

A Waste Of Time By Scribblesinink

The barrel of the gun stares him straight in the face, a gaping black hole that promises death.... Pale blue eyes above it, cold and impassive.... Somewhere, a woman screams....

"Heather," Jake whimpers. "No...."

Then the gun goes off....

With a cry, Jake shot up. He was covered in a thin layer of sweat, and he shivered as cool air hit him where the sheet fell away. For a moment, in the pitch dark, he didn't know where he was. Then he recognized the slightly lighter rectangle of the window in his bedroom at the ranch, and he fell back against the pillow, relief washing over him.

Just a bad dream....

Not the first, and he didn't think it'd be his last nightmare, either. Too much had happened, things not easily forgotten. And it didn't take a doctor with a psych degree to understand why he'd have this particular dream on this particular night. Jake suspected the memories of what had happened the year before would always cast a shadow over Independence Day: those horrible hours after Constantino had taken Heather, and he and Beck had raced off in pursuit, not knowing if they'd find her at all, let alone alive....

Another shiver ran through him, and it had nothing to do with the night air. He'd feared her lost to him for good that time. And what had he done once they got her back? Jake flopped over onto his belly, groaning: he'd spent another year being the biggest idiot ever to walk a Kansas field.

So much time wasted already.... He glanced over at the empty place in the bed beside him, longing to see her sleeping there again: lying on her side, legs drawn up and one hand under her head, which seemed to be her favorite position.

But Heather was back in Jericho, in her own home and her own bed. He hoped she was sleeping better than he was. He'd hate for her to wake up from a similar nightmare, all alone in that dark house. He knew today had taken its toll on her as well; he'd noticed her grow more subdued as the day progressed, the brave smile she gave others never quite reaching her eyes. After the fireworks, she'd begged off on coming back to the ranch with him, claiming she was exhausted and that she wanted to sort through a few of her school books for ideas for lesson plans anyway.

Jake hadn't pressed her, but god, he wished she was here. He didn't want to lose any more time; he wanted Heather to make the ranch her home, for better or for worse, bringing all her bad memories *and* her school books with her. 'Cause, right now, he wanted nothing more than to be able to scoot over and hold her, and share her troubles and cherish her forever.

oOo

"So, it's settled then?" Gray folded his hands together in front of him, looking expectantly around the table. "We can present this plan to the school board?"

"I'd say so, Mr. Mayor." The gray-haired woman from Topeka smiled.

Mrs. McVey nodded as well. "Yes. Heather?"

Heather glanced up from her notes. A low headache was building behind her eyes, from too many hours in Gray's office and too many hours of intense talks. It had taken a lot of discussion to sort out the educational status of Jericho's students after two years of very little to no official schooling, and with the demands of the newly reinstated Kansas State Board of Education. "Uh huh."

"Good!" Gray sounded relieved. He pushed his seat back and held out his hand to the state's representative. "Thanks for your help, Ma'am."

The woman got up and shook Gray's hand. "Glad to have been of service." Turning toward Heather and Mrs. McVey, she added, "The sooner we get our young ones back in their classrooms, the better, wouldn't you say?"

Heather couldn't agree more; her kids had already missed so much. She leaned toward the principal. "I'll drop by this afternoon, so we can go over those summer school lesson plans?"

Mrs. McVey nodded. "I'll see you there."

With the meeting officially over, Heather could finally escape. Outside Gray's office, on the landing, she nearly bumped into Jake. She started in surprise. "Hey!" She frowned a little. "What are you doing here?" It was the Monday after Independence Day, and she'd thought he'd left on another run to Wichita, hauling supplies for Dale.

"Came to see you." He grinned down at her and drew her in for a kiss. "Missed you."

She pulled back, giving a nervous snort—it was true she'd spent most of the weekend

pouring over her books in preparation for today's meeting—before casting a glance back into the room, where the woman from the State Board and Principal McVey were still talking to Gray. She wasn't sure how she felt about Jake's public display of affection under the eyes of her employers. She imagined she could sense their disapproving looks prick her neck.

