

Home Brew

By Scribblesinink

The low, rumbling sound of a heavy engine echoed along Main Street, bouncing off the church and Gracie's Market until it hit City Hall. Heather stopped halfway up the steps and tilted her head toward the sound; she could feel the vibrations in her belly. She twisted around and squinted against the afternoon sky. A dark green army truck, its bed covered with a tarp, lumbered to a halt right in front of the war memorial. She fought back the brief surge of panic at the sight; with the Rangers and Edward's troops patrolling the area, it was highly unlikely that the AS Army could roll into Jericho without raising an alarm, while the battalion of soldiers on Jericho's side had been ordered to stay out of town, except in cases of grave danger. Judging by the unhurried approach of the truck, she could rule out an emergency.

Curious, she took a step back down. She'd planned to see Trish before heading up to the mayor's office for her daily conference with Gray, Edward and Eric, if he made it back in time. At Edward's suggestion, they'd started holding these regular meetings early on, briefing each other about the goings-on with their respective tasks so they could avoid mistakes and misunderstandings. But she figured talking to Trish could wait a minute longer.

Raising a hand to shield her eyes, she tried to make out who was driving the truck, but the light was wrong and the interior of the cab was hidden in shadow. Then the engine shut off, the sudden silence deafening, and three men dressed in army fatigues jumped down.

Heather's heart skipped a beat. "Jake?"

He turned at the sound of her voice, a slow grin lighting up his face as he saw her. "Heather?"

"Oh my God, Jake!" Not feeling the least bit embarrassed, she ran down the steps as fast as her feet could carry her and flung herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck for a welcoming hug that he accepted without hesitation. He held her tightly against him, and for a moment she relished how *good* it felt, before she pulled back a little and peered up.

He looked tired, with dark stubble shadowing his jaw, and his eyes were bloodshot, but the warm smile he gave her made her stomach flutter despite herself.

"You're back."

"Yes, I am." He pushed a strand of hair behind her ear, taking in her face as if they hadn't seen each other in years.

The stupidity of her own remark made her feel flustered. "I mean.... You said you'd try to get home soon as you could, but you didn't say *when*, and I thought—" Jake was looking decidedly amused now, and she snapped her mouth shut. She'd believed she'd outgrown babbling whenever she got nervous or agitated, but Jake always brought it out in her.

"So, I assume this is the incredible Heather, she of the giant ants?" Heather didn't recognize the voice, which held a hint of badly concealed laughter. A shadow fell over her and she had to crane her neck to see the face that went with the voice. Piercing blue eyes twinkled down at her, above a bushy mustache that twitched as the man struggled not to grin. "Mack Davies, Ma'am. I've heard quite a lot about you."

Heather blushed, glancing from Davies back to Jake, who offered her a slight shrug by way of apology. She abruptly realized she was still in his arms, and that his hands rested on her hips. She quickly stepped back out of his grip, feeling her cheeks grow even hotter. Clearing her throat, wishing she could come up with a witty comeback, she discovered her mind had gone blank.

She shook the hand Davies offered her, vainly trying to will the blush away. "Um, nice to meet you," she mumbled, spouting the words by rote while her mind raced. Did *everybody* know about the ants now? Looked like she needed to have a serious talk with Jake later. She turned back to him. "Does your mother know you're back?"

It was the first thing to pop into her head, but she figured it was as good as anything to provide the much wanted change of subject.

"Not yet." Jake waved a hand in Davies' direction. "Mack is here as our liaison with the Texas government. Thought I'd take him to see Gray, and then go by the house."

"Try the clinic first," Heather suggested. "She spends most of her days there." She reached up to touch his arm briefly and smiled. "She'll be so happy to see you home."

Mack cleared his throat. "Let's go talk to this mayor of yours," he advised. "We'll get that out of the way, and then you two can catch up all you like." Was it her imagination, or did he really wink at her with the last few words? Heather felt her face grow warm again. What the heck had Jake been telling the man?

