple months than in all the years since leaving Jericho. He didn't really have the patience for it. But he remembered the bookcases at home, volumes of classic tales next to his mom's cookbooks and gardening manuals.

Curious to see what Edward liked to read, Jake scanned the books' titles. Most were non-fiction, books on history and art. Some were military books: historical battles or soldiers' memoirs. Jake smiled as he continued reading the spines, discovering biographies of people he'd never heard of, and even a volume of collected poems.

Maybe if he read one of Edward's books, he'd get a better handle on the man. He didn't have anything else to do, anyway. He hardly knew anyone in Rochester, and Edward had impressed on him, if not in so many words, not to invite people to the apartment. Bored as he was, Jake couldn't begrudge Edward's request. It was his place, after all, and he'd been good to Jake. The least Jake could do in return was make sure Edward felt safe here.

He finally settled on a biography that looked halfway interesting, and returned to the sofa with it. Outside, the predicted snow had begun falling, covering the flagstones in a thin layer of white.

o0o

The two months after Beck signed the lease went by quietly. Spring showers had replaced the winter snow, slashing the building with their fury. Beck glanced up as a strong gust of wind clattered the rain against the window, the water streaming down the pane in thick rivulets. Once upon a time, he'd have detested a storm like this, forcing him into an unhappy choice between squandering his free time alone in an impersonal hotel room or dashing from gallery to museum while cold water trickled into his collar.

No more: those days were past. The second time Beck came to the apartment, Jake pointed out it no longer made sense for him to take a room at the Four Points if he was going to stay at the apartment. After some thought, Beck agreed.

Since then, the apartment had become so much more than a place for Jake to stay, or a place where they could meet undisturbed. Their weekends together—too few, and too soon it was Sunday again—passed in quiet leisure, Beck's need to keep a low profile preventing them from going out in public. To Beck, it didn't matter; he simply enjoyed being with Jake.

As Jake appeared to enjoy being with Beck.

Glancing past the Sunday edition of the New York Times spread open in his hands to where Jake slouched on the sofa, his socked feet on the coffee table and his eyes glued to the TV, Beck still couldn't quite believe he deserved such happiness; he kept expecting the other shoe to drop. Every

time he walked into the apartment he still feared he'd find it abandoned, Jake's messenger bag and clothes gone.

Over time, he'd come to accept that he didn't have anything to worry about. Jake had made it clear he stayed because he wanted to. Beck smiled to himself, newspaper forgotten in his hands as he thought back to the second weekend the two of them had spent together at the apartment, a couple of weeks after he'd given Jake the key.

Jake had shoved something square and white into Beck's hands as soon as he'd stepped across the threshold, not giving Beck a chance even to take off his coat or drop his overnight bag in the bedroom. "Here." Jake hadn't looked at Beck. "You left that last time."

Unfolding the sheet of notepaper, Beck had found a wad of cash. He'd raised an eyebrow in Jake's direction. "What's this?"

"Your money." Jake had shrugged. "It's not about that."

Pondering the folded bills, a flare of mingled hope and fear had run through Beck. Jake had given the impression he'd rather not discuss it further, but Beck had known it was important he left no room for misinterpretation. Not about something as potentially important as he suspected this to be.

"I'm sorry, Jake." He'd placed the money on the writing desk and shrugged out of his coat. "You'll have to be a bit more specific than that. What's not about what? Sex? Money?" He hung the coat on the hook by the door. "Both?"

"The money." Jake's head whipped up. "I'm not a whore."

Seeing the red blushes on Jake's cheeks as he continued avoiding Beck's gaze, Beck had smiled inwardly at Jake's bashfulness, reminding himself that years of negotiating with strangers had given him an advantage over Jake. Outwardly, he had nodded calmly. "I know."

"So...," looking relieved, Jake had finally met Beck's gaze, shyly, "you okay with that?"

Beck might have lost the ability to feel embarrassed years ago, but he

hadn't grown so blasé that Jake quietly asking for his approval hadn't startled him into speechlessness. His jaw had dropped, a warm rush of affection taking his breath away. Lost for words, he'd done the only thing he could: he'd stepped forward, closing the distance between them, afraid Jake would pull back, and kissed him. "Absolutely. Thank you."

They'd never discussed the matter again. It hadn't stopped Beck from buying Jake things, but he was careful to make sure they were small gifts that Jake could accept without shame: a decent shirt, a magazine subscription Beck thought he might enjoy, leather gloves, back when it was still winter and freezing hard, so that Jake could throw out the dirty wool mittens he'd been using.

He'd enjoyed having someone to indulge; he so rarely had the opportunity. And Jake had so little.

Beck's brow furrowed, the newspaper now forgotten, as he contemplated that Jake was still a mystery to him. He seemed willing to entertain Beck with stories of the present—anecdotes from his job, or gossip about their neighbors in the building—but he still hadn't told Beck anything about his past much beyond the fact he'd once driven trucks in Iraq. He'd hinted at runs up to Balad and along Route Irish, so Beck had tried to remember if he'd ever crossed paths with Jake overseas, and he'd told Beck a little more about the incident where a piece of shrapnel had given him the scar on his hip—the one Beck liked to run his tongue over during their love-making. Once or twice, while they were both sated and sleepy, Beck had prodded—very gently—for more. Each time Jake's face had clouded over and lines of tension had stiffened his naked shoulders, and Beck had hurriedly dropped the subject.

Bo's contact hadn't yet come up with anything, either. Beck had asked, once, and the barman had shrugged: his cop buddy had to be careful about running random searches on people who weren't suspects.

Beck didn't worry about it. The past didn't matter. He was in too deep and he wouldn't give Jake up, no matter what Bo's friend discovered. And Beck trusted Jake. He reckoned that if there was something in Jake's past life that could affect them, Jake would've told him.

No, the past didn't concern Beck; the future frightened him far more. It

was only a matter of time until the army would tear them apart. His unit could be redeployed, send back to Iraq or some other hot spot, on a moment's notice. If—no, when that happened, it'd be months before he'd see Jake again—assuming Jake would stick around that long. And Beck wouldn't even dare call or write, with the army censors going through everything to ensure he didn't reveal sensitive information.

He was probably attracting his share of attention as it was; he was certain the increase in his weekend leave and the numerous trips off base had been noted. It was such a contrast to the behavior people had grown accustomed to from him. Nobody had commented on it yet, so at least Beck hadn't had to add lying to his list of sins. He was committing plenty as it was.

Oddly, he couldn't bring himself to care.

Sneaking another peek at Jake from behind the cover of his newspaper, Beck sighed quietly, the sound going unnoticed under the onslaught of rain on the window and the sound of the basketball game on the TV. Not only had Jake changed Beck's behavior, he was making him question his beliefs. Both the Church and the army said what Beck was doing was bad, and that should've been enough for him. But how could something that seemed so right be a sin? He cared about Jake, Jake cared about him. Why was it wrong they sought comfort in each other's arms?

A sudden, excited roar coming from the TV pulled Beck from his rueful musing. Jake was leaning forward eagerly, hands on his knees, his gaze riveted on the game. Beck glanced at the TV: the Kansas Jayhawks seemed to be winning, if he read the scores plastered in large white letters on the screen correctly. He chuckled softly: Beck had never quite got the appeal of most sports, and generally, Jake didn't seem to care either. But when the Jayhawks had made it to the final rounds of college basketball, Jake'd gotten interested enough to want to watch.

It told Beck more than Jake probably realized: his keen interest led Beck to suspect Kansas was where Jake came from. Beck had already wheedled out of him that he'd grown up somewhere in the Midwest, and that his family still lived there. Beck hadn't pressed for more; it was obvious to him something bad had happened to chase Jake from home, and if he didn't want to talk about his time in Iraq, he certainly wouldn't want to tell Beck about his family.

The Kansas team scored again, eliciting a soft cheer from Jake. Beck ducked behind his newspaper to hide his grin. Yeah, Jake's home state had to be Kansas. He didn't mind Jake's sudden obsession with the game; it gave him another chance to watch Jake without the other man noticing, something he didn't think he'd ever tire of doing.

The game ended with a rowdy crowd all dressed in bright blue filling the court and Jake reached for the remote to turn off the TV. The movement caused his shirt to ruck up a little, revealing a bare strip of skin. The sight of it made Beck pull in an involuntary gasp of lust. In the sudden quiet after the TV was shut off, it was loud enough for Jake to catch. He twisted his head in Beck's direction. "What?"

"Nothing." Beck dropped the newspaper into his lap. When had he become so wanton? To distract Jake—or perhaps himself—he dipped his head at the now-dark TV. "Your guys won, huh?"

"Um, yeah." Jake was too bemused by Beck's apparent interest in the game to notice he'd just confirmed Beck's suspicion.

"Congratulations." Beck nodded absently. He continued to scrutinize Jake, unaware he was staring.

"Like what you see?" The nervous laugh that accompanied the question invalidated the brazen tone in which it was asked, and Beck grinned involuntarily. Who was he kidding? He surely did: Jake'd finally gotten some flesh on those bones.

But, Beck furrowed his brow, in spite of wearing one of the new shirts Beck had bought him, he still looked as unkempt as when they'd first met. Beck considered him for a few more seconds. "You could do with a hair cut."

Jake made a face. "What are you, my mother?" Even as he blurted out the words, Beck noticed his eyes clouding over and a shadow flitted across his face. Beck held his breath, aware he'd inadvertently put himself on shaky ground again. It sure hadn't been what he'd intended. Likely watching the game had reminded Jake of home more than he'd expected.

Beck wondered if he should use the opportunity to ask for more, or if he

should back off. "No." He kept his voice low. "But I suspect she'd tell you the same thing."

Jake sniffed. "You don't know the first thing about my mother." There was still a hint of hostility in his tone, a warning for Beck not to push it, but no real animosity behind the words. And as he spoke, he combed his fingers through his hair, as if to check Beck's observation.

Beck suppressed a smile at the gesture. Leaning back in his chair, the newspaper rustling, he decided to take a chance. "Kansas, huh?"

At Jake's startled blink, he again nodded toward the TV. "That pretty much gave it away."

Jake puffed up his cheeks and blew out a breath. "Right..."

Beck waited to see if Jake would voluntarily offer any more, but he had turned his head away and was now gazing out of the window. Without seeing his face, Beck couldn't read his expression, and he didn't dare press on. He picked up his newspaper again and was trying to pick up the thread of the article he'd been reading when Jake asked, "Don't you think you should tell me where you're from?"

Beck raised his head, meeting Jake's gaze across the edge of the paper. Jake shrugged. "Tit for tat?"

Beck folded the paper and put it next to him on the floor. He considered his answer for a few moments. "I'm from all over."

Jake gave a small shake of his head, his eyebrows lifting quizzically. "What's that mean?"

Beck's mouth curved. "Army brat," he explained. "My father was a career soldier. He got deployed all across the globe. Germany, Japan, Italy, you name it."

"You joined the army to follow in your father's footsteps?" Jake scratched his neck. "Do you like it?"

Beck shrugged. "It's what I do." He'd never considered another career; joining the military had been a given since he could walk. His grandfather



had made it to sergeant major; his father was a captain when he retired. Beck'd been expected to continue the tradition, and climb higher on the command ladder—as he had. And unless he messed up, he'd have another promotion or two to go. "And I'm good at it."

Jake's gaze skittered away again. "He must be proud of you." He had muttered the words half under his breath, longing in his tone, and Beck wasn't sure they were meant to have reached his ears. When Jake didn't add anything else, Beck decided it was best to pretend he hadn't heard. He picked up his paper again, but found it hard to concentrate.

Jake had sounded so hurt, so desolate.... Beck wished there was something he could do. He peered at Jake from under his lashes. Jake was staring straight ahead at the blank TV, one foot tapping nervously to an unheard beat. Beck suppressed a sigh, turning his gaze back to the page of newsprint. Anything he said right now would likely not go down well. Would Jake ever trust him enough to share the pain?

It was a while before he could redirect his focus enough to make sense of what he was reading.

## Chapter 5

"Hey." Jake emerged from the bathroom as Beck shut the door behind him. His hair wet from what Beck presumed was a shower and—Beck smiled: Jake had cut it at some point in the last three weeks.

He was about to return Jake's greeting, happy to see he'd taken note of the gentle criticism, when he spotted the second thing that had changed during his absence: the large, purplish bruise that bloomed around Jake's left eye. His smile transformed into a frown as his gaze zeroed in on it. "What happened to you?" Dropping his overnight bag by the door, he put the Thai take-out he was carrying in his other hand down on the writing desk and strode up to Jake. He reached up and lightly touched the bruise.

Jake flinched from his fingers. "Nothing."

Beck let his hand fall, sniffing to indicate what he thought of Jake's answer and to hide the hurt he'd felt at Jake drawing back from him. It looked like a nasty injury, and he'd merely wanted to make sure a bruise was all it was.

Jake pulled in a breath. "Ran into a fist, alright?" He sounded surly.

The explanation elicited another snort from Beck. "I suspected as much." He hung his coat from the rack and carried his bag toward the bedroom, forcing Jake to step aside. "Mind telling me whose?"

Jake shrugged. "Does it matter?"

Beck bit back a sharp retort. Concern for Jake clashed with growing anger. Anger at the person who'd dared hurt Jake, and anger at Jake. He couldn't afford attention from the police, and Jake getting into scraps was a sure-fire way to attract exactly that. "It matters to me."

"Why?" Jake's tone remained contrary.

*Because you're mine.* It was the first reply to pop into Beck's mind, shocking him with its possessiveness. He was wise enough not to voice it out loud. Struggling to keep his tone calm, he said, "Because I care about you. And Jake, in case you forgot, the lease to this place is in my name. I'd

prefer not to have the authorities poking into our arrangement."

Jake had the grace to blush. "I know. Neither would I." He prodded at the discolored flesh around his eye with his thumb. "Don't worry, the cops weren't involved."

"Hm." That was something, Beck supposed, though it didn't make him feel much happier. He went back to pick up the bag with the food and take it into the kitchen area. It was good Thai; it'd be a shame to let it grow cold while he tried to more drag information out of Jake.

Jake's acknowledgment he also didn't want anything to do with the authorities reminded him that Jake had once told him he didn't want anyone to know where he was, although he'd yet to explain why. Which made showing up with a black eye all the more remarkable; Beck would've expected him to stay out of trouble.

He was determined to get to the bottom of it, but a head-on collision with Jake wasn't the way to get the answers he wanted.

"Grab some plates, will you?" Beck indicated the kitchen cabinet that housed their dishes and ducked into the fridge for a bottle of chilled wine. While Jake set the table, Beck uncorked the wine and poured them each a glass.

They sat down, dividing the food Beck had brought over the two plates. After he'd swallowed down a couple bites and the worst of his hunger had been satisfied, Beck tried again. "Are you going to tell me what *did* happen?"

Jake snorted a wry laugh. "You're not gonna let this go, are you?"

"Not with you looking like that." Putting down his fork, Beck squinted across at the bruise, dark against Jake's skin. It was a week old, maybe, the edges already turning green and yellow. It must've been spectacular when it was fresh.

Jake sighed, taking a swallow from his wine and tapping his fingertips against the glass. "This guy was hassling Anita. Her ex-boyfriend."

"Anita?" The name sounded familiar, and Beck vaguely recalled Jake

mentioning the woman once or twice, but he was hard-pressed to place her.

"From down the hall." Seeing his confusion, Jake flapped a hand toward the front door and the corridor beyond. "She's a hairdresser. She did this." His gesture changed direction to point out his own head.

"She did a good job." Beck nodded appreciatively. "I like it."

Jake rolled a shoulder dismissively, vanity not being part of his make up, though Beck didn't miss the pleased twitch of his mouth. To be honest, after Beck had remarked on Jake's hair, he'd half-expected he'd grow it longer out of sheer obstinacy. And whoever this Anita was—try as he might, Beck couldn't put a face to the name—she did know her craft. Despite the bruise marring his features, Jake looked a lot less like a bum and a lot more respectable. Put him in a nice shirt and jacket, Beck mused, and he'd be rather handsome. Enjoying the mental image he'd conjured up, Beck wished he could take Jake places, show him off....

He shook his head to chase away the idle fancy, and focused on the present. "The ex?" he nudged, once it seemed Jake wasn't going to say anything else.

"He's been bugging her for a while." Jake spoke around a mouthful of noodles. "When we got home the other night, he was waiting for her." He swallowed the food. "He flipped out when he saw her with me."

Something about what Jake said.... "We got home?" Beck struggled to contain the unexpected flare of jealousy. From the startled look Jake shot him over another forkful of Thai food, he suspected he hadn't been entirely successful.

"She was my date for a work thing." Jake sounded defensive. "One of the guys threw a birthday party." He put down his fork, food uneaten. "Look, they've been pestering me for months they want to meet my 'girlfriend'. Anita was happy to fill the part."

*I bet*, Beck thought gracelessly, startled at his own bitterness. What had gotten into him? What Jake did while Beck wasn't around wasn't any of his business, was it? As long as Jake stuck to the rules they'd set up, he could

do as he pleased.

He sketched an apologetic wave in the air. "Sorry. Please go on." He tried to concentrate on the rest of Jake's story.

"Anyway, the ex freaked out. There was a bit of a scuffle, Anita threatened to call the cops, and he took off." Jake picked up his fork again. "She says she's got a restraining order against him. The guy's not going to press charges any more than I am."

"Glad to hear that." Beck struggled to make sense of the conflicting emotions roiling inside him: envy at the girl grappling with pride that Jake had stood up for a friend. "Does it hurt?"

Jake huffed. "Only when I laugh."

Beck scowled back at him, not seeing the humor. "Did you at least put ice on it?"

"Course I did." Jake gave him the sort of look that said he was questioning Beck's opinion of him. Clearly, this wasn't the first scrape Jake had gotten into.

Beck pushed his chair back. "Lemme take a look?" This time, Jake didn't pull away as Beck ghosted his fingertips over the bruise, though he stiffened almost imperceptibly. Beck wasn't sure if it was an instinctive reaction because he was afraid it would hurt, or because he simply didn't like Beck touching him like this.

Not wanting to dwell on Jake's reasons, Beck focused on examining the bruise. It was as he'd thought: any swelling had gone down and the bruise was beginning to fade. It didn't look like Jake had fractured the bone beneath. He let his fingers linger for a moment, before, reassured, he stepped away. "Next time, duck, okay?"

Jake quirked up his lips in a lopsided grin, tension easing from his features. "Will do."

Beck started clearing away the dishes, somewhat mollified. He saw enough cuts and bruises back at base, where small accidents were part and parcel of soldiering. He didn't appreciate seeing similar injuries on

Jake.

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*That could've gone a lot worse*, Jake thought a few hours later, struggling to suck in much-needed air as Edward's weight rested heavily on him briefly, until the other man rolled off, catching his own breath. All week, Jake had fretted about the coming confrontation, about Edward discovering he'd been in a fight.

At least he'd given Jake a chance to explain—unlike so many other times Jake could remember coming home with a black eye or a torn shirt and finding nobody had wanted to listen to his side of the story. Like that time Dad had let him stew overnight in the Jericho jail. Jake hadn't been prepared to break Jimmy's confidence by telling his father he'd started the fight because the prom king and his buddies, knowing the poor guy was claustrophobic, had locked Jimmy in the janitor's closet—but dammit, Dad could've waited for an explanation, or simply given him the benefit of the doubt.

Edward had offered him that benefit. He'd obviously been upset when he'd discovered Jake's injury, and Jake had braced himself for the inevitable accusations and recriminations. He'd had to scramble for new footing when the angry words didn't come. In fact, looking back, once he'd been assured the cops hadn't been involved, Edward had seemed more bothered Jake was hanging out with Anita than by the fight itself. Jake furrowed his brow as, rolling onto his back, he replayed their conversation in his mind: if anything, the man had acted jealous.

As if privy to where Jake's thoughts were taking him, Edward hooked a leg around one of Jake's, pulling closer as he sleepily muttered something Jake didn't catch. Jake snorted softly at the irony of Edward's envy. Truth be told, Anita was a pretty girl. Tall, blonde, smart.... exactly Jake's type. In other circumstances he'd surely have been attracted to her. He *was*, if he were honest. In the first weeks, he'd even flirted a little with her, the few times they ran into one another, on the stairs or in the basement among the laundry machines. But when she'd tried to take their flirting a step further and attempted to kiss him, next to the dryer, he'd held her off. "We shouldn't..."

Anita peered up at him, curious and faintly dejected, her gaze flicking over

his features searchingly. "It's that guy, isn't it?"

Jake's chest tightened with fear and he willed himself to keep his expression neutral. "Wha—what guy?"

Anita rolled her eyes, taking a step back and crossing her arms in front of her chest. "The guy who drops by your place ever other weekend? Dark, handsome, little older." She grinned. "Nice ass. I'm guessing: boyfriend?"

Jake's face grew hot even as his breath stuck in his throat. He struggled to find the words to deny it.

"Don't worry." Anita took another pace back, collecting her basket. "I won't out you." She put one finger against her lips and smirked. "I can keep a secret, you know."

Jake was still scrambling for a response when she stopped in the doorway and gave him a rueful look. "Shame, really. It's always the cute ones who're gay."

He'd stared after her as he disappeared, unsure whether to be shocked or amused. She thought he was gay?

Next to Jake, Edward let out a soft snore. Falling asleep, Jake knew from past experience. Ever since Edward had finally started to let down his guard, he'd always drifted off right after they—Jake huffed a quiet laugh, careful not to wake the other man. Anita hadn't been wrong, had she? He was sleeping with a guy; what else would people call it?

His mirth faded as fast as it had come. Yet another way he was letting down his father. *Sorry Dad, no grandkids by this son.* Jake had no doubt that Eric would fulfill his filial duties in this regard as well as all the others: the Green name would live on.

He shoved the thought away. Remembering home depressed him. Home was in the past; he'd burned those bridges a long time ago. He had to live in the present, with the man sleeping beside him.

He folded an arm behind his head and stared up at the ceiling, too wired to fall asleep himself. He hadn't told Edward that Anita had guessed their secret, too afraid Edward would freak out. Not that Jake reckoned they had

anything to fear; Anita had, apparently, been true to her word. Though, for weeks after she'd confronted him in the laundry area, Jake had been on full alert each time he bumped into one of their neighbors on the stairs or in the corridor, warily searching for clues they were treating him different from before. He never found any. Either he was living among the most tolerant bunch of neighbors he'd ever met, or Anita really had kept her promise.

He preferred to believe the latter. That was why, confident she could be trusted, he'd gathered the courage to ask her to go to the party with him. She'd teased him—*I'm not good enough to be a real girlfriend, but good enough to be a pretend one?*—but she'd agreed to play along with his scheme, helping to take the heat from the guys at work off of him.

That had made it even worse that he'd had to ask her not to involve the cops after the incident with her ex. She'd helped him out, and he repaid her by wanting another favor. Something good had come of it, though: Anita said she hadn't seen her ex since last week, so hopefully he'd gotten the message.

Growing drowsy, Jake rolled over onto his side, his back to Edward's chest as he tugged the sheet over his hips. Combined with Edward's reaction this evening, that outcome was worth every bit of pain the eye had caused him.

oOo

Beck ignored the flutter of anxiety in his stomach as he locked his car and headed up the path to the apartment building. He hadn't gotten the chance to leave the base until late Saturday afternoon, and he was expected to return the following morning. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't have bothered making the long drive for such a short visit.

But circumstances were far from normal. The last two weeks had been among the longest of Beck's life. It had proved impossible to keep busy twenty-four seven, and whenever he wasn't concentrating on solving some logistical puzzle or other, his mind had drifted. Images of Jake having fun with a faceless woman had kept intruding on Beck's thoughts, leaving him ill-tempered and miserable. At one point, he'd caught himself chewing out a poor private for misplacing a form until the kid was close to tears. It had



brought Beck up short and made him decide he had to take action. He wasn't going to roll over and give Jake up without a fight.

Rehearsing the speech he'd prepared a final time, Beck reflexively glanced upward, confirming the lights were on in their window. Jake was home, would be waiting for him—he'd called ahead, after all—but how many more visits could he count on until Jake would be gone?

From the moment he'd laid eyes on him, Beck had known Jake wasn't wired the way he was. For a while, he'd succeeded in deluding himself that Jake had *chosen* him. Foolish, perhaps. Beck had to acknowledge that, if only deep down, that Jake had merely used him as a crutch to crawl up out of the gutter. He could pretend all he liked that Jake belonged to him; truth was, as Jake gathered his feet back under him, he was was going to need Beck less and less.

Until one day, he'd go.

After all, you couldn't force a person to be gay—same as you couldn't 'fix' someone if they were. No matter how often you prayed or did penance or fought to suppress those sinful desires. Heaven knows, Beck had tried hard enough.

Jake had changed all that. Beck didn't know what to call the feelings he had for Jake—*love*, a small voice had whispered in the back of his mind while he was shaving, a few days ago. Hand frozen in mid-stroke, Beck had watched his own reflection in the mirror. Was that what it was? Was that even possible for a man like him?

Putting down the razor, he'd grimaced at his reflection. Bo believed it was; the bartender had been with the same man for as long as Beck could remember. They'd entered a domestic partnership several years ago, and Bo had confessed at one point that they were keeping a close eye on developments surrounding same-sex marriage, in the state as well as the rest of the country. Beck supposed that meant they loved one another as much as any two people could.

But it wasn't the same with him and Jake, was it?

He let himself into the building with his key, holding the door open for a pretty woman in strappy sandals and a knee-length dress, a small purse

clutched under her elbow, going the other way. She smiled and nodded her thanks as she passed him. Beck watched her descend the steps and clatter along the flagstones. Was that her? Anita?

It was Beck's own damned fault Jake had met the girl, of course. If he hadn't leased the apartment—No. He derailed that particular train of thought before it could gather speed. No, he couldn't think like that; that way lay madness. Even if he didn't lose Jake to this particular woman, there were bound to be others.

Reaching the third floor apartment, the deserted hallway at his back, Beck took a deep breath and unlocked the door. He took careful stock of Jake's reaction as he entered. Jake seemed happy to see him, even if he wasn't overly demonstrative about it. Did that mean—? No, Beck answered his own question. Jake never was effusive—and, to be honest, neither was Beck. In the past months, however, Beck had learned to read the small signs that betrayed Jake's feelings—or so he'd believed.

Leaving his bag in the bedroom and freshening up in the bathroom, he returned to the living room and suspiciously squinted at Jake, looking for further clues that Jake was being less than honest in his responses.

Unaware of Beck's inner turmoil, Jake served up the dinner he'd prepared. His cooking skills were improving, yet Beck had little appetite and he struggled to hold the thread of the conversation, his mind repeatedly going over the solution he'd come up with during those long, sleepless nights in his quarters and searching for a way to broach the subject.

After they'd finished eating, they moved to the sitting area, where the chairs were more comfortable than the hard-backed dining chairs. Beck still hadn't said a word about what was foremost on his mind. He sat in his usual chair, watching Jake pouring coffee. His back was turned and not having to look Jake in the face made it easier for Beck to gather up his courage. "Jake...." He cleared his throat, afraid to go on. "There's something I want to talk to you about."

"Finally." Jake's mouth quirked up in a half-grin as he offered Beck a steaming mug, though there was an edge of uncertainty to the smile. He settled on the sofa across from Beck, stirring his own coffee. "I was wondering how long it'd take you to bring up what's bugging you."

Beck shot him a startled look. "Am I that transparent?"

"Not really." Jake toyed with the coffee spoon. "I can tell something's up, but I have no clue what you're thinking." He smiled wryly. "I never do."

"Oh." Beck didn't know how to respond to that. He was used to keeping his cards close to his chest. "Anyway." Beck coughed to clear his throat a second time. "I was wondering...." He took the plunge and blurted out, "Are you happy?"

"Whoa!" Jake gave a nervous laugh, dunking the spoon back into the coffee. "That's kind of a loaded question, don't you think?"

Beck inclined his head in agreement. It hadn't been what he'd planned on asking. He hid his consternation by taking a sip from his own drink. It was hot enough to burn his tongue. Setting the mug on the coffee table, he rasped a palm across his chin. "I meant, are you happy with me?" Putting both hands flat on his knees, he leaned forward. "Wouldn't you rather be with... with that girl down the hall? The way you talk about her...." Dammit, he was stammering like a raw recruit.

"Hang on." Jake's eyes narrowed and he scooted to the edge of the sofa. "Is this about me hanging out with Anita?"

"Yes." Beck blew out a breath of relief that Jake picked up on it so quickly. "Because if you... if you want to have sex with her, or... or any other woman, that'd be... I mean, I wouldn't...." He winced at the way he was stuttering. It was hardly the self-assured, firm way he'd pictured discussing this with Jake.

"Hold on." All amusement had left Jake's face and angry color rose in its stead. "What the hell are you saying? You think I slept with her?" He slammed the coffee mug on the table with enough force the coffee spilled over, and shot to his feet. "Is that what you're saying?"

"No." Beck peered up at Jake, stunned by his sudden fury. This conversation wasn't going at all as he'd planned. In fact, it was going very, very badly. He got up too; he didn't appreciate having to crane his neck all that way to meet Jake's gaze. "No." He spread his hands, helplessly. "I'm just saying that if you wanted to, you should."

Jake gaped at him, the angry blush abruptly fading. "And you wouldn't care?" He spoke quietly, his tone entirely unlike his earlier outburst, and there was something in his voice Beck couldn't quite place.

Beck opened his mouth to reply, snapped it back shut, opened it a second time. Didn't Jake see...? "Oh, I'd care," he whispered around the lump in his throat. "I'd care a lot."

"Then why...?" Jake asked. This time, Beck caught what he'd missed before. Jake sounded hurt.

He sucked in a deep breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. A headache was building behind his eyes. "Jake, I know you're not... like me. I'd understand if you have other needs, desires I can't fulfill."

"And you think Anita would? Or," Jake huffed a bitter laugh as he threw Beck's words back at him, "any other woman?" Turning toward the window to stare out into the dark night, he stuffed his hands deep into his pockets. "I'm not an animal."

Beck gasped, horrified Jake would think he'd suggested that. "That's not—."

Jake ignored him. "I'm here because... because I want to be. Look..., I won't lie." He twisted back around to face Beck, "I've thought about it. I mean, Anita's a pretty girl, and she's fun to be with. But," Jake hunched his shoulders higher, glancing at Beck from under his lashes, "she's not who I want right now."

Beck's jaw dropped. He hardly dared believe his ears. "You're saying—." His voice cracked, and he swallowed hard. "You're saying...?"

Jake shrugged, some of the walls back in place, making him harder for Beck to read. "I'm here, aren't I?"

Emotion bubbled up in Beck, strong enough to leave him light-headed. Not stopping to think about what he was doing, he moved over to Jake, pulling Jake's head down and capturing his mouth, trying to tell Jake without words what he meant to him. He could care less that the curtains were still open and they were in full view of anyone who bothered to look.

It only took a heartbeat for Jake to respond and begin kissing Beck back.

oOo

"Hey," Jake panted later, while Beck was pushing into him, "Anita... fancies you, too.... I could—Ah!" The last word came out as a startled gasp because Beck had reached around and closed his fingers around Jake's throbbing cock.

"Could do, what?" Beck grunted. He wasn't paying close attention to what Jake was saying.

"Ask her over." Jake inhaled sharply, letting the breath back out in a soft moan as Beck squeezed him lightly. "To join us."

"Wha—?" Beck checked mid-motion, the implication of Jake's suggestion abruptly sinking in. He wasn't sure Jake meant it.

"You know." Jake squirmed until he could look at Beck across his shoulder. His eyes sparkled with humor, and his mouth twitched. "A threesome. You, me, her."

Beck goggled, scanning Jake's features uncertainly. Shaded in the dim light of the bedroom, it was hard to make out Jake's expression. "Are you serious?"

Jake snorted a laugh. "Of course not." He turned away from Beck, his head falling forward on the pillow, body shaking with laughter. "Wanted to see what you'd say—Ow!" Beck, in the perfect position, had smacked Jake firmly across his buttocks.

"That's what I say to that." Despite his stern words, Beck couldn't keep the wry grin out of his voice. For a heartbeat, he'd thought Jake meant what he'd said, but the teasing didn't bother him.

"Copy that," Jake muttered, reaching back to rub the reddened area with one hand.

