

Honor Bound

by Tanaqui

"Well, well, well." Hoffman looked up from the map he'd been studying. "Major. It really is you. I didn't quite believe it when the patrol called it in." His gaze slid sideways. "And I do believe you're Jake Green." He looked back at Beck. "Not a combination I would've expected to find trying to sneak past my lines."

Not Beck's preferred combination either, but he and Jake hadn't had much choice. Not if they wanted to get Heather back from Constantino's clutches. And it would be easy for Beck to say it was bad luck they'd gotten captured, but he didn't believe in luck. No, it was setting out on a crazy mission with too few men and too little time to scout the creek crossing properly. With the result that they'd been totally taken by surprise when, having nearly reached the trickle of water moving sluggishly along the half-empty water course at the bottom of the creek, they heard a shout to their left.

Tipping his head back, Beck had spotted a soldier at the top of the bluff. He was joined a moment later by half a dozen others, their M-16s raised. From somewhere he couldn't see, he heard a humvee engine being gunned into life, and he guessed the rest of the party were headed downstream to circle round them. Not that it would have helped much to flee along the creek, in plain sight of those rifle scopes. Exchanging a resigned glance with Jake, Beck had gestured for the other man to find a way up to where Hoffman's patrol waited to arrest them.

Now, standing in front of Hoffman himself, Beck again looked across at Jake, who nodded in confirmation: in the back of the humvee on the way to Hoffman's headquarters, they'd held a hurried debate about what to do next. Beck didn't think there was much hope for either of them, but the least they could do was try and make sure Heather still got rescued.

He turned back to Hoffman. "Phil Constantino sent several assassination squads into Jericho last night." Hoffman didn't blink, which Beck thought was as much of an admission that he knew about them as if he'd said it out loud. "One of the squads kidnapped Heather Lisinski. They're taking her back to New Bern. We understand Constantino plans to hold a public execution in front of City Hall."

Hoffman did raise his eyebrows a little at that. "That's quite a story."

Beck could sense Jake thrumming with barely suppressed impatience. Only half aware he was doing so, Beck gestured a little with his tied hands to tell him to keep calm. "It's no story. One of Constantino's people warned us, but too late. We captured one of the squads and they confirmed it. She may not have much time before...."

"I see." Hoffman pulled out a chair and settled himself in it, crossing one leg over the other. "You know, I don't know what lies Hawkins and his terrorists friends fed you, but the ASA does believe in the rule of law."

At Beck's side Jake snorted. "Right. Your laws. The ones that let you torture people while you cover up mass murders?"

"Jake...." Beck twisted so he could put a hand on Jake's arm, urging him to hold on to his temper.

"No." Jake glared at Beck. "We know he let Constantino execute Ted Lewis. We know he put him back in charge of New Bern. Why are we even talking to him?"

"Because he's holding us prisoner, and he's our only chance of saving Heather," Beck snapped back, meeting Jake glare for glare.

He turned back to Hoffman and met the colonel's amused gaze. "You do remember Heather, don't you? She was my liaison, before...." Beck left the sentence unfinished. He cleared his throat.

"Constantino regards her as a traitor to New Bern for the work she did for me. For the work she did for us. I recall you recommended her specifically for the position." He hoped Hoffman would feel at least some of the guilt he did.

Hoffman nodded, steepling his hands. "I also recall you reporting that she turned out to be a double agent. She stole confidential material from the ASA, and has been instrumental in aiding the insurrection in Jericho. Give me one good reason why I should believe this pile of horseshit about her being kidnapped."

Jake had apparently had enough of Hoffman's soft-spoken disdain. With a cry of frustration, he lunged at Hoffman across the table, trying to fling himself out of the grip of the soldier who held him. "Because they're going to hang her if someone doesn't get to her in time." The soldier hauled him back.

Hoffman, ignoring Jake, continued to meet Beck's gaze. Beck swallowed, trying to get his own anger and frustration under control. "Look, do you really think that if I had some operation going on, I'd be out here with *him*," he jerked his head at Jake, "risking getting captured myself? Do you think I'd be doing something this stupid if—?" He took a deep breath. "They're taking her to the old Franklin mine." He tilted his head toward Jake again. "Jake can tell you where that is. At least send a patrol to investigate. Please."

Hoffman continued to look at him, his eyes narrowed. Beck hoped he was remembering the months they'd served together. That this wasn't the kind of stunt Beck pulled. When Hoffman still didn't reply, Beck stepped forward and, awkwardly leaning his shackled hands on the table, said softly, "You and I both know that killing the enemy in a sneak attack is one thing, Colonel. But a public lynching? For the 'crime' of trying to help the government? A government that Constantino was trying to overthrow just a few weeks back?" He shook his head. "You know as well as I do, that's unacceptable."

Hoffman snorted. "Strikes me Constantino and New Bern are only—."

"Come on, Bob!" Beck didn't use Hoffman's first name often, but he knew a decent man wore that ASA uniform, and he was determined to reach him. "The ASA would at least give her a trial and conduct an execution in a civilized manner, not in front of a baying mob. What Constantino's up to is exactly the kind of thing you sent me here to stop."

Hoffman shifted uncomfortably under Beck's gaze for a moment, before he nodded. "Lieutenant Marsh!" he barked.

"Sir." One of the junior officers loitering on the far side of the map table snapped to attention.

"Take three squads out to the—." He turned to Jake. "Where did you say?"

"The old Franklin mine." When Hoffman tilted his head, Jake stepped forward, studied the map for a moment and then pointed. "Here."

Hoffman half turned his head toward the lieutenant. "Take three squads and see if there's any truth in this story. If you find Miss Lisinski, bring her back."

"Sir." The lieutenant took another look at the map and then started round the table for the door.

"Oh and lieutenant," Hoffman looked back at Beck grimly. "If Constantino or his henchmen *are* out there and deny having seen her, search the place thoroughly until you find her."

oOo

Heather had eventually realized trying to loosen the screws on the door hinges with the multi-tool was futile. Shoving the tool back into her pocket, she squatted down as far away from the door as she could get and gave herself over to waiting.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed—it seemed like the way the sunlight bounced around the mine kept the bright slivers that found their way into the shed pretty steady—before she heard several trucks approaching. There was the sound of doors opening, and voices, although she couldn't make out much other than someone demanding to know where Constantino was.

The voices moved off—into the office, probably—and everything went quiet, apart from the low grumble of the truck engines still running. A few minutes later, she heard several pairs of boots approaching. She scrambled to her feet as the padlock rattled, her heart thudding. The door swung open and she blinked against the sudden brightness.

"Ma'am?" The figure in the doorway bulked oddly, until she realized the man was wearing a helmet and tac vest. "Miss Lisinski?"

"Yes." She could barely hear the word herself. What were the Army doing here? Russell had said Hoffman had given Constantino free rein for the assassination attempts, so why were his troops getting involved now? She swallowed and tried again. "Yes," she managed a little more loudly.

"Please come with us, ma'am." The soldier took half a step back and gestured for her to leave the shed. When she stood frozen, wondering whether she was going to face a firing squad rather than a hanging, he added, "Colonel Hoffman sent us, ma'am. We're to take you to headquarters. You're safe now."

She hesitated for a moment longer, and then it occurred to her that if Hoffman was in on her execution, the soldier wouldn't have sounded quite so uncertain when confirming her identity, or half so polite. Pushing herself away from the wall, she allowed him to shepherd her out of the shed.

Outside, the light was even more blinding. She squinted as the soldier, a lieutenant by his patches, escorted her to one of three humvees pulled up beyond the pickups. Constantino was standing outside the office where he'd threatened her a few hours before. He scowled as he watched the lieutenant settle her in the back of one of the humvees, and that in itself was enough to reassure her that she really was being rescued.

As they climbed slowly up the steep switchback road out of the mine, she wondered how Colonel Hoffman had gotten wind of this particular part of Constantino's plans. Maybe someone other than Russell had balked at the scheme? However it had happened, she was glad to discover there were limits to what Hoffman would allow, despite letting Constantino take charge again in New Bern. For all Hoffman had refused to listen to Edward's attempts to persuade him that he was serving the wrong people, she'd thought him merely cynical about politicians and generals, not devoid of a

sense of right and wrong. It was some comfort to find she'd hadn't misjudged him completely—especially as it seemed she was now on her way to see him.

oOo

Heather found that being shown into his presence turned out to be uncomfortably like going to see Edward. It made her wonder—not that she hadn't been already—if Edward was okay, if Jake was okay, everyone back in Jericho. She remembered what Constantino had said about moving up his plans. If the team that was supposed to be firebombing Bailey's had hit while—. She pushed the thought away.

"Miss Lisinski." Colonel Hoffman dipped his head at her. "My men seem to be making quite a habit of rescuing you from unfortunate situations."

"Yes." Heather nodded gratefully. "Yes. Thank you, Colonel. I don't know how—."

"Don't thank me too soon." Hoffman unfolded himself from where he'd been lounging against a table littered with maps. "I gather that, among other acts contrary to the interests of the government, I have you to congratulate for ensuring Jericho still has power." His mouth twitched with the wry amusement she remembered from when she'd asked him which government was in charge. He gestured in the general direction of the maps. "You do realize I can't send you back there?"

Heather swallowed. She wasn't terribly surprised by that. Getting the wind turbines up hadn't just been about making sure the town had power but also about making sure Hoffman knew they weren't going to roll over without a fight. She couldn't imagine he'd been very happy when he'd found out what she'd done—she guessed Constantino or one of his people had told him—or that he was feeling nearly as well-disposed toward her as last time they'd met.

"Where are you going to send me?" She wondered if she'd ever find out what had happened in Jericho, and whether Constantino's plans had succeeded.

