

Fool's Paradise

by Tanaqui

Mary arriving home from Mimi's wedding shower was Jake's cue to leave Bailey's. Shrugging into his coat, he turned the corner into Main Street and saw Heather still having a last word with whoever had dropped her and Mary off. Trish, he guessed, recognizing the black minivan with the patches where the J&R logos had been stripped from the doors.

He paused and leaned back against the wall, hands in his pockets, watching Heather. She was laughing and gesturing with her arms, and he realized he hadn't seen her this... animated for a long time. Since before the trip to Black Jack.

She stepped back from the minivan, waving and calling "Night!" after it as it pulled away. Then she executed an overly precise about turn. Jake saw her sway a little.

"Hey." He'd intended to keep quiet but he couldn't help himself. "You okay?"

"Yup." She giggled slightly and walked carefully towards him. "Just been making sure Mimi's wedding shower was suitably... showery." She settled herself next to him, nudging him along with her hip.

He grinned and nudged her back. "I'm guessing you had more than the odd light beer."

"Maybe." She gave him a secretive smile. "So, what have you guys been up to while we girls were having fun?"

Jake laughed. "Not so much fun. Getting everything ready for Stanley's bucks' party." Stanley had been making jokes for days about strippers, but Jake knew he wasn't serious—and the looks Mimi had given him made it plain he'd better not take Stanley at his word.

Heather arched her eyebrows. "Let me guess: beer, beer and more beer?"

Jake made a face and lightly punched her in the arm. "You're one to talk. But no. I found out from Mary that she didn't actually get rid of the mechanical bull when she had it taken out. Eric and I spent the day putting in back in." He smiled to himself. "Reckon it'll make Stanley's night when he sees it."

"Sounds like it." Heather chuckled, and he felt the laughter shaking her frame where her shoulder was pressed against his.

They were silent for a while. Jake was thinking about how, once they were done with that, they'd spent the rest of the evening going through Mary's CDs, loading the jukebox with all the stuff Stanley liked, or that had meant something back when he and Stanley were growing up. It had brought up a lot of memories, from back when life had been simpler, and the biggest problem he'd faced was getting bawled out yet again by Dad for failing to live up to whatever impossible

standards the Greens were supposed to aspire to.

Heather shifted again, breaking into his thoughts, although Jake had been aware of her presence at his side the whole time. "I can't believe they're actually getting married."

He squinted down at her in surprise. "You didn't think they would?"

"No." Heather paused for a moment, and then giggled. "Umm, I mean: yes, I thought they'd get married. I just can't believe it's happening so soon." She shook her head. "That the war's actually over. That we have food and gas and power. And peace. You know? All the stuff you need for a wedding."

Jake nodded. He still hadn't quite gotten used to having all those things again. And to not spending his days worrying about what Hoffman was going to do next, and whether they'd be able to smuggle in whatever critical supplies were running low. Though Mimi had hardly given them a chance: as soon as the troops from Texas had rolled into town and confirmed the Cheyenne government had ceded Kansas, and supplies were going to start flowing again, she'd begun putting into action the plans she'd been making all winter. Stanley had seemed a little bemused by it all, but happy enough.

Jake had found himself envying the way his friend's life was moving forwards, while his own... well, he didn't know where it was going.

He glanced down at Heather, wondering if she felt the same. He supposed she'd go back to teaching, once things settled down. Or at least, she could. Whereas even if he got his pilot's license back, he didn't hold out much hope of there being any work. So he'd be driving trucks again.

"I miss the stars." Heather had her head tipped back and was gazing up at the sky.

"The stars?" Jake glanced upwards, but couldn't see anything beyond the glow of the streetlamps, relit a week or so back.

Heather gave an embarrassed laugh and shot a sideways glance at him. "After the bombs, when we didn't have any power, you could see the stars from Main Street." She sighed, and shoved her hands into her pockets with a shiver. "It was one of the things I used to remind myself about when things were tough. That not everything that happened because of the bombs was bad."

Jake nodded. That had been how they'd survived, really. They'd worried about food and gas and heat, but it had been those moments that had kept them going. The good things that had happened: Stanley finding Mimi; him fixing things with Dad; Heather finding the stars for a while.

Well, she could still have the stars.

"Come on." He pushed away from the wall and held out his hand to her.

"What?" She gave him a confused look.

"Come on," he repeated, reaching forward and taking her hand and pulling her towards him. With his palm in the small of her back to steady her, he encouraged her across the street to where the Roadrunner was parked, and ushered her into the passenger seat.

Starting the car, he eased them gently off along of Main Street—it was late, after all, and the growl from the Roadrunner's engine bounced back off the buildings even so—and headed out towards the

Tacoma bridge. Heather seemed a little bemused, and kept shooting him puzzled looks, but she had folded her hands in her lap, apparently acquiescing to his mad scheme. It suddenly occurred to him that the last time he'd dragged her off somewhere without telling her why had been so Hawkins could tell her about the bomb.

He cleared his throat. "I'm just taking you down to the river. There's a really great place to look at the stars...."

"Okay." She still sounded doubtful, but she settled herself more deeply in her seat. He noticed, as he made the turn off the main road, that she was running her hand over the door trim in what seemed to be an approving fashion. When the car lurched a little on the rough road, she giggled and leaned forward and patted the dash. "Nice car. *Good* car."

Jake, glancing across, grinned and shook his head, and went back to concentrating on keeping the car on the rutted track down to the river. At last he drew to a halt in the clearing by the bend, and killed the engine.

Heather peered forwards through the windshield, looking up at the sky, while the plink-plink of cooling metal died away.

"Come on," Jake said for a third time. He climbed out of the car, went round to the passenger door and opened it for her. Her hand was warm and soft in his as he helped her out. He kept hold of it as she stopped close to him and tilted back her head to look at the starry expanse above them.

"Oh!" She seemed to have sobered up some on the drive out, but now her face was lit by wonder. Jake dragged his own gaze away from her awestruck features, dim in the light of the quarter moon, and looked up. What he saw took his breath away. The night was very clear, and he didn't think he'd ever seen so many stars.

"My grandpa taught me about the stars when I was little. And then, when I was a bit older, he taught me how to use them to fly at night." The quiet of the evening—nothing but the sound of slow-moving water and a faint insect hum—made him hush his voice. Without consciously thinking about it, he guided Heather away from the car and drew her down to sit next to him on the grass.

She leaned back on her arms, head tipped up. "I used to bug my parents to take me to the Cosmosphere in Hutchinson for my birthday every year. And then, when I went to Emporia, I visited the Peterson every chance I— Oh, look!" She leaned towards him and pointed. "A shooting star. Must be one of the Virginids."

"You really know your stuff, huh?" He was aware of her warmth next to him as he looked where she was indicating.

"I wanted to be an astronomer when I was a kid." She giggled. "Or maybe an astronaut. I think I had those confused for a couple of years." She flopped back on her elbows, wriggling until she was comfortable.

He twisted so he could look down at her while she continued to gaze at the sky above them. "Why didn't you...?"

She shrugged a little. "Didn't have the math. And, you know, I guess the same reason I didn't become an engineer. Girls don't do those things." She turned her head and met his gaze and must have seen something in his expression, because she laughed again. "Oh, it's okay. It doesn't bother

me. Somethings just aren't... meant to be, are they?"

She gave an embarrassed chuckle and looked away, back up at the sky. He went on looking down at her, not really seeing her, but thinking instead about all the wrong choices in his own life: the missed opportunities and the dreams he'd clung to even when his better judgment warned against it. About how life was going to change again, and there'd be a whole new set of choices for him to screw up.

Heather flicked a glance at him and caught his eye for a moment, before she looked away again. She shivered. "It's getting cold. Maybe we should go back?"

"Sure." Jake scrambled to his feet and held out a hand to help her up. When she stood, he saw her face once more carried the guarded look he'd come to expect from her. He wished he knew how to take that look away permanently. Wished he didn't feel partly responsible for putting it there in the first place: he should never have let her leave for New Bern, should never have let her get kidnapped.

More bad choices.

She cleared her throat. "Thank you." She pulled her hand out of his and gave a wave that encompassed the place, the stars above and the two of them. "For bringing me out here."

He shrugged. He'd been the one who'd dragged her here without being asked. "You're welcome."

They were silent on the drive back, but it was a good silence, not one he felt he needed to fill. Yet driving back out to the ranch, with the windows cranked down, breathing in the spring scent of damp earth and things growing, he couldn't help but feel like there was something he should have said. He just didn't know what it was.

oOo

Four days later, he parked the Roadrunner in the lengthening line of cars in the pasture below the Richmond farm and climbed out. He squinted up towards the farmhouse for a moment, but he couldn't see any obvious signs of panic from here. Not that he expected there to be; his mother was overseeing the arrangements. She'd accepted the role of honorary mother of the bride with such alacrity when Mimi had asked that Jake suspected she'd always wanted daughters.

"What if she changes her mind?" Stanley, emerging from the other side of the Roadrunner, was also looking up at the house anxiously. He'd spent the night out at the ranch with Jake, to allow the tradition of not seeing the bride before the wedding to be preserved. Also, Jake suspected—having caught a few glimpses of Mimi and her bridesmaids when he'd been at the farmhouse earlier to help with the last-minute setting out of chairs and tables—because having them both in the same place would have caused a critical mass of pre-wedding stress.

Jake rounded the front of the car and gave Stanley a reassuring punch on the arm. "Don't be an idiot. She won't." Over Stanley's shoulder, he saw Heather's Dodge pull into the improvised parking lot. He hadn't seen her since they'd gone stargazing together the night of Mimi's wedding shower; the memory made him smile.

"Yes, but—," Stanley objected.

"If she's lived with your bad jokes and your smelly socks for the past...." Jake's train of thought was

derailed as he saw Beck, wearing green service dress, get out of the passenger side of the Dodge and come round to the driver's side to help Heather out. He supposed he shouldn't be surprised that Heather had offered him a lift; she did still seem to be the only real friend he'd made in Jericho.

"Jake? Jake!" Stanley gripped his arm. "*You're* not going to flake out on me, are you?"

Jake dragged his attention back to Stanley. "No." He shook his head. "No, I'm fine. Let's...." He gestured up the hill.

Ahead of them, Heather had taken the arm Beck had offered, and they'd set off up the path to the house. Feeling annoyed, Jake shoved his hands into his pockets and reminded himself that Beck had probably had those kinds of manners drilled into him during officer training.

As he watched, Heather tilted her head towards Beck and laughed at something he'd said. Jake clenched his jaw and forced away his annoyance, reminding himself that he was supposed to be keeping an eye on Stanley.

They set off briskly enough, but their progress as they neared the house slowed as people who'd spilled out along either side of the path stopped Stanley to congratulate him and wish him luck. Ahead of them, the crowd was thicker. Jake peered around, trying to see where Heather and Beck had gotten to.

"You have got the rings, haven't you?" Stanley suddenly hissed at him, as he turned away from the latest wellwishers.

"What?" Jake gave him a blank look for a moment, before putting his hand over his breast pocket to confirm the rings were still there, along with the speech he'd spent days slaving over. "Yes. Everything's fine. Just relax."

He finally caught sight of Heather, greeting Emily. Beyond them, Beck was talking to Mack Davies, also in dress uniform. Trust the two military men to stick together!

Realizing time was moving on, Jake tried to shepherd Stanley on up past the guests, towards where Reverend Young was waiting to one side of the rows of chairs set out in front of the house. It was a thankless task: as soon as he successfully detached Stanley from one group, another would claim him.

From somewhere behind him, he caught the tail end of a conversation as Mrs Simmons and Mrs Levinson ambled past. "...make a handsome couple. Of course, there's nothing like a man in uniform."

Jake took another glance over at where Emily had now twined her arm back through Mack's. When he'd first discovered she was dating the Texan colonel, it had bothered him. Not that he wanted her back, but he didn't want her to get hurt again. Over time, as he'd watched them together, he'd seen that Emily seemed happier than Jake had ever been able to make her since he returned to Jericho. The discovery was oddly liberating. He knew Mack could take care of her in a way he'd never quite believed Roger could, and that meant he no longer needed to carry the weight of feeling responsible for her himself.

Behind him, Mrs Simmons and Mrs Levinson were still talking. "Is it true she had the major over every week for dinner during the winter?"

For a moment, Jake's brain refused to process what he'd just heard. Then he realized with a jolt that the two women weren't talking about Emily and Mack at all. There was a buzzing in his ears, and he had a sudden urge to throw up.

Swallowing down the bile in his throat, he looked around and realized that, rather than being ahead of Stanley, urging him on, he'd now gotten left behind, as Bill and Eric had started encouraging the guests to take their seats. Taking a deep breath, he hurried after Stanley.

Once in their places in front of their chairs—and trying to meet Stanley's worried look with a reassuring one—he squinted back over his shoulder. Heather and Beck were sitting together more than halfway back, their heads close. He twisted a little more: he couldn't quite see, but did she maybe have her hand on his arm, and he had his hand over hers...?