Smile fading, Beck returned to what he was doing, concentrating on

pushing in deeply as his hand snaked around Jake's hips again, tickling his balls until Jake writhed under him. Jake was his, and he was going to make every effort to keep it that way.

oOo

Beck woke an hour later to discover the bedroom dark except for the glow of the streetlamps filtering through the curtain. Jake was fast asleep beside him, curled up on his side facing away from Beck, his breathing deep and even.

Beck shifted over until he was near enough to sense Jake's body heat but a fraction shy of touching him, and closed his eyes. With the worst of his exhaustion alleviated, however, he was wide awake, unable to drift back off.

He abandoned the attempt after thirty minutes, and silently slipped out of the bed, careful not to disturb Jake's slumber. The alarm clock told him it was an hour after midnight. He gathered up his clothes where they'd been strewn across the bedroom, scooted back into them quietly, and hunted the apartment for a notepad and a pen so he could write a note, in case Jake woke up before Beck returned. No point in worrying him when Beck was merely going out to clear his head.

A short time later, Beck pushed through the door of Bo's Bar. It was less than half an hour till closing time, and the usual Saturday night crowd had dispersed, leaving a lingering handful of late customers. Bo was busy cleaning up, gathering empty beer bottles and glasses, and straightening bar stools. Despite the late hour, he looked pleased to see Beck.

"Hey." He sketched a greeting as he walked over, his arms filled with bottles. "Haven't seen you around much, lately."

"Um, no." Beck grimaced guiltily. It wasn't as if he visited his old friend often before, but previously he'd always dropped in whenever he was in town. Even though the number of trips he'd made to Rochester had increased significantly, he hadn't been to Bo's in months. "Sorry, I'm—."

Bo snorted as he walked behind the bar to plunk the bottles into their plastic crate. "Don't worry about it. I'm not expectin' weekly updates."

Chuckling, Beck shook his head ruefully, while Bo poured him his customary shot of Jack Daniels and gestured for Beck to grab a stool.

"Thanks." Beck raised the glass. The whiskey burned down his throat, and he licked his lips. "How've you been?"

Bo leaned against the counter behind him and crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Same ol', same ol'." He cocked his head, scrutinizing Beck. "You, on the other hand, look—," he drew his brows together, as if searching for words, and settled on, "—different. Less... standoffish."

Beck blinked: was that what Bo thought of him? He let out a soft guffaw: the former sergeant was probably right. Seemed he wasn't as good at hiding his emotions as he'd thought he was; this was the second time in a single evening someone had seen right through him.

"I do feel different," he admitted. He supposed the joy he felt over Jake's admission, that he was with Beck because he wanted to be, was obvious in his face for anyone who cared to read it. Bo seeing it wasn't a problem. But, he reminded himself sternly, he'd have to work on masking his feelings before he went back to base in the morning. Or, he smiled inwardly at the idea, he'd have to ask Anita to be his pretend-girlfriend some day soon as well.

Bo studied him a few seconds longer, his expression unreadable. "Got something for you." He pushed away from the counter and ducked out of sight. Beck heard him slide open a compartment door and rummage around in the space under the bar. "Here." Bo reappeared, holding a thin manilla folder. "That information you asked for? My buddy came through last month. Dropped this off."

For a full five seconds, Beck had absolutely no idea what Bo was talking about. Then it struck him. *Jake*. He'd asked Bo to dig up what he could about Jake's past. "Did you read it?" He didn't take the file from Bo, and after regarding Beck for a moment longer, Bo dropped it on the bar next to Beck's empty glass.

"Yep." Bo nodded, unashamedly.

"And?"

"Dunno." Bo held up the whiskey bottle again, arching an eyebrow in silent question. Beck shook his head. He'd driven over, so one drink was all he'd allow himself. "Not as good as I'd hoped." Bo put the Jack Daniels back on the shelf behind him and poured Beck an unasked-for soda water instead.

Beck rolled his eyes at the cryptic answer. "Meaning?" Whatever was in that file couldn't be too bad. If it had been, Bo would've contacted him instead of holding on to it until Beck swung by.

"See for yourself." Bo moved away to clean the tables in the front section of the bar and allow Beck some privacy.

Not entirely willingly, Beck took his glass and the manilla folder, and withdrew to a booth in the back. He tapped his fingers on the folder without opening it. Did he want to know? Did he want to find out what Jake was unwilling to tell him? It felt... dishonest, somehow. As if he still didn't trust Jake.

On the other hand, Bo's friend had taken a risk gathering this data, and perhaps if Beck knew what Jake was hiding, he might be able to help him. At the very least, he'd understand better why Jake was so reluctant to talk about his past.

Taking a deep breath and pushing the half-empty glass out of the way, Beck drew the folder closer and opened it.

The top page showed a picture of a younger, lighthearted-looking Jake on a California driver's license dating back to 2005. Beck peered at the details, pausing as he spotted the birth date. *Huh*. Jake was only twelve years his junior.

Dismissing the detail as irrelevant, Beck flipped over the copy of the license, noting as he did so that Jake was also licensed to drive commercial trucks. That didn't come as a surprise; Jake had already told him he'd been transporting cargo in Iraq.

He shook his head; if Jake wasn't so stubbornly refusing to get a social security number, he could've gotten a far better job with one of the freight companies, instead of off-the-books brick-hauling for a sleazy contractor



with no compunction about hiring illegals.

Beck browsed the rest of the sheets, skimming the hurriedly made copies of various print-outs and reports: a police report mentioning an incident seven years ago in a town called Jericho, Kansas, the details sketchy; a couple of outdated speeding tickets, also from Kansas; a few bar brawls and altercations spread out over most of a decade and spanning half the globe.... Beck paused, straightening the loose papers he'd leafed through so far. From what he'd seen, Jake's file didn't look much different from the average grunt's background story—and most of those kids turned out well enough after a few years of army service and discipline.

None of the facts he'd read so far jumped out at him as particularly worrisome, and he wondered again about Bo's cryptic declaration. Until he flipped to the final pages of the file.

Beck grew cold to his core.

He quickly scanned the text of a San Diego police report detailing a murder victim by the name of Freddy Ruiz. Ruiz'd been found dead of a gunshot wound in an apartment that'd been leased in Jake's name. An anonymous phone call to 9-1-1 had reported the body. By the time the police had gotten there, Jake had been nowhere to be found, making him the police's prime suspect for the murder.

His throat dry, Beck fumbled blindly for the glass of soda water, his eyes never leaving the smudged print of the police file. His brow creased in puzzlement. A statement by Ruiz' girlfriend, taken weeks later in Houston, blamed an unnamed criminal gang, and forensic evidence suggested Ruiz hadn't been shot in Jake's apartment. No arrest for the murder had been made so far—the supposed criminal group had never been never discovered—and the SDPD still wanted to talk to Jake.

Beck carefully laid down the last sheet of paper and closed the file, interlacing his fingers and resting his hands on top of it. He stared down at his hands, not seeing them. Could Jake have...? *No*. He shook his head to underscore his assertion. Whatever Jake was, Beck didn't believe he was a murderer.

After another couple minutes had passed, he reopened the file, and re-read the girlfriend's statement. It sounded paranoid, her story something a

conspiracy nut would come up with. Was it a lie? To protect Jake? From— Beck wasn't sure what. Perhaps the girlfriend and Jake had been involved, and Ruiz found out? That type of crime of passion wasn't unheard of, after all.

Yet, if what she said was true, it would explain why Jake was so scared of being found. If he'd gotten involved with bad people, gotten in way over his head, he could be in real fear for his life.

A small voice piped up in Beck's mind, telling him to stop being delusional and face the truth, that he was merely looking for excuses so he wouldn't have to give up Jake. He ignored it.

No, the explanation made sense, didn't it? People had started dying, and Jake had run. Beck could hardly hold it against him. Being wanted for questioning by the police was one thing; being hunted by a crime gang quite another. Anybody sane would've done what Jake had done.

"You read it?" A shadow fell over Beck as Bo slipped into the booth opposite him.

"Yes." Looking around, Beck was startled to see the bar was empty, all the chairs upside down on the tables. Bo must've closed and finished cleaning while Beck was reading. "What did you make of it?"

Bo rubbed a hand across his skull. "Not sure. Either way, going by that," he indicated the copies spread out on the table, "you're better off on your own."

Beck puffed up his cheeks and blew out the breath in a *woosh*. "Yeah...."

"So, what'cha gonna do?" The bartender's expression was filled with concerned empathy.

Beck collected the pages and piled them together, shoving everything back into the file folder. "Nothing."

Bo made an unhappy noise, and Beck lifted his gaze to meet his friend's. "Bo, he's not a bad kid. Whatever this is," he tapped a finger on the manilla cover, "I have to believe that. I can't believe I could be that wrong."

Bo was silent for a moment. "You're in love with the boy." It wasn't a question.

Beck's jaw fell and he gaped at Bo for a heartbeat. Snapping his mouth shut, he lowered his head, finally admitting it. "Yes. I guess I am."

Bo heaved a weary sigh of his own. "In that case, nothin' I say is gonna make a difference, is it?" He got up out of the booth.

Beck collected the file and slid out as well, trudging after Bo to the door. The barman unlocked it to let Beck out. He stopped Beck on the threshold with a hand on his arm.

"For what it's worth, I don't think he's a bad kid, either. Not at heart." He dipped his head at the file under Beck's arm. "Be careful, major. I'd hate to see you get caught in the fall-out." Bo dropped his hand.

Abruptly finding himself choked up—Bo's assessment of Jake meant a lot to him—Beck nodded wordlessly. He heard Bo locking the door behind him as he strode off into the quiet, dark night. Bo was right, of course: one small mistake, or a stroke of bad luck, would be enough to destroy everything Beck had worked for. With the police looking for Jake, simply letting him stay in the apartment he'd leased was dangerous. And all it'd take was a raid by ICE on the site where Jake worked and they'd both be in deep trouble.

His thoughts running a mile a minute, Beck made it to the apartment without noticing how he got there. Pulling into the parking lot, he glanced at the folder he'd placed on the passenger seat. He snatched it up, stuffing it deep into the glove compartment. He and Jake had gotten through the past six months without trouble; nothing indicated they wouldn't make it unscathed through the next six. They would merely have to continue being careful.

Despite his concerns, Beck was glad he learned what was in the file—if Jake ever brought it up, at least he'd be prepared. But for now, for them? None of it mattered. Whatever Jake had done, Beck had gotten to know him as a loyal man, with a good heart, in spite of a bit of a temper and a big dose of easily injured pride. Beck was willing to put his faith in that.

## Chapter 6

Water cascaded over Jake, hot and steam-filled. Hands followed, roving across his body, calluses rough on his skin. He let his head fall back into the spray, closing his eyes as running water and touch conspired to take his breath away. Two weeks had gone by—not quite fourteen days—since the last time Edward had come over. A fortnight was the common interval between visits, and they both should've been used to the length of time. But during Edward's last, too-brief visit, something had shifted between them. This time, those two weeks had seemed an eternity to Jake.

One look at Edward's face as he walked in late on Friday evening and shut the door behind him had been all it took for Jake to know Edward felt the same way. Their eyes had met, holding them both motionless for an endless few seconds. Then they moved at the same instant, coming together in the middle of the living room between sofa and kitchen area, mouths latching on to each other. Before long, Edward was pressing Jake toward the bedroom, almost frogmarching him backward without ever breaking contact. He'd bypassed the bed, aiming straight for the bathroom and the shower stall.

Jake had been shocked into speechlessness by Edward's urgency, but he hadn't minded, not in the least. He figured it had to do with their argument. His blurted admission, that he was with Edward because he wanted to be, had astonished Jake almost as much as it had Edward. Realizing he'd turned Anita's advances down because he honestly didn't want to betray Edward's trust in him, and not out of a weird sense of obligation, had come as an unexpected revelation. Edward's expression, as he slowly processed Jake's words, had been worth it. Although, to be honest, the blatant need Jake had seen in Edward's eyes had also frightened him.

How could he, screw-up extraordinaire, ever live up to that kind of expectation?

Edward pulled Jake's head down out of the shower's stream so he could kiss him again, long and deep, distracting Jake from his recollections, until Jake wrenched free to suck in another much-needed gulp of the warm, moisture-filled air. Edward offered him a small grin, clearly satisfied with the effect he was having on Jake.

Jake smirked in response, his own grin both a promise and a warning: *two can play at that game*. Tilting his head, keeping his gaze locked with Edward's, he carefully slithered to his knees in the tiny cubicle. He came to rest on the smooth tiles in front of Edward, water swirling around him into the drain. Clamping his hands on Edward's hips to hold him steady, Jake felt him quivering under his palms. Jake tilted his head further, nudging Edward sideways into the spray. He flashed another smirk up at him, before lowering his head to close his lips over Edward's cock.

Edward was already half-hard from their kisses, and he quickly swelled further in Jake's mouth. His fingers tangled in Jake's hair, tugging. "Jake...." Edward pulled harder. Confused, Jake peered up at him. Edward gave a small shake. *Not here*.

Yielding to the request, Jake let go and scrambled to his feet. Edward's hand under his elbow supported him until he regained his footing on the slippery tiles. Once he was standing securely, Edward kissed him again.

That was another thing that had changed, Jake mused, as he let his hands roam freely over the firm muscles of Edward's back, his flanks, the ridged line of the scar Edward had never explained. In the past months, their coming together had become so much more about mutual pleasure, and less about physical need or mindless lust, than it used to be.

Jake wasn't complaining about those changes. Edward could work magic with his hands; a simple touch could transform Jake into a quivering, boneless heap. In his turn, Jake'd learned that giving head was as good as getting it—if not better. He'd always assumed it wasn't fun for the girl, although Emily never complained. But once Edward had taught him what to do, Jake had quickly discovered he'd never fully appreciated what Em had gotten out of it. The rush of making someone writhe and buck helplessly beneath you, using nothing but tongue and teeth and lips, didn't compare to anything else.

The water coming from the shower was turning cold. With obvious reluctance, Edward let go of Jake, reaching around behind him so he could turn off the tap. They toweled off quickly, neither willing to linger in the bathroom any longer than absolutely necessary.

Carelessly tossing the towel into the sink after he'd finished with it, Jake

padded into the bedroom. Pulling aside the bed covers, he made to climb up, trusting Edward would grab the condoms and lube.

"Jake."

Something in Edward's tone made Jake's heart begin to hammer in his chest. Edward was standing near the foot of the bed, his posture unsure. Jake's brow creased in uncertainty.

"Jake, I think—," Edward licked his lips, "I want—would like—you on top."

Jake quirked an eyebrow as he tried to picture how that would work. None of the positions his brain came up with were very appealing or practical.

As if Edward knew what Jake was thinking, he let out a quick chuckle and shook his head. "No, I mean I want you to *be* the top. Reverse our roles."

Jake's stomach clenched. "I've never.... I've not done that before."

Edward let out a wry guffaw. "Neither have I," he muttered. "It's never too late to learn, right?"

The look on Edward's face and the doubtful way he held himself, his hard-on almost completely gone, told Jake that this wasn't a sudden whim—not that he'd ever seen Edward given to whims.

No, this was a big deal. Jake had gotten to know the other man well enough to tell.

As if to confirm Jake's conclusion, Edward added, "Please."

Though his throat tightened with terror—what if he hurt Edward?—Jake couldn't deny the plea. He nodded his assent.

A nervous, almost shy, smile broke on Edward's features. It did nothing to alleviate Jake's anxiety, but he pulled himself together. He could do this. As Edward passed him the lube and made himself comfortable on the mattress, he racked his brain, trying to recall how Edward usually went about things. He thought he knew what to do.

Jake quickly discovered that the reversal of roles was more difficult than he'd anticipated. After fumbling around with the lube for a time, and trying to prepare Edward the way Edward always did him, he had to admit he still had no clue if he was doing it right. Edward remained quiet beneath Jake's hands, which wasn't much of a help, either. However, Jake was reluctant to ask. He'd had sex before; he should know what to do, right? But Edward never took this long.

As the minutes progressed, Jake grew more and more discouraged, his heart pounding against his ribs in fear. His first attempt to enter Edward resulted in Edward tensing up beneath him, a clear indication of pain, although he didn't say anything. Jake yanked back with a frustrated growl. Sex with Em, or any of the handful of women he'd slept with after he'd left home, had always been so much easier; at least, he hadn't actually hurt them.

He puffed out a heavy breath and swung his legs over the side of the bed, putting his face in his hands. "I'm sorry, I can't—."

Edward twisted round, until he was kneeling next to Jake, the mattress dipping under their combined weight. He took hold of Jake's wrists, pulling his hands away from his face. "Jake, look at me." Jake raised his head, reluctantly meeting Edward's gaze, dark and intense. "Jake, you can do this."

Jake started shaking his head. "I've no idea what I'm doing. I'll hurt you."

Edward's lips curved briefly into a gentle smile, his expression quickly fading back into earnestness. "I don't expect this to be entirely free of discomfort. First times rarely are."

Jake pulled one of his hands out of Edward's grip and scratched his neck. Edward was right. The first night, at the motel, Edward had been careful, but he'd not been able to keep Jake from experiencing some pain.

"I'm not made of spun sugar," Edward continued. "I won't break."

Jake snorted a laugh, and another quick grin ghosted across Edward's face.

"If you really are uncomfortable, we don't have to...." Edward shook his head as his voice trailed off. "But Jake, believe me, this is what I want

tonight." He put one hand on Jake's shoulder, his palm warm against Jake's skin. Despite the dim light in the bedroom, Jake detected his blush. He couldn't tell if it was the result of embarrassment or desire.

He swallowed. "Why?" There was nothing wrong with the way they did things usually, was there?

Edward dropped his hands in his lap. "I don't know," he admitted. "I've thought about it often, these last couple of weeks. And this, with *you*, it's...." He didn't finish.

How could Jake resist the naked appeal in Edward's words? The entreaty went straight to his heart, making it pound faster. Without fully comprehending the how or why, Jake understood they'd reached another waymark in the relationship they were building. The fact that Edward had enough faith in him to allow him this amount of control made butterflies dance in Jake's insides, even if it also scared the crap out of him.

Jake glanced down to where his fingers, splayed across his thigh, were outlined sharply against the whiter skin of his leg. His palms were sweating. He knew that if he said the word, Edward wouldn't ask him again. Edward had promised as much. But it mattered that he did this. Mattered a great deal. To Edward.

He squared his shoulders, rubbing his palms dry against the sheet. "Okay." He was determined not to let Edward down. Which meant.... "Um.... If you could give me some pointers on what to do...?"

"Of course." Edward touched Jake's back briefly in reassurance.

With Edward's repeated affirmations that he was doing fine, Jake grew more confident, until he no longer felt the need to ask Edward's opinion on every move he made. He quickly learned to read the signs that showed what Edward was experiencing: the way he tensed if Jake was going too fast or pushing too hard; how his fingers curled into the sheets when it felt good; the soft whimpers that escape him when Jake changed the angle to what was clearly the right one....

As his belief in his own abilities increased, so did Jake's own enjoyment, and he began to understand why Edward preferred this position. Growing bolder, he angled his upper body forward, covering Edward's broad frame



with his own, until Edward bucked and moaned beneath him. Jake wormed his hand under Edward's hips and wrapped his fingers around Edward's cock, mimicking what Edward always did to him. "This okay?"

The only answer was a strangled moan that resembled a "Yeah", muffled by the pillow. The cry went straight to the pleasure centers in Jake's brain, sending an unstoppable wave of heat and lust roiling through him.

Jake let go of Edward, needing both arms to brace himself on his hands and knees as his body convulsed helplessly around his sudden climax. It passed, leaving him slumped limply across Edward's back, sobbing for air.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, once he found his voice again. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—."

"Shh." Edward wriggled out from underneath him and nudged Jake until he rolled onto his back.

Shame and guilt made Jake's eyes burn and he squeezed them shut. "I let you down."

"No, you didn't." Edward curled his fingers over Jake's shoulder and squeezed lightly. "You didn't, not at all."

Jake opened a bleary eye to find Edward's face swimming in front of him in the half-dark. "You mean that?"

Edward grinned. "I do." His smile reverted to serious again. "Jake, nobody gets everything right on their first attempt. You did well."

Though he wasn't ready to believe Edward's declaration, Jake accepted it gratefully. Until he remembered he still hadn't finished what he'd started in the shower. Oops. The poor guy must be in agony. He reached for Edward. "I think I should—."

Edward chuckled and pushed him back down with a light tap against his chest. "Later. Rest a bit."

Sinking back onto the pillow, Jake admitted Edward had the right of it: he was tired, his arms and legs heavy. He'd never considered the hard work

that went into being the one calling the shots. *And he never fails to get me off too.* Jake's admiration for Edward increased. He'd do better, next time, he promised himself, before exhausted slumber overtook him.

oOo

Beck sat up straight in the conference room chair, trying to listen to his captains' reports. Outside, a May shower spattered, large raindrops pattering lightly against the window. He found it difficult to keep his focus on the company commanders' words; his thoughts repeatedly floated back to the weekend.

He grinned inwardly. Friday night with Jake had been the worst sex he'd had in a very long time. And yet Beck didn't regret a single second of it. Or perhaps, he amended, he regretted he hadn't recognized quickly enough that Jake needed guidance, but was too proud, or too shy, to ask for it. He should've given it sooner, too, except he hadn't wanted to make Jake feel like he didn't trust him. Still, despite Jake's awkward floundering, he had tried so earnestly. That alone made it worth whatever discomfort Beck had suffered....

"Sir? Major Beck, sir?"

With a start, Beck came back to the conference room, realizing his logistics officer was making a third attempt to get his attention. He frowned in annoyance—this sort of distraction would *not* do!—and cleared his throat, a little abashed. "Yes, Captain?"

The captain gave him an odd look, holding both concern and relief. "Um, I was saying, delivery of the new night vision scopes has been delayed...." He glanced miserably at the operations officer.

The operations officer, a major with fewer years' service than Beck, glared at the captain. "How am I supposed—?"

Beck waved him to silence, and directed his attention toward the captain. "Why?"

The captain shrugged. "Shipment got diverted. Again."

Beck hummed unhappily as he stapled his hands together on the table's surface.

"We'll put in another request, mark it urgent," he decided. "And," he added quickly, to forestall the major, who'd opened his mouth to protest further, "if necessary, we can train using the old scopes."

The major, whose job it was to ensure their troops retained battle readiness, drew his brows together glumly. Both he and Beck knew there wasn't much else they could do. Theater operations overseas took precedence over training exercises back home as far as allocating equipment was concerned, whether the troops overseas actually had a need for the equipment or not.

"Okay, what else?" Beck struggled to give his men his undivided attention as they made the rest of their reports, shoving his memories of Jake to the back of his mind. He wasn't as successful as he'd have liked, and images kept intruding as he listened to his medical officer explaining that the rash of stomach ailments was due to meat gone bad in the mess, and the captain handling maintenance complaining about a lack of spare parts to keep their motor pool up and running. At least, Beck thought wryly as he listened, they hadn't run out of ammo—yet.

oOo

The days strung together as May slowly gave way to June. Edward continued to visit Rochester whenever he could get away without raising eyebrows, and Jake tried to stay entertained during those weekends when he couldn't. He carried on working at one construction site or another, and spent most of his evenings alone at the apartment, not feeling up to much socializing apart from the occasional beer with the guys he worked with. He kept busy tinkering with broken gadgets he bought from pawnshops, reselling them for a higher price after he'd fixed them.

Jake knew the good days wouldn't last; he didn't deserve the peace and quiet. While he refused to think about it or plan for it, he dreaded the day it'd all come crashing down.

Midsummer's Day was drawing near, the days long and sultry, when Jake's worst nightmares came true. Arriving home hot and sweaty after a long day of hard labor, Jake wanted nothing more than a shower and a slice of

the left-over pizza waiting for him in the fridge. As he reached for the outer door into the cooler confines of the shaded building, he met Anita on her way out. She was dressed as if she was going on a date, and he unabashedly looked her up and down, whistling appreciatively as he took in the dress clinging to her curves. She grinned in reply, twirling on her heels for him so her skirt flared. "You like?"

"Yeah. Who's the lucky guy?" After Jake had chased off her ex-boyfriend for good, Anita had invited him to her place for dinner. In return, he'd taken her to a baseball game, with a pair of tickets he'd won through a silly bet with a guy from work. While she'd initially been disappointed that their flirting hadn't lead to anything more, they'd nevertheless developed an easy-going friendship.

"Blind date." She shrugged. "We'll have to see who's the lucky one, him or me."

Jake chuckled, watching her skip down the stairs. Any guy winning her should consider himself lucky. Truth be told, Jake wouldn't have minded at all if their friendship had evolved into more, if he hadn't already been with Edward.

"Oh, Jake?" Anita stopped halfway down the path, turning back to him. Jake paused in shutting the door. Something in the way she looked at him caused his breath to catch in his throat. "A man was here asking about you."

Jake's smile distorted into a grimace. Dread clamped around his heart. He tried not to panic. *Don't go jumping to conclusions*, he reminded himself. It could be a guy from work, after all—although nobody was supposed to have his address. "Who?" His voice was hoarse.

"A cop? Agent Brick?"

"Hicks," Jake snarled, knowing immediately it was the truth. How the hell had the damned man located him? He'd been so careful not to throw up any flags that would put Hicks back on his trail. "What'd you tell him?"

He wasn't entirely successful in keeping the fury out of his voice, and Anita took a step backward. Jake forced himself to take a deep breath and calm down.

"Nothing much." Anita looked apprehensive. "Told him I thought you were at work. Didn't know when you'd be back. He left after that."

A taxi stopped at the sidewalk at the other end of the path. The driver honked impatiently. Anita glanced behind her. "That's my ride. I gotta go." She looked back at Jake. "Are you gonna be all right? I hope I didn't get you into trouble...."

"You didn't." If Hicks had found him, Jake was certainly in deep shit, but it wasn't anything Anita had done. "Don't worry about it, I'll be fine. Go have fun."

With a last, dubious look in his direction, she scurried off and got into the cab. As it drove off, Jake twisted his neck and peered up at the apartment building, sorting his jumbled thoughts into a semblance of order. The urge to simply turn around and take the next bus out of town was strong. He'd done it once; he could do it again.

He thought of the emergency cash hidden in the spaghetti container in the kitchen. It had to be several hundreds of dollars' worth, at least. He could use that money. And he should grab some clothes, swing by Bo to leave a message for Edward—damn the man for refusing to give Jake any contact info!

Shaking himself into motion, Jake took the stairs three at a time. With Hicks knowing where he lived, he had to hurry. The agent could be back any minute; having caught Jake's scent, he wouldn't leave off until he'd caught up—or until Jake disappeared again.

Winded, Jake arrived on his floor, his breath coming in quick bursts. He fumbled with the key, nearly dropping it in his haste to get his things and go. But as soon as he opened the door, he knew there was no need to rush: it was too late.

Hicks was sitting at the table in the kitchen area, watching the door and looking for all the world like he owned the place. His hands rested on a manilla envelope lying on the table in front of him.

"Hello, Jake." Hicks appeared to be alone. For an instant, Jake considered making a run for it. He didn't; he suspected Hicks' goons were nearby and

ready to grab him should he try it.

He sighed, shutting the door behind him, resisting the urge to slam it close. Dammit, he should've listened to his instincts and gotten the hell out of Dodge while he had the chance.

"How'd you find me?"

"Let's say a little birdie told me." Hicks smirked. "Gotta hand it to you, Jake, I thought I'd lost you after you sold your car. Then someone poked the system. Started making inquiries about you. And, lo and behold, here you are." He sketched a wave. "Nice place you got."

Inquiries? Had Edward...? Jake knew better than to ask. Hicks wouldn't give him the answer. He moved on to the next item on the agenda. "What do you want?"

"You know what I want: Ravenwood." Hicks was no longer smiling. "And I need you for that."

Jake snorted. Some things never changed. "Why me?"

"Turns out, they're in need of a pilot. I was thinking you could volunteer to be their man." Hicks smirked again, a grin devoid of humor. "And mine."

Jake huffed an equally humorless laugh. "Got my license revoked," he reminded Hicks bitterly. He couldn't quite keep a hint of smugness from his tone. *Deal with that, you nasty creep.*

To his surprise, Hicks shrugged it off as if it was of no consequence. "That was just an administrative error. Been put to rights already."

Jake blinked in shock, an unexpected burst of excitement racing through him despite finding his nemesis in his kitchen after successfully evading him for months. He could fly again? He crossed his arms in front of his chest. "And what if I don't want to help?" He needed to know what the price of his refusal would be.

Hicks didn't answer. Instead, he pulled a picture from the envelope and slid it across the table. Jake's stomach tightened with fear: it was a photo of Edward, in full dress uniform, his features serious and unsmiling as he

looked straight at the camera. His insignia were clearly visible. A major, Jake saw. He'd never asked Edward what his rank was.

Despite the cold dread sitting like a stone in his belly, he quirked an eyebrow at Hicks. "Who's that?" He hoped he hadn't lost his poker face.

"The man whose apartment you live in. The man you fuck every other weekend." It was Hicks' turn to sniff dismissively. "Don't play the fool with me, Jake. You know better than that."

Jake didn't deny it. It'd be useless to try; Hicks wouldn't have shown his hand if he didn't have hard proof. Jake drew in a harsh breath and scratched his neck. "All right. What do you want?"

"Like I said, I need you to cooperate and help me bring down Ravenwood." Hicks got up. "I'll be nice; I'm gonna let you think on it for the night. I'll have your answer in the morning." He strolled over to the door. "And Jake?" He paused in the doorway. Jake raised his head and met his gaze. "Don't even think about running." Hicks nodded at the photo lying on the table in front of Jake, a silent reprimand. "I suspect Army command will be very interested to hear what their major gets up to during his leave."

Without waiting for a reply, he walked out, shutting the door behind him, abandoning Jake to panic and barely-suppressed fury. Feeling helpless beyond belief, Jake slammed a fist on the table, displacing the envelope Hicks had left behind, the one he'd taken Edward's photo from. His hand ached from the blow. It didn't do much to make him feel better.

Crap, he should've kept moving. He shouldn't have stayed in one place for so long, shouldn't have gotten involved with Edward. Because now, Hicks had them both by the balls and one of them would pay the price for Jake's mistakes.

Nursing his sore hand, Jake plopped onto the nearest chair, finding it hard to breathe. Hicks had him trapped. The Fed could pretend all he wanted that he'd left Jake with a choice; Jake had no doubt that if he refused to cooperate, Hicks would expose Edward's secret. And if Jake just upped and vanished into the underbelly of society again, he'd do the same. No matter what Jake did, Edward's career would be shattered, his life destroyed. And why? Because the guy had been stupid enough to get

involved with Jake Green, the loser who always screwed up.

No. Jake shook his head and scrubbed his palms across his face. No, he wasn't gonna let Hicks destroy another good man's life. No way in hell. Which left him with the only thing he could do: play along, do as Hicks told him. Even if it got him killed....

o0o

Jake didn't sleep well that night. More accurately, he didn't sleep at all. He couldn't stop thinking about how, the last time he'd tangled with Hicks and Ravenwood, his best friend had ended up dead. Memories of Freddy dying, his blood sticky on Jake's hands, kept intruding whenever he was about to drift off. Tired and edgy, he gave up on sleep altogether when the first light of dawn filtered through the curtain.

Yawning, Jake padded into the kitchen to put the coffee on. On the table, Edward's service photo glared up at him accusingly. Jake flung it face down, unable to look at it any longer. Edward was a good guy; he deserved better than to have his life destroyed because of Jake's past mistakes.

As soon as Jake was properly caffeinated and a great deal more alert, he called the number he'd discovered written on the envelope, spitefully hoping he'd at least disturb Hicks's sleep.

"I'll do it," Jake said without preamble as soon as he heard Hicks' alert "Hello?" on the other end of the line.

"Good." Surprisingly, Jake couldn't detect any hint of triumph in Hicks' tone. He'd expected him to gloat; the Fed had been riding his ass to get him to sign up for the job for long enough. "Stay home today. I'll have a package sent over." The line went dead.

Glaring at the phone, Jake gritted his teeth. So Hicks reckoned he had Jake at his beck and call, did he? Pressing the button to get a clear line, he heaved a tired breath: Hicks probably did believe that. And he was right. As long as Hicks held the proof that could expose Edward, he could call all the shots any way he wanted, no matter how much Jake gritted his teeth or cursed the guy inwardly.