"An ASA detention facility." Hoffman shrugged. "One appropriate for terrorists and traitors."

Heather gazed at him blankly for a moment, not understanding what he was saying, before she caught his meaning. "I'm not." She tilted her chin up and looked him in the eye. "The only traitors are Thomas Valente and Senator Tomarchio—" She wasn't going to dignify him with the stolen title of president. "—and the officers who follow their illegal orders."

Hoffman seemed taken aback for a moment, and then he snorted. "I was right. You do have a lot of spirit. Pity it's so misplaced. A word of advice, sweetheart." He dipped his head and gave her what she supposed was a fatherly smile. "You're not going to do yourself any good by continuing to spout terrorist propaganda."

"It's not propaganda." Heather took a step forward, wondering why he couldn't see it. Why he didn't seem to care. "Valente knows what Cheyenne is saying about the bombs is a lie. Knew the attacks were going to happen. And the corruption, the arbitrary arrests, the—."

"That's enough!" Hoffman took a step toward her, his angry bark cutting her off. He shook his head, like he was disappointed in her. "You seem like a very... loyal young woman. But your loyalty to your friends is misplaced. The Allied States is the legitimate government of this country, and the sooner you accept that, the better." With an angry jerk of the head, Hoffman nodded to the soldier still standing behind her. "She's to go with the others. Tell the lieutenant to get the transport on the road as soon as possible."

Heather opened her mouth to argue back, but Hoffman was already turning away. She snapped her mouth shut, suddenly feeling too tired to argue any more; when the soldier took her arm, she listlessly let him march her out of the tent.

As they trudged across the camp toward a humvee parked some yards away, she wondered what would happen to her next. She remembered Edward telling her, after he'd found out about her stealing the page from the report, that he could have her imprisoned or executed. What she'd done since then was probably much, much worse in Cheyenne's eyes. The only comfort was that her execution wouldn't be feeding Constantino's sick hold on the people of New Bern. And she hoped that Hoffman would at least let whoever was left in Jericho know that she'd been rescued from Constantino's clutches.

They rounded the end of the humvee and the soldier shoved her toward the open rear door. "Get in."

His words were drowned out by another, much more familiar voice, exclaiming, "Oh my god! Heather?"

"Jake?" Heather tipped her head up and met his relieved gaze. He was hunched on one of the bench seats that ran the length of the back of the humvee. Suddenly, her unexpected rescue by Hoffman's troops began to make sense: Jake must have come after her, like she'd hoped, and gotten caught.

The soldier behind her gave her another shove, telling her to hurry up. As she climbed in, Jake reached out his hands to her—she realized with a start that they were bound with a plastic strip—and she put out her hand to grasp his. Even as she felt the reassuring warmth of his skin under her fingers, her gaze was drawn past him into the far reaches of the humvee, to the figure sitting next to him.

"Edward?"

He only had time to give her a small, tight smile of acknowledgment before another soldier climbed in behind her.

"Sit down and keep quiet." The newcomer roughly pushed her down onto the seat opposite, tearing her hands away from Jake's and sandwiching her between him and a third soldier already in the humvee, whose rifle, resting across his chest, covered Jake and Edward.

The soldier who'd escorted her from Hoffman's tent banged the rear door closed, plunging the back of the humvee into gloom, and rapped twice on the side of the truck. A moment later, they lurched off.

Heather turned her gaze from Jake to Edward and back again as her eyes adjusted to the dim light. She saw that Edward's hands were also bound. If the situation hadn't been so desperate, she would have laughed. As it was, she had to hold down a hysterical giggle. They'd done like she'd asked and worked together—and gotten caught together.

Caught trying to rescue her. She wasn't sure she was worth Jericho losing both its leaders. And if Constantino had moved up the rest of his plans, there might be nobody left in charge....

oOo

The soldier on Heather's right shifted and smothered a yawn. They'd been on the road maybe half an hour, and it was getting warm in the back of the humvee, though nowhere near as hot as the shed

back at the mine had been. Heather's legs were cramping, but she hadn't dared move since the soldier thrust her into place. Sneaking another look at the guards on either side—the one on her left had his head turned away from her and was staring out the rear window of the humvee—she tried to unobtrusively wriggle into a more comfortable position on the bench and stretch her legs a little.

Opposite her, Jake also stretched, his foot bumping against hers. She would have drawn her legs in again, but he tapped his foot against hers a second time. She looked up at him, the first time she'd done so in a while; she'd been too embarrassed to look at either him or Edward once the implications of both of them getting caught had begun to sink in.

Jake met her gaze and held it for a moment, before he lowered his lashes, tilting his head forward slightly at the same time. She gave him a puzzled frown; he made the same gesture again, and she suddenly understood that he wanted her to look down again. What on earth—?

Slowly lowering her gaze, she saw he had one hand resting on top of the other, two fingers extended. As she watched, he curled them back into a fist, and then extended the two fingers again. With a little surge of excitement, she realized he was signing the first letter of her name.

Thinking frantically, she tried to remember the rest of the fingerspelling alphabet she'd learned in a college class on dealing with disabled students. J was an easy one, even though you didn't use it much. Crossing her own wrists in her lap, she made a fist, raised her little finger and drew it in a curve through the air, trying to keep the movement as small as possible.

Looking up as she made the gesture again, she saw Jake was watching her hands. He lifted his gaze and met hers and nodded, a relieved smile breaking out on his face. Glancing down again, she saw he was beginning to sign something else, but she gave a slight shake of her head and held her hand out flat, signaling she wanted him to wait. Obediently, he curled his hand into a fist.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she began to sign her way through the alphabet, trying to remember the chart in her textbook. She got stuck on P. Opening her eyes and looking at Jake again, she gave him a slight, hopeless shrug. He gave her an encouraging smile and made the sign for her; she copied him, and then went on, until she reached the end of the alphabet with a sigh of relief.

When she was done, he gave her another smile. Then began the strangest conversation she'd ever held. It felt like they were conducting it mostly in textspeak, as they both looked to find the shortest way to say anything. After a while, her head began to ache: just deciphering what Jake was trying to say was hard enough, let alone trying to remember how to sign herself. But she kept going, because she didn't know how long they'd be kept together, and there were things she needed to know and things he probably needed her to tell him.

"U OK?" was the first thing he signed, and she answered with a Y. When she asked him the same question, she got a Y and a rueful shrug back. She began to sign "Jericho?" but he got it after three letters and signed back an "All OK". When she started on "Jimmy?" she got back another "OK" and felt a weight lift that she'd scarcely known had been pressing down on her.

She was about to ask him for more details when he put his hand out flat. Lifting her gaze, she caught the merest shake of his head, confirming his gesture telling her not to sign. At the same moment, she became aware that the soldier on her right was stirring and yawning. He wriggled his shoulders a little and shifted on the seat, before making himself more comfortable in the corner.

Watching Jake, waiting for him to let her know it was safe to talk again, she saw he had half closed his eyes. It almost looked as if he, too, was taking a nap, but she guessed he could still see her hands well enough. Glancing down, she saw him sign "Go", and they began signing again.

In slow, fractured sentences, stopping every now and then when the soldiers looked like they might be paying attention, he told her about the firebombing, and how a patrol had picked up one of Constantino's teams, that Perkins had confessed where she'd been taken, and that he and Beck had set off on horseback. "Why you?" she'd asked him, and he'd answered, "Who else?" She wasn't sure, when she looked up at his face, whether he simply meant there'd been no one else to send, or whether he meant something more.

It was around then that she noticed, out of the corner of her eye, that Edward was watching them. Putting out her hand to tell Jake to wait, she shifted slightly so she was angled more toward Edward and signed an E. But he only shook his head sadly and spread his hands to indicate he didn't know how to join in.

She'd signed a T and a Y to him, just in case he understood that much, before she turned back to Jake and signed the same. It felt entirely inadequate—but she wasn't sure how, even if they could have spoken normally, she could have expressed how much it meant to her that they'd come after her. He shrugged slightly, and signed an Y and a W, which she guessed stood for "you're welcome".

They went on talking after that, the conversation proceeding in fits and starts—about how they'd gotten captured by Hoffman's patrol, and her meeting with Constantino, and them finding Charlotte—while the humvee rumbled over the blacktop, eating up the miles to wherever they were going and whatever fate awaited them when they got there.

oOo

It was dark by the time the humvee drew to a halt and they were allowed to climb out for the last time. Beck guessed they'd been on the road for maybe seven or eight hours, with a couple of stops to change drivers. Each time, they'd been given some water and allowed to relieve themselves. Heather had been taken round the far side of the humvee; he wondered if the soldier with her had been polite enough or bashful enough to turn his back on her. When he'd given her an inquiring look—the guards still wouldn't let them talk—she'd replied with a rueful shrug and a wry smile. He guessed that, rough as the treatment they were getting was, it was an improvement on the handling she'd gotten from Constantino's thugs. He also took it as a good sign that Jake didn't seem particularly worried about her—or no more than the situation in general warranted—so he guessed that whatever she was telling him in the intervals when they dared resume their silent conversation was keeping him reassured.

Following the two of them out of the humvee, Beck looked around, trying to guess where they were. They'd stopped outside a cluster of low buildings next to a high chainlink fence topped with razor wire. In the arclights that lit the compound, Beck could see a second fence a hundred yards beyond that, with bare ground in between. A watchtower loomed above them, off to the right; nearby, a gate was sliding shut with a clang. He'd never seen the place, but he'd bet a month's worth of rations they were in Loomer Ridge.

