

# Correspondence

by Tanaqui

Bailey's was warm after the chill of the dark December evening outside that threatened snow. Heather began unwinding her scarf and shrugging off her coat even as she, Stanley and Mimi made a beeline for one of the booths, while Jake headed to the bar to order drinks.

Mimi was telling Heather about the Christmas decorations she and Stanley had put up earlier in the day. "He kept pulling out all this... stuff," Mimi flapped her hand to indicate how indescribably bad it was, "from the basement. Claimed they had to put it up when they were running the produce stall, the customers expected it...."

"It was fun," Stanley objected, although he didn't sound too put out to Heather's ears. She guessed they'd had bigger arguments than this about his wardrobe, or about Mimi's continued lack of interest in baseball, football or pretty much any other kind of sport.

"It was hideous, more like." Mimi rolled her eyes. "Inflatable santas! A whole troop of reindeer! This awful, awful nativity scene...."

While she spoke, Jake rejoined them, slipping into the seat next to Heather and sliding his arm around her. He laughed and nodded at Stanley. "You've still got that?"

Stanley huffed a little. "It was my mom's favorite."

"Yeah, well," Mimi made a face, "no disrespect to your mom, but she had terrible taste in decorations. Thank god this year there's a City ordinance on how many lights we're allowed to have. Gray Anderson's got *something* right for once!"

"So what have you put up?" Heather shot a glance at Jake, wondering if he wanted to decorate the ranch house. He hadn't mentioned it yet, and she didn't feel completely comfortable bringing up the topic herself.

Mimi leaned back and looked smug. "Just some nice tasteful strands of lights running around the porch. I thought I was being very reasonable when I allowed more than one color."

Stanley looked like he was about to say something, but he was prevented from speaking by Mary bringing their drinks over.

"Here you go." Mary slid Mimi's club soda across the table to her, and set down bottles of beer in front of the rest of them. "Oh, and there's this" She wiped her fingers, damp from the cold beer, on her jeans and reached for an envelope stuck in her back pocket. "Came for Heather, care of City Hall. Eric brought it over yesterday. Thought you'd probably be in this evening." She held it out and Heather took it, wondering who would write her like that.

Her heart skipped a beat when she turned the envelope around—it was a heavy, cream affair that felt expensive under her fingers—and saw the return address in the upper left corner.

"Who's it from?"

Stanley's question jerked her from staring at the letter. Instead of looking up at him, she turned her head and looked at Jake. There was a hard, closed expression on his face, and she could feel the tension in him where his arm circled her waist and she rested against his shoulder. She guessed he'd spotted the return address as well.

She opened her mouth and, just in time, caught herself from giving the answer that immediately sprang to her lips. Instead, she said carefully, "Major Beck."

Heather heard Mimi let out a small "Oh!" of surprise. Jake turned his head away, a grimace on his face, and pulled his arm from around her on the pretense of picking up his beer and taking a drink. Heather shivered, the chill she felt having nothing to do with the current of cold air that had snaked its way down her back.

Across the table, Stanley snorted. "We haven't heard from *him* in a while. What does he want? Ow!"

Heather was aware from the corner of her eye that Stanley was glaring at Mimi, and she guessed that Mimi had kicked him under the table. But she was more concerned about the stony set of Jake's jaw. While a part of her wished that Mary hadn't presented her with the letter in front of Jake, she was mostly glad. With Beck's name on the front, Jake would have learned about it soon enough, and it was better he didn't think she was keeping secrets from him.

She looked back down at the letter. "Why don't we find out?" She slid her finger under the flap of the envelope and tore it open.

Sneaking another look at Jake, she saw he'd dropped his head and was staring morosely at his beer.

Pulling out the contents of the envelope, she discovered a Christmas card with a picture of a snow-laden building with a modernist-looking round tower. The return address had already told her that Edward was still in Columbus, so she quickly recognized it from the shots they showed on the news as the former Ohio Statehouse, now the home of the US government.

She stood the card on the table, where Stanley and Mimi—and Jake, if he cared to look—could see the picture, and unfolded the sheets of writing paper that had been tucked inside. Edward's firm, sloping handwriting covered the pages, his clear script easy to read. Though she didn't quite have the courage to read whatever he'd written aloud, just in case....

*Heather. I hope this letter reaches you. I don't know where you may be living in Jericho, or even if you're still in Jericho, but I figured someone at City Hall would know how to pass this on to you. I hope that, wherever you are, you're happy and well.*

*As you will have guessed from the card, I'm still in Columbus. They've rewarded me with a desk job. Also a promotion—perhaps they thought it was the best way to keep me quiet after I'd been general of my own army for a year.*

*I'm tasked with coordinating some of the reconstruction efforts here on the East Coast. It's rewarding but also frustrating at times. Most of that's to do with big business still being up to its old tricks: trying to overcharge for substandard work on poorly-written contracts that were handed out with understandable haste. It's a constant battle to keep things on track. I'm beginning to think that part of the reason they gave me the job is because they know how much I hate the likes of J&R, and that I won't stop trying to make sure things are done properly.*

*Some of it, though, is the people in these places. Perhaps those who survived the FEMA camps have*

*become too dependent on handouts, and on being told what to do and where to go, but they seem slow to take the initiative and make their contribution toward rebuilding their communities—while they're not slow to complain! I often long for the resilience, ingenuity and sense of community I found in Jericho.*

