



The Paternity Proposition

By Merline Lovelace

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""Are You My Baby's Mother?"" Billionaire Alex Dalton has had more than his share of women. But now he needs just one--Julie Bartlett, the fiery redhead who'd once given him the hottest night of his life. Was she the mother who had left a baby on the Dalton doorstep? When a paternity test proves inconclusive, he needs Julie's DNA to determine if it is Alex or his twin brother who's now a father. But when Julie refuses to cooperate, Alex vows to tempt her into giving him "everything" he wants.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

As an Air Force officer, Merline Lovelace served at bases all over the world. When she hung up her uniform for the last time, she decided to combine her love of adventure with a flare for storytelling. Since then, she's produced more than 85 action-packed novels. Over eleven million copies of her works are in print in 30 countries. Named Oklahoma's Writer of the Year and Female Veteran of the Year, Merline is also a recipient of Romance Writers of America's prestigious Rita Award.

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"Uh-oh."

The mechanic's muttered exclamation brought Julie Bartlett's head up. She was hot, sweaty, splattered with engine oil, and in no mood for another glitch. The PA-36 Pawnee they were working on was almost twice her age and had seen some hard years before being purchased third or fourthhand by her new partners. No way she was going to take the plane up again until she and Agro-Air's chief mechanic had wrestled new rings onto the cylinder heads.

Agro-Air's chief and *only* mechanic. Tobacco-chewing Chuck Whitestone and Julie's other partner, Dusty Jones, had been in the agricultural aviation business for a combined eighty-two years. They'd scraped by during the lean times, when plummeting prices and widespread foreclosures forced so many Oklahoma farmers off their land. With U.S. crop production now on an upsurge, they should have turned the corner and be showing a tidy profit.

Should being the operative word. Dusty Jones could fly circles around any pilot, young, old or anywhere in between. Julie could attest to that. He'd swooped in to dust her parents' wheat fields, taken their eager nine-year-old up for her very first flight and had her working the stick their second time in the air. Because of Dusty, Julie qualified for a pilot's license before she could legally drive a car. *And* paid her way through Oklahoma State University with a variety of flying jobs after her parents died. *And* got hired by a small regional airline right out of college.

Her plan at the time was to build up her cockpit hours and move into bigger passenger aircraft. Ballooning fuel prices had axed that noble goal. With commercial airlines shutting down routes and laying off personnel, she'd switched from hauling passengers to hauling freight. In the past four years, she'd flown in and out of so many remote locations in North, Central and South America that she couldn't remember a tenth of the places where she'd overnighted. She would probably *still* be hopping from country to country if Dusty hadn't tracked her down a couple of months ago and called to suggest she partner up with him and Chuck Whitestone.

He and Chuck were both on the down slope to seventy, he'd reminded her. They wanted to retire soon. If Julie stuck with Agro-Air for a few years, she could buy them out lock, stock and barrel. All they needed was a small infusion of cash to stay afloat until they rode the upsurge in crop production to a nice, fat retirement.

As it turned out, Dusty's definition of "small infusion" differed from Julie's by several decimal points. Still, she couldn't let him and Chuck go under. So she'd quit her job and sunk her entire savings into Agro-Air. But even someone with all her hours in the cockpit didn't just jump into aerial agriculture feet first. Zipping under power lines and skimming tree tops required a completely different set of flying skills. Also damned near the equivalent of a double PhD in biology and chemistry. Luckily, Julie had taken many of the

necessary science courses at OSU. Still, Dusty had insisted she do all the grunt work these past two months—driving trucks, mixing pesticides, maintaining the plane. She'd learned every aspect of the business from the ground up, literally and figuratively.

During her hot, grimy apprenticeship, Julie had also discovered that one of her new partners hit the casinos almost as often as he climbed into the cockpit. The cash she'd invested in Agro-Air should have gone for new equipment. Instead, Dusty had diverted it to pay his most pressing debts.

So here she was, trying to get this forty-five year old tail-dragger back in the air. Consequently, she did *not* want to hear Chuck had found another problem with the Pawnee's engine. Mentally crossing all of her fingers and toes, she popped her head up over the engine stand.

"Uh-oh what?"

The mechanic shifted his plug of Red Man from one cheek to the other and spit out a black stream before nodding to something over her left shoulder. "We got company."

Twisting, Julie peered at the heat waves shimmering above the dirt road that led to Agro-Air's corrugated tin hangar/ operations center/business office. A plume of red Oklahoma dust rose above the iridescent waves. Generating the plume, she saw, was a low-slung Jaguar XFR.

"Crap!"

Her stomach did a swift free fall. She could think of only one reason why a \$70,000-plus sports car would bump down a dirt road to a mowed-grass airstrip stuck smack in the middle of the Oklahoma Panhandle. The same reason, apparently, had occurred to Chuck. Emitting another black stream, the mechanic shook his head.