The soldiers herded them through a set of double doors into the nearest building, past a mesh-windowed booth that held a watchful guard, and along a drab hallway lit by flickering fluorescents. Finally, they were shown into what was clearly an interview room, though it was bare of furniture. The soldier holding Heather's arm gave her a shove, and she took a few steps forward into the room, before she stopped and stood there listlessly, as if she didn't have the will to do anything else.

Another of the soldiers pulled out a knife and cut the tie around Jake's wrists, while the third soldier stepped back and raised his rifle to cover the three of them. While Beck waited for his own wrists to be freed, he watched Jake step forward and touch Heather on the arm. She turned, and he gathered

her to him in a bear hug. Her arms came up to grip his shoulders as she returned the hug. Beck was reminded of when he'd first seen them together, in the sheriff's department a few short months ago.

The guards backed out of the room and Beck heard the door being locked. He slowly approached Jake and Heather, feeling like an interloper. Heather must've been aware of him, though, because she pushed back from Jake—Beck noticed he didn't let go of her—and reached out a hand to grip Beck's arm.

She opened her mouth to speak, but he shook his head urgently, taking a step closer so that an observer wouldn't be able to see much more than their backs. "They're watching," he murmured, indicating the mirrors that covered the upper half of one wall. "Probably listening, as well." The opposite wall had openings cut into it, covered with wire mesh, that let on to another room. It was dark in there, the only light falling coming from the fluorescents above them where it fell through the openings, but it looked similar to the room they were in. It was impossible to see if anyone was lurking in the shadows.

He turned his head and met Jake's gaze. He could feel the tension in the other man, sense the way Jake's muscles were bunching to pull Heather away from Beck. Then, with an obvious effort, Jake relaxed, puffing out his cheeks and nodding in acknowledgment.

Beck let out the breath he'd been holding. He didn't think his days of butting heads with Jake were over, but he was glad that Jake was smart enough to recognize the current situation trumped their personal antagonism.

He shifted his attention back to Heather. "In the humvee." He kept his voice low. "You two were communicating?" When Heather nodded, he added softly but firmly, not quite a question and not quite an order, "Teach me."

Again, she nodded.

Before they had a chance to say anything more—there was so much Beck wanted to warn them about!—he heard the unmistakable sound of the door being unlocked. The three of them turned and watched as two armed prison guards entered. They wore dark brown uniforms that resembled Ravenwood gear closely enough that Beck guessed they were also J&R employees. It was not an encouraging thought.

One of them kept his weapon—a large semi-automatic pistol—trained on them, while the other pointed at them and said, "You. Beck."

Heather's hand tightened on his arm. For a moment, Beck considered refusing the command, but quickly decided against it. It would be almost entirely futile, and he didn't see much value in getting beaten to a pulp just to prove how cussed he could be. Better play along and spy out the lay of the land, and trust he'd be reunited with the other two at some point. He didn't think they would have been driven all this way if someone didn't want to talk to them before they were all executed.

Giving Heather what he hoped was a reassuring smile, he headed for the door. Once through it, he was marched further along the hallway to another interrogation room. He hesitated on the threshold when he saw who was waiting for him—although he wasn't really that surprised, was he?—but the guards shoved him forward and into a chair. A quick glance behind him told him they'd taken a pace back, but were still close enough to grab him if he made a lunge for the man leaning on his cane on the far side of the table.

"Major Beck." Valente lifted the cane and pointed at him. "You have been something of a

disappointment."

Beck linked his hands and rested them on the table, giving Valente back look for look, though he bit down on the urge to reply that Valente had proved equally disappointing to him.

Valente dropped the cane and took a pace sideways. He sighed heavily. "You were singularly inefficient in locating the terrorist. Had you done your job properly, we would not be having this... unfortunate meeting."

Beck watched Valente from under lowered lids. His presence all but confirmed they were in Loomer Ridge; Beck had never been told precisely where it was, but he'd gathered it was only an hour or two from Cheyenne by road. Even so, he wondered just why the ASA's Director of Homeland Security had made the trip from Cheyenne to have this chat, rather than leaving it to trained interrogators to extract any useful information the three of them might have.

He allowed himself a moment of satisfaction that Valente would almost certainly be wasting his time with *him*. Beck had only the sketchiest knowledge of Dale's smuggling contacts or the wider resistance movement they were trying to build outside Jericho, while any insight into the Texans' plans was limited to whatever snippets Mack Davis was allowed to pass on by his superiors. The little intelligence Beck did possess was strictly local, and it would have better served Valente to leave him to Hoffman, in hopes of breaking the stalemate and freeing up several thousand troops who could be deployed elsewhere.

Valente leaned on his cane and again sighed. "I trust you are aware how unpleasant things may become here. However, there is no need for such... inconveniences. Simply make a broadcast to your company commanders to tell them to surrender, and assist me in finding the real terrorist, Robert Hawkins, and you will be transferred to a far more... comfortable facility than this one."

Valente undoubtedly thought he was making a tempting offer. And that, Beck reflected, summed up the gulf between the two of them. He had no doubt that one day if—when, he promised himself silently—Valente was brought to justice, he'd sell out his co-conspirators in a heartbeat if he thought he could cut a deal. Whereas Beck....

He didn't reply for a moment. Then he leaned back and crossed his arms and, meeting Valente's gaze again, said coldly and clearly, "Major Edward Beck, United States Army. Five-two-five, two-six, four-three-eight-nine. Born October 1, 1962."

Valente looked at him in surprise for a moment, and then he laughed, a small, dry sound. "You seem to be under the impression, Major, that you are a prisoner of war, rather than a traitor and criminal. I can assure you that the Geneva Convention does not apply here."

That wasn't really news to Beck. Even if Valente *had* regarded him as a prisoner of war, the ASA didn't have much respect for human rights. He pushed away the memory of what he'd done himself, to Jake and to Jericho, in the ASA's name. He couldn't change the past; what was important was that he did the right thing now.

He didn't reply, just continued to stare Valente down. Valente was the one to break eye contact first, on pretense of picking up a folder that had been sitting on the table and flicking it open. Beck was again uncomfortably reminded of his own interrogation of Jake.

"You have an admirable service record." Valente had flipped through a couple of pages. "I see here that you received Class C SERE training prior to your deployment to Afghanistan." He looked up from the file and smiled sardonically. "It will be... useful to discover how effective that training is.

Meanwhile," Valente's lip curled in disdain, "perhaps Mr Green will be more co-operative."

Beck snorted. "Good luck with that." He'd tried his hardest to break Jake, and everything he'd done had just made Jake more defiant and determined. Beck was glad about that now.

Valente closed the file and slapped it down on the table. As if knowing the way Beck's thoughts ran, he sneered, "Everybody breaks, Major." He nodded at the two guards behind Beck, and Beck found himself being hustled from Valente's presence and back to the first room they'd been taken to,

There, he found Jake and Heather sitting on the floor in one corner, leaning against the wall. Jake had his arm around Heather, and her head rested on his shoulder. She looked absolutely exhausted, while Jake had the kind of jittery alertness that Beck recognized from the battlefield. He guessed he didn't look much better himself.

Seeing them like that together, he'd felt a rush of irritation. He wished he'd had a chance to warn them not to show too much affection toward each other. It was dangerous; the guards would use anything and everything against them, including each other. Then he laughed inwardly as he realized it was already too late: hadn't he and Jake demonstrated how much Heather mattered to them by getting caught making a half-assed foray deep into enemy territory in an attempt to get her back from Constantino's clutches?

As the guards pushed Beck into the room, Jake and Heather scrambled to their feet. Heather gave him a tight smile, and even Jake managed to look relieved at his return.

"Green!" the guard ordered. Jake glanced down at Heather and gave her a slight nod, before he stepped away from her to join the guard. As Jake passed him, Beck murmured "Valente". Jake grimaced and jerked his head back toward Heather. Beck took it as a sign that Jake wanted him to take care of her.

Once the door clanged shut behind Jake, Beck crossed over to her.

Again she took his arm, her gaze raking across his face. "Are you...?" She mouthed the words as much as spoke them.

"I'm good." He kept his voice low as he replied. Glancing at the mirrored wall, he drew them to sit down where she and Jake had been resting, understanding that one or other of them had chosen the place where it would be hardest to observe them from the other side of the mirror. Remembering again how the two of them had leaned against each other, he realized that part of his irritation at seeing them like that sprang from envy at Jake's easy familiarity around Heather. The more his own friendship with her deepened, the more awkward he felt when he was with her.

Pushing his feelings aside, because he didn't know how much time they'd have together, he took her hand in his. He curled her fingers into a fist and repeated what he'd said earlier: "Teach me."

Nodding, she frowned for a moment, and then pointed a finger at him, before forming her hand into four distinct shapes. Then she pointed at him again, and repeated the hand gestures.

He guessed she was signing his name. Indicating himself, he repeated the gestures back to her, and was rewarded with a smile. He pointed at her and raised his eyebrows, and she spelled out her name for him, twice. He recognized the E shape their names shared. Carefully, he signed her name back to her, fixing the letters in his mind.

He allowed himself a small smile as he realized he might have learned no more than a half dozen

letters, but he had three key ones. With a quick glance up to check she was watching, he offered her the first three letters of the alphabet.

He saw her hands shape a fourth letter almost automatically on the heels of his ABC. With a nod, he started again and ran through the first three and then added the D she'd just shown him. And, of course, the E he already knew. They went slowly on, his hand aching as he forced his fingers into the strange patterns. A few times, she had to reach out and help him make the shape; he felt her trembling, and wondered if it was exhaustion or fear or cold, or all three.

When they finally reached the end of the alphabet, he ran through the whole thing again a couple of times, only stumbling a little occasionally. He looked up at Heather, checking she was watching him, and began to sign his first question. She reached out and put her left hand over his, stopping him, while with her right she signed a T and a Y. She did so again, the fingers of her left hand giving his a squeeze, and he realized she was saying "thank you". He thought back to what she'd tried to sign to him in the humvee, and decided it was probably the same thing.

