



This story was written for the [Ladies Big Bang](#) ficathon. Much gratitude and thanks to my complementer, [Tassos](#), who has produced a selection of [really great graphics and cover art for the story](#), including the image above.

Heather made her way along the outer edge of the main machine hall, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible. Not that there was likely to be anyone to see her at this time of day, half an hour before the early shift started. But that just made her all the more visible to anyone who might be around.

Her steps faltered as she approached a door near to the end of the row of machines. She scanned the factory again, once more checking that she wasn't being observed. Heart thumping, she plunged through the door.

She felt even more exposed on the other side. The corridor she found herself in led past various storage areas and plant rooms, and then on down to the stores area on one side and the old assembly line on the other. Before the bombs, that'd been where they'd put together the parts being stamped out in the machine hall into brake systems for trucks.

No one had ever said this part of the factory was off-limits, but she'd gotten the impression she wasn't welcome here. Three weeks back, she'd been looking for Brett Daniels to ask him a question; he'd been part of the group working on the turbines, but he'd been transferred to some other project. She'd seen Brett enter this part of the factory when they came on shift that morning, so she'd headed off to find him. As she approached the door, Steve Marshall, Phil Constantino's chief lieutenant, had pushed his way out through the plastic strips guarding it. He'd frozen for a moment when he saw her, before he roughly grabbed her arm and demanded to know what she was doing there. When she'd explained about needing to speak to Brett, Marshall had curtly told her to wait where she was, and gone and fetched Brett to her.

She guessed the report Eric had brought her last night explained why they didn't want her around.

Hurrying down the corridor, a wave of relief washed over her when she saw the sign Eric had described—blue letters spelling out *Notice: Authorized Personnel Only*—tacked over another board, obscuring the room's former purpose. The sliding door next to the sign was heavy, but had clearly been oiled recently, because it moved almost noiselessly when she hauled on it enough to be able to slip through.

It was dark inside, just a sliver of early-morning light falling in through the narrow gap where she'd entered, and from vents high in the walls at either end of the room. She stood for a moment with her back to the door, trying to calm her breathing, while she counted to a hundred and let her eyes adjust to the darkness. She used the time to grope for the rechargeable shake-flashlight she'd brought with her. As her hand closed on it in her pocket, she sent up a silent thanks that Ted was gadget-obsessed enough to have bought one before the bombs, even if it was an early model where the light didn't last much longer than the time you had to spend shaking it to get it to charge.

As she shook the flashlight—carefully at first, her hand over the LED in case the thing was switched on; she didn't want to be betrayed by a sudden burst of light pointing where she didn't expect it—she peered down at the room. Slowly, she made out shapes at the bottom of the ramp sloping down in front of her feet: a table and chairs, and the large rectangle of a pivoting chalkboard, like the one she'd used in her classroom back in Jericho. Back when the world had been a much simpler and safer place.

Even as the room became clearer, she forced herself to go on counting. She knew she could easily be betrayed by a careless clatter as she bumped into something half-unseen, but she didn't want to waste the short minutes of illumination she'd get from the flashlight on crossing the room. And there really would be no excuse she could give for creeping around in the dark in here that would satisfy Constantino or his deputies. It was worth the extra seconds to be sure she could see as well

as she was going to.

At last, she moved forward carefully. Reaching the chalkboard, she lifted the flashlight and pressed the switch. The weak beam revealed the writing scrawled across the board, the list Eric had described: Stanley's farm; the Frederickson's, where she and Jake had gone a few days after the bombs to check out and dispel those ridiculous rumors that there were giant ants out toward Denver; the Jacksons, the Surreys, and a host of others. It all could have been quite innocent—Constantino working out New Bern's share of the spring crop—except Eric had said there was a map, too. He'd discovered it when he'd heard a noise in the hallway outside and instinctively ducked behind the board to hide.

Reaching up for the edge of the chalkboard, Heather swung it over slowly and carefully, worried it might creak. The map sprang to life under the small circle of light as she moved the flashlight from left to right. She stared at it unhappily. The last vestiges of her hope that Eric had simply misinterpreted it—that Constantino couldn't *really* be planning to invade and occupy Jericho—fled. It was one thing to listen to Eric's description, and quite another to see the map with her own eyes. To see Constantino's name written in large, confident letters on the right hand side, the hatching around it scoring firm lines across Stanley's farm. His wasn't the only name on the map: a wedge almost as large as Constantino's was marked out to Steve Marshall, and there were other names from Constantino's inner circle.

The beam from the flashlight wavered and died, and the map sank back into blackness, but Heather continued to stand there. There could be no misunderstanding for even a moment of the intention laid out in the image that still floated before her eyes, though her mind flailed at just *how* Constantino and the others planned to bring it about. Even if they had an element of surprise when they first attacked, Heather knew the Rangers would quickly rally and defend the town. From what she'd gathered from various Town Hall meetings, Jake had gotten them a fair way along to being well trained and organized even before she'd left Jericho, and she assumed he'd kept on with that since. So New Bern would have to fight step by step for every foot of ground, and there would be casualties. She couldn't see Constantino selling that to the people of New Bern, even with the promise of food at the end of it, when Jericho was willing to trade.

There'd be losses on the Jericho side, too. And Jake would be in the front line, like he always was.... Heather swallowed, trying not to think about Jake being hurt, trying not to remember his lopsided grin, and the way he'd handed over fixing the generator to her, and how good kissing him had been. Pulling her thoughts back to the present, she carefully returned the chalkboard to its original position and made her way back toward the door.

As she slipped through the door and quietly slid it closed behind her, she thought she heard a noise along the hallway, from somewhere back out in the main machine hall. Her heart leaped into her mouth and she froze, straining her ears. Maybe she'd lingered too long, and the first of the morning shift had arrived, and she could no longer get out unnoticed that way?

Making a snap decision, she turned and hurried further down the corridor, away from the machine hall. She knew that, past the stores, it led on through the loading dock. From there, she could work her way back to the small machine shop where they were assembling the turbines.

Hurrying along the edge of the rows of cages that held everything from raw sheets of metal to fixings and part-machined components, ready to duck between them if she heard anyone coming, Heather noticed that part of the assembly line had been screened with tarpaulins. And maybe that didn't mean anything, and the guys working in there were just trying to keep out the chilly wind that whistled through this part of the factory when the loading dock doors were open. And maybe it did.

Taking another look around her, straining her ears for the sound of anyone moving nearby, Heather crossed to the other side of the gangway and quickly hooked her fingers through the wire mesh screen so that she could grab the edge of a tarpaulin and pull it aside. Her breath caught in her throat and she clutched at the screen for support when she saw what was lined up on the conveyor belt on the other side. Glinting dully, their form was unmistakable, from their curved nose cones to the sleek fins arranged around their bases.

Heather sucked in a deep breath, and another, trying to shake off the dizziness that threatened to overwhelm her. Suddenly, Constantino's plans made a whole lot more sense. He and his men could dig in somewhere outside Jericho, safe and secure, and rain down destruction on Jericho until the town begged for mercy and surrendered.

Even as Heather tried to imagine what it would be like to be on Main Street as the bombs fell—her mind a jumble of war movies, and scenes of US troops coming under attack on the news, and a sudden, vivid memory, long-forgotten, of a documentary about the Battle of Fort Sumter her teacher had shown them back in grade school—she automatically tried to count the threatening shapes massed before her. There were maybe two dozen in various states of assembly actually on the line. A wheeled cage waiting at the end of the line to receive the completed devices was half-full with maybe as many again. For a moment, she hoped that was all—although it would be bad enough—and then she spotted another full cart off to one side, and the edge of a third cart beyond that.

She struggled to do the math in her head. Not because it was difficult to multiple by six by two dozen, but because of the horror coursing through her at the notion of—she finally, stuttering, worked it out—a hundred and fifty bombs falling on City Hall. Or on Bailey's or on Gracie's Market or on the Main Street Church. Or, most likely, on all of them. Maybe falling on her own house, too; it was plenty close enough to the center of town.

She closed her eyes and rested her forehead against the cold wire of the screen, a little part of her hoping that all of it would have miraculously vanished when she opened her eyes again. That she'd find she'd simply hallucinated the idea that the town where she'd been born would bomb the town she called home. The town that was also home to almost everyone in the world she cared about.

Because she might have been born in New Bern, so maybe her loyalties should lie here—but they didn't. They lay back in Jericho. Folk back there might grumble, but they'd pull together, like they'd done when they'd helped pick Stanley's corn. And Mayor Green would let them have their say while they complained, even if he'd then put them in their place when they were done saying. Despite all that had happened since the bombs—Gracie Leigh's murder, and the troubles with that gang run by Emily's father, and those mercenaries who'd threatened the town—Jericho had always felt safe to Heather.

