

## A Twist In The Tail

By Scribblesinink

Jake was glad they'd left the porch light on; it was a welcoming beacon at the end of the frozen track leading down from the highway. The night was dark and the sky overcast, and he thought they could expect snow before morning.

From the corner of his eye, as he parked the truck in the yard, he saw Heather shiver and rub her hands together. "You cold?" The old Ford's heater wasn't really up to dealing with a Kansas winter; it might only be a short drive from the Richmond farm back home, but it was long enough for the chill to seep past even several layers of clothes.

"A little," Heather admitted, ducking deeper into the thick coat she wore.

"Let's get you inside and warmed up, then." Jake got out and scooted around the truck to help her out. By the time he got there, she'd only just turned herself around enough to get the door open, and she accepted his hand to help her clamber down. Getting around had started to get hard on her the last couple of weeks, as her pregnancy had moved into the eighth month. And though Jake still missed his old Roadrunner, he didn't regret selling it once he realized the pickup's high cab was much more comfortable for her.

Having made it down from the cab, Heather wrapped her coat a little tighter; Jake noticed it didn't quite fit across her stomach any more. It wouldn't be much longer.... Nerves fluttered in his belly. The thought he'd be a father soon left him both excited and frightened: the prospect of having such a small and fragile creature depending on him.... He'd never realized how tiny newborns truly were, until Mimi had offered him her one-week old daughter to hold, while Stanley looked on a little anxiously.

And he missed his own dad all the more for it. He'd give anything to ask Johnston's advice; despite their differences, he'd been a good father, and Jake could only hope to live up his example.

He realized Heather had let go of his hand and was walking—she'd say *waddle*, he thought with an inward smile—toward the porch. He quickly shut the door of the truck and jogged to catch up with her. Taking her by the elbow, he helped her conquer the steps up to the front porch. There had been a time not too long ago that she'd have shrugged him off a little impatiently, but the fact she'd accepted his help without even a murmur of protest told him more about how she felt than anything she could've said.

Maybe they'd finally reached a place where his level of anxiety matched her reluctance to let him coddle her. He chuckled to himself as he remembered how ridiculously terrified

he'd been when he first learned she was expecting. Though he knew what had happened to April had been a freak accident, something that would've been dealt with long before it could threaten his sister-in-law's life if they'd had proper medical care, the fear that something like it might happen to Heather had gripped him deep in his gut. But, as time progressed, and all the tests and scans said everything was fine, and she just grew bigger and bigger (and more beautiful, although she refused to believe that), his anxiety had lessened somewhat.

Reaching the top step, Jake looked up from keeping an eye on where they were putting their feet on the slightly icy steps. He stiffened, unaware he was clamping down on Heather's arm so hard that his fingers dug into her painfully, despite the coat, until she protested, "Jake...?"

"Shh." He was no longer looking at Heather, but had his eyes firmly fixed on the front door. He heard Heather's sharp intake of breath, and knew she'd seen what he had: the door stood ajar, the interior of the house visible as a dark strip of shadow inside the frame. "Stay behind me."

Jake let go of her hand and fumbled for the Beretta stashed in his belt. He knew she hadn't much liked him taking it along but, while most of Kansas had been cleared of its post-bomb road gangs, there were still plenty of bad people about, and he wasn't about to take any chances.

He tiptoed toward the door, trying to step so the wood floor wouldn't creak and betray him. After he reached the door, he cautiously pushed it open further, keeping his finger on the Beretta's trigger. He strained his ears. There was a soft noise from the direction of the kitchen, but he couldn't hear anything else. After a last glance to make sure Heather was behind him—she gave him a reassuring smile—he inched deeper into the house, heading for the kitchen as silently as he could.

There it was again! That small sound.... He frowned, not able to make out what it was. He felt around the kitchen door, searching for the light switch, once again grateful they'd managed to get the ranch hooked back up to the main grid. Finding the switch, he flicked it on and—

The cat hissed angrily as it darted from the counter, sending the plate of freshly baked cookies it had been nibbling crashing to the ground. Shards of china and cookie crumbs scattered all across the kitchen floor.

"Dammit!"

