

Devil's Due

By Scribblesinink

The second glass of whiskey that Mary had poured for Heather sat forgotten on the bar. Beck pushed it within her reach. "You okay?"

Heather nodded, shakily, and reached for the glass without really seeing it. "He needs to be stopped."

Her voice was soft, the words barely audible. With a start, Beck realized she wasn't just talking about keeping Constantino from getting to her, or even about what the bastard had planned for Jericho in the next few days.

He wished she'd told him about what had really gone down in New Bern when he'd first suggested that she be his liaison. He might have pushed harder for his recommendation to hold the promised tribunals when the Cheyenne government suggested amnesty instead, if he'd known that—. He stopped his train of thought. He hadn't really asked her about it, had he? At the time, the skirmish between Jericho and New Bern had looked like any other dispute over resources between neighbors, one that had gotten more out of hand than most under the pressure of post-attack survival. With order restored, amnesty had seemed like a wise decision. But no use fretting over what-ifs and maybes; he couldn't change what was in the past. It was the future that mattered now: Heather's future, in particular.

He changed his stance, drawing her gaze. "Maybe you should come with me. Stay at the camp. You'll be safe there."

She blinked at him, shaking her head. "I don't want to hide while—."

Jake, who had been talking to Russell in a low voice, must've overheard. He turned back to once more take up a position half-behind Heather's stool and interrupted before she could finish. "She's right. She's better off in town." He gave Beck a hard stare over Heather's shoulder. "We've been up against Constantino before."

"I know." Beck shifted his attention from Heather to Jake, meeting him stare for stare. He wasn't sure if the other man was genuinely opposed to the idea of putting her up in his camp while they dealt with the threat, or if he was merely being contrary because it was *Beck* who'd made the suggestion. With Jake, it could be either; it wouldn't be the first time he'd opposed Beck's advice even against his own better judgment. "I still believe—."

Jake didn't let him finish. "This is about Jericho. About people in Jericho. That makes it a

police matter, not a military one."

Beck drew himself up, trying to ignore the twinge of annoyance Jake's tone provoked, and not quite succeeding. "Is that so?" It was Heather's *life* they were talking about, not some random incident of people stealing goods from Dale's trucks before they could be distributed properly. And here was Jake deciding to use it to score another point against him. "Then why did you ask me here?"

Jake shook his head. "Wasn't me."

Beck took a deep breath to keep his temper under control. While he usually managed to ignore Jake's half-hidden barbs and not-quite-veiled accusations, this time he felt his anger rising. "Jake, think about it. Heather—."

Again, Jake interrupted him. "She can stay at my grandfather's hunting cabin." He smirked at Beck, and the scorn was clear in his tone: *you* couldn't find it.

Beck crossed his arms over his chest to keep his hands from clenching. "Do you really believe Constantino doesn't know about that? Are you willing to stake Heather's life on that?" He managed to keep his tone calm, though he felt a muscle in his jaw start to twitch. "If you really want to keep her safe—."

"Hello?" The woman on the stool between them cleared her throat, and both men bent their heads to look at her. She flapped a hand in irritation. "I'm sitting right here. Don't talk about me like... like I'm some brainless twit!"

Cursing himself for a fool for letting Jake draw him into another contest of wills, Beck gave her a slight nod of acknowledgment. "My apologies." He turned back to Jake. "May I have a word?" He jerked his head to indicate the back of Bailey's; Heather didn't need the added stress of them continuing to argue over her head. "In private?"

For a moment, he thought Jake would refuse. Then Jake glanced down at Heather and, giving a one-shouldered shrug, brushed past Beck, snatching up one of the Coleman lanterns as he went. Beck sensed more than he saw Heather's concerned frown. He offered her a reassuring half-smile, before hurrying to catch up with Jake. From the far side of the pool table covered with maps, Colonel Davies shot him a sharp look that Beck decided to ignore. The others around the table seemed too caught up in their discussions to even notice anything was going on.

Beck followed Jake into the pantry and shut the door behind him with a soft click. He glanced around the room, dimly lit by the glow of the lamp that Jake had set on a ledge near the dark window. A large shelf rack covered the back wall, most of the shelves bare.

As Mary had told him when he'd threatened to break down the door, the pantry held peanuts and pretzels and, oddly, a half dozen bottles of mustard. The only fully stocked shelf was burdened with unlabeled jars containing clear liquid: the moonshine Mary had brewed herself during the long winter, and started producing again once J&R began charging exorbitant prices for supplies. She must've had a hard time keeping the bar running.

Jake took up position with his back against the rack, arms crossed in front of him, hostility in every line of his body. Beck suppressed a sigh. He wasn't entirely sure where they'd gone wrong—he felt like they'd been butting heads even before Jake had been dragged off to the hog farm—and he didn't know how to fix it, either. Maybe he never would; perhaps too much had happened between them for that to be possible. Even so, he had to keep trying. For everyone's sake.

"So?" Jake lifted an eyebrow. "She's not going."

"That's not what I wanted to talk about." Unwilling to get caught up in another senseless argument, Beck hesitated, not entirely sure how to continue. It was important that he got through to Jake, that he didn't put his back up even further. He scrubbed at his eyes as he tried to decide how best to proceed; he hadn't gotten much sleep since he'd been dragged out of bed the night before.

"These people—", Beck waved an arm, indicating Bailey's and beyond, "—listen to you. Gray Anderson may be mayor, and your brother sheriff, but they look to you for direction." There was a reason he'd asked Jake to be sheriff back in the spring, and he still stood by his assessment, despite everything. "They expect you to make the difficult decisions, and to make sure they're the right ones."

Jake merely stared back at him, jaw tight, though his eyes glittered darkly in the meager light of the gas lamp. Beck couldn't tell if what he was saying was making any impression.

He decided to cut right to the chase. "So you can't afford to let your personal feelings cloud your judgment."

"I'm not—."

"Yes, dammit, you are." This time, it was Beck's turn to interrupt Jake before he could finish. "Look, I know you don't like me very much, and I understand that."

Jake made a dismissive noise and scrunched up his face, but Beck thought it best to pretend he hadn't noticed. He continued, "But no matter what you think of me, trust me when I say I have Heather's best interests at heart here. I don't want to see her hurt any

more than you do."

"Trust you?" Jake laughed bitterly.

Beck took a step toward Jake. "See? That's what I mean." He felt his frustration rise again; Jake could be so damned stubborn. "You didn't hear a thing I said!"

Jake blinked rapidly, clearly surprised at the outburst, and Beck took a deep breath, pinching the bridge of his nose; there was a headache building behind his eyes. He continued in a softer tone, "You oppose everything I say, for no other reason than I'm the one saying it. You're confusing everyone out there. And the last thing Jericho needs is for you to come to the wrong decisions because, Heaven forbid, making the right choices would mean you actually have to agree with me."

Jake made another face but he didn't speak, and Beck began to hope he was perhaps finally willing to listen. "Think about it," he went on. "You've seen the perimeter fences and the troop numbers at Camp Delaware. There's no way anyone from New Bern can penetrate those. Heather'll be safest there, while you and I deal with Constantino. She, and the families of the other people on Constantino's hit list."

Jake remained silent, watching Beck for a long moment, his gaze sharp, as if he were looking for ulterior motives. Finally, he pushed away from the rack he'd been leaning against, admitting, "I guess you've got a point." He headed for the door, chuckling wryly. "So, now, we just need to explain this to Heather?"

Beck's mouth twitched in a grin at the thought. Yes. If he'd been a betting man, he would've reckoned it even money who'd be harder to convince: Jake, or Heather. But he'd managed to persuade one; together, they should be able to bring round the other.

oOo

Watching Edward follow Jake into the room at the back of the kitchen, Heather pricked up her ears, listening for raised voices or even sounds of violence. But after the door closed on Edward's heels, no noise came from the pantry. All she heard was Mary clinking glasses together, and the quiet murmur of the group surrounding the pool table as they made plans to stop Constantino.

She discovered she was still holding the shot glass Edward had pushed in her direction. She threw back the contents, nearly choking on the sharp tang of the liquor. Setting the glass back down, she glanced over to the booth where Gail was clucking over Russell's wife and children. At least they were safe. Unlike—. Unbidden, tears sprang into her eyes. Unlike Ted. Ted was gone. Poor, sweet Ted, who'd been such a gentle soul, and such

a good friend to her when she was staying in New Bern. Even if she couldn't be for him what he'd wanted her to be.

And now he was dead, because of her.

She slid from the bar stool and turned toward Mary. "I think I'm going home."

Mary dipped her head in the direction of the back room. "Don't you think you should wait?"

"I've had it up to here—" Heather indicated chin level with a sharp gesture. "—with those two. They can beat the... the *crap* out of each other, for all I care!"

She wasn't sure what had irked her more: Edward and Jake snipping and sniping at each other, like a pair of third graders arguing over who got to help their teacher wipe the blackboard after school, or the way they discussed what to do with her as if she hadn't even been there....

Mary gave her a quick smile of sympathy, and Heather took another deep breath. "It's getting late; I didn't get much sleep last night and—." She gulped when a fresh wave of grief washed over her. Suddenly dizzy, she clutched at the edge of the bar to keep her balance.

"Hey, hey, easy, now." Mary leaned across the bar, putting a hand on Heather's wrist. "Maybe you shouldn't walk home by yourself, huh? Wait a minute, and I'll ask Bill or Jimmy to go with you."

"Yeah." Realizing she was shaking badly, Heather leaned against the bar for support while she watched Mary walk over to where Russell was talking with Eric and the two deputies.

She'd taken a couple more deep breaths, willing the wooziness to fade, when she heard the pantry door open. Carefully, she twisted around, half-expecting to see bloodied noses or split lips. Much to her surprise, neither Jake nor Edward appeared in any way ruffled at all. Even the stiff, angry cast had gone from Jake's posture, though there was still a slightly mulish glint to his expression. As for Edward.... She could only describe the ghost of a smile playing around his lips as 'smug'. She frowned. What the heck had been going on in there?

They headed straight for her, Edward half a pace behind Jake. Jake stopped in front of her and cleared his throat. "We, um, discussed things." He indicated Edward with a jerk of the head. "And I, um, think he's right that you shouldn't stay in Jericho. You should go. With him, I mean. You'll be safer at the camp."

"What?" Heather blurted it out before she could stop herself. She gaped at Jake, before sneaking a peek at Edward, who gave her a slight nod. "Now you two decide to agree on something?" She could hardly believe her ears.

Edward's smug grin faded a little, while Jake gave her a guilty shrug. He leaned toward her. "Hear me out, okay?" He kept his voice low, almost as if he was embarrassed. "Beck's got hundreds of soldiers at the camp to put between you and Constantino. They can keep you safe in a way we can't do in town."

"What about the others?" According to Russell, she was far from the only one on Constantino's hit list. Heck, Jake himself had been named. And Edward, too.

"You wouldn't go alone." Jake sounded relieved, like he thought he'd already won her round. "My mom and Emily, and Darcy Hawkins and her children, Beck's offered to give you all shelter until this is over."

Heather crossed her arms in front of her chest and sniffed. "You two have it all figured out, don't you?" She was beginning to understand the reason for the complacent smile on Edward's face. "You want us to hide behind the army, while you, and they," she nodded in the direction of Eric and the others, "go chasing Constantino, waving your guns. Do we even get a say in this? Do I? Or maybe this is a guy thing? You know, tuck the women away somewhere safe, while you all get to be big damn heroes?" Her voice had risen, and she realized she was beginning to draw curious stares from the other two groups, their talk falling silent. She didn't really care.

Jake shot a helpless look in Edward's direction, and Heather felt self-righteously pleased. Deep down, she knew she wasn't being fair. But she was getting sick and tired of everyone thinking they could move her around like she was some pawn on a chess board. "Jake, I'm not a coward."

"Nobody's saying you are." Jake put his hands on her shoulders, dipping his head until his face was level with hers. "You're the bravest woman I know. But—."

She pulled away, cutting him off mid-sentence, and glared at the two of them, turning her gaze from one to the other. She noticed with satisfaction that Edward was also no longer looking nearly so pleased.

"I want to go home." She snatched up her purse and started to stalk away, but Jake grabbed her arm, while Edward moved to block her path. She shook Jake's hand off angrily, and gave Edward a furious look. "What?" she snapped. "Am I a prisoner now?"

Edward's brows drew down. "Don't be—."

"Naive?" she spat at him.

Edward flinched as if she'd slapped him, and Heather suddenly felt ashamed. He meant well, and so did Jake. But the stress of the last twenty-four hours was starting to catch up with her, and she simply wanted to go home, curl up in bed, and forget all about Phil Constantino and New Bern for a few hours.

"Um." Mary cleared her throat. Heather hadn't even noticed the other woman come back. Jimmy hovered behind her, a startled line creasing his brow as he looked from Heather to Jake and Edward, and then back at Heather.

"May I?" Mary took Heather by the elbow and, without waiting for anyone's consent, drew her aside. Heather was too tired to resist.

"I understand you're upset." Mary's tone was soft, but urgent. "And it sucks to not be able to do something. I should know; I'm stuck here, making coffee and serving drinks, while Eric's out there doing God knows what." Her voice trembled. "Every day, I'm scared to death about what could happen, until he walks in that door again unharmed. But I know he can only do his job because he knows he doesn't have to worry about *me*."

Heather was too exhausted to hold on to her anger any longer. She let it flood out of her while she whispered, "What are you saying?"

"That you need to look at the bigger picture. That what's important is stopping Constantino." Mary indicated Edward and Jake with a quick jerk of her head. "They can't do that when you're putting yourself in the way."

Heather hugged herself; she suddenly felt cold. "You think I should stay out at Camp Delaware? Like they want?"

"Yes." Mary nodded. "That's what I think. For the town's sake, as well as your own."

oOo

Jake watched Mary take Heather aside. The two of them talked in low voices; Jake couldn't make out any of the words but, judging by the shifting expressions on Heather's face, it was a pretty intense talk.

He glanced over in Beck's direction. The major was watching the two women as well, his features impassive. He held his hands clasped behind his back, as if he were entirely

untroubled. But Jake was beginning to learn the subtle signals that gave Beck's emotions away: the small twitch in his jaw when he got angry, the stiffness in his shoulders that showed his concern. Grudgingly, Jake had to admit—if only silently—that, in his own way, Beck appeared as concerned about Heather's welfare as he was.

Casting a quick glance at Jimmy, who was looking at the two women with a puzzled frown, Jake went back to studying Heather's profile. She nodded at something Mary said; whatever it was, it was apparently enough to dissolve her anger, by the way her shoulders sagged. Jake realized he had no idea what the hell was going on; he'd never seen Heather so upset. Not even that night in her kitchen after he'd come back from Texas, when she'd upbraided him about his attitude toward Beck. He wondered if maybe she blamed him for Ted's death. To be honest, Ted had been a bit of a wimp—but he'd also been a good friend to Heather, and he'd stepped up when Jake and Hawkins had gone to New Bern to find her and Eric. If only the guy hadn't run when he did....

But it wasn't Jake who'd murdered Ted.

He leaned toward Beck, keeping his voice low. "You should've let us kill him when we had the chance."

Beck drew his gaze away from Heather and Mary, and toward Jake. After a moment's pause, he murmured, his voice just as quiet as Jake's had been, "Should have done a lot of things differently."

Jake pulled up in surprise: it wasn't the response he'd expected. Beck didn't elaborate, though. Instead, he warned Jake with a slight nod that Heather and Mary had finished their conversation, and that Heather was coming back.

She looked tired and pale as she rejoined them, but her voice was firm. "Alright. I'll stay at the camp for a few days."

Jake let out the breath he'd been holding. He gave Mary a grateful nod over Heather's head. He had no idea what she'd said, but it had obviously made an impression on Heather.

Next to him, Beck shifted. "Best you come right away. I'll make the arrangements." He gave Heather a curt nod, and started for the door, presumably to radio Camp Delaware. After a few paces, he stopped and turned back. "Best everyone else comes right away as well." He sought Jake's gaze. "Will you inform Mrs. Green and the others?"

Jake nodded. Beck carried on toward the door, while Jake glanced over to where his mom sat with Russell's family. He caught Em's eye for a second, before she looked away. He

frowned. Judging by the cold stares they'd been giving him all evening, he didn't think they were going to take any suggestions at all well. And he really wasn't in the mood for dealing with more objections. Maybe Eric could talk to them instead, while Chavez went to get Darcy Hawkins and her kids.

Beside him, Heather drew in a shuddering breath, and he turned his attention back to her. "You okay?"

"Not really." She uttered a humorless laugh. "But I guess I'll live." She glanced up at him, and added, "I need to go home, pick up a few things."

"Sure." Jake stepped aside and gestured for her to precede him to the door. "I'll go with you."

But she didn't move. "Jake...?" She tilted her head up. "I'm sorry I yelled at you. It's just...." She waved her hands helplessly, and he caught them between his. He noticed her fingers were cool, almost cold.

"I know. It's okay, I understand." He didn't, not entirely, but it seemed like the right thing to say. Judging by the faint but grateful smile she gave him in response, it was. He let go of her hands and nudged her gently, his palm on the small of her back. "Let's go."

"Jake?" Eric waved from the other side of the room for him to come over. "Something you need to hear."

Heather clutched her purse tightly. "I think I still remember how to find my house." She offered him what he supposed was meant to be an encouraging smile, though it looked forced. "Go talk to Eric."

Jake hesitated. Eric repeated the gesture impatiently, indicating the maps the group had spread out between them. Jake realized they'd been conferring over them for a while: Russell, Eric and the rangers, and Chavez and Mack, who'd joined the group at some point as well. But there was no way he was gonna let Heather walk home by herself.

"I can go with Heather." Jake had almost forgotten all about Jimmy, who'd been hovering nearby ever since Mary had brought him over. He shrugged shyly. "Mary already asked me. And I'd be happy to."

"I don't need a bodyguard," Heather objected. "It's just a few blocks."

Jake shook his head sharply. "That part's not negotiable." He didn't care if she thought it a 'guy thing': after what he'd heard about what Constantino did to 'traitors', he wasn't

going to take any chances. But she was right about one thing: it wasn't far, and Jimmy could look after her as well as he could.

Jake put a hand on Jimmy's shoulder. "Make sure nothing happens to her, okay?"

Jimmy puffed himself up, his expression serious. "Will do."

oOo

As the door to Bailey's fell shut behind them, Heather filled her lungs with cool night air. It was such a relief to be out from under the compassionate glances and concerned looks from the people inside that it almost felt like a physical weight lifting.

Edward was standing a little to her left, next to the humvee, talking on the radio. He turned around at the sound of the door closing; when he saw her, he gestured for her to give him a minute. Heather put her hands in her pockets while she waited, her purse clutched tight under her arm. The night was still and dark, and although she'd told Jake she didn't need any kind of bodyguard, Heather half-wished he'd come with her instead of Jimmy; Jake made her feel safe in a way the deputy never could.

She glanced sideways at Jimmy, hovering at her side, like a silent shadow. Though his presence made her a little nervous, it was also good to know someone was watching over her. Russell's news about Ted had unnerved her more than she wanted to admit. She was glad Jimmy didn't seem inclined to chat, though—or perhaps he'd caught her mood.

Edward concluded his call and joined them. "Let me finish up in there," he dipped his head at Bailey's, "and I can take you back with me right away." He shrugged. "Can't offer you much comfort, but there'll be a tent and a cot waiting for you when we arrive."

Heather gave him a wan smile in return, too worn out to fully appreciate his attempt to put her at ease. "I was going home. You know, to get a few things."

"Hm." Edward appraised her for a second, his eyes hooded in shadow, so she couldn't quite read him; she was briefly afraid he'd argue with her again.

"No need to worry, Major." Jimmy moved up to her shoulder. "I'll watch out for her."

"Well, alright." Edward gave Jimmy a quick look, before turning back to Heather. "I'll be here when you get back."

With a final nod, he disappeared back inside. Jimmy leaned toward her. "So, you got a car somewhere? Oh wait...." He chuckled. "You drive that old Dodge, don't you?"

"Charlotte." As Jimmy blinked down at her in confusion, Heather hunched her shoulders, not in the mood to explain. "Yeah. But I only live a few blocks away, so I walked." Poor Charlotte had been through enough, getting dragged out to the ranch in the middle of the night, and then having to sit abandoned in Jake's yard under the hot sun for half the day. Fetching Charlotte back, Heather had promised the old girl a leisurely tune-up in the morning. She shrugged to herself as she set off round the corner and down Main Street. *Guess that'll have to wait a bit.*

"Oh...." Jimmy looked taken aback while he hurried to catch up with her. "Okay."

They walked along in silence. Jericho was dark and quiet around them; the street lamps had been switched off in an attempt to conserve power, and most people were fast asleep, secure in the knowledge that Jake and Eric and the rangers were on guard. It wasn't entirely dark, though. The moon, sitting low over the church, had been full a few days ago, and it still gave enough light that Jimmy didn't need to use his flashlight. Somewhere, a night bird hooted and, in the distance, a dog barked. Heather shivered, wishing she'd thought to bring a jacket.

"Um...." Jimmy cleared his throat before he fell silent once more. Heather waited for him to continue, but they were already turning into her street when he spoke again. "I... I wanted to say, I'm sorry."

"Thank you, Jimmy." She gave him a sideways glance. Jimmy didn't know the half of it, but apparently he was more perceptive than most people gave him credit for. "Um, this is me." She pointed to her small, unlit bungalow and turned onto the flagstone path to her front door.

Jimmy lumbered after her. "Don't you worry, though. Jake and the major, they know what they're doing." He paused a moment, before adding hurriedly, "And Eric too. We'll stop Constantino before he can do any more harm."

He sounded so convinced that a giggle, which somewhere on the way out turned into a half-sob, escaped her. Abruptly, fresh tears stung her eyes as she fumbled in her purse for her keys, and she dropped the bag on the lawn beside the path. "Dammit." She knelt down to stuff everything back in, hardly able to see what she was doing.

"Here." Jimmy crouched beside her to help. As she accepted the object he offered her, she realized it was the multi-tool that Jake brought back for her from Texas.

"Thanks." She pushed back to her feet, sniffing back her tears. She stuffed the tool into the front pocket of her jeans, juggling her keys and purse in the other hand while she

made for the porch steps.

Jimmy straightened up as well and followed her up. "Should I wait—Ungh." His words were cut off mid-sentence by a grunt, and Heather turned to see what was up.

From the corner of her eye, she caught something shift in the deep shadows of the porch. It was all the warning she had before powerful arms wrapped around her, pinning her own arms against her side. Even as she drew in a breath to scream, something clamped over her nose and mouth. She caught a whiff of old sweat and tobacco, and something antiseptic that reminded her of the med center. Fighting whoever had gotten hold of her, panic giving her strength, she twisted in her captor's strong grip, kicking out wildly. Her right foot connected, and a man cursed in pain, his hold on her briefly letting up. For a moment, hope flared. Then she pulled in another breath through the cloth over her mouth, and the world around her went black.

oOo

After Heather left with Jimmy, Mary made her way back behind the bar, picking up the empty shot glass for cleaning along the way. She washed it and dried it and put it away. The whole time, Jake went on gazing at the door, for so long that Mary half-expected him to go after Heather and the deputy. Then he gave a start, as if pulling himself back to the present, and headed over to join Eric and the rest of the war council around the pool table.

"We could stop them here." Gray was jabbing a finger at a spot on the map. "The main road up to The Pines."