Then the fiddle-player from the band who'd been hired for the dancing afterwards—a local trio and a caller—struck up the music for Mimi's entrance, and Jake was jerked back to what he was supposed to be paying attention to. Turning back to Stanley, he saw his friend had also half turned round, and was grinning like a Cheshire cat. When Jake looked down the aisle at Mimi advancing, he could quite understand why, and couldn't quite suppress a stab of envy.

oOo

Heather was glad she'd tucked a couple of handkerchiefs into her purse. She normally didn't cry at weddings, but this wasn't just any wedding. As she'd tried to tell Jake a few days ago, not very coherently—she blushed a little at the memory of how drunk she'd been—it was more than just two people exchanging their vows. It marked the end of the war; the end of all they'd struggled against for the past eighteen months.

She might well have needed to dab at damp eyes more often if she hadn't been somewhat distracted by the whispered running commentary coming from behind: Mrs Simmons apparently considered it her civic duty to fill in, at every available opportunity during the service, all the background gossip for Mrs Whalley, who'd been in Jericho only a little longer than Heather.

"...don't know why he was asked after the mess he made of his brother's wedding..." was one tidbit Heather caught as she and Edward were taking their seats. She couldn't help glancing at Jake as he made his way up to the front with Stanley: he looked good dressed up, and she couldn't deny her heart had skipped a beat when she'd seen him and Stanley standing next to the Roadrunner as she'd pulled up in Charlotte.

She dragged her gaze away from him and back to Edward, and found him smiling at her in a way that made butterflies flutter in her stomach in quite a different fashion. Impulsively, she edged herself closer and put her hand on his arm. He looked surprised for a moment, and then dipped his head and covered her hand with his. He didn't say anything, but he didn't need to.

Music began to play, and Heather turned to see Mimi, with Trish and Mary behind her, walking down the aisle between the chairs.

"...Emily Sullivan's, you know..." suddenly came across quite clearly from Mrs Simmons as the music quieted for a moment. Heather had to suppress a giggle, even as she nodded to herself: she knew Emily had offered the dress for the wedding-that-never-was the instant she'd heard Mimi and Stanley had set a date. Heather glanced to one side, to where Emily sat next to Mack. Maybe it was a way for Emily to close that chapter of her life. And it looked good on Mimi, the cream setting off her dark coloring.

Stanley obviously thought so too, by the ridiculously large grin on his face. That was the point at which Heather had needed to grope for her handkerchief, because if anyone deserved a happy ending, after all they'd been through, it was those two....

The ceremony was brief and Mrs Simmons mercifully silent during the exchange of vows, although Heather could hear she'd started up again while they were singing the hymn. She obviously wasn't paying close enough attention; as the hymn came to an end, she boomed out in a loud whisper, "...old enough to be her father." Which puzzled Heather a great deal, because she'd thought, if anything, that Mimi was older than Stanley. Until, glancing over her shoulder, she caught Mrs Simmons' eye and the woman went bright red; Heather realized with a start that she probably meant her and Edward. Which was.... Heather felt herself blushing as well, but, really, it was no one else's business what she.... Straightening her shoulders, she focused on the Reverend Young leading the final prayer, and tried to ignore the notion she was being gossiped about. Again. This was Jericho, after all.

After the ceremony, she hurried off to make her contribution to the event: helping to bring out the food for the wedding breakfast that had been cooked in kitchens across Jericho over the past couple of days. The trays filled with plates of starters and bread rolls and butter dishes were heavy, and she had to weave her way carefully in between the groomsmen fetching over the chairs that had been used during the service.

She was carrying her second tray past Jake when he stepped sideways unexpectedly, making her swerve and overbalance. Only his quick reflexes and his hands around her waist kept her on her feet and the tray from falling.

"Whoa!" He pulled her back against him. "You okay?"

She nodded a little uncertainly. He lifted a hand up to catch the tray and help her set it down on the nearest table.

"Thanks." She put a hand to her throat, trying to catch her breath, as she turned towards him.

"Sorry." He still had his hand on her waist, steadying her.

She shook her head, feeling dizzy, and not wanting to examine whether it was the shock of almost having dropped the tray or something else entirely. "No. It was my fault, I—."

"No, it was mine." He dipped his head towards her a little. "I wasn't looking."

"Hey!" Eric, passing by them, slapped Jake on the shoulder. "Come on, you two. No loitering!"

Heather felt herself grow hot and gave an embarrassed chuckle. Glancing up, she saw Jake shooting an annoyed look after his brother. Then he looked down at her again. He took half a step back, still not letting go of her. "Well, I guess we should...?"

"Yes." She hoped she didn't sound too eager, because now she was sure it wasn't just the shock that was making her uncomfortable. And, dammit, she was so tired of this. She backed away herself, and he let his hand drop. "Let's not do this again, huh?" She listened to herself for a moment. "Uh...."

"Yeah." He gave her a wry grin. "You don't want to know what my mom will do to us if we mess

up the food."

He stepped past her, leaving her to pick up the tray and carry it to the table she'd originally been heading for.

They managed to avoid each other for the next few minutes, but found themselves working at the same table again after a while. When Jake brought the first pair of chairs across, they simply smiled awkwardly at each other, but when he came back a second time, it seemed more awkward not to say anything at all. Heather pushed a strand of hair back of her face and glanced over to where the new Mrs Richmond was receiving the congratulations of various Jericho matrons. "It was a lovely ceremony, wasn't it?"

She looked back at Jake and saw he was looking at Mimi with a distant expression on his face. "Yes." He stuck his hands in his pockets. "Stanley's a lucky man."

"Yes." Heather didn't know what else to say; Jake's expression had shifted to the lost look she'd noticed him wearing more than once the past few weeks. The silence stretched out for a moment, and then Jake looked back at her. Heather picked up her now empty tray and gestured wordlessly towards the kitchen—*we should get on*—and Jake nodded, still apparently distracted.

The next time they encountered each other, he seemed to have made an effort to shake himself out of his gloom. He dipped his head at her as he swung around the chair he was carrying and slid it under the table. "You look very nice today. That color suits you"

Heather blushed. *Again*, she berated herself. Out loud, she said, "Thanks. You look very nice, too. I mean," she felt herself grow even hotter, "you look very smart. I don't think I've ever seen you dressed up before."

He laughed as he straightened the second chair. "Not my usual style, huh?" He rested his hands on the back of the chair, waiting for her reply.

Heather concentrated on putting out the next plate and lining it up so that the food on it was presented properly. "No. But then, today's not a usual day, is it?" She smiled up at him, and he smiled back. She moved on to the next place setting, expecting him to turn away to fetch more chairs, but he lingered. Searching around for something to say, she grasped on the first thing she could think of. "Do you have a good speech written?"

He laughed again. "Well, I have *something* written. Don't know if it's any good."

"I'm sure it is."

Glancing up, she saw he was looking tense again, and she mentally kicked herself for bringing him down.

"I guess we'll find out soon enough." With a sigh, he turned away to fetch the last of the chairs.

oOo

It *was* a good speech. Heather was very glad she'd brought the second handkerchief.

Glasses had been filled with champagne—it had been Emily's turn to help out—and chairs were scraped around as Jake stood up and tapped a spoon against his glass. Heather's had been one of the

chairs that had needed turning; after Edward had helped her move it and back it up towards his, he let his hand rest on the small of her back. It was unexpected, and yet it felt good as she leaned into his touch, enjoying the sense of reassurance it gave her.

Jake shook out the piece of paper he'd taken from his breast pocket and cleared his throat. "Most of you know I've not much of a track record as a best man—" His words made Heather shoot a sideways look at Mrs Simmons. "—so I'm not entirely sure why Stanley asked me. Except," he turned and grinned along the table at Stanley, "most of you also know Stanley can be an idiot, so I guess it fits."

There was a ripple of laughter from the guests. Heather saw Jake take a deep breath before he went on. "There's one thing Stanley did that proves he isn't an idiot, and that's ask Mimi to marry him." He shifted his gaze closer to fix on Mimi, sitting next to him, before looking back out across the tables. "That's why we're all here today, and why I get to make this speech." He waved the piece of paper and smiled nervously.

"It's traditional for the best man to tell a few embarrassing stories about the groom." Jake glanced back at Stanley. Heather, following his gaze, saw Stanley slump in his chair and cover his eyes in mock horror. Or possibly real horror. Turning her attention back to Jake, she saw he was smiling as he added, "And I've known Stanley my whole life, which means I know a *lot* of stories." That prompted an audible groan from Stanley; Mimi patted him reassuringly on the hand.

Jake was still smiling. Looking round at the audience, he caught Heather's eye. She smiled back, because she was sure that, whatever Jake had planned, he wouldn't intentionally embarrass Stanley.

"But I'm only going to tell you two of my memories." Jake reached for the water glass next to his champagne flute and took a sip. "The first was our senior year in High School, and yelling myself hoarse as Stanley ran in a sixty yard touchdown to help Jericho win the final game of the season."

Stanley had dropped his hand and was looking up at Jake with an expression that suggested he was caught between relief and still wanting to kill Jake. Again, Jake grinned at him, before turning back to the audience and adding, "I only wish I had a video of the stupid celebration dance he did."

This time the laughter was louder; Heather thought many of those listening probably remembered the dance as well.

Jake's expression sobered. "That touchdown helped Stanley win a scholarship to college, and I'd love to tell you I saw him score a winning touchdown in his senior year there."

The guests had hushed. Watching, Heather was strongly reminded of Johnston; Jake was less studied than his father, but both of them knew how to hold a crowd. How to command respect.

Jake turned back to Stanley, who met his gaze. Jake's words were for the guests, but he continued looking steadily at Stanley as he spoke. "But he never got a chance to do that. Instead, he came back home to take care of his little sister, and to run this farm, after their parents died." Jake paused, swallowing, and spoke more slowly, his voice resonating with admiration. "I remember coming back and seeing Stanley with Bonnie, and being awed and humbled by his strength, and his sacrifice, and his love." Jake dipped his head in salute. "You were a wonderful brother, Stanley, and I know you're going to make Mimi a terrific husband."

There were a few snuffles from the hushed crowd, and Heather realized her own cheeks were wet. She lifted her handkerchief to blot them away.

Jake was silent for a moment, before he went on. "As for Mimi...." Jake looked around the guests until his gaze fell on Heather again. "The September attacks brought a lot of bad things to this town, but not everything was bad." He smiled at Heather for a moment, and she realized he was echoing back her own words of the other night. His gaze moved on round the crowd. "Mimi came to Jericho to take Stanley's farm away, and she ended up stealing his heart instead." He turned back to look at Mimi again. "All our hearts."

There was another ripple of laughter and a murmur of agreement. Jake picked up his glass and raised it to Stanley and Mimi. "I hope you'll join me now in wishing Stanley and Mimi a long and happy life together."

"Stanley and Mimi!" Heather added her heartfelt tones to everyone else's before she drank. Setting her glass back on the table, she caught Edward's eye. He smiled at her, and she thought that maybe her own happy ever after was no longer such a distant and unlikely prospect as it had once seemed.

oOo

Beck, seeing Heather return his smile, felt a little more light-headed than the sip of champagne or the glass of wine with the meal could really account for. But then, the whole day had made him feel somewhat intoxicated.

It had been a pleasant surprise to be asked to the wedding at all, in fact, although he supposed he'd developed a fair working relationship with Stanley over the year he and his troops had effectively been Stanley's tenants. He'd been even more surprised when, after Heather had abandoned him temporarily to fulfil her contribution to the day's chores, people had come up to talk to him without him seeking them out. And not just Gray Anderson, or Eric Green, or the two deputies, with whom he'd worked most days, but people he'd scarcely spoken to more than a couple of times.

He guessed he'd gotten so used to thinking the town regarded him as the man who'd occupied and oppressed them—and tortured their favorite son—and that he needed to win their trust back that he hadn't noticed that at some point he apparently *had*.

When Heather came back to his side, he murmured wryly, "I think Jericho might finally have forgiven me."

She raised her eyebrows as she slipped her hand through his arm again. "Most of them did that months ago. Didn't you notice?"

"I guess not." He smiled down at her, but she was already turning away to answer a question from Emily. It didn't matter, because her hand on his arm reinforced the message she'd sent during the wedding ceremony—leaving him more distracted than he should have been—that she didn't just see him as a friend. That he was—he shook his head slightly at the thought, because the term made him feel thirty years younger and as giddy as a teenager—her *date*. He at last allowed himself to think what he hadn't let himself consider every time she'd had him over to dinner the past few months: that, later, he was going to kiss her.

When they sat down to the wedding breakfast, the food was good, the conversation at their table relaxed and, even as an outsider, he appreciated Jake's speech. Watching Jake work his audience, he was glad to know that his instincts hadn't been wrong: Jake *was* "The Guy". Even if they'd been pulling in opposite directions most of those first months he'd been in Jericho, and far too often even after that. At least their mad scramble to rescue Heather had sorted most of that out, though they'd

continued to butt heads on a regular basis.

The speeches over, there was a general bustle to clear the dishes and move the tables, so that those who wanted to could dance. Again, Beck expected to remain on one side, but Heather laughingly pulled him into the forming double line.

"I don't—," he tried to object, but she just tugged harder on his hand.

"Of course you do." She waved at where the caller stood next to the musicians. "He'll tell us what to do, and you'll soon get the hang of it. It'll be fun!" She gave him a mock pout. "Besides, I want to dance and, if you won't, I'll have to keep borrowing Mack from Emily, and he's too tall."

He hadn't been able to resist smiling at that—he often came away from talking to Davies with a crick in his neck himself—or at her general cheerfulness. And how could he deny Heather a little fun, after all they'd been through?

oOo

Dancing was hot work. Heather flapped a hand to cool herself as the band finished another tune with a flourish and the dancers paused to catch their breaths. Even Edward looked a little red in the face. He slid a hand under her elbow. "Let's take a break."