Whereas if the last few months had taught her anything, it was that New Bern wasn't the place she'd grown up in. Or maybe it was; she'd just never noticed its ugly underside, or realized how people here would willingly follow a petty despot like Constantino. But then, how could you stand up to a man like Constantino when his thugs hauled people off to jail—or worse—at the first sign of dissent? Hadn't she known herself at least some of the awful things that were going on, and pretended she didn't, buying her own safety at the expense of other people's?

A wave of helplessness surged over her. She felt small and weak and stupid, crushed by the knowledge she now carried, and the responsibility that came with it to somehow stop Constantino putting his scheme into action.

Another clatter from somewhere in the factory snapped her back to the immediate danger of being found where she wasn't supposed to be. Swallowing down the sick feeling inside her, she forced her eyes open again and pushed off from the cage, resuming her careful, hurried path toward the loading dock and the part of the factory where she worked.

oOo

The rest of the day passed in a blur. Heather worked mechanically on the turbines: riveting the edges of blades together, welding the seams, grinding them smooth. It was noisy work, and her visor hid her face much of the time, shielding her from the glances of the guys working alongside her and making conversation impossible while her mind churned away at what she'd seen. While she thought about what she'd tell Eric that afternoon—she hoped he'd had the sense to stay hidden out at the trailer park—and what they'd do about it.

Because what *could* they do about it?

Putting down the angle grinder at one point, she was startled by a touch on the shoulder. When she pushed up the face-shield on her visor, she found Stanley hovering at her shoulder.

"Have you seen Eric? He didn't come back last night and—." Stanley gestured vaguely, indicating the factory around them.

Heather hesitated, wondering if she should confide in Stanley. But over Stanley's shoulder, she could see Ted bent over his workbench. Around them were still a scattering of other men from New Bern. And she couldn't trust any of them. Couldn't even risk them getting suspicious if she tried to take Stanley off somewhere they wouldn't be overheard. Because if they *were* to do something about New Bern's plans, the fact Constantino didn't yet know they'd uncovered them was pretty much all they had going for them.

And she maybe also couldn't risk Stanley reacting first and thinking later once when he heard his own farm was marked out for Constantino's personal conquest. Much as she liked Stanley, she didn't think he was the best man to have around in a delicate situation. She still cringed when she recalled them getting gas for the Med Center, and the way he'd picked up that tire iron to knock loose the cap from the gas tank, over her protests. And she knew he'd heard her and agreed with her and *still* ignored her—or not been able to stop himself—by the way he'd admitted straight after that it had been a dumb thing to do.

She realized Stanley was still waiting for an answer from her. Shaking herself, she offered him a troubled smile. "Not since yesterday." Which wasn't a lie, but probably wasn't quite as long ago as Stanley thought: he'd likely assume she meant she'd last seen Eric around the same time he had, when they'd all been taking a break and the Jericho guys had been standing around talking about when they'd be able to return home, now they'd gotten half the turbines built. Someone had directed a remark at Eric; he'd been on the fringe of the group, not taking part in the conversation but leaning against a workbench and staring down at his boots. He'd looked up at the sound of his name and simply shrugged wordlessly in reply. A moment later, he'd quietly edged away and slunk outside.

Heather had been too busy struggling with her own surge of longing and panic at the thought of returning to Jericho—*I'm not ready to see him again!*—to be of a mind to follow Eric just then. She wasn't sure whether it was a good thing or a bad thing she hadn't. A good thing, really, she supposed. Because even though a part of her wished she could go back to the state of blissful ignorance she'd been in twenty four hours ago, she knew it was for the best they'd discovered what Constantino was up to. At least that gave them a chance of stopping him, no matter how slim it

might be, before people started dying.

She had noticed Stanley shoot her an inquiring glance after Eric had left, clearly expecting her to follow him. When she didn't move, he'd gone after Eric himself. He'd come back a few minutes later, alone, his expression grim but resigned.

Now, a day later, Stanley scratched the back of his neck. "I was hoping he was with you," he admitted with a strained smile. "I mean, it wouldn't be the first time, right? Or even the first time he's spend the night somewhere entirely on his own. But this is the first time he's not turned up at work the next day...."

Again, Heather clamped down on the urge to reassure Stanley. Now she'd started on her lie, she didn't think she could easily backtrack and tell Stanley that she *had* talked to Eric last night. Not without risking messing up on her story enough to make him suspicious, or accidentally letting something slip. And it was just too dangerous to tell Stanley they were *all* in trouble, not just Eric. But simply dismissing Stanley's concerns and telling him Eric would turn up eventually wasn't an option either; even someone as blind to nuance as Stanley would know that wouldn't be her usual response if Eric really was missing.

Her mind racing as she tried to figure out what to say, she pulled off her visor and wiped the back of her hand across her forehead. "What did he say to you? Yesterday."

Stanley shrugged. "That he couldn't deal with going back to Jericho right now. Was thinking about staying in New Bern a while to get his head straight."

Heather nodded. She'd assumed that had been behind Eric leaving the conversation, though they'd hadn't got around to talking about it. There'd been too much else to discuss in the short hours between her getting home from the end of her shift and needing to push Eric out of Ted's trailer before Ted came back.

"Yeah. He was pretty resistant to the idea the one time I mentioned it." Heather thought it best to stick to as much of the truth as possible, because it was easier to remember than a lie. She didn't add that the only time she'd raised the topic with Eric had been weeks ago, not long after he and the others had arrived in New Bern. "I guess he was more upset yesterday than we realized. And you know what he gets like...."

"Yeah." Stanley grimaced. "Yeah. Probably find him sitting on your stoop this afternoon."

Heather tried to give him a reassuring smile. "I hope so."

"Let me know, okay? Meanwhile," Stanley jerked his head at the rest of the guys in the workshop, "I'll ask around. See if anyone's seen him."

Heather nodded. She really hoped nobody *had* spotted Eric yesterday afternoon, either when he'd been waiting to ambush her outside Ted's trailer, or when she'd guided him to an empty trailer three along where he could spend the night. And she hoped he'd had the sense to stay out of sight since then, and not given into the restlessness that had more than once taken him prowling around New Bern in the middle of the night in defiance of Constantino's curfews, and nearly gotten him shot by New Bern's deputies at least once.

Watching Stanley move away, Heather wondered again why Eric had come to her with what he'd found. Why not Stanley or one of the other guys from Jericho? For the same reason, Heather

supposed, that Stanley had asked her if she'd seen Eric, and thought Eric might have spent the night, or at least the evening, over at Ted's trailer with her. Because she and Eric, unlikely as it seemed, had grown close in the weeks Eric had been in New Bern.

She wasn't quite sure why he'd latched on to her. Maybe simply because she'd been there and willing to help. Most of the other guys seemed to avoid him, perhaps unsure what to say, because it *was* hard. Stanley was trying his best. He'd kept the two of them together when Constantino assigned the Jericho men to their New Bern hosts in pairs. But perhaps there was some guy thing going on that meant men hid their feelings from each other. Not that Eric was doing a good job of hiding what he was going through: Heather remembered how shocked she'd been at the way he'd shambled listlessly off the back of the truck when the men from Jericho had first arrived, completely unlike the energetic figure she'd seen bustling around City Hall before the bombs, and working to keep things running after them. Or maybe Eric just preferred to confide in her because, unlike Stanley, she hadn't known either him or April well, beyond the kind of professional social interactions they had as deputy mayor and doctor and schoolteacher.

As for her own motives, Heather had avoided examining them too closely. The simple fact that Eric was in pain and she could help was part of it, of course. And it was a way, if a wholly inadequate one, of repaying Eric for rescuing her from the library fire. But she couldn't ignore the fact that Eric was Jake's brother, and that maybe she was doing this as much for Jake's sake as Eric's. And sometimes, when they talked, Eric told stories about Jake, and Heather hung on to every word, and wanted more....

"Heather?"

Ted's voice brought her back to the present. Realizing she was still holding the visor, she put it down on the bench and steeled herself to meet Ted's anxious smile.

"Are you okay?" Ted caught her eye and quickly looked away. Things had been awkward between them for a while, ever since he'd tried to kiss her and she'd turned him down.

She swallowed and nodded. "Yes. Just worried about Eric. You heard...." She gestured after Stanley.

"Yeah." Ted fiddled with the rivet gun he was holding. "So will you go back this time? When they do?" Ted jerked his head toward where the others were working. "Or will you stay if Eric stays?"

Heather sighed. She knew why Ted was asking, and she knew as well that she could never be what he wanted her to be. It would be kinder on him if she did leave. Not that the question would likely matter in a few days anyway. "I don't know."

She picked up the visor again and jammed it back on her head. "I don't know," she repeated quietly, almost to herself, as she dropped the shield down over her face, ending the conversation.

oOo

The burden of New Bern's treachery—and her own cluelessness as to what she could do about it—seemed no lighter a few hours later as she returned to the trailer park after her shift. Still turning over the possibilities, Heather bypassed Ted's trailer and made her way to the one where she'd left Eric. The place had once belonged to a guy who'd been a victim of one of Constantino's earliest purges. In the months since he'd been "disappeared", it had been stripped of everything that could be used, or reused, or burned for fuel.