The third man who'd arrived in the truck with Jake joined their small group, distracting her temporarily. Her eyes narrowed at the sight of him. "I know you." It sounded a bit more accusatory than she'd meant it, but he took no offense.

"Chavez." He grinned. "But you might remember me as Lieutenant Parker." He turned to Jake. "I'll hang around here, keep an eye on the truck."

"Yeah." Jake offered Heather another apologetic, one-shouldered shrug. "We'll talk later, okay?" After she nodded, he brushed his way past her and headed for the steps, with Mack in tow. They were halfway up to the front door when something occurred to her.

If they were going to Gray's office....

"Wait." She hurriedly caught up with the two men and stopped them with a hand on Jake's wrist. His skin was warm beneath her touch. "Jake...." She hesitated.

He looked down at her, a little puzzled.

"Edward's in there with Gray. Major Beck, I mean."

A shadow crossed his face and his jaw tightened. Heather felt sudden tension thrum under her fingers as he went rigid.

"Edward?" He shook loose from her grip.

Way to go, Lisinski! Heather smacked herself mentally for the slip. She might've just made things worse instead of better. Jake didn't know; he couldn't know. He hadn't seen how much Edward had been doing, once he'd realized the truth of what was going on, to make amends for past wrongs. All Jake would remember was what he'd suffered at Edward's hands.

She tried again. "Jake.... Please. Just—." She could see Mack, behind him, watching the exchange with curiosity.

"Just, what? Don't kill him?" Jake ground out the words through clenched teeth. "Why the hell is he still even here?"

Heather took a deep breath. "There are things you don't know." She took a step closer to him, tipping her head back to look up at him. "Promise me you won't do anything rash, alright?" She sought his gaze, imploring him with a look. "Please?"

After a moment, some of the anger seemed to leave Jake, and he breathed out. "Okay. But only because you ask me to."

It sounded like the most reluctant promise she'd ever heard. She hastened up the last few

steps after the two men, deciding she'd better keep an eye on things. There had been too much bloodshed in Jericho lately.

oOo

As soon as he saw Beck, Jake realized it'd be hard to keep his promise to Heather. The mere sight of the major, dressed in his familiar fatigues and leaning over a table covered with maps, was enough to make his blood boil. He might be able to overlook what Beck'd done to *him*, but not—.

"Well, I'll be damned. If it isn't Jake Green!"

Gray's greeting made Jake jump. He'd been so focused on Beck, he hadn't even noticed the mayor. Grinning, Gray rounded his desk, holding out his arm to shake Jake's hand. "The prodigal son returns." He seemed totally unaware of the strained atmosphere that had fallen over the room.

Jake fought the urge to roll his eyes. Instead, he met Beck's gaze over Gray's shoulder. While the mayor might be oblivious to the undercurrents, Beck most certainly was not. His face was impassive, but something swirled behind his eyes. Jake couldn't determine if it was shame, or fear, or something uglier.

"It's good to have you home, son." Gray pumped Jake's hand enthusiastically and slapped his shoulder hard enough for Jake to wince. "Great job getting that bomb to Texas."

"Um, thanks." Gray's joviality surprised Jake enough that he briefly let himself be distracted from the subject of Major Beck and his desire for payback. Behind him, he heard Heather sigh with relief. He hadn't even realized she'd followed them in.

"We got your faxes, but didn't expect you'd make it back so soon." With a nod, Gray indicated Mack, who had so far observed the exchange in silence. "Who's this?"

Mack walked further into the room. "Mr. Mayor, pleased to meet you. Colonel Mack Davies, of the Republic of Texas."

It was another twenty minutes before all the introductions were complete and Jake could escape Gray's office. Outside, on the landing, he met Eric, who came dashing up the stairs two steps at a time.

"Jake! Randall told me you got in."

Jake looked Eric up and down. He was happy to see his brother seemed well, especially

given the mess he'd left him to deal with. Apparently, the feeling was mutual, because Eric enfolded him in a bear hug, slapping his back before stepping back.

Jake glanced down and poked Eric in the chest. "What's that?"