Heather nodded—she could hardly complain about his lack of enthusiasm; they'd been do-se-do-ing and promenading for nearly an hour—and allowed him to guide her away from the dancing and up onto the porch. He drew her out of the path of people going in and out of the house and on around the corner, to where it was suddenly peaceful, the house baffling the noise of the band starting up another jig.

Heather walked a little further along the porch before resting her arms on the rail. "Isn't this such a lovely house?" She sighed contentedly. "The view here is great."

"Yes, it is."

Edward sounded amused and, turning, she saw he wasn't looking at the distant sweep of the hills but at her. There was something in his gaze that had been there all afternoon—been there for months, if truth be told, though never so openly as today—that had made her breath catch every time she looked at him. Licking her lips, she stepped towards him.

"Heather...?" he murmured, his eyes asking a question to which her leaping heart joyfully answered *Yes!* She gave the slightest of nods, and he reached out for her, tipping her face up so he could cover her mouth with his.

oOo

Jake ambled along the porch and halted at the end, glad to be away from the crowds for a moment. Some instinct made him glance over his shoulder, to where the porch continued on round the side of the house. At the far end, standing close together, were two figures he recognized only too well: Heather and Beck. Even as he watched, Beck raised his hand to cup Heather's cheek and he leaned forward to kiss her. Her arm snaked around his neck to pull him closer as she returned the kiss.

Jake stumbled back until the corner of the building hid them. Turning, he leaned against the sun-warmed wood and gasped for air, his mind a jumble of sensations. The image of Heather kissing

Beck, overlaid with the memory of how her lips had felt on his own; the feel of her confidently pulling him close as she embraced him on his return from Texas, mixed with a vision of her at Beck's side, a comforting hand on his shoulder; Heather's hand in his as he'd helped her out of the Roadrunner the other night.

He pushed off from the wall and hurried down the steps. Behind him, he thought he heard someone calling his name—his mother, maybe?—but he ignored it.

Adrenaline carried him down the hill as far as the rows of cars. He stopped next to the Roadrunner, his hand on the roof. His head was swimming and he took a deep breath, but it didn't seem to help with the black spots dancing in front of his eyes. Instead of reaching for the door, as he'd first intended, he took a few more steps and settled himself against the trunk, looking out at the hills on the other side of the valley, but not really seeing them.

He tried to calm his breathing, to stop himself trembling, while his thoughts stampeded around his mind like a herd of spooked foals in a paddock. *How can she...? How...? Him!*

Bad enough she'd wanted to be his *friend*. That, after everything he'd done, she'd felt *sorry* for him.

Sure, Beck might have turned his back on Cheyenne and thrown his lot in with Jericho, but only when faced with evidence even a blind man couldn't fail to see. And before that.... Jake ground his teeth as he remembered being forced to listen to Beck lecturing him about "justice", in that oh-so-reasonable tone—after he'd had Jake tied up and blindfolded and dragged to a damn torture chamber.

Another surge of anger rose in him: he balled his fists as he remembered the heat, and how hard the floor had been, and how he'd been glad when numbness had finally set in to his arms and shoulders. *Beck placing that glass of water, carefully, precisely, a smug smile on his face....* Jake still woke in the night sometimes, sweating, thinking he was back there.

How can she—? How—?

But then, hadn't Jake fallen for Beck's lies himself? Trusted he'd find reason, that Beck would listen when he tried to surrender, tried to explain. That Beck had actually meant any of what he'd said. And then Beck had pulled the rug from under him. *Cold-eyed. Cold-hearted. Didn't give a damn that an eighteen year old girl had been murdered by one of Cheyenne's thugs.*

Jake gasped for air, his body remembering the suffocating cloth pulled down across his face, the way the shock of Beck's betrayal had been like a punch in the stomach.

He'll betray Heather, too....

God, hadn't he already done the same to his wife? Bile rose in Jake's throat as he again remembered seeing Beck and Heather together in the interview room in the sheriff's office, her hand on his shoulder. The guy's wife had been barely cold in the ground and he'd been turning to Heather for comfort....

What kind of man—?

The kind of man who'd use a woman to get what he wanted. Jake pushed away the memory of that moment when he'd realized his mom wasn't another hallucination. That she was really there.

How can she have a man like that sit at her table, eat her food? How—?

He closed his eyes. Because she didn't know. Because she was too trusting. Because she always believed the best of everyone, could never imagine what people were capable of. *Especially* the kind of man who could use smooth words to hide the fact he was prepared to torture and terrorize to get what he wanted.

Well, Jake wasn't about to stand aside and let Heather get mixed up with a guy who could give Phil Constantino a run for his money.

Twisting around, he squinted back up at the house, where laughter and music covered up something so sickening it made his stomach churn. No, he'd find Heather, and tell her exactly what kind of man she was getting mixed up with, and exactly why she should stay away from him. Before Beck had a chance to really hurt her.

oOo

Edward's kiss was everything Heather had expected it to be: confident, competent, and yet a little reserved and formal. But it still made the blood hammer in her ears, and she reached up and slipped her arm around his neck to draw him to her. And then, suddenly, his reserve was gone, and he was kissing her passionately, his mouth demanding and urgent on hers. He wrapped his arm around her to pull her against him, and the world fell away as the feel and taste of him overwhelmed her. She felt him back them up, drawing him with her, and dimly wondered what he was doing, until her arm brushed wood, and he steadied, and she realized he'd stepped back so he could lean against the wall and gather her even more tightly against him.

After a while, his lips grew more gentle, softly exploring hers, while he slid his hand to cup the nape of her neck, tangling his fingers in her hair. She rested her palm on his chest as she returned the kiss, feeling his lean muscles under the crisp weave of his service dress.

At last they broke apart, yet he still kept her close, brushing the hair back from her face while his gaze held hers. The intensity of his expression, declaring his feelings for her even as he remained silent, was almost too much to bear. Letting her gaze drop, she leaned against him, resting her head on his shoulder while he softly stroked her hair, his breath tickling her neck. The quiet strength in his arms made her feel safe in a way she didn't think she'd felt since before the bombs.

"We should go back," he murmured eventually, still gentling her.

"Uh-huh." She didn't move, not yet ready to let go of the moment. Apparently he felt the same, because his only response was to tighten his arm around her a little. Another minute passed, and then she reluctantly pushed away from him. They shared a wry smile: there would be time later for the two of them, and it really wouldn't be very polite to skip out on Mimi and Stanley on their big day.

As she stepped back, Edward caught her hand and twined his fingers in hers. Keeping her close, he led her back towards the front of the house.

oOo

Chavez was taking a breather, a cold beer in his hand—even he was flagging after two hours of whirling partners round the dance floor—when he saw Jake round the corner of the house and stop, as if he were waiting for someone or something. At first Chavez didn't realize what, or that Jake had

been following Heather; not until she came back out the kitchen, and Jake moved to intercept her, blocking her path away from the bottom of the steps down from the porch.

"We need to talk."

Chavez could see the anger clouding Jake's face as he loomed over Heather, and he straightened from where he'd been slouching against the wall. The wedding had been very pleasant up to that point. There'd been plenty of pretty girls to dance with and flirt with—although he'd quickly returned Allison Hawkins to Darcy's side after just one dance when he'd seen the way her father was looking at him. And the food and drink were good. Not to mention that, short of a tornado or a thunderstorm appearing out of the clear blue sky above them, this was the first time in months they weren't living under the threat of some sudden crisis interrupting their fun.

There'd certainly been no sign of *this* coming: Chavez had seen Jake and Heather together earlier in the day, and they'd been chatting happily enough. So what the heck had happened since then to make Jake angrier than Chavez had ever seen him, apart from that frantic night last July when they'd learned about Constantino's plans?

He saw Heather raise an eyebrow, apparently not liking Jake's attitude any more than Chavez did. But before she could say anything, Jake had grabbed her arm and hurried her a few paces away.

When he stopped, she shook him off. "What do you want?" Her tone was as hostile as her expression.

"You and Beck...." Chavez, watching carefully even as he stashed his beer bottle somewhere safe, saw Jake swallow.

Heather set her mouth into a thin line. "That's none of your business."

Jake stepped closer and grabbed her arms, glowering down at her. "You can't be with him." He gave her a small shake. "You shouldn't be with him."

Chavez took a pace forward, but before he had a chance to intervene, Heather had wrenched herself away from Jake and taken a step back. "Oh, no. You do not get to say that!" She glared back at Jake. "You gave up any right to say that when you ignored me for a month." Chavez could see she was shaking. "You had your chance, Jake—and you weren't interested. And just because you hate Edward doesn't mean you get to tell me what I can and can't do."

"Heather...." Jake reached out a hand, sounding as if he was trying to placate her, but she took another step back. "It's not...." He shook his head. "No, I don't like him. But I don't like him because of what he is. What he's done. Because he can't be trusted." His voice hardened again. "Do you know what he's capable of? Do you know what he's really like?"

"Better than you." Heather tilted up her chin defiantly. "Don't ever—." She stopped, apparently too angry to continue. Then she shook her head and backed away another step. "It's none of your business, Jake." She turned on her heel and stalked away from him.

Chavez shook his head slightly as he watched Heather make her way towards the front of the house. Looking back at Jake, he saw he was staring after her. Then Jake let out a sharp breath and set off in pursuit. Chavez hurried after him, only for Jake to stop dead before he could reach him. When Chavez caught up, he saw Heather had headed straight back to Beck and slipped her arm through the major's. Beck must have realized she was upset, because he spoke to her for a moment, and then

put his arm around her waist to draw her against his shoulder.

Returning his attention to Jake, Chavez noticed he was staring at them with narrowed eyes, his hands forming fists, oblivious to the laughing, chattering crowd around him.

Chavez reached out and caught his arm. "Come on, Jake. Let's have a beer." When Jake made to shake him off, he tightened his grip and said quietly, "Come on. Don't do this. Do you really want to spoil things for Stanley and Mimi?"

Jake finally dragged his gaze away from Heather and Beck and looked at Chavez. Abruptly, he sagged, the tension going out of him; the anger in his eyes was replaced by pain. He nodded curtly at Chavez, before turning on his heel and heading towards the back of the house again.

Grabbing two opened beers from an ice bucket, Chavez followed. They walked on until they rounded the barn and were out of sight—and earshot—of the wedding party. Chavez stopped and leaned against the sun-bleached boards, sipping his beer, while Jake paced up and down for a while, muttering to himself

At last, he turned to Chavez and burst out, "How can she want to be with *him*? After everything he's done?"

Chavez shrugged. "He's a decent enough man despite that, and he obviously cares about her." He cocked an eyebrow. "Maybe you're asking the wrong question?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" A frown settled on Jake's face.

Chavez stopped smirking. Entertaining as he'd found the whole thing for the first few months, it suddenly didn't seem nearly so funny now. Not now he finally realized what was going on. He caught and held Jake's gaze. "Ever since we got back from Texas, I haven't been wondering why Heather's been getting involved with Beck. I've been wondering why she isn't already with *you*."

"What? No. We're not—. She's—. I—." Jake suddenly folded into a crouch and put his head in his hands.

Chavez left him like that for a moment, but when Jake didn't move, he pushed off from the barn and crossed over to him. Jake looked up as he approached, and Chavez offered him a hand to help him back to his feet.

The anger in Jake's eyes had been replaced by anguish. "You knew?" When Chavez nodded, he asked, "Why didn't you say anything?"

Chavez raised an eyebrow. "I thought *you* knew. How you felt about her, I mean. I assumed there was some other reason you two didn't get together after you split with Emily. After all, you'd both been through a lot...."

"I—." Jake shook his head, turned away, and took a few quick steps and punched the barn wall. Chavez winced in sympathy at the sound of flesh meeting wood. He wasn't surprised when Jake shook his hand and then, nursing it in the other, slumped against the wall.

Chavez walked back and offered him the other beer, before leaning next to him.

Silence stretched out between them. Squinting sideways, Chavez could see Jake frowning, clearly

turning things over in his mind, trying to make sense of them. He wasn't at all surprised at Jake's words when he finally spoke.

"She was just... Heather. We fixed stuff together. Air pumps, and cars, and model planes, and....," Jake snorted, "pages in reports that were going to expose nuclear bombs. She's great to be around. To just hang out with...."

Chavez grinned. "Yeah. She is." He liked Heather a lot, and not just because she was a fellow coffee-fiend. "But the rest of us don't...." He spread his hands, unsure how to explain the way Jake had acted like he and Heather were dating, even when they weren't: how comfortable he was around her; how protective; all the small gestures that revealed how attracted to her he was. When Jake gave him an inquiring look, Chavez settled for exasperatedly snapping, "Don't look like we're always on the point of kissing her."

"Oh." Jake looked down at his feet and scuffed the dirt with his toe. "I did that?"

Chavez nodded.

After another long silence, Jake said reflectively. "She kissed *me* once. About a month after the bombs. After I came back to town, and before I got back with Em. It was...." He closed his eyes and groaned. "God, it was great."

"So what happened?" Chavez took another swig of beer.

Jake sighed. "Bad timing? Thinking I was still in love with Em?" He shook his head. "Deciding it might be kinder on her in the long run not to get involved?"