Jake nearly fired the gun out of pure shock. Behind him, Heather let out a surprised

squeak, and the cat screeched as it dashed past them and ran out the front door.

"Damned cat!" Jake headed back out to the porch, lighting more lamps along the way, and glared out into the yard. He saw the cat's eyes gleaming from under the truck, and it hissed at him. "Scared the crap outta me." He felt almost faint with relief, though. From all the scenarios that had played in his head when he first caught sight of the door standing open, reality had turned out to be by far the most innocent.

Heather gave a nervous laugh, and he knew she was as relieved as he was. "How did it get in?"

He shrugged, pushing the door closed and noting that there was no sign the lock had been forced. He switched on another light. "Dunno. Guess we didn't lock up properly."

Heather nodded, biting her lip. "I'm sorry, I—."

He silenced her with a finger against her lips. She'd been the last one out of the house, while he'd brought the truck round and tried to warm it up. But the latch was old and worn: if you didn't pull the door closed quite right, it didn't catch. Usually, they used the deadlock as well, but not always, and he figured she'd been too eager to get out of the house to remember this time.

And not that it would have mattered, except he saw, as she took in the mess on the floor of the kitchen, that she was trembling. He reckoned she was thinking the same thing he was: remembering that horrible night in July a couple years ago, when Constantino's thugs had come for her....

This time, at least it had been nothing worse than a stray cat.

oOo

That night, Jake lay awake, sleep eluding him as he kept replaying the events of the evening and the terror that had gripped him when he thought someone had come to threaten his family. They'd almost taken Heather from him once; he wasn't about to give them a chance to ever try again.

Problem was, he couldn't be around to protect Heather all the time.

He tossed over onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. If she knew what he was thinking, she'd probably laugh at him, and tell him she was a big girl who could take care of herself. And normally he'd agree: she was, and she could. Her self-reliance was one of the things he loved about her. And though she didn't like guns, he'd taught her how to handle one

regardless. She'd never become a great shot, but she wouldn't hesitate to use it.

That still didn't mean she couldn't get hurt. That something couldn't happen to the baby. That something might happen that would send her into labor early, out here and alone, while he was away getting their business up and running....

He glanced over to where Heather lay on her side, her back to him, her breathing slow and regular. If something happened to her... to them....

He flung off the covers, giving up on sleep. Not wanting to disturb Heather, he slipped out of the room and headed downstairs. Puttering around in the newly cleaned kitchen, he made some coffee and took it into the living room. Settling himself on the back of the couch, he warmed his hands around the mug, and glanced out of the window into the dark night. Fat snowflakes had started drifting down, and the ground was already covered in a thin layer of white.

He loved the ranch, the peace and quiet, and so did Heather. It was a great place for a life together. But here, she'd be alone whenever he was gone, miles from town, with the nearest neighbor over the next hill.

Perhaps he should convince her to move back to town? At least until the baby was born. His mother'd take her in without hesitation; she'd probably be glad for the company in the old house, which was really too big for her on her own.

Taking another sip from his coffee, he dismissed the thought. Honestly? He didn't think Heather would agree to the suggestion. Certainly not if she thought he was just being over-protective.

He sighed. If only there was a way he could be assured she was safe while he wasn't around....

oOo

A few days later, Jake couldn't keep his lips from turning up as he drove home, feeling rather pleased with himself. Turning off the highway and bumping up the track to the house, he snuck glances sideways at the box on the passenger seat: he'd found the perfect solution to making sure Heather and the baby were safe while he was at the airfield.

Though dusk was settling, it was still light, and he was home earlier than usual. Heather appeared in the doorway as he got out of the truck, a frown creasing her forehead.

"Hey." He gave her a quick smile and a wave, before ducking back into the truck to lift his

surprise from the box. Wrapping it in its blanket, he carried it inside, Heather's expression telling him she had no idea what he'd brought. Her confusion only made him grin more widely.

"Please, sit down." Arms full, he dipped his head to indicate the high, hard-backed chair at the dining table, knowing it was about the only seat she could comfortably use now. Giving him a bewildered look, she did as he asked.