Eric was sitting on the floor inside the empty shell, his back to the wall. His hands were hanging limply between his knees, and his gaze was turned down. He started as she pushed open the door, and then sank back when he saw who it was.

Heather crossed to crouch before him. He looked almost as wretched as when he'd first arrived in New Bern with April's death still newly weighing on him. She took his hands, worried to find they were chilled even compared to hers, and gave them a squeeze. "You okay?"

He gave an unconvincing nod. "Did you see?"

"Yes." Shifting so she could sit cross-legged before him, still holding his hands, unconsciously seeking comfort for herself, she swallowed hard. "Eric, there's more...." When he didn't respond, she tilted her head, trying to catch his eye. "Eric?"

He lifted his head and met her gaze, blinking a couple of times. "More?"

Heather noticed that she was still holding his hands, and that they *were* cold. She began chafing them, wondering if Eric seemed so slow-witted because he was suffering from hypothermia. Maybe not: when he'd turned up at Ted's trailer yesterday afternoon to tell her about the list and the map, he'd not been much better, appearing more confused and distressed than she'd seen him for a while. The halting and muddled way he'd described what he'd found at the factory was one of the reasons she'd thought he might have been misinterpreting things, and why she'd insisted on seeing for herself. It had been shock, she supposed, and she didn't blame him: she was feeling like someone had knocked her sideways too.

Pressing her lips together, she took a moment to compose herself before she answered him. "They don't just have a plan to divide up Jericho. They've...." She hesitated, because maybe if she didn't give voice to it, it wouldn't be real. But it was. Horribly real. "They're making some kind of bombs. Or shells. Or... I don't know what you call them."

"Shells?" Eric frowned at her.

Heather nodded. Letting go his hands, she sketched a shape in the air. "About this big. Dozens and dozens of them. And those were just the ones I saw. They must have some way of firing them from outside town." She wrapped her arms around herself, shuddering at the thought.

Eric's frown deepened. "They're going to *bomb* Jericho?"

Heather nodded again. Looking at Eric, at the bewilderment on his face, she realized that she'd been sustained all day by the thought she could come back to the trailer park, and tell him, and between them they'd figure out what to do. She hadn't expected to share the news and find she was maybe as much on her own as ever. Because she was so not equipped to stop a war between two towns.

Biting her lip, she wondered what to do next. A growl from her stomach reminded her that maybe it wasn't just cold and grief that were making it hard for Eric to concentrate. Diving into her coat pockets, she pulled out a plastic bag and a bottle. The bag contained a soggy mess that was half the lunch she'd gotten at the factory—her stomach was letting her know she'd gone without, but she and Ted would share something later—and she'd filled the bottle with water from the well on Fourth Street on the way home. She held them out toward Eric. "Here."

"Not hungry," he mumbled, pulling his hands back and refusing take them.

She thrust them at him again. "I know. But I need you to eat."

He lifted his gaze to hers. With relief, she saw comprehension take hold in his expression, and knew that he understood she wasn't just asking him to eat but also to pull himself together as much as he could.

Taking the food, he began picking bits of the cold stew out of the bag with his fingers, swallowing them with an obvious effort. "We need to warn them," he offered, after a few mouthfuls.

"Jericho?" Heather had shifted, pulling up her knees and wrapping her arms around them, trying to ignore the cold seeping up through the trailer floor.

"Yeah. Dad and Jake. They'll know what to do."

That had been Heather's first thought, too. That they needed to get the news back. And she, too, had bypassed Gray Anderson when considering who to tell. Because people might mutter that the Greens ran Jericho like their own private fiefdom, but she knew whom she'd trust with her life in a crisis. There were just one or two small problems. "Yeah," she agreed cautiously, "but how? We haven't got a car. It'll take a day or more to walk back." Besides, even if they could get hold of a car—Ted had a truck, if no gas—and used the excuse Eric needed to go home, it probably wasn't going to work. "That's assuming we can get past the patrols. Because I really don't think Constantino's gonna let us just drive out of here."

"Then we...." Eric had finished the food. He crumpled up the bag, making a halfhearted effort to wipe the stickiness from his fingers. "I guess we walk? At least it'll be easier to sneak out on foot?"

Heather rubbed a hand across her forehead. "But even if we get back to Jericho, what can they do? It's not like they can stop them firing those things. Can they?"

Eric unscrewed the water bottle and took a swig. "They could maybe stop Constantino getting them close enough to do any damage?" he suggested, although without much conviction. Heather noticed he was at least sounding a bit more coherent now he'd had something to eat and, maybe, now he had something practical to focus on. He made a face. "Though that's a hell of a lot of ground to cover. More likely they'd have wait until they've started firing to figure out where Constantino's set them up, and then try and take them out."

He held the water bottle out to Heather, but she shook her head. "And if they can't? And while they're doing that...." Her voice trailed off as she remembered pictures she'd seen of towns in Europe that had been bombed during the Second World War. Would that be what Jericho would become like, with the jagged remains of buildings sticking up between the craters? And what about the people in those buildings?

She'd been hoping Eric would see another way, something she'd missed. He'd been involved with Jake in setting up Jericho's defenses, after all, so there was a chance he knew things she didn't. But it sounded like there weren't any magic bullets. And that the idea she'd formed in her head over the course of the afternoon was the only solution.

She hugged her knees more tightly. "We need to stop them here, then. Take out the launchers, I mean. After all, they can make all the bombs they like, but if they can't fire them...."

Eric's gaze slid away. Realizing he was still holding the water bottle, he carefully screwed the cap

back on and put it down. "Yes, but the launchers could be anywhere."

Heather grimaced. Eric was right. She'd been assuming the launchers would be at the factory, but now she thought about it, that was probably the last place they were. More likely out at Constantino's ranch, or in one of the warehouses on the edge of town. "We could try looking?" she suggested, without much hope they'd have any success.

Eric snorted, obviously thinking as much of her idea as she did. "Just the two of us?" He sighed. "Maybe we *should* tell Stanley and the others? Get them to help?"

That had been Heather's immediate suggestion yesterday, when Eric had first come to her and told her about the map. He'd said then that it was a bad idea. The more people who knew, the more dangerous it would be for all of them. It was part of why he'd refused to go back to the house where he and Stanley were rooming, knowing he probably wouldn't be able to hide that something was up.

Heather wished she'd pushed him harder at the time, or simply gone and fetched Stanley after his shift ended. Although that would have made it impossible to keep what was going on from Ted, who worked the same shift. And she didn't want to drag Ted into this. She didn't want to make him choose between his home and her, or carry the burden she'd face if she was the one he picked. So she hadn't pressed the point with Eric.

Besides, they'd missed their chance to talk to Stanley. She shook her head at Eric. "Constantino's got deputies keeping an eye on the guys from Jericho now."

Eric raised his eyebrows. "Since when?"

"This afternoon. The end of my shift, a couple turned up to escort Scott and Gary home." Heather shivered, remembering the cold fear that had trickled down her spine when she'd looked up from her workbench at the sound of new voices and seen the deputies loitering in the doorway. "Said they wanted to make sure they got there safely. I'm guessing they'll do the same for Stanley's shift."

Eric scrubbed a hand through his hair. "They know we know? About the plans?"

Heather shook her head. "No. I don't think so. Otherwise I think they'd be escorting me round too. Since they know..." she blushed a little and gave a little self-deprecating shrug, "you know, that you and me... that we're friends."

It wasn't something either of them had said out loud before, but it was why they were sitting there right now, wasn't it? Yet stating it so baldly made her feel like she was forcing Eric to agree: like she was one of those bossy girls back in grade school who linked arms with you and dragged you off to their side of the playground. The slow way Eric reacted, a strained smile eventually lighting up his features, only intensified the feeling, and she had to chide herself with a reminder that, yes, they *were* friends, and that Eric wasn't thinking particularly quickly about *anything* right now.

Pushing her own insecurities aside, she added hurriedly, "But Stanley was asking around if anyone had seen you, and then I think he reported you missing to the cops. They're probably pretty jumpy anyway that someone's going to stumble across it. I mean, if they're planning to attack in the next few days, they'll be doing stuff like getting trucks and guns together somewhere, won't they? So I guess they just want to make sure."

"Yeah." Eric nodded to himself. "So it is just the two of us." He sounded a little defeated.

Not for the first time, Heather wished Jake was with them. But if wishes were horses.... She snorted to herself: much as she didn't care for riding, having a horse or two to hand would be pretty useful right now. Help them get back to Jericho at least. Dismissing the thought, she focused on what they *could* do, once more running through the possibilities in her head while silence descended over the two of them.