Of course Gray would worry about his own place first, Mary scowled to herself, wiping a rag over the bar and collecting the crumb-covered sandwich plates. However, she hadn't missed the part where Russell had told them Bailey's was on Constantino's hit list as well. She shivered; if not for Russell's warning, she and Eric might've been fast asleep, never knowing what hit them, while her bar—her *father's* bar—burned down around them.

"Won't do much good." Eric shook his head at Gray. "Russell talked about simultaneous attacks. Besides, chances are they won't be using the main roads."

"They'll be coming in over the back trails," Jake confirmed. He glanced up at Eric, before turning toward Gray. "Remember how hard it was to figure out where Constantino would fire his mortars from?"

Gray paled visibly and nodded reluctantly. Another prickle of fear ran along Mary's spine. She didn't think she'd ever forget the high-pitched whine of the mortars as they

descended.

"If we have to cover the back trails too...." Bill brushed a hand over his scalp, puffing out his cheeks in frustration. "Jake, we're trying, but we've only got so many guys."

"And we can't pull too many guys from the regular patrols either." Eric dragged the map back toward him and peered at it, as if he'd find the answer if he stared long enough at the scribbles and lines marked on it.

The outer door swung open and Beck walked back in, glancing around briefly before making a beeline for the pool table. Mary saw Jake visibly relax when he caught sight of the major, and she chuckled under her breath. Most folks considered Jake's hostility toward Beck the result of what he'd had done to Jake out at the hog farm, but Mary suspected there was something else in play as well.

"No," Jake agreed, turning back to Eric. "Hoffman's probably on alert for us pulling some of the rangers back to town to deal with whatever mess Constantino puts us into."

"I can temporarily step up patrols on the perimeter." Beck rejoined the group. He took a moment to orient himself on the map, before leaning over for a closer look. "Keep an eye on Hoffman and give your guys some relief."

Gray peered up at the major. "Thanks. Much appreciated." Beck accepted the mayor's words with a nod.

"Yeah." Eric was quiet for a moment, and the expression on his face told Mary he was thinking hard. "With Beck's troops helping out, we could pull back half, maybe three-quarter of our guys, and put them to cover some of the trails north and east instead?" He glanced over at Jake for confirmation.

"Half, I think." Much to Mary's surprise, Jake didn't seem to have any objection to allowing army troops to take over the rangers' role in Jericho's defenses.

Since it didn't sound to her as if the meeting was breaking up any time soon, she turned away to grab the empty coffee pot and wash it out, ready to start another brew. As she worked, she glanced over at the booth near the door where Gail was taking care of Russell's family and briefly met her eyes, before the older woman turned back to her self-appointed charges. Russell had joined his family and was talking softly to his wife, who was holding their daughter in her lap. The little girl was curled up in a ball, sucking her thumb, while Russell's son was snuggled up tight against his mother's side, his gaze fixed on Emily as she tried to distract him. Mary could only imagine how frightened those kids must be, having been dragged from their home, forced to hide out in a barn all day.... At

least they'd be safe here, in Jericho.

Or, well, *safer*....

"Russell?" Jake called from near the pool table.

Russell twisted around at the sound of his name, and, at Jake's beckoning wave, leaned down to say a few more words to his wife, before walking along the length of the bar, navigating around the stools.

Eric folded his arms in front of him as Russell reached them. "What more can you tell us of Constantino's plans?"

Russell shook his head. "Nothing much. I already told you I wasn't privy to the details. I know they've got a base outside New Bern somewhere, but I don't know where. Like I said, Constantino started to get suspicious and kept me out of the loop."

"Try." Beck's tone made it clear it wasn't a suggestion. "You've worked with the man for months. You must have an idea of how he thinks."

Russell scrubbed a hand over the stubble on his chin. He looked tired, his eyes red-rimmed. "Best guess, he'll hit the ranch first. It's more or less on the way in." He looked up at Jake briefly, before glancing away. "And he wants you bad."

Jake snorted. "So, we set up one ambush there. What else?"

Russell threw up his hands. "I don't know, alright? I already told you everything I know." Jake took a pace in Russell's direction, and for a moment, everyone in the bar seemed to hold their breath. Eric put a restraining hand on his brother's arm, but Jake angrily shook it off. One of the children gave a soft whimper—Mary guessed Russell's wife had seen the turn the conversation had taken and tensed—and Gail cast an annoyed look in the direction of the group around the pool table.

Before things could get worse, Chavez stepped between Jake and Russell. "From what I hear," he turned his back on Jake and forced Russell's gaze onto himself, "you know your way around these parts quite well. You snuck in last night without being noticed. And also from what I hear, that wasn't the first time, either."

Russell took a step back and nodded reluctantly. "Wasn't easy."

Chavez chuckled. "I should hope not. Anyway, is it likely New Bern's hit squads would use the same routes in and out of town?"

Russell shrugged. "I guess."

Beck pushed the map in his direction. "Show us."

Russell studied the map for a bit. "Through here, maybe." He indicated somewhere north of Jericho. "And possibly here." Another tap of his finger on the map, further west.

"Would Constantino go around Jericho?" Jake asked. "Come in from the south?"

Russell pondered the question for a moment. "Don't think so. We're not as familiar with those roads as the ones to the north. And Constantino isn't the most patient of men; he'll want to hear about the results fast."

Jake straightened up in surprise, frowning. "He's not coming himself?"

"No. From what I know, the plan was to send small groups of men to infiltrate. Three, four to a party. Each with their own assignment."

"Makes sense." It was the first time Mary had heard Mack, the army colonel from Texas, speak up. He'd been lounging on a stool near one end of the table, quietly observing and listening but not adding much to the discussion. She wasn't entirely sure what he was doing here; far as she could tell, the Texans hadn't done a damn thing to help them, aside from providing the truckload of supplies Jake had brought with him on his return. But Eric said the colonel was important, and so she'd smiled when she'd served him drinks along with the rest of her customers.

"Major Beck, sir?" The door opened again and Beck's aide stuck his head in.

"Yes, Lieutenant. What is it?"

"Sir, Corporal Adams just radioed in. His patrol intercepted several men headed south on a track near Route 6, north of the mine."

The tension in the room picked up a notch. Russell's daughter made another frightened sound, and her mother stroked back her hair with a soothing murmur. Beck raised an eyebrow. "Hoffman's?"

"No sir. Civilians. They're being transported to Camp Delaware as we speak."

Mary noticed Eric exchange a long look with Jake; as she caught the message behind their silent communication, she felt herself grow cold.

"Bill, alert the runners." Eric's order was sharp. "And get me as many rangers as you can."

"But—?"

"Just do it. Wake them if you need to."

Bill grabbed his hat and rushed out, brushing past the lieutenant, who was still standing in the doorway awaiting Beck's orders. Beck tilted his head inquiringly in Jake's direction.

Jake leaned forward, resting his hands on top of the map and meeting the major's gaze. "The ranch house is on Route 6."

Beck stared back at him for a long second. "Right." He turned toward the lieutenant. "New orders for the corporal. Tell him to bring the detainees—." He caught himself, and started for the door. "Never mind. I'll talk to Corporal Adams myself." He paused briefly, turning his head to catch Jake's eye once again. "Get Hawkins' family down here ASAP. And get Heather."

Despite the commanding tone, Jake was already shrugging into his jacket even as Beck followed his aide outside.

"Wait." Gray swiveled his head around. "What does this mean? Is Constantino—?"

"Yes." Eric sounded grim. "He's stepped things up . He's coming early. He's coming right now."

oOo

Jake had barely reached the door when there was a screech of tires in the street outside, followed by a rapid burst of gunfire and the growl of an engine being gunned. Instinct made him duck into a crouch as he flung the door open and peered around the frame. Without thinking, he'd grabbed the Beretta lodged in his belt, and now he held it in front of him with both hands, seeking a target. He caught a glimpse of a pickup racing along the street, the men in the back outlined briefly against the moonlit sky, before muzzle flashes from his left blinded him for an instant. Someone cried out in pain, the shout abruptly cutting off. He aimed the Beretta at the truck, but the angle was wrong, and he wasn't really sure who was in it.

Next thing he knew, dark shapes were arching from the back of the truck, trailing fiery

orange streaks across the night sky. "Get down!" Jake hollered, following his own advice and diving for cover.

The missiles crashed through the large front window of Bailey's, scattering glass across the floor. Jake barely had time to throw an arm over his face for protection before the firebombs smashed against the bar and exploded in a burst of flames.

A woman shrieked, and men shouted. Somewhere, a child started to wail in terror.

"Mary!" As Jake held his arm up against the heat from the fire, he saw Eric dash into the flames.

"Get them out!" Jake shouted over his shoulder at the others while he raced back into the main bar to help his brother. The order wasn't necessary; Chavez was already shoving Gray ahead of him, while Mack had snatched up Russell's boy. Russell was holding his daughter in the crook of one arm and dragging his wife after him with the other hand, with Gail and Emily following on their heels. Jake pulled his attention away from them, concentrating instead on locating Eric and Mary in the inferno that roared around him. The fire, licking at the wood of the bar, reeked of gasoline and was burning hotly. Jake coughed when he accidentally inhaled a lungful of smoke.

He found his brother crouched in the far corner behind the bar, cradling Mary in his arms. She seemed dazed, blood trickling from a cut on her scalp, where something—possibly a shard from the exploding bottles—had nicked her.

"Come on! Out, out!" Jake shoved his gun back into his belt and dragged the two of them to their feet, ushering them out through the flames. Once he was certain they would make it through the fire, he turned back, snatching up the rag Mary had been using to clean the bar, and dunking it in the sink used for washing glasses. He started slapping the wet cloth at the flames, trying to put them out, while the smoke made his lungs ache, and he had to scrunch his eyes into slits against the heat.

For a few horrible seconds, it seemed as if all his efforts were making no difference at all, and Bailey's would burn down around him. Then Chavez was next to him, with the fire extinguisher Mary kept behind the door. The flames didn't stand a chance against the foam: a minute later, the bar was a mess of charred wood that stank of chemicals, but the fire was out.

Jake pushed his hair back from his face with the back of his hand, cursing Constantino under his breath.

"You okay?" Chavez blew out a breath. His face was soot-streaked, and he was a little

wild-eyed from the adrenaline. Jake suspected he didn't look any better himself.

"Yeah." His eyes stung from the smoke, and his throat was raw, but otherwise he was fine.

"Come on." Chavez put the empty extinguisher down and took Jake by the elbow, guiding him outside. In the street, a crowd had formed, sleepy people in their pajamas gawking at the damage to Bailey's. "I'm gonna make sure Darcy and the kids are safe. You sure you're alright?"

"Yeah." Jake coughed and stared back at the crowd, a little bewildered as to where all these people had come from.

With a last, concerned warning that Jake see a doctor about smoke inhalation, Chavez disappeared into the throng.

"Constantino will pay for this." Gray's mumbled threat dragged Jake's attention away from the crowd. The mayor, looking shocked and angry, walked off again without waiting for a response, apparently unable to stand still in one place for more than a few seconds.

"Oh Jake. Are you okay?" His mom appeared at his side, wrapping her arms around him and hugging him tight.

"I'm fine." He ignored the scratch in his throat and held her at arm's length, looking her over in turn. He was glad to see that, although the fear hadn't gone from her eyes, she appeared unharmed. "Don't worry about me. How's Mary?"

They both looked back to where Mary was clinging to Eric, his arm tight around her shoulders. She was gaping in stupefied horror at the thin trail of smoke that still drifted from the broken window of the bar. "In shock, I think." Gail turned back to glance up at Jake. "But they'll be okay. Thanks to you."

He shrugged it off—it wasn't like he'd done anything beyond shoving them out the door—and met Eric's gaze. His brother looked as grim as he had that night Jake had stopped him from going to New Bern. Jake nodded in response to the silent question: *Yes; this time, Constantino will pay*. And he was quite sure that, this time, Beck wouldn't interfere—Jake started, the thought half-finished. Where the hell *was* Beck?

He took stock of his surroundings and found the major a short distance away, standing beside the humvee and talking urgently into the radio, his sidearm still clutched in his right hand. As Jake headed toward him, he noticed there was blood on Beck's fatigues. He arched an eyebrow, nodding at the stains. Beck finished his call and shook his head. "Not

mine." He stepped aside, revealing the body of the lieutenant crumpled in a heap next to the rear wheel of the humvee; one glance told Jake the man was dead. At Jake's side, Gail let out a small gasp.

"Sorry." Jake meant it; it was the first casualty in town since they'd broken away from Cheyenne. And it hadn't even been the ASA who'd killed him.

Beck knelt down beside the dead man, his back stiff. "He had a mother in Orlando. His sister died in Detroit."

Jake dragged his gaze away from the body, staring out across the crowd again without really seeing it. "How the hell did they manage to sneak past all our patrols in a damned pickup?" It shouldn't have been possible.

"They didn't." Bill came jogging up, two tousle-haired rangers on his heels. "It's Marty Haigler's. They stole it right out his drive. We found it abandoned a couple blocks from here."

They must've carried on on foot, then. "Find them," Jake told Bill. "I don't care what it takes, find them."

"They won't get far." Bill gestured angrily. "And—."

"Where's Heather?" Jake was no longer listening to Bill. He'd been subconsciously scanning the ever-growing crowd, but had yet to see either Heather or Jimmy's unmistakable shape. Since Heather lived only a few blocks away, the commotion and gunshots should've brought them back here. Shouldn't they?

Fear clogged his throat. "She's not here." He hesitated, the urge to go look for Heather warring with the need to keep an eye on his family.

Gail put a hand on his arm. "Go." She gave him a nod. "We'll be safe in this crowd."

Needing no further encouragement, Jake pushed through the throng. His heart pounded with fear as he reached the edge of the crowd and set off in a loping run, heading for Heather's house. Dashing past the alley that led to the back of the pharmacy, he tried to convince himself that she was okay, that Jimmy had probably decided to go to ground when he heard the gunshots. But Jake couldn't completely stifle the wave of panic that rose within him as he ran. *God, let her be okay.*

oOo

The street was dark and deserted as Jake pulled up short at Heather's house, gasping for air. Gazing up the empty driveway, fear uncoiled in his belly. If anything, the house was too quiet. Lights should've been on inside: at the very least, the glow of a candle visible through the window. But the bungalow sat in silent gloom, cloaked in the shadows of the tall trees surrounding it.

Booted footfalls behind Jake made him twist around. He was surprised to see Beck jogging up to him. "What are you doing here?"

Beck gave him an exasperated look. "Making sure you don't get yourself killed needlessly. If another of Constantino's teams has—." He shook his head, apparently as unwilling as Jake to finish the thought. He pointed at the silent bungalow they were standing in front of. "Is this her—? Hey! You! Not another step!"

Jake had noticed it the same time: a hulking shape that tottered toward them out of the shadows. On the heels of Beck's challenge, two guns were aimed at the unsteady figure.

"J—Jake?"

As the man came closer, Jake recognized Jimmy. Blood was trickling down his face, and he swayed crazily on his feet, his eyes threatening to roll back in his skull.

"Jimmy!" Jake shoved his Beretta back in his jeans as he hurried forward to catch the deputy before he collapsed. He clamped his hands around Jimmy's upper arms, fingers digging into flesh. "Where is she? Jimmy?"

"I'm sorry...." Jimmy whimpered as Jake shook him.

"Easy...." Beck put a hand on Jake's wrist.

Jake took a deep, shuddering breath, pulling himself together. Jimmy was obviously injured, and treating him roughly wasn't going to help with getting the answers Jake desperately wanted. With assistance from Beck, he helped Jimmy over to the sidewalk and made him sit down at the curb. He knelt in the street in front of him, only half-aware that a small crowd was forming behind them: people who had noticed his mad dash and followed out of curiosity, he guessed.

"Jimmy, what happened?"

Jimmy's gaze slowly focused on Jake's face. Tears shimmered in his eyes. "They were waiting...." He swallowed. "They j—jumped me. Knocked me out...." He groaned again, bringing one trembling hand up to the cut on his head. Jake took a quick look and saw it

wasn't deep, and already scabbing over.

There was a softly murmured "Dammit," to Jake's left. He sensed Beck leaning over his shoulder, but he ignored the major. He needed to get Jimmy to tell them what happened, and do it fast.

"Stay with me now, buddy." Jake grabbed the deputy's shoulders. "Where's Heather? Did you see what happened to her? Where did they go?" It took an effort not to shake Jimmy again.

Jimmy reluctantly lifted his head back up to meet Jake's gaze. "I don't.... I think they used her car?"

"Charlotte." Jake released Jimmy and straightened, finally understanding what had been bugging him about the empty driveway: in the back of his mind, he'd known Heather had collected her car earlier in the day—heck, he'd driven her out to the ranch himself to bring it back—and it should've been here.

"Char—?" Beck began, then caught himself. "Oh. Her truck."

Jake turned to Beck. "That thing's a wreck." He apologized silently to Heather for badmouthing her Dodge, but he'd driven it: despite the loving care she put into it, it was just a matter of time before it broke down beyond repair. "If we hurry, maybe we can still catch up with them."

While they'd been getting Jimmy to tell them what had happened, Bill had joined them. He hovered next to Jake, squinting down at Jimmy with a mixture of concern and frustration. Jake told him, "Get Jimmy to the med center. And send out patrols. Have them look for Heather's old Dodge. You know it?"

Bill guffawed darkly. "Who doesn't?" Leaning down, he pulled Jimmy to his feet. He paused before he started to half-carry, half-drag Jimmy off and added, "We'll find her, Jake." The small crowd parted in silence for them.

With Jimmy taken care of, Jake looked around for Beck. He found him kneeling in front of the steps leading to Heather's front door. He was picking things up off the ground: Jake recognized Heather's purse, and a set of keys.

Impatiently, he demanded, "You coming?"

Beck straightened. "Where?"

"To find Heather, of course." Jake looked around, trying to figure out which roads Heather's kidnappers might have taken. Definitely not Main Street; he'd sure have noticed if Charlotte had gone by.

Beck dropped the keys inside the purse and arched a brow at Jake. "How do you plan to do that? Run around town at random looking for that old truck of hers?"

Jake tensed, his irritation at the major's tone rising. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was the best he could think of. With a little luck, Charlotte had broken down before making it to the town limit. "You got a better idea?"

"Matter of fact, I do." Beck reached out to put the purse on the porch, and then hesitated. Instead, he tucked it under his arm. "First," he started back down the flagstone path, "we need more intel. Adams is bringing over those men he apprehended. Why don't we—?"

Jake strode after Beck. "We don't have time for that," he hissed. "*Heather* doesn't have time!"

Beck peered up at Jake, his dark eyes hard, and his jaw twitching. "You think I don't know that?" He drew himself up stiffly. "I heard what Constantino has in store for her just as well as you. Running around on a wild-goose chase isn't gonna help, though. So, for once, will you let me finish?"

Deep down, Jake knew Beck was right: without a clue where to begin searching, trying to find Heather would be like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. And they couldn't afford to waste time on false starts: to get her back safe, they had to play it smart. And if that meant he had to listen to what Beck had to say.... Well, he supposed he could do that. It went against the grain to admit it, but he knew Beck wasn't stupid. Far from it: he'd shown himself a clever tactician. And he obviously cared for Heather, much as Jake might prefer he didn't.

He flung up his hands in defeat. He hated feeling so powerless. "Make it quick."

Beck didn't respond right away. Jake bounced on the balls of his feet; he wanted nothing more than to hop into the Roadrunner and tear off in search of Heather. Those guys couldn't have gotten far, not in that old pickup of hers. They'd only been gone, what? Ten minutes? Twenty?

"Okay." Beck pushed past Jake and out of the yard. "Chances are, they'll head straight north, agreed?"

Jake nodded. Russell had said Constantino would be impatient for results, and he seemed

to have taken a special interest in Heather, so the hit squad sent for her definitely wouldn't be taking the scenic route.

"How many roads are we talking about?"

"Too many." It irked Jake to acknowledge it, but even if they'd had the manpower to send a patrol up each and every road that led north out of town, they wouldn't be able to cover all the farm trails and rut paths and country tracks. There were simply too many ways that Constantino's men could sneak out of Jericho unseen.

"I'll have my men work with the rangers to cover as many as we can."

They turned in the direction of Main Street, Beck quickening his step, though Jake, with his long legs, had no trouble keeping up. "I thought you said—."

"Yes. But we could still get lucky." Beck glanced sideways at Jake and smiled grimly.

"Meantime, you and I should head up to your ranch to meet with Corporal Adams. I told him to take the detainees there. We'll question them, see if we can get a better idea where to search for Heather. If nobody's located her by the time we're done, we'll take it from there."

Jake thought it over for a few moments and reluctantly conceded that Beck's plan was a good one. One of their patrols could get lucky, but it wasn't something he'd be willing to stake Heather's life on. He picked up the pace. "Let's go. We need to talk to Eric."

oOo

As soon as he and Jake reached Main Street, Beck noticed that the crowd had thinned significantly. With the fire out, there was nothing left to gawk at, and it looked like Eric Green and one of the rangers were gently nudging people to return to their homes. The other rangers that Bill had dragged from their beds were gone, presumably chasing the New Bern men. Beck glanced around; he also didn't see Russell and his family, nor Mary Bailey or Mrs. Green.

"Eric!" Jake jogged toward his brother, who turned at the sound of his name. "Where's everyone? Where's Mom? And Mary?"

"Med Center." Eric scratched his beard; it looked like it had been singed in the flames.

"Emily too, and Russell and his family. I sent a few men with them; they'll be safe." He glanced over at the dark hole that used to be Bailey's front window. "Colonel Davies offered to check on the house, and Gray took a couple guys along to The Pines." Beck saw Eric's eyes narrow when he took in his brother's soot-stained face. "You should go see

Kenchy yourself. Smoke inhalation can be nasty."

As if prompted by Eric's words, Jake coughed, but he shook his head. "No time. Heather.... They took her." Beck heard the fury and anguish in his voice, a mirror to the frustration he felt himself.

"Dammit." Eric pressed his lips together in a thin line, and Beck remembered what the reports had said: how Eric and Heather had tried to stop New Bern when they first discovered Constantino's plans. He guessed they were close even before Eric became sheriff and they began working together every day. "So, what do we do?"

Jake shot a sideways look at Beck before answering his brother. "Send out as many rangers as you can. Have them watch the roads going north. Beck's offered his men to help out."

"I'll tell Captain Clark to coordinate with you," Beck added. He realized he was still holding Heather's purse and offered it to Eric. "Will you keep this somewhere safe?"

Eric blinked at the purse, before he nodded and took it. He frowned at Beck. "Why Clark? Why not do it yourself?"

"Beck and I are going to the ranch." Jake beat Beck to the reply. "We're gonna get some answers."

Eric looked puzzled. Leaving Jake to explain, Beck excused himself and briskly made for the humvee, and the radio, to relay his orders to Camp Delaware.

He was grateful to see someone had covered Lieutenant Posey's body with a sheet. His driver was waiting next to the vehicle, following the order to man the radio that Beck had given right before hurrying off after Jake. Beck shook his head in frustration: if the New Bern team had still been around, Jake could've easily gotten himself killed—or Heather.... It was one reason why Beck had followed. Jake meant well, but his kind of rashness too often led to disaster.

He nodded to acknowledge the driver's salute. "Any news?"

"Sir, Corporal Adams reported he has reached the Green ranch." The soldier stepped away, giving Beck space to reach in for the radio. "He's waiting for you there. And Captain Clark wanted to know if he should send troops out to locate the hit squad sent for you, sir."