He lifted his gaze to meet hers and shrugged, before he began to laboriously spell out, frowning as he concentrated on remembering the letter-shapes, "Are you OK?"

She signed a Y back to him and looking up, he saw she was nodding and giving him a tired but reassuring smile. With a touch on his wrist, she drew his attention back down to her hands and slowly spelled out. "Not secret, talk." A slight lift of her shoulder seemed to indicate the last word was a question, and he guessed she meant that if what they had to say was something their captors already knew, they didn't have to sign it. He nodded at her and signed a Y.

Her voice when she spoke was a little hoarse. "They knocked me out with something—."

"Chloroform?" he offered.

She bobbed her head in agreement. "Carted me off to a mine outside New Bern. Constantino—" A shiver ran through her. "—threatened me a bit, and then they locked me in a shed for a while. Then Hoffman's soldiers turned up and got me out." She looked around her and gave a small snort. "I guess things could've turned out a lot worse."

Beck tried to block out the sudden memory of a dusty village somewhere deep in Kandahar province where he and his men had cut down three bodies swinging in the wind: men from the neighboring village who'd been mixed up in some petty dispute about... something. He'd never quite gotten to the bottom of it, and the roots of it seemed to go back decades, if not centuries. He realized that part of the way he'd dealt with it at the time was by telling himself that it was crazy foreigners with their crazy religions. Not good Christian folks in the mid-West...

He pushed away the memory—and the thought that he had gotten it all wrong when he'd called Heather naïve, that he'd been the one with blinders on—and cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. I got you into all this. I should have never asked you to be my liaison...."

Heather shook her head. "You didn't. Get me into this, I mean. It's not your fault that Phil Constantino's... like he is. And anyway—."

She stopped speaking at the sound of the door being unlocked again. They hastily got to their feet, his arm under her elbow to help her up, as the door opened and Jake was returned to them. He was wearing the defiant air that Beck knew all too well: Valente had obviously rubbed him the wrong way. One day, Beck promised himself, when they'd all gotten out of here and the ASA was just a bad memory, he was going to have to track Hawkins down just to ask him how the hell he'd

managed to work with Jake for months without putting his back up.

Dismissing the thought, Beck clenched his fists as the guards called Heather's name and escorted her away. He guessed Valente wanted a look at each of them, to see what levers he could use. And Heather, in her quiet way, had been a key part of exposing Valente's machinations and keeping the resistance going. Watching her leave the room, he allowed himself a small smile: he didn't think Valente would have much success with her either; she was quite as stubborn as Jake when she wanted to be.

He wasn't much surprised by the way Jake also turned and watched Heather leave, stiffening as the guard roughly grabbed her arm and dragged her out. Or the way Jake carried on looking at the door even after it was closed and locked again, as if he could see through metal and brick and follow her into Valente's presence.

Clearing his throat and making sure he trod heavily, Beck cautiously approached and touched Jake on the arm. Jake started and shook himself and then looked down at Beck. Making sure their bodies were angled so his gestures were hidden from any observer, Beck began to sign, "What—?"

Jake let out a snort of laughter, apparently amused that Beck had learned to sign in the time he'd been away, before he sobered. Raising his gaze, he caught Beck's eye and gave him an approving nod. Then he dipped his head, indicating Beck should go on.

Beck only got out the first three syllables of "What did Valente want?" before Jake began to answer. It took Beck a moment to catch on to the slight differences in the way Jake formed the letters compared with Heather, but Jake's signing was easy to read, especially as Beck already had some idea of what the answer would be: "Hawkins. Texas plans. You?"

Beck repeated back the letter-shapes for Hawkins, which earned another snort from Jake, and then spelled out "Order surrender." When Jake raised his eyebrows, Beck glared at him and spelled out "No" twice with rather more vehemence than his previous answers.

Jake's next question was, "Know where we are?"

Beck shrugged and signed back, "Loomer Ridge. Probably."

Jake's nod suggested it was the answer he'd expected. "Anyone ever escaped?"

Beck shook his head. He'd never heard of anyone coming out of Loomer Ridge once they went in. It was part of the reason why he'd listened and granted Jake's ridiculous request to name Dale as an informant in his investigation into Sarah Mason. Whatever Dale was up to, it wasn't bad enough to be sent here. Parker—Chavez—on the other hand, he'd had no compunction in shipping off to Loomer Ridge, although he supposed now it was a good thing the transport had never made it, even if it was at the cost of three lives.

"Look for chance," he suggested silently. Not that he expected there to be any. Still, it was the only plan he could come up with, right now. His main hope was that they could at least all remain in touch within the prison. Seeing the frustrated expression on Jake's face, he added as an afterthought, "Don't provoke...."

Jake's expression darkened, but before he could reply, they heard the door being unlocked again.

Jake had to admit he was impressed by how quickly Beck had picked up the fingerspelling. He was less impressed that Beck seemed no less patronizing when restricted to sign language than he normally was. Did he think Jake wasn't aware that provoking the guards would be a bad idea? Jake's left hand instinctively curled into a fist, but he'd only just begun to formulate a retort that, even signed, would convey the full extent of his contempt for Beck's suggestion when he was diverted by the sound of the guards returning.

He swung round toward the door, his pulse quickening. The whole time he and Beck had been talking, he'd been worrying about what Valente, or the guards, were doing to Heather. But when the door swung open, there was no sign of her, only of several guards in the hallway. He sprang forward. "Where's—?"

The guard who'd opened the door drew his pistol and pointed it at Jake, even as Beck caught his arm and pulled him back.

The guard sneered at them. "You'll find out soon enough. Move." He wagged the pistol to indicate they should step out into the corridor.

"You're not going to do Heather any good if you get yourself shot," Beck hissed at him as they headed for the door. Jake gave him an annoyed look; he *knew* that. He knew he had to keep his cool. He just.... He grimaced: it was just that, where Heather was concerned, he lost all reason. It was his fault, after all, she'd gotten dragged into all this....

When they got out into the hallway, he saw with relief that she was standing at the far end, near the main entrance to the building, watched over by a couple of guards. With more guards flanking him and Beck, they headed all outside and across the prison to another, larger block.

Here, they were processed into the jail. In the first room, photographs were taken and their fingerprints scanned, while a clerk tapped other information into a computer. Jake wasn't surprised, when he caught a glimpse of the computer screen, to see the J&R logo glowing in one corner. He wondered when they'd be tattooed with barcodes or implanted with ID chips.

From there, the guards hustled them into a second room, where hatches led through into what looked like a store room, shelving stretching into the distance. Another clerk lounged at one of the hatches, a smirk on his face. When the guards had lined the three of them up, the clerk looked them up and down, before he disappeared in back.

While they waited for him to return, one of the guards pointed at Beck, who was at one end of the row. "Strip," he ordered.

Beck raised an eyebrow. "Here? In front of...?" He glanced sideways, past Jake, to Heather.

Looking at her as well, Jake saw her cheeks had gone pink, and she'd half turned her head away.

"Now." The guard unshipped a stun baton from his belt and pointed it at Beck. "If it's something the young lady hasn't seen before, she'd better get used to it." He laughed derisively. "Unless you're afraid she'll find out you don't measure up."

The guard's words send a chill down Jake's spine. He was only dimly aware of Beck undressing, the major's movements stiff and his gaze fixed straight ahead; his own attention was focused on Heather, on what the guard had said and what it might mean. If they were separated.... A small voice in the back of his mind pointed out that, right now, even with all three of them in the room together, there wouldn't be much they could do against six armed guards.

"Your turn." The guard poked Jake in the shoulder with the stun baton. Remembering Beck's admonition not to provoke their captors, Jake restricted himself to a snort of disgust before he began to strip.

The clerk had come back with a stack of clothing that he separated into three piles, before barking "Shoe size!" at them. Heather's voice was barely above a whisper as she gave her answer, and Jake had to swallow and wet his tongue before he could force his out. Even Beck's reply sounded hoarse. The clerk disappeared again.

Jake dropped his underpants, adding them to the pile in front of him. He felt goosebumps rising as a draft of cold air from somewhere behind him hit him. He resisted the temptation to hold his hands in front of him, because he was damned if he was going to let the guards know how humiliating this was. Instead, he let them hang limply at his side.

"And now it's the young lady's turn." Jake could almost hear the guard's leer in the way he spoke.

"What?" Jake swung his head round to look at Heather.

The guard took a moment to smirk at Jake and Beck; behind him, Jake heard Beck's sharp, quiet protest of "Officer!"

Then the guard turned back to Heather and, with the tip of his baton, tilted up her chin. "Get on with it," he ordered.

"No!" Without thinking, Jake launched himself at the guard. He heard Heather whisper his name despairingly as the stun baton was slammed into his stomach. He doubled over, falling to his knees. As he curled around the pain, gasping for breath, he dimly realized he'd gotten lucky: the guard had only hit him with the baton and not shocked him.

Black spots were still dancing on his eyelids and he was struggling to get his breath back when he felt Heather's touch on his arm. Forcing open his eyes, he realized she was crouching down next to him. To his surprise, she slid her hand down his arm until she could grab his hand in both of hers and shove something warm and hard into his palm. She curled his fingers closed around it, before she put her arm around his shoulder.

Drawing in another lungful of air, he let her help him back to his feet. Her hand lingered on his shoulder and she caught his eye. "It's okay," she whispered, before she stepped back.

He watched her turn and square up to the guard, meeting his gaze unflinchingly as she kicked off her shoes, dragged her top over her head and worked her way out her jeans. Jake turned his head away as she reached back to unhook her bra, and tried not to listen to the wolf-whistles and catcalls coming from around the room.