Not being able to get the launchers—and she couldn't see how they had much chance of finding them, while there was a lot more chance of getting caught if they went poking around looking for them—made it so much harder to put a spoke in New Bern's plans. She briefly considered again trying to get back to Jericho, but none of the arguments against it had changed. Which left trying to minimize New Bern's attacks in the only way possible.

Raising her head, Heather saw Eric was also turned in on himself, his shoulders slumped. She reached out and touched his wrist, and he looked up at her. "We have to take out what's in the factory, don't we?" She gave a slight shrug. "Destroy as many of the bombs as we can. Break the production line. It's not as good as destroying the launchers, but...."

Eric nodded. "It'll help. And then maybe we can try and warn Jericho."

He caught her hand and gave it a squeeze, and she knew he was thinking what she was: *if we make it out alive*.

oOo

The sky was clearing by the time Heather made her way back to Ted's trailer, and the temperature dropped quickly as the stars pricked out in the inky blackness above. The hard cold gave her an excuse to turn into bed early. But once she was huddled under the piled blankets on the couch, she dozed only fitfully. She was too keyed up by what she and Eric had planned, and too afraid she'd oversleep. Repeatedly checking the old-fashioned wind up alarm clock that she and Ted shared, she finally saw the hands were pointed to three o'clock. Shivering from the cold, she wriggled out from under the bedclothes.

Before she did anything else, she rewound the alarm clock and set it to wake Ted for his shift, just like she had done every morning since she'd moved in with him. He deserved to be implicated as little as possible in what she was up to, and to be able to act genuinely innocent and confused when, as he inevitably would be, he was confronted by Constantino and his thugs. That was why she'd been so careful to leave Eric and return to the trailer well before Ted was due home. Why, too, she'd been glad for once of the strain that had grown up between them in the weeks since Ted had tried to kiss her: it had made it easier for her to keep her responses short when he'd asked whether Eric had turned up yet.

Moving as quietly as she could, she dressed quickly. Shoving the flashlight into her coat pocket and pulling on her gloves, she slipped outside. The cold air fogged her breath as she made her way to the other trailer. Eric was waiting for her, his silent nod to say he was ready barely visible in the near-darkness, and together they headed through the empty streets.

Much to Heather's relief, they didn't run into any of the patrols that enforced the curfew, though that was more by accident than design: she had no idea what their routes were, or if they were normally still out this late. It wasn't until they reached the factory that they saw any signs of life. Peering around the corner from a block along, Heather saw dark figures gathered around a fire lit in an old oil drum. She counted four of them in the uncertain yellow light, which meant that, right now, the night watchmen were all huddled close to the fire's warmth. She guessed they'd make rounds at

some point, assuming they were at all conscientious, but it was a relief to know she and Eric maybe had a few minutes to get inside without the likelihood of being interrupted. After all, she really couldn't pull the same trick she'd used yesterday of walking right past them and attracting nothing more than a curious look because she was a little early for her shift.

Ducking back round the corner, she raised four fingers to indicate to Eric what she'd seen, before gesturing for him to lead the way round to the loading dock on the other side of the factory. Once they reached the gates, and with another check to make sure no one was around—although, with no street lamps and only a sliver of moon, it was almost impossible to see anyone until they were right on top of you—Eric gave her a boost to get her over.

She heard the gates rattle a little as he hauled himself over after her, while she fled into the even inkier shadows of the building. Eric cannoned into her a moment later; she reached out to steady them both. They clung together, her own blood pumping in her ears, and Eric's labored breathing loud beside her, while they listened for any sign they'd been heard. But the world lapsed back into silence, except for the barking of a dog somewhere in the distance, and a far-off clatter that might have been the rattle of a trashcan being turned over by a raccoon. If the watchmen had heard anything as she and Eric climbed over the gates, they'd likely assumed it was some wild animal.

"Okay?" she whispered. She registered Eric's answer more from the faint movement of the air as he nodded than from seeing it.

Letting go of him, she scrambled up onto the loading dock and checked the doors. As she'd hoped, one of them hadn't been pulled all the way down. The two of them were able to wriggle under it without having to risk making more noise as they pushed it up further. Inside, she turned on the shakelight, shielding the beam with her hand, and led them toward the turbine workshop.

When they'd first discussed how to destroy the bombs—preferably without blowing themselves up in the process—Eric had suggested setting a fire. Heather had raised her eyebrows: the bombs hadn't exactly looked flammable. But Eric had explained that Constantino was probably using some kind of commercial explosive, maybe mixed with fertilizer; you didn't have to handle the stuff too carefully, but if you heated it past a certain point—the kind most house fires reached in a few minutes—it would explode spontaneously.

It wasn't the kind of knowledge Heather would have expected from Eric. Then she'd remembered Eric dragging her and Ashlee out of the burning library. As the deputy mayor in a town with a salt mine on its outskirts—as well as being a volunteer fireman—he'd probably spent a lot of time worrying about the mine's stocks of explosives going up.

So the first step in their plan was to get a blowtorch from the workshop to start the fire. Reaching the workshop, Heather ran the flashlight beam across the bench below the tool rack and saw with relief that the torch was where it was supposed to be. Grabbing it, she gave it a shake to make sure there was gas in the canister, before nodding at Eric to tell him they were good to go. He put out his hand to stop her as she turned for the door. Taking the flashlight from her, he played it over the tool rack until he found what he was looking for: a set of bolt-cutters. Handing the flashlight back, he lifted the bolt-cutters down and indicated with a tilt of his head that he was ready to leave as well.

Heather shot Eric a quick grin of appreciation, probably lost on him in the dim light, when they reached the assembly line area and found the door into it was padlocked. The snap of the bolt-cutters' jaws as they bit through the chain, and the clink of the links against the blowtorch as Heather caught the severed chain and stopped it slithering to the floor, seemed to echo loudly in the quiet factory. They both paused, holding their breaths, but no sound of shouts or approaching feet

broke the silence.

Slipping through the door, they confirmed there was no sign of the launchers inside, only the half-finished shells on the workbench, and the cages of completed ones. Heather bit her lip in frustration when she saw the part-filled cage was emptier than it had looked that morning, and that only one full one now stood to one side of the room. At best, the full cage was the one she'd seen half filled earlier, but that still meant the other two, along with their deadly load, had been taken somewhere else during the day. Well, not much they could do about that now.

"Let's..." She put the blowtorch down on the workbench next to the half-finished bombs and tilted her head to indicate to Eric they should head back out to the stores. They needed something flammable they could pile around the assembly line and set fire to, in hopes it would burn long enough and hot enough to make the first of the bombs explode. After which, the rest should go up pretty spectacularly on their own.

Against the far wall of the stores, they found cages of flattened cardboard; old packaging, Heather guessed. "This do?" she asked Eric, and he nodded, grabbing the nearest cart and pulling it out. Heather winced as the wheels squeaked and grumbled over the rough concrete floor. Struggling herself to get the next cart along moving, and without dropping the flashlight she still clutched in one hand, she tried to convince herself that the sound probably didn't carry any further than her own ragged breathing, and that the nightwatchmen were most likely still huddled round their fire. After all, with the curfew in place, the town tightly in Constantino's grip, and his enemies already dealt with, what were the chances someone was going to be breaking in?

She was panting and hot with the effort of pushing the cage along—who knew cardboard could be so heavy?—by the time Eric helped her maneuver it into the assembly area, but she paused for a breather only long enough to unbutton her coat with one hand while giving the flashlight another good shake to keep it working. Every moment they spent setting up the fire made it more and more likely they'd be discovered before they had a chance to light it. Jamming the flashlight on top of the full cage of bombs, wedging it between their conical tips so that it illuminated as much of the room as possible, she joined Eric in pulling the cardboard off the carts and stacking it around the assembly line.

When they were done, she turned her head to catch Eric's eye. "Enough?"

The word seemed to barely reach her own ears, but Eric must have heard. He took a step back and eyed the pile critically, before he shook his head. "We should get more," he murmured.

God, let's just light it and get out of here, Heather wanted to snap back. Her nerves were jangling with the effort of working quietly, all the while with her ears straining for any sound of the guards patrolling. But Eric was right: there was no point doing this if they weren't going to do it properly.

They almost had the second load of cardboard unstacked and arranged when Eric—nearer the door—whispered her name urgently, gesturing to the hallway outside. Cocking her head, Heather could hear faint tuneless whistling, and the sound of approaching footsteps. Her heart leaping into her mouth, she reached for the flashlight, once more propped on the full cage of bombs.

Haste made her clumsy; she knocked the flashlight to the floor, and it bounced away with a clatter, the beam spinning crazily. Grabbing for it, she managed to get hold of it and turn it off, but not before she heard a "Hey! Who's there?" from the distance, and the sound of feet pounding toward them.

