

Between a rock and a hard place

by Tanaqui

Jake must have been watching for her, like he'd been for Mr Hawkins earlier, because he opened the door before she had a chance to knock.

Heather wanted to just shove the paper at him and walk away, but that wouldn't have been smart. Instead, she stalked past him as he stood back for her, and waited until he'd closed the door.

"Did you get it?" He twisted to face her, one hand still resting on the door.

"Here!" She thrust the page from the report towards him.

Stepping towards her, he took it with a frown. "Is everything okay?" He unfolded the sheet and glanced at it briefly, before turning his attention back to her.

"Not really, no." She rubbed a hand across her forehead, trying to ease the headache that had been building since she'd left Beck's office. "I almost got caught."

"What?" He took a step closer. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She waved him off. She was *here*, wasn't she? "I'm fine." She shrugged. "One of the sergeants came in while I was in Beck's office and wanted to know what I was doing in there. Luckily I'd just got the binder back where it belonged. I told him I needed something from the major's inbox, but I guess he didn't believe me." She looked down at her hands, twisting them together. "He made me wait in the office until Major Beck got back."

Those two hours had been among the longest of her life. The page tucked into her back pocket had felt like it was burning a hole in her jeans, while her brain churned over the coming confrontation. That Beck would be out of the office, that he would never know, that she wouldn't have to flat out lie to him, had been one of the two things that had stopped her from just backing out of the office the moment she got in there. The other was knowing that Jake was relying on her, and that he wouldn't have asked her unless he really was desperate. That she owed him.

She looked back up at Jake and saw he was trying to smile encouragingly at her, though he couldn't completely mask his worry. "But Beck believed you?"

She nodded mutely. Beck had been so ready to believe. He'd had to ask her the question, for form's sake, but the expression in his eyes showed he harbored no real suspicions. That had made lying to him so much worse. She hated the way she'd been able to use his trust. She almost hated him for giving it to her so easily, though he'd had no reason before this not to.

"Heather?" She was dimly aware of Jake saying her name, but it was only when he put his hands on her shoulders and repeated it that she looked up at him. He peered intently into her face. "I know Hawkins is going to ask me, so I have to ask you. Do you think Beck or that sergeant have any idea what you might have been up to?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so. No. I'm not sure the sergeant was convinced I wasn't snooping around looking for *something*, but Major Beck...." She bit her lip. "He *apologized* to me."

Which had only made it worse. She was angry with him for being so... so damn *nice* that he'd conspired with her to make an even bigger fool of himself than he needed to. And as for Jake....

Maybe she'd trusted *him* too easily. Maybe he was making a fool out of *her*.

She swallowed and met Jake's gaze. The least he could do was tell her why she'd had to betray someone who'd wanted nothing but good for the people around him. "You said you'd explain," she reminded him. "Why it was so important."

He nodded and gestured towards the couch. She sat down and wrapped her arms around herself, while he perched on the edge of the seat, angled towards her.

He paused for a moment, as if unsure where to start, before taking a deep breath. "You asked Hawkins who he was...."

As Jake unfolded his story, Heather's mood shifted from anger to incredulity—what kind of crazy conspiracy nuts had she got herself mixed up with?—and, finally, to acceptance. Because it did all hang together. She couldn't dispute that Major Beck and his superiors believed there was a terrorist in the area with a nuclear bomb; Jake claimed to have actually seen it; Hawkins had arrived just before the attacks.... And Jake wasn't stupid or gullible.

When Jake finished talking, she sat there for a moment, trying to take it all in. Trying to take in that a group of Americans had killed millions of other Americans for... for power. And killed millions of people in two other countries to hold on to that power. She would have said it an improbable fantasy, like something dreamed up by Hollywood—except she'd spent the winter in New Bern. She'd seen what Phil Constantino had done; she knew now what men like him were capable of. This was the same thing, just... larger.

At last, she looked up at Jake. "So you have to protect the bomb while this teammate of Hawkins persuades Texas to listen?"

He nodded.

"Okay. Okay." She licked her lips. "Look. I understand why you asked me to do this. That there wasn't any other way, and it had to be done. But," she dropped her gaze for a moment, and then looked back up at him, "please don't ask me again. Major Beck trusts me and... I don't like lying to him. He's a good man."

Jake turned his head away for a moment, grimacing, before turning back to her. "I can't promise you that." He looked at her unhappily. "I promise I won't ask if there's any other way, but...."

What's at stake? I believe it's the future of our country.

Hawkins' words came back to her. She swallowed and nodded. "If it has to be done, I'll do it."

She just hoped Major Beck never found out.

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