Still breathing heavily and trying to tune out the after-effects of the punch, he tightened his hand around whatever she'd passed him. It was mostly squarish, with rounded edges, and about an inch wide, an inch deep, and maybe four or five inches long. Whatever it was, he was determined to keep it hidden. He clenched his other fist as well, hoping the guards would just think he was trying not to take a swing at them. Which wasn't so far off the mark.

Looking around, imprinting the faces of the guards on his memory, he had the satisfaction of seeing some had fallen silent and were looking down at their feet. Not all of them, though. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the guard who was giving the orders slowly walk round Heather;

inspecting her from every angle. Eventually, just as Jake wasn't sure he could hold onto his frustration and disgust much longer, the guard stopped pacing and snapped, "Get dressed."

Jake saw him sheathe his baton, grab a pile of clothes from the counter and shove them at Heather. A moment later, the guard was thrusting a bundle at Jake. He took it awkwardly. Putting it down on the floor, he managed to slip the thing Heather had given him inside one of the sneakers sitting on top of the pile. He pulled on the underwear and orange hospital scrubs that seemed to be the prison uniform, and then managed to extract whatever it was Heather had given him, and hide it inside his fist again, apparently without being detected, before he slipped on the shoes. Picking up the pile of spare clothes—an extra set of scrubs and some more underwear—and straightening, he saw Heather and Beck were also ready; it was strange to see the major out of uniform, while the bright orange made Heather look even more washed out.

After that, they were hurried out of the room and taken in different directions. Jake threw a despairing look over his shoulder at Heather as she was marched away from him. Not that he'd been able to do much so far to protect her when they'd been together, but at least he was there, at least he had a chance to stop—.

He didn't want to think about what they might do to her when they got her alone. Instead, he used the time between them pushing him into a cell and the lights going out to take a look at what she'd given him. Crawling under the thin blanket that covered the low cot—pretty much everything in the cell, including the bed, seemed to be made from either concrete or steel—he turned his back to the door, as if going to sleep, and opened his hand.

He almost laughed when he discovered he was holding the multi-tool he'd brought her from Lackland. God knows what use it would be, though various attachments when he pulled them out suggested they might prove vicious enough in determined hands; the short knife blade certainly felt sharp when he cautiously tested it against his thumb.

Folding everything away, he carefully slid the multi-tool under the thin mattress, deciding he'd find a better place if he could in the morning. He knew the chances of him holding on to it for long were slim; he suspected the cells would be searched thoroughly on a regular basis. Yet the thought that Heather had managed to salvage his silly gift, that she'd had it on her in the first place, made him feel oddly happy.

The lights went out. Turning onto his back, he lay on the narrow cot and stared up into the dark. Though he was dog-tired, and knew he should be trying to snatch some sleep while the guards allowed it, he lay awake for a long time, trying not to think about what might be happening to Heather.

oOo

Jake woke with a start, for a moment not knowing where he was, before memory flooded back in. He held his arm across his face, blinking against the bright fluorescents that had come back on. A harsh buzzer was still sounding, but it cut off as he sat up and looked around his cell.

The brutalist design only served to confirm what Beck had suggested the night before: they were most likely in Loomer Ridge. While the only jail Jake had ever seen the inside of was the town jail in Jericho, he knew they built prison cells like this for supermax facilities. The bed, stool and table were poured concrete, and the shower, sink and toilet were steel and clearly designed to be impossible to take apart. A small window set high up showed nothing but sky, and the door was solid steel, with a hatch. Even as Jake looked at it, the flap was snapped open, and a cup and bowl pushed through.

Jake got up and padded across, his stomach rumbling. He couldn't remember when he'd last eaten; he and Beck had snatched a bite on horseback soon after they set off, so he guessed it was nearly twenty four hours ago. The cup contained water, and the bowl slightly oversalted grits. Jake didn't think he was in a position to be fussy, and he quickly finished both.

Under cover of relieving himself, he went back to examining his cell, quickly coming to the conclusion there weren't any hiding places around the nooks and chinks of the sanitary ware that the guards wouldn't already know about. Looking back at the bed as he washed and dried his hands, he decided the multi-tool was already in the best place possible. Although maybe he could make it a little safer....

Before he could act, he heard the series of heavy metallic clanks that meant the door was being unlocked. He turned and watched as it swung open.

"Green! Out!"

Jake gritted his teeth, reminding himself that Beck was right, and there was no point needlessly provoking the guards. Bracing his shoulders, he moved toward the door and stepped outside.

A stun baton slapped across his stomach, not hard but enough to bring him up short.

"You wait one pace outside the door until you're told what to do!" The guard wielding the baton smirked up at him. A second guard lounged against the wall opposite looking bored, as if he'd seen this played out a hundred times before. "Understand?" the first guard asked.

"Yes." Jake nodded.

"Yes, sir!" the guard snapped.

The time the baton hit Jake hard enough to wind him. He staggered back, catching at the door frame to steady himself. Swallowing down the urge to take a swing at the guard, he straightened and sucked in a breath.

"Understand?" The guard poked him in the stomach with the end of the baton.

"Yes, sir." Jake managed to gasp out, trying not to let his contempt creep into his voice. He'd never thought much of bullies.

"Good. Left turn. Get movin'." The guard gestured with the baton, and Jake set off down the hallway. There were more steel doors with hatches at regular intervals, but Jake seemed to be the only prisoner on the move. He wondered where Heather and Beck were, and if he'd get to see them again.

Glancing back over his shoulder to check how far the cells extended in the other direction earned him another prod in the back, and an, "Eyes forward!" Jake supposed he should be glad he still hadn't been shocked, although he guessed it was only a matter of time.

The guards escorted him to another interrogation room somewhere within the same block. It was smaller than the one they'd been taken to last night, with one mirrored wall and no mesh letting on to the next room, although it did have a table and two chairs. Jake began to move toward the table, but one of the guards—the one who hadn't spoken before—put out his baton to stop him.

"Face the mirror!" he barked.

Jake turned and examined his reflection. He looked rough, his skin sallow, dark shadows under his eyes, and his stubble heavy. Not that he'd looked so great even before he'd gotten captured, he reckoned.

The guard who'd ordered him to face the mirror stepped up and put his face close to Jake's. "Squat! Hands on head!"

Jake gave him a puzzled look. Why—? Before he had a chance to complete the thought, he tasted the stun baton again, this time with a jolt of electricity. With a cry he dropped to the floor. Gasping for breath, he was only half aware of the guard hauling him into the position he'd ordered: feet slightly apart, knees bent, his hands on the top of his head.

"Don't move!" The guard stepped back and leaned against the mirror, idly twirling the stun baton like a gunslinger in a western playing with his revolver.

Jake squatted where he'd been placed and tried to work out what the guards were playing at. He started to understand when his legs began to ache after just a few minutes. Gritting his teeth, he held himself still, not only trying to avoid getting another taste of the baton but also determined not to give the guard the satisfaction of using it. Attempting to distract himself, he focused on thinking about the other two, wondering if they were facing the same treatment. He guessed Beck would have been prepared for something like this, but the thought of Heather being pushed around and shocked by these goons made his blood boil. The adrenaline coursing through him helped him hold still for a while longer, though his knees and thighs and ankles and lower back all protested more and more loudly as the time wore on.

When the adrenaline rush had passed—it had maybe sustained him another ten minutes—and the pain began to bite into him even more fiercely, he turned his attention to examining the guards, working out what each of them carried, and where. They seemed to come in pairs when moving prisoners around. If he had the multi-tool and the element of surprise, he could maybe jump his escorts in one of the hallways: put them out of action and take their weapons before they had a chance to raise the alarm. After that... well, Jake didn't think his chances of escape were high, but it was a start.

Thinking about escape and memorizing each bit of equipment—pistol, stun baton, radio and more—allowed him to survive perhaps another ten minutes. By that point, his muscles were beginning to tremble with the exertion of holding himself steady. Forcing himself to breathe slowly and evenly, he began to count, parceling the time out into minutes, just trying to get through the next sixty seconds, and the next.... Until, suddenly, his legs gave way and he slumped over sideways.

They didn't actually stun him; he guessed that meant he'd done well enough at the first round of this sick game. Instead, they made him kneel, which he knew was going to end up being just as bad and even more quickly from the moment his kneecaps met the concrete floor. When the position finally grew too unbearable, when all his attempts to distract himself with plans of escape failed, he lifted himself back onto his heels in a crouch. That did earn him another shock, but also the relief of being allowed to stand. Which sounded like it would be a whole lot better—but more than three hours later by his estimate—the guards watching him had changed twice—a whole different set of muscles in his shins and thighs and back were in agony.

He was just wondering how long they'd keep him like this when the door to the interrogation room opened. Instead of another change of guards, the newcomer was unarmed and in shirtsleeves and tie. He looked Jake up and down for a moment, and then gestured with the folder he was carrying

toward the chair facing the mirror. "Sit."

Jake flicked his gaze to the guards for a moment, unsure whether this was another test, but they seemed indifferent. Letting out a breath, Jake cautiously moved toward the chair, forcing his stiff legs to carry him there. Taking a seat, he tried to settle into a position that would ease his aching muscles.

"So." The man—an interrogator, Jake supposed—flicked open the file; Jake saw the picture from his passport stapled to the first page. "Jake Green." The interrogator began to turn the pages. "You had quite an interesting history even before you decided to betray your country."

Jake didn't bother to answer. The Allied States wasn't *his* country. Wasn't even a real damn country in the first place. Of the four people in the room, in fact, he was the only one who *wasn't* a traitor.