"Run!" she hissed at Eric, the word drowned by the blast of an air horn as the nightwatchman alerted his colleagues. In the growing light from the much more powerful flashlight the guard carried, she saw Eric hesitate. "Run!" she repeated. "Get out! Warn Jericho!"

Not waiting to see if he obeyed her, she turned away and snatched up the blowtorch from among the half-finished bombs. Her fingers groped for the switch, and the torch clicked once, twice, before it mercifully caught, and a wave of yellow flame bloomed out and engulfed the nearest pile of packaging.

She twisted, intending to play the jet of flame across the rest of the cardboard, but someone seized her arm and, with a curse, knocked the torch from her hand. She heard the torch skitter away across the floor, but it didn't matter: the flames were already licking eagerly at the cardboard, spreading by themselves, and the heat was harsh on her face.

Before she could move back, the man who'd grabbed her roughly pushed her aside. She stumbled into an empty cage, snatching at it to hold herself upright; it slid away from her, before abruptly jarring to a stop as it hit the wall. She cried out as, pitching forward into the cage, she banged her shins on cold metal.

Doing her best to ignore the pain, she hauled herself back to her feet. She saw the watchman had a fire extinguisher in his hands and was spraying foam on the flames. She hesitated for a moment, wondering if she should try to stop him. Then, as she heard more feet pounding along the hallway toward her, she realized the fire was a lost cause. Either she or Eric now needed to get back to Jericho and warn them. And that meant she needed to get away *now*.

Too late. Even as she backed away from the guy with fire extinguisher and into the hall, she collided with another guard. He grabbed her arms, letting out a startled, "What the—?"

"Leave her!" The first guard, still battling the last of the flames, shot the order over his shoulder. "There's another one. Loading dock."

Obeying, the second guard pushed her away. She caught her heel, sprawling backwards and slamming the back of her head against the door frame. Black spots danced before her eyes, and her ears rang. She was aware, as she unsteadily tried to pull herself upright, of another set of feet thundering past her toward the loading dock. Against the ringing in her ears as she managed to regain her feet, she thought she could hear shouting in the distance and the sound of something—someone?—being thrown against a wall.

She managed to totter a few steps before a brutal hand closed on her arm and spun her round. "Not so fast." The speaker shone a flashlight in her face, blinding her, and she lifted her hand to shade her eyes. "You? You little bitch!"

He lowered the light a little, and she tried to blink away more black spots blurring her vision. There were bobbing lights too, although she realized after a moment that they weren't in her head after all: they were the wavering beams of the flashlights carried by the other two guards as they hauled Eric back toward her. His head was down and his feet were dragging as he sagged between them.

The guard holding Heather jerked his head toward the assembly line when they got closer. "We'll need to damp that down. As for these two...", he glared first at Heather and then at Eric, "I reckon Constantino's gonna want to hear about this."

Sitting in the airless interview room as the minutes dragged by and they waited for Constantino, Heather was acutely aware of the weight of the handcuffs around her wrists. Opposite her, Eric had his head bowed, refusing to look at her. Heather wondered if he was angry with her for insisting they try to sabotage the factory rather than trying to head back to Jericho, or if he was blaming himself for dragging her into this mess in the first place. She didn't have the chance to find out and either apologize—though their plan had so nearly worked—or reassure him she had no regrets; one of the deputies guarding them had brusquely given the order for "No talking." Heather had to content herself with reaching across the table to grasp Eric's hands; he'd briefly returned the squeeze, before pulling his hands away from hers.

She knew—in an oddly detached way, her brain perhaps too numbed by fear to feel it properly—that she and Eric were about to join New Bern's "disappeared", and that Jericho was going to be bombed until it submitted to Constantino's rule. The months of closing her eyes to what she knew was happening in New Bern had caught up with her at last, and maybe this was her due for not speaking up sooner. All that seemed left for her now was to figure out why: why Phil Constantino had gone from being New Bern's stern but fatherly sheriff to someone who would imprison and execute his neighbors, and lead an all-out attack on the next town.

At last, the door opened. Looking up, Heather saw Constantino pause on the threshold, glancing between his two prisoners. Eric lifted his head for a moment to meet Constantino's gaze, before turning his eyes down again. Heather kept her gaze fixed on Constantino as he closed the door behind him and approached the table.

Constantino halted by the table, still looking between them, as if evaluating them. Heather hadn't been this close to him in a while: not since she'd arrived, really. While they were all more ragged and worn out than they'd been, Constantino seemed more on edge than she expected. As much as Eric, perhaps: the avuncular air that had once overlain his toughness and brought warmth to his pale blue eyes was gone. Heather felt a chill from him that had nothing to do with the weather.

Finally, Constantino reached out and put his hand on Eric's shoulder. Eric started and looked up.

"Eric." Constantino shook his head. At first glance, Heather might have taken his expression and tone as pitying, except there was no benevolence behind his words. "We all know you've been through some tough times. And maybe you blame people back in Jericho for what happened to April. I can understand that. And you decided they didn't deserve the turbines. But what you tried to do didn't just hurt Jericho. It hurt New Bern. And I can't let that go."

Eric exchanged a confused glance with Heather, and she saw his mouth shape the word *turbines*? Heather could do no more than give a slight shrug—*he's pretending the bombs don't exist?*—before Constantino turned his attention to her. "As for you, Heather.... Helping Eric instead of trying to stop him? What were you thinking?"

Constantino still had hold of Eric, and something about Eric's expression told Heather that the sheriff's grip had tightened, no longer reassuring but threatening. Eric wriggled his shoulder, trying to throw Constantino's hand off him, but Constantino wasn't taking the hint. Licking his lips, Eric turned to meet Constantino's gaze, "We weren't trying to hurt Jericho. We were trying to save it."

Constantino raised his eyebrows. "By destroying factories in New Bern? I think you're a little confused—."

"We know you're planning to invade Jericho." Eric yanked himself backward, wrenching himself

from Constantino's grip, and glared at him. "We saw the map. We—."

Constantino cut him off. "Eric, I don't know what you saw, or imagined you saw, but the only thing going on in that factory that concerns Jericho is making turbines." He stepped back, folding his arms and again shaking his head as if he pitied Eric. "You've been working on them yourself."

Eric was looking at Constantino as if he wasn't making any sense. Which he wasn't, of course. Heather could almost see Eric's brain trying to process the barefaced lies, his brows drawn down into a frown. She cleared her throat and Constantino transferred his attention to her, his cold gaze scanning her face. "Then why have you got a map of Jericho with your names written on it? Why are you making bombs?" Her voice sounded scratchy in her own ears.

She saw the merest hesitation from Constantino, as if he hadn't expected her to challenge him so directly, before he heaved a sigh. "Look, Heather, you weren't here when Ravenwood came calling. I know Jericho got off lightly, but we need to protect ourselves. A few mortar rounds—."

"A hundred and fifty!" Heather couldn't believe he was trying to pretend this was all for defense. "There were at least a hundred and fifty. And that map...."

Constantino pressed his lips into a thin line. His eyes seemed even icier than usual as they bored into hers. Heather swallowed, fear leaking back into her for the first time since they'd been caught. She suddenly felt physically vulnerable, with her hands tied and Constantino and the two deputies looming tall above her. Although physical violence wasn't really Constantino's style. Not personally, anyway.

At last, Constantino let out a faint snort. "We're just protecting our interests. Making sure Jericho lives up to the end of its deal."

He seemed to have decided it was a lost cause to try to convince them that they were wrong about New Bern's intentions. Which seemed to be based on believing Jericho would be equally duplicitous. Heather wondered what had happened when Constantino had gone over there with the first turbine to make him think that. For all Gray Anderson was clearly in over his head as mayor, and had a reputation as a slick salesman, Heather had never heard of him going back on a deal once he made it. And she couldn't imagine Jake or Mr Green letting that happen if Gray tried.

She tilted her chin up. "Why wouldn't they?"

Constantino's lips twitched. "Heather, I know you lived there for a while, and you have friends there. But Jericho's not dealt straight with us the whole way, and New Bern's come off worst every time. Like those turbines we're building. We've put in manpower and materials, and what have we seen so far?" He spread his hands, palm up. "Nothing."

Heather shook her head in disbelief. "You got salt," she reminded him. She'd seen it being unloaded when they came back from delivering the first turbine. "You got the turbine design." Although she was starting to regret the part she'd played in giving him that. "People will bite your hand off for those. You can trade them for anything you need."

Constantino stepped forward and rested his fists on the table, leaning in close. His breath was hot on her face as he snarled, "Where? Thanks to your precious friends in Jericho, we're not welcome at Black Jack any more."

Heather shrank back, her chair creaking under her as she tried to lean away from him. "It can't be

the only trading post...." She hated the way her voice shook. "There must be others. Out towards Topeka, or Wichita. Or—."