Beck nodded. He'd been in the middle of giving instructions about the squads when the stolen pickup with the New Bern team had come careering down Main Street. "Thank

you, soldier." Grabbing the handset, he called the camp.

He was still talking when Jake's car rolled up beside the humvee.

"Come on!" Jake yelled over the growl of the engine, loud in the once again quiet night.

Beck hastily finished his call. "What are you doing?"

"She's faster than yours." Jake nodded in the direction of the humvee. Beck cocked his head and pondered the car dubiously, but he had to agree with Jake: the humvee was sturdy and could handle most road conditions, but it wasn't *fast*.

He gave a curt nod of agreement. "Let me grab the radio." The value if they needed one later would be worth the minute it would take to snatch the set from the humvee.

"Just hurry."

Beck took another moment to reach into the back of the humvee to snatch up his M-16, before jogging around the Roadrunner to climb into the passenger seat. Jake had them moving before Beck had properly closed the door. Juggling radio and M-16, Beck scrabbled for a seat belt, while the acceleration pressed him tight against the leather seat.

A few sharp turns later, they'd left Jericho behind and were racing along Route 6 at what felt like breakneck speed. The night around them was dark, the moon having set, and the car's own lights were all that showed them the way. Having failed to locate the seat belt, Beck forced himself not to grab the dash for support every time Jake anticipated the road and steered into turns before the headlights illuminated them. Despite the rollercoaster ride, Beck realized Jake was a good driver; after they'd survived the first mile without ending wrapped around a tree, he relaxed slightly, using his legs to brace himself against the car's motion.

They didn't speak on the way out to the ranch, which turned out to be several miles outside town. Not that there was much opportunity: Beck guessed they'd arrived in record time. Despite himself, he let out a secret breath of relief as Jake drove down the track to the house.

As he'd reported, Adams was waiting for them. He had the captive New Bern men lined up, sitting on the ground in the middle of the yard, with the other two members of his squad guarding them. The prisoners squinted into the glare when the headlights moved over them.

It seemed to Beck that the car hadn't even come to a full stop before Jake had jumped out

and grabbed one of the prisoners by the front of his shirt, hauling the guy to his feet. "Where is she? Where's Heather?"

The man—Beck recognized him as one of Constantino's close followers—smirked. "You lost her *again*?"

Jake dropped the prisoner and pulled back a fist.

"Jake!" Beck caught his arm just as he was about to deck the guy. Jake tore free of his grip; for an instant, Beck thought he was going to take a swing at *him* instead. Then Jake's expression shifted. He strode a couple paces away, fists balled, and then turned back to face Beck.

"Gimme five minutes," Jake jerked his head at the New Bern guy, "and I swear he'll—."

Beck stepped up to him. He was quite aware they had an audience and made sure to keep his voice low. "Jake, you know I can't let you beat up—."

"Yeah." Jake gave him a scathing look. He was humming with the effort of keeping himself under control. "Pity we don't have time for *your* methods of questioning, eh?" He swiveled on his heel, glaring darkly at the prisoners. "Besides, I'm not sure Perkins even has a mother."

It was the first time since Jake's return from Texas that he'd brought up what had happened at the hog farm as directly as this, and Beck winced involuntarily. He shut his eyes briefly, praying for patience. Of all the times to have this discussion, Jake had to pick *now*?

"Dammit, Jake...!" He suppressed the urge to throw up his hands. For heaven's sake, he had apologized to Jake, to Mrs Green, to anyone that mattered. He'd tried to make amends. Tried to work *with* Jake, instead of around him. Was trying to do that right now. Perhaps that was a mistake. Perhaps he should've taken the matter into his own hands; Heather's life could depend on what he did in the next few hours.

He glanced over at his soldiers. Corporal Adams was watching them, though he managed to keep everything but his evident curiosity off his face.

Jake took a deep breath and scrubbed a hand through his hair, drawing Beck's attention away from the corporal. "Never mind." He seemed to have calmed down somewhat. He added quietly, the words meant for Beck's ears alone, "I won't touch a hair on the bastard's head. But I promise you—" The determination lining his face was frightening, and Beck suddenly pitied the men who had taken Heather. "—he *will* tell me where to

find her."

Beck directed another glance toward the prisoners. The deputy—Perkins, Jake had called him—was openly staring back at them. The small smirk playing around his lips indicated his confidence that an army major—even a rogue one—wasn't simply going to hand him over to a furious Jake Green. Beck caught his eye, holding it long enough that the smirk slowly melted and Perkins looked away. And suddenly Beck understood what Jake was up to. His own lips twitched in a grin, and he ran a hand across his face to mask it. His palm rasped over stubble.

Straightening, Beck barked at Adams, "Get him up." He indicated Perkins with a nod of his head, before looking over at Jake. "Where do you want him?"

Jake gaped, clearly surprised at Beck's sudden change of heart. Then he collected himself and pointed. "The barn."

At a quiet order from the corporal, the two soldiers guarding the prisoners yanked Perkins to his feet, and started hauling him off toward the building Jake had indicated. Beck was gratified to see Perkins' confidence replaced first by confusion and then by fear, once it dawned on him what was going on. Looked like Jake's plan was already working.

"Hey!" Perkins protested, shooting a panicked look at Beck across his shoulder. "You can't let him.... You're.... I have *rights*!"

oOo

Under Jake's direction, the soldiers hauled Perkins over to an empty horse stall, where they tied him to the gate, face-out. From one of the occupied stalls across the aisle, a horse stuck its head out, alerted by the sudden noise and curious to see what was going on. Jake absently scratched its neck, while keeping an eye on Perkins.

Watching the soldiers truss the deputy up, Jake struggled to keep his face empty of emotion, though his hands curled themselves into fists without him realizing at first. When he noticed, he stuffed his fists deep into the pockets of his jeans. He wanted nothing more than to beat Perkins to a pulp, to vent some of his frustration—how the hell had New Bern managed to catch them off guard again?—just as much as to wring out whatever information he could get about Constantino's plans for Heather. But he remembered the last run-in he'd had with Perkins; he could still hear Hawkins' admonition: *it's the fear of torture that gets results....*

Judging by the wary expression on Perkins' face, and the way he struggled against the soldiers' grip, the deputy also hadn't forgotten how, with nothing but a kitchen knife to

wave around, and without touching a hair on Perkins' head, Hawkins had gotten the answers he wanted. Jake wasn't sure if those memories would work to his advantage, but the cold matter-of-factness with which Hawkins had sharpened that knife had sent chills down Jake's own spine—and he hadn't even been the subject of Hawkins' attention. Ready himself for the task, he hoped he was as good an actor as Hawkins had been.

Once the soldiers were done securing Perkins, they stepped back and headed outside. Beck had watched the proceedings from the barn door, his hands clasped in front of him as if he were totally at ease. As the soldiers brushed past him, one of them hesitated, shooting a dubious glance over his shoulder at the two civilians. "Sir...?"

Without turning his head, Beck said crisply, "Dismissed."

"Yes sir." The soldiers saluted and left the barn, leaving Jake alone with Beck and the immobilized deputy.

Jake had been surprised when Beck had offered no further objections, but it had quickly dawned on him that the major knew exactly what he was planning. The way he looked Perkins up and down coolly before he gave Jake a curt nod confirmed it. "I'll be outside."

"What?" Perkins swallowed audibly, his throat bobbing. "Wait! No...! Major, you can't leave me with... with *him*." His eyes were wild as he cast a furtive glance to where Jake stood in the middle of the barn.

"Sorry." Beck grimaced and shrugged, reaching for the barn doors. "You must understand: as a representative of the US Army, I was never here." He backed up and slid the heavy doors shut behind him without another word, despite Perkins' sputtered protests.

The closing doors cut off the glare of the Roadrunner's headlights and the barn was thrown into darkness. Jake struck a match and lit the oil lamp hanging near the door. He had to give the major his due: Beck had played his part beautifully, adding to Perkins' despair with a mere few words.

Then again, Jake told himself glumly, while he carried the lamp over to where the deputy strained against the ropes, Beck knew all about playing psychological games, didn't he?

Jake set the lamp down on the floor instead of hanging it from the hook on the nearest support beam. The open flame posed a greater danger like that, but he liked how the angle made its small flame cast monstrous shadows on the barn walls. It added to the sense of danger, and he figured he could use all the help he could get if he wanted to convince Perkins to talk.

He quietly regarded the deputy. Sweat beaded Perkins' brow, glistening in the wavering flame of the oil lamp. Part of Jake wished it hadn't come to this. If he hadn't stopped Hawkins, that day in Ted's trailer, when it looked as if Hawkins was about to kill Perkins in cold blood.... Another part of him was glad that he *had* stopped Hawkins. If there was anyone from New Bern that Jake knew how to put enough pressure on to break quickly, it was this guy. And whatever Jake did in the next few minutes, it could very well decide Heather's fate. The thought was enough to make Jake's heart pound in his chest, though he was careful not to let it slip into his expression.

Perkins shifted uneasily, tugging vainly at the ropes, and pulling in air in shallow, frightened gasps. One of the horses in a nearby stall nickered and scuffed a hoof against the floor, probably picking up on the fear that oozed off of Perkins almost palpably. Jake suppressed a grim smirk. So far, so good.

The barn smelled of horse, and fresh straw, and a little of manure. It was a smell Jake normally loved, reminding him of peaceful days puttering around the ranch with his grandfather. Right now, though, the smell seemed cloying and heavy, and it threatened to make him gag. He swallowed, trying to breathe through his mouth, while he pondered his next move. He lacked Hawkins' kitchen knife, but the barn should provide plenty of what he needed.

Glancing around, he ambled over to the tool rack and collected several items: pliers; a pair of bolt cutters; a hammer and some of those wicked nails he'd been using to fix up the paddock.... He was mostly picking tools at random—he didn't think he could bring himself to tear out finger nails or cut off thumbs, even if he'd wanted to—but he did notice that every object he put on the ground in front of Perkins made the deputy's eyes grow a little bigger, and he was now heaving in stuttering breaths, nearly hyperventilating.

"You remember Hawkins, don't you?" Once he'd gathered a sizable collection of implements, Jake straightened and knuckled his back.

"Yes. Yes, I do." His voice shaking, Perkins nodded his head fiercely. His eyes never left the casual assortment on the floor in front of him. "G—Guy came with you to New Bern."

"That's right. Unfortunately, he can't be here today." Jake's gaze fell on the ax lodged in the block beside the door, and he decided to bring it over as well. Walking off to get it, he continued, "But, see, he taught me everything he knows. So if you think you're safe...." Jake let his voice trail off while picking up the ax and carrying it back to Perkins.

"No, no.... Jake, c'mon.... Please?" The naked pleading in the deputy's appeal left Jake both grimly satisfied that his plan seemed to be working and a little nauseated.

"So...." Jake set down the ax and picked up the pliers, snipping them open and closed experimentally, before holding them up in the light for closer scrutiny. "Why don't you just tell me where Constantino's holed up?"

Perkins gulped. "Alright, okay.... I'm sorry. It's true: Constantino sent us. He wants you dead."

"Yeah, yeah. I've heard it all." Jake gave him a bored look and put down the pliers as if dissatisfied with them. He reached for the ax instead; Perkins seemed to be fascinated with that in particular. "Come on, Perkins. This doesn't have to be so hard. There's only one thing I want from you: where has Constantino taken Heather?"

Perkins was shaking his head. He was sweating liberally now, droplets of perspiration slowly trickling down his brow, glistening where they dangled from his chin.

"I don't know." He pulled on his bonds; the soldiers had done a good job, though, and the ropes didn't give.

Jake hefted the ax, twirling it experimentally in a narrow arc.

"P—Please, what are you—?"

"See, that's where we have a problem: I believe that you do know."

Jake walked toward Perkins, measuring the distance. The deputy's gaze was transfixed by the ax, his eyes wild and as round as saucers. His throat worked convulsively, but no sound came out.

Crap. Jake hesitated. He was still holding the upper hand, but if Perkins didn't break... or if he really didn't know anything.... Jake knew he'd either have to make good on his unspoken threat, or lose the initiative altogether. And if he lost that, he'd lose Heather with it.

He turned his back on Perkins, pretending to test the ax's sharpness while he squeezed his eyes closed against the anguish that threatened to overwhelm him. He couldn't give in to despair, he just couldn't. Instead, he gathered up every scrap of anger and hatred he could find. He remembered his father, lying pale and still on Stanley's kitchen table, the room reeking of blood.... He recalled Eric telling him Heather was dead, and the expression on her face when she learned what had happened to Ted. Knew that it would be her fate as well, if he couldn't find her in time....

With renewed determination, he swiveled back and hefted the ax, taking a deep breath to steel himself.

"The old mine!" Perkins shrieked, pressing himself back against the gate. "The mine! He's at the old mine."

This part of Kansas was pocked with old mine workings from a hundred and fifty years ago, but Jake thought he knew where Perkins meant. "The Franklin mine?"

"Yes!" Perkins slumped against the ropes, drawing in air in large gulps. With disgust, Jake noticed a damp patch had formed in the deputy's crotch. "Yes.... P—please, I'm telling you the truth."

Jake lowered the ax slowly—it seemed to weigh a ton—and hunched over the handle, fighting the nausea that burned in his already smoke-roughened throat. He believed Perkins was telling the truth because the Franklin mine—an abandoned gypsum mine that lay maybe thirty miles north of Jericho, not far from New Bern—made a lot of sense as Constantino's out-of-town base..

Problem was, it was in Cheyenne-controlled space, miles behind Hoffman's patrol lines....

oOo

Heather woke to a pounding headache, worse than the hangover she'd suffered last November, after what should've been Emily's wedding day. God, she'd been horribly drunk then....

The memory faded as she slowly drifted further out of unconsciousness and became more aware of her surroundings. A horrible coppery taste coated her tongue, and she discovered she was lying on her side on a hard surface that pitched and lurched. Taking further stock, she discovered that her hands had been tied behind her back and her feet lashed together at the ankles, making it impossible for her to brace herself against the rocking motion. And there was something in her mouth that she couldn't spit out, despite her best efforts.

What on Earth—?

The rest of her memories snapped back into place and her heart jumped into her throat in fright. *Constantino!* New Bern's men had been waiting at her house. Attacked her and Jimmy. Knocked her out somehow.

And now they were taking her to Constantino....

Who was going to execute her.... Just like he'd executed Ted.

Sharp panic surged through her and she thrashed against her bonds, only succeeding in pulling them tighter so that they dug even more deeply into her flesh. Her stomach roiled, bile rising in her throat at the thought of what she was facing. Her terror increased when she realized the gag in her mouth would make her choke on her own vomit....

"Hey. Hush, now." Someone crouched at her side, his callused hands on her bare arm steadying her against the roll of what she realized must be a car bouncing across rough terrain. She tried to see who the hands belonged to, but all she could make out was the black silhouette of a man, outlined against the slightly lighter late-night sky. She caught a whiff of old sweat that even the cool breeze flowing over them couldn't entirely banish. Her nausea increased, and she snorted a distressed breath through her nose.

"Promise you'll be quiet as a mouse, and I'll take out the gag." His voice wasn't unkind: a little hesitant, even.

Heather nodded hard, instantly regretting the movement when a wave of dizziness washed over her. She couldn't help the soft moan rising in the back of her throat.

"Shh." Fingers hooked behind the gag and pulled it from her mouth.

Heather gasped in cool night air. "...sick..." The word came out a croaked whisper.

A firm hand curled into her hair, lifting her head. The grip was gentle, though, and a heartbeat later, something cold was pressed against her lips. "Here."

She flinched, before realizing it was a water flask. She drank eagerly, the stale water tasting better than anything she could ever remember drinking before. It washed away some of the horrible taste in her mouth, although she coughed when she nearly choked on a swallow. Finally, the flask was pulled away from her mouth, and the man rested her head back on the metal surface.

"Thanks." She licked her lips for the last drops.

He gave a non-committal grumble in reply.

"So.... " Her voice was still rough, and she cleared her throat. "Could you untie me?"

His response was a surprise. She hadn't really expected him to cut her loose, but she also hadn't expected him to giggle, as if she'd said something funny. She recognized him, now:

Donnie Holloway. Not a mean guy at heart, really, but not exactly very bright, either. It was easy to see how Constantino would've lured him in to his schemes.

"Sorry, no. Mr. Marshall wouldn't like that."

The small relief she'd felt at being allowed to breathe freely evaporated, and a cold tremor ran through her as Donnie identified another of her captors. She remembered Steve Marshall all too well; he was Constantino's right-hand man, and ruthless, vicious and cruel. She squeezed her eyes shut as a fresh wave of despair washed over her, trembling at the thought that she was at the mercy of a man like that.

Once she had herself a bit more under control again, she became aware that Donnie was peering down at her intently. She couldn't quite make out his expression, but she sensed no threat from him, only curiosity. "Why... why are you looking at me like that?"

He shrugged and settled back on his haunches, planting one hand on the floor next to her to steady himself against the rocking of the car. "You don't really look so bad."

A hiccup of startled laughter escaped her. "What are you talking about?"

He leaned closer. "Mr. Constantino says you're a bad woman. That you were helping the mean people who made things bad for New Bern."

Heather snorted. Yeah, she'd bet that was how Constantino had explained it. He hadn't put that bounty on her head because he'd felt charitable. "And what do you think?"

Another shrug, though this time Donnie didn't answer.

Heather decided to try a different tack. "Where are we going?"

"To see Mr. Constantino." Donnie offered her the bottle again and she shook her head. The water she'd drunk sat heavily in her empty stomach and she was afraid she really would be sick if she had any more.

"Where is he? At his ranch? Or in New Bern?" She'd already guessed they'd be taking her to Constantino; what she wanted to know was where. Though what use the information would be to her, she couldn't tell.

Before Donnie had a chance to answer, someone banged on the inside of the back of the cab. "Shut the hell up back there."

Donnie shifted closer. He knelt next to her head and whispered, "Sorry. Shouldn't talk no

more." He put the gag back in her mouth.

She slumped against the hard surface of the truck bed. The vibration under her cheek was oddly familiar. After another minute, she figured out why: it was Charlotte's hesitant rumble she felt. Helpless fury coursed through her: that animal Steve Marshall sat behind the wheel of her poor girl! And he'd damage her, for sure; Charlotte required a delicate touch and careful handling, things that Constantino's henchman wasn't capable of.

Hot tears of fear and frustration leaked from her eyes. It wasn't fair: she'd taken such pride in her old Dodge, using every trick her dad had taught her to keep the car running against the odds—and now her kidnappers were using her girl to take her to Constantino...?

Terror lodged in her throat again as her mind returned to what that would mean: this time, there would be no escape. They'd hang her in the town square, like they had Ted, for everyone to see. And she'd never—.

No. She shook her head angrily, not caring about the bout of dizziness it caused, biting her tongue to keep in the moan that had been rising within her, relishing the sharp pain. No, she was *not* going to die like that, like a lamb brought to the slaughter. She was Herb Lisinski's daughter and she wasn't gonna give up; she was better than that. She just had to keep her wits about her and not give in to the panic and fear.

Somehow, she would find a way out.

oOo

Jake slid the barn doors open. They felt heavier than usual; he hadn't slept since Heather had dragged him from his bed the night before and, for some reason, fatigue was suddenly catching up with him.

He shook off the tiredness; there'd be plenty of time for sleep once he got Heather back. Tilting his head back, he blinked at the sky, unexpectedly bright after the gloom of the barn. It had grown noticeably lighter while he'd been working to get answers out of Perkins, and the sky overhead was a pale, even blue, promising another hot summer's day.

The sound of the doors sliding open made them all look up: Beck, over by the humvee, talking quietly to the corporal; the two soldiers keeping a close eye on the other prisoners; the New Bern men sitting in the dirt, their wrists strapped together behind their backs.

Jake met Beck's gaze. "He's all yours." He indicated Perkins with a jerk of his thumb back across his shoulder, unwilling to look at the deputy hanging limply in his ropes, sobbing

heavily. Without waiting for a response, he headed back inside the barn and hurried toward the far wall. He grabbed a body brush from the shelves, before slipping into the nearest occupied stall. Whisper, a chestnut gelding with a white blaze running down his nose, sniffed curiously at him, his large brown eyes alert. Jake let him smell his hand, before reaching up to grab the halter, planning to attach a lead so he could saddle the horse.

Whisper snorted and reared his head, dancing sideways, and Jake cursed under his breath. He couldn't blame the animal for being edgy; the horse was simply picking up on his own mood. Because, by God, a part of him had wanted to keep that ax swinging, even after Perkins had broken and given up Constantino's location.

Jake squeezed his eyes tight shut, fighting to get his emotions back under control. Fury churned through him: at himself for letting Constantino catch them with their pants down a second time; at Beck for not addressing the problem in the first place.

He was even mad at Heather: if she'd told them the truth about what had happened while she was in New Bern, then perhaps Beck wouldn't have gone so easy on Constantino and his pals, and none of this would ever have happened.

Jake ran a hand through his hair and took several deep breaths, struggling to bring himself under control. All the ifs and maybes in the world wouldn't bring Heather back—that would be entirely up to him.

Once he felt like he'd regained some of his composure, he reached for Whisper again. This time, the horse let him approach. A minute later, Jake had secured the gelding and given him a first good, long stroke with the brush. The horse snorted, but stayed still.

Jake soon discovered that brushing Whisper calmed him as much as it did the animal. The familiar, repetitive motions brought back memories from happier times, and he felt some of the tension flow out of him with each stroke.

"What are you doing?"

Beck's footfalls on the concrete floor of the barn had alerted Jake to the major's approach before he spoke, and Jake kept brushing with a steady hand. "Grooming a horse."

"I can see that." Beck's tone was dry but, underneath that, Jake detected a puzzled note. "May I ask why?"

Jake squeezed past the gate and out of the stall, and jogged over to the rack holding blankets and saddles. "Perkins told me where Constantino's hiding. Where they've taken

Heather. I'm going after her." He snatched a blanket, shook it out, and refolded it quickly, before lifting a saddle from the rack as well and scurrying back to Whisper's stall.

Beck watched him the whole way. "On horseback? Alone?"

Bewilderment had changed to incredulity. Jake felt his customary annoyance with the major rear its head, and he didn't bother to reply. Instead, he hung the saddle and blanket over the gate and bent down to run a hand along Whisper's foreleg. He made the horse lift his feet so he could check his hooves.

"Jake, there's a transport on its way from Camp Delaware to pick up the detainees, and one guard should be enough to keep an eye on them until it gets here." Beck rested his forearms on the gate, next to the saddle. Near the front of the barn, one of the soldiers was cutting Perkins loose and escorting him out to rejoin his companions. "Horses are too slow; we can take the humvee and be on our way in a minute."

Jake shook his head. "Won't do any good." He reached for the blanket, draped it over Whisper's rump and quickly smoothed it. "They're probably too far ahead already to catch up with, and Constantino is holed up at the Franklin mine."

"Your point being?"

Jake rubbed a tired hand across his face, reminding himself that Beck wasn't as familiar with the area as he was. "The mine's in ASA-controlled territory. There's no way we can get that humvee past Hoffman's patrols unnoticed."

Beck hmm'ed unhappily. "Then I'm coming with you."

Jake gave the major a hard stare. "You? On a horse?" He chuckled, though there was little humor in it. "It'll be a long, hard, *fast* ride." He grabbed the saddle and hoisted it onto Whisper's back. The horse started at the sudden weight, and Jake murmured soothingly to calm him.