Eric offered a sheepish scowl, squinting at the sheriff's badge pinned on his shirt. "Not my choice, let me tell you."

Some of the humor faded from Jake's voice. "Beck?"

"Um, no." Eric scratched his beard. "Gray. Flat out told me I was sheriff. I had nothing to say about it."

Jake laughed. "Gray Anderson's yes-man, after all?" He smirked wickedly at his brother, before he turned serious again. "Well, congratulations. You're much better suited for the job than I ever was."

Eric scowled. "Don't know about that." He gestured with a thumb over his shoulder to the truck outside. "That yours?"

"Yep." Jake grinned again. "Food, medicine, radios. Whatever we could get our hands on."

"We can sure use it." Eric stuffed his hands into his pockets. "What about troops? Can we expect help from Texas?"

Jake's grin faded. That was the question he'd dreaded. "No." He moved a few steps away and planted his hands on the balustrade, staring down the stairwell at the bustle in the main hallway. "The governor said he didn't want to get involved." He turned his head toward Eric. "How are things here? You holding out okay?"

"Doin' alright, so far." Eric nodded curtly. "I got the Rangers manning the lookout points we set up last winter. And Beck's troops patrol the surrounding area—."

Jake straightened. "About that... What's he doing in *there*?" He indicated the mayor's office with a jerk of his head, unable to keep the bitterness out of his tone.

"Um, yeah..." Eric scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Heather convinced him to stay and help defend the town."

"What?" Jake stared at him.

"Jake, I know what he did to you, and I don't like it any more than you do." Eric joined

him at the rail, taking a deep breath before he went on. "But we can't afford to be too picky about our allies. Beck's got about seven hundred troops loyal to him, and we need those men. Especially when—."

"Especially when the Texans won't send any," Jake finished. He became aware he was holding on to the balustrade so tightly his knuckles were white, and he forced himself to loosen his grip. "I guess you're right." He twisted around to shoot a dark look at the closed door to Gray's office. Eric had a good point, but he still didn't like it one bit. The man who'd tortured him for four days was in there, making nice with Gray Anderson and Mack Davies—and Heather....

He dragged his attention back to Eric, suddenly realizing his brother was talking again.

"... while Gray's been trying to buy us some time with Hoffman, pretending he wants to negotiate. He won't be able to hold them off much longer, though." Eric turned his back to the stairwell and leaned against the rail, folding his arms in front of his chest. "I don't know what'll happen next, but whatever it is, I'm glad you're here." He was silent a moment before he shifted around to face Jake. "Mom know you're back?"

Jake shook his head. "Was about to go see her."

"She's at the med center." Something about the way Eric said it made Jake look at him sharply.

"So I heard."

"I think she misses Dad...." Eric was quiet for a moment before he pushed away from the balustrade. "Well, I better go update Gray." He gestured in the direction of the mayor's office, and, at Jake's nod, started walking away. Over his shoulder, he added, "Maybe you'll drop by Bailey's later?"

Jake nodded again. "Maybe." What he really wanted to do was to go home and sleep. He hadn't slept in an actual bed for more than a night or two during the past couple weeks, but he figured he owed Eric more than a quick summary.

While Eric disappeared in the direction of the mayor's office, Jake continued down the stairs. He'd almost reached the front door, when a voice calling his name stopped him dead in his tracks.

He turned slowly, senses on full alert and all weariness forgotten. "Beck."

The major reached the ground floor and stopped a few yards away. Heather had followed

behind Beck and was hovering uncertainly on the third step up, a worried frown creasing her brow. Ignoring her, Jake marched up to the major in a few long strides. He had a couple inches on the other man and, as he glared down, couldn't help but want to use them to his full advantage. "What do you want?" He nearly spat the words in Beck's face.

"I owe you an apology." Beck spoke quietly, but without hesitation. He seemed unfazed by Jake's apparent anger. "For what I did, there are no excuses." The major's gaze flicked briefly toward Heather, before returning to meet Jake's again. "So all I can say is: you were right, and I was wrong, and I'm sorry for what I put you through."