He dialed another number, begging off from work by claiming he'd eaten spoiled Chinese food. The lie was merely postponing the inevitable, as he'd already worked out he'd soon have to quit altogether. Yet he was unwilling to tell his bosses until he had to. The pay was shit, but the work hadn't been bad. And he got along with the guys—apart from the foreman, who was a bastard who didn't seem to have much of a liking for Jake. The feeling was mutual, and Jake imagined his hard work was all that had stood between him and him getting his ass fired a long time ago.

After putting the phone down, he wandered back to the kitchen area. Though he wasn't hungry, he set out to make something to eat while he waited for Hicks' promised package to arrive. He was going to need all his wits about him.

He didn't have to wait long. Less than two hours after he'd called Hicks and agreed to his ultimatum, the doorbell rang. A courier service dropped off a heavy brown envelope that held neither a return address nor any other outer markings. Jake slid it open and reached inside to pull out a comb-bound document. Flipping it over so he could read the cover, he felt a twinge of pleasure: it was a report re-certifying him as a pilot, ante-dated to the previous fall, when he should've gone up for his biannual review. It was neither right nor legal, but Jake could care less. The report meant he could fly again. Placing the binder on the table, he shook the envelope to see what else it held.

A small, black cell phone tumbled out, clattering across the table. Jake scrambled to catch it before it fell off the edge. It would almost certainly have shattered if it'd hit the kitchen tiles.

Shaking his head as he imagined having to tell Hicks he broke the phone, he laid it with trembling fingers on top of the re-certification report. Reaching into the envelope again, he pulled out another booklet. It was the cell phone's manual, that someone had helpfully included. A sticker on the front told Jake the cell's number. Browsing through the manual randomly, he discovered his new toy also contained a camera, which the manufacturer claimed would take "high definition photos in low light situations".

Jake tested it out by taking a picture of the manual's cover. The tiny click of the shutter was loud in the silence of the kitchen. He grimaced; it was far from stealthy. Then again, camera phones were becoming a normal

occurrence in Rochester's streets, so hopefully nobody would think twice about him carrying one. He snorted in cheerless amusement, thinking of all the suddenly-outdated spy movies he'd seen over the years. Putting the phone to one side on top of the manual, he focused on the rest of the pile of documents that came out of the envelope in a bundle.

Among the papers, Jake found a brand new passport issued in his name, as well as a copy of his J&R personnel file and a document from the State Department listing all the dates he'd left the country. A yellow Post-it note had been stuck to the photocopy. *They'll look into your background*, the blocky words said, in what Jake assumed was Hicks' handwriting. *Be prepared.*

Jake scoffed. Did Hicks think he was stupid? As if he could forget those years, or the nightmares during which he relived the things he'd seen and done in Afghanistan and Iraq—or the regret he felt when he thought of the half dozen flights he'd made to South America, closing his eyes to the cargo he was transporting until he no longer could ignore what he was doing, and had gotten the hell out.

Hicks did have a point: Ravenwood would dig through his past thoroughly before they consented to hire him, no matter what cover story Hicks had devised. Jake better have damned good answers for whatever awkward questions they might ask. Lord, he hoped Freddy hadn't mentioned his name when he had been setting up the job. If Freddy had, or if Ravenwood had tracked down Anna, or had put two and two together from the San Diego police reports, they'd recognize him instantly, and he'd be dead before he got near the company.

Pouring another cup of coffee, Jake took the files to the living room and settled on the couch, determined to be prepared the best he could. He wished Hicks had included information detailing the actual job that Ravenwood needed a pilot for, but he guessed it was better he didn't know. He wouldn't be able to pull off pretending to be a ruthless mercenary who didn't care what his next job was about if he had even half a clue what business Ravenwood was up to. He knew, based on what he'd seen previously, that he wouldn't want to get involved with them if he had any kind of choice. He could still picture the photos Hicks had shown him in San Diego, when the Fed had tried to enlist his help last time.

As he read on, refreshing his memories of his own past, both the real facts

and the bits of fiction Hicks' people had come up with to account for the missing time he'd been on the run from them, Jake was glad Edward only visited one weekend out of every two or three. He had a strong sense of patriotism, and he wouldn't react well if he discovered Jake was flying cargo for a company like Ravenwood—especially since Jake suspected the job would include more smuggling of weapons to the highest bidder. And he couldn't justify what he was doing by telling Edward the truth, either. At least, not the whole truth. If he told Edward he was working with the Feds, that he'd been drafted specifically to infiltrate Ravenwood, Edward might forgive him for the job itself. But then he'd want to know why Hicks had picked on Jake. And Jake couldn't tell him about the evidence Hicks had on the both of them. Edward would blame it on Jake, and he'd—

No, it was better Edward never find out. With luck, Jake could get the job over and done with before Edward caught wind of it.

Jake didn't need a great deal of time to read through the files. Their contents contained little he didn't remember clearly, as much as he'd rather forget some of it. His Jennings & Rall personnel file did offer one revelation that had Jake blink and sit up: aside from the write-up of what happened in Saffa—pages he skimmed over quickly—the older evaluation reports described him as reliable and hard-working, and one of his supervisors had marked him as a potential candidate for a management traineeship. Jake couldn't help snorting softly as he read those words: Dad would never have believed that.

Finished with the files, he put the last page with the rest on the coffee table. Getting up, he walked over to the window, gazing out across the small park. It wasn't noon yet; the sun was out, the sky blue and the grass a lush green. Jake didn't see any of it; he was seeing dusty, bare countryside baking under the sun, ramshackle buildings, burned out husks that had once been cars or planes. And, as happened every time he dwelled on the past, the image of a young girl, lying so still and pale in the dirt, her clothes soaked with her blood....

Jake ground the heels of his hands in his eyes, willing the memory to go away. He turned back from the window and the peaceful scenery outside, his gaze reflexively going back to pile of copies that contained every dirty detail of his exploits. Damn, he really did screw everything up, didn't he? With Dad, with Chris, with Freddy... and now with Edward.

Wisest thing to do, he thought glumly, would be for him to pack up and abandon the apartment. Not to run—Hicks wouldn't let him escape now he had his claws firmly hooked into him—but to break away from Edward. Regardless of whether he got killed or, by some miracle, Hicks brought Ravenwood down before that happened, Edward would be safe from Jake messing up his life any further. Problem was, he didn't believe Edward would take it in his stride if Jake vanished without a word.

Jake chuckled humorlessly, shuffling the loose pages into a pile and shoving everything back into the envelope. That was an understatement. The more likely scenario was that Edward wouldn't rest until he'd overturned each and every stone to locate Jake; he'd certainly proved persistent during the early days of their relationship. And Jake couldn't afford that; Edward digging into everything would only make things worse.

He considered making it official. He could tell Edward he no longer wanted to see him, maybe pretend he'd met someone else. A girl. Edward would believe that.

Jake quickly dismissed the idea; picturing Edward as he told him the lie brought a sour taste to his mouth. He simply couldn't bear the thought.

He was trapped. Trapped between not wanting to break Edward's heart and not willing to let Hicks ruin the man's career.

Suddenly the room was too small, the air too thin. Grabbing his keys from the desk, Jake hurried out the door, running down the stairs, until he reached the sidewalk outside. There, on the stoop, he sucked in a deep gulp of air, filling his lungs, helpless anger making his eyes sting with tears of frustration.

"Jake? You okay?"

Jake blinked his eyes clear. Anita was coming up the path, her arms filled with groceries. Her pace slowed as she looked him up and down, her smooth brow crinkling with concern. Jake knew he must look a mess: he hadn't slept, hadn't shaved, and he was humming with tension. He fought to keep his voice steady as he wrung out a hoarse, "I'm fine." He cleared his throat and changed the subject, nodding at the bags in Anita's arms. "Need some help with those?"

She offered him one. "Thanks."

"How was your date?" he asked, as he accompanied her back inside and up the stairs. Had it been only last night that he'd been thinking how lucky the guy was that she was meeting, while she showed off her dress?

"Terrible." She laughed self-deprecatingly. "Guy talked my ear off all night, blathering about stocks and bonds and whatnot." She juggled the bag she was still holding to her other arm to dig her keys from her pocket. "Ruined my new dress by spilling red wine all over it."

"Sorry." Jake listened with only half an ear, commiserating absently and hmm'ing in what he hoped was the appropriate places as she detailed the rest of the evening's disasters. Glad as he was for the distraction she was providing, the rest of his mind was busy still devising and discarding various wild plans to get out from under Hicks' heel.

"You sure you okay?" Anita asked a second time. She opened her door and Jake followed her inside. "You seem distracted."

"What? Uh, yeah." He set the bag he was holding down on the counter. "Got a lot on my mind."

Anita turned from where she was placing her own bag down and crossed her arms over her chest, arching an eyebrow. "Does this have anything to do with that cop?"

Jake blinked, before recalling Hicks had talked to her.

"Um, no. It's—." He gestured helplessly. "It's nothing, don't worry about it." Aware he hadn't convinced her in the slightest, he fled back to his own apartment, not giving her a chance to say another word.

The light on the answering machine was blinking. Ignoring the rumble in his stomach that reminded Jake he'd not eaten much for breakfast, he trotted over and hit play. Had Edward called?

It was Hicks' voice that came tinnily from the speaker. "Jake?" After a vain attempt to get Jake to pick up, a note of annoyance entered the Fed's voice and he left a curt message for Jake to call him.

Jake scowled at the machine after the message ended. Part of him wanted to ignore the s-o-b, let him stew for a few hours. But it wouldn't be wise to antagonize Hicks any further. Sighing in defeat, Jake lifted the receiver and punched in Hicks' number. A sudden, sharp *chirp-chirp* coming from the sitting area nearly made him drop the phone. Heart pounding in his throat, Jake sucked in a shuddering breath: the chirping was coming from the cell phone he'd left on the coffee table.

Dropping the landline receiver back in its cradle, he darted over and snatched up the cell, fumbling for a minute to figure out how to answer it. "Hello?"

"Dammit, Jake, where were you?" Hicks didn't bother to introduce himself.

"Out." Jake clenched his jaw to hold in the rest of the retort that shaped itself on his lips. He paced the floor in hopes of finding an outlet for his annoyance.

"Next time you feel the need, take the goddamn cell with you. That's what it's for."

Jake's scowl deepened; he had completely forgotten the device in his haste to get some air. "Sorry. Not used to it."

"Hmph." Hicks scoffed. "Anyway, you obviously got the package. Any questions?"

"Yeah." Jake ran a hand through his hair. "How am I going to get Ravenwood to hire me?"

"We got a guy inside." Hicks fell silent. Muffled voices at the other end of the line told Jake he was talking to someone else, his hand covering the speaker. Jake waited impatiently to hear the rest of Hicks' plan.

"We'll get him to set up a meet," Hicks came back. "The rest'll be up to you."

Jake scoffed. "Not much of a plan." He could sense Hicks' shrug over the line.

"Best we got. I'll be in touch. And Jake?" Hicks paused again.

"Yeah, I know. Take the cell."

Hicks chuckled. "Good boy." Again, he broke the connection without so much as a goodbye.

Jake was tempted to fling the cell phone against the far wall. It took a conscious effort to lightly put it down on the kitchen table instead, on top of Edward's still-face-down service portrait.

Jake couldn't wait for this job to be over.

oOo

The next few days went by in a slow agony of ticking minutes. Having no means to know when Hicks' man on the inside would have a chance to introduce him to Ravenwood, Jake made sure to keep the cell phone near at all times. Anxious not miss the call, he checked every hour he was awake that it was fully charged and switched on. The waiting began to wear on him, and he both dreaded the moment the phone would ring and prayed for it, so at least he could get on with whatever it was he needed to do.

He returned to work, fleeing the apartment, where the walls seemed to be moving in on him and the ceiling bearing down. He hoped the job would provide a distraction from fretting. Neither his heart nor his mind were into it, though, and Friday ended with a shouting match with the foreman, who threw down Jake's pay and snapped for him to not bother showing up on Monday.

Picking up the bills, Jake shrugged off Hank's concerned inquiries about whether he'd be okay. Maybe this was for the best. At least it would spare him from having to come up with a reason for quitting once Hicks' scheme got off the ground and he'd have to leave anyway.

Not in the mood for the usual Friday after-work beer—and at least having an excuse to call off, now he'd been fired—he went home. Edward wasn't scheduled to come down. While Jake longed to see him, he was glad he'd be on his own. He didn't think he'd be able to fool Edward and pretend everything was all right. He was far too strung out and jumpy to play the part of happy lover.

Saturday afternoon, the long-awaited call came. In a way, it was a relief when the cell phone emitted its high-pitched *chirp*. Jake dropped the transistor he was fiddling with, and snatched up the small device. "Yeah?"

"You'll be meeting Ravenwood's squad leader tonight." Hicks rattled off the order without any preamble.

"Tonight?" Jake squeaked, breath catching. Crap. He was glad the waiting was over, but he'd have appreciated a longer heads-up. *Thank God Edward's not here*. At least he didn't need to make up an excuse for wanting to go out on his own.

"Tonight," Hicks confirmed. "My inside guy says he told them he knows a guy who knows a guy."

Jake snorted back a humorless laugh. "Very cloak and dagger, isn't it?" The sarcasm failed to stave off a nervous clenching in his insides. Would Ravenwood believe him? Or were they on to him already and the meet was just a ploy to thumb their noses at Hicks?

Would he still be alive in the morning?

"Jake?" Hicks' voice held a note of warning. "They'll be suspicious. I know for a fact they've already lifted your corporate dossier with Jennings & Rall—you know they're a subsidiary, right?"

"Yeah, I know." Jake rubbed the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to will away the fear that made his jaw muscles tighten until his teeth hurt. "Just tell me when and where."

The rustle of pages came over the phone as Hicks went through his notes. "The man you'll be meeting is John Goetz. He's a hard-ass, brought up on assault charges a number of times, but nothing ever stuck." Hicks gave Jake the address of a bar in the seedier part of Rochester, and a time. "Don't mess this up, Jake." As usual, he hung up without waiting for a reply.

Jake switched off the cell phone and dropped it onto the kitchen table. He plopped heavily into one of the chairs, wiping his hands across his face. He noticed he was shaking. This was it; no way back. He glanced over at the clock, calculating how many hours he had left until he had to go out



and meet with Ravenwood.

He tried hard not to think about Freddy.

## Chapter 7

The bar where Jake was supposed to meet Ravenwood was as squalid as the littered alley leading to its entrance. Skirting an overturned trash can and avoiding greasy hamburger wrappers and rotten fruit, Jake carefully navigated his way toward the door, which was marked by a flickering neon sign. The smell of stale beer, old sweat and cigarette smoke assaulted him as soon as he pulled the door open, replacing the reek of the rubbish in the alley. The new stench didn't help with the mild nausea resting in the pit of his stomach. Walking in and letting the door fall shut behind him, he swallowed hard.

If possible, the gloom inside was even thicker than out. Waiting for his eyes to adjust, he fought the urge to turn and run. The place reminded him of bars Jonah had done business in, and the patrons, sporting leather and faded jeans, were the same kind of men. A couple of them, nearest the door, shot him suspicious looks, their low murmur falling silent at his presence. Another, dirty hair brushing his shoulders, licked his lips as his gaze raked Jake up and down. Jake ignored them, firmly reminding himself why he was doing this: for Edward's sake. Thinking of Edward, and how he had put his faith in Jake more than anyone else, calmed him a little. Mentally squaring his shoulders, Jake began to work a path through the Saturday night crowd of sweaty bodies packed close together.

In spite of the sparse lighting in the bar, Jake spotted the Ravenwood group easily. They were in a booth at the far end. As per Hicks's briefing, there were three of them. They were dressed similarly to the other low-lives in the bar—and still managed to stand out like a sore thumb. Maybe it was the way they sat isolated, a small circle of space surrounding their booth as the other customers instinctively avoided getting too close to them. Or perhaps it was the threatening air they exuded, daring anyone to challenge them. One of the Ravenwood guys gave Jake a hard-eyed stare, before bending forward to whisper something to the man across from him. The other, dark-haired and broad-shouldered, nodded in acknowledgement, though he didn't look up. Jake supposed they'd recognized him from his J&R mug shot the instant he'd walked into the bar.

Trying not to let the fear uncoil inside and give him away, Jake made a beeline for the booth. "Goetz?"

The dark-haired guy slowly raised his head at Jake's question. A short, neat beard covered a weak chin, but there was nothing weak in the way his cold blue eyes traveled over Jake. Jake suppressed another quiver of fear. Those kinds of eyes didn't miss much. He'd never felt more exposed in his life; it was as if the man could see right into his soul, and would know the real reason Jake was there.

"Jake Green." Goetz flicked a hand at one of the men sitting opposite him, a short guy with a crewcut. The man slid from the booth, making room and silently indicating Jake was supposed to take his place. He slipped back in after Jake and, again, Jake had to struggle not to show his fear; he was effectively trapped between Crewcut and his buddy, a muscular blond. Neither of Goetz's companions introduced themselves as they sandwiched Jake, and Goetz didn't bother with introductions either. Nor did they offer him a drink from the bottle of scotch they were sharing between them. Jake didn't care; he wasn't here to socialize.

Nobody spoke for a while. Around them, the buzz of men talking picked up again. Goetz continued to scrutinize Jake with that unreadable stare, until Jake had to fight not to fidget where he sat. He recognized it as a tactic to unnerve him. The knowledge didn't stop it from working as intended. He cleared his throat; time to show some initiative and let them know he wasn't so easily cowed. "I hear you're looking for a pilot?"

Goetz sniffed. "Lotsa people hearing lots of things." He poured a fresh shot from the bottle and contemplated his glass. Jake was acutely aware of the two hard bodies on either side of him, and the fact that he couldn't escape.

"But yeah, might be we got a job for an experienced pilot." Goetz threw back the whiskey and resumed staring at Jake.

Ignoring the elbows jabbing in his ribs, Jake smirked cockily at Goetz and thumbed his own chest. "ATP-certified, 1,600 verified hours." He wriggled until he had enough space to lean forward and plant his elbows on the table. "Single seater or passenger jet, don't matter. If it's got wings, I can fly it."

Goetz's expression didn't change. "You drove a rig for J&R for a while." It wasn't a question.

"Yep. Needed a job." Jake wasn't going to divulge any further details than strictly necessary. Would be safer, he'd concluded, as he'd gotten on the bus to the rendezvous. The less he told them, the less chance they'd catch him in a lie or a half-truth.

"Why'd you quit?"

Jake hesitated, his smirk melting as the memory of that poor girl flashed through his mind. "There was... an incident." The blond on Jake's right scoffed at his choice of words.

"And?" Goetz prompted, ignoring the blond's snort.

Jake raised his shoulders in another shrug. "Guess I didn't have the stomach for killing innocent villagers."

This time, both of Goetz's men reacted, barking derisive laughs. Goetz gestured them to silence and they quickly curbed their amusement. It spoke of the man's influence over his underlings, corroborating Jake's first impression: Goetz was one dangerous sonofabitch.

Goetz pondered him silently for a minute, toying one-handedly with a cardboard coaster. "Thanks for coming by," he shook his head, "but you're not the guy we need." Beside Jake, Crewcut started to slide from the booth to let him out.

Jake's heart sped up in his chest as panic threatened to overwhelm him. He had a sudden vision of Hicks gleefully presenting whatever evidence he had to Edward's superiors. "Wait!"

Goetz quirked an eyebrow, and Crewcut stopped moving.

"That was then, okay?" Jake wrestled his alarm under control and racked his brain. What he could say to Goetz that'd convince him to give Jake the job? Maybe he should've lied about Saffa? No, Jake instantly answered his own question. The fact that he'd protested the company's decision to bury the whole sordid affair with no repercussions at all was in his file. Goetz would be aware what Jake's feelings about Saffa were; he'd have known immediately if Jake had lied.

"Since I've been back state-side," Jake succeeded in meeting Goetz's stare head-on, "I've not had much luck finding work." Goetz didn't stop him from talking. Encouraged, Jake went on, "Employers don't like holes in a resume. Especially when they plan to let you play with their expensive toys." He recalled the interview at Saber Airlines: the guy had given the impression he really liked Jake for the job, until Iraq had come up.

"So?" Goetz dropped the coaster. He didn't sound convinced yet.

"So, I learned my lesson." Jake scratched his neck. "All I'm interested in is the money. I don't care what the job is."

"Hm." Goetz considered Jake quietly. Jake's only hope was that they were desperate enough to give him a second chance. After all, how many out-of-work pilots with no conscience did they have to choose from? The mere fact that Goetz and his men were interviewing him in a bar, dressed in civvies, told Jake that what they were planning was an off-the-book job, an operation on the side that Ravenwood's higher-ups didn't want to know about.

Goetz's next words confirmed Jake's speculations were correct. "Ever done any low altitude night flying?"

Inwardly, Jake breathed a small sigh of relief. He hadn't bungled it completely yet. Outwardly, he sniffed, thinking it was time he sounded less desperate. "Of course." There was no need to elaborate; Goetz had known the answer before he'd asked the question. And while Jake preferred not to dwell on the South American jobs he'd done, he was also aware it was mark in his favor in Goetz's opinion.

"Hm." Goetz's tone was neutral and Jake still had no clue what was going on behind those pale eyes. "Thanks for dropping by, Jake. We've got your cell number, we'll be in touch."

Jake blinked. Did that mean they were going to hire him? "So I've got—?"

"I said: we'll be in touch."

The guy next to Jake was climbing to his feet, and Jake thought it best not to press his luck any further. He slipped from the bench and walked away without another word.

Outside, he breathed deeply from the loathsome alley air, hands shaking and heart thudding against his ribs. Retracing his steps to the main road and the bus home, he sent up a silent prayer. *God, let me not have mucked that up.*

o0o

Two days later, Jake was steering a rented Taurus off I-90, following the signs pointing toward Cuyahoga County Airport in Ohio. After leaving Goetz and his men, he'd suffered an unpleasant call with Hicks. The Fed had wanted an update, repeating his threats to expose Edward—as if he believed Jake wasn't trying hard enough. The rest of the weekend, Jake had spent fretting that Goetz would find another wretched fool with a pilot's license.

Monday at noon, his cell phone rang. Jake picked it up on the second ring, expecting it to be Hicks, to increase the pressure. Instead, it had been Goetz's gruff voice on the other end of the line, telling Jake they were willing to offer him a trial run. He'd proceeded to give Jake detailed instructions. "Meet us at Cuyahoga Airfield, near Cleveland. Hangar 6, Tuesday, 11 pm. Pack a toothbrush."

Jake had been so relieved he hadn't screwed up the interview, he'd almost forgotten he was supposed to be playing a despairing pilot-for-hire. Goetz had been ready to hang up before he remembered. "How much...?"

Goetz had sighed heavily. "Fifteen K. Half up front, half after the job's done." He'd broken the connection without giving Jake the chance to say anything else.

Hitting the blinker for the next turn, Jake glanced in the rear mirror. The headlights that had been a constant presence since he'd picked up the car at the rental agency in Rochester five hours ago followed him around the bend. He couldn't blame Hicks for wanting to keep an eye on him—in a way, it was reassuring—but he sure hoped those guys had enough sense not to follow him into the airport.

At the next corner, where Jake made the turn into the airfield's access road, the pursuing car continued straight. Jake let out a breath, shaking his head at himself. Of course Hicks wouldn't send complete fools.

He could've let Jake borrow a car, though. It didn't seem fair that Jake had been forced to raid the emergency fund in the spaghetti tin to rent the Taurus, while Hicks could afford an agency escort to trail him the entire route to Ohio. The thought grated on Jake; he didn't expect Hicks to let him keep the fifteen thousand Goetz had promised—not that Jake wanted it; it was blood money—but Jake doubted Hicks would reimburse him for his expenses.

The county airport was largely abandoned at this time of night. In the gloom at the edge of the security floodlights, Jake caught a glimpse of several small twin-engine props tethered on the tarmac parking areas. He slowed as he drove down the row of buildings and parking spaces that lined this side of the airport, searching for the hangar where he was supposed to meet Goetz.

It did feel good to drive again, instead of having to depend on public transport. They'd asked him for an ID at the rental agency counter, and Jake had been pathetically happy he could present something with his real name on it. Although, he chuckled ruefully as he spied hangar 6, a credit card would've been useful too; it had taken a good deal of arguing to get the clerk to accept cash as payment.

He pulled up in front of hangar 6. It hadn't been so hard to find, after all: it was the only building showing lights. Parking the Taurus next to an SUV with Ravenwood markings, he got out.

"Hey! You!"

Someone came running from the direction of the hangar even as Jake slammed the car door shut and hit the lock button on the key chain. Palming the key, he stuffed his hands into his pockets, waiting for the other man to reach him.

"Who're you?" The guy was a few inches shorter than Jake, with a military buzz cut. A side arm dangled from his hip, and he kept his hand close to the butt of the weapon as he spoke. On his chest, Jake made out the familiar red patch with a black raven. "You can't park here."

Jake held back the irritated comment burning on the tip of his tongue. Experience had taught him that Ravenwood were a suspicious lot. Likely

the reason Hicks had never gotten close enough to gather the proof needed take them out of business. "I'm the new pilot."

"Oh." The guy relaxed slightly, though his hand remained near his gun. "Name?"

"Jake Green."

As Jake offered his name, the security guard grew friendlier. Goetz must've announced he'd be coming.

"Randy Payton. Come on." Payton spun on his heel. "I'll take you to Goetz."

Preceding Jake into the building through a small side door, Payton reassured the other guard, who was keeping watch inside the hangar, that Jake was okay. As they passed the planes standing side by side in the hangar, lit by the overheads, Jake automatically inventoried Ravenwood's tiny fleet: a new Challenger 604, with the J&R corporate logo painted on its hull, and an older Lear 36A, unmarked except for its tail number. In spite the danger of walking into the lion's den, Jake's pulse quickened at the idea he'd soon be flying one of those. It had been so long....

Sudden doubt struck: would he still know how? That was what the biannual review was for, and he'd missed it—.

*Don't be an idiot*, he told himself as soon as the fear made itself known. Flying was in his blood; he'd remember what to do if he lived to be as old as Grandpa when he'd died. Assuming he'd make it that far. Giving himself a mental shake, Jake yanked his attention back to the present.

Payton led him into an office at the rear of the building. As soon as they stepped across the threshold, someone called out jovially, "Jake!" The greeting came from Goetz, and its unexpected cheerfulness put Jake on instant alert, all thought of the planes and taking them up forgotten. He met Goetz's gaze warily. From the corner of his eye, he saw Payton disappearing, the underling having done his duty. The door shut behind him. Again, Jake was trapped.

Goetz's grin seemed friendly enough, though Jake noticed the smile didn't reach his eyes. They were as cold as they had been back at the bar. "You



remember Sloan, don't you?" Goetz indicated the other man in the room. Jake recognized him as the blond from the meeting in Rochester.

Sloan grunted something unintelligible that might've been a greeting.

"Of course." Jake hadn't learned the guy's name; he sure as hell was familiar with the man's elbows poking into his ribs.

Introductions done, Goetz turned to business. "Let's get a move on." He snatched a sheet of paper from a nearby desk. "This is the flight plan."

Jake peered down at the schedule. *Destination: Santiago de Cali International, Colombia*. His eyes widened in surprise; he'd expected something more obscure, a backwoods airstrip in the jungle, without any officials snooping around. "This—?"

"What? Not good enough for ya?" Goetz quirked a cynical eyebrow.

"No, it's fine. Just—." He broke off; he couldn't give voice to his suspicions.

Goetz understood anyway. "What, you thought...?" He snorted a laugh and exchanged an amused look with Sloan. "Jake, Jake. What were you thinking? Ravenwood is a legitimate outfit, and we have legitimate dealings with the Colombian government."

"Sure." Jake had no doubt that Goetz spoke the truth: what better way to hide their dirty dealings than under a layer of legitimacy? It had made Jonah successful, once he'd learned the lesson the hard way in Lansing, when Jake was a teenager.

"Is that a problem?" While Goetz sounded genuinely concerned, Jake didn't buy into the act for an instant. A test; it had to be a test.

"Nope." Jake gave another shake, folding the flight plan double. "My job's to get your plane from A to B, quickly and without any trouble. Anything else? Not my business."

"That's my boy." Goetz flung a cordial arm across Jake's shoulder. Test or no test, the man's behavior was so markedly different from the way he'd treated Jake in the bar that it unnerved him. It was probably a new tactic,

one designed to make him feel like he was one of the boys and make him let his guard down. Jake made a mental note to be very, very careful over the next few hours.

"Good, now that we've got that settled, if you turn that in," Goetz pinpointed the page Jake was holding, "I'll have Sloan make sure the plane's ready. We're taking the Lear."

Jake cast a dubious glance at Sloan. The Lear would officially require a flight crew of two. "You're the co-pilot?" The guy looked formidable enough for a mercenary, muscles bunching under his shirt, and he had a mean elbow, but Jake didn't trust him to know one end of a plane from the other. "Um, if it's all the same to you, I'll do my own inspection." He was less worried about regulations—that was as much Ravenwood's problem as it was his. But he wasn't prepared to crash and get himself killed because the aircraft was defective.

Sloan shot him an offended glower, while Goetz snorted good-naturedly. "You're filling me with confidence, Jake."

It was Jake's turn to scoff lightly. "One other thing." He'd remembered he needed to keep up the ruse of being a mercenary pilot. "My money?"

Some of Goetz's good cheer left him and he glowered at Jake. "Told ya: half in the plane before take off, the rest when we return. As agreed. A'ight?" The way he asked the question brooked no argument, and Jake judged it wisest to nod without further comment.

Goetz signaled Sloan. "Have the Lear rolled out of the hangar. I'll tell our passengers to get ready."

Passengers?

Before Jake could ask, Goetz carried on, "You're taking five today. Two regional Ravenwood managers, plus me, Sloan and Payton. The three of us will be handling security."

"No cargo?"

"No cargo." Goetz strode off, presumably to fetch the executives Jake was hired to take to Santiago de Cali.

Jake furrowed his brow as he stared after Goetz's back. If there was no cargo, illicit or otherwise, what the hell was he going to tell Hicks?

oOo

The total trip, one of the most unremarkable Jake had ever undertaken, took less than thirty hours. True to the flight plan, he'd carried the two executives to Santiago de Cali, setting the Lear down early in the morning. An official-looking limousine had been waiting to whisk them away, along with Goetz and Sloan, leaving it to Jake and Payton to see to the formalities and have the jet refueled. After flying all night, Jake would have liked to get some sleep during the day, but he discovered another drawback of serving two masters: there was no chance for anything more than a quick nap. The limousine returned just after sunset; an hour after that, Jake had them wheels-up, nose pointing north, returning to the States and landing them safely at Cuyahoga airport another five hours of quiet flying later.

Following the suspense of the past week, it was all very anticlimactic. At least he'd proved he hadn't forgotten how to work a plane, Jake grumbled bitterly to himself, following Goetz into the hangar's office. It took an effort not to let his feet drag as he walked and he suppressed a yawn; he hadn't slept much since Hicks had ambushed him in his kitchen and the lack of rest was starting to catch up with him.

"So," Goetz sat down in the chair behind the desk, "you like working for Ravenwood?"

Maintaining his wariness of the man's amiability, Jake rolled a shoulder. Job like this would've actually been a good gig to have, if not for the fact it was for Ravenwood, the outfit which had murdered Freddy, and against which he was supposed to find evidence while Edward's career hung in the balance. "Piece of cake."

Goetz guffawed a laugh and pulled open a drawer, rummaging through its contents. Jake decided to throw him a piece of bait. "I've got no clue why you needed me. That old Lear's like driving a bus; anyone who can handle a plane could manage her." Not everyone would've been able to manage her single-handedly, though; as he'd expected, Sloan had made himself scarce the instant Jake started the engines.

"I take it you haven't earned this, then?" Goetz smirked, holding up a thick envelope that Jake surmised contained the rest of his payment. He had an envelope similar to the one Goetz held stashed in the inner pocket of his jacket. As promised, the Ravenwood leader had given it to him on boarding the plane.

"Like hell I have." Jake held out his hand. "Deal's a deal."

Goetz's smirk faded as he considered Jake, the coldness creeping back in to his expression. "Glad you feel that way." He slapped the envelope into Jake's open palm. "Get your ass outta here. We'll know where to find you if we need you."