"I know."

Jake glanced at Beck over the saddle horn: Beck actually managed to sound a little affronted, though the cool look he gave Jake was as composed as ever. "My family has a ranch, in New Mexico. I used to ride, before—" He caught himself. "Anyway, I know my way around a horse."

Jake considered him for a moment.. "Well, doesn't really matter, anyway. We've only got two horses available." He dipped his head to indicate his mom's favorite, a good-natured

bay mare named Abby standing in the stall next to Whisper. "And I'm taking her for Heather."

"What about this one?" Beck walked over to the stall across from the one Jake was working in, which contained the third horse in the barn. The red chestnut stuck its head out over the gate as soon as it realized it was the subject of their conversation, begging for treats. Beck held out his hand and the horse sniffed it, snorting in disappointment at finding it empty. Beck chuckled, scratching the chestnut's neck.

Jake peered at Beck from beneath his lashes. "He picked up a stone bruise."

Beck made a disgruntled sound, taking off his helmet and scrubbing his fingers through his short-cropped hair, but he seemed to accept the reason. Which told Jake that he hadn't been lying when he said he knew something about horses. Jake caught him peering at the other stalls, but Jake had spoken the truth: the other stalls were all empty, most of the horses either being used by rangers to patrol the perimeter, or kept somewhere near the checkpoints in case they needed to get a message back to town in a hurry.

"So...." Beck walked back to where Jake was finishing buckling the cinch, making sure Whisper didn't fool him by holding his breath. "Do you honestly believe you can get Heather away from Constantino and his thugs, and back to Jericho unharmed, all by yourself?"

There was something in his tone that made Jake's hackles rise again. He opened his mouth, ready to snap back that he'd figure something out, and then thought better of it. Pressing his lips tightly together, he brushed past Beck to collect Whisper's bridle.

Why *didn't* he want Beck to come? Was it just because he suspected the major felt some guilt about letting Constantino walk when he'd had him in custody, and Jake wanted to see him suffer without giving him a chance to make amends?

He paused at the tack rack and met Beck's gaze. "You really know how to ride?"

There was a spark of relief in the major's brown eyes as he nodded. "Yes."

If he was honest with himself, Jake knew he didn't stand much of a chance against Constantino on his own. But of all people, to have *Beck* ride with him...? Still, the major had made it clear that he cared about what happened to Heather. What sort of friend would Jake be if he made his own desire for payback more important than her rescue? Yes, they were short on horses, but two guns were better than one. And, if necessary, Heather could ride double. She was a slim woman: how much could she weigh?

"Okay." Hurrying back to finish readying Whisper, he made up his mind. "You can saddle Abby. The tack's marked with her name." He indicated the racks of saddles and bridles.

Beck's lips twitched ever so slightly. "Alright." He headed toward the shelves and picked up one of the grooming brushes. As Jake made to leave the barn, he added, "Where are you going?"

"To get supplies from the house." If they were going after Constantino, they'd need food and water, and more guns and ammo.

When Jake returned a couple minutes later, loaded with supplies and with his rifle slung over one shoulder, Beck was almost done putting the tack on Abby. Using the excuse of distributing the supplies between the horses, Jake checked Abby's gear. He found nothing wrong with the way Beck had saddled the mare: no wrinkles in the blanket, the cinch tight but not too tight. When he'd finished his inspection, he realized Beck was watching him, arms crossed in front of his chest, a somewhat amused look on his face. Jake shrugged slightly, not really caring about getting caught, and Beck gave him a small nod of understanding, suggesting he would've done the same.

They led the horses out, where Beck gave some final orders to Corporal Adams. "We should be back by tomorrow. Next day, at the latest. If not...." Beck shrugged. "Captain Clark knows what to do."

"Yes sir." The corporal looked decidedly unhappy about his commanding officer heading off on horseback with a civilian, without support or back-up, but he saluted him crisply. Beck returned the salute and swung himself up on Abby's back. Jake was waiting impatiently, already having mounted Whisper. A minute later, they were galloping away from the Green ranch.

The first couple miles, they followed an overgrown track that took them slightly northeast, the rising sun a hot, red ball on their right. They gave the horses free rein, letting them run as they would. Fresh from the stable, Whisper and Abby were both eager to go, and they made good time to the army checkpoint overseeing Route 23. The soldiers manning it appeared quite taken aback to see Beck ride up on a horse instead of in a humvee, and Jake caught them exchanging puzzled glances. He supposed it must be an odd sight.

"We've seen nobody all night, sir," the sergeant leading the squad told Beck. "That is, until you showed up, sir." He eyed Abby suspiciously.

The lack of news wasn't unexpected—Jake figured that if any further arrests had been

made, it would've been relayed to them over the radio that Beck was lugging along awkwardly—but it was disappointing all the same. He'd hoped Beck's soldiers had intercepted more of New Bern's hit squads before they'd even made it into Jericho. He wished he knew what was going on in town, and he wondered if he should ask Beck for the radio.

They only stayed at the checkpoint a few minutes, giving the horses a breather while Beck conferred briefly with the sergeant. Jake half-expected him to take charge of their two-men rescue party when they set off again but, much to his surprise, Beck merely waved him into the lead, adding, "This is your home territory."

Knowing he'd need to pace the horses for the long day ahead, Jake kept them at a more moderate pace on the next leg of their journey, trotting along a track that wound its way through the low hills. They'd gone perhaps another two or three miles beyond the Route 23 checkpoint when Beck called out. Jake twisted around and saw Beck had brought Abby to a halt and was juggling the radio, lifting the receiver to his ear before announcing himself. He listened intently to whoever was on the other end of the line and hope flared within Jake. Perhaps Heather had been recovered.... But the major's expression didn't change, and Jake's spark of hope fizzled and died. He figured that, for all the faults he could lay on Beck, the man wasn't so callous that he wouldn't let Jake know right away if the call brought good news.

As it was, Beck's face betrayed absolutely nothing about the gist of the message. He stayed on the line for a minute or so altogether, asking for clarification once or twice. Finally he finished the call and met Jake's curious gaze.

"They stopped two more teams." Beck glanced down as he put the receiver back where it belonged and rearranged the radio until he could retake Abby's reins. "Your friend Chavez killed several men trying to break into Robert Hawkins' house. He wants you to know that Darcy and her children are alright."

Jake let out a relieved breath. He'd promised Hawkins that he'd keep an eye out for his family until Hawkins was well enough to return from Texas, so he was glad to know Chavez had taken care of it. "And the other team?"

"Located and intercepted at your mother's house." Beck's jaw twitched in what Jake thought was a bit of wry humor, though he couldn't imagine what was so amusing about it. Beck continued, "Colonel Davies arrived in time to keep them from doing any damage, but they got away before he could call for assistance. From what we can tell, there were three or four gunmen in each party. They found a blood trail, so the colonel thinks he injured at least one of them."

Jake looked back over the empty trail behind them. "There's still the other teams that are unaccounted for: the one that hit Bailey's, the one sent for Gray, and the team that was supposed to ambush you."

Beck brought Abby level with Whisper. "Assuming all of them make it back before we reach that mine—."

Jake did some quick mental calculations, and finished before Beck could, "—we can expect at least fifteen to twenty men there."

Beck nodded grimly. He didn't need to voice what both of them were thinking: that those odds weren't very good.

However, good odds or not, they had no choice; they had to keep going. Jake wheeled Whisper back north and they nudged the horses into motion again, keeping them going at a steady clip.

After a few more minutes had passed in silence, Jake could no longer hold his tongue. "You realize all this could've been prevented?" The thought had been foremost on his mind ever since Russell had first revealed Constantino's plans.

Beck shot him a look. "Yes." He spoke curtly, like he was unwilling to admit the truth.

"If you'd let us take care of the problem..." Jake couldn't resist twisting the knife, "if you hadn't stopped the tribunals...."

Though the major's eyes darkened, his face remained impassive. But Jake knew him well enough by now to recognize the tension in the set of Beck's shoulders. He was still surprised, though, when Beck muttered, more to himself than to Jake, "I had no idea how bad it really was."

Jake made a dismissive noise in the back of his throat. "You knew about the executions." *He* hadn't known about those, but he'd known plenty enough about what Constantino had done to think that letting him walk free was a mistake.

Beck glanced sideways again, before adjusting his grip on Abby's reins. "Apparently, that was only a part of Constantino's reign of terror."

Jake's memory flashed back to the day before, to that moment in Bailey's when he'd seen Beck with Heather hunched over a table, talking quietly, Beck handing her a handkerchief.... "Heather tell you that?"

"Yes." Beck pressed his lips together.

They rode in silence for several long minutes. Then Beck cleared his throat. "There are a few things you should probably know." He broke off, and they went another hundred yards or so before he spoke again. His voice was soft, but steady. "From what she told me, Constantino could've given Stalin a run for his money. Arbitrary arrests... a forced-labor camp...." He gave Jake an odd look, before glancing away. "Letting his deputies rape the women...."

Even though it was still early in the day, and the sun was already baking the Kansas earth, Jake felt himself grow cold to his core. He remembered noticing the changes he'd seen in Heather after she'd returned from New Bern: how she'd started wearing more makeup, and how she'd seemed sadder and less trusting. He knew those changes were to do with what she'd been through, but he'd never thought—. He swallowed and made himself ask, "Is that what happened to Heather?"

Beck didn't answer right away. At last he heaved a breath, wiping an arm across his face. "I don't know. I don't think so, but...." He gave a shrug.

Jake gritted his teeth, muscles tightening in helpless anger until Whisper faltered in his rhythm, unsure what his rider wanted. Jake forced himself to ease up until the horse regained its steady gait.

As if he'd needed more reasons to want Constantino dead....

oOo

Taking them along unpaved back trails, or cross-country when there were no trails to follow, Jake tried to cut as straight a line north as he could. The landscape made for slow going: insurmountable rock outcrops, or deep gullies with sides too crumbling for the horses to manage, forced them to detour from their path more than once.

Despite his desire for haste, Jake also knew he had to be smart and spare the horses. Running the animals into the ground before they reached the Franklin mine wouldn't do anyone any good. And even after they got Heather out, there was the journey home to consider....

Still, his need to catch up with Heather was strong, and sticking to the trot-canter-trot scheme that was easier on both horse and rider required a constant, conscious effort. Catching himself preparing to spur Whisper into a gallop for a third time, Jake looked over his shoulder at Beck. The major was following him closely, his lips pressed tensely together, though he sat Abby with the ease of a skilled horseman. It had been a relief to

find he hadn't exaggerated his ability.

'Cause if he had? Well, Jake would've had no compunction about leaving him behind in the middle of nowhere, while he took Abby and continued alone. To be honest, he was secretly happy to have the major along, though he'd swallow his tongue before he told him so. The odds of getting Heather out of New Bern's clutches unharmed were bad enough to begin with, and having another experienced gunman could only improve them. And because of that, Jake was willing to put up with a lot. He chuckled ruefully at himself. Even the extended company of Major Beck.

A thicket of trees rising up in their path, their crowns heavy with summer leaves, required them to change course again, forcing them further east. Away to their left, at the edge of the grove, a ray of morning sunshine sparked off of something half-hidden in the wood. Jake blinked at the sudden stab of light and the dark spots swimming in his vision. He slowed Whisper to a walk and shielded his eyes against the sun. "What's that?" Something red and white and bulky shimmered in the trees.

"It's Heather's truck." Beck had raised a pair of small field glasses he'd produced from somewhere to his eyes and was peering through them.

"Charlotte?" Now that he knew what it was, Jake could make out the rounded corners of the old Dodge's cab.

Beck gave him an amused look when Jake named the truck, before making the glasses disappear into his tac vest. That vest seemed to house an endless number of useful items, Jake noted absently.

"We should check it out." Jake spurred Whisper into a canter without waiting to see if Beck was following. A few seconds later, he heard Abby's hooves drum the hard ground behind him. Once they got closer, he saw the pickup wasn't very well hidden at all, carelessly covered with just a few branches of dead brush. Jake was glad for the slipshod work; if New Bern's men had done a better job, he and Beck would've probably missed it altogether.

As soon as they reached the grove, Jake slid from Whisper's back and hurried over.

Beck caught up at a slightly more moderate pace. "Careful," he cautioned, but Jake had already dragged the cab door open. Inside was empty.

Beck rounded the truck to inspect its bed. "It's clean." He didn't need to explain what he meant: there was no blood in it. Which could mean nothing, and it might mean everything.

Discarded on the floor of the cab, half-hidden under the gas pedal, Jake found a balled-up handkerchief and a small glass bottle a quarter full of clear liquid. He twisted the top off and caught a whiff of a sickly sweet smell that reminded him a little of the med center. Grimacing in disgust, he screwed the cap back on and clawed his way out of the cab.

He found Beck standing behind him, resting one hand on the edge of the truck bed. Jake showed him the bottle. "Chloroform."

He was picturing it in his mind's eye: Constantino's kidnapping squad lying in ambush in the shadows of Heather's porch, waiting for her to come home; someone grabbing her, pressing a rag soaked in chloroform against her face. She never did stand a chance. He could only hope that Constantino's desire to take his revenge personally—and his hold on his thugs—was strong enough that drugging Heather was all they'd done. 'Cause if they hadn't—? Jake shoved the thought of what Beck had told him earlier firmly from his mind.

"That must be how they managed to take her quietly." Beck pushed away from the car and headed back to Abby. "I'll call it in, have someone come out here and recover the truck."

For a second, Jake was shocked into silence. Then it dawned on him: Beck understood how much Heather liked her car, and how sorry she'd be to lose it. It was something Jake knew, but he hadn't realized Heather had grown close enough to Beck for him to know it as well, and the discovery came as a bit of a chilly surprise.

While the major talked softly on the radio, Jake scanned the ground around the thicket, until he found what he was looking for: a set of fresh tire tracks headed north. He pondered them for a moment, printing their pattern into his memory, and felt a grim sense of satisfaction. From finding Charlotte and the tracks, it looked as if Perkins had indeed told him the truth. They had to be on the right trail.

oOo

Heather felt as if she'd been jolted around in the bed of the truck for days. She didn't think there was any part of her body that wasn't bruised from the constant bouncing and jostling that she was helpless to do anything about, bound hand and foot as she was. Judging by the way the sun had slowly crept higher into the sky, the journey couldn't have lasted more than five or six hours, though. Her kidnappers had abandoned Charlotte shortly after she'd woken up, and thrown her into a newer and much sturdier truck—dashing her faint hope that maybe the Dodge would break down and give Jake and the rangers a chance to catch up and find her. 'Cause she was *sure* they must've started

looking for her the moment they discovered her missing....

Assuming Constantino's teams hadn't got them too. Or that they hadn't been too busy to even notice she was missing—no, she told herself, Jimmy would've warned them.... That was, if Jimmy himself was okay. God.... Tears threatened and she blinked them away. Jimmy had been nice enough to walk her home and, as reward, had gotten hit over the head. She only hoped they hadn't hit him too hard.

The feeling had gone out of her hands hours ago and, though her initial nausea had faded, her head still throbbed and her mouth was dry. She also needed to pee badly, but she was damned if she'd beg for a potty break. Certainly not with the way the new guy was watching her. He'd joined them in the back after they'd changed cars: mean-looking, with greasy hair and dark stubble on sunken cheeks. He seemed vaguely familiar; she thought he'd been one of the overseers at Constantino's ranch. His gaze crawled over her constantly: it reminded her of how, one day last summer, when she'd been weeding her little garden, she'd accidentally seized a snail; the guy's eyes on her gave her the same slick, slimy feeling as the snail's body on her skin. Enough that, the one time he'd made to reach for her, she'd recoiled so violently that she'd hit her head against the side of the truck bed and seen stars. After that, he'd settled for leering at her and licking his lips, while she worked hard to pretend he wasn't there.

They continued to bump over overgrown tracks and across abandoned farm fields. She was a little surprised they continued to avoid the main roads: it made for slow going and would give Jericho's rangers every chance to catch up. She understood it better when Donnie, grumbling to himself about their slow progress—before a grunted warning from the other guy caused him to withdraw in an embarrassed sulk—made a remark that at least it helped them avoid the various army patrols.

Heather could imagine why they'd want to do that: they definitely wouldn't want to bump into Edward's men, and Hoffman might be willing to look the other way while New Bern took care of Jericho's leaders, but she doubted he'd agreed to what Constantino had planned for her. He'd seemed a decent enough man when she'd met him back at the ASA camp after she'd escaped from New Bern the first time. Unfortunately, unlike Edward, he refused to accept Hawkins' evidence and admit he was fighting for the wrong side.

Another bump shook her, and fresh pain shot along her bound arms. She wriggled around, trying to find a better position. Donnie had pulled his cap over his eyes against the morning sun and was slumped against the truck's side, snoring softly; peeking through her lashes, Heather found the Creep—as she'd silently dubbed him—was still staring at her with that hungry look. She was beginning to feel real sympathy for the little pig in his flimsy straw house when confronted with the wolf. The ghastly sensation was almost

enough to distract her from the rest of things making her uncomfortable.

Finally, after another eternity had passed, the swaying motion of the truck changed. It no longer thumped over mostly flat ground; instead, it started to nose-down a slope, using a winding road with hairpin turns that made Heather roll back and forth helplessly. She tried to think where they could possibly be taking her that was steep enough to warrant the sharp turns—Kansas being mostly flat, despite the gentle hills that surrounded Jericho—but she failed to come up with anywhere like that.

Once they stopped at the foot of the slope and dragged her from the truck, she understood. She was at the bottom of a large, shadowy bowl dug into the earth. Steep, white walls rose up around her, and the bowl's rim was sharply outlined against the circle of deep blue overhead. Ramshackle buildings clustered to one side; a bulldozer, its rubber treads long gone to dust, had been left in front of the biggest hut; further away a rusty tipper truck stood with its platform tilted up as if the driver had just delivered a load. She vaguely recalled the existence of an open-air mine somewhere west of New Bern; it had closed during the recession in the early eighties, when she'd been too young to understand the impact on the town's economy.

The air at the bottom of the mine was sweltering and still, with not a puff of breeze. Sweat broke out on her brow and trickled along her back. The sun wasn't high enough yet to flood the entire mine pit; she suspected that once it did, it would get unimaginably hot in the windless bowl.

Steve Marshall came walking around the truck. He carried a wicked-looking hunting knife in his right hand, and Heather's breath hitched in her throat. She blew it out slowly when he merely used the knife to slice through the ropes tying her ankles together, snarling, "You can walk." The smirk on his face told her he'd heard the hitch, and found her fear amusing.

She berated herself for letting it show. She was thinking like a fool: they wanted her dead, yes, but if they'd wanted to murder her in such a simple way as slicing her throat with a knife, they would have done it back in Jericho.

Marshall stuffed the knife back into a sheath at his belt. "Take her to see Phil."

"Sure thing, Mr. Marshall." Donnie snatched her elbow and started pulling her along.

As soon as she'd taken the first step, Heather didn't think she could make it on her own. Pins and needles stabbed her legs when the blood started to flow again, and she had no real sense of where she was putting her feet. But by half-clutching Donnie for support, and going on sheer willpower—she didn't want to give them any reason to carry her; bad

enough to have been lugged from Charlotte to the other car like a sack of potatoes—she made it to a decrepit wooden building shaded by the eastern wall. At some point in the mine's history, someone had nailed a sign to the door whose faded letters announced *Office*.

Constantino swiveled on his heel to face them when Donnie brought her in, his expression cold and calculating. An icy tremor ran along Heather's spine, though the room was stuffy. Behind Constantino, a map of the area marked with red scribbles had been thumbtacked to the rough-sawn boards. It didn't require much brainpower to interpret the markings: concentric circles around Jericho that indicated the rangers' and Edward's outer patrol perimeters; X's that denoted checkpoints and roadblocks. An arrow pointed out the location of the gypsum mine, and long strokes led from the arrow south to Jericho, to the Green ranch, and even all the way to Camp Delaware. Heather guessed this was where Constantino and his men had drawn up their plans. Seeing those targets marked so carelessly made her shiver again; she prayed the others had been more prepared for the attack than she had been.

"Heather Lisinski." Constantino's voice was soft.

She pulled her gaze away from the map and made herself stand up straight. She looked him in the eye, refusing to cower before him.

"You've caused us a lot of trouble." Constantino's pale blue eyes never blinked, and the pointy beard he kept meticulously trimmed jutted accusingly in her direction.

She wanted to object and snap that he only had himself to blame for anything that had happened, but the gag was still in her mouth, and all she could manage was an incoherent protest. Constantino gestured for Donnie to remove the gag; when he pulled it away, she worked her tongue, moistening her lips. "I did what I thought was right," she spat, once she felt she could speak. "And I'd do it again."

He smiled slightly, a humorless grin, and another shiver of dread made its way up her back. "I expected you might see it that way." He pulled out a folding chair and sat himself down. "Even so, it's... most disappointing." Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on his knees, looking up at her. "'Cause, see, this is how I look at it: you were born and bred in New Bern. We fed and housed you during the long, cold winter, though we had very little ourselves. And you repaid that kindness by betraying us." He shook his head sadly. "I can't let that slide, Heather."

"So you plan to execute me?" She didn't think bringing up her work on the windmill design was going to make any difference to Constantino—his mind was made up—so she decided not to waste her breath. "Like you did Ted Lewis?" Though she'd managed to

keep a firm tone so far, she couldn't prevent her voice shaking a little as she said Ted's name.

He shrugged. "Examples need to be set." The door opened and Marshall walked in. Constantino sat up straight. "Any word from the other teams?"

Marshall grabbed a thermos that stood on a dust-streaked desk cluttered with filthy coffee mugs and more rolled-up maps, and poured himself a cup of whatever was in it. "Not yet." He cast a dark look in Heather's direction. "There was a lot of activity in Jericho. Looks like our friend Russell already spilled the beans."

Constantino got back up and wandered over to the map. He clasped his hands behind his back as he studied it. "Russell." He sighed. "I'd hoped moving our plans up—. Well, never mind. Our guys know what's at stake. They'll do what needs to be done."

"They'll fail." Heather wasn't sure if she were trying to convince Constantino, or herself.

Constantino turned back, seemingly surprised to find her still there. She met his gaze stare for stare, even as he quirked a eyebrow.

"Your thugs won't succeed with their murders," she continued. "Jericho will be expecting them. They're ready."

"Like you were ready for us? With that fat cop?" Marshall laughed harshly. "Oh, yes, that was real impressive." He wiggled his hands at her. "Very scary...."

Constantino gave him a sharp look and Marshall dropped his hands, glancing away and muttering something into his drink. Constantino directed his gaze back to Heather. "Donnie, lock her in the shed."

Donnie snapped to attention. "Will do, Mr. Constantino." He reached for Heather's arm and tugged. "Come on."

"And Donnie?" Donnie stopped them and glanced across his shoulder at Constantino. "Don't forget to put the padlock on."

Donnie gave a nervous laugh and shook his head. "I won't."

oOo

Beck and Jake followed the tire tracks of the second truck for several hours, Beck happy to let Jake take the lead. He was surprised, to be honest, at how well Jake was managing

to keep his cool, despite the hatred Beck saw shimmering in his gaze every time their eyes met. Looked like Jake had learned a thing or two since those days in April, when he'd been all gung-ho to go after Constantino, consequences be damned.

Or perhaps Jake simply cared more for Heather than he wanted to admit.