"What you put *me* through?" Jake clenched his fists and stuffed them into the pockets of his fatigues to keep from punching the other man. "What you did to me isn't what bothers me. It's what you did to my *mother*." This time, the major did look away, and Jake took another step closer, ending up toe to toe with Beck.

"Jake...?" Heather skipped down the final few steps and placed a warning hand on his shoulder. He could feel the heat of her palm through his fatigues.

"You should tell *her* you're sorry," he snarled at Beck. His mind flashed back to that night at the pig farm, to the moment it had dawned on him that his mother was *real*, that she wasn't another figment of his tormented imagination. "You dragged her to that place.... You forced her to see—." His voice cracked as he remembered, and he couldn't continue.

"I know." Beck's voice was soft.

They were so close now that Beck had to tilt his head back to look up at him, and Jake went nearly cross-eyed in an attempt to focus on the major's features. What he saw in Beck's eyes made his breath catch. It reminded him a little of the haunted guy he'd seen looking back at him every time he'd passed a mirror during those first weeks after Saffa....

"I know," Beck repeated. "It was unforgivable. There's no way...." He glanced away again. "For what it's worth, I did apologize to Mrs. Green."

"Jake, come on." Heather tugged at his elbow, urging him to take a step back and away from Beck. "He's been trying."

Jake shrugged her hand off, giving Beck a hard stare. It'd be a long time before he'd forgive the man. If ever. But, for the time being.... He turned on his heel and strode away.

For the time being, he just wanted to go see his mother.

oOo

Jake shoved through the doors to City Hall and stopped dead at the top of the stairs. He breathed deeply, trying to get himself back under control. What the hell was Beck thinking? That he could just say *Sorry*, and all would be forgiven? In that case, he'd better think again. Jericho might need his help, but that didn't mean Jake was willing to trust him any further than he could throw him.

Too worn out to hold on to his fury for long, Jake chuckled ruefully at the mental image, and started down the steps. He'd figure out what to do about Beck later. He had other priorities: med center first, to find his mom, and then home, for a shower and a fresh set of clothes. God, he hoped the water was running....

"Jake...!"

Before he knew it, he found himself stumbling back as Emily threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around him and tangling her fingers in his hair. "Oh God, Jake." She kissed him soundly on the mouth. "I heard you were back...."

"Um, yeah. Just got in." He extricated himself from her embrace and held her away a little.

She scanned his face. "You look tired."

He offered her a wan smile. "It's been a crazy—." He tried to remember. "Two weeks?"

Emily gave a soft laugh, thumb stroking along his jaw. "It's been a crazy year."

"Yeah." He stepped back and took her hands between his. "Listen, I was gonna go find my mom. I'll see you later, alright?"

"Sure." She looked a little startled, and then smiled at him. "Gail will be so happy to see you're safe. So, I'll see you back at the house?" She grinned slyly. "Your mom's been teaching me how to cook."

Jake laughed and let go of her hands. "Makes me wonder how safe I am, then."

She punched his shoulder lightly, and stood on tiptoe to kiss him again, before murmuring against his lips, "Welcome home, Jake."

oOo

Gail had indeed been very happy to see him, squeaking in delight in a way that would've

embarrassed him if she'd done it in public a year ago. Nowadays, he didn't care so much what people in Jericho thought. He just scooped her up in his arms, and held her tight, until she protested faintly, "Can't breathe, Jake."

She hadn't had much time for him, though. The clinic was severely understaffed, especially after a number of the Jennings and Rall personnel that had worked there decided they didn't want anything to do with Jericho's revolt and opted to go back to Cheyenne. But Jake gave her the highlights of his adventures—leaving out the road gang's attack, and the fact that he'd nearly gotten himself blown out of the sky by a pair of Cheyenne fighter jets. Even so, it made for a chilling tale that had her shaking her head in several places.

Once he'd finished speaking, she hugged him again. "I'm glad you're home, Jake."

He kissed her hair. "Me too, Mom."

