

## A Traveler's Insurance

By Scribblesinink

While the crowd leaving the church surged around them, Jake took a moment to survey Main Street, spread out before him. Though work had been paused for the afternoon—out of respect for Jericho's dead, and to allow the crew to attend the memorial service—the clean-up from last week's shelling was far from done. With the help of the military, the car wrecks had been cleared away, but the street was still littered with debris. And then there was that big crater right in front of the Kansas Liberty building....

Jake gave himself a shake, concentrating instead on helping his mother navigate the steps in front of the church. Her hand on his arm tightened slightly when she caught sight of Mrs Olsen heading for them through the throng. It was the only outward sign of his mother's dismay, as she quietly thanked the woman for her kind words before Mrs Olsen had a chance to get up to full-steam, cutting off whatever else was on the woman's mind.

Mrs Olsen had hesitated, clearly wanting to say more, but departed with a mumbled last word of sympathy when his mom turned toward Jake: "Jake, I like to go home now."

Jake peered down at her, brow furrowed in concern. The last few days had been as hard on her as on anyone, and she looked small and frail to him. *She looks old.* The thought startled him. Though his mom's eyes were dry, they were red-rimmed and bruised with fatigue and grief. He'd never fully appreciated how much his parents loved each other until he'd seen Mom's pain at the loss of her husband. His father....

Realizing he was about to lose himself in thought again, and that Mom was still waiting, Jake pulled himself back to the present.

Before he could reply to his mom's request, Eric and Mary joined them at the bottom of the steps. "Don't you want to go to the reception?" Eric dipped his head toward City Hall and the people streaming in that direction. There'd be coffee and cake in the hall and, Jake knew, more reminiscing, and further tears.

His mother shook her head. "I don't think—." Her voice cracked, and she didn't finish.

Jake met Eric's gaze over their mother's head. "Can you...?"

Eric chewed on his bottom lip, but he nodded. "We'll go. Represent the family. You take Mom home." Glancing down, Jake saw how tightly Eric held Mary's hand, and he offered his brother a small nod of thanks.

"You want me to come with?" Emily appeared at Jake's elbow.

"No, honey, that's alright." Gail answered her before Jake could. "You go on with Eric and Mary. I'll be fine." She didn't add that she wanted to be alone, but it was clear from her tone.

Hesitating an instant, Emily nodded. "Of course."

Jake gave Emily a quick smile of appreciation before he started guiding his mother away from the group. Emily had been there for him—for them—ever since he'd poured out his grief on her shoulder, right before Constantino launched his final attack. He wasn't sure what to make of her constant but unassuming presence in the last few days, but he was glad for her support.

The drone of many voices talking quietly fell away behind as he and his mom rounded the corner and headed back to Washington Drive. Around them, the streets were hushed, except for the birdsong of spring. Nearly everyone in Jericho had lost someone in the battle with New Bern—family, friends, neighbors—and the church had been packed during the memorial service, people standing in the back for lack of seating.

"I think I'll stay at the ranch for a while." Mom's quiet words broke the silence.

Jake gave her a glance. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. This," she gestured vaguely around them at the empty homes lining the street, "it's getting a bit... overwhelming."

"Right." Jake wasn't convinced her going to the ranch was a good idea, but he could also understand her need to deal with his father's death in her own way, out from under the compassionate glances and concerned whispers of the townsfolk. "I'll drive you over." The words had left his lips before he remembered his car was still hidden somewhere in the woods near New Bern. Maybe he could borrow the Brigners' old Chrysler instead....

Another memory came back to him, of another time he'd had to borrow a car: Heather babbling to hide her concern as she gave him instructions on how to handle her truck; the way she'd—. He shoved the thought away, fresh hatred for Constantino surging through him instead.

"Jake? Are you alright?"

His mom's voice pierced through the red haze of his anger, and Jake stopped and turned. She offered him a concerned tilt of her eyebrow, and Jake discovered that, in his fury, he'd marched them straight past the house. He gave her a wry shrug. She held his gaze for

another second before proceeding ahead of him into the house without further comment and heading upstairs to pack.

oOo

Jake was reluctant to leave his mother alone, and it was late before he finally headed back to town. He didn't think Mom'd be in any danger at the ranch, not with the number of army patrols currently around. But the thought of leaving her by herself, with nothing except her grief for company, didn't sit well with him. He found one excuse after another to stay a little while longer, until she practically shooed him out of the door.

"Jake, I'll be okay. I just need some time."

Admitting defeat, but promising he'd be back in the morning, Jake climbed behind the wheel of the truck he'd borrowed. The car bucked unwillingly as he shifted gears, and he again bemoaned the loss of the Roadrunner. Perhaps he could sneak out of town and get her back, now the army was here to keep New Bern from launching further attacks....

With half his attention focused inward, it was instinct more than conscious perception that made him register the blur of movement in the beam of his headlights. Without thinking, he slammed on the brakes. The truck swerved. As he struggled to get it back under control, the engine hiccuped and cut out. While the truck coasted to a stop, Jake found his heart was hammering against his ribs.

Taking a deep breath to calm himself, he squinted through the dirty windshield, seeing nothing but empty road in front of him. He hadn't felt a bump, so he knew he hadn't hit anything. Replaying the scene in his mind, he decided he must've seen an animal shooting across the road. A fox, or a jack rabbit, maybe. Still, it had been uncomfortably close....

Automatically, he removed his right hand from the wheel and reached up for the St Christopher medallion lying against his chest. He gave a brief, jittery laugh when he discovered his neck bare of the thin chain. He'd completely forgotten....

He was once again forced to admit he'd never realized how often he used to touch the amulet—to remind himself of home, of hope, or to speak a brief prayer to whoever was out there that might hear him—until he'd taken it off.

He didn't regret its loss, though. The medallion was back where it belonged: with Dad. His father had given it to him when Jake'd been eighteen and leaving for Embry-Riddle. He'd scoffed a little, not quite knowing how to accept the gift gracefully, as Dad had explained, in a gruff voice, how St Christopher was the patron saint of travelers. Despite that, Jake'd worn the medallion for over fifteen years. He'd never removed it, no matter how bad things got between him and Dad, or how many angry words they exchanged, or

how long it had been since he'd last seen Jericho.

He'd finally slipped the chain over his head on the evening of the viewing, after the last of the mourners who'd come to pay his father their respects had left.

"Goodbye, Dad." He'd wanted to say more; there was so much he'd wished he could tell Dad. But the words failed to come. Besides, his throat had clogged up with unshed tears. Instead, he'd slid the small pendant into the breast pocket of his father's suit, half-guilty about it, even though it also felt right to return it for Dad's final journey. The medallion had been his first, a gift from Grandpa when Dad had joined the Rangers back in the sixties.

*I'm proud of you, son.*

His father's last words echoed again in Jake's brain, and he found them as difficult to grasp now as he had when Dad had spoken them, dying on Stanley's kitchen table. Of all the things he'd expected to ever hear from his father....

With a start, Jake noticed he was still sitting motionless behind the wheel of the borrowed truck, and that his cheeks were wet. Damned tears.... Pressing the palms of his hands into his eyes, he gritted his teeth, renewing a silent vow. Constantino would be brought to justice: Jake would make sure that army major understood exactly what sort of crimes New Bern's leader had committed.

Starting the engine again and setting the car back into motion, Jake pressed his lips together grimly. He'd never been much of a fan of the death penalty, but when they strapped Constantino in the chair, you bet he'd be first row, cheering.

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