Knowing better than to argue and risk raising suspicion by trying to push for a more definitive answer, Jake stuffed the envelope into his pocket alongside its twin. He nodded his thanks and ambled out as if all was right in his world.

o0o

The road to Rochester was endless. Several times Jake caught himself just as his eyelids were falling shut. He stopped for coffee twice, but the caffeine didn't sustain him long. At last he reached home, thankfully without crashing the Taurus or wrapping the car around a tree. Leaving his jacket on a kitchen chair, he stumbled straight into the bedroom, not bothering to take off his boots, and fell face-down onto the mattress, too tired to drag up a blanket. Exhausted from the strain he'd been under over the past week, and with the adrenaline of working with Ravenwood and being around Goetz fading from his blood, Jake was out before his head had hit the pillow.

Rhythmic banging gradually filtered into Jake's sleep-befuddled brain, as if someone was beating a heavy drum. The noise slowly brought him back to consciousness. He raised his head a fraction, wincing at the stiffness that had settled into his neck from the awkward position he'd fallen asleep in, and peered blearily at the alarm clock. The digits told him it was shortly after eleven in the morning, which meant he'd gotten only a handful of hours of shuteye.

"G'way." He dropped his head wearily, his plea muffled by the pillow,

hoping whoever was pounding on the door would give up and leave if they didn't get any response. Five minutes of intermittent, relentless knocking later, it dawned on him that the other person was more patient than he was.

Cursing under his breath, Jake dragged himself from the bed, tottering drunkenly toward the door. Peering through the peephole didn't make him feel any better. "Hicks." He unlocked the door and stumbled into the kitchen area to make coffee. He was going to need it.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Hicks stormed in, slamming the door behind him.

"Sleeping." Jake rubbed at his eyes, which were stinging with fatigue, and yawned.

"Why didn't you pick up the goddamn phone?"

"What phone?" Jake's gaze landed on his jacket, still hanging where he'd discarded it on the chair. Gradually, Hicks' meaning filtered through his addled brain. "Oh," he muttered sheepishly. "That phone." He snatched up the jacket, digging through its various pockets until he located the cellphone Hicks had provided. He glanced at the display. Fifteen missed calls? Laughing ruefully, he held up the phone so Hicks could see the notification. "These all yours?"

"Yes." Hicks still looked furious, his pale, thin face flushed red with anger. "I've been trying to reach you all morning."

"Sorry." Jake managed to put a measure of regret into his tone. "I've been up for—" He tried to calculate how long it had been since he'd last slept, not counting the midday catnap in Santiago de Cali, snatched while curled up in the pilot's seat. His brain proved incapable of doing the simple sum. "—God knows how many hours."

Hicks' expression didn't soften. "I'd have imagined you'd want to debrief soon's you got away." A slight smirk played around his lips. "Get your boyfriend off the hook."

The sobering reminder instantly brought Jake fully awake. He'd been too exhausted to think beyond getting some sleep, but even if he hadn't—he

had nothing to report to Hicks. Nothing of use, at least. He busied himself finding a clean mug in one of the cupboards. "Got nothing to tell."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hicks rounded the kitchen table and pushed into Jake's personal space.

Jake refrained from taking a step back. He met Hicks' sharp-eyed gaze. "Don't—." He swallowed the bile that threatened to rise. What could he say to convince Hicks not to reveal Edward's secret? "It's not my fault."

Hicks scanned his features closely. "Not your fault, what?" He threw up his hands in disgust as the answer dawned on him. "Come on, Jake. Don't tell me you didn't get any evidence! Do you think I'm an idiot?"

Jake poured a mug of the coffee that had now finished brewing. He decided against adding milk—he needed the coffee every bit as strong as could be—but put in a spoonful of sugar for energy, using the time to try and figure out how to tell Hicks the truth without sending the Fed straight off to Edward's superiors.

"Well?" Hicks demanded impatiently. "I asked you a question."

"It was a legit flight, okay?" Jake swung round to confront Hicks. "No drugs, no weapons, no Stingers, nothing."

"What?" Hicks blinked at him, taken aback by Jake's outburst.

Jake shrugged wearily, the flash of anger leaving him more tired than before. He plopped down heavily on the nearest chair, setting the mug on the table in front of him. "I took a couple of brass in suits to a business meeting in Colombia. No cargo whatsoever, clandestine or otherwise."

"Did they pay you?"

Jake sipped from the coffee, startled by Hicks' change of subject. "Yeah."

"How much?" Hicks grabbed the coffee pot and found a clean cup for himself.

Jake watched the agent over the rim of his own mug, frowning at Hicks. "Fifteen grand."

Hicks whistled through his teeth. "For driving a bus? On a legit flight?"

Jake scowled at Hicks' choice of words, an echo of his own. "A Lear jet, actually. But basically, yes." He shrugged as Hicks gave him another look. It was too much; he'd thought the same thing. But it was what it was.

Hicks dumped a couple of spoonfuls of sugar into his mug and peered around. "Got any milk?"

Jake pointed with his chin. "In the fridge."

A minute later, Hicks was seated across from Jake. He looked pensive as he stirred his coffee. "Are you absolutely sure the flight was legit?"

"Yes." Jake got up to refresh his cup. "Told you: there was nothing. I went over the entire craft while they were gone. Every nook and cranny and secret compartment." He'd grabbed the opportunity after Payton fell asleep in one of the leather seats in the main cabin, Payton's loud snoring accompanying him as he searched the plane top to bottom for anything that didn't belong. "So unless you think they hid a pair of Stingers in their briefcases...." He let his voice trail off.

"There's no need for sarcasm." Hicks scowled. "I'm just trying to figure things out. Why'd they hire you?"

Jake shrugged. "Damned if I know." He peered over at Hicks. "Could've been a test."

Hicks mulled over Jake's suggestion for a moment. "Could be you're right. Did you pass?"

Another wary shrug. "I don't know." Jake set his mug down and rubbed his neck. "Maybe. Just don't...." He stopped. He didn't want to beg. Dropping his hands to his sides, he lifted his head to look at Hicks. To his surprise, the Fed was more thoughtful than angry.

"Let's give it another few days." Hicks pushed back his chair, scraping it noisily across the tiles. "See if they contact you again."

"Okay." The prospect didn't cheer Jake, but he reckoned it was a hell of a

lot better than the alternative.

Leaving his coffee unfinished, Hicks strode toward the door. He paused on the threshold. "Jake?"

Jake glanced up.

"Keep me posted."

"Will do." If Ravenwood called him for another job, he'd need Hicks as much as Hicks needed him.

After Hicks left, Jake washed out the coffee mugs and then grabbed his jacket, planning to hang it in its proper place on the peg near the door. It was oddly heavy in his hands, and he remembered the wads of cash he'd stashed in the inside pocket. Surprisingly, Hicks hadn't mentioned the money again after Jake had told him how much Goetz had paid him. Jake had expected him to demand he turn it over. Jake doubted Hicks had forgotten about it; not much passed him by.

Pulling the bills out the envelopes and shoving them together in a single pile, Jake riffled through them. All twenties and fifties. It was come by as honest as could be, but Jake still didn't want it: it had belonged to Ravenwood, and that alone made it dirty.

Deciding he'd worry what to do with it later, after he'd slept a couple more hours, he reached for the spaghetti tin on the top shelf. He stuffed the cash into it, before slogging toward the bedroom.



## Chapter 8

The landing gear settled in the belly of the Lear with a *thunk* that quivered through the airplane's fuselage. Below, the runway lights of Cuyahoga airport dwindled to tiny pinpoints until they faded out altogether in the distance. Jake banked sharply to set a course south, leaving Cleveland a glowing orange sphere on the western horizon.

Goetz had finally called Jake for a new job on a bright Tuesday in July, almost two weeks after his trial run with Ravenwood. Jake had spent the intervening days being harassed by Hicks and second-guessing the wisdom of not sharing his problems with Edward when he had the chance.

Edward had figured out there was something going on, despite Jake's efforts to hide it, and Jake had briefly been tempted to confide in him: to tell him about Hicks and how the agent was holding Edward's career over Jake's head to force his cooperation. But the specter of the hurt and disappointment that would undoubtedly be Jake's due once Edward learned his carefully protected secret life was in danger of being exposed because of Jake's mistakes had held him back. And if he told Edward about Hicks, he'd have had to tell him about all his screw-ups, too: Freddy and San Diego, and the girl in Iraq....

Jake had shut down the conversation when Edward asked.

Maybe, he hoped, sparing a thought for the cell phone in his pocket as he checked the Lear's altimeter again, he'd get the proof Hicks required during this trip, and then Hicks would leave him alone—and he'd never have to tell Edward a thing.

The Lear reached cruising altitude, and Jake informed his passengers they were free to take off their seat belts and move around if they wanted; the weather forecast was clear all the way, the tropical storm forming over the Atlantic ocean posing no threat to their flightpath, and their ETA in Santiago de Cali was seven in the morning.

After he'd switched off the intercom and was alone with his thoughts, he let his gaze rove over the instrument panel, directing only half his attention to the various meters and dials. He trusted to his instincts and experience to alert him if something wasn't right, focusing his mind instead on the

real job he was supposed to do. On the surface, this trip was identical to the last one—a pair of executives, along with their security detail, for passengers, with a flight plan to a destination in for Colombia—but Jake was wasn't fooled: in the thirty minutes he'd had to prepare the plane, he'd noticed the differences.

To begin with, Goetz had been nothing like the amiable guy Jake had dealt with last time. He'd been tense and curt, impatiently barking at Jake to get the plane up and running while Jake was still climbing out of his car, and then refusing to let Jake run the pre-flight checks personally, telling him bluntly it had been taken care of and demanding he get his ass into the pilot's seat and the plane in the air as soon as possible. Jake had attempted to put his foot down—no way was he going to take up a plane he hadn't looked over himself—but Goetz hadn't backed down until one of the suits overruled him. Even after that, he'd dogged Jake's heels during the preparations, his presence a silent menace that made sure Jake didn't dawdle.

Secondly, they were carrying cargo. Jake hadn't been around to see if any had been loaded but, finding the external lockers bolted shut, he'd asked. Goetz had nearly bitten his head off, snarling it was none of his business. Jake had needed to explain three times that he needed to know so he could calculate their take-off weight. At last, Goetz had unwillingly admitted the lockers were filled to their load capacity, though he'd point-blank refused to allow Jake to inspect the cargo and confirm it was secured properly.

Reluctantly, Jake had given in, praying silently Goetz was right, that Sloan knew what what he'd been doing when he'd overseen the loading. Fortunately, it seemed Sloan did know his business: while the Lear was noticeably more sluggish to respond to Jake's touch than he remembered, she still handled well.

He wished he'd had a chance to see the actual cargo, or take a peek at the loading bill. Knowing they were transporting a heavy load of an undetermined nature wouldn't be enough to satisfy Hicks. The Fed had made it clear that he wanted hard, irrefutable proof: copies of manifests, photographs, eyewitness statements. He hoped he'd have an opportunity during the unloading in Colombia, perhaps to take some photos—.

"Jake."

Goetz's voice startled Jake from his plans. He'd been so deep in thought, he hadn't heard the cockpit door open or noticed Goetz sticking his head in. He twisted in his chair so he could meet the other man's gaze. "Yeah?"

Goetz gave him a hard stare. "Change of plans."

Jake's heart started beating faster in his chest. "Why?"

Goetz scowled at the question. He stepped further into the cockpit, taking a seat in the empty co-pilot's chair. "We're making a detour. Quick stop en route to our official destination. Here." He shoved a sheet of paper at Jake. In the low light the instruments emitted, Jake made out a pair of coordinates, scribbled in a sloppy handwriting. Looked to be a location north of Santiago de Cali. Also in Colombian territory, he reckoned, though he couldn't be sure without consulting a map. Either way, it shouldn't add a great deal of time to the trip.

"What's there?" He took the sheet from Goetz and turned back to the instrument panel. He'd have to calculate a new route.

"A place to land." Again Goetz sidestepped Jake's question. "It's got a dirt strip. They're expecting us." He got up from the chair. "And Jake? We need to have nobody none the wiser about this detour."

Jake scoffed. Easier said than done, especially in the dark. "Could get tricky," he warned. A quick mental calculation had told him the sun would still be below the horizon as they approached the landing site, although it shouldn't be full dark any longer. Thank God it was going to be a clear day; with luck, it'd light enough he could pull off landing visually. And the Lear was equipped with the latest navigation aids if he should have to bring the plane down on the instruments. Biggest problem was gonna be avoiding ATC tracking them.

Goetz clamped a hand on Jake's shoulder, gripping him hard. Not hard enough to hurt, but a warning all the same. "That's why we hired you, Jake. Time to start earning those big bucks. Like you said, if a bus driver could do it, we'd have hired one."

Jake shrugged off Goetz's hand. "Right."

Goetz left him to calculate the new course, shutting the cockpit door carefully behind him and blocking Jake from hearing anything of what was going on in the main cabin. Jake swallowed a sour laugh. He might not be a bus driver, but he sure as hell wasn't part of the crew, either. And while he didn't have any desire to be best buddies with the likes of Goetz and Sloan, it would've made his job easier.

Shaking his head to himself—nothing to be done about it—he concentrated on the calculations needed to reach Goetz's airstrip, while trying to figure out the best way not to alert the Colombian authorities to their presence.

o0o

A few hours later, the sky to the east was turning pink and orange with the imminent sunrise as Jake approached the coordinates Goetz had given him. He'd been flying low over the tree tops for the past hour, relying on the Lear's instruments to keep him from crashing into hills or cliffs. It was still too dark to see properly but, almost imperceptibly, the ground below was taking on more and more shape: endless forested slopes interrupted by the occasional small river snaking through the trees, its rippling surface glistening in the early dawn light.

Jake glanced at his instruments again. They should almost be—there! The dark forest opened up abruptly and small yellow pinpricks of lamps being lit at their approach sprang to life, stretching out in a ragged double row. He allowed himself a brief grin; at least they weren't expecting him to set down on the landing strip completely blind. He grudgingly admitted Ravenwood was running a pretty smooth operation; whoever was in charge down below must've had a spotter on one of the hills along the plane's flight path, radioing in their approach so they could hold off on lighting the beacons until the last minute.

After warning his passengers they should ready themselves for landing, Jake flew a single pass over the dirt runway—a chance to examine it and let the people on the ground finish lighting the beacons and get out of his way—before turning to make his final descent. His impression of efficiency was reinforced once he'd put the Lear down and bumped along over the rough ground. At the end of the strip, someone wielding a pair of flashlights directed him toward a cluster of corrugated-iron sheds obscured from view under the trees. A couple of trucks, canvas painted in

camouflage colors designed to make them blend in with the surrounding rain forest, stood parked near the sheds, with a group of men dressed in a ragtag collection of frayed army fatigues lounging around them.

The men got to their feet as the plane rolled up and swarmed toward it as Jake turned off the engines. A truck's engine rumbled as one of the vehicles was brought closer, and bangs and crashes reverberated through the fuselage: the cabin door being unsealed and the stairs lowered. Voices shouted orders, and the plane shook again as the external locker lids were slammed open. Jake crawled out of the pilot's seat, rolling his head until his spine crackled, and strolled out of the cockpit, trying to look as casual as possible.

He made it less than two paces into the cabin. "Who said you could come out of there?" The third Ravenwood guard on the trip shoved a gun in Jake's face. Barsotti, Jake recalled Goetz had called him. Jake would've preferred to have Payton along; he'd seemed a decent kid at heart—which was probably the exact reason Goetz hadn't brought him this time.

Jake squinted down at the muzzle pointed up his nose. "Hey, can't a guy take a leak anymore?" The instant he uttered the excuse, Jake became aware it wasn't a lie. The flight had been long, and focusing all his energy on not crashing into the jungle had kept his mind occupied. Now he'd had the chance to relax a little, his bladder made itself known.

"Hmph." Barsotti peered at him suspiciously along the barrel of his gun for another second. "Make it quick." He slowly lowered the weapon. "Boss wants to be gone ASAP."

"Sure."

By the time Jake inched back out of the cramped bathroom in the rear of the plane, Barsotti was gone and the cabin empty. This was the opportunity he'd been waiting for. He dashed toward the stairs leading from the aircraft. The sun was slowly climbing above the tree tops, illuminating a hive of activity in the dew-speckled grass. Nobody seemed to be paying Jake any attention.

Struggling to appear nonchalant, Jake dropped down the set of steps and wandered around, trying to give the plane a cursory inspection while, at the same time, looking everywhere at once and assign everything he saw

to memory. He was certain Hicks would grill him mercilessly for every last detail. The ground crew were running back and forth, carrying slim cylinders from the plane to the truck that, despite their relatively small size, were evidently heavy. Wrapped as the objects were in plastic, Jake couldn't make out what they were.

One of the Ravenwood executives, a bald guy whose name Jake hadn't been told, stood talking with one of the receiving crew: a tall, older man wearing a neatly pressed uniform that Jake guessed probably belonged to some branch or other of the Colombian armed forces. Goetz hovered near the pair. From the sheer quantity of insignia the Colombian wore, and the authoritative way he held himself, Jake reckoned he was in charge. He had no idea what rank or branch the marks signified. Then again, it occurred to him, the man was just as likely to be serving in a private outfit than any official military.

With the unloaders shouting instructions at each other, and the truck engines rumbling noisily, Jake couldn't make out anything beyond a couple of snatches of the conversation.

"... not enough..." the Colombian was complaining in heavily accented English. He glared at the Ravenwood man, as if to guarantee he was being understood.

The executive shrugged, the man's displeasure not impressing him in the least. "... be careful... entire shipments missing..." He shook his head.

Frustrated, Jake retreated to a spot near the Lear's wings. He couldn't get any closer to the discussion without it becoming obvious, and those snippets were next to useless. He fished out his cell phone. No way Goetz would let him see any cargo manifests—and if he did, Jake reckoned they'd claim the cargo was something innocuous, like machine parts or manufacturing equipment. But perhaps he could get some shots of the area, and of the man in charge.

He'd snapped a handful of pictures when someone shouted, "Hey! What the hell d'you think you're doing?"

Jake's heart jumped into his throat. Lowering the phone, he slowly swiveled around. Sloan was standing behind him, face twisted in suspicion, his gun in his hand.

Jake struggled to not stare at the weapon. He offered Sloan an unconcerned shrug. "Need to make sure the plane's okay."

"Again?" Sloan didn't relax in the slightest.

"After landing on a dirt strip? Damned right I do." Jake quirked an eyebrow. If Sloan had any clue about planes, he'd know that. "Unless you want to risk us dropping out of the sky because a screw came loose?"

For the first time since he'd accosted Jake, uncertainty crept into Sloan's expression. He made a humming noise under his breath, and relaxed his grip on his weapon a fraction. "What were you doin' with that?" He pointed with his chin at the phone Jake had been trying to slip into his pocket unnoticed.

*Crap.* Jake snatched at the first excuse to pop into his mind. "Trying to find a signal."

The leery crease in Sloan's brow deepened. "Who're you tryin' to call?"

"Um..." Jake racked his brain. "My girlfriend."

Sloan looked as if he didn't quite believe Jake. Jake prayed he wouldn't demand Jake give him the phone. The cell held what little evidence he'd gathered and he didn't want to lose it. And if Sloan insisted on checking what Jake had been doing and saw the photos....

*Mix truth with the lies,* Jake reminded himself. "Her ex has been harassing her," he explained. "With me gone, I wanted to make sure she's okay."

Sloan still seemed dubious.

"I'm not getting anything, though." Jake had finally managed to shove the phone into his pocket. He hoped he looked less guilty than he felt. "Too many damned trees, I guess."

"Whatever." There was a warning shout behind Jake, followed by a heavy *thud* and a cry of pain. Sloan's gaze lifted to look past Jake. Jake glanced across his shoulder. One of the unloaders had dropped the cylinder he'd been carrying. Jake caught a glimpse of an olive-green tube rolling out into

the dirt from its plastic wrapping. It was maybe four feet long, and five or six inches in diameter. Jake's breath caught: though he didn't know exactly what model it was, it was clearly some type of advanced missile system.

Sloan shoved him in the chest, preventing him from making out any further details. "Get your goddamn ass back in the plane."

Jake puffed out a breath as he trudged toward the plane's open door. Hicks had been right; Ravenwood was smuggling weapons to insurgents in South-America. He wished he could've taken a picture of the missile as proof. It would be the sort of thing Hicks would love to have. But he could feel Sloan's glare prickling in his neck every step of the way back to steps up to the cabin door.

At the top of the short staircase, he risked a final quick scan around. His blood grew cold: Goetz had joined Sloan, and they were both staring at him. Would Goetz believe his story? Deciding not to take any further chances, he retreated into the cockpit.

Soon after, Goetz joined him. "We're done here. Get us up and to Cali." Jake muttered an acknowledgment and started flicking switches to turn on the plane's equipment. "And Jake?"

Jake snuck a glance in Goetz's direction, enough to tell him what Goetz was going to say next. He forestalled him with a hand gesture. "Hey, just here to fly the plane and get paid. The rest isn't my business."

Goetz pursed his lips. "See it stays that way."

Jake didn't bother to reply; the roar of the engines firing up would've drowned out anything he might have said anyway. Five bumpy minutes later, they were up in the air, the landing strip in the jungle fading into the general greenery of the forest.

oOo

Whistling a popular tune that had been playing on the car radio, Beck walked into the apartment. It was quiet, as he'd anticipated. Faced with the rare opportunity to leave Fort Drum unusually early on a Friday, he'd grabbed it with both hands. Then the traffic had proved light, so he'd made better time than expected on the interstate, which had meant he'd also



beat the Friday afternoon rush hour in Rochester. So it was only mid-afternoon by the time he reached the apartment. Jake would still be at work.

Walking to the bedroom to drop off his bag, he chuckled under his breath. He certainly wouldn't have minded a repeat of the welcome he'd received from Jake the last time. Jake had accosted him the instant he'd stepped inside, shoving him up against the door. Beck hadn't managed to produce more than a startled "Whoa...!" before Jake silenced the rest of his protest with a deep kiss.

Beck had quickly given in to the sensation, pleasure taking over from shock. It had been nice. Surprising as hell, but definitely enjoyable. At last, reluctantly, he'd pushed Jake away far enough to scan his face. "What's gotten into you?"

Sure, he was a little on the late side, later than he'd told Jake he'd be, thanks to a nasty pile-up north of Oswego that had forced him to go round. That wasn't sufficient reason for such abundant enthusiasm, was it?

"Nothing," Jake mumbled, not looking at Beck.

Was it Beck's imagination, or did Jake blush?

"Just... I missed you." Jake's fingers were fumbling to undo Beck's belt, and Beck drew in a sharp breath as Jake's hand brushed over his cock where it strained in his jeans. He forgot about asking any further questions as, to his own amazement, he discovered he was hard already. Usually he needed time to make the mental leap from army major to lover. His body had no such concerns, though; it readily appreciated Jake's unexpected forwardness.

Of course, over time, as Beck and Jake had grown closer and gotten to know each other better, Jake had become bolder, more secure in his actions. He rarely reminded Beck these days of the uncomfortable, hesitant kid he'd picked up all those months ago at Bo's. But this? This was new.

Curious to see where Jake would take it, Beck let his overnight bag fall from his fist, grabbed Jake's ass and yanked him closer, letting him feel his desire. Jake made a small noise in the back of his throat, pressing tighter to

Beck and hiding his face in the crook of Beck's neck. He whispered hoarsely, his breath warm on Beck's skin, "You okay?"

Deep inside Beck's brain, a warning signal went off, alarmed either at the question or the tone. Beck ignored it, desire and heat and need for Jake overwhelming him.

"Heavens, yes," Beck breathed into Jake's hair. A cry escaped him as Jake wriggled a hand between their bodies and shoved it down Beck's jeans. His palm was cool on Beck's cock. "Never... uhn... better."

Realizing the memory had left him shaking with fresh desire, and with his jeans uncomfortably tight, Beck ducked into the bathroom to splash water on his face and cool off. He'd get his fill of Jake soon enough; no need to act like a schoolboy dreaming up sexual fantasies.

Toweling himself dry, he ambled back into the main living area and then headed for the kitchen, inspecting the fridge, he noted it was mostly empty. He'd have to do something about that if they wanted to eat later. Preparing to shut the door, he caught a whiff of something unpleasant. Frowning, he ducked in further and reached for the open carton of milk. *Ugh*. He grimaced in disgust as he got a full blast of the stench: the milk was spoiled.

Jake could be such a slob, sometimes. How long had that carton been in there? Dumping the curdled milk down the drain and carefully disposing of the offending carton in the trash, Beck softened his mental censure. It was July, after all, and the carton had been less than a quarter full. Milk could go bad quickly in those circumstances.

He glanced around the kitchen again. He had time to kill while he waited for Jake to get home; he could get fresh groceries and decide what to prepare for dinner. One of the cast-iron rules he stuck to, no matter what, was that he and Jake couldn't be seen in public in situations that could possibly lead people to unwanted—if correct—conclusions. As a result, they'd taken to cooking elaborate dinners at home, each attempting to outdo the other. Beck had been on kitchen duty his last visit, but Jake would be tired by the time he got home, and Beck didn't mind pulling double duty.

Beck returned an hour later, his arms full of paper bags. "Jake?" He kicked

the door shut behind him with his boot before walking further into the kitchen.

There was no answer to his hail. Beck glanced over at the clock as he set the groceries on the kitchen counter. Jake should be here any minute; best he get started on dinner right away. Putting the groceries in the fridge, he began chopping up the vegetables for the pasta sauce he was planning on making.

His attention focused on preparing the meal, Beck didn't notice Jake hadn't come home yet until dinner was nearly ready and he was preparing to set the table. His brow creased as he checked the time again. Jake was distinctly late. A bit put-out, Beck switched the burners under the pans to their lowest settings, hoping the food wouldn't dry out while he waited.

Jake knew Beck was coming, didn't he? Beck had called yesterday evening and left a message on the machine. Had Jake picked it up? It'd be annoying if he was hanging out with the guys from his job, having a quick beer, unaware that Beck was waiting at home with dinner, like a neglected housewife.

While Beck could be very patient when the situation called for it, fretfully waiting for Jake began to grate on his nerves. He restlessly paced from kitchen to living room and back to the stove again. On his third round, after peering out of the window hoping to see Jake hurrying home across the small park in front of the apartment building, he turned off the stove entirely. Why hadn't he insisted Jake get a cellphone? At least he'd have been able to call and ask where he was.

Discouraged, Beck plodded toward the sofa. As he turned and sat down, his gaze drifted over the answering machine on the desk. A red light was blinking rapidly, indicating there was a message waiting to be played.

Beck snorted a laugh at his own expense. He was a fool. If Jake knew he was going to be late, he'd have tried to let Beck know. And he'd have done it the only way he could: by calling the machine in the apartment.

Beck walked over to press the button—*one new message*, the device told him—but it wasn't Jake's voice that came from the speaker: instead, it was his own, with the message he'd left the night before. Listening to his own words, he concluded he sounded pleased: being able to leave the base on

Friday and not have to return until Monday was a rare treat.

Filled with disappointment and faint irritation, he hit the button to erase the message, as it served no further purpose. *Dammit, Jake.*

Still staring down at the answering machine, now dark and empty, annoyance mutated into apprehension. The message hadn't been listened to yet; if it had, the light wouldn't have been flashing. But if Jake hadn't played the message, did that mean he hadn't been home since yesterday?

Abruptly, Jake's absence took on a more sinister meaning, especially in light of the uncharacteristic eagerness he'd displayed last time and the way he'd stonewalled Beck's questions after Beck had found him staring sleeplessly out of the living room window in the middle of the night. He wouldn't—would he?

Cold fear clamped around Beck's heart and in a few large strides, he was back in the kitchen, reaching up on his toes for the spaghetti tin on the top shelf. He'd never told Jake, but he knew it was where Jake kept his savings.

Fully convinced he'd find the tin empty, he nearly dropped it as it proved to be far heavier than he'd expected. He upended its contents on the kitchen table, sucking in a sharp, whistling breath as bills tumbled out. Piles and piles of them. Gaping at the money on the table, Beck estimated it was at least ten thousand dollars. Perhaps more.

He plopped down heavily on the nearest chair. How the hell had Jake gotten his hands on that much cash? Off-the-books construction work didn't pay that well. The relief that Jake hadn't *gone*—if he had, he'd have taken the money—was short-lived, as Beck's imagination ran through the list of other possibilities.

What sort of bad business had Jake gotten involved in?

Nothing in Jake's file could explain the money, except—Beck swallowed, remembering the details: the murder in San Diego, the accusations that some criminal outfit or other had been involved. Jake had been a professional driver, over in Iraq and Afghanistan; he'd had plenty of opportunity to meet the wrong people.

Beck didn't want to admit it, but in the end, he had to: the obvious

explanation for the incredible amount of money hidden in the tin was that Jake had somehow gotten involved in drug smuggling. Beck scrubbed his fingers through his hair, pulling in a shuddering breath. Running drug transports to Canada, maybe; the border was only a short drive away.

He put his elbows on the table and hid his face in his hands, wishing he'd pushed Jake harder to tell him what was bothering him, when he discovered him missing in their bed, last time.

Beck had woken, after that amazing bout of love-making, to find Jake's place bare, the sheets cold. Jake hadn't replied to his soft hail. Coming fully awake, Beck had located the alarm clock. It had been shortly after one in the morning. No light filtered from the bathroom, so that wasn't where Jake had gone.

Rubbing at his eyes, Beck swung his legs over the edge of the mattress, and searched around for his boxers. He finally located them caught in the crumpled sheets.

Chuckling wryly, he stepped into them. He considered looking for a shirt as well, but neither he nor Jake liked to run the noisy A/C at night, and he figured the apartment was warm enough. He didn't expect to be gone long, anyway.

"Jake?" Padding barefoot into the living room, he spied Jake silhouetted against the window. He'd put on jeans and a T-shirt, indicating he'd been up for a while. Light from the streetlamps was playing on his hair.

Jake turned at the sound of Beck's voice. "Did I wake you?"

"No." In the gloom, Beck felt around for the switch to turn on the small lamp on the desk. He made the mistake of staring straight at the bulb when he found it, blinking owlishly at the sudden glow that blinded him momentarily. It took a minute for the spots dancing in front of his eyes to fade so he could make out Jake's face. "What are you doing up?"

Jake hunched his shoulders. "Couldn't sleep."

Beck started to chuckle, until something in Jake's expression made him swallow the quip that Jake should be plenty exhausted after their earlier activities. Again, a warning flare went up in Beck's mind. He'd never

known Jake to suffer from insomnia. Combined with the way Jake had practically assaulted him, getting Beck off in the living room, before dragging him to the bedroom for another round without giving Beck the chance to say so much as "Hello", it was enough to raise the alarm. "Is everything okay?"

Jake stared at him, giving him a look Beck couldn't quite read. Despite the warmth of the room, involuntary goosebumps pimply Beck's skin. He moved closer. "Jake? What's wrong?"

Jake opened his mouth as if he was preparing to answer, then snapped it shut without saying a thing. He gave a wry sniff. "Everything's fine." He turned once more toward the window, shoulders to his ears, leaving Beck to gape at his back.

Beck drew down his brows in a mixture of irritation and concern. He didn't believe Jake for a single second. Closing the last three feet of distance, he put a hand on Jake's shoulder. Jake flinched; he was tight as a coiled spring, the tension perceptible even through the soft cotton of his T-shirt. "Are you sure?"

From the way Jake wrenched away, Beck realized it had been the wrong thing to say. He dropped his hand.

"I said it's fine, didn't I?"

Dammit, Jake could be so damned stubborn. Every instinct in Beck longed to grab him by the shoulders and shake him until he'd share whatever trouble was keeping him awake. Instead, Beck forced himself to remain calm. If there was one thing he'd learned over the past months, it was that Jake didn't respond well to being pressured: he tended to push right back—or run away. And neither was going to help the situation any.

Was this a new problem Jake didn't feel like sharing? Or an old one that had resurfaced? Beck had burned the file Bo's friend had put together for him; he'd neither wanted to keep it in the apartment, where Jake might find it, nor in his quarters at the base. But destroying the copies didn't mean Beck had forgotten the things he'd read. Had something from those files come back to haunt Jake? He wished he could ask directly. But as long as Jake refused to tell him, Beck couldn't let on he was aware of any of those facts. He'd have to explain how he'd found out, confess he'd had

Bo dig into Jake's past. While it had made sense at the time, it now shamed Beck. So he offered Jake a small shrug instead. "As long as you know you can talk to me if there's a problem."

Jake offered him one of those wry half-smiles, his posture relaxing a fraction. "I know. Thanks." Beck continued to scrutinize him until he added reluctantly, "It's nothing I can't handle."