"Which will take more gas to get to, and time to build the right contacts." Constantino shoved off from the table and stepped sideways. Catching the back of Eric's head, he abruptly shoved Eric forward, slamming his face into his hands where they lay shackled on the table. Eric cried out in pain. "Jericho cost us a good thing, and we've seen *nothing* in return." With a contemptuous growl, Constantino hauled Eric upright again by the hair.

Heather stared across the table, aghast. Eric blinked back at her, looking dazed. At last, she dragged her gaze away from him and up to Constantino's smirking face.

"But you agreed." Tears sprang to her eyes, because this was all so unfair. She felt like a child again, when adults made arbitrary rules, and changed them just because they could. "That you'd have half the salt now, and the rest when you delivered the turbines, and your share of the spring crop when it was harvested. Jericho gave you a fair deal."

Constantino laughed harshly. "Fair? This isn't about fair, Heather. This is about survival of the fittest. About being strong enough to take what you need." He let go of Eric's head with a shove and stalked around the table. "You think Jericho's just gonna to hand over what they promised without a fight? When they send their agents into New Bern to destroy our factory?"

Heather blinked, trying to parse what he was saying. "They—? *You* were the one asked for workers. You...." She tailed off as she realized there was no logic to Constantino's words and no reasoning with him. He was convinced he was right, and he'd twist anything and everything to suit him.

Constantino let out a snort. "You think Jericho is ever going to play fair? When they turn our own people against us?" He leaned his hands on the table and again pushed his face into hers. "You were born here, Heather. We welcomed you back. We took care of you. And you betrayed us."

He held her gaze for a long minute, close enough she could smell his slightly sour breath, but she didn't back away this time, determined not to give him the satisfaction of thinking he'd cowed her. Because she'd done the right thing. She was as convinced of that as he seemed convinced of the opposite, and she wasn't going to apologize for it.

When she didn't give him the response he was clearly hoping for, he pushed off from the table with an angry growl and turned his back on her. She swallowed, trying to wet her tongue and find her voice. "I'm not the one betraying New Bern."

She saw his shoulders tense. For a second, she thought he was going to swing round and hit her, but she plowed on. "When I was growing up, everyone said you were a good sheriff. Tough, but fair. What happened to you?"

He did turn then, slowly. His face was hard, his eyes dark with anger. At last, he spoke. "Things change." The words were charged with an edge of bitterness, though she couldn't tell if it was directed at himself or the wider world. He looked from Heather to Eric and back again. Holding Heather's gaze, he gestured in Eric's direction. "Lock him up. I'm going to want to talk to him again later." As one of the deputies moved toward Eric, Constantino jerked his head toward Heather. "And get rid of her."

Heather let the second deputy drag her unresisting from the interview room, barely hearing Eric's anguished, "No!" as he was herded away in the opposite direction. She felt like she'd exhausted the last of her reserves in arguing—to no apparent effect—with Constantino.

The deputy directed her to a pickup almost as old as Charlotte. As he drove them away from City Hall, Heather closed her eyes and leaned her head against the door frame. She knew she was going to die in a few minutes, and that she ought to be mad about that, but it was like there was a sheet of glass between her and the world.

The sound of the truck's tires scrunching to a halt and the parking brake being pulled on made her open her eyes. The journey had lasted only a few minutes, and she was surprised to see they'd drawn up in front of a warehouse somewhere in the industrial quarter. She'd expected to be taken straight out to a field in the middle of nowhere and shot. Though she guessed even Constantino's reign of terror wasn't at the point where he felt he could carry out executions in broad daylight. No, they'd keep her somewhere until after nightfall and then—.

As the deputy ordered her out of the truck, she realized the building they were outside was probably *the* warehouse: the one where they kept the prisoners who worked on the chain gangs she'd sometimes seen shuffling through the streets on the way to or from wherever Constantino had them working that day. Nobody really talked about the place or about the people—friends, former neighbors, family—who were being kept there. Heather would occasionally see someone do a double take as the line passed, clearly recognizing one of the prisoners, and probably not knowing until that moment that they'd fallen foul of Constantino's goons.

Mostly though, people would turn away as soon as they could from the lines of gaunt, dispirited souls trudging along, pretending not to see them. Because even looking could attract the attention of the nightstick-wielding deputies who strolled alongside to keep order. And when, averting your gaze, you caught someone else's eye, both of you would look away quickly. Guiltily: ashamed you were too weak to stand up against Constantino and his bullies.

But what else could you do? They'd all seen what happened when you spoke up.

The deputy led her toward a door at one end of the building. The whole place had a sad, neglected air, from the scuffed red paint on the door to the rust flaking from the warehouse's corrugated siding. But the outside seemed almost homey compared to the stench that hit Heather when the deputy opened the door and pushed her through. Mostly it smelled like the worst kind of gas station restroom, without even the usual pathetic attempt to cover it up with air freshener. But there were also top-notes of unwashed bodies, and something like damp carpet.

Heather swallowed, trying not to gag, as the deputy unhooked a set of keys from a peg near the door before marching her along the hallway that ran the length of the building. The place was divided into sections. In the gloomy light falling through the grimy, high-set windows, Heather could see mattresses laid out on the floor in each section, with a few ratty blankets folded on top of them. The place seemed deserted—Heather guessed most of the prisoners were working—but the occasional pained cough indicated more than one person was around somewhere. Probably huddled under the blankets, too sick to work. Maybe closer to death than even Heather was.

They reached the last enclosure. As the deputy unlocked the gate into it, Heather saw there was another door at the far end of the hallway, with a faded handwritten notice tacked to it insisting "No work boots!" She supposed there were offices on the other side.

The deputy manhandled her into the enclosure, and then swung the gate closed and locked it again.

Heather stood where she was, listening to the deputy jangling the keys as he walked away, and the slam of the door as he left. What was she supposed to do now?

She eyed the collection of mattresses spread across the floor, wondering if she should sit down. None of them looked exactly attractive. Not that it would matter if she picked up bedbugs or fleas—which seemed likely; she remembered headlice going round the first graders at Jericho Elementary two years ago—in the few hours left to her. But it wasn't the thought of bugs that stopped her. It was the way the blankets were carefully folded and placed on the mattresses, making it clear each of them belonged to someone in particular. And Constantino might not be treating these people with much respect, but that didn't mean Heather should do the same. It would be rude just to sit down somewhere without being invited, even if there was no one around to do the inviting.

She was considering the cold floor without much enthusiasm where she heard coughing coming from the far end of the cell. She peered into the shadows. "Hello?" Picking her way forward, she made out a figure hunched under a blanket. Moving nearer, she saw it was a woman of fifty or thereabouts, although it was hard to tell these days: the last few months had put years on everyone.

The woman coughed again. Heather knelt down by her and gently touched her shoulder. Close up, Heather could see that her skin was pale and beaded with sweat, but that she was shivering.

"Can I...?" Heather looked around uncertainly and spotted two buckets standing just along from the gate into the enclosure, with a few plastic beakers stacked next to them. Turning back, she noticed a blanket had been rigged up across the corner opposite, and she glimpsed another bucket behind it. She guessed that was all there was in the way of sanitary facilities.

She looked back at the woman. "Can I get you some water?"

When the woman gave a slight nod, Heather hurried to fetch a cup of water. Perching on the edge of the mattress, she helped the woman drink. When the woman nodded her thanks and laid her head back down, Heather set the cup down on the floor and, without thinking, reached out and stroked the woman's hair. The woman made a small, inarticulate noise that sounded so like one of Heather's third-grade class when they were finishing up crying over some bump or bruise that tears sprang to Heather's eyes.

She went on sitting there, stroking the woman's hair and listening to her breathing slow as she fell asleep. She wondered if anyone had taken care of Eric's injuries: the ones he'd gotten from the guards at the factory and the ones from Constantino roughing him up. Probably not. She wondered, too, if Eric's jail cell was any more comfortable than this, and if he was worrying about her. Which he shouldn't be: she was almost beyond anyone needing to ever worry about her again, and Eric needed to save his strength for the next time he faced Constantino.

The long hours dragged by. Heather dozed a little herself, pulling her knees up and resting her head on them. She had time, finally, to grasp that this was her last day in this world, and that her life was going to be over in a few hours. Time to think about all the ways she'd expected and hoped her life would turn out, and how none of that was going to happen.

Not that she'd ever been one of those people with a list of things she wanted to do before she got too old. Emily had one, with stuff like going to Paris for Valentine's Day, or spending New Year in Times Square, or sailing a private yacht round the Caribbean. She and Roger had done some of that already, and Heather guessed Roger had been quite rich enough to manage to accommodate the rest of Emily's fancies over time.

When Emily had asked Heather about *her* list, Heather had simply shaken her head and given an embarrassed chuckle and said she didn't have one. Truth was, she'd just wanted to live a *good* life, without fireworks or grand adventures. To make others happy, and to be happy herself. To be the kind of teacher people fondly remembered years later. To find love, and become a mom herself, and raise her kids so she could be proud of them. Like she'd told Jake: she was flannel pajamas and crossword puzzles and the occasional light beer.