They agreed to talk later, and Jake left the clinic. The army truck was gone from its spot in front of City Hall; Gray must've asked someone to take care of its contents, and Jake suspected the vehicle was now on its way to Beck's camp with the ammo Gray would've shared.

"Jake!" He turned at the shout to find Chavez waving him over. "Glad I caught you. I'm heading over to your friend Heather's. She offered me use of her grinder. Wanna come?"

Jake hesitated. He should go home; he'd promised Emily he'd be there.

Chavez bumped his shoulder. "C'mon, man. Lighten up a little. We did good out there. We earned ourselves a little party. Besides, I *know* you're a coffee fiend, too."

Jake chortled. That part was true enough. Rediscovering real coffee had been one of the perks of eating at the O-club in Lackland. He could never say no to a decent cup, and he already knew that Heather could concoct a wicked brew. He threw his hands up in defeat. "All right."

Heather's house wasn't far from Main Street, and a few minutes later Jake found himself on the same front porch where he'd reluctantly left his boots all those months earlier. He smiled to himself as he remembered it, though the smile dissolved when he recalled she'd left for New Bern the next day. After she'd gone, the winter months had seemed grim and cold. And then Eric told him she'd died.... He shook off the chill that still gripped him at the thought. Thank God Eric had gotten that wrong.

Heather opened the door to Chavez' quick rap, blinking as she saw Jake. "Oh, hey. Come

on in."

The hearth was cold tonight, the summer sun hot enough to warm the house without need for a fire. As for the rest of it, Jake reckoned it hadn't changed much from how he remembered it: Heather still had books scattered around, and brightly colored pillows still decorated the soft and comfortable couch.

"You hungry?" She busied herself straightening the room and fluffing up a pillow. "I can make sandwiches. And I think I've got some noodles around somewhere, too. I could heat those up."

At the mention of food, Jake's stomach rumbled. Chavez must've had heard it growl because he smirked. "Sounds like Jake here could do with something to eat." He winked at Heather and added in a stage-whisper, "Seems if I don't remind him, he forgets to eat."

A little nettled, Jake shot Chavez a glare. "Just haven't had the time yet," he muttered. Turning to Heather, he added, "I'm good. No need to waste what you have on me."

Heather rolled her eyes. "It's not a waste. Besides, with what you guys brought in today, and the stuff Trish got out of the J&R warehouse in Garden City yesterday, we're good for a while. No need to go hungry yet."

She waved them to take a seat and disappeared into the kitchen. A few minutes later, she returned with a plate heaped with neatly sliced sandwiches that she put in the center of the coffee table. Gesturing for the two men to eat, she went back into the kitchen and reappeared with an old-fashioned coffee grinder, powered by a hand crank. She set it down in front of Chavez, who'd taken a seat in one of the chairs.

He picked it up and tilted it this way and that, admiring it. "Nice." He turned the crank experimentally. "Very nice."

Jake couldn't see what was so special about it—all he saw was a dark wooden box with copper studs and a metal handle—so he snatched a sandwich instead and bit down, enjoying the taste of the tomato and lettuce and bacon that Heather had put in it. Last decent meal he'd had was breakfast at Lackland, the morning before they left.

"It belonged to my grandmother." Heather took a seat on the sofa next to Jake, and leaned forward, hands clasped together. "So, what did you bring?"

"Ah." Chavez put the grinder back on the table and rummaged through the satchel he'd brought. He pulled out a couple small canvas bags, their tops tied with string, and set them beside the grinder.

Heather picked one up and squinted at the small label attached to the string. "Oh my god." She sounded a little breathless. "You brought *Jamaican Blue*?"

"Yep." Though Chavez attempted to shrug it off, Jake could see he was rather pleased with Heather's response, although Jake couldn't see what there was to get excited about. He frowned as Chavez snatched up another bag, wiggling it in Heather's direction and quirked an eyebrow. "*Hawaiian Kona*..."

"May I?" Heather held out her hand.

"Sure." Chavez gave her the bag

Heather untied the string, and brought the mouth of the bag up to her nose. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply from the aroma. "Oh...."