"Okay." Beck resisted the urge to sigh. To be honest, Jake's stubborn streak was one of traits that had attracted him in the first place. And he suspected that same stubbornness had kept Jake alive during the hard times he'd gone through. While Jake could be exasperating, Beck wouldn't wish him to be different.

He took a step to close the distance between them again, this time placing a hand on Jake's arm. "Come back to bed." Problems that appeared insurmountable in the dark of night often proved not quite so serious in the light of day. "It'll be better in the morning."

Jake snorted disbelievingly, but he did allow Beck to lead him back to the bedroom.

Once there, though, despite the soft mattress and the physical satisfaction of their earlier lovemaking, sleep had eluded Beck for a long time. Lying on his back, staring up unseeingly at the ceiling, he hadn't been able to banish the twinge of resentment, of hurt, that Jake didn't trust him enough to share whatever it was that was troubling him. He could also feel the waves of unhappiness coming off of Jake, curled up beside him, his knees lightly touching Beck's hip. He didn't think Jake was getting any sleep, either. He longed to reach out, to pull Jake closer, to repeat his offer of help, but he told himself he shouldn't; that he should respect Jake's evident desire to deal with the issue alone.

In short, he'd deluded himself that the reluctant admission there was *something* going on was all he could expect from Jake at this point, and that Jake would confide in him if the problem turned out to be too big to deal with on his own.

And now Jake was missing....

Beck had a sudden, horrible vision of Jake lying dead in a morgue

somewhere, a John Doe tag on his toe, and him never finding out what had happened. He'd always been so careful to ensure nothing could tie them together, to protect himself. He'd never considered that it would also mean that, even if the authorities did identify Jake, they wouldn't know to contact Beck.

Sick to his stomach, Beck forced the vision away, firmly berating himself for coming up with such an outrageous idea. He was a soldier; he should know better than to jump to far-fetched conclusions based on skimpy intel. However, whether Jake's absence meant he was dead or not, a persistent voice in the back of his mind warned him that all the facts put together did paint a grim picture.

Shaking his head, Beck got to his feet, and started scooping the bills back into the tin. He shouldn't panic or accuse Jake of anything as damning as drug smuggling without proof. He'd do what he was best at: methodically puzzle together what facts he could until he had a clear picture. Then, and only then, would he pass judgment.

Putting the tin back on the shelf, feeling better for having a plan of action, he considered his next move. First thing to do would be to talk to the neighbors. He'd start with that woman across the hall, the one Jake hung out with when Beck wasn't in town.

*Anita*: her name popped into his mind, along with Jake's crazy suggestion they engage in a threesome. Despite his fears, Beck's mouth twisted in a slight smile at that particular memory. The smile quickly faded as he grabbed his keys, and crossed the hall to knock on Anita's door. He hoped she hadn't gone out, it being Friday night.

Luck was with him and, to Beck's relief, she answered the door only a few seconds after he'd rapped his knuckles against it. The hubbub of various voices talking at the same time came from behind her, and he caught sight of a number of people cluttering up the living room: she was having a party at home. Though he couldn't help scanning the crowd, he reckoned it was too much to hope Jake would be among them.

"Oh, hey." It was clear from her expression that she recognized Beck, although he'd never talked to her beyond a hello on the stairs. She must've seen something in his face: the quick smile she'd bestowed on him in greeting disappeared and, with a wave to her friends, she stepped out into



the hallway, pulling the door almost closed behind her. "Is everything alright?"

"I don't know." For some reason, Beck was reluctant to say even that much. "I'm sorry to bother you...." He paused again. Was he getting carried away by his own insecurities? What if his initial conclusion was right? What if Jake had simply gone out for a beer and to shoot some pool with a few buddies? He'd look like a overwrought fool.

No, he told himself. No, he had to trust his instincts. And all his instincts, honed over the years, screamed that something was wrong. And if he was mistaken after all? He reckoned he could care less if Anita thought him an idiot, as long as Jake showed up hale and healthy. "I'm worried about Jake," he admitted. Saying it out loud made it real, and a cold shiver slithered along his spine. "Have you seen him lately?"

"Not for a couple days. Maybe—." She broke off, and her features turned pensive. She bit her lip, then straightened slightly, as if coming to a decision. "I'm not sure I should tell you this, but, um, there was a cop looking for him, a few weeks ago."

"A cop?" Beck raised an eyebrow. Jake had been trying very hard to avoid any contact with the authorities.

"Yeah, some kind of federal agent or other." Anita clasped her hands together. "Jake seemed upset about it. When I asked, he said he wasn't in trouble or anything."

Beck resisted the urge to scoff; he didn't believe that for a second. The way Jake had been acting, the money, and now a federal officer added into the mix? It was impossible to believe Jake wasn't in trouble.

"Is there anything I can do?" Anita asked. A burst of laughter drifted out from her apartment.

"No, thank you." Beck indicated where the merriment came from. "Go back to your guests. Please. I'm sure everything will turn out fine."

She hesitated for another moment. "Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Well, alright." She took a slow step backward, pushing the door open wider with her hip. "Let me know, okay?"

Beck promised he would, and Anita closed the door, cutting off the noise of the party. Beck stood in the quiet hallway for a minute, trying to decide what to do next, before returning to their own apartment. He went straight for the bedroom closet. He didn't want to, but he had no choice: he had to search through Jake's things. There could be something among them that would give him a hint of what kind of trouble Jake was in, or where Beck might start looking for him.

Opening the closet, Beck reached inside. From the back, he pulled out Jake's frayed messenger bag. Sheets fell out from it and he bent to pick them up, turning them over as he did so. He gasped in shock: the last thing he'd expected was to be staring at his own face. It was his service photograph, taken two years ago, before he'd left for his last tour in Afghanistan. How on God's green Earth had Jake gotten hold of *that*?

## Chapter 9

Jake's fingers were trembling with exhaustion as he struggled to insert the key into the lock. If he was lucky and Edward stuck to his usual schedule, he could get a few hours of shut-eye before Edward arrived. Heaven knows he needed it.

His estimate, that this second trip would play out in a similar fashion to the first, and that the detour to the jungle airstrip wouldn't involve more than two or three extra hours, couldn't have been further from the mark. Whether or not the journey to Cali was merely a front to hide the smuggling, they'd stayed in the city for a day longer than during the previous flight. Whatever business the Ravenwood directors were having with the locals had apparently proved trickier than anticipated. The company had put the entire party up in a hotel after it became clear they wouldn't be flying home any time soon—which meant Jake had been forced to share a room with a hostile Barsotti. It hadn't made for a very restful night.

During the extra day, the tropical storm building over the Atlantic for the past week had moved in close enough that Jake hadn't been comfortable taking the Lear straight across the Caribbean Sea on the way back to Cleveland. Goetz had grumbled, but eventually given in, and Jake had detoured them to the west—which in turn meant the Lear couldn't make the entire distance on a single tank. They'd been forced to put down for a refueling stop at a J&R facility in Oklahoma. By the time Jake touched ground in Ohio, at the crack of dawn on Friday morning, everyone was tired and irritated, and Goetz had thrust the envelope with the other half of Jake's money into his hands with a snarled, "Get the hell out of here."

Jake had beat a hasty retreat. He didn't want to risk increasing the man's ire any more than he had to, and he was still afraid Sloan would remember him messing around with his phone while they were unloading the illicit cargo. However, if he'd thought he could go straight home and crash, he'd been sadly mistaken. Not far from the Rochester city line, the car that had latched onto his bumper a mile after he'd turned out of the airport had pulled alongside him, the agents inside holding up a badge—not that Jake had needed it to know who they were—and indicating he should follow them. They led him to a government building in Fairport, where Hicks waited impatiently on the stoop.

"What's with the goons?" Jake jerked a thumb across his shoulder at the two agents dogging his heels.

Hicks didn't smile. "I figured this time I'd make sure you'd come straight to debrief."

Jake grimaced as he followed Hicks inside the building. He couldn't quite blame him.

Hicks showed him to a drab windowless interview room. Apart from a single, grudging bathroom break, it was the only part of the building he saw until Hicks let him out twelve hours later, shortly before midnight.

He told Hicks everything he could: the unscheduled landing, the cargo, the tall Colombian. Based on Jake's description, including details he hadn't been aware he'd noticed that Hicks' interrogators patiently extracted from him, the missile he'd seen was identified as "probably a Javelin anti-tank weapon": heavy-duty tech Hicks said was worth tens of thousands of dollars a piece. They showed him a picture, and Jake had confirmed the device he'd seen had looked similar.

When Jake mentioned the photos he'd taken, his cell phone was whisked away by a lab tech. Blurry blown-up prints were delivered to the room an hour later. Hicks had asked Jake again and again and *again* to give him a blow-by-blow account of every minute they'd spent on the ground. Jake had been forced to repeat countless times what everyone had said to him, and what he'd overheard, and who had moved where and done what, until he got so sick of it he was afraid he'd strangle the Fed if Hicks dared order him to tell the story one more time.

All the while, stenographers captured his words; schematics were drawn and Jake asked to correct and amend them from memory; and a computer artist brought in to work with him to make improvements on the picture of the Colombian leader. The original photo, taken at low light and from a distance, had been too fuzzy for the techs to ID.

At last, dog-tired, Jake found himself left alone with Hicks. "Can I go?" He tried to sound bored, but he was afraid it had come out as desperate begging.

Hicks considered him silently for a minute, arms crossed over his narrow chest as he stood on the far side of the room. "It's not enough."

Too worn-out to grasp Hicks' meaning, Jake blinked in confusion. "What isn't?"

"The evidence."

Jake resisted the urge to bang his head on the table—barely. "I did what I could." He couldn't muster the energy to raise his voice.

"We need more, Jake."

Jake rubbed his eyes, gritty with fatigue, and peered blearily up at Hicks. "I can't help you."

Hicks spread his hands. "Jake—."

"Hey, I did the best I could, alright!" Frustration overcame tiredness, and Jake jumped up from his chair. "Those guys, they don't trust me. They don't trust anyone. I nearly got caught getting these." He sketched a wave at the photos still spread out in front of them, before leaning forward, his fingers curling into fists on the table. Lowering his voice, he added, "So, no matter what you do to me, what you do to Edward, I—can't—help—you." He pronounced the last four words separately, to underscore them.

"I've no intention of doing anything to you, or him." Hicks sat himself in the other chair, ignoring Jake's open-mouthed stare. "Jake, listen to me. *Maybe, maybe* if you'd gotten a photo of that Javelin missile, we'd have had a case. As it stands, if we arrest them based on what we have, chances are, we won't get a conviction. Your testimony alone isn't enough." Hicks shook his head as if to stress what he was saying. "Too easy for a good defense lawyer to explain that you misunderstood what you saw. The case would get thrown out and we'd have to release them." He caught Jake's gaze, holding it. "Make no mistake, no matter where you go, they'd find you. And they won't be as nice about it as I've been."

Jake blinked at Hicks, his heart dropping into his stomach as Hicks' warning filtered through the fog in his brain. He hadn't given a lot of thought to what would happen to him after he'd helped Hicks collect his evidence; his main concern had been to keep Hicks from exposing

Edward. But Hicks was right. If Ravenwood got so much as a whiff that he was working with the Feds, the entire world wouldn't be big enough to hide in. "Then don't arrest them."

"That's not an option." Hicks scowled. "You think I'm doing this for fun? I've got people leaning on me too, Jake. People demanding results yesterday. And can't say as I blame them." He paused for a moment, leaning back in his chair and drumming his fingers on the table. "Outfits such as Ravenwood are a cancer we need to cut out. Or they'll run roughshod over every damned law they don't like. What would that make us? No better than some goddamn banana republic, that's what." He drew in a breath, and added softly, "You need to go back in."

No. Every cell in Jake's body wanted to scream in denial. But the alternatives were worse. "What makes you think they'll want me again?" It depended on whether he'd succeeded in assuaging Goetz's mistrust after he'd seen the missile.

Hicks shrugged. "They called on you twice, right? Let's hope they do it a third time." He held up his hands as Jake was still trying to assemble a protest. "I know, I know, they don't trust you. Maybe they'll slip up. Make a mistake. You just need to be there when they do." He slid Jake's cell phone across the table toward him.

Defeated, Jake pocketed the phone. He didn't bother to mention that if Ravenwood were prone to making mistakes, Hicks would've put them behind bars a long time ago. He thought it more likely the mistake would be his, and he'd end up dead in an unmarked grave. And the longer he spent in Goetz's company, the greater the chances of that happening. He had no doubt that if Goetz or Sloan got the slightest inkling Jake wasn't the pilot-for-hire he was pretending to be, he'd be a corpse the next second.

Right now, he was simply too exhausted to care. "Can I go?" he repeated tiredly.

"Yeah. Go home, get some rest." Hicks managed to sound compassionate. "We'll be in touch."

That had been an hour ago. After he'd left Fairport, Jake had needed to drop off the rental car at the agency—catching a penalty fee for the late return—and then take a night bus to the apartment.

Squinting to focus his blurry eyes, Jake repeatedly stabbed at the keyhole with the key. At last, he successfully slipped it into the lock, and opened the door. The apartment was dark, but to his surprise, a light was on in the kitchen—its yellow glow revealing the pages of the files Hicks had given him lying spread out on the kitchen table. They were weighted down with the spaghetti tin, the money Jake had concealed in it lying in a heap next to it.

"Crap." The display could only mean one thing: he hadn't fooled Goetz after all.

Fear and fatigue kept Jake frozen to the spot, incapable of running even if he'd thought for a second that would do any good. He expected a bullet to bury itself in his skull any moment soon.

But the anticipated shot never came, although Jake almost wished it had when, with a soft click that made him jump, the floor lamp in the living area flicked on, casting soft light over the man on the sofa.

"Wanna tell me what this is all about?" Edward's voice could've frozen Lake Ontario for all the warmth it held.

o0o

Senses on the alert, despite the slight doze he'd fallen into, Beck started awake the instant he heard the quiet rattle of the key being inserted into the lock. He'd spent the last hours pouring over the documents he'd discovered in the closet, until his head ached. Deciding he needed a break, he retreated to the comfort of the couch, carrying his service photo with him.

The pages, records of Jake's past activities, had filled in some of the blanks, adding details that Bo's cop friend hadn't been able to dig up. The scribbled notes of what looked like names and numbers, written in Jake's hasty chicken scrawl, had been harder to decipher, and Beck had soon returned to studying the print-outs and photocopies.

Jake had graduated from Embry-Riddle with a degree in aeronautical science, had he? While Beck had always been aware Jake was bright and picked stuff up quickly, he had to admit he was impressed: it was a

prestigious school, and a number of the army's best helicopter pilots had trained there.

Impressive as Jake's education was, it also raised new questions: why would a man who was certified to command large airplanes do cargo runs to South America for an obscure company called Shelby Aviation? Why would he drive trucks for Jennings & Rall in one of the world's most dangerous places? Or wreck his back by hauling bricks for a living?

Beck's brows had knitted together in bewilderment as he'd identified the declining trajectory of Jake's career path; Jake's life certainly had taken a wrong turn somewhere.

To be honest, the files had raised as many new questions as they'd answered. None of the information explained what trouble Jake was currently in, or why he'd gone missing. It didn't shed light on what the Feds wanted with him, or where the fifteen thousand dollars in the tin—Beck had carefully counted it to be absolutely sure—had come from. Beck definitely had no clue how his own service photo had ended up among Jake's visa records and J&R personnel file. The more he mulled it over, the less sense he could make of the various pieces. By the time Jake walked in the door, Beck was as thoroughly puzzled as he was scared.

"Wanna tell me what this is all about?" It took every ounce of self-control for him to keep his voice calm, his relief that Jake was alive clashing with his confusion over everything he'd learned and his fear of what the future might hold. A part of him wanted to grab Jake and shake an explanation out of him, while another part wanted nothing more than to be able to touch him and reassure himself that Jake was all right.

And, having learned Jake was alive, a third part of him was simply furious for the scare Jake had given him.

"Not really," Jake mumbled under his breath, his voice low enough that Beck suspected the answer hadn't been meant for his ears. He bit down on his rising irritation and instead carefully scrutinized Jake as he stumbled toward the easy chair across from Beck.

Jake's skin was pale under his tan, eyes bloodshot and bruised, three-day stubble shadowing his jaw. He let the small backpack he carried slip from his shoulders and fall unceremoniously to the floor, before collapsing into



the seat, exhaustion in every line of him. He lifted his head enough to sneak a glance in Beck's direction from under his lashes, before quickly letting it fall back and picking at his nails as soon as he met Beck's eye.

In the brief flash, Beck caught something that dulled his anger. What was it? Guilt? Shame? It took him a second to make the connection, but then he knew: Jake's gaze held the same flatness he'd seen in troops who'd been battered for too long on the front lines. A sign they were too tired and too ground down to care anymore.

Beck's chest tightened with concern, and he wanted to reach out and take Jake's hands between his and swear to him that everything would be all right. But he couldn't. Not until he understood what was going on. Otherwise, it might prove to be an empty promise.

"Jake?" He waited for Jake to raise his head, before tapping the service photo he was holding to draw Jake's attention to it. "I'd say I have a right to know what's going on."

Jake scrubbed at the corners of his eyes with the tips of his fingers. "I guess so."

In spite of his sympathy for Jake's beat-up state, fresh irritation flared within Beck. "Dammit, Jake...!"

"I was trying to protect you, okay!" Jake burst out. He got up so quickly he shoved the heavy chair backward. Its legs scraped across the wood floor with a screech.

"What?" Beck blinked. Of all the things he'd expected Jake to say, that made the least sense of all. "Protect me from what?"

"Hicks." Jake started pacing between the kitchen and the sitting area like a caged animal. Beck climbed to his feet as well, not wanting to have to crane his neck to look at Jake. "He said he'd—" Jake inhaled a shuddering breath. "He'd have destroyed you. Your career, everything. I couldn't let him do that."

"Who is Hicks?" Needing to give his hands something to do to keep from grabbing Jake, Beck went over to the kitchen table and began to shuffle the loose pages into a neat pile.

"A federal agent." Jake stopped by the kitchen counter, his back to Beck. He curled his fingers around the counter edge and hunched his shoulders. "I thought I'd lost him, that he didn't know where I—." He shrugged. "I guess I was wrong."

"Is he one of the people you were hiding from?" Beck's mouth had gone dry as Jake spoke, the implications quick to sink in. Could this have been *his* fault?

Jake turned, wearily slouching back against the counter top. "Yeah." He gestured at the photo Beck had put on top of the files. "He showed me that. Said he knew about... about us."

It was slowly starting to make sense to Beck. Jake was aware what would happen to Beck if anyone discovered the truth. Beck had certainly impressed the need for secrecy on him often enough. "And he blackmailed you?"

Jake nodded, running his fingers through his hair, not looking at Beck.

"To do what?"

"Doesn't matter anymore." Jake slid down to the floor, as if his legs were no longer strong enough to carry him. He drew his knees up to his chest, folding his arms around them. "I didn't get Hicks what he needs, and Ravenwood's gotten suspicious. No way they'll hire me a third time." He dropped his head onto his arms. "I'm sorry...." Tears choked his voice.

Ravenwood? Beck thought he recognized the name: weren't they a private security firm? But what could a private contractor have to do with Jake's troubles with the authorities? Resting on his palms on the table, he gazed down at where Jake sat slumped on the cold kitchen floor, his shoulders trembling. Beck amended his earlier conclusion: none of what Jake was saying made any sense.

One thing he did know: he wasn't angry any more. At least not with Jake. Straightening up, he made a beeline for Jake and knelt on the tiles in front of him. Jake didn't look up. Beck put a hand on his wrist. "I think you need to tell me everything from the beginning." Jake made a noise in the back of his throat; Beck couldn't quite decipher if it was in agreement or protest.

"But not right away." Part of the reason Jake wasn't making any sense was because he was dead on his feet. But he was alive, safe; explanations could wait a short while longer. "Come on. You should get some sleep first."

Jake wiped his face with his sleeve and nodded dully. He didn't object when Beck dragged him to his feet, helped him out of his jacket, and half-led, half-carried him into the bedroom. As soon as he fell onto the mattress, he rolled onto his side and curled into a ball, eyelids drooping shut. He didn't seem to notice Beck pulling off his boots or draping a blanket over him.

Beck stood gazing down on Jake for a short while, watching Jake's face relax into sleep, before he tucked the blanket tighter and tiptoed out of the bedroom. He still didn't understand much of what was going on, though at least it would seem that his earlier conclusion—that Jake was running drugs—had been so far off the bat, it was out of the ballpark. While that was a relief, it wasn't a comfort: from the small amount Jake had told him, he'd come to suspect that he, Beck, was at least partly to blame for the mess Jake was currently in. Bo's friend rooting through the police systems to dig up information on Jake must've raised a flag in some agency's computer system, leading the Feds right to Jake to put the thumb screws on. And, as disjointed as Jake's stammered explanation had been, it had left scant doubt Jake had done whatever he'd done for Beck's sake.

Beck pulled the drapes in the living room closed, and tried to make himself comfortable on the sofa so he wouldn't disturb Jake's rest. Sleep didn't come easily, however, his mind brooding over the bits he had learned and the gaps Jake had left. There had to be a way to fix this, a chance to get Jake out of the jam Beck had helped get him into. He just had to find it.

oOo

Jake was woken by a sliver of warm sunlight playing over him. He blinked sleepily at the familiar ceiling, for one blissful instant not remembering anything—and then reality crashed over him like a wave of cold water. He wished he could go back to sleep, sink into oblivion again; he also knew he couldn't hide forever. Throwing off the blanket Edward must've put over him, he scrubbed his fingers through his hair, stretching. He scrunched up his nose as he caught a whiff of himself, realizing the clothes he'd slept in

were wrinkled and smelly. He hadn't been out of them in... well, a very long time. The shower stall in the bathroom beckoned, with the promise of hot water and soap.

He started to swing his legs over the side of the bed, stopping half way. On the nightstand stood a glass of orange juice and a plate with a tin-foil wrapped package that wordlessly invited him to open it. For a second or two, Jake gaped at it, uncomprehending. Edward must've put the food out, even though, if asked, Jake would've said he'd been far too angry for such a considerate act.

The sight of the food made him aware of his hollow stomach and parched throat. Not wasting any more time agonizing over Edward's motives, and postponing the much-warranted shower, he scooted over to reach for the glass and the plate. After chugging down a good portion of the juice—God, he was thirsty!—Jake unwrapped the package to discover a ham and cheese sandwich. He bit into it, ravenous. He'd been too nervous to eat much while on the trip, and yesterday had been sustained during the debrief by nothing beyond bad coffee and greasy cheeseburgers, that had given him a belly ache on top of everything else.

He was wiping the crumbs from his mouth when Edward appeared in the bedroom doorway, propping a shoulder against the frame. "Thought I heard you. Sleep okay?"

Jake eyed him uncertainly. Edward didn't look angry or upset, and he met Jake's gaze placidly enough. Jake nodded in response, indicating the plate as he put it down. "Thanks for that. How long did I sleep?"

Edward walked further into the bedroom. "Sixteen hours, give or take. You were exhausted."

Jake huffed a wry laugh, relaxing a little at Edward's continued calm manner. He'd slept away the entire day: that explained the sunlight, which only entered the room near sunset.

"I guess I was," he conceded. He paused, fragments of the memory of his last conversation with Edward returning. "Can we not talk about—." He considered a minute, his sleep-befuddled brain not yet caught up. "Last night—?"

"No, Jake." Edward collected the dirty dishes. "You owe me an explanation." He uttered the statement softly, but his tone was firm, and clearly brooked no argument.

Jake sighed and gave small nod. It had been worth trying, but truth be told, he'd figured he wouldn't get out of it that easily.

Edward cocked his head. "Do you remember anything you said?"

Jake drew his brows together, trying to recall more of the events of the previous night. "Not exactly," he admitted with a rueful shrug.

Edward smiled gently. "As I expected. Don't worry; most of it didn't make a lot of sense, anyway." He ambled over to the window and drew the curtains wider. The full glare of the late afternoon sunlight fell across the bed.

Jake squinted into the sudden brightness. It didn't stop him from noticing the way Edward was now looking at him. His cheeks grew hot with embarrassment as he viewed his own disheveled state through Edward's eyes.

"You go grab a shower," Edward suggested, confirming Jake's misgivings, "and I'll make us some coffee. And then you can start from the beginning."

With a nod, Jake trudged to the bathroom, feeling Edward's gaze resting between his shoulder blades. He wasn't eager to start explaining; he'd have preferred to not tell Edward anything about anything ever. But that option had evaporated the instant Edward had found the files and the money. And while Jake had also gotten the impression Hicks was no longer looking to make good on his threat of destroying Edward's career, they still had Ravenwood to consider.

No, Jake could no longer keep quiet: Edward had a right to know.

oOo

Shortly over an hour later, Jake hunched on the couch, his hands curled around the mug Edward had offered him. He blew on the steaming coffee, enjoying the fresh scent. The hot shower had refreshed him, as had another sandwich, and he felt in better spirits than before. He studied Edward

furtively over the rim of his cup while the other man took a seat in his usual armchair. Edward's attitude unnerved Jake; he'd expected him to still be furious. Instead, Edward came across as being more worried than angry or disappointed.

"So...?" Edward prompted once he was settled, urging Jake to begin.

Jake puffed out his cheeks, collecting his thoughts. Where should he start? He put the coffee down and drew up one leg, resting his chin on his knee as he tried to decide what to tell Edward. The other man's easy manner as he patiently waited for Jake's explanation helped him put his jumbled thoughts into order. "Have you ever heard of Ravenwood?"

That was when it had started, hadn't it? Two years ago, with Ravenwood, in Iraq.

Once he started talking, he couldn't seem to stop. In the end, Jake told Edward about more than just Ravenwood or Hicks, the words tumbling from his mouth. Edward let him tell the tale the way he wanted, only occasionally interrupting to ask for further clarification or to make sure he'd understood Jake correctly.

The only thing Jake couldn't bring himself to speak about was Saffa. He wasn't sure if, as a soldier, Edward would be able to understand better than anyone or not, but the wound was too raw, too near the surface, for him to give voice to.

He told Edward of the trouble he'd had finding a job after he'd gotten home from Iraq. Admitted the smuggling trips to South America, after he'd left Afghanistan. Explained about Freddy and Anna, in San Diego. He even told him about Jericho, and Chris, and copped to what a lousy son he was. Deep down, as he was laying out all the facts for Edward's judgment, Jake had to agree with his father. His life was one long series of fuck-ups.

"Eric was always the good son," Jake finished, unable to keep the bitterness from his tone. His voice was hoarse, and his throat sore with all the talking he'd done. His coffee, forgotten and cold, was still on the table. "Me, I'm just the one who hurts everyone." He let out a sour chuckle. "As you've discovered."

Jake had talked long enough that the sun had fallen below the horizon.

Neither of them had taken the time to turn on any lights and Jake struggled to make out Edward's expression in the gloom. "I'm sorry."

It sounded horribly inadequate, as it had so many times in the past. "I messed up." Again.

oOo

Beck stared at Jake after he finished his story with a mumbled apology and a whispered word of self-recrimination. For one of the rare times in his life, he was lost for words, unsure how to react to what Jake had told him.

Because, sweet Mother of God, Jake had gotten them into a spectacular jam. *FUBAR'ed*, the troops would call it. Beck couldn't help wonder: if he'd known all the facts when he met Jake, would he have...?

*Don't*. Second-guessing himself was not in his nature. And besides, it wasn't a fair question. Yes, Jake had made mistakes. More than most people made in their life. But everyone had skeletons in their closet, things they'd have done differently in retrospect.

Jake snuck a glance at him, as if seeking reassurance. He sat angled forward, elbows on his knees, hands dangling, his entire posture screaming remorse and self-loathing. Any resentment Beck had felt as Jake told his story—and true, there had been several times he'd *wanted* to blame Jake—melted like a snow cone in the summer sun.

How could he hold Jake responsible? Beck's curiosity had been instrumental in giving Hicks the opportunity to locate Jake in the first place. And Jake had tried to protect Beck, keep him out of it. His belief he had no other choice but give in to the agent's blackmail was the direct result of Beck's insistence on the need to conceal their relationship.

No, Beck was mad as hell, but it wasn't Jake he was mad at. While Jake had been relating his past run-ins with Ravenwood, Beck had summoned to mind the rumors he'd heard in Afghanistan. Tales of American weapons being sold to the insurgents and used to kill American soldiers. Seemed those tales were true, after all.

Beck's jaw hurt, and he became conscious he was grinding his teeth together hard enough his muscles ached. He forced himself to relax, even

as he considered that he'd lost friends that way. *Friendly fire* had been the PR department's choice of the least embarrassing of two evils. After all, how could anyone ever take US troops seriously if they got killed by their own weapons, sold to the highest bidder by their own countrymen? No, better to claim a regrettable mistake had been made.

Jake was slowly climbing to his feet, bringing Beck back to the here and now. His shoulders were drawn up to his ears, and he'd put his hands in his pockets. Without meeting Beck's inquiring look, he scuffled toward the bedroom.

"Where are you going?" Beck managed to make it not sound like an accusation, like he wasn't done scolding Jake.

"Pack my things." Despite his tense bearing, Jake accomplished a shrug. He was still refusing to look at Beck. "Get out of your hair."

Beck pinched the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger. "Sit down, Jake. Don't be an idiot."

"But—."

"Do you *want* to get yourself killed?" Beck's anger flared as it found an outlet. "I said, sit down." He sucked in a deep breath to calm himself. "Please."

Jake did as he was told, if a little sullenly. The attitude would've been more convincing, Beck noted absently, if Jake hadn't also looked scared at the same time.

"I don't think Hicks will make trouble for you," Jake offered as he gingerly perched on the edge of the sofa, "not anymore. He hinted as much. So there's no need for you to get involved."

Beck scowled at Jake. "What kind of man do you take me for?" Did Jake honestly believe he was such a coward he'd run at the first sign of trouble and leave a friend to the wolves? Especially when said trouble was in part due to his own actions? "I *am* involved, whether you like it or not. No, don't." He held up a hand to forestall the protest he could see forming on Jake's lips.



Jake visibly swallowed down what he'd been getting ready to say, throat bobbing, and asked, "What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know." Beck moderated his tone to something less harsh. "Let me think for a minute."

Having ensured Jake wasn't going to do anything hair-brained and stupid for the next five minutes, Beck directed his focus inward. He locked away his fears, a trick he'd mastered over years of combat. There was no room for his personal feelings; they'd only get in the way of rational thinking. And he was sure that, if he put his mind to it, he could come up with a better option, a scheme less dangerous than Jake digging in deeper as he waited for Ravenwood to mess up. Jake's plan left too much to chance—and luck. Luck could turn both ways, far too easily. No, they had to take the fight to the enemy. Tactics 101: offense is the best defense.

Beck sat forward in his chair, planting both feet flat on the floor and curling his hands over his knees. "I need you to tell me everything: what happened after you landed in the jungle? What did you see? What did you hear?"

"You too?" Jake barked an incredulous laugh. "What's the point? I've been over this with Hicks all day yesterday. He says it's not enough."

"Humor me, please."

Jake showed no sign of doing as Beck asked.

"I know you think it's useless," Beck prodded, "but we need to devise a strategy to get these people off your back. If we can take Ravenwood down at the same time, so much the better." *And nobody else needs ever die again for their profits*, he added silently.

"We?" Jake snuck him another sideways glance, a look so filled with disbelieving hope that Beck wasn't sure whether to be offended or hurt, or if he should smack Jake for being such a fool.

"Dammit, Jake, of course, 'we'," he snapped. "You think I'd let you struggle with this alone? Especially when it's partly my fault you're in this mess to begin with?"

Jake tilted his head, clearly puzzled by Beck's last words. Beck scrubbed a palm over his jaw. He was tired; while Jake had slept the day away, Beck had spent a restless night on the couch and gotten up with the sun.

"I had someone investigate you," he confessed. "Months ago. I think that's what allowed this Hicks to find you." He paused, shaking his head. "Even if it didn't, I still wouldn't abandon you. You're—" Again, Beck paused, racking his brain to come up with a description that wouldn't sound too melodramatic. He wasn't used to talking about his feelings.

He didn't need to.

"Thank you." Jake's heartfelt whisper barely reached Beck's ears.

For reasons he didn't want to examine too closely, Beck's throat tightened. He swallowed to get rid of the lump. "Now," he cleared his throat, "please, will you tell me? Don't leave out any detail, no matter how unimportant it may seem."