Jake followed her gaze. "Who's that?"

"She's the lady from Topeka that I told you about, from the State Board of Education." Heather smiled up at him, eager to tell him about their meeting. "We've been finalizing our ideas for the summer school program."

"Huh." He shook his head distractedly. Heather felt a twinge of disappointment that he didn't seem all that interested in what she had been up to the entire morning. Most of last week, actually.

"Come on." Visibly dismissing the visitor from his mind, Jake reached for her hand and gave a tug. "There's something..." His voice trailed off as he headed for the stairs, and he didn't finish the sentence.

Heather stuffed her notepad into her bag as she hurried to keep pace with him. "What's going on?"

He shot her an innocent grin across his shoulder, before heading down the stairs. "Thought you might like to get out of here for a bit. And I figured you'd want lunch?"

As soon as he mentioned food, her stomach rumbled softly and she forgot her slight annoyance. The meeting had lasted longer than she'd expected, and she *was* hungry. Getting some fresh air before she headed over to the school for her meeting with Mrs. McVey sounded good too. Maybe it'd help with the headache.

As they crossed the hallway, she cast an automatic glance toward the sheriff's office. Jimmy, manning the counter, gave her a quick nod before turning his attention back toward the army lieutenant he was discussing something with. The army—the *United States* army—still had a liaison in Jericho, although most of the 10th Mountain Division had been moved out by the end of May—Edward among them....

Those last weeks, after she'd chosen Jake over Edward, had been awkward, to say the least. Edward had tried to hide it from her, but he'd been deeply hurt and disappointed, and she knew he'd been watching her closely to see if Jake would mistreat her, or if she'd change her mind and come back to him. As such, it had been something of a relief when he'd been transferred out. He'd told her he'd been ordered to Columbus, to testify at the

hearings about Cheyenne's crimes. That was the last she'd heard from him; for all she knew, he was still in Ohio. She hoped he was all right.

Shaking the thought away, she squinted at the bright glare outside as Jake led her through the glass doors and down the steps. The sun stood high in the pale blue sky, though thunder clouds were building in the distance, barely visible over the roofs of Main Street. The Roadrunner was parked at the bottom of the steps, and Jake guided her toward it, which was a bit of a surprise. She'd expected him to maybe take her to Bailey's, but he waved her into the passenger seat with an impish half-smile.

"Jake? Where are we going?"

The grin widened a little. "You'll see."

Shaking her head at the cryptic answer, she smiled back and got in. A few minutes later, they were rolling out of Jericho, headed west. Heather frowned a little uncertainly as Jake took the turnoff onto the trail toward the old Shaw Creek bridge. She cleared her throat. "Um, I'm supposed to meet Mrs. McVey in an hour?" Not only did she need to work on the summer school program, now that the school would be back in session soon, they also needed to discuss how to find a replacement for poor Mr. Rennie, dead almost two years now from a heart attack shortly after the bombs.

Jake shot her a glance as he steered the Roadrunner around a hole in the dirt. "Don't worry, this won't take that long." There was another hint of that sly twist to his lips, like he was harboring some secret she didn't know about. "I'll have you back in Jericho in time."

They reached the bridge, and Jake parked next to it on a flat patch of ground. Snatching a cooler Heather hadn't noticed before from the backseat, he led her down to the creek, which gurgled softly. He spread a blanket out on the grass, shaded by the trees, and invited her to sit.

She laughed, delighted. "You decided to take me for a picnic?"

"Yup." He grinned back, but Heather noticed a hint of nervousness beneath the grin that hadn't been there before. She wasn't quite sure what was up, but she gave him a warm smile in return, trying to show him without words that she was enjoying his surprise. Kneeling by the ice box, she started exploring its contents, her mouth watering at the sight of the food.

"Did you...?" She unwrapped a ham-and-cheese sandwich and waved it at him questioningly, before taking a large bite.