"Did the terrorists recruit you during your time in Afghanistan or Iraq? Or before that, when you were in South America?"

Jake snorted. Was the guy serious? When the interrogator raised his eyebrows, Jake just gave him a dumb shrug.

"So, then....," the interrogator flipped over another page, "at some point, you met Robert Hawkins."

Here it was. They wanted to know where Hawkins was. Well, good luck with that one, because Jake hadn't got a clue. Mack had relayed a message a week back—no, must be ten days, now; with a start, Jake realized two days and more had passed since Russell had pitched up at Heather's house. Anyway, the last they'd heard, Hawkins was still in Texas, but making plans to return to Jericho.

The interrogator looked up and met Jake's gaze. "Don't suppose you'd care to tell us where we can find him?"

Jake shrugged again, remembering how that had seemed to particularly annoy Beck.

"What about his associates? Anyone you think could lead us to him?"

Jake laughed. "Thomas Valente?" he offered with a smirk.

The interrogator gave him a long hard look. "Hmm." He looked down and went back to reading through the file again, tipping it up so Jake couldn't see what was on the pages as he turned them. The silence stretched on as the interrogator continued to read. Jake laughed inwardly, because he knew that technique too. Keeping half an eye on the man opposite him, he turned his attention back to the guards, resuming his earlier examination of them.

Eventually the interrogator must have decided Jake wasn't going to volunteer anything just to break the silence. He cleared his throat and looked back at Jake. "So, why don't you tell me about, what's the name of the place?" He flicked back a few pages. "Oh, yes. Jericho. What do you think's going on back there? Who do you think is in charge there now?"

Again, Jake offered him the dumb shrug.

"Come on," the interrogator gave him a conspiratorial smile. "What's the harm in telling me that?"

That you start me talking, Jake thought. He shrugged again. "What's the point? I'm sure you already know the answers."

The interrogator closed the file and laid it flat on the table. "Humor me."

Jake turned his head away, letting a sneer settle on his face. "And why would I want to do that?"

The interrogator leaned forward, his hands clasped on the file. "Because I can make life very... difficult for you, if you don't. Or," he sat back and opened his hands expansively, "I could ensure that any... unpleasantness is kept to the absolute minimum."

He nodded at the guard standing behind Jake. Even as Jake twisted, trying to work out what was coming so he could defend himself, the guard dug the stun baton between his shoulder blades and administered another shock. Jake bit back a cry and grabbed the edge of the table with both hands.

While he gasped for breath and tried to calm his racing heart, the interrogator once more opened the file. "So, let's try this again. Where is Robert Hawkins?"

Jake felt the guard rest tip of the stun baton against his back. He met the interrogator's gaze, and the man raised his eyebrows. When Jake still didn't answer, the interrogator flicked his eyes upward and sideways, toward the guard.

"Wait!" Jake held up his hands. "Wait!" He paused and breathed heavily, wondering how long he could string this out without actually telling them anything. Because he damn well wasn't going to give them anything useful, but he didn't think getting shocked into unconsciousness was much of a plan either. And if he didn't give them anything, then they'd only be harder on the other two, and he didn't want to think about what they might already be doing to Heather, right now....

The interrogator tapped his fingers impatiently.

"Look, I don't know, okay," Jake snapped, trying to inject the right mix of fear and irritation into his tone. "Last time I saw Hawkins was in Texas, and that was weeks ago. He could be anywhere by now, for all I know. Dead in a ditch, or on some tropical island in the South Pacific living the high life."

The interrogator eyed him for a moment, before making an unimpressed noise in the back of his throat. "And Jericho?"

Jake shrugged. "Same as before, I guess." When the interrogator gave him a skeptical look, Jake rolled his eyes and shook his head. "I don't know what kind of half-assed intelligence you have in there," he gestured at the file, "but I wasn't running Jericho. If you're hoping the place is going to fall apart without me, you're wrong. They've probably barely noticed I'm gone."

He didn't think that last part was true, but he knew the rest of it was: Eric and Gray and everyone else would do just fine without him. The knowledge gave him strength.

"I see." The interrogator turned a page in the file. "And what about the resistance?"

Jake raised his eyebrows. "The what?" He did his best to make the question sound as incredulous as possible.

"The resistance outside Jericho." The interrogator looked up calmly from the file.

Jake shook his head. "I don't know anything about that."

"Oh, come on." The interrogator shook his head slightly. "We know Jericho's been passing people through ASA lines. Nearly caught some of them too, though," he dipped his head slightly in an approving nod, "your guys are pretty good. I guess you do have home advantage."

He stopped talking and looked at Jake inquiringly, but as there hadn't actually been a question in any of that, Jake wasn't planning on answering.

After a moment, the interrogator must have realized that as well, because he said, "So, what's all that about?"

Jake snorted. "Smuggling?" he offered.

"Smuggling?" The interrogator raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah." Jake gave him a contemptuous look. "We like to eat."

"So all that activity? That's just about food?"

"Pretty much."

"And people outside Jericho, they're willing to sell to a rebel town?"

Jake shrugged. "I guess. I don't really know."

"And these... smugglers. They're not making contact with agents from Texas?"

Jake gave the interrogator a blank look. "Not as far as I know." No need, when they had Mack in town, and he had some kind of hotline back to San Antonio. Sounded like Cheyenne didn't know that though, and Jake tucked that bit of information away in case... well, in case he ever got out of here and could actually tell someone.

The interrogator looked disappointed. He asked a few more questions about the smuggling: who they were buying from, about what kind of gossip they brought back. When Jake offered him nothing but half a dozen variations on "I'm not running Jericho, I have no idea", his expression grew blacker and blacker. At last, after another five minutes of getting nowhere, he simply closed the file, got up and left the room.

Jake carried on sitting at the table, wondering if any time now the guards were going to force him back into another painful position. After maybe half an hour, one of the radios carried by the guards crackled. The guard answered it. Jake didn't properly catch the order that came over the airwaves, but it obviously meant something to the guard. He jerked his head at Jake. "On your feet."

They marched him out of the room, along several corridors that echoed with their footsteps, and through some double doors that led outside, to what looked bizarrely like an empty swimming pool. Some steps near the doors led down into the sunken concrete area, and the guards with Jake led him toward them. Four other guards were lounging at various points around the perimeter, eyeing two orange-clad prisoners who stood close together at the bottom of the concrete depression, a few paces away from the foot of the steps.

A wave of relief washed over Jake as he recognized Heather and Beck, and he hurried down the steps. Beck saw him coming and touched Heather's arm to alert her. She turned; even though her skin was gray with fatigue and there were shadows under her eyes, her smile was like the sun coming out.

Reaching her, Jake gathered her into a hug, holding her close for a moment, before she pushed him gently away from her.

She glanced over her shoulder at the four guards who'd already been there when he'd arrived, who were now congregated on the far side of the area, and then past Jake to where the pair of guards who'd brought him here were lighting up furtive cigarettes. She shuffled a little sideways, turning Jake too, his hands resting on her upper arms still, and he realized she was making sure the guards couldn't see them "talking".

"No time," she signed, and he nodded. He didn't think the guards were letting them spend a few minutes together out of the kindness of their hearts.

Letting go of her arm with his right hand, he signed, "You OK?" She nodded. He glanced over her shoulder at the guards, wondering if he could believe her. She must have seen his gaze shift, because she shrugged and signed, "Looks. Words. Val said: no touch."

He let out a breath. He couldn't be completely sure Valente's prohibition would hold, but he guessed getting on the man's bad side wasn't something the guards were likely to want to risk.

Beck coughed, drawing Jake's attention away from Heather. He stepped closer, and Jake turned a fraction, his left hand still on Heather's arm, to admit him to the circle.

"We should talk a little," Beck said, keeping his voice low. "It'll look suspicious if we don't, and they may work out—" He gestured slightly with his hands. "But we should only discuss what they already know. Anything else...." Again, he made a slight movement with his hands.

Jake nodded: it made sense.

"So," Beck cleared his throat, "how's your day gone so far? Mine was stress positions and then being interrogated: how did I have my troops deployed, what did I know about the resistance outside Jericho, what's Texas up to, where's Hawkins?" There was the hint of a wry grin on his lips as he added dryly, "They do seem very keen to get hold of him."

"What d'you tell them?" Jake couldn't quite keep the cynicism out of his voice, even though he knew Beck was on the same side. He was finding it hard to forget that Beck had worked for Cheyenne and used some of the same tricks on Jake.

Beck gave him a mildly annoyed look—again, Jake found his hackles rising automatically, and he had to swallow down his irritation—and shrugged. "Name, rank, serial number, date of birth. I think my interrogator got bored by the end."

Jake snorted. "An easy answer for everything."

Beck pressed his lips together, but didn't say anything. Realizing he was unnecessarily trying Beck's patience, and it wasn't a good time, Jake dipped his head in apology. Beck gave his own brief nod to acknowledge the gesture. "You?" he asked.

"Stress positions, too, I guess. At least, they were damn uncomfortable." Jake rolled his shoulders at the memory. "Then sounds like much the same questions as you. Told 'em I'd no idea what had happened to Hawkins since I left Texas, and that I wasn't running Jericho, so I'd no idea on the rest."

Beck nodded; Jake thought there was a hint of approval in it. They both turned to look at Heather.

"They just made me stand and...." Her cheeks went pink. When Jake raised his eyebrows at her, she added, "Just comments. You know, the kind of the kind of thing some guys say...."

She tailed off as Jake instinctively gripped her arm more tightly. He knew exactly what she meant: he'd heard way too much of it when he'd been out in Iraq with J&R. Most of the time he'd tried to tune it out: when the other guys were watching porn or swapping skin mags or just shooting the breeze. A few times, he'd stepped in when they'd started verbally roughing up the few female J&R employees working in the Green Zone or out at BIAP. Gotten him a bit of a reputation, and there might have been trouble, but Freddy had always had his back; it was one of the reasons Jake had stayed in touch with him after—.