"Huh." Chavez bit down on the temptation to ask Jake how well that last one was working out for the two of them.

They lapsed back into silence. Jake clearly had some thinking to do, and Chavez reckoned keeping him away from Beck and Heather for a while longer wasn't a bad idea. While Jake seemed to be past the stage of wanting to hit Beck, that didn't mean he wouldn't do something equally boneheaded given half a chance.

At last, Jake drained his beer. "So what do I do now?"

Chavez gave him a sideways glance. "What do you *want* to do?"

"Be with her." Jake shot back the answer without a moment's hesitation. He squeezed his eyes closed for a moment. "Just put my arms around her, and make her safe, and make her happy." He looked across at Chavez and smiled bitterly. "She's not even going to want to talk to me, is she?"

Chavez tilted his head. "Right now? No, I shouldn't think so."

"Probably not even want to see me." Jake stared at his feet gloomily.

"Maybe not. But I think other people will. Like Stanley." Chavez pushed off the wall. "It is his wedding day and you are his best man. Come on." He jerked his head in the direction of the house. "Let's go see where they're up to, and we'll figure it out from there."

Jake was still sunk in thought as he followed Chavez back towards the house, wondering how he could have missed the signs: how good it had felt to hold her in his arms after they'd rescued her from Constantino; how furious her championing of Beck had always gotten him; how many excuses he'd found to hang out with her, work with her, simply be around her....

Rounding the corner of the house, he immediately tried to spot her in the crowd of guests. The dancing seemed to have just finished: everyone was clapping the musicians, and people were breaking up into small groups to talk. He craned his neck, looking for a flash of the color she was wearing.

"Oh, there you are, honey." His mom hurrying up to him temporarily distracted him from his search. "I was looking all over for you. Stanley and Mimi are about to cut the cake, and Bill's had a little bit too much to drink to...." She paused, peering up at him, the slightly stressed look on her face replaced by a frown. "Is everything all right?"

He swallowed down a bitter laugh. "Not really." When she reached out a hand to him, he added hastily, "I'll be okay." He tried to smile at her reassuringly. "What did you want me for?"

For a moment, he thought she wasn't going to let the subject drop. Then she gave a quick nod and patted his arm comfortingly. "Bill's supposed to be handing the cake around, but—."

Jake had just caught sight of Heather to his right, standing near the far corner of the house. He was dimly aware of Chavez at his side offering to help, and his mother thanking him, but he was too busy watching the way Heather was laughing, the way she brushed a lock of hair back from her face —

"Jake?"

He dragged his attention back to his mom. "Yeah, I'll...." He swallowed and focused. "Just tell me what to do."

Gail gave him another concerned look, but apparently decided getting the cake served was more important than dealing with whatever was going on with her son right now. Following her across to where the cake had been on display all afternoon, Jake shot another look back over his shoulder at Heather. He was relieved to see that their earlier confrontation didn't seem to have entirely ruined the wedding for her. Because, God, he'd been such a *jerk*.

He winced as he remembered the way he'd grabbed hold of her. The way he'd spoken to her. If he'd wanted to drive her straight into Beck's arms, he'd picked the perfect way to do it. He shook his head slightly. No: he'd already done that by being too stupid to understand what he felt for her—even though it had apparently been obvious to everyone else—and act on it. By ignoring her for a month after she kissed him, because it had been glorious and terrifying in equal measure, and he'd let his fear win out. *You had your chance, Jake....*

He realized everyone was clapping as Stanley and Mimi made the first cut into the cake, and he distractedly joined in. Then his mom appropriated the knife and began slicing the cake into small squares. As he picked up a stack of plates and waited for her to fill a large plate with slices of cake, he wondered bleakly if he could even salvage the friendship he'd had with Heather.

Woodenly, he took the plate his mom handed to him and headed off into the crowd, relieved when he realized that Chavez had positioned himself so as to make it natural for him to offer cake to the

guests around where Heather was standing, leaving Jake to serve the other side of the gathering. Moving from one group to the next, he cast another glance at Heather, and saw she was now talking to Trish. As he watched, she glanced up and her gaze fell on him. He saw her stiffen, staring at him for a moment. Then, quite deliberately, she took a step sideways so she could turn her back on him.

It was like a stab through the heart, but he couldn't blame her. Swallowing down his pain, he went on handing out cake, managing to make all the right noises when people talked to him. At last, he was done, and he could retreat to a quiet corner. Chavez spotted him and came over; though they didn't speak a word, Jake was grateful for the protective cover, because he wasn't sure he could hold things together much longer. He tried not to keep looking at Heather, because it didn't help, and she sure as heck didn't want to catch him staring at her again, but he couldn't help himself.

When dusk started to fall, people began to drift away, and he saw Heather and Beck leave together, hand in hand. He closed his eyes. Maybe not being friends with her any more was the best thing, because he wasn't sure he could handle seeing her with Beck. Even though he had to admit to himself now that Beck wasn't so bad. That most of his hate had been fueled not by what had happened at the hog farm—or by what Beck had done to Jericho—but by jealousy, pure and simple.

Much as it stuck in his gullet, he guessed he owed Beck an apology too.

After a few more minutes, his mom came and rounded the two of them up to lend a hand with some final clearing away before it got dark, and to help Jimmy pour Bill into the Taylors' car. Then, finally, mercifully, he could leave. Chavez bummed a lift with him, claiming Mack and Emily had skipped out without him—although Jake suspected he was still being babysat.

Dropping Chavez off in the center of town, Jake pointed the Roadrunner towards the ranch; when he got there, he found he couldn't actually remember making the trip. He couldn't recall anyone blaring their horn at him either, so he guessed he'd been paying some kind of attention. But mostly he'd been thinking about how he'd told Chavez that he wanted to be with Heather. Not just to kiss her, or to make love to her—though he shivered at the thought of them together like that, because, God, he wanted that too. No. Bumping down the track to the house in the near dark, he knew that what he wanted, what he really wanted, more than he'd ever wanted anything, was to spend the rest of his life with her.

And if that didn't happen? He had no one to blame but himself.

oOo

In the deepening dusk, Beck looked across at Heather as she negotiated Charlotte away from the Richmonds'. Her expression was hard to read, but she seemed to have gotten over whatever had upset her earlier. Or was putting a brave face on it, maybe, because he knew she'd been more shaken that she was prepared to admit when she came back to his side after powdering her nose. All she'd say at the time was that somebody had said something, and that it didn't matter, so he'd let it pass.

He wished she'd open up to him more, but—he shook his head slightly—he guessed he was one to talk. Maybe now....

They took the turn for the camp. The track was still rough, though they'd done some work patching it last winter, and the Dodge bumped along for another hundred yards, before Heather took her foot off the gas and let the pickup roll to a halt.

Beck raised his eyebrows, wondering if the truck had broken down again. "Is everything...?"

Putting on the parking brake, Heather killed the engine and turned to face him. She licked her lips. "I, uh...." She chuckled nervously. "I didn't want to say goodnight at the main gates." He frowned at her, unsure what she meant. She added hurriedly, "I mean, say goodnight properly. If you, ah...."

Her meaning hit him, and he felt such an idiot. "Yes." He nodded and held out his hand to her. "Yes. I—."

The rest of what he'd been going to say was lost as she scooted along the seat and threw herself at him with such force that he was rocked backwards. Her mouth didn't quite land on his, but they soon sorted that out as he pulled her to him. He had a moment to think that she was right, this wasn't something he wanted to do in front of the sentries, and then he gave himself up to kissing her back, and nothing else mattered for a while.

When they drew apart, he feasted his eyes on her. She was so beautiful! And he still couldn't quite believe that he really was holding her in his arms at last; that her lips had been sweet and welcoming under his; that her eyes were shining as she looked at him....

It had taken him a long while to admit he wanted this. He'd been attracted to her right from the start, true, but in the abstract sort of way a married man finds any smart, pretty woman attractive. Because he hadn't been anywhere near ready to give up on Alondra back then. Even though the rational part of him knew that there should have been news already: lists of names had been gathered in camps and towns across New Mexico, just like they were being gathered in Jericho and New Bern.

After official word came from the Red Cross, he'd let himself feel some of the grief he'd locked inside. And Heather had been there for him, offering what comfort she could. It was friendship—more than he'd looked for or could have hoped for—but he soon began to wonder if there was something more on her side, from the way she looked at him, the way she touched him. Guilt had held him back from taking more comfort, because in all the time he'd been apart from Alondra—more than half their married life together—he'd never once considered betraying her.

Yet Alondra was gone, and he knew she wouldn't want him to wall himself up in his grief. Would have been the first to tell him to be happy. And so, while his heart ached for Alondra, because it would never not ache for her, he let himself grow closer to Heather: accepting her invitations to dinner; unbending a little more when they talked; letting his eyes and his gestures speak for him. He hadn't been quite ready, even then, to take the next step—though he was pretty sure there would be a time he would be ready—but he didn't know if Heather would wait. She was so much younger than him, after all....

As if she could read his thoughts, she laughed gently and whispered, "I thought you were never...." She touched her fingertips to his lips.

He gave her an embarrassed smile. "I'm sorry. I'm slow."

"No." She rested her hand against his cheek. "It's okay. You've just looked like maybe you wanted to for a while...."

"I did." He drew her close again and murmured against her lips, "I do." He kissed her gently before pulling away and sighing. "But I have to get back to camp."

"I know." She slid back over to the driver's side, and he reluctantly let her go. She started the car and they began to head for the camp again. She glanced over at him. "You'll come to dinner Monday as usual?"

"Yes." He wished he could see her before then, but there was too much to do and, even with the selective deafness and blindness his staff had cultivated, he reckoned a few snatched moments in his quarters would be more frustrating than not seeing her at all. And Monday wasn't so far away, really.

When they reached the gate, she stretched out her hand, and he gave it a quick squeeze before he got out. As he watched her drive away, he began calculating the hours until they'd be together again.

oOo

A noise outside brought Stanley awake. Opening his eyes, he saw Mimi next to him, just like he had every day for the past year. Except now.... *My wife!* He watched her sleep for a moment, and then the sound that had woken him came again, a faint clatter. Judging from the light falling on the window, it was still very early. He twisted and squinted at the old-fashioned alarm clock on the nightstand and saw it said just after seven.

He slipped out of bed and padded to the window to peer out through the curtains.

"What is it?" Mimi's sleepy question came from behind him.

"Someone outside." Stanley snatched up pants and a shirt and pulled them on as he headed downstairs. Opening the front door, he found—

"Jake?" Stanley padded barefoot to the top of the steps and looked down at where Jake was stacking chairs together and carrying them towards the tailgate of a truck—borrowed from Dale to bring them and the tables over the day before—that he'd brought up to the house.

"Sorry, didn't mean to wake you." Jake gave him an apologetic, one-shouldered shrug.

"It's seven in the morning," Stanley pointed out. He shivered in the chill air. "I thought you guys were going to come over at ten or so to help clear up?"

Jake picked up another couple of chairs. "Couldn't sleep. Thought I'd make myself useful."

Stanley came down the stairs and caught Jake by the shoulder as he came back from the truck, forcing him to stop. Jake gave him a puzzled look. He'd obviously shaved that morning, but there was a pallor to his skin that, together with a puffiness around his eyes, suggested he hadn't slept at all.

Stanley frowned. "You okay?"

Again, Jake shrugged. He gave a choked laugh. "I'll live."

Which wasn't any kind of answer at all, and yet clear enough, Stanley thought, as he let go of Jake. "I'll go put some coffee on," he said, and Jake nodded silently in acknowledgment.

The chairs and tables were all squared away, back where they'd been borrowed from, by the time

anyone else turned up. When Stanley had headed back inside to get dressed properly, he'd merely told Mimi that it was Jake. He'd added, in response to her enquiring eyebrow, that there seemed to be something up with him, but didn't elaborate, before he headed off to the devastated kitchen—still filled with dirty plates from the day before—to unearth the coffee pot.

With the outside cleaned up, Jake helped his mom and Trish and Mimi do the dishes, drying them like an automaton while the three women chattered and laughed around him. Stanley managed to duck out of most of that part by seeing to the livestock, who'd had pretty short shrift the day before, but he saw the worried look Gail gave Jake as she and Trish headed off to return the plates back to their owners.

Jake, turning away, found himself waylaid by a bottle of beer that Stanley had purloined out of the fridge. The two of them settled themselves at the top of the steps by the front door. Stanley waited, watching Jake out of the corner of his eye as his oldest friend stared out at the view before them.

At last, Jake sighed and said wearily, "I think I screwed up."

Stanley took a pull on his beer. "So what's new?" Jake shot him an annoyed glance, and Stanley gave him an apologetic shrug. "So what is it this time?"

"Heather."

"Heather Lisinski?" Not that Stanley knew of any other Heathers, but she didn't seem like the sort to take offense, and he couldn't quite work out how Jake might have upset her.

Jake nodded. He twirled his beer bottle absently. "She's... getting mixed up with Beck."

"And that's news?" Stanley raised an eyebrow. "I guess they were a bit more obvious about it yesterday, but—."

"I tried to tell her to stay away from him." Stanley saw Jake clench his jaw. "She didn't take it well."

Stanley gave him an exasperated look. "I'm not surprised. It's nothing to do with you, Jake."

"It might be." Jake puffed out his cheeks. "I think I love her."