She let out a harsh laugh that echoed in the nearly empty warehouse. Except, apparently, it turned out she was sufficiently dangerous to need locking up in here, and then taking out and shooting. She pushed away the thought that maybe now she was finally hazardous enough to interest Jake—because it wasn't as if he was ever going to get a chance to find out—and thought instead about how maybe being dead wouldn't be so bad. She wouldn't be cold and hungry and scared all the time; she'd get to see her parents again and, God, she missed them still; and even if she wouldn't be able to do anything more to stop Constantino putting his plans into action, at least she would no longer be unwittingly helping him.

At last, as the light began to fade, Heather heard a door open somewhere in the distance, and the scuffle of weary footsteps and the low murmur of a few unhappy voices. She scrambled to her feet, waiting awkwardly, feeling like the new girl back in school. A moment later, a deputy appeared from along the hall and unlocked the gate, holding it open while a trickle of women shuffled into the cell. Their skin was gray with fatigue, their hair lank, and their expressions pinched with hunger. Most didn't seem to notice Heather as they made their way to one sleeping place or another. Those who did gave her incurious looks as their gazes passed over her.

"Heather?" Heather's gaze was pulled to where an older woman had stopped a few paces into the cell, forcing the other women to divide around her. "Heather Lisinski?"

After a moment, Heather recognized her, though both the eight years since she'd graduated High School and the events of the last winter had changed her. "Mrs Morris?" She'd taught history and social studies. Heather wasn't terribly surprised to find her here in Constantino's prison: she'd always been trying to get the students involved in some good cause or other.

The other woman nodded. Both of them took a few steps forward, closing the distance, before they hesitated. Though Heather had been one of the better students at the school, and Mrs Morris had been one of the teachers who'd encouraged her to go to college, and they'd talked sometimes outside class, it wasn't as if they'd ever been close. But in this place....

With an attempt at a smile, Mrs Morris reached out and embraced her. "Suzanne, please." She held Heather away from her. "But what are you doing here?"

Heather shrugged. "Constantino...." She gave the other woman a wry smile. "I found out some things I wasn't supposed to."

Mrs Morris—Suzanne—let out a faint snort. Then she peered over Heather's shoulder. "You were taking care of Annette? How—?"

Heather realized Suzanne meant the sick woman. She'd never learned her name. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw someone else was now bent over her. Turning back to Suzanne, Heather grimaced. "Not so good. But she's still hanging in there."

Suzanne nodded. "Maybe she'll make it." She didn't sound very hopeful. Taking Heather's arm, she began to lead her to one side of the cell. "Come on. There's a bit of spare room over where I am."

Heather didn't resist. She didn't have the heart to tell Suzanne it wasn't necessary to find her a place to sleep.

There were four other women in Suzanne's little group, who seemed to share three mattresses between them. One of them was carefully removing bandages from the feet of a second. Heather turned her head away, feeling a little sickened, as she caught sight of the woman's frostbitten toes. A third had her head bent over some task; after a moment, Heather realized she was trying to darn—or at least mend—a battered looking sock in the failing light. Heather's heart gave a lurch as she remembered stitching a smiley face into the repair she'd made to Jake's sock the day before they'd made that fateful trip to Black Jack Fairgrounds. She wondered if he still wore those socks, and if he thought of her when he pulled them on.

The fourth woman had fetched a beaker of water, which the six of them shared between them as Suzanne rapidly introduced the others. "But I thought you were over in Jericho." Suzanne put the water beaker down on the floor in the middle of the group and frowned at Heather. "Weren't you teaching at the elementary school?"

Heather nodded. "I was. But I've been back in New Bern a few months. I—." She hesitated. "Long story," she offered ruefully. She didn't much fancy explaining to the people in here that, in her own way, she'd been helping Constantino secure his hold on the town. She didn't much like admitting that to herself.

"From what we hear, you'd've been better off staying there." The woman who'd brought the water—Heather hadn't properly caught her name—shook out one of the two blankets that had been folded on the mattress she sat on and wrapped it around herself.

Heather made a non-committal noise. She'd started to hear those rumors too, a week or so back. She couldn't really disagree with the assessment, although she suspected now that the rumors had been orchestrated by Constantino as part of his invasion plan.

"Here." Suzanne had unfolded another blanket and was offering half of it to Heather. She indicated the blanket. "We're a bit short, I'm afraid. But you've got that nice warm coat..." There was a touch of envy in Suzanne's voice as she reached out and touched the sleeve of Heather's thick duffel.

Heather swallowed, fighting down the despair that swept over her as she considered how little these women had, and how slim the chance was of any relief for them. She fumbled with the fastenings on the coat. "Here. You wear it for a while." Over Suzanne's protests, she shrugged out of the coat and draped it around the other woman's shoulders. It would only be wasted where she was going, and the zipped jacket she wore underneath would serve her well enough for however many hours she had left.

"Do you have a scarf?" That was Elaine, the woman with the frost-bitten feet. Heather realized she'd been scrutinizing her ever since Heather had sat down. She went on looking Heather over for a moment longer, before turning her gaze toward Suzanne. "We should get her a scarf."

Heather gave her a puzzled look. "There's one in my coat pocket. But why—?"

"For the deputies." When Heather raised her eyebrows, still not sure what Elaine meant, the other woman made a face. "If you're all wrapped up, they may not notice you. Girls your age, as pretty as you...."

She and Suzanne exchanged another look, before Suzanne said, "You don't want them taking you to the offices."

"To—? Oh." Heather clamped her mouth shut as she realized what the other women were saying, or not saying. What was happening to the women the deputies took away. She suppressed a shudder. Maybe being executed wasn't so bad after all.

"Kenny Landsman's the worst." Elaine bit back a pained hiss as her friend began replacing the bandages on her feet. "Always was a mean bastard, Kenny. And that Oscar guy...."

Heather didn't know who Oscar was, but she'd met Landsman twice. He was one of Constantino's inner circle—she remembered seeing his name somewhere on the map of Jericho, alongside Constantino's—and she had to agree with Elaine's assessment. The last time she'd run into him had been when the Jericho guys had been sharing a few words outside the factory before they each headed off to where they were rooming. Landsman had told them to break it up and move along; when Stanley had protested, Landsman had unshipped his nightstick. Only Ted stepping in to soothe Stanley down had prevented the fight Landsman had clearly been looking to provoke.

"They're not all as bad as Kenny, though." Suzanne seemed keen to reassure her. "Some of them can be pretty decent. You know, considering...." She gestured at their grim surroundings.

The women went on talking in low voices as night fell, telling Heather the things they thought she needed to know, that would help keep her safe. Except nothing would keep her safe. But Heather let them go on speaking, because she could see it was a comfort to them, a strange sisterly solidarity.

Elaine was explaining how they were taken in small groups once a week to the high school gym for a chance to wash up—cold water of course—when she broke off, her gaze going over Heather's shoulder. Heather realized the whole cell had fallen quiet, the low hubbub of the women's voices dying down. Turning, she saw the gate into the enclosure was open, and a deputy was standing in the doorway.

"Lisinski!" Her name sounded loudly in the silence. The deputy peered around the crowded space, and Heather realized he was the one who'd brought her to the warehouse. "Lisinski!" he repeated.

Wearily, her stiff muscles protesting, she got to her feet.

"Oh, honey!" Suzanne put her hand on Heather's wrist, almost as if to hold her back, although they both knew that was useless. Foolish, even.

Heather patted her hand for a moment. "I'll be okay." She wouldn't, of course, but not in the way Suzanne thought. She still hadn't told anyone about Constantino's order. What was the point?

Outside in the hall, while another guard locked the gate again, the deputy snapped, "Hands!" Heather looked at him blankly for a moment, and then realized he wanted to handcuff her. She held out her wrists and let him put the cuffs on. He didn't meet her eye, even after he'd secured the cuffs, but simply seized her by the arm and dragged her along the hall.

The sectioned-off areas of the warehouse that had been nearly empty when she'd passed them on the way in were now as crowded—maybe even more so—as the women's quarters. Ragged-looking men, their faces gaunt behind their straggly beards and their clothes dirty, shuffled around, or sat on mattresses with bowed heads, or talked quietly in small groups. A few turned and looked at her as she passed, and then quickly turned away again, shame etched in the way they hunched their

shoulders.

Outside, Heather pulled in deep breaths of the clean night air, realizing how accustomed she'd grown to the stink of the warehouse while she'd been there.

The deputy led her back over to the same battered pickup as before, pushing her into the passenger seat before climbing behind the wheel himself. Although the truck was several years younger than Charlotte, the growl of its engine, loud in the quiet night, sounded much rougher. Heather automatically began thinking about the work she could do on the engine to—she caught herself with something between a snort and a sob. No more happy Saturday afternoons tuning up Charlotte....