Jake's frown deepened.

"Good, eh?" Chavez laughed, and Heather joined him with an excited chuckle.

Jake watched them, feeling more like an outsider by the minute. He cleared his throat, and two sets of eyes swiveled in his direction. He shrugged, suddenly self-conscious.

"So," Chavez turned back to Heather. "Which one should we try first?"

Heather pondered the various choices. "The Jamaican, please."

Chavez took the bag from her. "Good decision."

Jake suppressed a harumph. As far as he could tell, any pick would've elicited the same comment from Chavez. He took another bite from his sandwich, but the tomato tasted a little sour in his mouth.

Heather settled back against the pillows next to him, while Chavez untied the string on the bag of beans and poured some of the contents into the grinder. He cranked the handle several times. Even from where he was sitting, Jake caught a hint of the strong scent of freshly ground coffee.

"Percolator in the kitchen?" When Heather nodded, Chavez got up, carrying the grinder with him, and disappeared through the door, indicating he could manage on his own.

Jake suddenly found himself alone with Heather. He finished the sandwich and licked his

fingers, before turning toward her. "So," they began at the same time. She chuckled nervously, and Jake grinned. "You first," he offered.

She grinned back, her cheeks dimpling. She was silent for another moment, her gaze traveling over his face. "The fax.... I'm a little surprised you remembered all that."

He blinked and tilted his head. Did she really think he had forgotten? "How could I not?"

She shrugged and remained quiet. Jake kept his peace, not sure what to say, or how she was feeling about that day. Maybe he should never have used those events; she couldn't be very happy about complete strangers teasing her about the ants thing, and maybe she was embarrassed about having kissed him. Not that she should be, but....

"Are you okay? Really?" Her voice was low, and she half-reached out as if she wanted to touch him, before dropping her hand back into her lap. Jake suddenly found himself with a lump stuck in his throat. He coughed to clear it.

"Yeah, I'm fine." In an attempt to give himself something to do, he snatched another sandwich. "Just tired, is all."

She nodded. "It's been a crazy few weeks." She was totally unaware that she was echoing his earlier words to Emily.

He swallowed down another bite. "Beck give you any trouble while I was gone?"

Heather pushed a wayward lock of hair behind her ear. "Not really."

Jake raised an eyebrow, putting the sandwich down and turning further toward her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Heather plucked at her jeans. "When he found out I'd taken that page, he had me arrested."

"What?" Jake started up straight, guilt flooding through him. "What did he do to you?" It was an effort not to curl his hands into fists again. If Beck had laid a finger on—.

Heather glanced up, a small furrow between her brows. "Nothing. Just put me in a jail cell for twenty four hours" She crossed her arms. "Besides, it doesn't matter anymore. Once he realized he was working for the wrong people, he let me go. He's been nothing but helpful ever since."

Jake scratched another mark on the mental tally he was keeping against Beck. He gave

her a long look before settling back into the cushions and forcing himself to relax. There would come a day of reckoning, but it wasn't now.

"Oh." A hard shape dug into his hip, distracting him. "I brought you something. From Texas, I mean."

"Really?" She sounded a little uncertain. "That's... sweet of you."

"I, um...." He reached into his pocket and took out the multi-tool he'd found in the shop at Lackland. The handle was engraved with the words *Lackland Air Force Base*, and the date for the 2006 annual Airfest, which had never happened due to the bombs—probably why the shop still had had plenty of the tools available. "It's.... It's not as good as premium coffee, but...." He shrugged awkwardly, and handed it to her. "I saw it, and I thought you might need it some day. Sorry it's not wrapped...."

Heather took the gift, her fingers brushing briefly over his. She examined several of the tool's appendages, tilting them outward and back in, before she raised her gaze back up to him. "Jake, this is great." Her eyes sparkled, making him feel warm inside, and he no longer regretted so much bringing up the silly gift. "Thank you."