Stanley turned to look at him in disbelief. "Heather?" He knew she and Jake had hatched a few crazy schemes together, and there'd been that mad dash cross-country to rescue her from Constantino, but he'd never seen much evidence that they'd been anything more to each other than part of the tight-knit circle around City Hall that had seen the town through the past year. If he'd thought about it at all, he would've said Jake behaved around her much the same way he had around Bonnie.

Jake nodded again.

"Since when?" Suddenly, the fact Jake had split up with Emily was beginning to make a lot more sense. Although, wasn't that nearly a year ago now? If he'd ditched Emily for Heather, why hadn't he asked Heather out already?

Jake folded his arms on his knees and let out a snort. "Since I rescued her and that bus load of kids the day of the attacks?"

Which was eighteen months ago. And Jake had shacked up with Emily again in between. Stanley frowned at Jake. "I don't understand...."

Jake turned his head away and gave a wry laugh. "I didn't notice. Or maybe I did, but I pretended to myself I didn't. That it wasn't that big a deal."

Stanley thought about how he'd known he fancied Mimi from the moment he saw her. How he'd realized that she meant so much more to him than *that* when he'd tried to comfort her about the loss of her family and friends in DC, and there'd been nothing he could do. He stared at Jake in disbelief. "Why would you—?"

Jake shot him a shamefaced look. "Because I'm an idiot?"

Stanley was still trying to wrap his head around the idea that Jake had been in love with someone for eighteen months—someone who seemed to like him back well enough; someone who there was no good reason for him not to get involved with—and he'd done... what? Run away? "Have you told her how you feel?"

Jake laughed bitterly. "Not exactly." He took a swig of beer. "I told her she couldn't be with Beck. She pretty much told me to go to hell."

The sound of the door behind them opening made them both turn. Mimi paused on the threshold, looking down at them. "Hey, what's going on?"

oOo

Mimi saw Stanley and Jake exchange a look as Stanley shuffled along to make space for her next to him. He put his arm around her as she sat down. "Jake's making a mess of his love life."

On the other side of him, Jake huffed in annoyance.

Mimi leaned forward and peered around Stanley. She wasn't terribly surprised by the answer; she was just surprised that they were only now discussing it. In her opinion, though she'd been careful to keep it to herself in this case, Jake had been making a mess of his love life for the better part of a year. She caught his eye. "Let me guess? Heather?" It wasn't much of a guess, really; anyone with eyes could see Jake had a thing for her.

Jake put his head in his hands and groaned. "Does everyone—?"

Stanley shrugged. "Well, *I* didn't...."

Mimi rolled her eyes at him. *Almost* everyone: Stanley might be good at owning his own feelings—and she loved him for it, loved him for having been the one to say *I love you* first—but he could be pretty clueless where anyone else was concerned. He returned her look with a slightly annoyed glare, and then relaxed, his expression suggesting he'd conceded the point.

Mimi shifted her attention back to Jake. Seemed Jake had been clueless, too. Which would explain a lot. And if they were discussing it now.... "Something happened yesterday?"

Jake, his hands still covering his face, nodded, but didn't say anything. When Mimi gave Stanley a questioning look, he shrugged again. "They had a row. He saw her with Beck and—."

"Uh-huh." Mimi ran her mind back over the previous day. Those two had spent quite a lot of time in each other's company; she didn't think she'd seen one without the other. "I did notice they seemed to be... together."

Jake scrubbed his hands over his face and sat back up. He said wearily, "I saw them kissing."

"Oh? That together, huh?" Mimi had to admit to herself she'd missed that possibility. Not that she was *very* surprised; the major had clearly had a thing for Heather, too.

Stanley snorted. "Apparently, Jake was too dumb—or too pig-headed—to realize he was in love."

That definitely explained a lot. "But you figured it out when you saw her with someone else?"

The corner of Jake's mouth lifted in a wry smile "Kinda."

They sat in silence, Jake staring off into the middle distance, while Mimi eyed him thoughtfully, wondering what his intentions were and what he was going to do about them. What she and Stanley could do to help. She'd messed up enough times herself to know that charging in like a bull in a china shop wasn't always the best approach. But sitting back and suffering in silence didn't get you anywhere, either.

She also wondered, given Jake had been so clueless about his own feelings, whether he had any idea what Heather felt. Not that Mimi knew for sure, of course, but she thought she could make a good guess. Heather was a pretty private person, but some things you could read a mile off. Well—she glanced from Jake to Stanley and back again—unless you were a *guy*.

She cleared her throat. "You do know she's only with Beck because she thinks you're not interested?" When Jake looked across at her, startled, she shrugged and added, "Well, not *only*. I think she does have feelings for him. But... if you'd asked me a week ago, I'd've said *you* were the one she was in love with."

Jake continued to stare at her, his mouth hanging open slightly, his eyes wide; the resemblance to some of the fish she'd kept back in DC was quite startling, and she had to suppress the urge to laugh. That was so not going to help. Suddenly, he took a gasp of air, as if he'd forgotten to breathe and just remembered. "How—?" he croaked.

Mimi gave him a pitying look. Guys really could be such idiots. "The way she looks at you," she pointed out gently. "The way she talks about you. The way she acts around you."

Jake's expression was filled with hope for a moment. Then he sagged. He turned away and clenched the fist resting on his knee. "Yeah, well, she probably hates me now."

"Probably." Mimi suspected it was a lot more complicated than that. "Maybe you should try offering her an apology? At least fix that much?"

"Yeah, maybe." Jake drained his beer and put the bottle down. He stood and turned, looking down at them. "Thanks. For listening. And for letting me screw up your morning."

Without waiting for a reply, he shoving his hands into his jacket pockets and turned away, heading for the Roadrunner. Watching him go, Mimi hoped he could sort things out with Heather. Because she didn't think Jake was the kind of guy who'd take losing a woman like that at all well.

oOo

Relief washed over Gail as she heard the screen door clatter and turned to see Jake closing it behind him. She'd been afraid he'd cry off from the invitation to Sunday dinner; she knew how good he was at ducking out of difficult conversations, even with her.

"Hey." He bent and kissed her cheek. When he pulled back, she saw he looked a little less ragged than he had that morning, but there was still a bitter and unhappy look about him that his smile didn't quite disguise. He turned and, giving the oven a look, sniffed the air. "That smells good."

"I made your favorite." She patted him on the shoulder. "Now go lay the table."

He laughed and she knew he knew she was going to get whatever was bothering him out of him before the end of the evening.

They chatted about other things while they ate: whether Eric would carry on as sheriff now things were getting back to normal; if Gail would go on working at the clinic; about the reconciliation efforts that were going on with New Bern. Watching him devour her cooking, she sighed inwardly. It was nice having him home. She wondered if she should ask him to move back in. There was no reason for him not to, now; Emily had moved out months ago, back to her own place in The Pines to be with Colonel Davies, and Gail felt like she was rattling round the house on her own. But he sidestepped any discussion of his own plans for the future, and she didn't press him. Not yet.

It wasn't until Jake had cleared the dessert plates away, and she'd poured out the coffee, that she gestured at the table and said, "You do know all of this is just to soften you up so you tell me what's going on, right?"

Jake gave a short bark of laughter and sat back in his chair. "Yeah." He toyed with his coffee cup for a moment, before letting out a heavy sigh. "I screwed up again. Really, really screwed up."

Gail clasped her hands on the table and leaned forwards, suddenly dry mouthed, remembering the heartache and worry Jake had caused in the past.

He flicked a glance at her. "I think I met the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. And I think I lost her."

"Ah." Gail let out a breath. If that was all it was... although, judging by the expression on Jake's face, *all* didn't really cover it: this wasn't something he'd be able to shrug off as easily as a few nights in jail or the constant glowering disapproval of his father. Suddenly, she almost wished it was just another stupid prank or criminal scheme of Jonah's that he'd gotten mixed up in. Because she'd seen what thwarted love could do to a man.

As for who Jake was talking about.... Gail only had to think back over the past year to be able to make a guess. Things she'd seen herself; remarks that Eric and Mary had made; gossip she'd overheard at the clinic and in Gracie's Market. She just hadn't realized Jake had felt that strongly about her. Sounded like Jake hadn't either. In fact, hadn't Johnston told her that Heather had kissed Jake, months ago, not long after he came back to Jericho, and Jake had brushed her off? Well, he wouldn't be the first man to make that mistake.

He was still staring at his coffee cup, though Gail didn't think he was seeing it. "Heather?" she prompted.

He nodded.

"Does she know how you feel?"

He shook his head.

Gail raised an eyebrow. "Don't you think maybe you should tell her?"

"It's too late." Jake turned his head away, a pained look on his face. "She's with Beck now."

That wasn't much of a surprise, either. Although.... "Are you sure about that?"

Jake looked back at her. "I saw them together. At the wedding." When she opened her mouth to point out that she'd seen them at the wedding, too, and maybe Jake was reading too much into it, he forestalled her by adding flatly, "I saw them kissing." He turned his head away, grimacing again.

"Oh." Gail remembered how she'd seen him striding away from the house with that wild, unhappy look on his face, deaf to her calling out to him as he passed. She eyed him thoughtfully.

"You know," she picked up her coffee and took a sip, "your father was practically engaged to someone else when he and I met. Which I didn't realize at the time," she shrugged slightly, "but by the time I did, I'd fallen in love with him. And if he'd truly loved her and wanted to be with her, I—well, you wouldn't be here, and we wouldn't be having this conversation, now, would we?"

Jake snorted. "You think I should try split them up?"

"I think it's maybe not as settled as you seem to think it is. That maybe Heather's kissing Major Beck because you *didn't* kiss her."

Jake huffed again. "That's what Mimi said," he muttered. "That Heather was only with him because she thought I wasn't interested."

"Mimi's a smart woman." Gail reached out a hand to cover Jake's. "Maybe... maybe Heather really does love him and want to be with him. And if she does, you're just going to have to accept that. But sometimes women... settle. For a man who's good enough. Because they think they can't have what they really want."

Jake looked up at her, and she saw hope sparking in his eyes. It went against the grain to tell him to put himself in the middle of a couple, but she wasn't entirely sure he wasn't already in the middle of it. And she had to admit to herself that Eric and Mary seemed far happier together than Eric and April had ever done. That a good enough relationship was... good enough, but maybe everyone ended up unhappier in the long run. And she couldn't help but want her boys to have what she and Johnston had had.

She gave Jake's hand a squeeze. "If she never has a choice, maybe you'll all three come to regret that even more?"

"You think I should tell her?"

Gail hesitated a moment, and then nodded. "I think you should."

Heather cautiously steered Charlotte down the rutted track to the river. Her stomach fluttered as she saw the Roadrunner was already there. She'd almost chickened out of the meeting, afraid that she and Jake would end up in another row in which they'd both say hurtful things. She'd never expected him to be entirely happy that she and Edward were dating—she knew he only tolerated Edward for her sake, and she didn't expect him to forget what he'd suffered at Edward's hands—but the violence of his reaction when he'd cornered her at the wedding had scared her.

Yet she couldn't entirely blame him for getting mad. He was right that she'd never seen what Edward was capable of, even if she also was sure that Edward deeply regretted every moment of it. She knew Jake was only looking out for her: even if he didn't care about her in the way she'd once hoped, he did still care, and he didn't want her to get hurt. And he had seemed genuinely contrite about the way he'd acted at the wedding.

Though her heart had dropped like a stone when she'd first seen him hurrying towards her as she came out of City Hall earlier in the day to find some lunch. What did he want *now*?

She sped up, trying to pretend she hadn't noticed him, but he called her name, forcing her to stop. She halted and turned towards him as he hovered a few feet away.

"I...." He cleared his throat. "I wanted to say I'm sorry. What I said at the wedding—" He shook his head slightly. "The way I acted. I was totally out of line."

"Yes." She knew she sounded cold, but she couldn't easily forget how much he'd scared her. That he'd shown her a side of himself she'd never expected to see directed at *her*.

He nodded, accepting the censure in her tone. He carried on looking at her as if he wanted to say something more. She fiddled with the strap of her purse. "Was there—?"

"Yes." He swallowed. "Look, I know I have no right to ask you this after the way I behaved, but I really need to talk to you. In private."

He held her gaze; in his eyes, she saw misery and a little bit of fear, and she realized he did understand exactly how badly he'd screwed up. When she didn't answer, still unsure, he tilted his head and raised his eyebrows. "Please?"

She hesitated a moment longer, and then she nodded. She guessed she owed it to their friendship over the past year to try and patch things up.

So here she was, drawing Charlotte up next to the Roadrunner at the spot where they'd gone stargazing last week. Jake was leaning against the Roadrunner's hood, legs stretched out in front of him, gaze fixed on the water rippling a few feet away. He turned his head a little as Heather climbed out of the truck and approached him, acknowledging her presence with a slight nod, before he went back to contemplating the view.

Heather sighed quietly and settled herself next to him. Apparently, in Greenspeak, *I need to talk to you* meant *I'm going to be my usual inarticulate self*.

The silence between them stretched out, broken only by the humming of insects. "Well?" she prompted eventually.

He took a deep breath. "Everyone used to think I was the town screw up." He stopped and

swallowed before he went on. "Except for you." He turned to look down at her, his eyes dark with misery. "But you're the person I've screwed up with more than anyone."

Heather looked away, unnerved by the intensity of his expression. While she wasn't going to pretend the way he'd behaved hadn't been horrible, she wouldn't go as far as saying it was the worst thing he'd ever done. "Jake, that's not—."