*Does it surprise you to learn that I frequently think about all of you and wonder how you're doing? It sometimes surprises me. There are days when my time in Jericho seems like a dream. Then there are other days when being here seems like the dream: in a way, it's strange to see life continuing much as it did Before.*

*Here in Columbus, that means politicians pontificating to no great point and lobbyists throwing cocktail parties. I got dragged to a couple as some kind of minor celebrity while I was testifying in the hearings into the War. I think they were quite disappointed when I didn't turn up looking like Davy Crockett or similar.*

*As for the hearings, I'm sure, after the part you and the rest of Jericho played, you've been following them closely—much good may it do any of us. I suppose it's a record of what happened, and in a hundred years' time, historians will be able to piece things together, but I feel like the chances of anyone being brought to justice for what was done to us are slim.*

*I'm sorry—I'm getting rather cynical here, aren't I? Truth is, it's good to see our country being restored to what it should be—I'll never again take for granted being able to look up and see Old Glory flying outside a public building—and it's good to play a small part in that.*

*Heather, if you care to write me back, I would very much like to know how things are in Jericho. I'll admit to a burning curiosity about how you're all getting on; I hear bits and pieces about how things are going in Kansas from my colleagues, but none of it is quite specific enough to let me know what's happening in a small town in Western Kansas.*

*Of course, I'll understand if you don't want to write. I thought long and hard about whether I should write you, about whether that might make things difficult for you. But I will always be your friend and hope you will always be mine. If you are still with Jake, please show him this letter; I don't want there to be any secrets in your life.*

Heather reached the bottom of the last sheet and stared at the squiggle of Edward's signature, once-familiar from the forms and notes crossing her desk, that closed the letter. She felt a lump rise in her throat. God, she could almost hear him: the dry tone as he talked about the politics in Columbus; the wistfulness when he mentioned his time in Jericho; the shy hesitation when he wandered into more personal territory and tactfully tried to find out whether she and Jake were still together....

She read again his last words, and then turned back to the beginning of the first sheet and went through the letter again, this time looking for any reason she shouldn't show it to Jake. Apart from the fact it was from Edward, of course. As she scanned the words—how many drafts had he been through before he dared send it?—she realized how much she missed their friendship. Not that things could have really gone any way other than they did after she chose Jake: Edward had been too hurt, and Jake too insecure. But she wanted to be able to write him back. She just didn't want this to become a big fight between her and Jake, because there was no need, no need at all....

She reached the end of the letter and looked up, meeting Jake's gaze. She felt the flutter in her stomach she still always got whenever she looked at him, even as she noted the way his lips were pressed tightly together, and how stiff his shoulders were.

He nodded his head at the letter. "What's he say?" Underneath the snappish tone, she could detect his anxiety. Her mind went back to those days in July when he'd thought her "Not yet" meant "No" and that she was regretting her choice. The accusation he'd thrown at her: that she still wanted Edward.

Suppressing a sigh, because she could understand his fear, even as she wondered how much time would have to pass before he came to accept there was nothing to be afraid of, she held the letter out him. "Here. Read it for yourself. He wants you to see it."

Jake let out a snort of disbelief, but he took the sheets. Relinquishing them, Heather picked up her beer and took a sip, wishing she'd ordered something stronger. She snuck a glance across the table at Mimi and Stanley and saw they were watching Jake just as avidly, while trying to pretend they weren't.

Jake huffed a few more times as he read the letter, before he let the hand holding it drop to the table. Still looking at the pages, he said, "Do you want to write him back?" He sounded almost scared to hear her answer.

"Yes." Heather kept her tone gentle. "Yes, I do."

She saw Jake swallow. "You do realize he's still in love with you?"

Heather couldn't really blame Jake for suggesting that; she'd gotten the same sort of impression from the letter. But it had been more complicated than that. "Maybe." She shrugged. "But I also think he's ready to move on. If he hears I'm happy...."

"And are you?" Heather could see the letter trembling in Jake's hand.

She reached up and cupped his cheek and forced him to look at her. "Yes." When he carried on looking at her doubtfully, she said more forcefully. "Yes." Seeing he still wasn't convinced, she wondered how on earth she was supposed to prove it. She glanced across at Mimi and Stanley for inspiration. And it struck.

Turning back to Jake, she gave him a slightly exasperated smile. "Look, believe me. I'm no more likely to elope with Edward than I am to run off with Stanley over there, okay?"

Mimi spluttered into her drink, Stanley let out a startled "What?" and Jake—after another long moment—burst out laughing.

"Okay." He was still chuckling as he slid his arm around her and pulled her close again.

Not breaking eye contact with him, Heather took the letter back from his unresisting fingers, folded it with one hand and, still without looking at it, dropped it on the table somewhere near where she'd put down the envelope. She'd already decided to show Jake her reply—even though she knew he wouldn't ask to see it, and might even refuse when she offered—because Edward had been half right: she and Jake didn't need to keep secrets from each other.

She laid her hand against Jake's cheek again, once more feeling her stomach flutter, and murmured. "I love you. Even when you *are* being a complete idiot." Drawing him to her for a kiss, she decided she'd talk to him about Christmas decorations for the ranch when they got home that night.

**Disclaimer:** These stories are based on the Junction Entertainment/Fixed Mark Productions/CBS Paramount Television series *Jericho*. They were written for entertainment only; the author does not profit from them nor was any infringement of copyright intended.