Chavez took that moment to return from the kitchen with a tray and three steaming mugs, whistling some tune. Heather put Jake's gift on the coffee table, next to the half-eaten plate of sandwiches, and grabbed one of the mugs from the tray. She breathed in the aroma before taking a sip. She closed her eyes and licked her lips, making a small, contented sound.

Chavez offered Jake another mug. "Hope you don't take milk or sugar. 'Cause that'd be sacrilege."

"Um, no, I'm good." Jake took a sip from the hot liquid, careful not to burn his tongue. He had to admit that, for all the fuss Heather and Chavez made about it, the coffee did live up to its billing: it was strong, but not bitter, and felt smooth on his tongue. He could maybe see why Heather had been so thrilled about Chavez bringing it.

"This is pretty good," he remarked.

Heather and Chavez exchanged a look Jake couldn't quite decipher. "*Pretty good?*" Chavez mimicked. "Jake, this is beyond good. This—" He made an exaggerated gesture with his mug, "—is nectar of the gods!"

Heather giggled and Jake bit his lip to keep in the miffed response that if that was what it was, it'd be beer. Even if it was good, it was still just damned *coffee*.

For several minutes, they enjoyed their brew in silence, each apparently occupied with their own thoughts. Jake's eyes grew heavy; with his stomach full, even the shot of caffeine couldn't keep him alert. Then Chavez broke the silence, stirring him back to the present.

"So, Heather," Chavez set down his mug, "I'm curious: how did you convince the good Major Beck to renounce Cheyenne? From what I remember, he's pretty set on following protocol."

Jake roused himself and turned toward Heather. That was something he wanted to know as well, ever since Eric had told him it was Heather who'd convinced Beck to stay. If it had been up to him.... His expression must have revealed something of his thoughts, because she shot him a warning look before she gave Chavez a shrug. "Wasn't me. He got hold of Mr. Hawkins' laptop. Apparently, what he found on there was enough to open his eyes."

"Bout damn time." Jake couldn't help himself. He bent forward to set his empty mug on the table. "Man's blinder than a bat in a cave."

"Jake, stop it!" Heather sounded more annoyed than he'd ever heard her. "He's not... the devil incarnate, you know!" She sprang to her feet, collecting their mugs and glaring down at him. "In fact, Edward's a *good* man." Without giving him a chance to reply, she turned on her heel and stalked toward the kitchen, leaving Jake and Chavez to gape after her.

oOo

Heather dropped the empty coffee mugs in the sink and twisted on the tap with more force than was necessary. Sometimes, Jake could just be so... so stubborn!

In a way she could understand, Edward had done some terrible things. But it wasn't like he'd *enjoyed* doing them....

She heard the door creak open behind her. "Heather?"

She switched off the water before turning around. "Jake, Edward's not—."

He interrupted her, walking further into the kitchen. "Heather, he put Jericho through hell. And now you really want me to believe he's decided to work *with* us? What's to say he isn't gonna change sides again when it suits him?"

She took a breath, pushing away from the counter. "I trust him."

Jake took another step toward her. "Well, I don't."

His jaw was tight, and there was tension in every line of his body. It spoke of his deep dislike for Edward, and Heather wondered how she could ever convince him to see her point.

He glowered down at her. "Why are you always defending the guy? How can you do that? How can you trust him? Haven't you seen what he did to Jericho?"

"Oh, that's just unfair." A little irked at the accusation, Heather pulled herself up and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Of course I have, I was right here, remember? But I've also seen—."

Again, Jake didn't let her finish. Backing her up against the sink, he towered over her. "Do you know what he did to me?" His voice was low.

She swallowed. "Emily told me."

Jake barked out a bitter laugh. "Em doesn't know the half of it." He shoved away from the counter and started pacing in front of her. Heather didn't dare move. "Took me to that hog farm. Had me tied up for days until I thought my arms would fall off." He was talking to himself, as if he'd forgotten Heather was even there. "Kept those hot lights on, twenty-four-seven. No food, very little water." He whirled towards her abruptly, and she gasped, startled by the suddenness of the movement. "You got any clue what that does to a man?" His gaze was haunted, horror at the memory replacing some of the fury in his expression. Heather felt sick to her stomach. "In the end—" He scrubbed a hand over his face. "—I didn't even know what was real anymore, and what wasn't. And why? Because Beck wanted me to give up Stanley. Stanley, my best friend since kindergarten, who'd just lost his baby sister to a murderer. A murderer, that *he* gave free reign." Jake paused to take a deep, shuddering breath. "Yeah, your precious *Edward*—" he managed to inflect the name with every bit of scorn he possibly could, "—would've fit right in in Guantanamo, or Abu Ghraib."