He interrupted her before she could finish. "No, it's the truth. Please." He reached out for her hand where it lay on the hood between them and covered it with his own. Startled, she looked back at him. He caught and held her gaze. "Please. Just let me finish."

She nodded mutely, acutely aware of his touch on her skin as his fingers curled around hers. Apparently just because she was with Edward now didn't mean she was suddenly completely immune to Jake.

He looked at her for a moment longer, and then turned his gaze back to the river, although he didn't let go of her hand. "I...." He hesitated. "I guess when I came back to Jericho, I was still hung up on Emily."

Heather raised her eyebrows. What had that to do with what happened Saturday?

"Thought I was still in love with her." Jake twisted his head away a little and let out a small, choked laugh. "And then I met you." His hand tightened on Heather's. "And... the bombs? They weren't the only thing that turned my world upside down."

Heather's mouth suddenly went dry and she found it hard to breathe.

"But I didn't understand." Jake closed his eyes for a moment, a pained expression crossing his face. "You see, Emily was the only girl I'd ever been in love with. Since," he shrugged, "since forever, I guess." He snorted. "Even before I kissed her in sixth grade."

He'd begun stroking the back of Heather's hand with his thumb as he spoke, his touch gentle but like a thousand volts through her, although he still wasn't looking at her. Maybe he didn't dare. Because they both knew this speech was eighteen months too late.

He was still talking, still explaining. "So there I was, feeling this... connection with you and... absolutely clueless.... Thirty two years old, and falling in love, and terrified of what I was feeling because I didn't know what it meant, and terrified of what it *might* mean, because I'd hurt everybody I'd ever cared about in the end...." He let out a sharp breath.

"Jake...." Heather couldn't manage more than a whisper.

He hurried on, not letting her interrupt. "And I didn't want to hurt you. So I did what I always do. I ran away." He laughed bitterly. "And I just hurt you even more."

He pushed off the Roadrunner's hood so he could face her, his fingers now twined with hers. "I blinded myself to all the signs. I convinced myself I didn't care about you. But it's not true. I love you so much." He caught her gaze and she couldn't look away from what she'd wanted to see in his eyes all those months ago. "And I want to be with you so much. And I think I'm too late...."

He carried on looking down at her and she carried on looking back. Everything seemed to have slowed, become overbright—the light bouncing off the river; the buzz of the insects in the reeds;

the feel of the warm metal of the hood of the Roadrunner when she put out her other hand to steady herself; Jake's fingers linked with hers....

"Heather?" He edged a little closer to her, a hint of worry creeping into his expression.

She suddenly remembered to breathe, and took in a shuddering gasp, and the world came back into focus. "I—." She shook her head.

Taking another deep breath, she straightened, pushing away from the Roadrunner. She looked down at where he still held her hand and gently disengaged her fingers from his, before she backed up a step. Turning, she took a few more paces, and then halted and wrapped her arms around herself, trying to steady her breathing and stop feeling so dizzy. Trying to make sense of the muddle of thoughts bouncing around her head.

She thought she wanted to cry and scream and curl into a ball and... and maybe *hit* Jake, because this was all so *unfair*. Because she was still in love with him; had never stopped being in love with him, even as she'd come to love Edward. And because Edward was a good man, and a kind man, and she would never have let him fall in love with her, never encouraged him and shown she returned those feelings, if she'd had any hope that she and Jake had a future.

And because Jake had no right to throw this at her *now*, not when he knew she and Edward....

"Heather?"

Jake's voice was soft and full of concern—and longing; she could hear that now. She closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath, and then opened them and turned back to him.

He'd taken a couple of paces towards her and stopped, obviously unsure what to do next and afraid of crowding her. He looked as lost as she felt.

She licked her lips "You know, I...." She stopped, unsure what to say or how to say it. Taking another deep breath, she tried again. "Edward and I...."

"Yes. I know." His expression darkened, but he kept his voice level. "And if he's who you want to be with, I'm not going to stand in your way. You were right: I had my chance and I didn't take it, and that's entirely my fault. You had every right to find someone else who wasn't such a jackass." He took half a pace forward and added earnestly, "And I want you to be happy, Heather. I really do. I want you to do whatever makes you happy." He gave her one of those wry, lopsided grins that had always made her heart turn over. Still did. "I'd just rather it was me you were happy with."

She shivered, because, God knows, she'd wanted that too. Except now it was all a mess. Now someone was going to get hurt....

She closed her eyes again, and Edward's face swam before her, a shy smile on his lips, his eyes filled with admiration as he looked at her. She thought back to the first time she'd seen past his stern demeanour, to the compassion and kindness hidden beneath. Remembered the way slow understanding had grown between them as they'd worked together and drunk scotch together, each revealing themselves bit by bit. How good it felt to be in his arms, and how his lips on hers had tugged at something deep inside her. That he might have been slow to make the first move—for reasons she understood and didn't blame him for—but that she'd never doubted what he felt for her.

He was safe, and steady, and reliable, and she could imagine them building a future together. A

happy future. And yet—.

He wasn't Jake. Who drove her crazy in a hundred different ways, and yet whom she understood and who seemed to understand her so well that they could work alongside each other for hours scarcely needing to exchange a word. Whom she'd trust with her life, if not her heart.

Whom, even a few days ago, she would have flung herself at without a second thought if she'd known how he felt. She snorted to herself: if *he'd* known how he felt.

She opened her eyes and met his gaze. "You couldn't have told me this before?"

He looked at her unhappily and shook his head. "I'm sorry. I was too stupid to see...." He gave a wry laugh. "Even when I was yelling at you Saturday, I thought it was just...."

"Because it was Edward?" she finished for him. "Because of what he did to you, and Jericho."

He nodded, his gaze sliding away from hers. "Right. I thought it was just because it was him."

"Are you sure it's not?" Because how could she believe him, really believe him, after the way he'd behaved the past year or more. After all the mixed signals he'd sent out, how could she trust what she was hearing?

He stuck his hands into his pockets and shuffled his feet. "Yes. It wouldn't matter who you were with." He lifted his head and looked at her again. "I still wouldn't want you to be with him." He hunched his shoulders a little. "I want you to be with me. For ever."

She had to suppress the urge to giggle. Her, geeky Heather Lisinski, whose idea of a Saturday night date was an assignation with a leaking fuel pump, being pursued by two suitors like the heroine of some trashy Harlequin romance. Having the power to break a man's heart.

The urge to laugh died within her. Because that was what was going to happen here, wasn't it? She was going to have to choose, and someone was going to get hurt.

She ran a hand through her hair. "I need to think about this. I need to—." She backed away another step, fumbling in her pocket for her keys.

Jake hunched his shoulders further. "Sure." His voice sounded as hoarse as hers.

She turned away from him and groped her way into Charlotte, scrabbling the key into the ignition, praying the car would start, thankful when it did.

Driving away, she couldn't stop herself glancing in the rear mirror at the lonely-looking figure she'd left behind.

oOo

Beck rapped softly on Heather's front door, his heart racing a little at the prospect of seeing her again. She seemed to take longer than usual to answer, but he put that down to his own impatience. At last, there was a sound from behind the door, and it opened.

"Oh." She gave him a slightly surprised look. "Hey. Er... come in."

She stepped back, and he followed her inside, wondering if he'd got the wrong day. She had said Monday—as usual—hadn't she? And he knew it was definitely Monday: he'd been counting down the forty seven hours since they'd said goodnight on Saturday. There was a distinct lack of the kind of delicious cooking smells he'd come to expect, as well. Maybe she'd just got home later than expected and was running behind.

As she shut the door behind them and turned, he took a step back towards her. Reaching out and cupping her cheek, he drew her lips to his, the way he'd been thinking about doing the whole drive into town. She tasted as sweet as he remembered as she accepted the kiss, but the passion with which she'd kissed him back last time was lacking. He drew away. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes." She paused and then gave him a look of frightening honesty; he hadn't seen such hopelessness in her eyes since he'd had her arrested. "No."

She pulled away from him, and headed for the fire, crouching down to prod viciously at the embers with the poker. He looked at her hunched shoulders for a moment, before he followed her and knelt next to her.

"Heather? What is it?"

She dropped the poker with a clatter and sat back on her heels, not looking at him. "I talked to Jake today."

Beck tilted his head, trying to catch her gaze—unsuccessfully. "Did he say something to upset you?" He was wondering if it had been Jake who'd said whatever had bothered her so much at the wedding. He couldn't imagine Jake would be at all happy at developments between them.

"You could say that." Heather gave a little hiccup, halfway between a sob and a laugh. "He told me he was in love with me. That he wants to be with me."

Beck felt like he'd been punched in the gut. He'd suspected Jake had feelings for Heather from the moment she'd walked into the Sheriff's Office more than a year ago. The way he'd acted when Constantino had kidnapped Heather had confirmed there was something going on there. He'd also thought Heather might be in love with Jake too, though perhaps reluctantly. But they'd seemed content to remain friends, while Heather had showed Beck, slowly and shyly, that *he* was important to her.

And now, just hours after Beck had kissed Heather, Jake had decided to tell her he loved her? Beck swallowed down his anger: if this had been a military campaign, Jake's move would have looked an awful lot like trying to deny resources to the enemy. And that Heather was so visibly upset by it, wasn't just laughing it off, suggested....

Unclenching his fists, he said very gently, "And are you in love with him? Do you want to be with him?"

She put her hands to her face. "I don't know," she whispered. She began to rock backwards and forwards. "Oh Edward, I'm so sorry, so sorry, so...."

Pity welled up in him. He knew the confusion in his own heart of a new love overlaying an old one. There was no possibility of Alondra walking in and telling him she still loved him, but if she had—. He shook his head: of course he would go back to her; they'd been married fifteen years. But that didn't mean that what he felt for Heather was any less real. Or that there wouldn't have been a

moment when he didn't know where his loyalties lay.

Without thinking about it, he reached out and turned her towards him Gently he pried her hands from her face. "Shhhh...." He bent his forehead to touch hers. "Shhhh. It's OK."

"It's not. It's not." Hot tears were running down her cheeks.

He shuffled forwards so he could gather her into his arms. She let him pull her against his shoulder, and he rocked her gently, stroking her hair. To see her like this was painful, and yet a part of him whispered that her misery indicated that maybe her feelings for him ran as deep as her feelings for Jake. That maybe his first instinct—she'll choose *him*—was wrong.

For an instant, he regretted saving Jake from Constantino. But no, he would have lost Heather as well. Even if she'd survived, she might have blamed him for Jake's death in the way she'd never seemed to blame him for what happened at the hog farm. And he wasn't sure how he would have made it through the past year without her friendship.

As her sobs quieted, he found himself growing aware of how good it felt to have his arms around her. He hated that it was because she was miserable, and that he was part of the reason—though Jake, damn him, was most of it. Why did he have to go stirring the pot? Why couldn't he just let her be happy? But it was still unfairly wonderful to be so close to her, breathing in her scent, feeling her warmth against him. Hadn't he been hoping that, after they'd eaten dinner, they'd have settled on the couch in front of the fire, and there would have been rather less talking than usual...?

He realized that Heather had stopped crying, and that his knees were protesting his abuse of them. He shifted slightly, trying to ease them, and Heather stirred as well. Her hand gripped his arm a little more tightly, as if to keep him moving away from her, and he unconsciously tightened his own arm around her, not wanting to let her go.

Squinting down at her, he said her name softly.

She sighed, and then gently pushed herself away from him, sitting back, but with her hands still on his chest. She looked up and met his gaze, and gave a nervous chuckle. "I'm sorry. This is... inappropriate of me, isn't it?" When he gave her a puzzled look, she added, "Letting you... comfort me. That probably isn't very fair when I'm...."

Crying over another man. He silently finished the thought for her.

She let her hands fall away from him, but he caught them before she could let them drop to her lap. He cleared his throat. "No. It's all right. I was your friend before...."

She nodded and gave his hands a squeeze. "I know."

He stroked her knuckles with his thumbs, while he held her gaze, trying to read what she was thinking. "Do I get a chance to plead my case?"

She bit her lip and looked down. "It's not like that."

He eyed her bent head, still unsure of his place in the scheme of things. Jake's place. "What is it like?"

She was quiet for a long moment. Then she sighed. "I haven't forgotten all the reasons why I... want

to be with you. Why I wanted you to want to be with me." She lifted her gaze to his. "But I can't forget the same things about Jake."

"Why you want to be with him?" When she nodded, he asked, the words hard to form as his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, "And those reasons are stronger?"

She shook her head. "They're... different." She pulled one of her hands from his and reached up and gently touched his face. "I didn't fall in love with you *just* because I couldn't have Jake, you know. If I'd never known him, I would still...."

He leaned into her touch, closing his eyes and savoring it, while she went on talking.

"But I *did* let myself fall in love with you because I thought I couldn't have him. I was tired of making myself miserable over him, and I knew I needed to move on. And I didn't just pick the nearest man—." She chuckled. "Even if you were. There are so many reasons for me to love you...."

She took her hand away. He opened his eyes again to see her looking at him unhappily.