Jake shook his head, laughing. "No. Mary did. I brought this." He held out a bottle that he'd produced from somewhere, its dark green glass glistening with dewy droplets.

She squinted at the label before raising an eyebrow. "Champagne?"

He shrugged, suddenly blinking at her shyly. "Picked it up on one of my trips for Dale. Thought it'd fit the occasion?" The tension was more pronounced now, audible in the way he voiced the comment as a question.

Heather shifted a little uncertainly on the blanket. "What occasion?" She tried to think if she'd missed a birthday, or something, but unless Jake considered the two months and four days that had passed since she'd made up her mind and gone to see him at the ranch—and they'd first spent the night together—an anniversary worth marking, she couldn't think of anything.

He knelt down in front of where she was sitting cross-legged on the blanket, putting the bottle aside and taking her hands between his. He looked down at them for a moment, absently stroking her palm with his thumb, before he tilted his head up so he could catch her gaze.

"Heather...."

He sounded so serious all of a sudden that fear swept over her. *He's breaking up*—No, she told herself, before she could finish the thought, he wouldn't have brought the champagne. But what...?

"Heather... I...." He uttered an uneasy laugh. "Um, I had this big speech but...." He shrugged and swallowed, hard. "Will you marry me?"

"What?" She'd blurted out the word before she could stop herself, and a nervous giggle followed. Of all the things she'd imagined....

Jake looked taken aback a little at her response, and Heather guiltily pressed her lips together tightly to prevent any further unwanted laughter.

He plowed on. "I love you. The war is over and... and we wasted so much time. *I* wasted so much time. But I'm more sure of this than anything: I want you to be my wife. Please?"

The warm summer air felt thick and heavy around her, and she thought she couldn't breathe. A roar in her ears drowned out the gurgle of the brook and the hum of insects.

She opened her mouth, but no sound came out, and she snapped her jaw back shut.

Too much! Too soon!

She swallowed, attempting to work some moisture back into her mouth, and tried again. "Jake... I... I don't...."

How could she be sure? He'd said it had taken him months to work out he was in love with her, but how could she be *sure*? How could she trust he wasn't wrong again? What if he realized he'd never really loved her at all?

"Oh god." Jake had paled beneath his scruff; he was still holding her hands, but now he dropped them. They fell limply into her lap, as if they weren't a part of her anymore. He was still right in front of her, but a chasm seemed to have opened between them. She wanted to reach across, but she didn't think the gesture would be well received.

He cleared his throat, pushing back to his feet. "I'm so sorry. I thought—."

He turned away from her, and started putting the picnic leftovers back in the cooler, his movements curt and abrupt.

"Jake...?" She tried to put a hand on his arm, but he shrugged her off.

"I'll take you back to Jericho." His tone was flat, and she realized how much she'd hurt him.

Why couldn't she just have said *yes*? The thought made fresh panic want to surge through her, and she knew she couldn't bring herself to say it.

It was too late now, anyway.

Without another word, she helped him to quickly collect their things and fold up the blanket. The ride back to Jericho was the longest of her life. She kept darting glances in Jake's direction, but he didn't look back. He stared straight ahead, at the road, his grip on the steering wheel tight. It was as if a brick wall stood between them, and she could no longer reach him. They'd always been comfortable around each other, even before, when she'd had to try very hard not to let slip how much he affected her. But now? Now it felt as if she were riding with a stranger.

After what seemed like forever, they stopped in front of the school. Jake was still not looking at her. She put her hand on the door handle, and turned toward him. "Jake—."

He gave a sharp shake of his head. "Don't. Please."

Heather sighed, and got out. Watching the Roadrunner roar off, a lot faster than was wise on the potholed road, she finally let the tears fall.

oOo

"God, I totally mishandled it." Heather offered Mimi a glass of iced tea, before sitting down on the bench beside her. Mimi huffed softly but didn't speak, waiting instead for Heather to continue. She'd shown up a few minutes before, indicating she knew what had happened, and asking Heather if she was all right. Heather wasn't sure what had come over her—she wasn't one for sharing her troubles—but she'd felt the sudden strong urge to confide in someone, and so she'd asked Mimi in for some cold drinks.