He realized Heather was looking at him unhappily. She reached up and put her hand over his. "It's no big deal." She shook her head. She let out a forced chuckle. "Just like being in High School. You know, fifteen year old boys with too many hormones and no experience. Really." She glanced at Beck—Jake guessed he wasn't looking any happier about it than Jake was—and then back at Jake. "It's fine. I can handle it."

Carefully relaxing his grip on her arm, Jake puffed out his cheeks. "Okay." He wasn't sure he entirely believed her, but he reckoned she needed him to act like he did.

Beck cleared his throat again, pulling Heather's attention away from Jake. "So, did you get the same questions?"

Heather nodded. "I kept telling them I wasn't involved in that stuff. In the end, they asked me what I *was* involved in." Her lips twitched. "I told them wind turbines. That I was responsible for keeping the town supplied with power."

"And they believed you?" Beck sounded a little incredulous himself.

She shook her head. "Not at first. So I spent most of the time they were talking to me explaining the technology. How a governor works; how we get the blades to automatically turn into the wind...." Again her lips twitched. "Plan on telling them all about the sewage farm tomorrow."

Beck was shaking his head, but his smile said it was admiration rather than disbelief. Jake pulled her close for a moment and murmured into her hair, "You're incredible." When he drew away, he saw she was blushing again.

Beck tapped him on the arm, drawing his attention, and Jake saw he had his fist clenched, ready to sign. Jake glanced at Heather and saw she was watching, too. He nodded at Beck and turned his gaze back to the major's hand.

"Need intel," Beck signed. Jake thought he must have been practicing: he was faster than the day before, clearly not having to think so hard about each letter before he formed it. "Cell locations, guard posts, routines, friendlies." He gave a shrug as if to say there was probably more they could find out. "Share." He circled his hand to indicate the three of them.

Jake nodded. He didn't know how much good it would do, but they needed every advantage they could get. Which reminded him—.

He gripped Heather's arm to get her attention again, and then signed. "Multi-tool. Safe."

She gave him a warm smile in return, and a quick dip of the head to show she'd understood.

"What—?" Beck's question pulled Jake's attention back to the major and he saw a puzzled frown creasing his forehead.

Jake looked back at Heather, wondering how to explain without taking forever to sign it. She gave him a slight nod of the head to indicate she'd handle it, before she turned to Beck.

"When Jake came back from Texas, he brought me a present."

Jake saw her sign "Knife. Other tools...." and raise her eyebrows at Beck. When she shaped her hands to mark out something about the size of the multi-tool and mimed opening it, his expression suddenly cleared and he nodded to show he understood.

Heather signed, "On me." Keeping her voice low, she added out loud, "When Constantino's thugs snatched me...." Signing again, she spelled out, "Last night. Change clothes...." She gestured in Jake's direction.

Beck nodded. Looking at Jake, he signed, "Weapon?"

Jake shrugged and signed back, "Maybe. Surprise...." It wasn't exactly what he'd have chosen to effect a breakout. If he was Hawkins, of course, it would be a different story. It occurred to him that maybe the same was true for Beck, who was infantry. He pointed at Beck and signed, "Trained?"

Beck nodded and murmured quietly. "Not recently, but... yes."

"Hmm." Jake guessed that meant he should really get the multi-tool to Beck. Although he wasn't sure how he could manage that without it being discovered. On the other hand, it wasn't doing much good shoved under his mattress, either, and maybe they could find a way to smuggle it between them if the guards were going to let them meet like this every day.

He squashed down the little voice in the back of the head telling him the tool was Heather's, and Jake had given it to her, so why should *Beck* get to have it, because he knew he was just being childish. It really did make more sense for Beck to hold the tool.

Before he could suggest they find a way to transfer it, one of the guards at the far end of the area called out, "Lisinski. Time to go."

Heather had twisted round to look at the guard as he called her name. She swung back and met Jake's gaze, and he drew her into another all-too-brief hug before he reluctantly let her step back. Turning, she gave Beck a quick, stiff, one-armed embrace that seemed to surprise him a great deal; he'd barely brought his own arm up to return it before she was pushing away from him and hurrying across to the steps in time to meet the guard at the top of them.

Jake watched her pass through the double doors. From the corner of his eye, he caught Beck looking after her too, the normally stern lines of the major's face softened. He looked almost as sorry and worried to see her disappear out of sight as Jake was.

Jake wasn't sure if he found Beck's expression comforting or irritating. On the one hand, it was a relief to know Beck would probably do his best to take care of Heather if anything happened to Jake. On the other hand, Jake didn't think the major had any right to lay claim to friendship with Heather after what he'd done to Jericho, and after landing her in this mess by asking her to be his liaison. But, then, Jake should never have let Heather go to New Bern in the first place....

The two of them stood there in silence, until it was Beck's turn to be marched away and, finally, Jake's.

oOo

Heather woke from an uneasy sleep at the sound of the buzzer and the lights coming on. For a moment, she hunched under the blanket, wishing she could return to black forgetfulness, wishing she could stay like that.

Last night, just like the night before, she'd found it hard to fall asleep. She'd lain tensely on her bed, wondering if the ordeal of the day was really over or if there'd be—more. Footsteps had passed occasionally in the hallway outside, shadows cutting off the rectangle of dim yellow light coming through the open hatch in her door, and she'd held her breath each time. She was afraid the footsteps would pause, the way they had once or twice yesterday afternoon after they'd taken her away from Jake and Edward and brought her back here. That there'd be more eyes watching her, more whispered words telling her what they'd like to do to her. That there'd be the rattle of door being unlocked....

Turning on her back, she saw the hatch was still open. It hadn't been closed at all while she'd been in the cell. Taking a deep breath and trying to mask her expression so her fear wouldn't show, she climbed out of bed and went to use the toilet. As she washed her hands and splashed water on her face, she eyed the shower: although she badly wanted to climb under it and get properly clean, she wasn't sure she was quite accustomed enough yet to the lack of privacy for that.

There was a clatter behind her, and she turned and saw breakfast had been delivered. Maybe she could work out a time when the guards were too busy with other duties to come and peer at her while she showered. The perfunctory way the food was pushed into the cells—last night, it had been a tray with meat stew and bread, and some kind of stewed fruit—suggested whoever was doing that had a lot to deliver. Or perhaps she could work out when the guards were on shift change and occupied with chatting with each other down at the guard post at the end of the wing.

She ate breakfast quickly, knowing that, if yesterday was anything to go by, it wouldn't be long before they came for her.

This time, as they marched her to the interrogation room, she tried to memorize the route and count how many paces it was, to get some idea of the size of the place and the layout. Of course, it wasn't easy when all you could see were fluorescent-lit corridors, and you had no idea of the shape of the building. Yesterday afternoon, on her way back to her cell, she'd determined from the few signs that she was in C-wing and cell 203. The interrogation rooms were on the floor below—after they'd gone past the guard station and various locked gates, they'd descended some stairs to get to them. She thought that maybe there was a central block with wings stretching out from it like arms. The only time she'd had any glimpse of the outside was when she'd been taken to the exercise area.

As the guards pushed her into place in front of the mirror in the interrogation room, she closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on visualizing the layout of the building, on seeing it like an engine part: this piece connected to here, and at this angle, and was this long.... Yet all she could do for the first few minutes was think about the others. About how good it had been to see them and know they were still alive. To be held close by Jake, and to see Edward's faith in her in the way he smiled at her. She knew they couldn't protect her, any more than they could protect themselves, but it was easier to face what was happening with them here.

Swallowing down the lump in her throat, she forced away those memories and concentrated on

what she'd seen on the way to the interrogation room. It helped her to block out the conversation being carried on by the two guards. One of them was telling the other in some detail about how he'd had a dream about her last night, although from the bits she couldn't help hearing, she didn't think he really had. It sounded more like he was fitting the two of them into some porn movie he'd once seen. Heather wouldn't actually know—she'd never watched any porn—but she vaguely knew about the kind of stuff you found in them.

After the guy had been droning on for around half an hour, and she was finally pretty sure she'd made sense of the structure of the building, based on what she knew so far, the guards changed. She used the moment when they were distracted talking to each other to shift her weight a little and ease her feet. Glancing briefly at the new arrivals from under lowered lids, she saw one of them had been part of the group that had booked them in when they first arrived, but the other one was new to her.

The new guy walked around her slowly, inspecting her. She clamped her eyes shut and pressed her lips together, trying to ignore the smell of stale cigarette smoke and sweat coming off him. He stopped close at one point and leaned in and sniffed her, but he never touched her. She guessed Valente's orders—given the first evening when she'd been taken to see him—still held. She tried not to think about what might happen when they no longer did.

"So, this is the new hoochie I been hearing about? The one the Director's all so riled up about." The guard had leaned closed again, his breath tickling her cheek.

"I guess." The other guard sounded bored.

"Not much for looks, is she?" Now he had his face in hers; she tried not to wrinkle her nose at his sour breath.

The other guard grunted.

"Hear she's got great hooters though. You guys have all the fun while I'm away." The guard stepped back, and Heather let out the breath she'd been holding.

Peering from under her lashes, Heather saw from the way the new guard's feet were arranged that he was lounging back against the mirror. She guessed from the way that her skin crawled that he was still looking at her. In the quiet, she thought she could hear him breathing heavily.

Forcing down the fear that wormed within her, she tried to focus again on what she'd be able to tell Jake and Edward when she next saw them. There was definitely a pattern to the guard changes—there had to be, that was how prisons worked—but without any kind of clock or watch, she wasn't completely sure what it was. Maybe if she counted....