"But now Jake wants me." She gave a harsh laugh. "Or says he does. And now I don't know what I want...."

oOo

Heather was still no closer to working out what she wanted as she roamed around the house later that night. Closing the door behind Edward as he left, she'd felt a mixture of regret and relief. He'd offered to stay or go, whichever she preferred. She'd hesitated for a moment, and then asked him to leave. Much as she wanted the comfort he'd provide as a friend, it would have been cruel on him. And perhaps, without him there, she'd be able to think more clearly.

It didn't seem to be helping. She stopped again by the bookshelves where the pictures of her parents stood, and ran her hand across the frame of the nearest one. Not for the first time that evening, she wished they were still alive and she could ask their advice. Instead, she was stuck with going over the same arguments again and again.

The thought of being with Jake made her dizzy—but she didn't know if she could trust him. He apparently hadn't known his own mind for the past year and a half: what if he changed it again, or realized he'd simply made a mistake. What if... what if he was just using her to get his revenge on Edward? No. She dismissed that last possibility from her mind; Jake didn't use people like that, wouldn't use *her* like that. But maybe seeing her with Edward had made him afraid he'd lose her as a friend, and he'd panicked and decided the only way to hold on to her was to tell her he loved her. And then, in a month or two, he'd realize he'd made a horrible mistake and that, while he cared about her, he didn't care about her like *that*.

Whereas with Edward she had no doubts. He wasn't the kind of man to kiss any woman lightly, though she suspected his being posted away shortly had hurried him into it. She certainly didn't think he was seeking comfort with her as a way to deal with Alondra's death; if that had been the case, he would have kissed her months ago. If anything, he'd held back: there'd been a lot of moments recently when he'd almost looked like he was going to make his move.

The trouble was, while it felt good to be in his arms and to be kissed by him, and she liked and respected him, and enjoyed his company, it was a pale shadow of what she had with Jake. Not just the physical attraction, but how she and Jake seemed to think the same way. Finishing each other's

sentences, sparking ideas of each other. When Jake hadn't been making her blush with those little gestures she'd thought were meaningless—except it turned out they *weren't*—they'd been comfortable around each other, like they'd known each other forever. Like they were family. Being with Jake was just... right.

Except maybe he was all wrong about what he said he felt. How could she *know*?

When it grew late enough, she climbed into bed, but sleep eluded her. Turning the bedside lamp back on, she tried to find a book to read, but she kept gravitating to titles she'd loaned to Edward, remembering the discussions they'd had, and how she'd learned his tastes, and tried to choose things she'd thought he'd enjoy.

Frustrated, she headed into the kitchen to make herself a warm drink. There, the sheer normality of every act—of having returned to what life had been like before the September attacks, when you didn't think twice about taking milk from a cold fridge and heating it in the microwave, and reaching into a well-stocked cupboard for a sachet of hot chocolate—kept reminding her of how she'd worked with Jake on one project or another. Like putting up the wind turbines so there was power; figuring out how to use the sun to get hot water; organizing the older teenagers to help with farmwork—milking cows, harvesting crops—when they didn't have the gas to do stuff mechanically.

Climbing back into bed with the drink, she tried to distract herself with an unfinished crossword puzzle—although even that reminded her of the conversation she'd had with Jake right before she left for New Bern. As she finally drifted off into an uneasy sleep, she reflected it seemed like everything in her life was tangled up with one of them or the other.

oOo

Keep busy. That was what Beck kept telling himself over the next few days. Because it was better than not being busy. Because it left no time for thinking: about what he'd found and what he was probably about to lose. Even if those thoughts still snuck up on him unexpectedly from time to time. And shook him up more than he cared to admit, and made it hard to concentrate on what he was so busily occupying himself with.

Besides, there was a lot to do now that he and his troops were going to be officially reincorporated into the US Army. Writing up recommendations for field promotions to be confirmed and medals to be awarded. Putting in place transport to send his men home on leave, and dealing with the fact that, for some of them, home was in AS-controlled territory still, and they needed to make other arrangements for them. Not to mention the headache of keeping a lid on a camp of several hundred soldiers who mostly no longer had any kind of duty and were more than ready to celebrate their part in the War being over.

At least all of that kept him mostly out at the camp, and there'd been no official need to meet with Heather. When he'd needed to go into town on Wednesday to consult with Eric and meet with Gray, he was relieved not to run into her at City Hall. Not that he didn't want to see her desperately, and for things to be all right between them. But to meet publicly as things were now would have been too painful and difficult.

Leaving City Hall, he was forced to pause at the bottom of the steps while a truck—one of Dale's, he guessed—did a u-turn and rumbled back down Main Street. As he headed to where his humvee was parked, he noted a second truck being unloaded out front of the supermarket.

"Major!"

He halted, still a few paces from the humvee, and slowly swiveled around. Jake was crossing the street towards him.

Beck let turning to look at his nemesis be all the acknowledgment he gave the other man. Jake's stride faltered a little, and then he came on, stopping a few paces away. Beck met his gaze with a stony expression, lips pressed together, though anger was boiling inside him. Probably a good thing that his M-16 was stashed inside the humvee, yards away.

"Major," Jake repeated. He hesitated, clearly taken aback by the animosity Beck knew he was radiating, before taking a deep breath and plunging on. "I... I owe you an apology."

Beck raised his eyebrows. If Jake owed anyone an apology, it was Heather.

Jake gave a small shrug. "I've been pretty hard on you the past year. Even after we... sorted a few things out between us, I never gave you enough credit for what you did for the town. I never gave you the respect you deserved. I just wanted to say I'm sorry, and that I was wrong."

"Respect?" Beck took a step forward and spat the word at Jake. He couldn't believe that Jake would dare to say it after what he'd done. "Maybe you could have shown a little respect by not using someone I care about to get your revenge on me? Maybe you could have shown *Heather* a little respect?"

Jake took a pace back, holding out his hands on either side—to calm Beck, or to get ready to defend himself, Beck wasn't sure. "I.... That's not why...."

Beck took another couple of quick paces, closing the distance between them. "Do you think I'm an idiot? You had a whole *year*. And the moment I—. The moment she and I—." He glared up at Jake. The other man's height didn't intimidate him; he'd spent his whole military career facing down guys who were taller than him.

This time, Jake didn't back away, though he shifted his posture slightly, and Beck realized he was offering to let Beck take a swing at him, perhaps because he thought he deserved it, or at least owed Beck. He met Beck's gaze. "I'm sorry about that too," he said quietly. "You're right. I had a year, and it wasn't until I saw her with you that I...." He stopped and swallowed. "I love her. I want to make my life with her. I'm sorry that I didn't see that until—."

Looking into Jake's eyes, Beck realized that—at this particular moment, at least—Jake was sincere in what he was saying, or at least believed he was sincere. Either that, or he was a far better liar than Beck had ever given him credit for.

Suddenly, Beck didn't have the energy to be angry about how badly Jake had mishandled this—what was done was done—though there was still plenty else to be angry about. And Heather certainly wasn't going to be happy if the two of them ended up brawling in the middle of Main Street over her. What mattered was the future. What mattered was Heather.

Pressing his lips together for a moment, he tried to make sure what he said next came out in an even tone that wouldn't put Jake's back up. "I told you once we needed to bury the hatchet, for Heather's sake." When Jake nodded, he carried on. "Well, I guess I need to take my own advice. It's Heather's choice, now. If we both care about her, we'll both behave like... grown men."

Jake took a step back, putting up his hands as a sign he didn't want to fight. "You'll get no argument from me on that."

Before Jake could take another pace back, Beck reached out and caught his sleeve, his fist bunching in the material. "But let me make one thing very clear. If she chooses you," Beck swallowed, because the thought hurt so much, "and you make her unhappy, so help me God, I *will* hunt you down, and what I did to you at the hog farm will be *nothing* in comparison."

Jake didn't react for a moment, and then he gave a curt nod. "If I make her unhappy, then, God help me, I hope you do."

Gently disengaging himself from Beck's grip, he took another step back, before he turned and walked back toward the truck. Watching him go, Beck thought the way Jake had taken that exchange said more than mere words ever could.

oOo

Heather sat at her desk Thursday morning trying to type up a report. She'd managed to spend most of the last two days out of City Hall, which had helped her to avoid meeting Edward. A casual remark from Eric on Tuesday had suggested Jake was busy making runs to Topeka for Dale, so there'd been little chance of running into him either. Even so, the days had been a blur—the result of too little sleep and her mind churning in an endless loop—and she'd gotten odd looks from people that suggested she wasn't quite as outwardly together as she hoped.

Nor inwardly: she was finding it hard to concentrate on the report she was working on. She was almost glad when a familiar voice greeting Jimmy drew her attention away from the screen, and she looked up to see Edward making his way round the counter and towards the Sheriff's Office.

He exchanged a stiff nod with her as he passed her desk, and she twisted to watch him as he went into the small glass cubicle and greeted Eric. The tension in his shoulders told her, even more than the careful blankness of his face, how much he was hurting. Biting her lip, she bent back to her work but, after a while, she realized she'd been unsuccessfully trying to reword the same paragraph for fifteen minutes. Perhaps a break and a cup of coffee would help.

Making her way to the small kitchen at the back of City Hall, she found the coffee pot was empty, and most of the cups dirty. She closed her eyes for a moment, because, *dammit*—. With a weary sigh, she opened her eyes again, and began gathering cups and dumping them in the sink, turning on the hot water so she could wash everything out in preparation for making a fresh brew.

The cups were clean at last, and she was fighting with the coffee pot—you had to line up the filter funnel just so, and you would've thought she'd have got the hang of it after a year—and she was almost in tears, because it was just the *last straw*, when—.

"Here. Let me...." Edward's voice was soft in her ear as he reached past her and helped her seat the funnel.

"Thanks." She half-turned and stopped, because the kitchen was too small, and he was too close.

He met her gaze, and took a step back, apparently realizing how uncomfortable he was making her. He raked his gaze across her face. "Are you all right?"

She nodded wordlessly, because the answer was *not really*, and she could see how unhappy she was

making him. She swallowed, trying to counteract the lump in her throat. "I'm sorry I'm taking so long. That I haven't—."

He closed his eyes briefly and then met her gaze again. "It's all right." He reached out, as if he was going to touch her arm, and then froze for a moment, before he dropped his hand. "Take all the time you need." He flicked his gaze to the coffee pot and tilted his head. "I'll come back when that's ready."

After he left, she leaned against the counter, looking for all the world like she was just waiting for the coffee to brew, but trying to get her emotions under control, trying not to cry. Because he was so miserable, and she could make him happy, she knew she could. And yet she didn't know if that would make *her* happy.

oOo

"Kinda confusing having a choice, isn't it?"

Heather looked up, startled out of her thoughts as she stood in front of the shelf of cake and brownie mixes in Gracie's Market. After she'd carried a cup of coffee back to her desk and found she still couldn't concentrate, she'd decided to take an early lunch break and shop for groceries. Even that seemed to require more decision-making ability than she was capable of; Mimi's words as she stopped next to Heather had sprung her from a dispirited attempt to choose one packet over another.

"Yes. Yes it is." Heather attempted to return Mimi's smile as she reached out and picked up the chocolate cake mix.

Mimi hefted the half-filled basket she was carrying. "Stanley and I are still living on leftovers from the wedding, but we needed a few things." She nodded at Heather's cart. "Fancy grabbing a coffee in Bailey's when we're done?"

Heather dropped the cake mix into the cart. "I should—." She stopped. What did she have to rush back for? In fact, the longer she stayed away, the less likely she'd run into Edward again. She looked up at Mimi and forced herself to smile back. "Thanks. I'd like that." She surveyed the items in her cart. "I still need a couple more things."

"I'll meet you over in Bailey's." Mimi dipped her head and turned on her heel to make her way to the checkout.

Heather hurried to pick up the final few items, so as not to keep Mimi waiting too long, but when she got to Bailey's, Mimi didn't seem bothered. She'd installed herself in one of the booths, and apparently already placed their order, because she simply waved at Mary to bring it over while Heather was settling her grocery bags.

There was a moment's silence after their coffees arrived while Mimi sat looking at her thoughtfully. Heather glanced away, trying not to squirm—she suspected her makeup wasn't doing a particularly good job of disguising the ravages of the last few sleepless nights—and cast about for a topic of conversation. "So," she cleared her throat, "how's married life treating you?"

Mimi made a non-committal noise. "It's not so different from before. Mind you," she leaned forward, resting her arms on the table, "Jake's been spending so much time out at the farm the past few days, I'm beginning to wonder if I accidentally married *him*." Heather looked back, startled by the mention of Jake's name, and Mimi caught her gaze and held it. "Seems he has a little bit of

woman trouble."

Heather stiffened, her spoon clattering against her cup. "That's—."

"None of my business?" Mimi gave her an amused look. "Yeah, I know. When did that ever stop me?" She gave Heather a conciliatory smile. "Just hear me out, okay?"

"Okay." Heather slumped back in her seat. Why did everyone in this damn town think they could poke their noses into everyone else's affairs?

"Look," Mimi sighed, "I'm not going to tell you who to choose. I can see lots of reasons why you'd want to be with Major Beck. Not my type—but hey, I never thought a hick farmer from nowheresville would be my type, either. And I can see he's got a lot going for him. Steady, reliable, not afraid to show he cares for you right from the off. Everything Jake's not, right?"

Heather snorted and nodded.