## Chapter 10

The heat struck Jake as soon as he got out of the car: the glare of the July sun bouncing off of the concrete had turned the parking lot into an oven. Beads of moisture sprang up on his brow and he wiped them away with the back of his hand. Truth be told, the heat likely wasn't the only factor making him sweat. The ants crawling around in his belly were reminding him he was about to do a very dangerous thing: walk straight into the lion's den armed with nothing except the story he and Edward had concocted, and do it without any backup. If something went wrong, if Ravenwood didn't believe him, he'd be on his own. At least the heat provided him with a good excuse to be sweating.

The contented prattle of a small aircraft's engine broke the afternoon quiet, and Jake paused to watch a Cessna Skyhawk take off. He figured, with it being broad daylight and regular companies using the airport, he wouldn't be accosted by an armed Ravenwood guard while he was in the parking lot—unlike those two earlier times when he'd arrived in the middle of the night.

He made a beeline for the familiar hangar door, proving his supposition correct when he reached it without incident. The door was locked and he rapped his knuckles on it.

He had to knock twice more before it was cracked open an inch, and a suspicious eye squinted at him through the gap.

"Hey, Payton." Jake strove to appear at ease, as if it was perfectly normal for him to show up uninvited at Ravenwood's base of operations.

"Jake?" Payton pulled the door open wider. "What the heck are you doing here?"

"Need to talk to Goetz."

"He ain't here." Payton yawned and scrubbed a palm over his stubbled skull. "Jus' me and Sloan."

Jake felt a twinge of disappointment. The answer wasn't unexpected—Goetz wouldn't be hanging out with the foot soldiers guarding a bunch of

aircraft. But expectations hadn't prevented Jake from hoping the venture would go smoothly and he'd catch Goetz at the airfield. "Can you call him? It's important."

"I don't know that I should." Payton's voice trailed off uncertainly.

"Who's—What the fuck do *you* want?" Sloan had appeared behind Payton to see what was going on. As soon as he recognized Jake, he yanked Payton aside. The next instant, Jake was staring down the black barrel of a Glock. His heart rate sped up, and he resisted the urge to wipe his face dry again. *Stay calm*, he reminded himself. It wasn't as if he hadn't known the Ravenwood guys would be distrustful if he put in an unannounced appearance.

"Get the hell in, before someone sees you." Sloan gestured with the gun. Taking a breath, Jake squeezed past him into the hangar. It was a great deal cooler inside after the heat of the parking lot, but it didn't make him feel much better. The ants in his intestines had picked up their pace.

He tried to turn around and repeat his request he wanted to talk to Goetz. A hard object poking in his back, right above his kidneys, made him reconsider.

"Office." Sloan shoved him, and Jake stumbled a step toward the rear of the hangar. "Randy, call the boss. Tell him we caught his star pilot nosing round the premises."

"I wasn't—!" Jake began automatically. A repeat jab in his ribs with what he presumed was the Glock made him swallow the rest of his protest. Besides, he didn't need to convince Sloan of his intentions; he needed to talk to Goetz—and if Sloan was calling Goetz, he was already doing exactly what Jake wanted. Without further protest, he started down the length of the hangar, heading toward the office.

"Sit." As soon as Jake entered the office, Sloan gave him another shove and clamped a hand on Jake's shoulder to force him down onto the hard-backed chair in front of the desk.

"Look, I—."

"Shut up. Hands behind your back."

"Now, wait a—."

For the third time, Sloan didn't let Jake finish. He wrenched Jake's arms together painfully and, before Jake could voice any further protest, cuffed his wrists together.

"Ow," Jake complained, struggling to keep his fear down and stay in the role he was supposed to be playing.

Sloan snickered cruelly as he made himself comfortable on the desk chair, watching Jake through hooded eyes.

o0o

For the next five hours, the clock on the wall ticked off the seconds slowly. Jake's ass grew numb from the hard chair he was sitting on, and his shoulders protested the awkward position he was forced to keep his arms. Every time he tried to speak, Sloan, slouched across from him, lifted the gun a fraction, and Jake snapped his mouth shut again. There was nothing to do but wait and see what came next.

At least he was still alive, which he reckoned was something. And he and Edward had guessed it wouldn't be anywhere near as simple as Jake walking into the hangar, delivering his proposal to Goetz, and walking out and driving home. So Edward wasn't expecting Jake to call him with news until the day was out, at the earliest.

Not that Beck had liked it one bit that he'd had to let Jake seek out Ravenwood without support. Initially, when they'd brainstormed the plan, they'd counted on Hicks to provide backup, to protect Jake in case something went wrong. But when they'd put the plan to Hicks—who'd suggested they meet in a sunny park in downtown Rochester, like a bunch of conspirators in a bad spy novel—the agent had shaken his head. "I can't be involved in this."

Sloan got up, the movement snapping Jake back from the memory of the meeting with Hicks to his current situation. Wondering what Sloan was up to, Jake stiffened—and then relaxed when the other man merely went to the water cooler in the corner to get a cup of water. Jake licked his lips; the air-conditioned air in the office was making his throat tickle. Sloan didn't

offer Jake any of the water—no big surprise. He returned to his seat behind the desk.

Jake wondered where Payton had gone off to—presumably he was on guard in the hangar, or keeping an eye out for Goetz. At least, he assumed they'd called Goetz. It was all he could hope for. If Jake could lay out his proposal to him, he stood a chance. Goetz was smart enough to see the advantages, and greedy enough he might fall for it. Jake just needed to hang on until Goetz got to the airfield.

To keep his fear at bay and press down on the panic that threatened to rise up inside him, Jake went over the plan in his mind again. After he'd bared his soul to Edward, told him the shameful secrets from his past, the other man had made him describe every single meeting he'd had with Goetz and Ravenwood so many times and in so much detail that Jake wasn't sure who'd grilled him harder, Hicks or Edward.

"I think you're right," Edward had said at last, hours into the night. "They're too smart to make the kind of mistake Hicks needs."

Jake had huffed miserably. "Told you it was hopeless." Admitting defeat had earned him a sharp look from Edward and he'd shrugged. "Sorry."

A twitch of the head as Edward got to his feet had indicated he'd accepted Jake's apology. He'd walked over to the kitchen table, where the files were, staring down at the manilla folder for a minute without opening it. "So we take the fight to them."

Jake's stomach growled, loud in the quiet office, reminding him he hadn't eaten anything since early morning. A glance at the clock told him it was now late afternoon. The growl was evidently loud enough for Sloan to pick up: he snorted in amusement, before considering Jake for a minute. Jake struggled not to shift on his chair again; the cold, calculating speculation in Sloan's eyes made him feel like a rat mesmerized by a snake's slitted stare, right before the snake struck.

Despite his efforts to stay still, Jake flinched as Sloan got to his feet abruptly. Ignoring Jake, Sloan walked out of the office without a word.

Instinctively, Jake tested the cuffs as soon as Sloan was gone. He chuckled wryly as he found the bonds were snugged tight around his wrists. He

hadn't expected otherwise. Besides, he had no intention of making an escape—not until he'd talked to Goetz. He just didn't like the helplessness that came with being tied up, or being at the mercy of men like Sloan.

He had nobody but himself to blame for his predicament, though. After Edward had suggested they lure Ravenwood out into the open and had laid out his idea for how to do that, Jake's first reaction had been to refuse. "Even if it goes right, it could so easily cost you your career. And if it goes bad—" Jake hadn't finished, but he hadn't needed to spell it out. If the plan went wrong, Edward stood to lose a lot more than his career: he could end up in jail, or worse.

To Jake's shock, Edward had walked over to where Jake stood, propped against the back of the sofa. He'd rested a warm hand on Jake's shoulder. "My career and my freedom don't matter as much as your life, Jake."

Discomfited with the show of deference, Jake had barked an embarrassed laugh, and muttered that Edward was being given the short end of the stick. Edward hadn't reacted; he'd merely squeezed Jake's shoulder and told him to call Hicks so they could set up a meeting.

Sloan reappeared, carrying a cardboard box, the kind used by bakeries. He set the box down on the desk, in full view of Jake, and opened it. It was half-full with donuts. Slowly reaching in, Sloan gingerly lifted one of them out. Taking a big bite, he caught Jake's gaze as he chewed, silently challenging him, taunting him with his hunger. Jake glowered back. It'd have been funny if he weren't getting so damned uncomfortable. At some point while they waited, Jake's bladder had joined the rest of the chorus of protests from his body. He fidgeted uncomfortably on the chair.

It couldn't be much longer until Goetz got here, could it?

Jake was right; not long after Sloan had begun tormenting him with the donuts, a door slammed somewhere in the building. A minute later, footsteps clattered on the hard floor, coming closer. A second after that, Goetz waltzed in. He shot Jake a fiery scowl before addressing Sloan.

"What's this?"

Sloan licked the sugar off his fingertips and gestured at Jake. "Caught him snooping."

Jake puffed out an exaggerated a breath, hoping he wasn't overdoing the annoyance. "Wasn't snooping," he muttered.

"Shut up." Goetz cast him another dark look. "I'll get to you next." Jake shrugged, instantly regretting it as a sharp pain stabbed through his shoulders. He clenched his teeth together to bite back an involuntary yelp.

"And?" Goetz prodded Sloan.

Sloan explained how he'd come across Payton talking to Jake. "I'da shot him, but I figured you'd wanna talk to him first."

"You bet I do." Goetz turned to Jake. "Your story?"

Jake wriggled up straighter, ignoring the pain. He pointed out his cuffed wrists with a jerk of his chin across his shoulder. "You mind getting these off? They kinda hurt."

Goetz scoffed dismissively, but to Jake's relief, he waved at Sloan to untie Jake. As the steel cuffs fell away, Jake rolled his shoulders, joints crackling, and rubbed at his wrists. Pins and needles pricked his flesh as the blood flow was restored and he glanced ruefully at the red skin where the metal had chafed him. Sloan retreated to jam a shoulder against the far wall, leaving the interrogation to Goetz.

"I'm waiting," Goetz reminded Jake.

"Like I tried to tell your pitbull over there, I wasn't snooping," Jake began. "Ask Payton. I came to talk to you. I got a proposal to make." He shifted his gaze from Goetz to Sloan and glowered. "Not sure I still want to."

Goetz uttered a snort. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't appreciate people shoving guns in my face." Jake directed his attention back to Goetz. "Especially people who're supposed to be on the same team."

"You should've thought of that before you got it in your mind to drop by uninvited." Goetz crossed his arms and settled his butt against the desk. "Besides, you're not on our team."



"Whatever." Jake massaged his sore shoulders. "How else was I supposed to get in touch with you?"

"You weren't," Goetz snarled. "You're the hired help. You wait until we call you. Got it?"

"Sure." Jake back on the hard chair and gave Goetz a sulky look. "You're the boss." He tilted his head. "So, you wanna hear my proposal or not?"

Goetz considered Jake for a long minute, his expression unreadable. Jake reminded himself to keep breathing.

"I'm listening."

Jake heaved an inward sigh of relief—he must've played his role right. "I overheard you and that Colombian talking." Sloan started forward threateningly. "Hey," Jake held up his hands, "I was checking on the plane. If you don't want anyone to hear what you're talking about, you shouldn't be discussing business out in the open."

Goetz waved at Sloan to step away. "Go on."

"Sounded to me like you're having trouble meeting demand." Jake dropped his hands back in his lap. "I can help with that."

Goetz's brows rose.

"I know a guy," Jake continued. "An army major. He's got a beef. Got passed over for promotion a few times. Now he wants a nest egg before he retires. He can get hold of what you need, the missiles." Jake smirked. "For a fee, of course. I hear those Javelins are worth a buck or two."

"I've no idea what you're talking about." Contrary to his words, spoken mildly, Goetz's eyes had narrowed dangerously, and his face was flushed. He leaned forward, his scrutiny intense as he looked Jake up and down, as if trying to see into Jake's soul. "What are you up to, Jake? Tryin' to trick us?" Goetz straightened. "Sloan!" He barked the order without giving Jake the opportunity to deny the accusation. "Check him."

Sloan hauled Jake roughly to his feet. Jake's heart thudded against his

ribs, a burst of adrenaline flooding through him. He was so prepped for fight or flight, it took a conscious effort not to resist when Sloan merely rucked up his T-shirt, likely checking for a wire, before running his palms along Jake's legs and ankles, patting him down.

Jake was suddenly glad Hicks had refused to give them any aid. When they'd asked, the agent had sighed deeply. "No. Officially, I can't know anything about anything."

"You bastard," Jake had snarled in response. Edward was risking everything so Hicks could put Ravenwood behind bars, and the agent would simply leave them hanging in the wind if the plan went wrong?

"For Heaven's sake, Jake, gimme break," Hicks had snapped back. "I've been trying to take down Ravenwood for years. Don't you think I already tried something along the lines you're suggesting?"

Jake had opened his mouth to argue further, but Edward had been faster. "What happened?"

Hicks had pulled in a breath, shrugging. "Ravenwood didn't buy it. Good people died. I haven't gotten permission to try again since."

"So, don't ask for permission," Jake had spat.

"Really?" Hicks had given him a parody of a smile. "A sting op without permission from my superiors? It'd be entrapment, get thrown out of court so fast it'd make your head spin. Then where would we be?" Jake had reluctantly had to admit the wisdom in Hicks' words.

Finished with his search, Sloan shoved Jake back down into the chair hard enough that Jake's teeth clacked together. "He's clean."

"Hm." Goetz considered Jake again, his eyes hard and difficult to read. Jake tried not to fidget.

"You're more perceptive than I figured." Goetz spoke slowly, and Jake held his breath. He'd laid out his cards, exposed himself. Goetz either snapped up the bait or decided Jake knew too much and needed to be disposed of. Probably by Sloan. "What's in it for you?" Goetz sat down on the edge of the desk again.

Relief so strong it made him dizzy flooded through Jake. He took a gulp of air, not entirely able to keep the breath from stuttering. Goetz didn't seem to notice. "Money, what else?" Jake injected as much mockery as he could into his tone, as if he thought the question a dumb one. "He's gonna give me a part of his cut, and hey, I figured you're gonna need a pilot to fly the things to South America."

Goetz uttered a snort. "Gettin' paid twice, are you?"

Jake crossed his arms. "I multi-task."

"Who is this major?"

"Can't tell you his name. Yet. You understand that, right?" Jake peered up at Goetz and waited until Goetz gave a reluctant nod.

"How'd you know him?" The questions came fast and clipped.

"Through a helicopter pilot, was in my class at Embry-Riddle." Goetz would know that was where Jake got his license. "Ran into the guy again in Iraq. We kept in touch since."

"Hm." Again, Goetz was silent for a minute or two. This time, Jake failed to keep motionless on the chair. He wanted to get out desperately: he wasn't sure how much longer he could keep his fear contained and carry on pretending to be here for the money.

"Hey," he decided to help the issue along, "I know this is out of the blue. But this guy's for real." He paused a moment, before throwing in his final card. "He's willing to meet with you, or your boss, in person, to talk specifics."

He and Edward had agreed: Ravenwood would want to check out their potential new partner before they agreed to anything. Jake would have vastly preferred it if a simple chat had been all that was needed, that taping it would be enough to bring down Ravenwood, and Edward wouldn't be required to actually steal those missiles from the US Army. Hicks had cured him of his illusions pretty quickly.

"You can't fake this," he'd warned them. "They'll want to see the real

merchandise, make sure you're on the up and up, or they'll never risk exposing themselves. And even then, you might never get to see the guys calling the shots. They're slippery bastards. For me to make it stick, I'd need to catch them red-handed: their paws on your missiles."

As if to prove to Jake that Ravenwood were a cautious bunch, Goetz pushed up from the desk and instructed him, "Stay put." He showed no indication of whether he was willing to take Jake and Edward up on their offer for a meeting. "Keep an eye on him." The last, as Goetz left the room, was addressed at Sloan, who smirked in Jake's direction, before taking up position in front of the door, the only way in or out of the office.

Jake got up from the chair creakily, pretending not to notice Sloan's tensing his grip around his gun. He'd been on that damned chair for long enough, and his legs were wobbly as he took a pace—although, Jake admitted, that might be from the stress as well. Glancing at Sloan from under his lashes, Jake deliberately reached for the donut box.

The chocolate-sprinkled donut he caught up was stale and not at all tasty, and Jake had trouble swallowing the dry crumbs. To be honest, he needed to pee far more urgently than he needed to eat—but he refused to display any sign of weakness in front of Sloan. He could hold it for a while longer. More than that, he reckoned he needed to demonstrate he wasn't cowed by Sloan; snatching a donut was the quickest way he could come up with. Well, that or going toe-to-toe with the guy, but he was sharply aware the Ravenwood guard was armed, and he wasn't.

At last, Goetz returned, giving Jake the excuse to drop the rest of the donut back in the box. "When can I meet this guy?" He held up a hand to forestall Jake's answer. "Just to talk to him."

"Give me a couple days." The donut settled more comfortably in Jake's belly. He was careful to keep his feelings from his face; it wasn't a done deal yet. Goetz grimaced at Jake's answer, the first indication Jake had that Ravenwood *wanted* this deal to be real. "He couldn't be sure you'd be interested."

Goetz nodded his acceptance. "I'll call you, day after tomorrow. That good enough?"

"Why don't I call you?" Jake attempted. Goetz laughed. "Okay, whatever

you want."

Driving off into the dusk at last, it was an effort not to step on the gas and hightail it out of the airport. But Jake knew Goetz would be watching from the shadowed hangar: he'd been able to feel those cold eyes boring into the back of his skull every step of the way from the door to where he'd left his car.

As soon as he'd left the airport behind, though, and he was sure nobody was following him, Jake pulled over onto the shoulder of the road. He tumbled from the car before it had come to a full stop and vomited up the stale donut. Once his stomach had settled, he went somewhere a little more private to empty his bladder, sighing in relief. With his immediate needs taken care of, he climbed back behind the wheel, discovering he was shaking badly enough he was having trouble turning the ignition key.

He hadn't been this scared since Saffa.

oOo

Bo had suggested they use his bar for the initial meeting between Goetz and Edward. "Familiar ground," he'd argued, once he got over the shock of hearing what trouble Jake had brought and how Edward planned to solve it. "Time and place of our choosing." Edward had grudgingly agreed to it.

They'd driven over to Bo's directly from the park where they'd met Hicks, Edward curtly stating they needed help if they were to pull off his plan. He'd left unspoken the observation that, with the Feds washing their hands of the operation, Bo was the only one he could turn to. Jake had remained quietly hunched in the passenger seat during the drive, worried sick but unable to come up with any counter-suggestions.

The bar had still been closed when they arrived, but Bo was there, readying the place for business. He'd greeted them warmly as he unlocked the door, until he got a good look at Edward's somber expression and Jake's bleak one. His smile had faded. "Not a social visit, huh?" he understood instantly, stepping aside to let them in.

"So, I reckon he got you into trouble?" Bo had asked five minutes later, the slight jerk in Jake's direction making it clear who he was talking about. They were seated at a table out of sight of anyone passing by the bar, a

bottle of scotch and three glasses between them.

"I'm not," Edward said quietly. "Jake is."

Bo rolled his eyes, as if he hadn't expected anything else. Old annoyances stirred within Jake. But Bo's next words took him off-guard. "Don't say I didn't warn ya."

Edward caught Jake's confusion and clarified, "Remember I said I had someone research you?" He offered Jake a regretful shrug. "I asked Bo. He had a friend put together a file."

"A file?" Jake swallowed, hard. That sounded far more ominous than what he'd imagined. He finally understood why Bo at times had seemed so ill-disposed toward him: Bo must've seen the information. But then—. "You already knew...?"

"Some of the things you told me?" Edward dipped his head. "Yes, I did."

"And you didn't...?" Again, Jake didn't finish the question. He was stunned: why hadn't Edward kicked him out the door long ago?

"Break it off? Obviously, no." Edward smiled gently. "None of it mattered to me, Jake. It was in the past."

Bo sucked in air through his nose, reminding them of his presence. "It didn't stay there, did it." It wasn't a question.

"No, it didn't." While Jake was still processing the fact Edward had learned more about Jake than he'd let on, Edward described the situation to his former sergeant, telling him Jake had tried to handle Hicks and Ravenwood alone, stressing Jake had done so in an attempt to protect Edward's career.

"Pffft. That's a nasty business." Bo reached for the bottle and poured them a fresh round. "What you gonna do? You got a plan, right?"

The smile that curved Edward's mouth had not been a pleasant one. "I do. And I need your help with it."

Once Edward had finished laying out the details for the sting operation he

and Jake had concocted, Bo had shoved his seat back, chair legs scraping across the floorboards. "Goddammit, Beck. You wanna steal weapons from the US military and sell 'em to those mercenary smugglers? Are you out of your mind?" He angled forward, putting his face close to Edward's. "You're willing to risk everything you worked for? For this—this—" He aimed a finger at Jake, shaking with anger.

"That's enough." To the casual listener, Edward's voice might have sounded calm, composed. Under the surface, Jake detected the suppressed fury. It wasn't lost on Bo, either, and he snapped his mouth shut before he finished what he'd been about to say. A vein throbbed in his neck, indicating the effort it cost him.

Jake was unable to stay silent any longer. "This is a mistake." Bo and Edward had known each other a long time and his skin wasn't worth the sacrifice of their friendship.

"Hush, Jake." Edward didn't look at him, instead giving Bo back stare for stare, until Bo sank down on his chair. Calmly, Edward declared, "I'm not proposing we steal anything. I'm proposing we pretend to steal."

Bo barked a bitter laugh and grabbed his glass, throwing back the contents in a single gulp. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "As if that'd make any difference to the brass."

"I know." Wry humor tugging at his lips, Edward puffed up his cheeks. "And I know I'm asking a lot. I'll understand if you don't want to get involved. But if you want to get mad, Jake's not the right target. That's the thugs making a fortune selling our missiles to the highest bidder. Missiles that one day may get our guys killed."

"Jesus." Breath whooshed from Bo's lungs. "Dammit, Beck, you fight dirty."

"I have no choice." It was Edward's turn to lean across the table. "Don't get me wrong, sergeant. I don't like getting dragged into this any more than you do. But we got a chance to shut these people down. And I plan to take it. I need you for that." He went on staring at Bo intently until the other man gave a reluctant nod.

It turned out all the guys Bo enlisted for their team had served under Edward at one time or another. As they scrambled to get the bar ready for

the meeting, Jake eavesdropped on a number of exchanges mentioning 'Lieutenant' Beck, or, in one case, 'Captain' Beck saving everyone's life. "There we were, pinned down in a damned ditch in fuckin' Somalia, tryin' to keep safe a bunch of whimperin' do-gooders cryin' for their mamas. Capt'n kept his cool, sends a bunch of us round to flank the bastards, firing like mad to distract 'em. We ain't lost nobody that day."

The storyteller clammed up as soon as he became aware Jake was listening, grumbling something Jake wasn't able to make out, before the men dispersed to finish their tasks, leaving Jake to his own company. It was obvious Bo's men weren't impressed with him.

Jake didn't care; it was the price he had to pay for Bo's support. To safeguard Edward's secret, Bo had spun his buddies the tale that Jake had come to him for help, and that he—Bo—had been the one to involve Edward in the plan. For the rest, they'd been told the plain truth. As the men had filed in over the course of the day, and Edward had thanked each of them, most had shrugged him off, hiding embarrassment under brash declarations of 'getting the bastards'—while darting peeks in Jake's direction that ran the gamut from openly curious to deeply wary.

During an interlude in the frantic preparation, Jake had brought up the stories with Edward. "Exaggerations," Edward had muttered, looking pained. Jake had grinned, glad for the chance to get his mind off of his troubles. He'd heard enough to know that the guys held a great deal of respect for Edward—far more than usual, if he compared what they were saying to the way the troops he'd hung out with in Iraq used to bitch about their commanding officers.

At last, shortly before opening time, the preparations were finished. Two men were setting up a game of pool in the back, while the others were dispersing to various tables and bar stools, ready to blend in with Bo's regular customers.

They'd never have been able to pull off the operation without Bo's aid, Jake reflected. He'd proved a fount of ingenuity and ideas and, with the men scattered around the premises, Jake was reassured Edward would be as safe as he could be. Because, no matter that they'd picked a time and place of their choosing, Goetz would be mistrustful and cagey—and that meant dangerous.



"Are you getting this?" To an outsider, Edward gave the impression he was speaking into thin air, but Jake knew he was testing the microphones hidden in the padding of the booth and behind the framed black-and-white photos of Rochester harbor on the wall nearby. From the shelves behind the bar, nestled between the tequila and vodka bottles, a camera eye was pointing straight at the booth they were in, ready to capture any move Goetz might make.

A thin-faced man with gray tufts of hair sticking out over his ears ducked out from the stock room and gave Edward a thumbs-up. "Loud and clear." The sound technician disappeared again.

Jake resisted the desire to squint at the shelves to see if he could detect the camera lens. "Looks like you got a good crew together," he told Bo. The barman was lounging on a nearby stool, waiting for Edward to be done with the testing so he could open up.

In response, Bo flashed Jake a stare that clearly said Jake wasn't helping his case and that Bo still considered him to be an obnoxious moron.

Jake grimaced. He hadn't meant the words the way they'd sounded. "That's not..." He shrugged without completing his explanation. "Thanks."

Bo gave Jake another sharp look, before he lowered his head almost imperceptibly in acceptance. Jake breathed out; he liked Bo, and the barman's opinion of him mattered.

"Did you talk to Hoffman?" Bo directed his attention back to Edward.

Having confirmed the nearby microphones were in working order, Edward folded his hands together on the table's surface. "Yes."

He had insisted he inform his commanding officer of the plan, prompting Jake to remind him Hicks had said Ravenwood had friends in high places.

"Not Hoffman," Edward had shaken his head to underscore his assertion. "He's too above board to be in anyone's pocket."

Bo had uttered a noise that could've been agreement as easily as a denial, but otherwise had kept out of the discussion.

"Then why tell him at all?" If the colonel was such a straight arrow, Jake failed to see how the benefits of telling him outweighed the risk: the colonel could shut down the entire operation before they'd gotten started.

Edward had pointed out patiently he'd have to deceive his men to pull off the sting. "If things go bad, Hoffman can make sure they don't get caught in the fall-out."

"What did he say?" Bo prompted, when it seemed Edward wasn't going to elaborate on Hoffman's reaction.

"Did he agree?" Jake asked eagerly. A US Army colonel on their side would be as good as Hicks giving them support.

"He's ducking." Edward's reply dashed Jake's hopes. "Says he can't know what we're up to." He made a rueful face. "But he did give me a long lecture on how well documented any missile transport is, and pointed out, in some detail, the best method to get ahold of a load of Javelins without instantly setting off alarms."

Bo snorted a laugh, scrubbing a palm across his skull. "I bet you ten bucks he'll want the credit if this goes right."

"Yeah." Edward's mouth quirked crookedly again. "Success has many fathers."

"And failure's an orphan." Bo barked an additional harsh laugh. He slid from the stool and gestured at the door. "Time to get the show on the road."

Jake glanced at his watch: it was opening time, and a half hour until Goetz was supposed to arrive. He gnawed nervously on his thumb, until Edward nudged him with his knee under the table. Flushing, Jake dropped his hands. He hated waiting.

oOo

An hour passed and Goetz still hadn't put in an appearance. Jake's nerves were frayed raw; he was terrified he'd messed up setting up the deal after all, and that Goetz wasn't gonna show up. He couldn't understand how Edward could appear so cool—only a close observer would've caught the

occasional twitch of a muscle in Edward's jaw, the single outward sign of his inner anxiety.

The door outside opened again to admit new customers and Sloan barged in. Jake fought to suppress a sigh of relief. "They're here," he muttered under his breath. Edward didn't give any sign he'd heard, other than a slight twitch of his hands where they lay on the table.

Sloan surveyed the bar, his height giving him a good overview of the entire room. By now, the bar packed a sizable crowd of customers, most oblivious to what was going on. Spotting Jake and Beck, Sloan backed out.

What the hell? Jake didn't dare look at Edward.

Five minutes later, Goetz came in, followed an instant later by Sloan. As Goetz made as straight a line for Jake's booth as he could, weaving through the crowd, Sloan hoisted himself up on an empty bar stool, gesturing to Bo for a beer.

"Jake." Goetz nodded curtly, before turning toward Edward. "And this is...?"

"Beck," Jake finished for him. "The man I told you about." He sketched a wave. "This is John Goetz."

Edward took in Goetz, appearing unimpressed. "You're the man in charge?"

Goetz uttered a wry snort. "You could say that. At least as far as you're concerned."

"Hm." Edward made a scornful noise, cocking his head as if considering Goetz further. "I guess you'll do." He arched an eyebrow. "I do hope your bosses pay you well."

"What?" Goetz looked confused at the question. "Enough. Why?"

"Plausible deniability, and all that." Edward smiled mockingly. "If I were setting you up, it'd be your ass in the wind, not theirs."

Goetz's confusion changed to worry and he cast an uncertain glance toward Jake. He made as if to say something, and then apparently thought

better of it.

Edward went on in the same mild tone, "Fortunately, for you, I'm not. I have the same interest as you do in keeping this meeting just between us." He shifted his attention to Jake. "Why don't you get us a bottle of Jameson? And then make yourself scarce while I talk to Mr Goetz."

Jake got to his feet slowly, ignoring the smug twitch of Goetz's mouth as Jake was treated like a drudge. As Jake walked over to the bar, Edward invited Goetz to the seat Jake had vacated. "Please, sit."

Goetz could smirk all he wanted. Jake's reluctance had nothing to do with the cavalier tone Edward had used to send him away—he was supposed to merely be the middle man, after all. No, he simply didn't want to leave Edward alone with Goetz. The man was a slippery bastard. But he'd been forced to admit that it would be weird if he stayed for the negotiations.

Procuring a bottle and a pair of glasses from Bo, he took them over to the booth. Glancing around as he set the bottle down, he did a mental count of the men watching Edward's back. They blended in well; if he hadn't known they were there, he'd never noticed anything unusual.

With the whiskey delivered, Jake withdrew to a stool at the far end of the bar. From there, he could oversee the whole room. To keep his gaze from drifting constantly to where Edward was talking to Goetz, which might draw attention to the pair, he contented himself with staring at Sloan, sneaking furtive glances at Edward from under his lashes instead.

Without being able to pick up a single word that was said over the general din in the bar, those peeks told Jake that Edward was having an intense talk with Goetz. For a while, Jake wasn't sure if the negotiations were going as hoped—Goetz shook his head unhappily a few times. At last, Goetz pushed to his feet. Jake tensed. From the corner of his eye, he caught Sloan reacting similarly.

Edward followed Goetz's example, sticking out his hand. Clearly surprised, Goetz gawked down at it, as if he didn't know what to do. Giving a shrug, he extended his own hand to shake Edward's.

Did that mean they'd struck a deal? Jake chose to take it as a good sign, and as his clue to rejoin the two men at the booth.

"You take it up with your superiors. But remember: this is a one-time offer," Edward was saying to Goetz as Jake reached them. He kept his voice low. "Jake'll let you know when the exchange can happen. You can confirm your agreement of the price to him."

He slid Jake one of the cardboard coasters that lay scattered on the table, a phone number written on it in sloppy digits. Jake recognized the handwriting: it was the same as the note with the new coordinates that he'd been given on his second flight confirming the note had been written by Goetz.

"Pleasure doing business with you," Edward concluded.

Goetz grunted something that sounded like agreement. He swiveled on his heel, jerking his head for Sloan to follow him. A minute later, the door fell shut behind the pair.

Jake slid into the booth, taking the seat Goetz had vacated. The vinyl was still warm. "How did it go?"

Edward awarded him one of his rare full smiles. "Exactly as planned." He pointed his chin at the door. "Greedy as hell, that one. I wouldn't be surprised if he's arranging an extra cut for himself, telling his superiors my price is higher than I asked for."

Jake sniffed: it certainly wouldn't surprise him, either. He wanted to ask for details, wanted to know if the recording devices had picked up the conversation. But they'd have to wait for closing time. He was satisfied on one point, though: Edward had raised his head and, twisting to follow where he looked, Jake saw the gray-haired technician ambling out of the stock room. He gave them a slight nod to indicate he'd caught and taped everything. His expression was grim, jaw set with anger, as he accepted the shot Bo pushed at him, clearly unhappy with what he'd heard.

Ten minutes passed while Jake and Edward waited silently. Then the door opened, and Jake recognized another member of Bo's team walking in. The new arrival also sought Edward's gaze, nodding once in confirmation. *They're gone*, that nod said.