The truck rattled out of the warehouse yard and the deputy pointed it north east. They stayed on the main road until they were just past the suburbs, and then turned off, and then off again, the truck bouncing over the rough dirt roads as they worked their way into the dark fields.

Heather found herself unnerved by the headlights sweeping over the countryside. Bushes and trees seemed to rush headlong toward her, and she kept tensing, foolishly afraid they were going to hit them. Was it really so long since she'd been in a car at night? Not since the journey here in Russell's truck, months ago now, she realized.

She was suddenly assaulted by the memory of Jake driving the two of them out to the Frederickson's place a few days after the bombs, to look for Bill's mythical giant irradiated ants. Her throat closed up, and her eyes burned suddenly. Angrily, she shook her head, forcing away the tears, and swallowed hard. Hadn't she once asked Emily how you got over a guy like that? And the truth was, you didn't. Except now she was about to get over him terminally.

The truck slowed to a crawl, and the deputy hauled over the wheel to take them off road and into a field. He switched off the engine but left the headlamps lit. They shone out across the rough grass, picking out patches of recently turned earth. Heather had time to wonder how many bodies lay mouldering under each dark rectangle, and how many she would be joined with in her own last resting place, while the deputy climbed out and came round to her side of the truck.

"Get out." He opened the door and jerked his head, and she awkwardly followed his brusque order. Taking her by the arm, he led her forward until they were some way outside the beam of the headlamps. Pushing her a last step into position, he moved behind her. She guessed he was going to shoot her in the back and send her tumbling into a pit that must surely lie in front of her. Her eyes were too blinded with tears to make it out in the near-darkness. Because, though she was trying to tell herself she was about to be reunited with people she loved—her parents, her grandparents—it was too soon, too soon. And there were people she cared about still here: the kids she'd taught, and friends like Emily, and Jake....

She heard the deputy draw his gun and cock it. She closed her eyes. *Into Thy hands, o Lord....*

The sound of the gunshot was loud in the hushed night, setting off a cacophony of squawking and flapping somewhere in the distance. Heather was surprised she didn't feel any pain, but maybe that was what death was like. A second shot rang out. She was puzzled that she didn't seem to be falling, either, though she felt dizzy. It was all so strange....

"Get down." Hands on her shoulders shoved her into a crouch, forcing her to obey the whispered command. Her knees hit the rough dirt as she crumpled. Then someone was tugging at her hands, trying to lift them. She resisted for a moment, and the voice said, sharply but still quietly, "Heather!"

She opened her eyes. She could just make out, as the handcuffs fell away from her wrists, the face of the deputy swimming before her in the faint light spilling from the truck's headlamps. She gaped at him, trying to make sense of what had just happened. "You didn't—" Her voice cracked.

"No." He peered into her face, his forehead creased with concern. "Hey, I'm sorry I scared you, okay? I just needed to make sure it seemed convincing if anyone was close." She could just make out that he was shaking his head as he added in an even lower mutter, "Should've told you."

She licked her lips, trying to pull her thoughts together. "Why?"

He shrugged slightly. "I don't take those kind of orders. I've been a deputy twenty years, and I didn't sign up for this. Constantino's goddamn crazy...."

"Yeah." Heather wrapped her arms around herself, trying to stop from shivering, and let out a snort. "Yes, he is." Drawing in a shuddering breath, she asked, "So what happens now?" She guessed she should head back to Jericho to warn them, although her heart quailed at the thought of trying to sneak past Constantino's patrols, and of the long trek she'd have to make just to circle round New Bern, even before she could start heading for Jericho. It'd take her days, and she'd probably arrive too late. Assuming she didn't run into Constantino and his private army along the way.

"I've got some friends." The deputy gestured off into the dark, although Heather had no idea if he was pointing in a particular direction or just at random. Especially as she didn't really know which way they were currently facing anyway. "They're part of one of Constantino's trading parties, so they've got a pass to leave town. That's how they heard about Constantino's plans to attack Jericho as well. They've been talking for a few days about trying to leave before the fighting starts. I spoke to them this afternoon, and they're willing to smuggle you out in the trunk of their car."

"Back to Jericho?" Heather thought that was too much to hope for, but getting her outside New Bern's patrols would be a big help.

She sensed the deputy shake his head. "They're willing to drop you off as near as they'll get. They've got family in Oregon. Now the snow's going off the mountains, they want to try and make it through."

Heather forced herself to smile at him, even though he probably couldn't see it. "I'll take what I can get. Thank you."

He gave her the address. "You know where that is?" When she confirmed she did, he added, "I'd take you there myself, but...."

"No, I understand." She let him help her back to her feet. Before he turned back to his truck, she caught his arm. "Thank you. For—" It seemed a little melodramatic to say: *for saving my life*. Even if that was what he'd done.

He didn't move or speak for a moment. Then he said softly, "You probably don't remember, but I used to live a couple blocks over from you. Went to the same church as your parents. Your mom and dad, they were good people. Helped a lot of people out. Helped me out a few times myself. And I know they raised you good. So if I can help out Herb and Nancy Lisinski's little girl...."

His voice had grown a little hoarse as he spoke. Heather wondered if he was remembering, as she was, those years when she'd been growing up when it seemed like half the factories and mines

around New Bern were closing. Probably he was thinking of similar times before that, too. When there wasn't much work or money, but people had pulled together and taken care of each other. Her own throat was tight as she remembered her parents, and how it had never been too much trouble to do a good turn for a neighbor. She gave the deputy's arm a squeeze, too choked up to make any other answer.

He hesitated a moment longer, and then gave her a barely-seen nod of the head, before stumping back to his truck and driving off. She waited until the grumble of the engine had faded into the distance, wanting to be sure he was safe away. Then, hugging her jacket tightly around herself, she wearily set off after him, back toward New Bern.

oOo

It was a dozen hours later, and Heather was beginning to think she'd never get the oily stink of the tarpaulin covering her out of her nose. Either the smell, or the grumble of the car's engine through the frame, was making her head pound and her stomach churn. She wondered how far out of New Bern Mark and Kathy would drive before they dared stop and get her out of the trunk of their car.

Not that she should be complaining. It was a lot better than being dead. And sneaking her past the checkpoint on the outskirts of town had been surprisingly easy. The deputies manning the control hadn't even bothered to check the trunk. She'd felt the car roll to a stop, and her heart had raced as she listened to low voices while someone spoke to Mark. Then there were a couple of quick slaps somewhere on the bodywork, and they were moving again. Heather guessed either nobody had been close enough to witness the charade out at the execution site, or it had been sufficiently convincing.

Her journey back through the dark, empty town to Mark and Kathy's house had been far worse, seeming to go on forever, though it could have only been four or five miles. She'd lost track of time, but she thought she'd hit town an hour or so before curfew: a few people were still hurrying home, but they had their heads bent, intent on their own destinations, without a glance to spare for another passer-by.

Despite being dog tired, the fact there were other people around meant she'd forced herself to keep moving at the same brisk pace they and everyone in New Bern used these days: keen to get out of the cold wind, and away from the capricious attentions of the deputies. She'd been almost out on her feet, though, worn out by cold and lack of sleep and hunger, and the after-effects of everything that had happened—Constantino's sneers, and the two gunshots, and being thrown against the wall in the factory, all muddled in head—by the time she reached the address she'd been given and plodded up the steps.

Her soft knock had been answered with a welcoming sliver of warm candlelight as the door opened to let her slip inside. She dimly remembered Kathy's kind face as the other woman fussed over her, and brought her warmed soup, and stood over her to make her eat it. Remembered falling asleep where she sat on the couch, and waking to find someone had put a blanket over her, and seeing Mark and Kathy moving around, packing and talking in hushed whispers, until she fell asleep again. Not safe, but close enough, at least for a little while, after all that had happened.

Now, trying to hold back her nausea under the tarpaulin, she felt the vibration of the car change, and she guessed they were slowing down. A few moments later, she heard a soft clunk and felt a draft of cold air, but she kept still. Because it might be Kathy and Mark helping her out, or it might not. Then she heard the boxes that had been piled in front of her being moved, and the tarpaulin was pulled away from her face. She blinked into the sudden light and made out Mark's tense smile. "Here." He held out his hand to help her wriggle forward and climb out of the trunk. "Okay?"

She nodded gratefully at him, trying to smile. Kathy appeared, holding out a bottle of water, and Heather took it with another nod and drank, washing away some of her lingering nausea. The wind whipped coldly at them while Mark rearranged the contents of the trunk.

When he had banged the trunk closed, they climbed into the car, Heather settling herself in the back seat. As Mark put the car into gear and they pulled away, Heather turned and looked out the rear window. They were too far away in the flat Kansas landscape for her to catch even a glimpse of the brake factory or New Bern's water tower. She wasn't sorry.

If she never saw the place again, it would be too soon.

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