As the sun climbed higher in the sky, the temperature rose rapidly, until the day seemed as hot to Beck as the Iraqi desert had ever been. He tilted his helmet back, wiping a sleeve across his face, regretting the instinct that had made him snatch his combat gear from the humvee after the molotov cocktail sailed through Bailey's window. Although he could hardly have foreseen at the time that he was going to spend the day riding a horse.

Some of Jake's urgency must've rubbed off on him, because he found traveling on horseback not nearly as swift as he'd have liked. They needed to pace the animals, and stop occasionally at a creek or pond to let them drink, or they'd run their mounts ragged before they even made it past Hoffman's lines. By mid-morning, they hadn't made half as much progress as Beck had hoped when they set off. The trail itself meandered across the Kansas landscape in what seemed to Beck to be an almost haphazard fashion, though it generally took them in a northerly direction, confirming Perkins' assertion that Constantino was holed up at this abandoned mine.

Beck glanced at the radio, tied to his saddle. He could still order Camp Delaware to send up some humvees.... On the other hand, Jake had been right when he'd said a truck was much more likely than a horse to draw unwanted attention. Far as Beck could tell, it was a toss-up between getting there slowly, or not getting there at all. Neither alternative sat well with him.

He shifted his seat, trying to ease the numbness that was slowly building in his buttocks and thighs, and the ache settling in his lower back. It had been a long time since he'd last found himself on horseback, and although it was a little like riding a bike—a skill you never really forgot—his body was starting to protest the long hours in the saddle. Not that he paid it much heed. Over the years in the army, he'd suffered a lot worse, and the end goal was far too important for him to bother with his own discomfort. Still, he wasn't as young as he used to be.

He squinted at Jake, riding a few paces ahead of him. Though grim-faced and tight-lipped, and sweating nearly as much as Beck, the younger man looked to be in his element, despite the heat and physical hardship. Beck blew out a breath. Small wonder the hog farm treatment had failed to break him.

That was the one thing he'd done that he regretted almost as much as letting Constantino walk. He wasn't even sure any longer why arresting Jake had seemed like a good idea,

though he remembered it had made perfect sense at the time. Looking back, all he could see was how he'd slowly sunk ever deeper into a morass of morally objectionable actions that he hadn't really wanted to take, but that each on its own had seemed reasonable and logical when he took it. And although he'd tried to apologize, he knew what he'd done was beyond forgiveness. His guilt was the reason he put up with far more crap from Jake than he normally accepted from anyone.

As if he sensed Beck's eyes on him, Jake shot a glance over his shoulder. The corner of his mouth twitched, and Beck suspected he looked as miserable as he felt. He offered Jake a rueful grin in return.

Jake slowed Whisper to an easy walk and, unhooking his water bottled from the saddle, unscrewed the cap. Much to Beck's surprise, he held it out without a word. With a nod to indicate his gratitude, Beck took it and drank deeply. The water had grown lukewarm, and it wasn't like he wasn't carrying his own, but he recognized the gesture for the peace offering it was, and accepted it gladly.

"Thanks." He handed Jake the bottle back.

Jake took a deep swallow himself, before screwing the cap back on. He gave Beck another long look before he asked, "I've been wondering: why are you here?"

Beck's eyebrow rose in question. "Here...?"

Jake vaguely indicated their surroundings: the land being baked to a crisp under the hot sun. "Here." He included the tire tracks and the horses in his gesture.

Beck didn't answer right away, swiping an arm across his face again while he considered his motivation. It was a fair question: he shouldn't be here. As Jake had reminded him, kidnappings and murder plots were a police matter, and should've been left in the hands of the sheriff's office. Beck himself had once told Heather he wasn't going to allow himself to get involved in any private vendettas. But, if he were honest, he couldn't help but think that he already *was* involved in this particular vendetta—had been long since before he ever decided to climb onto Abby's back. And while he could say he was out here helping Jake because Eric and his deputies had been strained by the number of attacks, that was only part of it. 'Cause the most important reason....

He sought Jake's gaze. "She's my friend too."

It was Heather who'd asked him to stay after he'd denounced Cheyenne, and who'd pressed the town into accepting his help—helping him and his men in return with provisions and supplies, the true flag flying over Camp Delaware being the least of it.

She'd kept him company while he'd waited for his officers to come to a decision, a fact he still found mind-boggling after the way he'd had her thrown in jail the day before. And she was always there to offer a willing ear for the thoughts he couldn't share with anyone else.

Before that, too: during his first month in Jericho, she'd tried so hard to believe in him, right up until he'd made it impossible for her to do so any longer. And when she'd told him that she couldn't see the difference between him and Constantino any longer, it had hit him hard. Harder than he'd been willing to acknowledge at the time. But, even then, he hadn't fully grasped what she'd truly meant. Now that he'd learned what she'd seen in New Bern....

He cleared his throat. "And I feel partly responsible for the situation."

A huff of agreement made it clear how Jake felt about Beck's assessment. He didn't ask any more questions, though, and Beck didn't volunteer any further information, and the next miles passed in silence.

As they rode on, Beck kept scanning the surrounding country side, squinting against the glare of the sun. He felt horribly exposed, out in the open like this: they'd be visible from miles away for anyone who bothered to look in their direction. The gently rolling landscape provided no places to hide if a helicopter spotted them, and there was always the risk of bumping into one of Hoffman's ground patrols. Being army troops, Beck felt confident they'd stick to predictable patterns and locations, but all it would take was a single deviation from the norm....

And if that wasn't enough, they also had Constantino's other teams to consider. As far as they knew, two or three hit squads were making the return journey from Jericho, and might be headed in the same direction they were.

Beck fingered the stock of his M-16 absently, taking some comfort in the familiar feel of the weapon. He and Jake had been lucky, so far. He could only hope their luck held a while longer.

oOo

Donnie directed Heather toward a small outbuilding a hundred yards or so from the office shack. Constructed of corrugated metal sheeting, it listed a little to one side, and the sloping roof was dark red with rust. "Can I get you anything? Food? Water?"

Heather hesitated. She didn't really want to ask, but—. "I need the restroom?"

"Oh." Donnie uttered a bashful giggle.

Glancing at him, she could tell he was blushing beneath the scruff and dirt, and he avoided meeting her gaze. But he did change course, leading her to the back of the shed, where the small building provided some privacy from curious eyes. He cut the rope from her wrists, and she shook her hands to get the blood flowing again. Embarrassed, hoping nobody was watching, she fumbled with her jeans, her fingers clumsy and awkward on the zipper. Donnie was shy enough to turn his back, and for an instant she considered making a run for it. But where could she go? She was at the bottom of a mine, and the only way out of the pit was along the winding, exposed access road. She'd already seen several men with guns milling about among the vehicles when Donnie had taken her in to see Constantino, and she knew she wouldn't make it to the first curve.

Finishing up, she straightened and cleared her throat. "All done."

Donnie took her around to the front of the rickety building. "I'll bring you some water later," he promised, before pushing her into the shed. He closed the door, and a moment later she heard the soft *chink* of metal on metal: he hadn't forgotten about the padlock.

Turning away from the door, Heather scanned her prison. It was dark, and it took her eyes a minute to adjust after the bright reflection of the sunlight on the gypsum walls outside. Looking around, she saw the shed consisted of a single room, bare of any furnishings. It had no windows, though a little illumination came from rays of sunlight slanting in through cracks around the door, or gaps where the metal sheets had shifted slightly. Dust danced in the thin beams, and her nose tickled at the sight.

A part of her wanted to simply drop to the filthy concrete floor and curl up in a ball, crying out her misery and defeat. But she resisted the urge: that wasn't how she was raised. And she'd been left alone for the first time since they'd snatched her from her front porch; she was determined to use the opportunity to come up with an escape plan.

Wandering around the small room, she started by examining the walls, feeling for cracks along the top and bottom, prying for any sheet of metal she might tear loose. But while the sheeting showed spots of rust, the walls felt strong and sturdy, and the concrete floor made it impossible for her to tunnel her way out. So she turned her attention to the only possible exit: the door.

It was a simple wooden door, with flat boards nailed onto the ledges and slanting braces of the frame, swinging inward on what felt like plain strap hinges. Heather's heart sped up as she ran her fingers over the metal fixings, testing the screws. If she could get those screws out, she could simply lift the door off its hinges and sneak away. She'd have to wait for cover of darkness, of course—she tried not to think that she might not have that much

time—but the sooner she started working on the hinges, the better. At the very least, having something to do would stop her feeling so damned helpless.

Her fingers found that one of the screws stuck up above the surface a little, and she tried to twist it with her bare hands. The sharp edge dug into the pads of flesh on her fingertips, and Heather soon realized there was no way she could get a tight enough grip on the old screw—it must've been put in before she was even born—to shift it. She glanced around at the empty room, searching for something to use as a—.

"Oh, you're such an idiot, Lisinski!" She wanted to smack herself for not thinking of it sooner. Patting the pockets of her jeans, she searched for the multi-tool she remembered stuffing in there right before she was attacked. God, she hoped they hadn't taken it from her while she was unconscious.... She gave a small cry of triumph when her hand closed around it. She recalled what Jake had told her when he'd given it to her—*I thought you might need it some day*. He couldn't have imagined how true that would turn out to be.

She pulled the screwdriver out from the handle and, kneeling in front of the door, began attacking the bottom hinge with a determined vengeance.

oOo

The tire ruts Jake and Beck had been following took them along a little-used farm trail, the coarse grass flattened on the nearly overgrown path. Abruptly, the tracks swerved sharply to the east, abandoning the old trail that, judging by the faintest of outlines Beck could make out in the grass ahead, continued straight on north.

Jake drew his horse to a halt, squinting along the fresh twin lines. Beck pulled up next to him, scanning the horizon. "I thought you said the mine was to the north?"

Jake nodded thoughtfully. "It is."

"So, why go east?" As far as Beck could tell, there was nothing in the landscape to prevent a pickup from continuing north: no obstructions like the rock outcrops or sudden deep gullies they'd had to go around earlier. He hesitated. "Maybe they're taking her directly to New Bern?" He didn't like the thought one bit: if her kidnappers got Heather to New Bern before he and Jake caught up with them, the odds that the two of them could get her back unharmed would go from bad to impossible.

"I don't think so." Jake shook his head and wheeled Whisper around, carrying on north along the old trail, abandoning the wheel prints they'd been following for so long.

Frowning, Beck spurred Abby in a trot to catch up. "Jake, talk to me."

"See that line of bushes?" Jake pointed ahead. "That's Mill Creek. There used to be an old bridge across, but it collapsed—" he thought for a moment "—ten years ago. I think horses can still get through the creek, but a truck?" He shook his head. "Not a chance. They've got to go 'round till they reach Oak Bridge."

A little reassured by the explanation, Beck pulled out his water bottle for another sip. There was so much he didn't know about the area, but Jake seemed to know every nook and cranny in a way that no amount of intel or data could compete with. Small wonder they hadn't been able to track down the rangers last spring.

He let Abby fall back, giving Jake room to find the best route for the horses. Almost imperceptibly, the land began to slope down, and those strange rock formations that were scattered all over western Kansas started popping up closer and closer together. Soon, they reached the southern rim of the gully; the scraggly bushes they'd seen from a distance clung to the edge, shielding most of the opposite side from view. One glance down the steep side into the gulch told Beck that Jake was right: no way a truck could have gotten across here. He doubted even a humvee would've managed it without sustaining serious damage.

Jake slid down from Whisper and knelt at the edge of the small ravine. The slope fell steeply toward the creek bed, where a thin trickle of water snaked around a jumble of rocks. "We can go down there, I think." He indicated a narrow ledge winding down through the rocks.

Beck studied the route Jake was suggesting. It looked like it was probably a deer track, and it appeared navigable for a horse. However, there was no way they could ride down. "We'll have to lead the horses."

Jake grunted in reply.

Following his example, Beck climbed from the saddle, wincing when his stiffened muscles objected and his knee joints crackled as he straightened them. He stood still for a moment, resting one hand on the saddle while he waited for his legs to adjust to being back on the ground.

"I'll go first." Jake reached for Whisper's bridle, getting ready to lead his horse down the treacherous slope.

Beck's skin suddenly prickled in warning, although it took him a second to place what had brought him on alert. "Jake!" he hissed.

Looking a little taken aback at the urgency in Beck's tone, Jake peered around at him. Beck signaled him to back away from the edge. Although Jake frowned, he didn't argue. Once he'd moved back from the rim of the gully, he asked, "What is it?"

"Smell that?"

Jake's nostrils flared as he sniffed deeply. His expression darkened, telling Beck he'd caught the scent too. "Smoke?"

Someone had just lit up a cigarette nearby. Beck wetted a finger and tested the wind: it came from the northwest, from across the creek. He handed Abby's reins to Jake. "Stay here. I'll go check it out."

For a second, it looked as if Jake was going to object, and Beck reminded himself to not treat the other man like one of his subordinates. He'd learned the hard way that giving Jake orders often provoked the opposite reaction to the one he was aiming for. But apparently, after thinking it over a moment, Jake agreed that it was best to keep the horses ready for a quick getaway—at least until they knew who was over there—and was willing to let Beck be the one to risk getting caught scouting it out.

Bent over, mindful to keep low, Beck set out, thrusting through the bushes and navigating around the rocks to the west. The scent of smoke grew stronger. Where the creek made a sharp turn south, he got down in a crouch, ignoring the way his back creaked in protest, and snaked up to the edge of the gully. Carefully, he raised his head enough that he could peer over the rim—and swore softly. Two humvees were parked across the creek, a handful of men in fatigues lounging between them. They'd made themselves comfortable the way only professional soldiers can, stringing a tarp between the humvees to give themselves some much-needed shade. A couple of the soldiers were playing cards, while another was perched on the humvee's bumper, cleaning his gun and smoking a cigarette.

They looked settled in for the long haul, but Beck found it hard to believe they'd been sent to guard the gully right at this spot when the bridge that had once spanned the ravine was long gone. Besides, they were far too complacent for men on guard duty. He knew Hoffman ran a tight ship; such casual behavior from his men wouldn't be tolerated. Beck reckoned it made much more sense that the soldiers been ordered away from their regular checkpoint at Oak Bridge, the only place Constantino's men could cross the creek. If no patrol was there to see the hit squad return, Hoffman could pretend he didn't know what New Bern had been up to in Jericho.

Beck clenched his jaw in annoyance as he wriggled away from the edge, reflecting that he and Jake had gotten lucky. If that soldier hadn't lit up when he had, they wouldn't have

known about the troops until they'd been caught blind crossing the stream, helpless to do anything about it. Which would've likely meant a speedy court martial—and probably execution—for him; Loomer Ridge for Jake; and for Heather.... Beck shoved the thought away, not wanting to dwell on it. Instead, he sent up a silent prayer of thanks: they'd gotten lucky, that was all that mattered.

He quickly made his way back to where Jake was waiting, holding both horses' reins in one hand and fingering the strap of the shotgun on his back with the other. He looked relieved as Beck reappeared, but his relief was short-lived when Beck quickly explained what he had discovered, and where he believed the ASA troops were normally stationed.

"You think it's dumb bad luck they're *here*?" Jake's tone echoed the disbelief Beck felt.

Beck nodded as he took Abby's reins back from Jake. It was annoying as hell, but there was nothing they could do about. "We'll have to go back, find another way."

"We can't," Jake hissed, his frustration evident in his tone. "There's no time, and this is the fastest way to the mine." He paused a moment, absently reaching up to rub Whisper's nose. The horse snorted, and Beck threw a concerned look across his shoulder in the direction of the gully. Fortunately, they were downwind from the soldiers.

Jake petted Whisper's neck to quiet him. "Can you arrange another diversion?"

Beck considered it. Maybe he could radio in to Camp Delaware, and have a squad engage Hoffman's troops further west of them.... He shook his head. "That'd take too much time as well." And they couldn't even be certain it'd work. He absently checked Abby's tack. "We need another plan."

Abby sidestepped him, sniffing at a patch of yellow grass. Jake looked at her, though Beck could tell he wasn't really seeing the horse.

"When we came up from Texas," Jake began slowly, "we ran into an ASA patrol." His lips twitched briefly in amusement at the memory. "Mack pretended to be an ASA colonel. Scared the crap outta me, but he gave them such a dressing down that they never thought to question him."

The mental image of the tall Texan colonel chewing out a bunch of ASA troops made Beck smile too: he reckoned Davies, though usually soft-spoken and easy-going, could hold his own against any drill sergeant. Beck's humor quickly faded as he reviewed and rejected that plan as well. "Afraid that's not gonna work." He scratched his neck unhappily. "My face is too well-known in the Tenth. And I'm sure Hoffman has distributed my picture. Chances are, they'll recognize me before I can get a word out."

Jake shifted the shotgun on his back. "I'm not hearing any suggestions from you," he snapped.

Beck's eye fell on the radio hanging from Abby's saddle. Used to be a time, he would've simply requested an air strike on the enemy's position and be done with it—but he wouldn't have liked doing that to Hoffman's men, even if it had still been an option. Not that long ago, those soldiers across the creek had been *his* men too. And it wasn't really their fault they'd ended up on the wrong side when the lines were drawn.

He suddenly straightened, startling Jake, as another thought occurred. "I've got an idea...." He unstrapped the radio and keyed the transmitter. An instant later, Camp Delaware came on. Beck quickly relayed his instructions to the operator. "So, ten minutes, you call me back—and make as much noise as you can. Understood?"

"Yes sir." The radio operator on the other end sounded baffled and confused, but Beck didn't have time to explain more. He knew the operator would do as he'd been ordered. Now it was time to plant the radio.

"Be ready to go," he told Jake, before slipping away into the underbrush again. He knew he didn't have to explain the rest of his plan to Jake; the way Jake's mouth had curled up in a half-smirk while he was on the radio told Beck he'd heard enough.

Beck went as far west as he dared before he put down the radio on a flat rock jutting up from the dirt. He turned up the receiver volume to maximum, hoping he hadn't gone out of earshot of the patrol on the other side of the creek. Then he dashed back toward where Jake had been using the time to feed the horses some food pellets. Beck gave him a nod—mission accomplished—and took Abby's reins back.

He glanced at his watch. Almost time, now. His stomach fluttered, the way it always did in the last few minutes before action.

The operator in Camp Delaware didn't let them down. Right to the second, the abandoned radio crackled to life. The racket it made was startlingly loud in the still, hot noon air. For several heartbeats, nothing more happened and Beck shoved away the niggling fear that he'd put the radio too far out: if he could hear it, so could the soldiers across the gully. Then surprised shouts rose in the distance, followed almost immediately by the sound of humvee engines grumbling to life. Beck couldn't help a twinge of pride: they'd responded fast.

He snuck a glance over at Jake, unable to resist giving him a small grin of satisfaction. "That's our cue."

A short time later, they'd made it down the gully and up the other side without incident. Mounting back up, they kicked their horses into a quick trot, to get as far away from the creek and Hoffman's troops as they could before the patrol realized they'd been tricked, and called in helicopter support.

oOo

Their shadows were lengthening by the time they finally reached the Franklin mine. Beck reckoned the patrol must've guessed the radio had been put there as a diversion, and that someone had slipped by them but, though he and Jake had both kept a cautious eye skyward for fear of helicopter surveillance, they'd seen nothing except a couple of contrails headed from west to east. The vapor trails had been too high to determine if the planes were military, although Beck suspected commercial flight was still pretty much nonexistent.

Either way, as far as they knew, nobody had spotted them.

Several miles after crossing Mill Creek, they'd come upon another set of furrows newly carved in the grassland, curving in a northerly direction. Jake drew Whisper to a halt and swung down. Kneeling beside the shallow gouges, he poked at a couple of dry sprigs that hadn't yet straightened. "Fresh tracks." Pushing back to his feet, he indicated the ruts, "And not from a single truck, either. I'd say at least two, maybe three or four."

Beck used the break to dab his face and neck with a wet cloth. "Constantino's men?"

"I'd think so. The mine's not much further." Jake got back on his horse. "Though I can't really tell if they're coming or going."

Knowing they were getting close at last renewed Beck's energy. They followed the new tracks for a while, until Jake directed Whisper away from the trail, heading for a cluster of tall cottonwoods on the horizon. Beck prodded Abby into a quick trot to catch up; before he could ask, Jake shot him a look. "We're almost there." He guided his horse down a shallow slope and along a muddy creek bed. "I expect Constantino has set guards. I don't want to risk bumping into them."

Beck nodded approvingly as he fell back; he was glad to see that Jake was using his brain, instead of racing in blindly to rescue Heather. Much as he probably wanted to. Heck, Beck could sympathize. The sooner they had her back, the better. And then he'd have a choice thing or two to say to Bob Hoffman.

A couple hundred yards further on, they reached the shelter of the trees. The shade

under the canopy felt almost cold after the heat of the sun.

Jake slid from the saddle. "We'll have to leave the horses here. Continue on foot."

Beck nodded and helped him tie the horses' reins loosely to a cottonwood trunk, making sure the animals had enough leeway to nibble on the patchy grass under their hooves. When Jake made to remove their saddles, Beck stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Leave them."

Jake opened his mouth to object, but Beck forestalled him with a rueful shrug. "Yes, I know." "It was terrible horsemanship, and he didn't much like it either. However, he felt they had little choice. "But we don't know what we're getting into. We may need to get out in a hurry."

Jake grimaced, but he left the saddles on. He scratched Whisper under his chin, resting his forehead against the horse's neck for a moment. Beck overheard him mutter an apology to the gelding that he didn't think was meant for his ears, so he pretended he hadn't heard.

Turning back toward his own horse, he collected his M-16, checking the spare clips in the various pockets of his tac vest. Then he offered the mare a handful of pellets from the sack Jake had brought along. She gobbled them up happily while he patted her neck. She'd been a pleasure to ride, responding to his commands quickly and eagerly. But she'd been ridden hard, and she looked exhausted. Beck truly hoped they wouldn't need to leave in a hurry any time soon; he wasn't sure how much more the mare had to give. Grabbing a handful of coarse grass, he did his best to rapidly rub her dry.

Once they'd done what they could in the circumstances to take care of the animals, Jake led Beck through the undergrowth. Beck soon discovered Jake's caution had been well-founded: only a short distance away, the shrubs gave way to a grassy clearing that ended in a steep, crumbling cliff edge. Glancing back, Beck estimated they weren't more than a quarter mile from the cottonwood grove.

Jake ducked into a crouch, so he wouldn't be outlined against the sky as he crawled toward the edge. Beck followed his example, holding his M-16 in one hand. A minute later, side by side, they were peering cautiously over the edge of the pit.

Beck fished his field glasses from his pocket, although the naked dirt of the gypsum mine was so glaringly bright in the summer sun that he had to squeeze his eyes into narrow slits before he could make out anything but a white-hot glow.

"You see her anywhere?" Jake was using the scope of his rifle to give him a closer view.

"No." Beck swept his glasses over the bowl again. Three pickup trucks were standing at haphazard angles in front of a cluster of old buildings. He counted a couple of armed men on foot, who didn't seem to be doing much of anything, but he saw no sign of Heather. "She must be in one of those shacks." He had no proof, and it was as much wishful thinking as logical deduction.

Jake started inching backwards. "We gotta get down there."

Beck dropped his glasses and snatched Jake's arm. "How do you plan to do that? The only way in that I can see is that access road over there." He indicated the road with a jerk of his head. "And there's no cover. You said it yourself: Constantino'll have set guards. You can bet your ass there'll be some at the top of that road. Constantino may be a tyrant and a murderer, but he's not stupid; there's no way we can get down that way without being detected."