"Dusty's gone and done it again."

Jaw tight, Julie pulled a rag from the pocket of her coveralls and swiped at her grease-streaked face. The brutal July heat had prompted her to stuff her unruly auburn mane under an Oklahoma Redhawks baseball cap. As a result, she was swimming in sweat and in no mood to threaten, cajole, bargain with or otherwise attempt to fend off another of Agro-Air's creditors. Except..

When the silvery Jag rolled to a stop some yards away, the man who emerged didn't look like the other collectors who'd harassed them about late payments. Julie slid her aviator-style sunglasses to the tip of her sweaty nose. With a pilot's quick grasp of the essentials, she catalogued sun-streaked tawny hair and linebacker shoulders encased in a crisp white shirt with the sleeves rolled up on muscular forearms. A silver belt buckle glinted in the July sun above a pair of pleated black slacks that only men with flat bellies and lean hips could carry off.

This guy did more than carry them off. He could have modeled them in any catalogue or on any website in the Western World, with some pouty, anorexic model draped all over him. Julie was thoroughly enjoying the view until he peeled off *his* sunglasses and hooked them in the open neck of his shirt.

"Omigod!"

She recognized those lean hips and wide shoulders now. She should! They'd pinned her to the sheets a year or so ago.

A different kind of heat slammed into her. Swift and furious and completely unexpected. She felt its scorch

as images tumbled into her head. This man, lean and sleek with sweat, while she straddled his hips. His hands on her breasts, her hips. Hers exploring every inch of the gorgeous male stretched out beneath her.

And she could barely remember his name! Andy? Aaron?

Her inability to extract that bit of data from the searing memories acted like a bucket of cold water, dousing the heat and all but making Julie cringe. She didn't tumble into bed with complete strangers! Ever! Except for that one time, and never would again. She was too careful, too precise, and too fastidious for one-night stands.

Normally.

If he hadn't swooped into that small airport outside Nuevo Laredo in a spiffy, twinengine Gulfstream...

If they hadn't bumped into each other in the operations shack.

If he hadn't offered to buy her a beer...

Oh, for Pete's sake! All the if's in the world wouldn't erase the idiocy of that wild night. Or her anxious hours after their insane marathon of sex. They'd used a condom. Several, in fact. But she'd been late the following month. Almost ten days.

She'd realized afterward that was probably due to her erratic hours and disrupted sleep cycles, but those were a tense ten days. Just remembering her dread when she'd walked into a drugstore to purchase a pregnancy kit made Julie shove her sunglasses back up her nose with a grimy finger. She wanted no trace of that nerve-racking experience to show when she greeted this ghost from her not-so-distant past.

Or didn't greet him. He flicked her no more than a quick, dismissive glance as he strode up to the engine stand and directed his remarks to Agro-Air's chief mechanic.

"I'm looking for Julie Bartlett. Is she around?"

Part Cherokee, part Afro-American and not particularly inclined to socialize at the best of times, Chuck looked the newcomer up and down.

"Might be," he drawled, shifting his plug to the other cheek again. "Who wants to know?"

"My name's Dalton. Alex Dalton."

Aha! Alex. The name clicked in Julie's head as Chuck gave the man another laconic once-over.

"You in the casino business?"

Obviously surprised by the question, Dalton shook his head. "No. Oil field equipment. Julie Bartlett," he repeated. "Is she here?"

Chuck left it to her to answer, which she did. First, however, she swiped her hands on the rag again and dragged in a long, steady breath.

"Yes, I am."

She could accept the fact that he hadn't recognized her at first in baggy coveralls and baseball cap. She wasn't

real happy with the second look he zinged her way, however. Was that surprise in those laser-blue eyes? Or disbelief that he'd hooked up with this grimy grease monkey? Whatever it was, it stung. Consequently Julie's next comment was more than a tad cool. "What can I do for you, Dalton?"

"I'd like to speak with you." He shot a glance at Chuck. "Privately."

She was tempted to tell him to say whatever he had to say right here. That brief look still rankled.

"All right. Let's go inside. The office is air-conditioned."

Even Dusty would admit "office" was a grandiose term for the plywood cubicle sectioned off inside the metal hangar. But it boasted an air-conditioner that sat on a precarious platform in the partition's only window and did valiant battle against the July heat.

The chilled air hit with a welcome slap as Julie motioned Dalton inside and shut the door behind him. He stood for a moment, looking around. She could imagine what the place must look like to an outsider. It had certainly made her gulp when she'd walked in two months ago. Weather reports, spraying schedules, fuel bills and chemical invoices littered every available horiz...

Users Review

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