He leaned over and put the squirming bundle he held into her lap, before pulling the blanket away. Freed from its confinement, the puppy clambered further up Heather and sniffed her nose, before giving her a long lick across her cheek.

Heather took a moment to react, during which the puppy managed another quick lick, before she pushed the ball of fur away from her, holding it at arms' length. "Eww!" She pulled a face at the dog, but she was laughing too.

Jake saw how her hand instinctively slid to scratch the dog behind its ear even as she held it off. The dog gazed soulfully back at her, its puppy-dog eyes large and brown and moist, and it panted eagerly, uttering a tiny squeak that sounded to Jake like it was supposed to be a happy bark.

Heather turned her gaze away from the dog and to Jake. "What's this?"

Her smile had faded somewhat, and Jake grinned uncertainly. "It's a dog?"

Heather snorted. "I can see that." As soon as she relaxed her hold on the animal, it scrambled back onto her belly to try and lick her face once more, and she had to gently push it away again. "I meant, what's it doing here?"

Jake shrugged, some of his excitement fading. "I, um...." He cleared his throat. "After the other night, I wanted to make sure you were safe...."

"So you got me this?" Heather gave him one of her looks, and he wondered if he'd be the one spending the night in the barn. She didn't seem as unequivocally pleased as he'd expected her to be.

Maybe bringing the dog home as a surprise hadn't been such a good idea after all.

"It'll grow big soon enough," he pointed out. He couldn't help but be a little defensive; after all, he had made sure the breed was one that was up for guard duty. "It's still a pup."

He noticed that the more Heather held the dog away from her, the harder it tried to

reach her face. She was struggling now to keep hold, and it mewled in disappointment, its little legs scrabbling for purchase. Jake wondered if he should take it back from her.

"Yes. And it'll need training. And house training." She lifted the dog up, and Jake saw with horror that there was a wet patch on her smock. He darted forward and took the dog back, wrapping it in the blanket. It turned its attention to trying to lick him instead.

Heather's gaze softened a little as she looked up at the two of them. "Jake, what were you thinking?" She sighed as she pulled the damp smock away from her thigh. "In a few weeks, we'll have another new arrival."

He blinked. "I'm—." He ignored the dog licking his face. "I made sure I picked a breed that's good with children."

"That's not it...." Heather stood up and put her hand on the pup's head, stroking it. It quieted a little, snuffling at Jake's neck. "It's just... maybe this isn't the best time? We're just starting to get settled, and then we'll have our own baby to take care of."

Jake put his free hand on her stomach. Maybe she did have a point. A young dog would require lots of attention, too. "I'm sorry." He sighed. "I can take it back if you don't want it? I just...." He caught her gaze, and gave another small shrug. "I just want you to be safe. Both of you."

Her expression softened further. The dog squirmed around and began nuzzling her fingers, and beneath his hand Jake felt the baby move inside her. Heather drew in a breath. "You don't have to take him back. But Jake?" She cupped his cheek, her fingers catching on his light stubble. "We're in this together, okay? Next time you decide to expand the family—."

Jake nodded, realizing he should've discussed it first; he remembered how his dad always talked major decisions through with his mom. But he'd come across the ad for the dogs.... It had seemed like such a good idea, that he hadn't stopped to consider. He turned his head a little so he could lightly kiss her palm. "Next time, I'll talk to you, I promise."

She smiled, then, leaning in to kiss him, and the puppy squeaked as it nearly got crushed between them.

Heather pulled back and scratched the pup behind the ear, soothing it again. "So, I guess you need a name, little guy?" Her voice was soft. "It's a guy, right?" She looked back at Jake.

He nodded. He'd had some ideas for a name, but he was happy to let her choose. It was

supposed to be her dog, after all.

Heather regarded the dog for a long moment, and it gave another little bark, its small tail whipping back and forth almost too fast to see. Heather gave a low chuckle. "Well, since it'll be your job to safeguard the house while the chief is gone," she glanced up at Jake, grinning mischievously, "I think we should call you Deputy Dawg."

For a moment, it didn't quite sink in and he just stared at her. Then he caught on and laughed, knowing he was forgiven. This time.

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