Jake looked at him, his face miserable as he peered past Beck at the exposed road snaking along the pit wall. "But Heather—."

"She'll be alright, for now." Beck had caught movement from the corner of his eye and he put the binoculars back up, but it was just one of the armed men crossing the open space between the trucks. He turned to look at Jake again. "Remember, Russell said Constantino's got special plans for her. He wants to make a big public spectacle out of her, send a message. He won't do anything to harm her here." He hoped what he said was true. He also remembered the other frightening things Heather had told him Constantino had gotten up to or tolerated.

Though Jake hesitated, he still didn't appear convinced. Beck warned himself to be patient. He couldn't simply tell Jake to stay put—he'd discovered that issuing orders was more likely than anything to push Jake into doing something rash and stupid—so he needed to persuade him.

"She'll be okay for now," he repeated. "But if you try to get down there and get yourself caught, you might cause panic. And panicked people are unpredictable; they can do crazy things." He sighed, scratching the stubble on his jaw, absently trying to recall when he'd last seen a razor. "Look, I know you want to go in and start tearing up the place. I understand." He'd be right behind Jake if he thought they had any chance of making it work. "But let's be smart about this. We need to have a better understanding of the situation, so we can come up with a plan of action that at least has a chance to succeed. Getting ourselves killed isn't going to help anyone."

After another moment, some of the tension left Jake, though the expression in his eyes

was one of sheer anguish. "I guess you have a point."

Beck let out a long breath and squeezed Jake's arm briefly before letting him go. Relieved that Jake wasn't about to do anything dumb, he twisted back round so he could keep a close eye on the mine.

oOo

After numerous failed attempts to loosen the door hinges—the tiny screwdriver head kept slipping the socket—Heather gave up on the idea of escape. The rusted screws were twisted in too tightly for her to have any hope of getting them out with nothing but the small tool and her bare hands. When she scraped her knuckles bloody on the rough wood after the screwdriver slipped yet again, she admitted defeat. Not knowing what else she could do except wait—for rescue or another way to escape; or for Constantino to do his worst—she crouched against the far wall and made herself as comfortable as possible, nursing her sore fingers.

Time passed slowly. For a while, she counted out the seconds and the minutes, until it dawned on her that counting was only making her more anxious and strained. She hummed the songs she used to teach her class, but stopped once she'd run through the entire repertoire. At some point, she heard another truck come down the road, the engine whining.

Its arrival brought a chorus of whoops and shouting, though Heather could only make out snatches of the conversation that followed.

"...late..."

"...had to hide..."

"...never saw us coming..."

More hooting laughter followed, the voices fading as the men walked off, and then things grew quiet again. Heather's heart sank at the bits and pieces she'd overheard; she reckoned the new arrivals were another of the hit squads, and they didn't sound as if they'd failed at what they set out to do. Russell's warning must've come too late for others as well.

Fear for her friends wrapped itself around her heart, but she did her best to thrust it away, telling herself to stop being so negative: she had no way of knowing where the truckload of men had come from. They could've come from anywhere but Jericho, and thinking about mights and maybes would only drive her crazy.

As more time passed, and the sun climbed higher over the mine, the temperature inside the metal shed rose unbearably high. Heather felt as if she was slowly being broiled. Her hair was plastered to her face and neck in sweaty strands, and her top clung to her skin. She pulled the shirt away, flapping the material, but the air in the shed was so hot that the makeshift breeze brought little relief.

Closing her eyes, she rested her head back against the wall, the metal warm to the touch. She absently mused that she'd probably be able to fry an egg on the rusty roof overhead—now that would make for an interesting science experiment. She wondered if it was part of Constantino's strategy: to cook her alive before the public execution. Fear slithered through her once more as she thought about Constantino's plans for her, and tears threatened. She brushed them away angrily with the back of her hand.

Heavy footsteps clumped toward the shed and hesitated in front of the door. Heather's heart started pounding against her ribs, and her stomach clenched. She jumped to her feet; she didn't want to confront whoever it was while kneeling down on the floor: it'd make her feel even more vulnerable. A heartbeat later, there was the quick rattle of the padlock being removed, and the door swung inward. Heather recognized Donnie outlined against the stark glare of the white world outside. She exhaled, only dimly aware she'd been holding her breath.

"Hey." He stomped across the threshold, beaming proudly at her and shoving a bottle in her direction. "Promised I'd get you some water, didn't I?" He blew out air, glancing around. "It's hot in here."

A quick sob of wry laughter escaped her as she gratefully accepted the water. The bottle was cold against her palm, beady moisture glistening on its plastic surface. She brought it up to press it to her face for a minute, before unscrewing the cap and drinking deeply. She tried not to drink too quickly—she remembered hearing that could cause bad headaches—but it was an effort not to gulp it all down at once. It tasted so sweet, and she almost believed she could feel every cell in her body sigh in relief.

Donnie hovered uncertainly near the door, a plastic box in his other hand. "I... I thought you might be hungry. I brought some donuts." He offered her the box. "Sorry there's no more chocolate sprinkles in there. Oscar ate them all." He tilted his upper body toward her and lowered his voice, whispering, "I don't like Oscar very much. He's a very mean man."

"That's alright." Heather made herself smile up at him. "Thank you, Donnie. And thanks for this." She shook the water bottle, already half-empty. "Do you think you can get me some more water?"

He nodded. "I'll try."

Heather took the box of donuts he was still holding out to her. "Donnie, what are you doing here?" She knelt for a moment so she could put the donuts on the floor. "You're a good guy. You don't belong with these crooks." She thought for a second. "Don't you have family in Garden City?"

"Yeah." He scuffed at the cement with a booted toe, not meeting her eye. "My Auntie Beth."

"You should leave here, go visit your aunt." Heather dipped her head to indicate the goons she could see through the open door, milling around near the trucks outside. "Don't go back to New Bern with *them*."

"Oh, no, I couldn't do that!" Donnie started whipping his head from side to side, his eyes growing wide. "Mr. Constantino, he said—."

"Donnie Holloway!" Steve Marshall hollered, and Donnie flinched. "Drag your goddamn ass outta there!"

Donnie drew his shoulders high and hunched his head down, before giving Heather another shrug. "Gotta go." He turned on his heel and scrambled from the room, pulling the door shut behind him.

Heather glanced at the box of donuts near her feet, making a face. Despite not having eaten since—she tried to remember: yesterday evening?—she didn't feel at all hungry. And the thought that Constantino's men had pawed through the donuts with their grimy fingers.... Her stomach threatened to turn over, and she shifted her gaze away from the box.

She pricked up her ears at the sound of raised voices outside, a little muffled by the door, but loud enough that she could still make out the words.

"... you goddamn moron! I don't know why Phil keeps you around, you good-for-nothing!" There was the wet sound of flesh meeting flesh, and something like a suppressed cry of pain, and then Marshall's voice again: "I should just shoot you and be done with it."

"No!" Donnie sounded genuinely scared. "P—Please, Mr. Marshall, I'm sorry. I'm stupid, I forget things. I—I didn't mean to."

There was a weighty pause filled with silence, and Heather braced herself for the gunshot, half-expecting Marshall to make good on his threat. But then Constantino's adjutant simply snarled, "Just go put that damned padlock back on. And then get the hell outta my face!"

Heather heaved a sigh as she slid down to rest against the wall again. She felt a little sorry for Donnie: in a way, he was a victim as much as she was.

oOo

Lying on their stomachs, shielded from below by the grass growing on the rim, while the shrub and brush surrounding them hid them from view from anyone roaming topside, Jake and Beck surveyed the goings-on down in the mine for a long time. Jake thought it a wasted couple of hours: other than the arrival of another pickup and a tense argument between two of Constantino's underlings, nothing much had happened at all. From their position at the rim, they hadn't been able to tell what the row was about, except one of the thugs had pulled a gun on the other. Jake had held his breath: if they started to fight amongst themselves, that might be the chance he and Beck had been waiting for. But, much to his disappointment, the gunman lowered his weapon without firing after a few seconds, and the moment was gone.

Shadows had begun creeping back across the hard-baked earth of the mine floor as the sun sank slowly toward where thunderheads were building in the west. The forced inaction was getting to Jake. They'd hustled all this way as fast as they could, and now they were hiding and sitting still, twiddling their thumbs? While Heather might be down there, suffering God knows what...? Jake tried not to dwell on what Constantino or any of those other sons of bitches might be doing to her. He focused instead on taking stock of the pit again. Not that anything had changed in the last five minutes; it was as if Constantino was waiting for something. Beck had suggested he was expecting more of his teams to return from Jericho: as far as they knew, there were a couple squads still missing.

There were a dozen guys already down there, that they could tell, and Jake was getting antsy. If more of the hit squads came back, the odds would only worsen further. Jake wanted to get down and search the compound for Heather now. Problem was, like Beck had so helpfully pointed out, they couldn't climb down without being seen. And they needed the element of surprise; with just two guns against a dozen or more, they were bound to lose any shoot-out...

Catching movement in the hot oven of the pit again, Jake raised his rifle to peer through the scope and take a closer look. He drew in a sharp breath: the New Bern ringleader himself had appeared from the main building, and was making his way over to the trucks. It was the first time the bastard had shown himself. "There's Constantino."

Beck acknowledged Jake's observation with a soft grunt, raising his own field glasses.

Jake kept the scope trained on Constantino. Hatred surged through him: this was the murderer who was responsible for the death of over sixty people in Jericho. For the death of his father. And now he had taken Heather.... Unbidden, Jake's finger tightened on the trigger. "I could take him out right now."

He wasn't aware he'd spoken out loud until Beck hissed an urgent, "No!"

The major sounded alarmed. Grudgingly, Jake made his finger let go of the trigger, and tilted his head to look at him.

Beck lowered his binoculars and met Jake's gaze. "I know, it's attractive." His face was as grim as Jake had ever seen it. "But we still don't know how many men Constantino has with him. And we can't be sure Heather's in that shed."

"She's *got* to be." Jake said it more to convince himself than in reply to Beck's words. But they couldn't be sure at all; they hadn't caught so much as a glimpse of Heather. They didn't even know if she'd ever been brought here in the first place; all they had were Perkins' confession and their own suspicions. And even if she had been brought here, they didn't know if she still was down there. But he'd stake his life Constantino hadn't killed her yet; the sonofabitch enjoyed a spectacle too much. And *someone* was being held prisoner in that shack: the door was secured with a rusty padlock and, at one point during the long afternoon, one of the gunmen had carried food and water into it.

"He'll want to keep her close. And he'll want to make a big show out of her execution." Jake could barely get the last word out without choking on it. He flashed back to that cold night in early spring when he and Eric had been paraded in front of a hungry and angry crowd. He'd thought the two of *them* were going to die that evening.

"You're probably right." Beck had raised his glasses again. "We still can't risk it. Who's to say they didn't put a guard in there with her? If you kill Constantino now, they could get to her before we can, even in all the confusion." He glanced sideways again, his eyes hard, and Jake got a glimpse of the steel core the major usually hid underneath his deceptively benign demeanor. Despite Beck's insistence they hold off on shooting Constantino now, he didn't think Beck was going to be willing to let him walk a second time.

Beck's next words confirmed Jake's impression. "No, Jake, if we get a good chance to take him out, I won't stand in your way. But this is not the time."

Jake chuckled humorlessly. "You're starting to sound like Hawkins."

Beck made a small noise at that, though Jake was unsure if it was displeasure or because he agreed. Pushing down his irritation, Jake shifted the rifle and once again peered through the scope to see what was going on. Constantino was still talking to his deputy, though the distance was too great to hear their voices, let alone make out the words. Jake wished he'd learned how to read lips, like Bonnie. It would've been very useful right now.

The conversation lasted a few more minutes, before Constantino turned and headed back into the biggest building. The deputy—the same guy that had pulled a gun on another member of the gang earlier—shouted an order, giving a big-armed wave. A couple men came running up at a trot in reply. They jumped into the bed of the nearest pickup, while the deputy headed for the driver's side. A minute later, the truck was lumbering up the steep track out of the mine.

"Where're they going?" Jake's gaze tracked the pickup until it disappeared from view.

"Back to New Bern? Getting things ready?" Beck shrugged. "Does it matter? It's three guns less we need to worry about."

Problem was, even with the three men gone, the odds weren't that much better. There'd been four pickup trucks parked at the bottom of the mine at one point—three, now—and they'd counted twelve men so far, including Constantino, the three that had just left, and the guy who'd been threatened by his buddy, although they hadn't seen him for a while. They couldn't be sure how many more gunmen there were, but if they averaged four to a pickup—a conservative guesstimate—he and Beck could still be another four or five short on their count. Some of those guys were undoubtedly guarding the road down into the mine, but the others could be anywhere.

Those were still crappy enough odds that Jake had to agree with Beck, however reluctantly: this wasn't the chance they'd been waiting for. He only hoped they'd get one, and soon.

oOo

Unaware of the two men fretting about her well-being just a couple hundred yards away, Heather was slowly being cooked in the shed. She thought the temperature in her small prison had increased even more after Donnie had left. And although she'd tried to ration the water, thinking she shouldn't count on getting more any time soon, despite Donnie's promise, it hadn't lasted very long. Once she'd wrung the last drop out of the plastic bottle, her thirst had returned with a vengeance, worse than before.

Seconds had strung together into minutes, and minutes into hours, until time ceased to

have any meaning. Heather had no idea of how long she'd been held captive in the shed, although the light still filtering through the gaps around the door told her night hadn't fallen yet. Nobody came for her, though; only the occasional footfall passing by, or muted voices mumbling at each other outside, broke the monotony.

She fallen into an uneasy doze, her mind drifting, so she was only half aware of a renewed hum of people talking outside—until her subconscious recognized Constantino's voice among them. Suddenly wide awake, she started up, her heart pounding against her ribs. She pricked up her ears, but Constantino was speaking too quietly—or he was too far away from the shack—for her to make out his words.

The conversation went on for a few minutes, and then she heard Steve Marshall holler a couple names impatiently, growling an order to "get your lazy asses into gear". Another minute later, she heard doors slam shut and a pickup engine grumble to life. The truck drove off, leaving Heather clueless as to its purpose or destination.

She was about to settle back down against the wall when the rattle of the padlock indicated someone was removing it. She struggled to get to her feet: a wave of lightheadedness made her sway, and she stuck out a hand to support herself against the warm metal wall, taking a few deep breaths of the stuffy air and willing the dizziness away. Once she felt a little more sure on her feet, she straightened up and pushed away from the wall.

Right on time, too. The door swung inward and Constantino planted himself on the threshold. Heather squinted owlishly at the red sunlight that streamed past him and cast a long and monstrous shadow across the floor. Though it was obviously late afternoon, the light falling in around him was still so bright compared to the gloom of the shed that her eyes watered. Hating the idea he might think she was crying, she blinked the tears away angrily.

Constantino swept his pale gaze around the room before settling it on her. "My apologies about keeping you waiting. And for the substandard accommodations." He chuckled and indicated the shed with a flap of his hand. "But not to worry, we'll be takin' you home real soon. I sent Steve ahead to make the necessary preparations."

He paused, and Heather bit her tongue to keep in the plea that burbled up. He was probably hoping to see her beg, and she refused to give him the satisfaction.

After a moment, Constantino continued, "Just wanted to let you know: we heard from our teams. Looks like we lost a couple of our guys, but it was worth it: Jake and Eric Green, your chum Major Beck—" he nearly spat out the name, "—they're all dead."

It was as if the concrete floor had given way beneath her. Her legs felt like they were made of rubber, and black spots danced before her eyes. She braced herself with one hand, using the firm, warm wall to ground herself. "No...." Her other hand flew to her mouth, nausea stinging in her throat. "You're... you're lying!"

Constantino leaned a shoulder against the door frame and crossed his arms in front of his chest, regarding her coolly. "Why would I do that?"

Tears burned in her eyes. It couldn't be true, Jericho had been warned...! Even with Constantino's teams moving in earlier than expected.... She remembered hearing the cheers and laughter when that other team had returned and she pulled in a shuddering breath: seemed Russell's warning had indeed come too late for someone else. Just as it hadn't come soon enough for her. She peered up at Constantino, hardly able to make him out through the film of tears in her eyes.

"The colonel will be pleased: your little revolution is over. And Jericho is mine." Constantino gave her a smug grin. "Not that you'll care for very much longer."

The last of her hope left Heather, and she hunched in on herself, wrapping her arms around her. She was as good as dead, but she mourned for her home town. Without Jake, or Edward and Eric, Jericho wouldn't stand a chance against Constantino, or against Hoffman.

"Why?" she asked in a hoarse whisper. "Why don't you just kill me right here and now? Why the charade?"

"Charade?" Constantino pushed away from the door frame, sounding scandalized. "Don't you think the people of New Bern deserve to see justice done to someone who's caused them so much harm?"

A final spark of anger flared in her. "Justice?" she spat. She could hardly believe he had the temerity to even use the term. "You don't want *justice*. You want revenge."

Constantino tugged at his beard. "Aren't they one and the same?" He reached over to grab the edge of the door. "In any case, you better get ready. It won't be much longer now." He pulled the door shut, locking Heather back in her hot little prison, alone with her despair and grief.

Once Constantino had gone, her legs refused to keep her up any longer. She crumpled back to the floor, hiding her face in her arms, finally allowing her tears to fall. She still couldn't quite believe it: they were gone? All of them? Eric, with whom she'd shared the danger and the horror of discovering what New Bern was planning, and then the failure

to blow up the mortar factory. Edward.... The thought of never drinking another friendly scotch with him, while he told her more about himself than he probably realized, wrung further sobs from her throat.

And Jake.... She squeezed her eyes shut, picturing him; she couldn't quite wrap her mind around the thought that he was dead. Jake had survived so much already: getting run off the road in Stanley's truck—something she'd only heard about months after the fact; taking Hawkins' nuclear bomb to Texas; that crazy stunt with the crop duster the other day.... It simply didn't seem possible: Jake was indestructible.

She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes: no. *No!* Constantino was lying. He had to be. Jake was alive; she had to keep believing that. And if she knew Jake at all, he wasn't gonna let her down. She shifted on the hard floor, drawing up her knees and trying to find a more comfortable position, while she struggled to hold on to her hope. She lost the battle, fresh tears spilling down her cheeks, although her body couldn't afford to lose any more moisture.

But if she was going to die soon anyway, what difference did it make? In a way, death would come as a relief. At least she wouldn't have to live with the gaping hole Constantino's words had carved inside of her.

oOo

After Jake and Beck had watched the dust stirred up by the departing truck settle, they saw Constantino come back out of the big building and amble over to the shed. Jake tensed at the hated ringleader's reappearance. Convinced Heather was being kept in the shed, he cocked his shotgun, even as, from the corner of his eye, he saw Beck raise his M-16. If Constantino had set one step into the shack, Jake would've fired, odds be damned. But New Bern's leader never crossed the threshold. Instead, he hovered in the doorway for several minutes, talking to someone inside, before he shut the door and returned to the main building.

Nothing had moved down in the mine since then.

For Jake, the desire to act was growing into an almost physical itch. Every minute Constantino held Heather captive was one minute too long. Every minute that passed was another minute in which New Bern could do its worst and kill her—assuming she was even still alive.... Jake shifted on the hard-packed ground, cursing at a rock that dug painfully into his hip.

"We should do something." He raised the rifle again, once more aiming the scope at the shed as though, if he stared at it long enough, he'd be able to see through its corrugated

walls and discover what was going on inside.

"Like what?" Beck's tone was mildly exasperated. Jake clamped his jaw tightly. It wasn't the first time he'd voiced his frustration, and each time, Beck's response had been the same: not enough intel, too many opponents, have to wait our chance, yaddayadda. Jake was beginning to wonder if Beck would turn out to be as much of a problem as Constantino, rather than the ally he'd been counting on.

"Start thinking about how to get down there, for starters." Jake lowered the rifle and turned to face Beck. "We could take out the guards at the entrance." An earlier covert expedition by Beck along the rim of the mine had revealed there were only two gunmen guarding the access road, and Jake liked those odds. "Then, maybe sneak up on a couple of those other guys. Lower their numbers before we make our move."

Beck gave him the kind of look that instantly made Jake's hackles rise. It was the sort of aggravated stare his dad used to give him whenever he screwed something up. It had been bad enough when it came from Johnston and Jake had deserved it, but he sure as hell wasn't gonna take it from Beck. He was about to utter a sharp retort when, somewhere nearby, a dead branch broke with a loud *crack*.

They both twisted around toward the sound. More branches snapped, and the brush that shielded them from view rustled as approaching footfalls scuffed heavily against the earth. Jake, exchanging a look with Beck, could even hear someone grumbling under his breath. Putting down the shotgun, Jake groped for the Beretta stuck in his belt, even as a stone clattered into the clearing, kicked loose. The next instant, a man pushed through the undergrowth and stepped into the open.

As soon as he caught sight of them, the intruder froze mid-step, one foot left hanging in the air. Along with the expression of surprise that settled on his face, the pose was almost comical. During the endless instant when the shock of the unexpected encounter held them all immobile, Jake noticed the man wore filthy jeans and a dirt-streaked T-shirt. He didn't seem to carry a gun.

"Oh...!"

The stranger followed up on the small gasp with a deeper breath. He finally set his boot down, twisting around and preparing to run. But Jake was faster. Shoving up off the ground with an agility he hadn't known he possessed, he tackled the newcomer and wrestled him to the dusty ground. The man wriggled and struggled against Jake, nearly succeeding in dislodging him, despite Jake using his full weight to keep him pinned down—dammit, the guy was *strong*—but at last Jake managed to get his Beretta pressed tight against the guy's chin, forcing his head back at an angle.

"Don't make a noise," Jake hissed.

"P—Please don't hurt me?"

Now that he'd gotten a better look at the guy, Jake realized he was quite young, early twenties maybe. Hardly more than a kid. His eyes had grown as round as saucers, and he was peering up at Jake in fear. Fat tears spilled down his stubbled cheeks. "Please, mister?"

Crap. Jake recognized him: this was the same guy he'd watched through the scope carrying water into the shed. The one they'd lost sight of afterward. "Who are you?"

"D—Donnie." The captive's voice quivered. "I won't make a sound. Quiet as a mouse. I promise."

Jake glanced at Beck, a little at a loss. Beck shrugged. "So far, we're good, I think." He stuffed his sidearm back in its holster and rolled back to peer over the rim. "Everything's quiet down there."

Jake pulled up until he rested on his haunches. He was careful to keep his gun still trained on Donnie, though. The muzzle trembled slightly as he pointed it: the adrenaline in his veins was making him jittery, and his heart pounded in his chest. He took a deep breath to calm himself.

"How the hell did you get here?" Jake seriously doubted Constantino's guards had just let the kid wander off from the mine. Besides, he and Beck had had a clear view of the access road the whole time; other than the truck Constantino sent off, nobody had gone up it since the kid's altercation with the other guy.

Donnie blubbered, "P—please... d—don't shoot me?"

"Jake." Beck softly calling his name drew Jake's attention away for a moment. "You're scaring him."

Looking back at Donnie, Jake hadn't noticed he was goggling cross-eyed at the gun barrel wavering under his nose. Jake sat up further, and scrubbed a hand over his brow. Donnie didn't move; he stayed on his back, clearly frozen stiff with fear. Jake watched him quietly for a few seconds. He was fairly sure the kid wouldn't try to give them away, and he decided to take a chance.