Jake exchanged a glance with Edward, letting out a long, slow breath.

Looked like Goetz had swallowed the bait, hook, line and sinker. Now all that remained was for his bosses to agree the plan.

## Chapter 11

The sky was overcast, low-hanging clouds threatening rain. Beck pulled the jeep he'd commandeered over onto the shoulder of the country road and killed the engine. He got out, surveying the scene in front of him. An old pickup stood a dozen yards ahead of where he'd parked, half on the shoulder and left at an angle that would allow it to be quickly moved to block the road. A cluster of men, half of them active reservists in uniform, the rest dressed in army surplus kit, milled around the pickup with the quiet ease of veterans readying for action. At a cursory glance, the smattering of camouflage and olive green made them look like real soldiers. Beck was pleased to detect no weapons in sight, though he knew they would be close to hand. He'd prefer to do this without the use of force—as, he knew, would every single man on the crew Bo had put together.

He easily picked out the tall, broad form of his old friend among the ex-soldiers. Catching Bo's eye across the distance, he nodded grimly to convey his compliments: the set-up looked good. Bo snapped out some last minute instructions to his team, before coming to meet Beck between the jeep and the truck.

"All set," he said, confirming Beck's impression. He hesitated visibly, made as if to say something else, apparently reconsidered, and remained silent.

Beck tugged at his fatigues. Bo didn't need words to express his doubts; they were clear from his expression. And if Beck had had any say about it, he wouldn't have done it this way, either. In the beginning, he'd hoped Ravenwood simply striking a deal with a battalion's HHC XO to deliver two dozen Javelins would give Hicks all the proof he needed to get the mercenaries convicted. Hicks had quickly dashed those hopes, stating he'd have to catch Ravenwood in the act of buying, or they'd be back to square one as soon as Goetz and his buddies lawyered up.

"I can't risk them making off with legit US Army ammo," Beck had protested, horrified.

"I agree." Hicks nodded. "That's why you need Jake."

Beck had liked that idea even less. Jake had already exposed himself to

Ravenwood far more than Beck was comfortable with; he didn't want to put him in their sights further. "No."

To Beck's chagrin, Jake ignored him and asked Hicks, "What do I need to do?"

"Jake...." Beck cautioned.

"I'm not letting you drag the coals out of the fire by yourself any more than you'd let me." Jake's eyes flashed passionately, daring Beck to deny him.

Beck held up a placating hand. "Okay. You have a point."

"If you plan to continue this scheme," Hicks clarified, without needing to be prompted further, "Jake has to be the pilot flying Ravenwood's plane. That way you," he dipped his head at Beck, "can be sure to keep control over the weapons. Even if, for some reason, they make off with the cargo."

"Unless they decide to shoot the pilot," Beck objected glumly.

"They won't." It was Jake who answered him. "Edward, if they had someone capable of flying the plane, they wouldn't have needed me in the first place."

And that had settled the matter of Jake's involvement. At least Beck could be reasonably sure nobody at Fort Drum would throw up a stink if the weapons transport was late. Hoffman had given him the idea to mark the transport as a training exercise in dealing with road snags and detours. The guys at the armory had been told not to be alarmed if the missiles didn't arrive at the officially scheduled time. If everything went as planned, nobody at the base apart from Hoffman would ever be any the wiser as to the real reason for the delay.

If something went wrong—. Beck prevented the train of thought from running its full course. He knew the risks; everyone who'd signed up did. And each man on his team had come to the conclusion that the potential reward—stopping Ravenwood from dealing arms to enemy insurgents—outweighed those risks. If they hadn't, they wouldn't have been here.

The distant rumble of heavy diesel engines broke the quiet of the afternoon. Bo met Beck's gaze and, at Beck's tiny nod, muttered, "Let's do



this." He turned away to warn his crew to roll the pickup in place, but didn't need to give the order: they had heard the convoy approaching as well and were already moving. In seconds, the truck blocked the road completely so no other vehicle would be able to squeeze by.

They waited, Bo standing silently beside Beck while the sound of the engines grew louder. Beck's mouth went dry. So much hinged on his ability to convince the lieutenant commanding the transport to give up the missiles. And he didn't even know who the officer in charge was. It had made it difficult to prepare what tack he should use.

He went over his options in his mind a final time. No matter what, he wanted to keep the men escorting the missiles out of the actual operation. Unlike Bo's vets, they hadn't volunteered for this, and Beck didn't want to leave them trapped between the proverbial rock and hard place. It wouldn't be fair to any of them. His best bet was to simply pull rank and order the lieutenant to relinquish the weapons to Beck as a senior officer. At least that way he'd be able to protect the hapless officer's career in some small measure.

If it didn't work, if the lieutenant wanted to confirm Beck's orders with the base—. Beck briefly closed his eyes. If it didn't work, they'd have to take the missiles by force; he simply couldn't allow the convoy's commander to compel him to abandon the sting. It'd be impossible to set up a second time, even if he could convince Goetz to give him another try. And Jake was with Ravenwood, preparing to fly the smugglers' plane from their Ohio base to the rendezvous point, an abandoned airfield in upstate New York. If Beck didn't deliver, he had no doubt who'd bear the brunt of the mercenaries' anger.

The transport was rolling around the bend in the road and coming into view: two deuce-and-a-halves, accompanied by a pair of humvees, one in front, and one bringing up the rear. Finding the road barred, the convoy slowed to a stop. Beck's heart sank as he recognized the lieutenant who jumped from the passenger seat of the leading humvee and he cursed his luck. Of all the officers the army could've put on the escort, they had to pick the smartest one. He instantly abandoned his plan to try and pull rank; Lieutenant Sorey was far too clever to fall for such a ruse. He'd wonder what reason Beck would have for taking his missiles, especially with the ragtag crew behind him; it'd be impossible for Beck to fool Sorey into accepting them as being assigned from another battalion or brigade.

No, only two options were left him: convince Sorey to give up the missiles willingly, or take them by force. The first could prove to be impossible, and the latter could so easily result in bloodshed.

Not for the first time, Beck wondered what arrogance has possessed him to believe he could pull off the sting operation. But he was committed; no way to back out of it now.

In spite of feeling he was leading everyone into a catastrophe, Beck was proud to see that the lieutenant, supposedly on friendly soil, took no chances. Coming upon half a dozen grim-faced men and an old pickup blocking his path, he was evidently sharply aware he was carrying a valuable load. Eyes narrowed under his helmet as he surveyed the situation, Sorey gave orders to his men to get out of their vehicles. They spread out, weapons at the ready, the soldiers tense, unsure of what was going on and eying Bo's men warily. Bo's men stared back impassively, seemingly unimpressed with the display of arms.

"Lieutenant!" Squaring his shoulders, Beck strode forward into the open ground between the pickup and the front humvee, pointedly ignoring the muzzles swinging in his direction. He knew he had to resolve the matter quickly with Sorey; half the troops were new recruits and one nervous finger on a trigger could spiral the whole undertaking out of control.

Sorey turned in his direction at the hail. "Major Beck?" Both eyebrows crawled up to the young lieutenant's hairline as he recognized his commanding officer. "What—?" He caught himself and saluted. "Sir."

Beck acknowledged the salute. "At ease, lieutenant." Sorey relaxed a fraction, although he and his troops still regarded Beck and Bo's crew warily. Beck felt a fresh surge of pride in his men: faced with an abnormal situation, it required more than the simple if unexpected presence of a familiar officer for them to let their guard down.

"Lieutenant Sorey, I'm going to need to borrow your transport."

Sorey blinked, puzzled. "Sir?"

Beck gave him a small, reassuring smile. "I'll explain everything." He took Sorey to the side, where they couldn't be overheard by the humvee's driver, a corporal, or any of the other men in Sorey's command, and

described the situation in a low voice.

"Sir? I don't understand." The lieutenant looked dubious as Beck finished. "Why does NSA need us? Isn't this their, um, their jurisdiction?"

Beck puffed out a breath. "It's... complicated."

"And—and," Sorey dropped his voice to a whisper. "What about Posse Comitatus? We're not supposed to—."

"Lieutenant." Beck broke in before Sorey could fully express his objections. Sorey had a good argument. Irrelevant, under the circumstances, but good. However, Beck didn't have time to debate the issue further with him. Behind him, he sensed the growing impatience from Bo and his crew, the men starting to fidget as they waited. While the country road they were on saw almost no traffic, they needed to remove the roadblock as soon as possible. Any second, someone could drive into their hijack and it'd blow up in all their faces. Time to apply a different tactic. He caught the lieutenant's eyes, holding them. "Do you trust me? Do you trust that what I've told you is the truth, even if I can't tell you all the details?"

Sorey's face was pale as he met Beck's gaze unwaveringly, scanning his commanding officer's features intently. Beck imagined that, when all this was over, he'd have to have Sorey transferred. Their chain-of-command relationship would've changed irreparably into something unworkable—assuming, of course, he would still be in a position to command anyone.

At last, Sorey pulled himself up straight, squaring his shoulders. He swallowed. "Yes, sir, I do."

Beck released the breath he hadn't aware he'd been holding.

"Thank you. Now," Beck glanced past Sorey at the rest of the transport, "let me make myself clear: I don't want you or your men involved in the operation. If anything goes wrong—" He shook his head, leaving the rest unsaid. "You'd be a great help to us if you could radio the base to explain you've run into an obstruction and the transport will be late." None of it would be a lie, and the base would be expecting the call. "And just so there's no mistake, lieutenant, this is *not* an order."

Again, Sorey didn't answer right away. Then he said, "I will, sir. I'll be glad

to help." He paused another moment before adding softly, "A good buddy of mine died in Zabul. Helicopter he was in got shot down. They never did explain how the insurgents had gotten hold of a US rocket."

Beck offered him a nod of quiet understanding; there were far too many such stories. Sorey went to tell his men to abandon the trucks and wave his radio operator over.

Waiting for Sorey to give his orders and make the call, Beck's thoughts had time to drift to Jake. Suppressed fear made itself known afresh, worming its way into his heart. He hoped Jake was right, and that Ravenwood needed him too badly to harm him.

The lieutenant returned a minute later to inform Beck he'd made the requested call. Beck locked away the fear, the odd calm he always felt shortly before action descending over him.

"Lieutenant, I think it's best if you and your men stay here, with the humvees."

"Sir...." Sorey hesitated. "Sir, all due respect, but I'm not comfortable letting these missiles out of my sight."

Beck gave him a sharp look, wanting to deny the lieutenant his request. He'd prefer Sorey and his squad to stay as far away from the engagement as possible—but the lieutenant had a point. And would he have expected anything else? "Fair enough."

The transport troops could wait with Hicks, Beck decided, as he sketched a wave at Bo to clear the road. They wouldn't be directly involved, yet Sorey could still keep an eye on the ordnance that was his responsibility.

Five minutes later, the pickup had been cleared off the road and Bo's crew were spread out over the two army trucks, while Lieutenant Sorey's men were crammed together into the humvees. Engines were fired up, and Beck's jeep led the convoy along the quiet backroads toward the airfield, Bo in the pickup bringing up the rear.

oOo

By the time the sun began to set, the weather had cleared up, and the

scattered clouds on the western horizon were colored a bloody red. Though Beck wasn't generally given to paying much attention to superstitions, a shiver ran down his spine as he noticed the sky, and he prayed it wasn't a precursor of events to come.

He also wished he knew how Jake was doing.

Unable to keep his nerves under the tight control he usually managed, he made another round of the perimeter his men had put in place, confirming yet again that everything was in order, and everyone knew what to do.

The borrowed missile convoy had arrived at the abandoned airstrip several hours earlier. Plenty of time before the rendezvous to dig in strategically and test the radio and other recording equipment they'd brought. The plan called for Beck, flanked by Bo and two other guys—one a former corporal-turned-electrician named Joe Estes, the other Pete Jacobson, a private who'd gone into the trucking business after leaving the army—to openly meet with Goetz and the Ravenwood men. The remainder of Bo's crew were to stay hidden among the rusty oil drums and discarded refuse heaped around the half-collapsed single building the old airfield still boasted. They'd provide backup, but wouldn't interfere unless the meeting went south. Hicks and his contingent of agents were holed up in a barn half a mile up the road, along with Lieutenant Sorey and the rest of the real soldiers. Hicks'd be listening while the exchange went down, recording every word, until Beck gave the agreed signal. Then the Feds would swoop in to make the arrests.

It would be tricky and dangerous, and a thousand things could go wrong.

Good people could get killed.

Using this particular airstrip in the middle of nowhere had been Hicks' suggestion, and Beck had readily agreed. A place and time of their choosing was preferable to dealing with Ravenwood on the mercenaries' home turf in Ohio, with the added bonus, as Hicks had pointed out, that there wouldn't be any civilians around to get caught in any crossfire if the deal went sour. Hicks, Beck and Jake had scoped the site out earlier in the week. While Jake had scuffed the toe of his boot unhappily at the potholed tarmac that had once been a landing strip, he'd declared it doable. That had cinched the decision, although Jake later reported Goetz wasn't at all happy about it. Fortunately, the Ravenwood mercenary possessed more

greed than discretion, and had eventually agreed to do the exchange on Beck's terms.

The last of the light was fading from the sky and stars were popping out between the clouds. "Major." Bo, who'd been scanning the horizon with a pair of binoculars, called for Beck's attention. "They're coming."

Following where Bo pointed in the black expanse of sky, Beck detected the blinking navigation lights of a small aircraft heading quickly in their direction. A minute later he could hear the engine.

"Let's light it up." Beck jogged toward his jeep. He switched on its headlamps to illuminate the building and the army trucks, trusting that Bo and the other two men would take care of the rest of the lamps they'd placed, in accordance with Jake's instructions, along the battered strip of tarmac.

The aircraft, a sleek business jet that was a white blur as it passed, dipped low and flew across the airfield once.

One by one the lamps were switched on, starting with those on Beck's end of the airstrip. Ten seconds later, Joe lit the last one at the far side. With the airstrip now clearly marked, the sound of the aircraft's engine changed pitch, though it had gone too far out for Beck to keep visual track of it in the darkness. An instant later, the plane roared out of the night a second time, like a ghostly bird, and touched down lightly on the tarmac. It bounced once, twice over the potholes, and Beck held his breath until the pilot—*Please let it be Jake*—got the plane under control and reduced speed.

Reaching the end of the strip, the pilot rolled in a circle, slowly bringing the aircraft around on to the wide swath of tarmac in front of the dilapidated hangar. Bo and the two ex-soldiers, a little winded from jogging back after lighting the lamps, were taking up position behind Beck, a silent warning to anyone looking out from the aircraft.

As the plane taxied to a halt alongside where Beck waited with the trucks, he squinted into the gloom, trying to see into the cockpit. He puffed out a relieved breath, feeling Bo's quiet support at his shoulder at the same moment, as he caught a glimpse through the windshield of a familiar profile. At least Jake was indeed flying the plane. Beck had been afraid

Ravenwood might have gotten wind of their plan and disposed of Jake as soon as he'd arrived at Cuyahoga, or had replaced Jake at the last instant with a pilot they trusted better.

Jake shut down the engines and a hushed silence fell over the airport. A small door in the plane's side, in front of the wing and half-hidden from view from where Beck stood, swung open. Steps were lowered from the gaping hole, and four armed men dressed in black jumped from the craft. Beck recognized one of them as the blond who'd come with Goetz to the negotiations in the bar. Sloan, he recalled.

The mercenaries spread out in a semi-circle, eyes shifting warily over Beck and the three men with him. Sloan stomped toward them, gesturing angrily. "What the hell is this?"

Beck sensed Bo stiffen and grumble something unintelligible. "Easy," Beck muttered from the corner of his mouth, afraid Joe and Pete would take their cue from the ex-sergeant. He craned his neck and bored a stare into Sloan's as the mercenary pushed forward into his personal space. "You expect me to transport two dozen missiles by myself?" he asked, not bothering to mask the distaste he felt.

Sloan uttered a grunt. He pulled back, shooting a final glare at Beck's entourage, before retreating toward the plane and calling out an all-clear. Beck started toward the plane, seeing Goetz now descending the steps. With a small gesture of his hand, he ordered Bo and the others to stay where they were. He stopped a dozen or so paces from the aircraft, just beyond the tip of the nearer wing, waiting impatiently for Goetz to join him. Movement behind the other man caught his eye and he suppressed the smile that wanted to break free: Jake was coming down the stairs, looking whole, if tense.

Hearing the clatter of feet on the metal steps behind him, Goetz swung around. "What are you doing? And don't give me any of that 'checking the plane' crap!"

Beck went rigid, his smile gone. He struggled not to reach for his sidearm, ready to draw it if needed.

"It's SOP for a pilot to do a visual check of the aircraft after landing on *that*." Jake scowled at Goetz as he jabbed a thumb across his shoulder at

the rough airstrip. Beck caught the way Jake's gaze briefly flickered toward him where he was standing a dozen yards further on.

*Careful, Jake.*

"I don't give a crap." Goetz flapped a dismissive hand. "Get your ass back into the damned cockpit. I wanna take off soon's we're done." He turned toward Sloan. "Make sure he stays where he is." Sloan nodded grimly.

"Hey, it's your skins, too." Jake offered the Ravenwood leader a shrug and climbed back up the steps, disappearing from sight.

*Dammit*, Beck swore under his breath. He'd counted on Jake being near him and Bo, more or less safe, when he called in Hicks. He racked his brain for any excuse to demand Jake join them for the handover, and came up empty—at least as far as reasons Goetz would accept without question.

Putting Jake from his mind as much as he could—he'd learned long ago not to spend mental energy on issues he couldn't do a thing about—Beck switched his attention to Goetz. "You got my cash?"

Goetz made a wry face. "You got my missiles?"

"Of course." Turning sharply on his heel, indicating he expected Goetz to follow him, Beck marched over to the trucks. He threw aside the canvas cover, revealing stack upon stack of wooden crates.

"Hm. Barsotti!" Goetz waved over one his cronies. "Check those out." The man he'd hailed—roughly Beck's height, with dark, disagreeable eyes—jumped into the back of the truck. Jake had told him he'd once had to share a room with Barsotti; seeing the man's disposition, Beck understood better why it had been a less than pleasant experience.

Using a small crowbar, Barsotti cracked open two cases selected at random. In the privacy of his mind, Beck thanked Hicks for advising them to make it look real. These thugs certainly were a distrusting lot.

Several minutes passed. Beck restrained himself from looking at the plane. Was Jake still inside? Or had he found a way to sneak out? He trusted that Bo was keeping an eye on that side of things and would let him know if he could.



At last, Barsotti was satisfied. "Looks good to me," he told Goetz with a grunt as he jumped from the truck.

"Get them repacked and loaded." Goetz's tension visibly left him and he smirked at Beck. "We're in business, Major."

Behind him, Barsotti and two of the unnamed Ravenwood troops started pulling crates from the trucks, popping off the lids and removing the missiles carefully one by one.

"What—?" Beck couldn't help voice his surprise out loud.

"Gotta repack." Goetz gestured vaguely behind him at the aircraft, where one of his men had released the hatch to a tiny compartment near the tail end. Beck blinked. It looked far too small to hold much of anything, let alone two dozen precious missiles. When Jake had mentioned 'cargo lockers', Beck had envisioned something more conventional.

Seeing Beck's expression, Goetz uttered a laugh. "It's tight, but they'll fit." He sounded confident enough Beck was sure Goetz spoke from experience. He fought not to show his dismay at the realization these probably weren't the first Javelins Ravenwood had stolen this way.

One of the Ravenwood gunmen came jogging up, distracting Beck from watching the missiles being rewrapped. He carried a small, bulky backpack that looked heavy, which he passed on to Goetz. "Your agreed fee." A slight, smug grin twitched at Goetz's lips as he held the bag out to Beck.

*Thinks he's so smart*, Beck thought grimly, remembering his impression that Goetz would quote a higher price to his superiors than Beck had asked and pocket the difference. He stared at the backpack without taking it. Where was Jake?

"Well?" Goetz jabbed the bag in Beck's direction impatiently. "What's wrong with you? Take your goddamned money."

Getting desperate, Beck glanced at the activity surrounding him. Goetz's men were trotting between the trucks and the plane, carrying bubble-wrapped missiles toward the cargo locker under the watchful eye of Bo

and the others. They'd as good as finished with the first truck and would soon start on the second. And he still couldn't see any sign of Jake anywhere. Should he stall for more time? He could insist on counting the money; that would be a demand Goetz would understand. On the other hand, stalling would also allow Ravenwood to finish loading the plane and, if Jake hadn't succeeded at getting out, increase the risk of them getting away with the missiles.

"No." Getting Jake out was no longer an option. "It's over." He raised his voice a fraction, guaranteeing his words would be caught over the radio. "Hicks, now!"

Within half a second, distant sirens started howling. "What the fuck...?" Goetz lost precious seconds to confusion, disbelief evident in his face.

"Put that crate down!" Bo's best sergeant voice roared over the clamor of advancing sirens and outraged cries from the mercenaries. Beck flinched as someone dropped the crate they were carrying with enough force to splinter the wood. He hoped the Javelins inside were packed securely that the impact hadn't damaged them. Implicit approval aside, Hoffman would not be pleased if he returned with broken equipment.

"You set us up!" Goetz took a swing at Beck with the backpack, his face flushed with anger as his brain caught up with what was happening. Beck instinctively ducked to avoid being hit with the money, the move throwing him off balance enough to gain Goetz a moment's respite. He used the time to start running in the direction of the plane, aiming for the stairs. Sloan was nowhere in sight, and Beck assumed he'd retreated into the aircraft at the first sign of trouble.

"Give it up, Goetz," he shouted, pulling his sidearm and aiming it at a spot between the mercenary's shoulder blades.

"Like hell," Goetz snarled, popping off a shot across his shoulder without bothering to see where he was firing. Beck dove for cover behind the wheel of the truck.

Goetz's shot went high, harmless, but guns rattatatted in response as the rest of Bo's team returned fire. Bullets clacked against the plane's hull.

*Jake's in there*, Beck's mind squeaked in horror. "Hold your fire! Hold your

fire!"

The guns stopped rattling.

Goetz had rounded the wingtip and was closing the last half dozen feet to the steps. Despite his own order, Beck raised his sidearm, taking aim. He hesitated with his finger on the trigger. Crap, he couldn't shoot Goetz: Hicks had made it very clear that they needed him alive. He lowered his weapon without firing.

Where the hell were the cops?

As if on cue, squad cars, their lights swirling crazily, raced up. Tires squealed as the drivers stomped the brakes. Doors slammed open and agents poured out.

"Federal agents!" a loud voice hollered. "Put your weapons down *now*!"

Blatantly ignoring the command, Goetz let off another couple of rounds and bolted into the plane. He yanked up the stairs, clearly not giving a damn about the men he was leaving high and dry on the ground.

Beck raced around the aircraft's wing as fast as he could, indifferent to his own safety. He wasn't prepared to let Goetz get away. The top section of the door was still standing open, the cabin a dark cavern behind it. Beck slowed, keeping his gun trained on the gaping maw.

"Major!" Hicks trotted over, wearing a bullet proof vest that said "POLICE".

"Jake's in there!" Beck glanced at the agent as he indicated the plane. "He —." The next thing he knew, Hicks was dragging him under the belly of the aircraft as bullets slammed into the concrete where he'd been standing a fraction of a second earlier.

"Don't be stupid, major." Hicks offered him a look that was part pity, part frustration.

Beck took a deep, shuddering breath, giving himself a shake. The agent was right; he'd been getting ready to throw himself in blindly after Goetz. Getting killed wouldn't do Jake any good. He needed to be smarter than that.

Disregarding Goetz's orders to return to the cockpit, Jake had remained crouched in the shadows near the door. Seeing Edward had sent a surge of relief through him: so far, the operation was going according to plan.

He craned his neck to watch Goetz and Edward talk, ever mindful of Sloan hovering at the bottom of the steps. Goetz's second-in-command was clearly on edge, his attention constantly shifting from the Lear to the trucks to the surrounding area and right back to the plane. Jake quickly realized there'd be no chance to sneak out of the plane unnoticed.

He pulled away from the opening, surveying the rest of the small craft. What other way out could—? *Dumbass*. He smacked his forehead. Where had he mislaid his brain? The Lear had an emergency exit positioned over the wing on the far side from all the action. The aircraft's body would nicely shield him from view—at least until they started packing the Javelins into the locker installed on that side of the aircraft. So he better move fast.

Jake hurried over to the last window on the left, nearly losing his footing on the bags and jackets his passengers had carelessly strewn around the cabin. He crouched in front of the window exit, eyeing the release mechanism. Sloan was right at the bottom of the steps, on full alert. Would he be able to remove the emergency panel without making any noise? Of, if he couldn't, could he do it fast enough that he could jump out and get away before Sloan figured out what he was up to?

Even as Jake tried to decide on his next move, sirens went up somewhere far off, the shrill noise muted by the cabin's hull. "Crap," Jake muttered. The time for stealth had passed. He grabbed for the release handle, readying to pull it.

"What the hell are you doing?" Sloan was springing up the stairs and crossing the cabin faster than Jake would've guessed he was capable of. He yanked Jake back by the collar of his shirt, flinging him across the cabin before Jake could get his feet under him to resist.

Outside, someone fired off a single shot. The next second, bullets rattled on the plane's hull and zinged through the open door. Jake curled into a

ball where he'd landed, not far from where the bullets were striking the fuselage. He heard a shout. "Hold your fire!" and he thought he'd recognized Edward's voice. The hail of bullets stopped immediately.

Struggling to draw breath, Jake scabbled at the nearest seat for support, the smooth leather slick under his fingers. Sloan snatched at him again. "Get this goddamn plane running!"

Outside, tires screeched, and people were yelling, "Federal agents!"

Sloan shoved Jake toward the cockpit. "Get movin'!"

Jake stumbled against the cockpit door. He wished he'd been able to bring the gun Bo had offered him, but he'd known Goetz would never have allowed him to bring it on board. "No." He pulled up straight.

"What?" Sloan gaped incredulously at him. "Are you crazy?" Fisting a handful of Jake's shirt, he hauled Jake toward him, shaking him. "I said, let's go." The cool muzzle of Sloan's Glock pressed up under Jake's jaw. Jake swallowed, his mouth dry.

"Go, go, go!" Shouting, Goetz barreled inside, his momentum nearly slamming him into Jake and Sloan. He pulled up short as Sloan swung the two of them out of his path, before reached back around to wrench up the fold-out steps. "What the fuck's going on?"

"This asshole refuses to fly," Sloan growled, his eyes never leaving Jake's face as he pushed him harder against the bulkhead facing the front seat.

Goetz switched his attention from Sloan to Jake. "What?" The stunned look on his face would have been funny, if not for the way Sloan was grinding the gun against Jake's jaw.

"Face it, Goetz. You lost." Jake snuck a glance in Goetz's direction before he met Sloan's scowl again. "What are you gonna do? Shoot me?"

"There's a thought." Sloan cocked his weapon.

"Wait!" Goetz seized Sloan's shoulder. "If you shoot him, who's gonna fly the plane?"

"Me."

"Right." Goetz uttered a snort full of contempt. "I don't think so. Put that gun down."

Sloan scowled, but he lowered the Glock and took a step backward. Jake worked his jaw as Goetz considered him for a second, his expression not promising anything good, despite the temporary reprieve.

"Here!" Goetz shoved the heavy backpack he'd been carrying toward Jake. "There's two million in there. All yours, if you get us the hell out of here!" The last words were hissed urgently.

Jake let the bag drop. He had no intention of taking Goetz's money, or of helping Goetz and Sloan escape. And even if he did, he knew he'd get little chance to enjoy his two million. Soon as he landed them somewhere safe, they'd kill him and take the money. He shook his head. "Nope. Not gonna happen."

Heavy boots slapped on the concrete outside, drawing closer. The sound made Jake aware that the shouting had died down.

"Major!" Jake recognized Hicks' voice.

Edward's reply was closer than Jake had expected and barely suppressed panic was audible in his tone. "Jake's in there."

At the sound of their voices, Goetz abandoned his attempt to convince Jake to take the plane up and twisted around. He fired off a couple of shots through the open door. Sloan raised his gun, pointing it at Jake once more. "Goddamn snitch," he snarled. "Told John we couldn't trust your sorry ass." His finger tightened.

"No!" Goetz's shout rang out at the same time as Sloan pulled the trigger.

The sound of the shot in the small confines of the Lear's cabin was deafening. Red-hot pain seared through Jake as the bullet pierced his flesh and the impact was enough to slam him into the bulkhead. Dazed, he slid bonelessly to the floor, aware of something warm and wet soaking his shirt. Through the roar in his ears, he dimly heard Goetz swearing, "You moron! He was our only leverage!"

Jake smiled. They weren't going anywhere. He tried to move, and fresh pain flared out from where the bullet had struck him. Unable to hold in a moan, he slipped into unconsciousness.

## Chapter 12

Huddled under the plane with Hicks, Beck felt the shot as it reverberated through the aircraft's fuselage, and the subsequent thump as a heavy object fell down, as much as he heard it. He winced involuntarily.

"You moron!" That was Goetz. "He was our only leverage."

Ice formed under Beck's ribs. Sweet Mother of God; Goetz had to be talking about Jake. No longer caring if he risked coming under fire, Beck began to crawl out from under the aircraft's belly.

"Major!" Hicks caught him by the elbow to hold him in place.

Beck attempted to shake off the agent's hand, but Hicks proved to have a surprisingly strong grip for such a thin man.

"Please, major," Hicks pleaded, "let me deal with this."

Beck paused, giving Hicks a hard look, before releasing a heavy breath. He nodded unwillingly. What else could he do, other than storm the plane single-handedly and likely get himself killed? But Lord, he wished he'd taken that shot at Goetz when he'd the chance...!

Apparently confident Beck now wasn't going to do anything half-cocked, Hicks squirmed past him. Careful to stick only his upper body out in the open, so his agents could see him while he'd stay hidden from those inside the aircraft, he sketched a wide wave. "Everyone, back off."

With a start, Beck became aware that the earlier ruckus had subsided. He'd been so focused on Goetz and the aircraft, and Jake inside it, he hadn't noticed Hicks' agents had rounded up the Ravenwood troops, cuffing them and forcing them to sit cross-legged in a row in front of the squad cars. Two agents were guarding them, while the rest had spread out to surround the plane. Their numbers were supplemented by Bo's team and, Beck saw with consternation as he peered out from where he was lying under the fuselage, Lieutenant Sorey and the weapons transport.

He shook his head in dismay. The situation was like old dynamite: unstable and primed to blow at any second.



And Jake.... *God, don't let him suffer for my sins*, Beck prayed silently. He should never have let it come to this, should never have gotten involved with Jake beyond that first night. Then Hicks wouldn't have located Jake. And even if he had, Jake would've been able to tell him 'no'. He would've been alive and free, not lying dead or dying in a damned corporate jet right over Beck's head.

He chafed to know what was going on inside the plane. After the single shot, and Goetz's angry shout, everything had gone quiet.

At Hicks' order, the federal agents and Bo's crew had begun to slowly withdraw behind the natural perimeter of the various vehicles. The soldiers stayed where they were. "I said, everyone!" Hicks shouted, giving another sweep of his arm to underscore his demand.

"Lieutenant," Beck called out, adding his own voice to that of Hicks. "Please do as Agent Hicks says."

"Yes sir!" Sorey quietly gave his men an order. Another minute or so passed, and the soldiers also melted into the shadows. A strained silence descended over the airfield.

"Goetz!" Once everyone had removed themselves from sight, Hicks stuck out his head and hollered up at the cabin. "You're surrounded. Give it up."

"No fucking way!" The answer was immediate. "I got a hostage!"

Beck stiffened involuntarily, heart hammering: Goetz meant Jake. Was he bluffing? Hicks, sensing the way Beck had tensed, pinned him with another backwards glare, telling him without words to stay put. Beck didn't want to: if Jake was still alive, every second could count. They had no time for lengthy negotiations. They also had no choice. Unwillingly, Beck inclined his head slightly, yielding control to the agent.

Above them, unaware of their silent communication, Goetz went on listing his demands. "I want free passage out of here." He paused, and Beck detected the mumble of voices, but he couldn't make out any words. "And a pilot to fly this goddamn plane."

A fresh shiver ran through Beck, chills running up and down his spine. If

Goetz needed a pilot.... Was Jake dead already?