"That's not true." Heather struggled to keep her voice level. Though her heart went out to Jake for what he'd suffered, she still felt the need to stand up for Edward. He wasn't a cruel man; he'd only done what he thought he needed to do, and he'd been trying to make up for the harm he'd inflicted, helping where he could, ever since he'd realized the truth. Why couldn't Jake see that? "Don't tell me you've never done anything you regretted later."

He flinched as if she'd slapped him, and she frowned uncertainly, wondering what raw nerve she'd touched. But she couldn't back down now. She glared up at him. "You think you're the only one that has suffered? That Stanley's the only one who lost someone?"

"No, of course—."

"Jericho lost sixty-five people to New Bern, Jake. What do you think the death toll would've been if Edward hadn't stopped them? Constantino had the manpower and the weapons."

"We would've—."

She didn't give him a chance. "No, you *wouldn't*. You'd all be dead. And do you know what Constantino would've done with the survivors? *Do you?* Because I do! I was there, Jake. I saw—." Her voice caught, and she discovered her throat was clogged as the memories threatened to overwhelm her: the terrible things she'd seen, the fear that it might be her fate as well. She struggled to regain control of her emotions and carry on speaking. "And now Cheyenne is coming for us...." A sob escaped her, despite her attempts to keep it in.

The next thing she knew, Jake was in front of her again, this time drawing her against his chest. "I'm sorry," he muttered into her hair. "I'm sorry. You're right, I don't know."

She enjoyed his nearness for another minute, unable to make herself pull away, reveling in his scent, the coarse cloth of the army fatigues beneath her fingers, the sense of security his embrace gave her. Finally, with an effort, she stepped back, shuddering.

She wiped her eyes and glanced up. He looked miserable, and she resisted the urge to reach up and touch his cheek. "I know you'll never forgive him for what he did. But Jake? Can you at least promise to try and work with him?"

Jake offered her a wry half-smile and a little shrug. "I guess I can do that."

"Thank you." She smiled back. It wasn't perfect but, for the time being, it would do.

For a long minute, neither spoke. To give her hands something to do, Heather turned back to the sink and started rinsing out the coffee mugs.

"So...." Jake cleared his throat and she glanced at him over her shoulder. He was looking at her with that little lopsided half-smile that always made her stomach flutter—a feeling she'd come to hate, because she'd learned a long time ago the smile didn't mean what she'd once thought it meant. "Coffee's the key to your heart, huh?"

Unsure what to make of the comment, Heather decided it was Jake's way of trying to lighten the mood, and she responded in kind. She slapped at him with the towel she was using to dry the mugs. "There are worse vices."

His smile widened, and he opened his mouth to reply. Before he could speak, there was a knock on the door. Chavez pushed it open a little and stuck his head through the gap. "Hey, you two, did you get eaten by giant ants, or something?" The question was followed by stifled laughter.

Jake's grin turned into an sheepish half-smile, and Heather felt her face grow hot. Jake gave her an abashed shrug and mouthed a silent apology in her direction, before turning away and escaping. The door closing behind him muffled his words but Heather could hear him telling Chavez to shut up.

She turned away to finish drying the coffee mugs. "Giant *irradiated* ants," she muttered to the empty kitchen. Did nobody remember the classics anymore?

Disclaimer: this story is based on the Junction Entertainment/Fixed Mark Productions/CBS Paramount Television series *Jericho*. It was written for entertainment only; the author does not profit from it nor was any infringement of copyright intended. Please do not redistribute elsewhere without the author's consent.