He stuffed the gun back in his belt, and backed off from Donnie, settling in a crouch a few feet away, careful to stay away from the edge so he couldn't be seen from down below.

"Listen, Donnie. I won't hurt you." Jake held out his hands sideways, palms up. "My name's Jake. And I'm looking for a friend of mine: Heather Lisinski. Can you tell me if she's down there?"

Gradually, the terror melted from Donnie's features. At the mention of Heather's name, his face lit up with a smile. "Yes. I know Heather." He pushed himself up into a sitting position. "She's nice." Lowering his voice, he added, "I think Mr. Constantino is wrong: she doesn't seem like such a bad girl."

Beck snorted wryly, and Jake muttered under his breath, "Constantino's wrong about a hell of a lot of things." Out loud he asked, "Is she okay?" He'd noticed Donnie had used the present tense, but he was obviously a bit simple, so Jake didn't dare put too much stock in that.

"Yeah. Mr. Constantino told me to lock her in the shed."

As Donnie confirmed Heather was still alive, such utter relief washed over Jake that he felt lightheaded. He shut his eyes briefly, throwing up a silent prayer of thanks, before he sought Donnie's gaze again.

Donnie scratched his nose. "I brought her donuts."

"That was very kind of you," Beck said gently. Jake thought kind wasn't quite the word he'd have chosen, but he guessed Beck was trying to win Donnie's trust. Donnie glanced in Beck's direction, eying the major's fatigues doubtfully. Beck continued to keep his voice soft as he asked, "Can you tell us how many men are down there?"

"Sure!" Donnie nodded eagerly, before his face fell and he hung his head. "But I don't know that I should."

Jake gritted his teeth in frustration. Getting Donnie to answer their questions quickly was like pulling teeth. He wanted to reach out and shake the information from him, but he restrained himself: he knew it would only send Donnie back into his frightened shell and destroy the fragile rapport they were building. He thought for a moment, and decided to try something else. "Can you tell us how you got up here, without anyone noticing?"

"Uh huh." Donnie's eyes started to gleam and he offered a toothy grin. "There's a trail that nobody knows but me." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "It's a secret. I found it last week, when Mr. Marshall didn't want to let me go home for supper."

Jake exchanged a look with Beck. The major gave a small nod, and Jake turned back to Donnie. "Can you show us where it is?"

Donnie thought it over for a minute, apparently hesitant to share his secret. At last he nodded his head. "Okay."

oOo

As soon as Donnie had mentioned he knew a secret path into the mine, Beck had started putting together a plan of action. Though he hadn't shown it, he'd hated sitting around feeling helpless as much as Jake did; he was just better at masking his frustration and keeping his impatience in check. Because the real problem wasn't the overwhelming odds they faced, or the uncertainty about how many gunmen Constantino had. No, their real problem was figuring out how to keep the element of surprise until they could put it to good use. Constantino not knowing they were there was the only advantage they had going for them.

Sure, they could've probably taken out the two guys they'd discovered topside guarding the entrance, just like Jake had suggested. But without knowing how many sentries in total Constantino had set, or where they were stationed, it would have been suicide to try the access road in broad daylight. They would've been spotted the instant they set foot on the road. And getting themselves killed before they could free Heather and take her home wasn't gonna help her one bit.

So Beck had bided his time, prayed Jake's patience wouldn't run out before their chance came, and done what he was trained to do: gather as much information as possible before formulating a strategy. Donnie's arrival, or rather the knowledge they could wring from the kid, might prove the key to unlocking the stalemate they'd found themselves in.

Jake had dragged Donnie closer to the rim, and Beck shifted over to make room for them. Lined up side by side, Donnie in the middle, they peered over the edge. "Show us," Jake told Donnie. "Where did you climb up?"

Donnie peered out across the pit. "There." He made to stick out his arm to indicate his secret trail.

Beck barely caught it in time, slamming his hand down on Donnie's wrist to keep him from lifting it. "Don't point. Tell us where to look."

Donnie shot Beck a hurt glance, before he heaved a suffering breath. "It's right across there. See that little tree a couple feet down?"

Beck let his gaze travel along the sharp rim of the pit until he found the tree Donnie had indicated. It clung bravely to the steep, crumbling slope just beneath the edge. The rough

and uneven surface of the western wall falling away below the tree was already thick with shade. A few gnarled shrubs had managed to take root in other cracks among the rocks—they might provide some cover from curious eyes.

Beck squinted into the low sun dipping over the edge and tried to make out the trail. Once he found it, his heart sank. Donnie's 'trail' was a narrow ledge winding away from the rim, passing by the misshapen tree and snaking along the rock-strewn slope toward the bottom. In some places, it disappeared altogether, and Beck had no clue how Donnie had managed to crawl up without breaking his neck.

"Uh-oh, that's not good." Donnie was shaking his head back and forth, and Beck drew his gaze away from studying the rock wall to see what had gotten the boy's attention. In the mine, someone was moseying up to the shed, his whole demeanor furtive. He glanced around, as if checking for observers, before crouching to fiddle with the padlock on the door.

"Who is that?" Jake demanded. "What's he doing?" Down below, the guy darted another sly look around to make sure nobody was watching him, before he pushed the door of the shed open and snuck inside.

"That's Oscar Grossman. He's not a very nice man." Donnie started scrambling away from the edge. "I've got to go. I should tell Mr. Constantino."

"You're not going anywhere." Beck clamped a hand on Donnie's neck to keep him in place, and Donnie squeaked in startled protest. Beck was thinking rapidly, considering that this was probably the best chance they'd had yet: the door to the shed was unlocked; nobody was around to guard it; and they'd just discovered a hidden way into the mine, however impassable it might look. His free hand gripped his M-16 more firmly. "Why is this Grossman not a nice person?" It wasn't a name he remembered hearing when preparing for the tribunals that never happened.

"He hogs all the chocolate donuts." Donnie's brows drew down. "And he likes to... to hurt girls?" He glanced up at Beck, his gaze troubled. "Yvette's always crying after she's been to see him...."

Beck bit down on the impulse to ask who Yvette was. It wasn't important. What was important—

Before he could even begin to consider the implications of what Donnie had told them, or talk over options with Jake, Jake was slithering away. A moment later, he was dashing off, bent over in a crouch.

"Jake," Beck hissed. "Jake!"

Jake gave no indication he'd heard—although Beck suspected he was playing intentionally deaf—as he disappeared into the undergrowth, heading west toward the treacherous ledge.

"Dammit." Wriggling backwards, Beck snaked away from the edge, dragging Donnie with him. Once he felt confident they'd crawled back far enough that they couldn't be seen, he stood up, yanking Donnie to his feet. He regarded the kid for a moment. The boy observed him through his lashes with barely-concealed fear.

Damn Jake Green. And damn his act-first, think-later attitude! During his career, Beck had met a handful of officers who'd held similar philosophies. It never ended well. That kind of rash impulse got good men killed. Beck had always believed there were times you needed to act decisively, and times when it paid to hold back for a minute and think everything through thoroughly. This, in his opinion, was definitely a case of the latter. But Jake's impetuous decision had taken any other choice out of play.

There was only one thing he could do now.

First, though, he needed to secure the kid. The last thing he or Jake needed was for Donnie to run back to Constantino and betray their presence. "Come on." Beck hauled Donnie deeper into the undergrowth surrounding the clearing, until he found a sturdy sapling. He tied the boy's hands to the trunk with a pair of plastic straps pulled from his vest. Donnie's eyes bulged, and he made small whimpering noises in the back of his throat. "I'm sorry." Beck gagged him with a dirty bandanna he'd discovered in the boy's pocket. "I can't let you go now."

Suddenly, the distant sound of gunfire broke the windless late-afternoon air: two single shots, spaced a few seconds apart, and then a burst from a semi-automatic. Shouts rose from the direction of the mine.

"Goddammit!" Beck cursed, fury and frustration making him use stronger language than usual. The sudden gunfire could only mean one thing: Jake had been caught.

With a last quick check to make sure Donnie was secured, he snatched his M-16 and whisked back toward the edge of the pit, mindless of the branches slapping at him. He had to see if he could still salvage the situation.

oOo

It was plain bad luck that did Jake in: a loose rock he failed to notice in the deep shadows

cast by the cliff wall, and a bored guard who'd decided to leave his post and take a leak right *then*.

Jake had been carefully groping his way down Donnie's secret trail, holding tightly to the rock face and making good progress up to that point. But as soon as he planted his full weight on the rock, it shifted and rattled down the hillside. Breathless with horror, he watched it bounce, throwing up puffs of gypsum dust before it rolled to a stop at the bottom of the pit.

The clatter of the rock alerted the sentry, who glanced up to see where the noise came from. There was no place for Jake to hide; he was stuck in plain sight, clinging to the cliff. As soon as the gunman saw him, he shouted in alarm and raised his rifle. The discharge from the shot echoed through the mine, and Jake winced. Luck was with him, though: the thug had been too startled to aim properly, and his bullets hit a couple yards from Jake's face. Automatically, Jake grappled for his own gun, as usual tucked away at his back, though what good the weapon would do him, he didn't know. He must be as clearly visible as a bull's eye on a practice target, and the gunman's next shot would hit the mark for sure.

Even as he fumbled for the pistol, more guns were fired, the noise deafening in the confines of the mine. Because of the way the sound bounced back from the walls, Jake couldn't tell where the shots were coming from. However, he quickly learned exactly where they were ending up: the bullets struck the rocks near enough to blast him with grit.

He squeezed his eyes shut and, compelled by instinct, curled in on himself, trying to present as small a target as possible. His earlier attempt to get out the Beretta had worsened his already precarious balance, and the sudden shift as he cringed proved too much. With a cry of surprise when the rock crumbled away under him, he began to slide ungracefully down the rough slope, picking up speed as he went.

Though Jake was too busy to notice, the fall saved his life: more bullets hit the rock in the exact spot where he'd been crouched less than a second before. All he did notice was that the slope seemed to go on forever; when he finally landed, he hit the ground hard enough to drive the air from his lungs. A small avalanche of scree and rocks tumbled after him. The dust they raised tickled his nose as he gasped in a breath, and he sneezed.

The echoing gunshots and the racket of Jake's unplanned descend quickly brought the rest of Constantino's men running. Before Jake had managed to catch his breath, he found himself surrounded, a half dozen guns aimed at him. The gunmen's faces were hard and determined behind the muzzles, daring him to move. Jake knew better than to even try.

The men parted reluctantly when someone shoved through the crowd. "Well, well." Lips pressed into a thin line, Constantino glared down at Jake. "Looks like the news of your passing was a bit premature."

Jake blinked up, the lingering dust stinging his eyes. He was unhappily reminded of that other time when he'd been surrounded by New Bern's thugs.

"Get him up." The New Bern leader turned away, barking orders to some of his men to check the area around the mine, and for others to start packing up immediately. "And someone bring me the girl." Hands jerked Jake roughly to his feet. Much to his relief, he discovered that he didn't seem to have broken any bones in his fall. A shove in his back caused him to stumble after Constantino, who was marching back toward the main building.

"You're not gonna get away!" Jake shouted after Constantino, spitting out a mouthful of dirt. "You'll—!"

"Shut the hell up." Someone struck the back of Jake's head, hard, and his teeth clacked together. When they reached the front of the main building, near the parked trucks, the guys holding Jake shoved him to his knees. The rocky ground was hard and uncomfortable. A couple guys stayed with him, their guns close to his head, while the rest ran off to start loading the remaining pickups with bags and boxes lugged from the buildings.

Constantino paced back and forth a few times before he stopped in front of Jake. One of the guards tangled a hand in Jake's hair, pulling his head back so he had no choice but to look at Constantino. Pale blue eyes measured him coldly. "I take it you're not alone?"

Jake shrugged. He worked not to show his fear, determined not to tell Constantino anything. Beck was still out there somewhere and he must've seen what had happened. As long as Jake kept the major's presence a secret, Beck had a shot at rescuing Heather. The way things stood, it might be Heather's last chance, and Jake would bite his tongue off before spoiling it by blabbing to Constantino.

"Come on, Jake, you're not that dumb. And neither am I." Constantino squinted up at the pit's rim, shielding his eyes with his hand. "Where's your buddy, Hawkins?"

Jake smirked. That was a question he was willing to answer. "Texas."

Constantino hit him in the face, open-handed. Unable to move, Jake took the full force of the blow, and his ears rang. He also tasted blood.

"Don't you get flip with me. Now, where—?"

"Jake?"

A voice he'd feared he might never hear again gasped out his name, and Jake paid no further attention to the rest of Constantino's question. He turned his head as far as he could, wrenching it around despite the agony when the hand tightened its grip in his hair. Relief flooded through him, strong enough to overwhelm the pain. Looked like he and Beck had guessed right: they'd been keeping Heather in the corrugated shack—one of Constantino's deputies was dragging her out of there by the arm. And she looked....

Jake shuddered. She looked terrible. Her white face was smudged with tears and dirt, her hair was matted and dull, and there were dark bruises under her eyes. She was gaping back at him as if she'd seen a ghost, while she tripped over her own feet as the deputy hauled her closer, his tight hold on her elbow apparently all that was keeping her from falling flat on her face.

Hot fury replaced Jake's initial shock. He twisted back toward Constantino. "You sick bastard!" Forgetting all about the guns that were trained on him, he lunged for the New Bern leader, hatred firing him up and murder first on his mind. The two men guarding him yanked him back ruthlessly before he made it halfway to his feet.

Constantino scowled, a cold, humorless smirk twisting up the corners of his mouth, and he pulled his handgun from its holster. He checked to make sure it was loaded. "I guess it doesn't really matter if you're alone or not. 'Cause I don't plan on giving 'em a chance to rescue you again." Flicking a glance toward Heather, he added, "Either of you." He clicked the magazine back into place, cocked the gun, and pointed it at Jake.

Jake's mouth went dry. It wasn't the first time he stared into the barrel of a gun, but he was certain it would be the last. He directed one last, sad look toward Heather, meeting her round-eyed, shocked gaze.

I'm sorry I couldn't protect you.

Closing his eyes, Jake waited for the end.

o0o

Caught up in her grief over the people she'd lost, Heather didn't hear the soft *clink* of the padlock being removed quietly. It wasn't until a golden sunbeam slanted in briefly through the gap as the door was pushed open for a moment that she raised her head. Someone slipped in and quickly shut the door behind them. For an instant, she felt hope:

maybe someone had come to help her escape!

The visitor hesitated, apparently taking a minute for his eyes to grow used to the gloom in the shed after coming in from the sunny afternoon outside. Long enough for Heather to recognize him, and for the spark of hope to vanish. It wasn't rescue; it was the Creep, the guy whose gaze had made her flesh crawl during the endless journey here in the back of the pickup. And he sure as hell wasn't planning to help her, she knew that much.

Despite the heat, which was an almost palpable presence, a cold tremor traveled up her spine. She slowly climbed back to her feet, swaying with weakness. The heat, the lack of food and water, and her grief had taken the last of her strength, and dark spots danced before her eyes. She willed herself to stay conscious, leaning against the back wall for support as she eyed the guy warily.

Once he'd gotten used to the dim light in the shed, he took a step forward, his gaze once more raking across her body hungrily. Goosebumps sprang up on her skin. "I can help you." His voice was raspy, and he licked his lips.

Heather swallowed down the lump of fear in her throat. "How?" She hardly recognized her own voice.

He grinned widely, showing her his teeth, and gave a slight shrug. "Oh, I could forget to lock the door when I leave. But before I do that, I want you to do something for me." He cupped his crotch, leaving very little doubt as to what he wanted from her.

Heather tried a snort, but it came out more like a frightened sob. "What good is leaving the door unlocked gonna do me?" She glanced around desperately as she spoke, searching for a weapon. All she saw was an empty plastic bottle and a box of stale donuts. Then she remembered her multi-tool, and stealthily slipped her hand into her pocket. The touch of the smooth metal of the handle made her feel a little bit better when she folded her fingers around it and gripped it tightly. "There's only one way in and out of the mine, and I'm sure it's guarded well."

"It'll be dark soon," he promised, taking another step toward her, and she fought the urge to press herself harder against the wall. She couldn't let him see how much he frightened her; guys like him thrived on fear, and her only chance would be if she confronted him head on.

"You could slip out unnoticed," he continued. "If, and only if—" He was so close now she smelled old sweat on his body and she struggled not to gag. "—if you're real good to me."

Her hand tightened further around the knife, trying to get it out of her jeans without

alerting him to what she was doing, while he backed her into the corner, towering over her and trapping her. Planting one hand against the wall beside her head, he lifted the other to trace a dirty finger along her jaw. Unable to help it, she turned her head away, and he hissed in sudden anger, grabbing her chin and forcing her to look at him again.

Loud explosions that sounded like gunshots rang out from somewhere out in the mine. The Creep froze, his fingers still digging in under her jaw, his head tilted toward the sound. Heather used his distraction to pull the knife free and flip it open behind her back, careful not to cut herself on the blade that she'd carefully kept honed. A blunt knife is as good as no knife, her father had always said, along with reminding her how a proper craftsman should take good care of his tools. It was a lesson she'd never forgotten, and now she was very grateful for it.

More shots were fired, and she felt the metal wall behind her vibrate with the echo. In the distance, men were shouting in confusion. Her assailant cursed under his breath and his hand dropped away. Heather breathed out in relief and worked her jaw to ease it, while still keeping a tight hold on the knife behind her back.

The Creep shoved further away from her, taking a few steps toward the door and half turning his back on her, clearly in doubt. Heather tried to gather up her courage to put the knife to use—*do it now, while his back's turned!*—as angry voices drifted in from outside. Then an unstoppable giggle bubbled up in her throat, the knife momentarily forgotten. Her mind must finally be cracking under the strain, she decided, or maybe she was suffering from heat stroke. Because she clearly recognized Jake's voice among the babble outside, sounding as belligerent as only Jake could. Except—

Jake's dead.

Boots thumped the ground outside, growing closer, and the uncertainty on the Creep's face changed to something akin to panic. Abruptly it dawned on Heather: he wasn't supposed to be here.

His gaze darted around the small shed, apparently seeking another way out. *Well*, Heather thought, *I could've told him: there isn't one.* Again, hysterical laughter bubbled from her.

Oh God, this must be what going insane feels like.

Two of Constantino's henchmen—like the rest, dressed in filthy jeans and sweating heavily under their flak jackets—appeared in the doorway. They stopped short, surprised at not finding her alone.

"Grossman? What the hell are you doin' here?" the guy on the left asked. He had a fresh scar, running from his temple up into his hairline, that crinkled as he grimaced in distaste. "Never mind." He stepped aside and indicated with a jerk of the gun in his hand that Grossman should leave. "Phil wants us ready in five. Get your stuff."

While Grossman scurried past the two men without looking back, the one who'd spoken stepped forward and snatched Heather by the elbow. "Same goes for you: let's go."

For a second, she considered resisting, the knife feeling like a burning rod against her leg where she was trying to conceal it with her palm. But what good would it do? She barely had the strength to stand up on her own two feet, let alone take on a pair of armed thugs and God knows how many more outside. If she tried to fight them, she'd only succeed in getting herself killed that much sooner. Not that that was necessarily a bad thing....

However, the will to live proved stronger, and Heather let them drag her from the shed. She breathed in deeply when the much cooler air of the late afternoon washed over her. It was probably still in the nineties outside but, compared to the oven she'd come from, it felt almost chilly.

Squinting into the low sunlight, she took in her surroundings. Not much had changed: the bulldozer and tipper truck still sat where they had for the past couple decades, and New Bern's pickups were still parked in a random cluster nearby. Next to the cars, Constantino was pacing, a handful of grim-faced men surrounding him. And on his knees in front of Constantino—

"Jake?"

They were holding him at gunpoint but, even so, Jake forced his head round to look at her as she called his name. Her gaze filled with tears, blurring the sight before her, although she hardly dared believe what her eyes were telling her anyway: Constantino had lied; Jake was alive!

Without giving her time to collect herself, the scarred guard hauled her toward the group. Heather tripped over her own feet, her legs trembling so much that she couldn't get them to work properly. She couldn't drag her gaze away from Jake: he was coated from head to toe in dirt and pale gypsum dust, and he was bleeding lightly from a half dozen superficial cuts that were already scabbing over. As they got closer, she saw Constantino pull his weapon from its holster and check it. He raised his arm and pointed the gun at Jake.

This isn't happening. Heather blinked rapidly, half-afraid and half-hoping that Jake would turn out to be a mirage, that he'd disappear between blinks, and that Constantino wasn't

about to shoot him right before her eyes.

But Jake didn't disappear. Instead, he smiled at her sadly for an instant, before turning back toward Constantino and closing his eyes.

Heather gasped. "No...."

oOo

As soon as Beck had crawled back to the edge so he could once more peer down into the mine, he saw his fears confirmed: Jake was being shoved to his knees in the open area between the buildings and the cars, half a dozen guns trained on him. From the way Constantino occasionally stopped his nervous pacing, Beck guessed he was addressing Jake. Because of the distance, Beck couldn't hear what was being said, although he could tell from their body language that Constantino was asking questions—likely demanding to know who else had come with Jake—and that Jake was refusing to answer. He winced in sympathy with Jake when Constantino hit him, even as his lips curled up in a grim half-smile. He knew from experience how maddeningly stubborn Jake could be....

He also knew he couldn't stay where he was. For all his cruelty, Constantino was far from stupid; Jake was never going to convince him he'd come alone. Chances were, Constantino had already sent out some of his men to scout around the mine. Beck would have to make his move soon, or risk being discovered and losing the initiative entirely. Thing was, his options were limited, and none looked very promising.

Considering his choices, Beck pulled his M-16 closer. His original thought—catch up with Jake down in the mine and take it from there—was no longer viable; Jake getting himself caught had set Constantino's men on high alert. Still loath to give up a position that awarded him such an excellent view of what was happening, Beck lingered, sighting the gun on Constantino almost idly.... He had a clear shot, and he could probably kill a couple of Constantino's underlings as well before they'd all ducked for cover. However, there was a strong possibility Jake would get caught in the crossfire, and he still didn't know where Heather was. She *had* to be his first priority, even if—

Even as he thought about her, he saw two men half-dragging her out of the shed. His heart jumped with joy to see her alive, although his relief was short-lived. Even without using his binoculars, he could tell she was in bad shape, stumbling and barely managing to keep to her feet. He clenched his jaw tight in anger. Damn Constantino. And damn the Cheyenne government for letting him walk free.

The two thugs escorted Heather over to where Jake was on his knees, while Constantino pulled out his gun and checked it. Beck tensed and took aim again, his mind made up. No

way was he gonna let Constantino use that gun, and he'd have to trust that Jake had the presence of mind to get Heather away in the confusion that would follow, and that neither of them would catch a stray bullet. It wasn't much of a plan—far from it—but it was the best he could come up with under the circumstances. Saying a silent prayer, he slowed his breathing as his finger tightened on the trigger.

oOo

The gunshot Jake expected never came. Instead, a terrifying scream echoed through the mine, causing Jake's blood to curdle in his veins and his eyes to snap back open. For several heartbeats, he couldn't quite grasp what he was seeing. Before him, Constantino was slowly sinking to his knees, blood spurting through his fingers as he clawed at his throat. His pale blue eyes had grown wide with perplexity, and he gurgled horribly while trying to pull in air.

"What the—?" The guard holding Jake's hair gave a surprised start, yanking Jake's head back. He never got to finish the sentence. A single distant shot rang out; the next instant, the guard toppled forward, half-landing on Jake, his weight keeping Jake pinned down.