"No can do." Hicks paused, giving Goetz a chance to reply. There was no reaction from the aircraft. "See, Goetz, I know you're just a middleman here. There's no need to make it any worse for yourself than it already is."

More silence. Then, guardedly, "What're you talking about?"

"Are you really prepared to take the fall for your bosses? Do you deserve that? Do they?" Hicks waited few seconds to let Goetz stew on that. "Come on out, and we'll talk deals."

"John, don't listen to him!" A second voice, low and urgent, drifted from the open cabin door. Beck assumed it was Sloan. "I can get us out of here. I know I can."

"You?" Goetz barked a harsh laugh. "You're the idiot who shot the fucking real pilot in the first place."

Beck's eyes stung as his fears were confirmed. He squeezed them shut, trying to quell the grief that threatened to overwhelm him. *Please, let it be a lie. Let Jake be all right.* Even as he silently sent up the prayer, Beck knew it was a vain hope. He'd heard the shot; he'd heard the desperation in Goetz's voice when he claimed to have a hostage, and how much it had sounded like he was putting on a front.

He was still trying to master his feelings when he heard a scuffle overhead. The plane shook on its carriage and someone cried out in pain. There was another heavy *thud* that sounded like a body hitting the floor. Beck ducked reflexively.

"I'm coming out," Goetz shouted. A moment later, two guns clattered onto the concrete next to the aircraft, slithering a couple feet along the tarmac before they came to a stop. The steps were lowered slowly, creaking as someone put weight on them, and a boot emerged in Beck's line of vision, followed by a second. Slowly, Goetz walked into view, hands held high.

The instant Goetz set foot on the ground, agents rushed in, tackling him to the concrete, wrenching his arms together and slapping on handcuffs. Beck didn't stay to hear them reading Goetz his Miranda rights; he squeezed past Hicks and, scrambling out from under the aircraft, hurled

up the steps.

Inside the cabin, it was dark, and it took his eyes a moment to adjust to the gloom. He pushed forward and immediately tripped over a body lying crumpled right inside the door opening. "Jake?" Leaning over, Beck caught a glimpse of blond hair: Sloan, dead or unconscious. Beck didn't bother to check; he didn't care. He stepped over the body, calling softly again, "Jake?"

He found Jake wedged between a bulkhead and a leather seat, feet sticking out into the aisle, chin resting on his chest. He wasn't moving. "Jake!"

Beck searched for the switch to the seat light and fumbled it on. The dim light springing out was enough to show Jake's shirt was soaked with blood, and when Beck bobbed his head low, he saw Jake's eyes were closed. *No no no*, a voice whimpered in Beck's mind.

"Jake?" His fingers shook as he leaned in to lightly touch them to Jake's neck. He found a pulse, slow but steady. "Thank you, God," he murmured, before raising his voice to call, "I need a medic here!" His voice was hoarse and a lump had lodged in his throat.

"Is he...?" Hicks asked from right behind him.

Beck started. He hadn't been aware Hicks had followed him inside. As Beck briefly glanced backward, Hicks clicked on more of the lights.

"He's alive." As if Hicks would care. Beck couldn't tell how badly Jake was injured, though; there was a lot of blood, but it was hard to tell how much or exactly what the damage was. "Medic!"

"I'll call in the EMTs." Hicks started to move away, aiming for the door.

Beck grappled around, snatching at the cuff of Hicks' pants. The EMTs were half a mile off, waiting for the site to be secured. "There should be a medic with the transport."

Hicks touched Beck's shoulder briefly. "I'll find him."

After Hicks had gone, Beck's hands fluttered over Jake's body, unsure what

to do. The bullet had hit Jake in the shoulder, as far as Beck could tell without moving him. He wished he'd put on his combat gear instead of fatigues—at least he'd have had gauze with him to stop Jake's bleeding. He risked another quick look behind him. Where was the damned medic?

Jake whimpered softly. Beck immediately turned his attention back to him, scrabbling for his hand. "Jake?"

Jake's eyes fluttered open, unfocused. "Edward?"

"I'm here." Beck squeezed Jake's fingers lightly. "You're gonna be okay. Don't worry." He attempted to put as much confidence into his voice as he could, grateful to discover he succeeded at sounding more certain than he felt.

The aircraft rocked again. "Sir?" Beck looked up. A young soldier stood on the top step, clutching a first aid kit in his arms.

"You the medic?"

"Y-yes sir. Corporal Lavelle." The corporal looked scared, and Beck wondered if he'd ever had to treat anyone for a real battlefield injury.

He drew in a calming breath. He couldn't let the corporal see his own fear; he seemed ready to bolt as it was. "Over here, corporal. I got a man down. I don't know how bad. He just regained consciousness."

"Did we...?" Jake attempted to move and his question ended in a groan.

Kneeling next to Beck, the medic reached for Jake past Beck's shoulder. "Please, sir, don't move."

"Yes, we did," Beck answered Jake's unfinished question. He shuttled out of the corporal's path until he was arched around the leather seat, able to hold Jake's hand without blocking Lavelle's access. He was gratified to see that, once the young medic set to work, he overcame his skittishness, his hands moving over Jake confidently. "We got them. Red-handed, with their paws on the missiles. Exactly what Hicks wanted."

Jake huffed a laugh that quickly changed into another moan of pain.

"Shh...." Beck stretched past Lavelle to brush the hair back from Jake's forehead. The medic was giving him a curious blink, but Beck was only half-aware of what the gesture must look like, and frankly, he didn't care. "How is he?" he asked.

"It's not as bad as it looks, sir." Lavelle turned his focus back to Jake. "I mostly stopped the bleeding. I think he fainted from pain and shock as much as blood loss."

Beck lowered his head in acknowledgment and to hide the tears of relief that filled his eyes. "Thank you, corporal."

"Excuse us?" A new voice called Beck's attention and he blinked rapidly to chase away the moisture. Once he felt confident enough to raise his head, Beck saw a pair of civilian EMTs had climbed into the cabin. Help had come.

"Jake? I'm gonna have to let go now." Jake's grip tightened on Beck's. Beck's chest clenched, and his eyes stung with fresh tears. "Jake, the paramedics are here to take you to a hospital. They'll take good care of you. I won't be far, I promise."

"Okay." Jake's agreement came out as a whisper. He unwrapped Jake's fingers from his, and squeezed past the crouching EMTs. They weren't paying him any attention, already in deep conversation with Corporal Lavelle.

Taking a deep breath and trying to regain his composure, he made himself walk out of the plane. Much as he wanted to stay and be as near to Jake as he could, he knew better than to get in the way of the emergency personnel. They knew what they were doing better than he did. Besides, he had two truckloads of missiles that were his responsibility.

He scrubbed a hand through his hair as he descended the stairs, noticing belatedly that his palms were sticky with Jake's blood. He puffed out his cheeks, feeling cold; he'd come so close to losing Jake for good.

Shoving the thought of what could've been to the rear of his mind, he strove to concentrate on his duty: he had to make sure the Javelins were taken on to their destination ASAP. He looked up, planning to find out where the missiles had got to and—Beck stopped dead in his tracks, jaw

dropping in shock. While he'd been inside with Jake, the small, quiet airfield had been transformed into an angry anthill. Federal agents wearing windbreakers declaring they were NSA or ATF, and some that said FBI, were crawling around the aircraft, through the sagging hangar, and over the army trucks. Hicks must've pulled out all the stops. Flashlights blitzed in rapid succession, some agents taking photos and cataloging everything, while others, holding notepads, were talking to Bo and Joe and Pete. Lieutenant Sorey was scowling unhappily at a pair of ATF agents breaking open the last of the crates Goetz's men hadn't yet had a chance to unload.

"Major Beck, sir!" he called as soon as he caught sight of Beck. "Sir, they won't let us—."

"It's evidence," one of the agents declared pompously, not allowing Sorey to finish his complaint. To Beck, it sounded like they had had the argument more than once already.

Beck stiffened his spine as he marched over. "Those missiles are also United States Army property." If the situation required, he could do pompous with the best of them. "They—."

Catching sight in his peripheral vision of a stretcher being lifted up into the plane, he forgot the rest of what he'd be about to tell the agent.

"Sir?" Sorey asked. His expression had grown even unhappier.

Beck scanned the area around the plane again, not listening to the agent, who was now expounding on the importance of preserving the chain of evidence. "Hicks!" he snapped, as soon as he spotted the agent with a pair of photographers working near the aft of the plane, presumably taking pictures of the locker.

At Beck's urgent wave, Hicks trotted over. "What's the problem?" He took a good look at the various expressions of the men standing around the opened crate. "Ah, I see." He raised his eyes skyward, his expression aggravated. "Agent Hill, please make sure you release these crates, and their contents, into Major Beck's care once you're done processing the scene."

"But—." Hill began. Hicks didn't let him finish.

"Photograph them, catalog them, hell, try to fingerprint them if you feel so inclined. Once you're done, every single missile you see is the major's responsibility. Understood?"

Hill gave Hicks a pained grimace. "Yes sir."

"Good." Hicks switched his attention to Beck. "That solve your problem?"

"For now, yes." Beck wished all the difficulties he expected to be having in the next weeks could be solved so easily. "Thank you." But Hicks had already hurried off.

"How's Jake?" Bo sidled up next to Beck, keeping his voice to a low whisper designed to only reach Beck's ears. Beck looked around and saw there was renewed movement near the door of the plane. One of the EMTs was walking out backward, taking cautious steps down the staircase. A heartbeat later, Beck saw they were ready to lift down the stretcher with, he presumed, Jake strapped to it.

"Medic says he'll live." Beck kept his eyes fixed on the activity near the aircraft, where an ambulance had rolled up. He took a step in its direction, and then paused. Duty warred with desire; his heart screamed to go with Jake, while the soldier inside refused to abandon the missiles.

"Major Beck, sir?"

Bo nudged his ribs with a gentle elbow, drawing his attention. Beck realized Sorey was trying to talk to him. With an immense effort, he turned his back on the ambulance, swallowing hard. "Yes, lieutenant?"

Sorey shot a quick look across Beck's shoulder. "Sir. If you want—." He cleared his throat. "Soon as those agents are done, I'll take care that those missiles get packed and reloaded, and transported securely to base. As per my orders." He let his voice drop, cocking his head a fraction, and added in a less formal tone, "The delay is just... part of the exercise, isn't it, sir?"

Bo snorted a laugh. Beck gaped at the lieutenant, at first not comprehending. Then he quirked up his mouth in a smile. "Yes, Lieutenant Sorey. It is indeed."

"Sir." The lieutenant offered him a smart salute, which Beck returned

crisply.

"Thank you, lieutenant."

Reassured the missiles would be safe with Sorey, and making a mental note to find out when the lieutenant would reasonably be up for promotion next, Beck nodded in Bo's direction to show his gratitude for his friend's help, before swiveling on his heel to jog over to the ambulance. The EMTs were finishing loading the stretcher into it and a dark shock of hair was all Beck could see of Jake. One of the paramedics stepped forward, trying to block Beck from climbing into the rig. "I'm sorry, sir—."

Beck pinned him with a stare. "Where are you taking him?"

"Cortland Regional." One glimpse of Beck's expression had changed the paramedic's mind about objecting to his presence. "Closest hospital that can handle a GSW."

"Let's go." Beck didn't bother to ask for further details, simply jumped into the ambulance, not caring if anyone wanted to stop him. A minute later, he was crammed in the narrow vehicle, crouched next to the stretcher and once again holding one of Jake's hands between his. Sirens started up and the ambulance rumbled off.



## Chapter 13

Bored out of his skull, Jake clicked the remote, flipping through the channels on the small TV bolted to the wall across from his bed. He hoped against hope to find something that would keep him entertained, even for a short while. Lying in a hospital bed for a week with nothing to do but heal, he'd quickly discovered that daytime television was unbelievably dull.

He couldn't wait to get out and go home; other than various medical staff checking up on him several times a day and the orderlies delivering meals, he didn't get any visitors. Even Edward hadn't bothered to come check on him....

No, that wasn't fair, Jake reproached himself. Edward had been with him when they'd whisked him away from the airstrip, and he retained a very fuzzy memory of Edward's relieved face after he woke up from surgery. He'd been too spaced out with pain medication for any real conversation, though, and he hadn't seen or heard from Edward since. The silence worried him in a way no dull TV could banish.

Was Edward in trouble with his superiors? Or had he not come because he didn't want to see Jake? After all, if his career was in shambles, whose fault was that?

Bo *had* dropped by a couple of days ago, but he hadn't been able to tell Jake anything much, either. Edward had gone back to base, he'd said, to "deal with the fall-out". It had sounded sinister to Jake, and the fact that he'd seen hide nor hair from Edward in the—he calculated quickly—six days since he'd woken up after surgery didn't bode well.

Jake wished someone would tell him what was going on with Ravenwood as well. Had they gotten the evidence Hicks wanted? The TV news had been oddly mute; he'd have expected to see reports if arrests had been made. Perhaps they'd failed, and the army, embarrassed about its involvement, had made sure everyone kept mum.

In which case, it made sense Edward hadn't visited Jake while he recuperated. For all Jake knew, Goetz had walked free and Edward was the one in jail.

Something somebody said on the screen interfered with his black mood, the words filtering through his subconscious so slowly he had to backtrack several channels until he came across the source.

"Police raid security firm's offices." The headline scrolled across the screen from right to left. He jacked up straight, ignoring the twang that went through his shoulder at the sudden move. Glum introspection forgotten, he listened to the pretty young reporter who looked earnestly into the camera.

"As has been revealed this morning," she announced, "in the past days, federal agents have taken possession of a number of files and computer disks belonging to Ravenwood, a private contractor providing security to high profile firms doing business in hot spots such as South America and Iraq." She was standing in front of a modern steel-and-glass office building that Jake didn't recognize, but that he presumed were Ravenwood's corporate headquarters.

Had they done it after all? Had the sting operation succeeded? Outside the hospital, a few stories below, an ambulance's siren wailed closer, drowning out the TV. Fingers shaking with suppressed excitement, Jake fumbled with the remote to turn up the sound.

A male voice-over had taken up the narrative. "Earlier today, at a press conference in Washington, DC, the lead investigator on the case explained." The image changed to a recording of Hicks. The agent came across as both self-satisfied and uncomfortable at the large number of microphones clustered together in front of him.

"Um," he cleared his throat, "after a long and extensive investigation, my office gathered enough evidence of illicit arms dealing, as well as other irregularities, to seize the company's records for further scrutiny." He peered straight into the camera, unsuccessfully keeping the twitch of lips under control as he added, "We have already arrested a number of Ravenwood operatives, who are cooperating with the authorities, and we expect more arrests to be made shortly."

Jake uttered a quiet snort at the statement. Would seem Hicks' estimate of Goetz had been accurate: from what the agent had said, it sounded as if the Ravenwood squad leader had folded like a cheap suit when faced with a lifetime in jail—or, possibly, the chair; Jake wasn't sure what federal law

said about people who smuggled arms to insurgents the US was technically at war with.

"Good-looking fellow, ain't he?"

Jake started at the familiar voice coming from an unexpected direction. Hicks was propping up a shoulder against the doorframe to his room, pointing with his chin at the television to illustrate whom he meant.

Jake grimaced, half caught between annoyance at being surprised by Hicks' presence yet again, and amused at Hicks' estimation of his own appearance. To be honest, the Hicks on the news had looked like he hadn't slept more than an hour in the last week. The Hicks who walked further into his room looked just as tired, but the expression on his drawn features also resembled that of a cat who'd gotten into the proverbial cream.

"So, you got what you wanted, huh?" Jake muted the TV to a background murmur.

"Yes." Hicks draped the coat he'd been carrying over his arm over the foot of Jake's bed. "Federal prosecutor made a deal with Goetz—yes, yes, I know," he added when he caught Jake's unhappy twitch. "But you always knew it wasn't Goetz I wanted. There are dozens of guys like him: take one out, and someone else will simply pop up in his place. It was the root of the evil I wanted to dig out."

"The guys in the suits," Jake supplied.

"Yes." Hicks waited for Jake to signal his acceptance before continuing. "Anyway, Goetz couldn't spill his guts fast enough, giving us names, places, dates, providing enough probable cause for what you saw there." Hicks jerked his head at the TV, where a cereal commercial had replaced the newscaster. He gave a disbelieving shake. "After all these years of hard work, it's incredible how fast the whole thing unraveled in the end."

"Congratulations." Jake failed to keep the bitterness fully out of his tone. It might be Hicks' moment of triumph, but at what price?

Hicks' head snapped up, his eyes scrunching together. Jake's acerbity hadn't been lost on him. "Couldn't have done it without you, Jake."

Lips pressed together, Jake studied the agent, searching for signs of sarcasm. He saw none. Giving Hicks a dubious look, Jake tried to believe he'd actually been sincere.

Hicks sighed, spreading out his hands in an apology. "I know I've been hard on you. That's why I wanted to tell you personally: you and your friends are in the clear. The prosecutor has announced he has no interest in going after any of you."

Anxiety he hadn't been aware of flowed out of Jake. When Edward had asked Hicks give them immunity, the agent had rebuffed him. "Can't promise you that." He'd given them a pained grimace Jake hadn't believed. "I'd expect the NSA to be far more interested in taking Ravenwood out of play than going after a bunch of vigilante Americans." He'd snorted wryly. "With the military? You're on your own, major."

Neither Jake nor Edward had liked it, but they'd been left with little choice. Luckily, it would seem Hicks' assessment had proved correct.

"In fact," the agent went on, unaware of where Jake's thoughts had gotten to, "I doubt we'll need you to testify in court at all." He let his hands fall, stuffing them into the pockets of his pants. "Between your statements during the debrief, the audio and video footage we gathered at the airfield and during the negotiations your major had with Goetz, plus all the paper trails we'll undoubtedly unearth from Ravenwood's records? I'd say you're free to go."

"Go where?" The words were out of Jake's mouth before he could stop them.

"Wherever you want." Hicks angled forward curiously. "Why are you complaining? You got your pilot's license back, I got you off the State Department's watch list, *and* I ended the surveillance of your family in Kansas the day I located you in Rochester."

"You what?" Jake shot up, hissing as a fresh stab shot through his healing shoulder. "You bastard." It shouldn't have come as a surprise; it was one reason he'd never dared call home after leaving Jericho, but to hear it confirmed so matter-of-factly...?

Hicks scrubbed a tired palm across his face. "Jake, let it go. It's over. Go back to Rochester to live a secret life with your lover. Go home to Kansas. Go... wherever. I no longer care." He snatched up his coat and draped it back over his arm. "Soon as I walk out of this room, you'll never see me again."

Jake stayed silent. He didn't know what to say. *Don't let the door hit you on the way out* sounded too ungraceful to mark the occasion. On the other hand, he couldn't bring himself to say "Thanks". Hicks had admitted to keeping track of Mom and Dad, had gone to the trouble of investigating Edward and God knows who else from his past, had gotten Freddy killed....

"Oh, hello, major." Hicks' voice drifted in from the hall. The agent had gone and Jake accepted he'd missed his chance to have the last word.

"Agent Hicks," came the curt reply.

Jake's heart leaped into his throat as he recognized the second speaker. He instantly forgot his resentment toward Hicks, or the news of the raid on Ravenwood's headquarters. He leaned forward eagerly, reaching for the blankets to throw them off and jump out of bed.

Before he could do more than cast the covers aside, Edward strode in. "Hey."

Jake grinned goofily, so glad to see Edward that he instantly forgave him for not calling or visiting during Jake's entire stay at the hospital. "Hey." He pulled the blankets back across his legs, the air-conditioned air chilly on his bare skin.

"How've you been?" Edward's gaze slid from Jake's, his posture contrite. "I would've come sooner—."

"Don't sweat it," Jake interrupted, not sure he was ready to hear Edward's excuse. "And I'm good. Doc says I'm healing okay. Thinks I can get out of here soon." He sketched a wave at the bland hospital room, bare of any distraction apart from the TV, and huffed a laugh. "Sooner's better than later, in my book."

"Uh-huh," Edward made a commiserating noise. He didn't say anything

else, just went on watching Jake from near the door.

*He looks tired.* Jake frowned as he took in the lines on Edward's face that spoke of little sleep. "Are you... in trouble? Bo said—."

Edward started shaking his head, preventing Jake from finishing his question. "Sometimes, Bo's such a blabbermouth." He walked toward the window and settled his butt on the sill, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "Surprisingly, there wasn't any problem. Lieutenant Sorey—." He broke off as Jake gave him a puzzled look. "The officer in charge of the missile transport," Edward clarified.

"Right." Jake motioned for Edward to continue.

"Lieutenant Sorey stuck to the story—." Again, Edward broke off, giving a quick smile at the inadvertent rhyme, and Jake laughed. "Colonel Hoffman backed him up." Edward's brief mood of levity was gone as fast as it had come on. "As far as the army's concerned, those missiles never left the lieutenant's custody, and the delay was all planned, all part of the exercise."

"That's good, right?" Jake asked cautiously. "You're in the clear? No... fall-out?" Ever since Bo had gloomily mentioned the potential of a backlash, he'd been afraid for Edward.

Edward dropped his hands to his sides, curling them around the edge of the sill. "I believe so."

Jake fell back into the pillows, letting out a long breath. "I don't think Bo likes me," he confessed in a mutter.

"That's not true." Unfazed by the seeming non-sequitur, Edward pushed away from the window. He dragged over the visitor's chair and sat down next to Jake's bed. "It's not about you. Or about liking you. Bo's a little... overprotective." His face lit up in a rare grin. "Think of him as a big, black mother hen."

Laughter bubbled up in Jake's chest at the mental image Edward's words invoked and he allowed himself to feel reassured. Bo's attitude had bothered him over the last days—weeks, actually, ever since he'd witnessed Bo and Edward arguing. Those two had such a history together,

and Jake didn't want to come between them.

Edward bent forward so he could rest his hands on edge of the mattress, folding them together thoughtfully. Jake reached out, intending to place his hand over Edward's. Edward looked up as he moved, startled, and Jake suddenly remembered where they were. He jerked away.

"Sorry."

"It's not—." Edward cut short what he was going to say and pulled in a deep breath, releasing it in a rush. He made as if to reach for Jake in turn, changed his mind, and let his hand fall onto the mattress. "It's not fair that I put this burden on you, Jake. This terrible secret. If I hadn't—."

"Don't. Please." Jake wriggled to sit up straight again. "I used to get in trouble all the time by myself, long before I met you. Anyway, didn't Hicks tell you?"

Edward gave a small shake of the head. "Haven't spoken to him since that night, until just now. And he just said hello, and went on his way."

"They got them, for real." Jake's excitement bled through into his tone. "Ravenwood. Prosecutor's going ahead with the case. And," he grinned smugly, "we're off the hook."

Edward smiled back. "I overheard that part."

Jake stiffened, eyes narrowing sharply. "You were listening?"

Mouth quirking, Edward rolled a shoulder guiltily. "For a short while. I didn't want to interrupt." His smile faded and again he made as if to touch Jake. "It's good advice he gave you."

Jake blinked, puzzled, trying to replay his conversation with Hicks in his mind. "What would that be?"

"For you to go home." Edward's voice was soft. "To Kansas. Make good with your father."

Jake tried to marshal his thoughts to object, and Edward raised a hand to forestall him. "Jake, I've seen how you perk up and pay attention whenever

Kansas gets mentioned. I've seen the wistfulness in you, much as you try to hide it."

"You don't understand." Jake glanced away, his throat tight. "What I want doesn't matter." He plucked at the blanket. "Dad would—."

"Would be very happy to see you, I'm sure."

Jake scoffed. "You don't know my father."

"Jake, you could've died last week." Edward pulled in a shaky breath that betrayed a hint of his emotions. "How do you think he would've felt if he —."

"That's not fair!" Jake scowled angrily, jaw clenched.

"Maybe not," Edward admitted with a nod. "But life's short, Jake. Remember that."

Silence descended on the room, only the murmur of the TV in the background and a dull siren as yet another ambulance pulled up to the ER entrance breaking it. Jake had no idea what to say. Could he go to Jericho? Would Dad chase him out of town if he did? He didn't think he could handle the heartache again if he did.

"Anyway," Edward coughed awkwardly, clearing his throat. "You'll have enough time to think about that later. I wrenched a few extra days' leave out of Colonel Hoffman, and the doctor tells me he's ready to let you go as long as you have someone to take care of you." He sat up straighter. "What do you say?"

Jake blinked, the words slow to filter through his distracted mind. "Oh yes!" He cast off the covers and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Edward grinned in response.

oOo

Beck parked in front of Bo's Bar, climbed out and locked his car. He should've gone straight to the base—he risked arriving late as it was—but there was one last thing he needed to do before he could leave Rochester. He glanced up at the bar, its neon sign off, as he rapped a beat on the



door. He waited for a couple minutes, until Bo materialized from the darkened bar.

"Are you plannin' on making this a habit?" he groused, meaning Beck dropping in ahead of opening time.

Beck shrugged ruefully; Bo didn't mean the complaint as it sounded. "Sorry. I've to leave soon, but—," he hesitated a fraction, "I need another favor."

"Hmph." Bo pulled the door open wider and stepped back, allowing Beck to squeeze in past him. "As long as it's not another illegal operation...?"

This time, Beck uttered a wry snort. "No. Something quite a bit more prosaic."

Five minutes later, Bo had poured Beck a glass of his customary scotch, and opened a bottle of beer for himself. "So what can I do for you this time?" They'd spoken several times during Beck's leave, and there wasn't much left to say regarding the operation to take down Ravenwood's smuggling activity, or Bo's role in it.

Beck dug through his pocket and located the set of keys he'd stashed there. He laid them on the bar. "Keep an eye on the apartment for me while I'm gone?"

"Gone?" Bo glanced at the keys for a second. "You shippin' out?" He left the keys where Beck had put them.

"Yes. Iraq, this time."

"Damn." Bo pointed at the keys with a jerk of his chin. "What about Jake? He not looking after the place?"

Beck shook his head, smiling sadly. He'd dropped Jake off at the bus station two hours ago. Jake would be miles across the state, on his way to Kansas. Beck didn't expect him to come back. "Jake's gone home."

Bo's eyes widened. He opened his mouth, thought better of it, and shut it again. Finally, all he said was, "Sorry to hear that."

"It's—." There was something in Beck's throat making it hard to speak, and he threw back the last of his scotch, feeling the liquor burn a path to his stomach. The night Jake had told Beck everything, his voice had held such unspoken longing when he'd spoken about his family, it had made Beck's heart ache for him, and he was glad when Jake had announced he wanted to go home after all, to see if he could patch things up with his father.

He simply couldn't imagine that, once Jake had regained his old life, he'd ever want to return to the secrecy and subterfuge that had been such a major part of their lives over the past year. That was why Beck had kept his upcoming deployment a secret from Jake—he hadn't wanted Jake to feel pressured into making false promises.

"I'm okay," he assured Bo, once he could speak.

It wasn't entirely true: he didn't feel okay. In fact, he felt hollow and raw, like something had been ripped from him. But he would be okay: once he got to Iraq, and the daily grind of staying alive occupied his every waking hour, he'd have little time to dwell on what he'd lost.

It was after his tour, what he'd do once he returned stateside, that Beck didn't particularly want to consider.

The door rattled as someone yanked the handle. Bo peered up at the clock. "Hell. Be with ya in a sec." Abandoning Beck to his own reflection in mirrored shelves, he rounded the bar and went to open up, unlocking the door and flicking on the neon sign along the way. A group of guys, their girlfriends tucked under their arms, filed through the door, clamoring loudly for beers, turning the quiet of the empty bar into the din of a successful business.

Beck waited until Bo was done serving his new customers, staring at the keys where they lay on the counter.

"Why don't you give up the place?" Bo asked once he returned. "Be cheaper than paying rent for a place you don't live in."

Beck raised his shoulders. It was a question he hadn't been able to answer for himself, either. How could he ever hope to explain it to his friend? All he knew was he wasn't ready to sever all ties so ruthlessly. Jake had packed his own set of keys and—. Beck blocked his train of thought from

continuing. No use in harboring false hope. "Don't know. It's—." He shrugged again.

Bo offered to pour him more whiskey. Beck shook his head 'no': he still had to drive back to Fort Drum. Bo screwed the cap on and put the bottle away, and finally snatched the keys off the counter. He locked them in a drawer under the bar. "I'll keep an eye on the place for you," he promised.

"Thanks. Appreciate that." Task completed, Beck slipped off his stool. He paused. "And Bo?" The bartender met his gaze. "Thank you." Though he'd thanked Bo and the other guys for their assistance earlier in the week, buying the men a few rounds as they celebrated their role in the success of bringing Ravenwood to justice, he figured that, after everything Bo had done, it couldn't hurt to extend his gratitude again—even if it seemed to embarrass him.

Bo held Beck's gaze for a heartbeat, before he turned away with an *aw-shucks* shrug. He rubbed an open palm over his skull roughly. "Just take care, 'kay?"

"Will do." Beck smiled inwardly as he walked out of the bar and back to his car. It was early evening, the sun still out, but hanging low enough in the western sky that he cast a long shadow ahead of him.

As he drove east out of town, pointing his car toward the base, Beck again boggled at the fact that he *had* a command to go back to. It was a great deal more than he could've hoped for. He hadn't missed the curious way the army medic had looked at him while treating Jake, or that Lieutenant Sorey had deliberately offered him the opportunity to go with the ambulance. At the time, with Jake's blood drying on his hands, he hadn't cared one jot what his behavior had told the men, or what conclusions they'd draw, or what they'd do with the information.

Those concerns didn't occur to him until, assured Jake would be okay, he'd headed back to base with his heart in his boots. Even if they didn't court-martial him for illegally appropriating the Javelins, he'd been certain they'd kick him out for admitting to a sexual orientation the army didn't want to know about. He'd gone to great lengths to keep it secret for so many years for precisely that reason.

To his consternation, when he signed in at the gate, there had been no

MPs waiting for him, no commanding officer demanding he confirm what they'd been told was true. Instead, he'd run into a flurry of unrelated activity: new orders had come down, and the battalion was preparing for imminent deployment overseas. He'd been told to report to Hoffman *asap*. On the way, he'd decided that meant the colonel wanted to give him the bad news in person, but Hoffman had only been interested in hearing his opinion of the 'exercise', and what he'd thought of Lieutenant's Sorey's performance.

"I'd say it was excellent, sir," Beck had told Hoffman wholeheartedly—ignoring that, once the shooting had started, Sorey had wilfully disregarded the implicit command to stay out of the actual operation.

Dismissed from Hoffman's office with the stern advice to start packing immediately, Beck had bumped into Corporal Lavelle in the hallway. The young soldier had stopped him with a hesitant, "Sir?"

Once he'd gotten Beck's attention, he'd glanced around quickly and asked lowly, "Sir, your... friend, is he—?" The hesitation had been brief enough that Beck had only picked it up because he'd been listening for it.

"The doctors expect a full recovery," Beck had reassured him. "In no small part thanks to you."

Lavelle had grinned, relieved. "My pleasure, sir."

The drive to Fort Drum this evening proved uneventful, giving Beck plenty of time to ponder all that had happened. As he reached the turn-off to the last mile, Beck replayed the conversation he'd had with Bo during the party earlier in the week, when his brain had still been trying to come to grips with the unexpected turn of events. "Perhaps, *major*," the sergeant had declared with a wink, "you underestimate your men. Good officers are rare. Every soldier knows this. And once they got them, they know how to keep 'em."

Beck's mouth had fallen open, and he'd only just started denying Bo's charge when Jake, not yet fully recovered from his injury, had sidled up and told him he was growing tired and wanted to grab a taxi to go home. Bo had seized the opportunity to melt into the throng of men without giving Beck a chance to argue further.

Beck had refused to let Jake go alone, of course. He'd been mindful of Jake's injury, too, as they'd made love that night, for the first time in too many weeks. The next morning, over breakfast, Jake had hesitantly told Beck that, yes, maybe he should go home to Kansas. "For a short while."

Seeing Jake get on that bus, his arm in a sling and his scruffy messenger bag dangling from his other shoulder, had been painful—more painful than any shrapnel wound Beck could remember. It had also felt *right*. Besides, he'd be halfway across the globe soon. What point could Jake staying in Rochester possibly serve?

Beck pulled up to the gates into Fort Drum, absently acknowledging the salute of the guard as he showed his pass and drove through. Making his way to his quarters, and a few hours of shut-eye before he'd have to join the rest of the battalion in Iraq, he couldn't help wonder: would he ever see Jake again?

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