"Whereas Jake." Mimi briefly closed her eyes and shook her head despairingly. "He acts like he wants you, and then he acts like he doesn't. And then he acts like he does, but he doesn't *do* anything about it—until some other guy, who he's done a pretty good job of hating up to that point, makes a move, at which point he starts declaring his undying love for you." Mimi leaned back and threw her hands up in the air. "And then he wonders why you don't fall into his arms immediately and instead ask him whether it's just that he doesn't want you to be with Beck."

Heather fiddled with her coffee cup. "It's hard not to think that...."

"The thing is," Mimi leaned forward again, "when Jake talks about you... he talks about *you*. He keeps telling us stories about all the stuff you did together. About how it was your idea how to get gas from Murthy's, and how brave you were when the schoolbus crashed, and the two of you building those stupid model airplanes. I'm beginning to feel like I know more about what you spent the past year doing than I know about what I did."

Heather looked away, blushing. "I'm sorry he's—."

Mimi reached across and put her hand on Heather's. "He's not. It's no trouble. He's Stanley's oldest friend, and I wouldn't be here if he hadn't kept Goetz from me. But what I meant to say is that he barely mentions Beck, and when he does...." Heather felt Mimi shrug. "He's not mad at him, or bitter, or angry."

Heather looked back at her, and Mimi smiled and squeezed her hand in confirmation.

"So...?" Heather asked uncertainly, not quite sure what point Mimi was trying to make.

Mimi sat back and spread her hands. "It's your choice. But I don't think Jake's doing this out of spite, or because he's afraid he's going to lose you as a friend. If you want to know what I think, I think he really does love you."

oOo

One side of the command tent was rolled up to let in some light and fresh air as Beck and Colonel Davies discussed final arrangements for leave for the soldiers whose homes were in AS territory. Beck broke off from the point he was making at an apologetic cough from his aide.

"Sir. Miss Lisinski is on her way to see you."

Beck nodded curtly in acknowledgment, unable to speak, because he'd hadn't seen her since he'd run into her in the kitchen at City Hall the day before. And because, if she was coming *here*....

Davies stretched and yawned ostentatiously. "I could do with a breath of fresh air. Why don't I step outside and stretch my legs, while you two discuss whatever it is you have to discuss." There was a hint of amusement in his voice that jolted Beck, until he remembered that the last time Davies had seen him with Heather had been at the wedding.

But he was grateful for Davies' tact. Whatever was coming, best to get it over as soon as possible. Nodding to Davies as he left, Beck retreated to his private quarters, giving orders that Heather was to be shown straight in.

He resisted the urge to pace while he waited the few minutes it took her to reach the command tent. He could hear her exchange a greeting with his aide, and then she was pushing aside the tent flap and stepping through. He realized he was standing to attention—just like he had when his company commanders had decided his fate—and he made a conscious effort to relax. But one look at her face told him her choice.

"It's Jake, isn't it? You've chosen Jake?"

She nodded, and he saw a little bit of the tension go out of her shoulders, probably in relief that he'd guessed and she didn't have to say it. She took a step closer, licking her lips nervously before she spoke. "I'm sorry. I had to."

He nodded and dropped his head. It wasn't that he hadn't expected it—he'd never really thought he had more than a glimmer of a chance—but to actually hear her say it. To hear that *had to*....

He sensed her moving and felt her hand on his arm. "Oh, Edward!" Her voice cracked slightly. "It's not that I don't care about you, or don't think I could have been happy with you. That we couldn't have made each other happy."

"We still could," he whispered, his voice hoarse.

He felt rather than saw her shake her head. "Only if Jake hadn't.... Only if I'd carried on thinking that it was all on my side, and I needed to put it behind me as a silly mistake. But knowing that Jake *does* love me—."

He couldn't stop himself asking, "You really believe that?"

She took a moment to answer, and then she sighed. "Yes. Whether he loves me as much as he says he does.... Whether it'll last...."

He heard the edge of fear in her voice; that, more than anything, told him how much she wanted things to work out with Jake.

She squeezed his arm gently. "Don't you see. If I don't try, a little part of me would always be wondering, *what if?* And I think a part of you would always be wondering if I'm wondering. And that's no way for us to live."

He wanted to tell her that she was wrong, that he'd take her however she came. But he couldn't, because he knew she was right. She'd been in love with Jake long before Beck had come to Jericho. Long after, too. And every time Beck kissed her, a little voice of doubt in the back of his mind would ask whether she was comparing him to Jake. Every silly argument between them would have him afraid she was regretting her choice. His doubt would be like a canker at the heart of their relationship and, no matter how hard he tried to cut it out, it would eat away at them both.

He looked up and met her gaze, and nodded. It killed him to say it, but he knew she needed to hear it from him: "You should be with him."

She closed her eyes for a moment, letting out a long breath. Opening her eyes, she managed to give him a half smile. "Thank you." She swallowed. "You're a good man, Edward. Better than I deserve."

He shook his head, because it wasn't that. He just knew when a battle was lost and it was time to retreat. When to fight on would just be a waste of lives.

Reaching up, he cupped her face in his hand and leaned forward to gently kiss her on the cheek. "Be happy, Heather," he murmured, holding her close for just a moment longer, breathing in her scent, knowing this would be the last time.

When he pulled back, he met her gaze again. "And remember. I'll always be your friend. No matter what."

"I will." She put up her hand to circle his wrist, her fingers warm and gentle on his skin. With a sigh, he drew away, but she caught his hand as he let it fall and squeezed it. She held his gaze and whispered with surprising intensity, "Be safe."

He nodded, and then she was gone.

He stood still for a moment, and then he turned and leaned his hands on the table, swallowing down the bile in his throat, because the pain was like a knife in the guts. Because even though he'd known this was the most likely outcome, he'd still *hoped*....

He didn't know how long he stood there before a gentle rap on a the tent frame and quiet cough from just outside his quarters brought him out of the black thoughts churning through him. "Sir? Colonel Davies is back."

He sucked in a deep breath, and straightened. "I'll be right there." Forcing his features into what he hoped passed for composure, he pushed back out into the main tent.

Davies was standing by the table, reading through some pf the papers they'd been working on. He looked up, his gaze sweeping over Beck. Apparently whatever he saw confirmed something, because he nodded his head slightly and made a non-committal noise in the back of his throat. But all he said was, "Afraid we'll have to truck your guys down there. Take three, four days, maybe. Would love to fly 'em, but we're still getting refinery capacity back on stream and we need all our aviation fuel for the flyboys."

Beck nodded, trying to claw his mind back to their interrupted discussion as he crossed back to the table and the scattered documents. There was a trick you learned on the battlefield, when you blanked off whatever had just happened and went on, because if let yourself get distracted thinking about it, you'd pretty soon be dead too. And the comforts of one hundred and thirty seven soldiers

were far more important than whatever was troubling their commanding officer.

He and Davies went on talking for a while, but Davies was soon shuffling the papers together and saying, "I think we're pretty much done here." He slid the papers back into the folder they'd come from. "All these arrangements," his tone was a shade too casual, "put me in mind that you'll be leaving Jericho soon yourself, and I never did show you any of our Texan hospitality. Got my hands on a bottle of George Dickel Special Barrel Reserve back at The Pines that it'd be a shame to drink alone." He looked up at Beck, eyebrows raised, leaving the unspoken invitation hanging.

Beck blinked, trying to stave off the sudden rush of emotion that replaced the numbness he'd been carefully cultivating, as he realized Davies was offering more than just good-quality whiskey. He didn't like that it was so transparently obvious what had happened, but he was touched by the other man's offer. He'd been so focused on Heather, on what she meant to him, that he'd almost forgotten there were other people around him who might care even a little for his suffering. Most of them—those under his command—could only show their concern in small ways; he didn't think he'd ever had a week of such smart salutes and prompt reports. But Davies wasn't part of his chain of command or bound by those protocols.

Beck dipped his head. "Thanks." He cleared his throat. "I'd, uh, appreciate a taste of that." And whatever conversation went with it.

oOo

The warmth of the afternoon was beginning to drain away as Jake concentrated on forking used bedding from the barn, trying not to think that about how it had been just a week ago, just about now, that he'd finally understood his feelings for Heather. A week that had seemed to last forever while he waited for her to make up her mind, growing ever more despondent that the delay meant she would choose Beck.

"Jake?"

The soft voice behind him made his heart leap. He turned and saw her standing just outside the door, the late afternoon sun making a nimbus around her.

"I—." She gave a nervous cough and twisted her hands together. "I made up my mind."

He leaned on the pitchfork, his heart suddenly pounding. "And...?"

She shrugged slightly. "I'm here, aren't I?"

It took a moment for her words to sink in, and then he let the pitchfork drop and strode across to her, stripping off his work gloves as he went. Reaching her, he caught her face between his hands and kissed her, trying to keep the kiss gentle, but wanting her, wanting her oh so much. And then she was kissing him back, her arms around his neck to pull him close, and he slid his hands down her shoulders to draw her against him, letting out all his pent-up desire and fear and hope in a deep kiss that seemed to last forever.

At last he broke the kiss and wrapped his arms around her, resting his cheek against her hair. They didn't speak, just held each other tightly, while he reveled in the feel of her against him.

A soft nicker and a stamp from behind him eventually dragged him back reluctantly to the real world. He pulled back, cradling her face between his hands, and smiled down at her apologetically.

"I, uh, need to finish seeing to the horses. And," he suddenly remembered what he'd been doing right before she'd turned up, "I should clean up...."

She giggled nervously. "It's okay." She put her palms flat against his chest. "It's kinda... manly...." Her cheeks dimpled as she chuckled, and he laughed with her. "Maybe I can help?"

He glanced down and noticed she was wearing a pretty dress, and strappy shoes that were flat but not best suited to the barn. He shook his head. "I'm almost done. Why don't you go into the house and fix us a cold drink, and I'll be with you in a few minutes."

"Okay." She stood on tiptoe and gave him a quick kiss on the lips, before sliding out of his arms and skipping away towards the house.

oOo

He didn't think he'd ever finished the chores and showered so fast. When he came downstairs, hair still damp and tousled, he found Heather sitting on the porch, looking out at the horses cropping grass in the paddock. He stopped in the doorway and watched her for a while, his breath catching at how beautiful she was, while he marveled that she was here, finally here....

She turned and caught him looking and jumped in surprise. "How long have you been there?" she asked accusingly.

"A few minutes." He grinned unrepentantly.

She blushed and turned away to busy herself with a tray she'd placed on the low table in front her. "I got us some lemonade. I could make some sandwiches if you...."

He padded across to her on bare feet and put his hands on hers to still her from re-arranging the glasses. She looked up at him again and he bent down and kissed her gently, savoring the taste of her and the feel of her. She accepted the kiss quietly, almost tentatively, and he realized she was as nervous and scared and excited as he was

He drew back and settled himself next to her. "Lemonade sounds good."

She leaned forward to pour a glass for each of them and handed one to him. When she sat back, he slipped his arm around her and pulled her close. She sighed quietly and relaxed against him, resting her head on his shoulder, feeling so right, feeling like she'd always been there and she always belonged there.

They sat like that for a while as the light slowly faded. Jake sipped his drink, and thought about the road he'd traveled since that fateful day of the September attacks. About how much he'd lost and how much he'd gained. About all that they'd endured, and how the woman at his side had made it so much more bearable. About how he probably didn't really deserve this amazing gift that had been given to him, after the way he'd behaved, but he wasn't going to complain.

He turned and squinted down at Heather, wondering if her thoughts ran in the same direction. "You're quiet." He dropped a kiss into her hair.

She shrugged slightly. "Nothing to say. Too happy." She reached up and covered his hand where he cupped her shoulder. Then she tensed. "Oh god, should I be saying something?" Her fingers tightened on his. "Is there something I should have said? Is there something you want me to—?"

He chuckled, and she stopped talking, twisting round to bestow an anxious look on him. He smiled at her happily. "That's my Heather." Another chuckle escaped him. "I love it when you babble."

Her anxious look turned annoyed for a moment, and then she relaxed again and lightly biffed his hand with hers. "Nobody makes me babble like you, Jake Green."

"I know." He smirked at her.

Giving him a look that, this time, was clearly mock-annoyed, she leaned forward and put her glass down, before settling back. She turned so that, tipping her head up, she could meet his gaze, and he bent and captured her mouth in a slow, tender kiss.

Her lips parted under his, allowing him to gently deepen the kiss while he drew her closer, his arm now wrapped about her waist. She wriggled around until she was lying more comfortably against him. On the way, she managed to dig her elbow into his ribs in a way that made him wince, but he didn't break the kiss, because he damn well wasn't going risk making her feel uncomfortable. He sensed, in the uncertain way her lips responded to his, that she was still nervous and unsure, and he was afraid she would flee the scene entirely in embarrassment if he made one false step.

Carefully lowering his own glass to floor beside them, he slid sideways, drawing her with him until he was half lying, with her resting against him. He wrapped both his arms around her, while they went on with their slow exploration of each other. She shivered where his fingertips brushed across her skin as he caressed her, while his mouth learned the shape of her jaw or the curve of her cheek, before his lips returned to hers again and again. He sensed her growing confidence when her hands at last began to move over him, stroking his arm or tangling in his hair, while she kissed him back.

Finally, they simply lay quietly together, her head resting on his chest, her body warm against him as the evening chill crept on. Dusk was falling, and the first few stars were appearing in the darkening sky. Jake looked up at them and idly wondered if there'd be another meteor shower tonight. Not that he needed to see a shooting star: he had everything he could ever wish for in his arms.

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