It was hot, and the shade of the porch was very welcome. The sweet scent of the honeysuckle in the yard was heavy in the air. Unsure where to begin, Heather stared out across the empty street. She figured she could've picked a worse confessor. At least Mimi had no ancient ties to the town; she wouldn't have the preconceptions about Jake, or Heather herself, that most other people did.

Preconceptions that meant she could get away with phoning the school this morning and saying she wasn't well enough to come in today. Truth was, she'd spent most of the hours of darkness aimlessly wandering the few rooms of her own house in Jericho. Over the past weeks, a lot of her things had somehow ended up at the ranch, but the framed photos of her parents and most of her books were still on the shelves. Tracing a finger along the spines, she'd wondered if it had been foresight that she hadn't given up her house, despite Jake hinting a few times that she should cancel the lease and move into the ranch for real.

The sky to the east had already been growing light by the time she'd finally fallen into a fitful doze on the couch, cradling one of the pillows in her arms, and she'd woken up stiff and tired a few hours later.

Now, she sipped from the tea, her face twisting into a grimace of disgust when she discovered she'd forgot to add the sugar. She put the glass down on the ground beside her and drew up her legs, folding her arms around her knees.

After a long minute had passed and she still hadn't spoken, Mimi broke the silence. "Did I ever tell you about the first time," Mimi paused a moment to smile at something only she knew, "that Stanley and I, um, talked about us getting married?"

"No." Heather gave Mimi a curious glance, glad to be distracted from her own worries.

"What happened?"

Mimi chuckled. "I asked him. Didn't even think about, it just popped out, like that."

Heather raised an eyebrow. "How did Stanley take it?"

"Not well. Not well at all." Mimi took a sip from her tea before pondering it with a small frown. She looked back at Heather. "For a short while there, I thought I'd messed it up for good." She laughed again. "Turned out he was mostly upset I had asked *him* before he could ask *me*. He repeated the question that same night, right there on his knees," she pointed at a spot in front of her, "and offered me his mother's wedding ring."

Heather couldn't help but smile a little at the story. Stanley and Mimi were so clearly meant for each other that it was hard to imagine them *not* being married—even if the actual wedding had taken place just a few months ago... when Edward had kissed her for the first time... and Jake had finally realized he was in love with her. Or so he said.

She sighed, the smile fading from her face. Her eyes were stinging, and she didn't think it was from fatigue. "I just...." She shrugged.

"You don't want to marry Jake?" Mimi sounded a little surprised.

"No. Yes. I don't know!" No longer able to sit still, Heather pushed to her feet. She walked the few steps to the porch rail and hugged herself. "No, I do want to," she muttered, almost to herself, before turning around. "I'm just not so sure it's what *he* wants. What if it's not real? What if Jake is wrong, if...? What if I made a mistake?" A tear trickled down her cheek, and she brushed at it angrily with the back of her hand.

"Oh, sweetie...." Mimi had set down her own glass and joined Heather at the rail. She dipped her head a little so she could meet Heather's eyes "Do you really believe it was a mistake to break up with the major?"

Heather shook her head. No, but.... "What if Jake just *thinks* he's in love with me?" she whispered.

Mimi gave a soft laugh. "Jake's an idiot who doesn't know himself very well, I'll admit that. But, trust me, he loves you very much." She raised a hand over her eyes against the glare and watched the street for a moment. Heather followed her gaze. A couple of kids had appeared, playing with a ball, their voices loud in the still afternoon. Mimi turned back to Heather. "He showed up at the farm in the middle of the night last night. Stone-dead drunk." She gave a wry grin. "Scared the living crap outta me, and Stanley nearly shot him for an intruder before he realized it was Jake."

Heather gaped, concern for Jake warring with embarrassment. "I'm sorry about—is he okay?"