A second shot followed on the heels of the first, and then all hell broke loose. Men were shouting, crying out in rage and confusion as the unexpected attack sent them, leaderless and untrained, into a panic. They began firing their weapons at random, without paying much attention to what or who they were shooting at, and bullets zinged and ricocheted off of the nearby trucks. A staccato burst of automatic fire came from the rim of the mine—*Beck*, Jake had time to think—and someone shrieked in pain. Another short salvo of distant gun fire, and the scream cut off abruptly.

Jake struggled out from under the dead guard, sweeping his gaze across the chaos around him. Amid the mayhem, Heather was standing still as a statue, frozen in shock, though her chest rose and fell with each shuddering gulp of air she took. Something fell from her limp hand, glinting briefly in the late sunlight. Jake thought it was a knife. Where had she—? He shoved the thought away; it didn't matter.

"Heather, get down!" he shouted. But she didn't move, and Jake realized she'd completely zoned out. She probably wasn't even hearing him. He frantically kicked the dead guy's corpse away and scrambled back to his feet. There was no time to be gentle as he tackled her to the ground, covering her with his body while bullets kept zipping by overhead.

"Jake...!" The shout reverberated around the pit. The next few words were so distorted by their echoes that they were barely comprehensible, but Jake caught the gist. "Get her out of there! I'll cover you."

Get her out...? Easy for Beck to say! Jake cursed the major under his breath. Then he became conscious of the way the sound of the gunfire had changed. Constantino's men were no longer firing wildly at anything that moved: Beck had managed to draw their fire to him, and none of the gunmen were currently paying any attention to Jake or Heather. Jake doubted their lack of interest would last very long, though, and Beck was right: this was their chance.

"We gotta go." Heather didn't respond, and Jake cautiously raised himself a bit, so he could look down at her. Her eyes stared straight past him, and he realized she was still deep in shock. He frowned. It was a long way up the access road, and he didn't think he could make her climb all the way in her current state. Certainly not without anyone noticing.

He looked around, thinking fast. The nearest pickup seemed promising. With a little luck, the keys would be in the ignition; if they weren't, he reckoned he could probably hot wire the engine. He gave a quick snort. Who'd have thought some of the tricks Jonah had taught him would turn out to be such life savers?

"Come on." He hauled Heather to her feet. Wrapping one arm across her shoulders to make sure she kept her head down, he rushed them over to the truck. He shoved her into the passenger side and pushed her into a crouch in the narrow space between the dash and the seat. "Stay down."

She nodded slowly. It was the first time she'd acknowledged him, and Jake allowed himself a brief sigh of relief. Reassured that she'd do as he said and keep hunched in on herself, he scrambled around the front of the truck and crawled behind the wheel.

Luck was with them: the keys were in their slot, a miniature skull dangling from the keyring. Jake turned the ignition, and the engine coughed to life without a hitch. Whoever owned the car had maintained it well.

The sudden noise of the engine drew notice from a couple of Constantino's henchmen, and they shifted their fire away from Beck. He heard bullets smacking into the bodywork, and the window next to his ear shattered, showering him with safety glass. Swearing under his breath, he shoved the car into gear and stomped on the gas pedal. The pickup bucked forward and he shouted "Hold on!" as a warning to Heather.

Keeping his head as low as he could while still being able to see where he was going, he aimed straight for the approach to the access road, the pickup flying over the uneven earth. He was about to turn them up the road when someone jumped in their way, aiming a gun at the car. The guy managed to take out one of the headlights with his first shot, but Jake didn't flinch; he simply pushed the gas pedal even deeper and the car

surged forward. The gunman dove out of its path just in time.

Pity, Jake thought viciously. Glancing down at where Heather was curled up, he was filled with enough rage that he would happily and single-handedly have strangled each and everyone of Constantino's men.

His hands clenched the steering wheel while he raced as fast as he dared up the dry and dusty road, navigating the pickup hastily through the hairpin bends. It took every bit of skill he had to keep the truck on the road—he reckoned the left rear wheel might've swung over the edge at some point. But he managed to pull it back, and the pickup kept going, bucking and groaning as it brought them ever closer to safety.

oOo

Beck swore out loud, almost dropping his M-16 in his haste to let go the trigger before firing. From the corner of his eye, he'd seen Heather tear herself away from her guards, a shrill cry rising from her as she dashed forward, raising her right arm. He blinked, not quite believing his eyes.

What on God's green Earth was the woman thinking...?

She blocked Beck's view of Constantino for a moment, but when she pulled back, he saw Constantino go down. Even from the rim, he could see blood spurting from where Constantino clutched his throat. Beck frowned. Had she...? He pushed the question out of the way: plenty of time to learn what had happened later. Huffing softly to himself in annoyance—he'd nearly shot *Heather!*—he renewed his grip on the M-16 and raised it again, this time aiming for the guy holding Jake, and pressed the trigger. He didn't wait to see if he'd hit his mark—he was confident enough of his skill—but immediately swiveled the barrel slightly and, with another bullet, took out the second guy who'd been guarding Jake.

After that, he flicked the M-16's setting from single to burst, pressing the trigger a half-second at a time as he tried to even the odds a little. It didn't take Constantino's men long to figure out where the shots were coming from, and Beck swore when bullets struck the cliff edge near where he was hiding. He ducked his head in and rolled a few feet to one side before he fired off another quick burst and then rolled some more. Raising his head slightly, he hollered for Jake to get Heather out of there. Despite the din of the fusillade, and the way his instructions bounced off the pit walls, it looked like Jake had gotten the message. Beck saw him drag Heather toward a pickup; a minute later, they were swerving up the access road in it, the engine whining in protest as Jake stepped on the gas.

As soon as he was sure they were going to make it without any further trouble, Beck let

off a final salvo and shoved away from the edge, ignoring the gunfire still being loosed wildly at the spot where he'd been lying. He ran back to the tree he'd tied Donnie to. The firefight clearly had scared the boy out of what little wits he had, and frightened whimpers came from behind his gag. His eyes grew even wider as Beck jogged up, his gaze zooming in on the large army knife in Beck's right hand.

Beck felt a little sorry for the kid; he suspected it had amused Constantino to make use of the boy's lack of intelligence.

"Ssh...", he hushed, quickly cutting through Donnie's plastic bonds before stowing the knife away. "I'm not gonna hurt you."

Pulling the gag from Donnie's mouth, he grabbed the young man by the shoulders. "Listen." He gave Donnie a shake to make sure he'd gotten his full attention. "Listen!" Slowly, Donnie's blue eyes, wet with tears, settled on Beck. "Constantino is dead. So is Oscar Grossman. He will never hurt Yvette again. Do you understand?"

Donnie dumbly stared back; for a moment, Beck didn't think he'd grasped what Beck was trying to say. Then he gave a quivering nod.

"Okay." Beck blew out a breath. "You have to get away from here. Don't go back to New Bern. You hear me?" He shook the kid again. "Do *not* go back."

The roar of a pickup approaching at high speed told Beck that Jake had reached the top of the mine and was heading for the horses. Beck dropped his hands from Donnie's shoulders. He'd done what he could. Not waiting for the boy's reply, he turned and headed into the trees to meet the truck.

oOo

Jake and Heather experienced another hairy moment when they reached the top of the road and the two gunmen guarding the entrance tried to stop them. Jake had forgotten all about them in his rush to carry Heather to safety. Bullets *thunked* against the car. Shifting into higher gear, Jake barreled straight on until the sentries were left behind, uselessly emptying their shotguns after the pickup. A stray bullet shattered the rear window, passing close enough by Jake that he felt it ruffle his hair before it disappeared harmlessly out the side window.

And then they were out of range. Taking a deep breath, Jake turned the pickup and headed in a straight line for the cottonwoods where the horses were hidden. He expected Beck would've figured out Jake's plan, and that he'd be making his own way back to their mounts. Sure enough, the major came zagging through the trees at the exact same time

Jake shoved the gear stick into *Park* and jumped out the cab.

Before Jake could round the pickup, Beck had dashed to the passenger side and pulled open the door. He reached in to help Heather climb out from her narrow hiding place. "You all right?" He sounded a little winded, which Jake guessed was from the sprint back from the rim.

Heather glanced up at Beck as she accepted his proffered hand, a puzzled expression settling on her face as her gaze slowly focused on him. "Edward?"

It was the first word she'd said since all hell had broken loose, and Jake couldn't help a small grimace: why did it have to be *his* name? He pushed the irritation away; Beck had proved himself useful, and Jake should be glad Heather was starting to shake off whatever funk she'd been in.

They also needed to get the hell out of here, before Constantino's crooks collected themselves and got their brains back.

Jake ran to untie the horses, quickly checking cinches and buckles. He tightened a few straps here and there, before returning with the animals in tow. Beck was busy checking Heather over for injuries.

"I'm fine...." Heather seemed to have collected herself a little bit more while Jake had gathered the horses, though he noticed her voice was shaking and, to his ears, she didn't sound fine at all. But he reckoned it would have to wait. Heather had been freed, she appeared to be in one piece and, most importantly, she was alive. Jake was determined to do whatever it took to see she stayed that way.

Offering Beck the reins for Abby, he remembered the dimwitted boy that had shown them the secret path into the mine. "What'd you do with the kid?"

"Let him go." Apparently having satisfied himself as to Heather's physical well-being, Beck took the proffered reins. He shoved his M-16 onto his back, out of the way. "Told him to get the hell out."

"What kid?" Heather was looking between them, and Jake took it as a good sign that she was showing more interest in what was happening around her.

He smiled at her encouragingly. "Kid named Donnie. He stumbled onto us, gave us some information that helped us get you out." He latched a foot into the stirrup and swung himself into the saddle. "Come, you'll have to ride double with me." He held out a hand to her.

"Donnie's not such a bad guy," Heather muttered, almost to herself, ignoring Jake's hand. "Just got caught up with—." She peered up at Jake, her eyes a little clearer and more focused. "We can't let him go back to New Bern!"

Jake shook his head. "There's nothing we can do for him. Please, Heather, we gotta go." In the distance, he heard another car being pushed to its limits as it navigated the steep road up from the mine. Sounded like they'd got their act together at last.

Heather looked dubiously at his hand and then up at the large horse. From where Jake sat, she seemed very small and fragile next to the big gelding. He leaned down impatiently. "Here, take my hand. And put your foot—."

"Let me help." Beck was suddenly at Heather's side, folding his hands into a foothold. "I'll give you a boost up."

Heather hesitated a heartbeat longer, and then she grabbed Jake's wrist. With Beck's help, Jake hauled her into his lap. Whisper pranced at the unwelcome extra weight. As Jake leaned around Heather to calm the horse, he felt her quivering.

Far off, thunder rumbled. Jake shot a worried glance over his shoulder: the storm they'd seen building earlier, was approaching from the west, and it was growing dark fast. Closer to, the noise of the engine had gotten louder, telling Jake it had almost reached the surface.

"You go on." Beck gave Jake a nod before he headed over to the pickup. He must have caught Jake's frown, because he added, "Won't do to leave our pursuers easy transport." Lifting the hood, he reached in and tore loose a handful of lines and wires. Jake chuckled to himself: yeah, it'd be a while before that truck would move again.

He was already nudging Whisper as Beck pulled out more wires, and the horse sprang forward, quickly settling in at a fast gallop. Heather let out a startled squeak, and Jake held her tightly. He was immensely glad to be able to hold her at all, and he couldn't help putting one hand over hers briefly, giving it an encouraging squeeze. She clutched him more fiercely in response.

Beck caught up with them a few minutes later—Abby wasn't nearly as burdened as Whisper—and, side by side, the horses flew across the fields. Jake knew it was dangerous to race across rough ground like this, especially in the early dusk of a thunderstorm. The gloom made it harder to see, and he had to shove away the picture of one of the horses stepping into a rabbit hole or onto a hidden rock, and breaking a leg. He also knew that riding more slowly and risking New Bern's thugs catching up with them would be even

worse. So he kept them galloping as fast as he dared, until at last they could no longer hear the pickup's engine.

They slowed to a trot, and went another mile or so. Jake kept his ears tuned for any sound of them being followed, but he heard nothing. Finally, he drew Whisper to a halt, the horse's flanks heaving with every breath, and he turned the gelding around to face Beck. "Think we lost them?"

Beck fished his binoculars from their pocket and twisted in his saddle to peer back the way they'd come. With a start, Jake realized he'd lost his scope, along with his shotgun, somewhere along the way—probably during his fall into the mine. He swore silently. That had been a damned fine gun, and it wasn't as if they had an endless supply back in Jericho. Still, as the feel of Heather in his arms reminded him, they could've lost worse things.

He squinted into the distance, though he knew he'd have to rely on Beck to determine if there was any sign of pursuit. Once more, dull thunder rolled along the sky, and lightning flashed on the horizon. Peering up at the towering clouds, Jake decided with relief that they were probably no longer in the storm's path. The last thing they needed was to get caught up in a summer storm.

Beck lowered his glasses and turned to Jake. "I believe so." He didn't smile, though, as he answered Jake's question. Instead, he shifted the M-16 on his back to a more comfortable position and stashed the binoculars away. "We should keep going." He spurred Abby back into motion.

Jake agreed and urged Whisper to follow his stable mate. They were far from safe: still deep inside ASA-controlled territory, and he didn't think Constantino's thugs would give up searching for them this quickly. And while luck had been with them so far, at any given moment, someone else might get luckier and stumble onto them. No, the sooner they reached Jericho's perimeter, the better.

As Whisper settled into a steady pace, he dipped his head until he could catch Heather's eye. She was staring off at nothing again, but brought her gaze round to him as he touched her arm with his free hand. Her eyes gleamed in the low light. The occasional shiver still ran through her, and she continued to cling tightly to him, even though Whisper was now moving at a relaxed canter.

"You all right?"

She gave a tremulous nod. "Thank you."

He could barely make out the whispered words, but for some reason, they brought a lump to his throat. He tried to give her another reassuring smile. "We'll have you back in Jericho soon," he promised. "Just hang in there, alright?"

oOo

They kept riding for what seemed to Heather a very long time. Gradually, the last of the light faded from the sky. The thunderstorm stayed north of them, but, far in the west, the last rays of the setting sun slanted underneath the edge of the clouds, bathing the world in a golden glow and painting the sky red. Heather gazed up at the clouds, absently thinking that they seemed to be coated with blood, just like.... Her mind shied away from the thought.

Absently, she noticed that Jake was giving her a worried look—another worried look—as a tremor ran through her. She bit her lip and tried to give him a brave smile back, though the little frown between his brows suggested the attempt hadn't been very successful. Fortunately, he didn't ask any questions; he just tightened his arms around her a little more, something she had to admit she didn't mind at all. Even though she probably should; she couldn't keep relying on Jake Green to make her feel safe.

Finally, after Jake had conferred briefly with Edward—and how weird was it to see them working together instead of arguing all the time?—Jake had suggested they stop for a while to give the horses, and themselves, some rest. Heather's backside agreed; if she'd thought being transported like a trussed-up turkey in the back of a pickup was uncomfortable, riding a horse in Jake's lap had proved even more so.

Jake guided them to a patch of trees whose shapes were outlined against the dark blue evening sky. To the east, the first of the stars were popping out, but a faint pink glow from the west still lit the last of the thunder clouds.

Behind her, Jake swung from the saddle. "By the way, I thought you'd like to know that we found Charlotte." He reached up to lift her off.

She slid down before he could help her, regretting it as soon as her feet touched the ground. Her knees buckled, and she had to steady herself with a hand against the horse's heaving flank. Jake snatched her elbow. "Hey, easy now."

Once she felt more or less stable on her feet, Heather looked up at him. "Is she okay? Charlotte?"

Jake gave her a rueful smile. "Looked to be in one piece." Still holding her arm, he led her toward a flat rock jutting up from the earth. She wanted to pull away from him, to

reassert her independence and stop drawing comfort from him, but she suspected she was too tired and shaky to make it there on her own. "Beck's having her towed back to town."

She glanced over to where Edward was fussing over his own horse, and felt a ridiculous surge of pleasure that her car had been rescued along with herself. Then she turned back to Jake, catching his eye for a moment before she fixed her gaze on a spot slightly left of his shoulder. "And... Jimmy?" It was the question she hadn't dared ask before; she was too afraid of what the answer might be.

"Jimmy'll be fine." When she glanced at him and caught his eye, Jake nodded to confirm what he'd said. "He got a nasty bump on the head, but—" he offered her another grin, "—he's got a pretty thick skull."

She let out a long breath. "Thank God." She closed her eyes briefly against the hot tears of relief that burned behind her lids. "You shouldn't blame him."

"Blame...?" Jake's grin disappeared and his expression darkened. "I'm not blaming Jimmy." He looked down. "I should never have let you go home alone."

Heather had a sudden vision of Jake following her every step, hovering in the doorway of her bedroom while she collected her underwear for the planned stay at Camp Delaware. She swallowed down the hysterical laugh that wanted to make its way out at the thought; once she started, she might not be able to stop. "You didn't."

"I know." He helped her sit down on the rock. "Still, I should have come with you." He straightened, perusing her features so intently she had to fight the urge to wriggle. Then he put out a hand, as if to touch her face, and she couldn't help herself: she flinched. She was too exhausted, too raw, to deal with Jake Green and his affectionate little gestures that didn't mean a damn thing. She wasn't even sure he was aware of what he was doing to her.

He was, however, very aware of her shying away, and he dropped his arm, looking troubled—and hurt. She wanted to reach out and take his hand, but she stopped herself before her brain could order her arms to move. It wouldn't be smart. If she let him begin to comfort her again, she'd crumble, like an old rock worn down over time. And though she wanted nothing more than to throw herself in his arms and never let go, she refused to make a fool of herself again, like she had the day he'd gone to Rogue River and she'd given in to her fears. She didn't think she could stand the heartache of getting turned down again.

Jake cleared his throat. "I'll see to the horses." He turned away. For some reason, she felt lost and abandoned as she watched him stride off.

oOo

Making his way over to Beck, Jake held out his hand for Abby's reins. "I'll go get the horses watered." He nodded in the direction of a small stream he knew ran nearby. "There's a creek down there. Will you...?" He shrugged and jerked his head toward where Heather sat hunched miserably on the flat rock.

Beck cast a look across Jake's shoulder before he nodded curtly in reply to the unfinished question. *I'll keep an eye on her.*

Jake led the two horses down the gently sloping hill to the gurgling brook. They slobbered up the cool water eagerly, and he made a mental note to give them some extra-special treats and a long brushing once they got home. The animals certainly deserved it after their long, hard day.

Watching them drink, he tried to make sense of what had just happened. The way Heather had jerked back from him had been an unpleasant shock, and something he'd not expected. She'd always seemed at ease around him, and the sudden shift had planted horrible fears in his mind. He hadn't dared ask, though, afraid to hear the answer. Instead, he'd decided the best thing to do was give her some space.

He clenched his hands into fists as he considered what they might've done to her, fury and hatred boiling in him. Then Whisper lifted his head and snorted uncertainly, bringing Jake back to himself. He forced himself to uncurl his fingers, realizing his palms were smarting where his nails had dug in hard enough to leave marks. With Constantino dead and the rest of the New Bern thugs left far behind, there was no outlet for his anger. All he could do was see to getting everyone safely back to Jericho.

oOo

Once the horses had drunk their fill, Jake took them back to where he'd left Heather with Beck. She was still sitting on the rock, Beck squatting in front of her. As Jake came closer, he realized Beck was sponging off the dried blood—Constantino's blood—splattered on her face and hands. She was trembling visibly again, but allowing him to do his work. Jake watched them for a moment, begrudging Beck the intimacy of the act—he was still smarting from the way she'd cringed from him—yet at the same time he was a little surprised by Beck's tenderness. It was a side of the major he'd never seen before. In fact, if you'd asked him, he would've said it was something Beck was incapable of.

Feeling strangely like an intruder, Jake coughed lightly to announce himself. "We should stay here and rest a while." He let the horses' reins fall to the ground, knowing they

wouldn't wander off, and wiped a hand over his face, feeling filthy and dusty and desperately in need of a shower. "We're safe enough, I think."

They'd left Hoffman's lines some way behind, crossing them without being noticed well over an hour ago, although there had been a frightening incident when the *thud-thud* of a helicopter had fast approached in the dark. They'd made it to the shelter of an abandoned barn before the random pattern of the search light dancing across the ground had been able to catch them, and the helicopter had flown on, seemingly without its crew ever knowing they were down there.

Beck nodded to show his agreement, pushing back to his feet. He started to screw the cap back on his water bottle when Heather stopped him with a hand on his wrist. Beck glanced down at her, frowning a little, and she gestured at the bottle, asking without words. Beck handed it to her, and she eagerly took several large gulps, before wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. Jake knew the water couldn't taste very nice: it would be lukewarm and stale. He'd considered refilling his own bottle when he'd taken the horses to the creek, but decided against it because he wasn't sure how safe it was for humans to drink.

"Sorry." Heather offered Beck the bottle back. "It was very hot in there. Donnie gave me some water, but...." Her voice trailed off. She turned her head slightly and stared off into space once again.

"Yeah, I'm sure that would've been very unpleasant." Jake muttered the words quietly enough that Heather probably wouldn't hear. Beck did, however, catch his cynical observation, just as Jake had intended he should. He gave Jake a sharp look, before quickly looking away again. A part of Jake took surly satisfaction in the major's embarrassment, though the thought of Heather suffering the same fate, even if for only a few hours instead of days, made him wish she hadn't killed Constantino—just so he could throttle the bastard himself.

With a glance at Heather, Beck crossed over to Jake and leaned in close. "A word, please?"

Jake shrugged but, as Beck headed off, followed the major without further protest. Beck walked a further half dozen paces away from Heather before he turned back. He didn't speak right away, instead sneaking another look past Jake at Heather. Jake stuffed his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans and hunched his shoulders, half-suspecting what Beck was gonna say.

Finally, Beck pulled himself up and tipped his head back a little so he could meet Jake's gaze. "We worked well together, today, you and I."

Jake nodded reluctantly. He didn't much like it, but he had to admit it was true. They *had* made a good team, a much better one than he'd expected when they set out that morning; the proof of that was the woman a few feet away.

Beck clasped his hands together behind his back, taking up an at-ease posture. "We don't know everything that has happened today, and maybe we'll never know...." Again, he peered past Jake in Heather's direction. "Maybe that's for the best, even." His jaw twitched slightly in what Jake now recognized as suppressed anger. "What I do know, is that that young woman is gonna need our help some more in the weeks to come." He paused a moment, giving Jake a hard stare. "I told you before, I know you don't like me, and that's okay. If I were you, I probably wouldn't like me much, either. But you buried the hatchet today to save Heather. Can't we just leave it buried? For Heather's sake, if not mine or yours?"

Jake darted a look across his shoulder. Heather had her arms wrapped around herself and looked ready to keel over, she seemed that exhausted. He'd not just saved her life; she'd saved his: she'd killed Constantino. If she could do that, Jake reckoned he could at least try to be civil to Beck. He drew a breath, and scratched his neck. "Alright. For Heather's sake."

Beck held out his hand; before Jake fully knew what he was doing, he'd taken it. The major shook it with a firm grip, a faint smile around his mouth, and Jake uttered a rueful chuckle. Maybe they'd never become friends, but at least they could stop being enemies.

'Cause they sure still had more than enough of those.

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