"Sure. Woke up with a whopper of a headache, though." Mimi chuckled. "Stanley fed him coffee and raw eggs," she scrunched up her face in disgust and shuddered, "and sent him home with a handful of aspirin. Physically, he's fine." She put a hand on top of Heather's wrist, her fingers warm. "Point is, before he dropped into a coma on the couch to sleep it off, he told us what happened. And you know? There's no shame in getting it wrong the first time. Just look at me and Stanley."

Heather sighed. "So... you think I should say yes?"

Mimi shook her head. "I didn't say that. If you don't feel you're ready...."

"How do you know when you are?" Heather gathered up the half-finished glasses of iced tea before turning back to Mimi. "How did you know you wanted to marry Stanley?"

Mimi folded her arms and shrugged. "I honestly don't know. I just did. I guess, that when it's the right guy and the right time, a woman simply knows?"

oOo

After Mimi had left, Heather had pottered around her house for a few hours, watering the plants and dusting the shelves, but her mind was elsewhere. She knew she'd have to talk to Jake; she couldn't let things lie and fester. She also didn't think he'd be the one who'd seek her out, not this time—she'd hurt him badly. But it had been such a shock when he'd sprung the question on her like that. Still, if only she'd responded a little better, she might've made him understand why she couldn't say yes. Not yet, at least.

After a miserable and lonely dinner of spaghetti and some canned sauce she found on a back shelf in the kitchen, she gathered her courage, climbed into Charlotte, and trundled along Route Six until she reached the ranch.

She found Jake working in the barn. It was almost like that other time.... She shook her head; it didn't do any good to think about that now.

"Jake?"

He must've heard her come—Charlotte was rattling like pinball machine on speed—but he was concentrating on giving Whisper a good brushing, and only looked up briefly as she called his name. She could tell he'd had a rough night: his eyes were bloodshot and

puffy, and there were bruises underneath them.

"Heather." He acknowledged her curtly before ducking around under the horse's neck so he could work on the animal's other flank.

She crossed her arms, clutching her elbows nervously as she walked closer. "Jake, we need to talk. About... about yesterday."

He gave her another quick glance over the horse's withers and bent over to run a hand along one of its front legs. "So, talk."

She sighed. Okay. He obviously wasn't going to make it easy on her. She probably deserved that; she'd practically laughed in his face when he'd been all earnest and serious. No matter that it had been nerves and not ridicule that had made her giggle.

She wandered over to the stall, putting a hand on the rough wood of the gate, trying to figure out where to start. "It's just—."

Jake interrupted her. "This is about Beck, isn't it? You still have feelings for him."

Heather blinked at him, stunned "As a friend, yes." She could hardly believe he'd bring Edward into this. "But that's not the point! Have I ever shown any sign I've regretted choosing you, even though I knew it'd break his heart?"

"No," he mumbled, glancing away, but not before she'd seen the contrition in his eyes.

Her anger faded as she realized it was fear more than anything that had made him suggest it, and she lowered her voice, suddenly knowing what she needed to say. "The thing is... marriage is a big commitment. And you... you ignored me for a month after I'd kissed you. And then, after I came back from New Bern, it took you another year to realize you wanted to be more than my friend. So, forgive me for being a little skeptical when you say this is what you want."

While she'd talked, Jake had come out of the stall, closing the gate behind him. Turning back around, he scrubbed a hand over his face, still not looking at her. "I really messed that up, didn't I?"

"That's not—." She paused to take a breath. "Jake, I love you, but trust takes time. I'm just not ready yet."

"Yet?" He finally met her gaze, hope bright in his eyes. "So, it isn't...?"

She shook her head before he could finish. "No. It's not"

"Okay." He gave her a smile filled with relief. "Heather, I *know* this is what I want, but I'll prove it to you. And go on proving it. Until you're ready." He shrugged. "I can be patient."

She rolled her eyes at that, and his smile turned rueful. "I can, you know. When it matters." He didn't need to add that, in this case, it mattered a lot.

She reached out to briefly touch his arm, in acknowledgment and as a silent promise: some day, she would say yes.

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