"Hey, Conrad." The new guard's voice broke into her thoughts. "How 'bout you go fetch us a couple coffees."

"You think—?" The other guard sounded uncertain.

"Oh, come on, you think *she's* gonna cause me any trouble. Come on, man, I'm parched."

Heather heard a heavy sigh from the other guard, and then his footsteps and the clatter of the door as he left the room. She tried to breathe deeply and calm her racing heart as she heard the new guard step toward her. She sensed him move behind her, and then the touch of his stun baton on her shoulder.

"Kneel," he ordered.

She swallowed and did as he asked, feeling the hard concrete under her knees. The baton lifted from her shoulder, and she felt him edge closer. Then she heard a zipper being undone.

She pressed her eyes tightly closed and bent her head, swallowing down the vomit rising in her throat. Behind her, the guard began grunting, and he was close enough for her to feel the air stirring as he moved. She tried to close her ears to the sounds he was making, to block out the smell of him, but she didn't seem to be able to. Tears were leaking from her eyes, but she did her best not to shake, not to let him know.

Then something warm and sticky hit her hair and began to drip down onto her back. She couldn't stop the violent shudder that ran through her, knowing—.

"Oh, jeez, man!" Heather had barely been aware of the door opening as Conrad returned.

"Hey, what?" She felt the guard behind her step back and heard him zip up his pants. "Valente said no touching, right?"

"You're sick, Morgan." Conrad sounded genuinely disgusted.

"Just 'cause you wanna do the same, but you're too much of a pussy...." Morgan taunted as he moved away from Heather.

She was shivering now, despite her best efforts.

"You're sick," Conrad repeated flatly.

oOo

Heather managed to stop shaking after about five minutes, as the first of the shock wore off, leaving her feeling wrung out. The semen on the back of her neck cooled and dried, but she could still feel it when she moved. After a few minutes, Conrad told her, in a surprisingly gentle voice, to get back on her feet.

She took a few more breaths once she was standing, and then opened her eyes. Through the mirror, she met Morgan's gaze. He smirked at her and she wanted to look away, but she went on looking at him, long enough and steadily enough that she hoped she'd convinced him that what he'd done didn't matter, that he hadn't gotten to her.

Then she deliberately turned her head away and closed her eyes. It wasn't so bad really, she told herself. It could be a lot worse. If Valente changed his mind, or the guards ignored his orders, it probably would be.

It was still a relief when the guards changed shift. She heard some whispering from the new pair; although she couldn't make out what they were saying, she guessed they'd seen the state of her and were talking about it. She shoved away the thought that if one of them had done it, the rest of them would take it as license to follow suit. As the hours wore on, and another crew swapped in—again, more whispering—it seemed like the others either didn't have the desire or the balls. Heather allowed herself to relax very slightly.

The worst part, as she waited out the hours, was that it robbed her of some of her pleasure in the thought of seeing Jake and Edward again. Because neither of them were going to be at all happy

about what had happened if they found out, and Jake—. Heather had done her best so far to save Jake from himself. It meant the world to her that he cared so much about her, and that he wanted to protect her. But not when he got himself hurt unnecessarily doing it. The way he'd lashed out at the guards the first evening, and the way they'd punished him.... She hoped she'd have a chance to clean up before they took her out to the exercise yard, so he need never know. If they didn't.... She tried not to think about how he'd react if he found out about this, or what the consequences would be.

When the interrogator came in—the same man as the day before—he did a double take when he saw her, but didn't comment, just gestured for her to sit. He tried asking her the same questions as before, in different ways: trying to get her to tell him what she thought people in Jericho would be doing right now, or who they'd be talking to. She played dumb again, saying she didn't really know what Gray or Eric would be up to—still having their daily meeting, if with Captain Clark rather than Edward, she hoped—and he changed tack. What would *she* be doing? She asked him what day it was. When he told her, she said she'd be checking the sewage plant and doing routine maintenance; he cut off her explanation of exactly what was involved a few sentences in.

Then he tried asking her who she was especial friends with, so she told him about Emily and the wedding-that-never-was. He indicated that he knew Jake had been dating Emily; she guessed it was somewhere in Jake's file—maybe Edward had made a note of it back when he'd asked Jake to be sheriff? Heather debated with herself for a moment, and then decided it was best not to give their captors any more ammunition to use against Jake; she told the interrogator he and Emily had split up, no, she didn't know why. (Oh, but she'd hoped, she'd so hoped.... Not that she told the interrogator *that*.) He moved on to asking her if she was friends with the Hawkins family as well, but when she stonewalled him on that, he apparently decided he'd had enough for the day and left. She just hoped that, in all her babble, she hadn't given him anything important.

She sat and waited for whatever was going to happen next. The guards changed again, and her heart sank when she saw it was the pair with her tormentor of the morning. A few minutes later, Conrad's radio crackled with the word "Ready", and they got her to her feet. As they led her out of the interrogation room, she realized it was likely she was either going to have to shower while Morgan ogled her, or put off showering until he was called away—and, God, she so wanted to get that...*stuff* off of her—or that she'd be meeting Jake and Edward with it still on her, while Morgan smirked down at them.

It turned out to be last option, and when they led her out to the exercise area, Jake and Edward were already waiting. She moved slowly down the steps, happy to see they were okay, but dreading the moment when they'd find out what had happened, and Jake impatiently hurried toward her and drew her against him.

After a moment, she felt him tense, his hold on her loosening a little. As he pushed her back so he could look into her face, he muttered, "What—? There's something in your hair...."

She met his gaze and then looked away. Edward had caught up with Jake and was frowning at her with concern as well. She swallowed. "One of the guards—." She couldn't prevent a shiver from running through her, though she did manage to stop her gaze sliding away to where she'd seen Morgan amble round to one side of the exercise area.

"What?" Jake kept his voice was low, but she could hear the anger.

Letting go of his arms, not looking at him, she curled her fingers into a fist and forced herself to sign "masturbated". She was just starting to form the B when Jake curled his hand over hers and stopped her. She could feel him shaking, too. Looking up, she saw he had twisted his head away and was grimacing. When she glanced at Edward, his face was set in hard lines, and she knew his

anger burned as coldly as Jake's fury burned hot.

She turned back to Jake, but his gaze was still turned away from her; he was looking over her shoulder, scanning the guards parading around the rim of the exercise area. He stiffened, his fingers digging into her arm hard enough to make her gasp, though he didn't seem to notice, and his eyes went dark with hatred. She realized he'd been looking for the pair who'd brought her here—and found them.

"Jake?" She tried to draw his attention back to her, but he let go of her without looking at her, and began to push past.

"No!" Edward reached around her and caught Jake's arm. Jake shrugged his hand off with such force that Edward stumbled into Heather.

He got another two steps before Edward, regaining his balance and pushing himself away from Heather none too gently, tackled him from behind, trying to get his arms around him.

The two of them went down in a tangle, struggling together. Jake was fighting furiously to get free of Edward's grip, but somehow Edward managed to come out on top, straddling Jake. Jake continued to thrash underneath him, aiming punches anywhere he could reach.

"Jake!" Edward's voice growling Jake's name galvanized Heather, bringing her out of the shock that had held her rooted a few paces away, and she hurried forward as well.

"Jake!" She added her voice to Edward's as she knelt next to them. "Jake, stop it!" She leaned over, trying to make eye contact with him and snap him out of it. She got a blow to the temple for her trouble and reeled back. Steadying herself, she reached out and grabbed Jake's arm as he flailed, holding on tight and letting him drag her into Edward as he tried to pull away. "Jake! Stop it!" Panic rose within her.

With Heather holding onto one of Jake's arms, Edward managed to pin the other one down. Jake struggled for a moment longer and then, abruptly, the fight went out of him. He let the arm Heather was holding drop. She could hear Edward panting heavily, while Jake drew in deep, shuddering breaths.

"Jake?" Heather slid one hand down his arm to grasp his hand. His fingers curled around hers, his grip firm but gentle, and she knew the blind fury had passed. He turned his head and met her gaze, his expression still filled with anguish. With her other hand, she reached out and laid her hand against his cheek.

"It's...." She stopped and swallowed, her throat feeling scratchy. She hated lying to Jake, but she had to. Taking a deep breath, she said as calmly as she could manage, "It wasn't them." Glancing up, she saw the guards were looking down at them, their stance suggesting they were amused by events below, and that they had no plans to intervene. Morgan was no doubt smirking, but she resisted the temptation to look for him. Turning back to Jake, she stroked her thumb over his cheek, gentling him. "And even if they were...." She shook her head. "You're just going to get yourself hurt, and it's not worth it."

He shook his head slightly, denying her words, but she hurried on. "No. It's not. It was horrible, but then so's all this." She jerked her head to indicate everything around them. She left unspoken the thought that it could have been much worse. That she was a little surprised that it hadn't been.

Jake must have guessed what she was thinking, because his expression darkened.

She pressed her hand to his cheek and whispered, "It's not important, okay?"

He snorted, and for a second she thought he was going to argue, but that was the extent of his disagreement. He let out a heavy sigh and, squeezing her hand, gave a reluctant nod. She saw him flick his gaze to Edward, and something must have passed between them, because Edward let go of Jake's arm and stood.

Heather helped Jake back to his feet as well. She could feel him still shaking. Reluctantly, she let go of his hand.

"Heather's right." Edward spoke quietly as he stepped back toward them. "We have to survive. We have to endure." He glanced at Heather, his expression grim, before returning his attention to Jake. "Now's not the time—."

"It never is with you, is it?" Jake sneered.

Heather saw Edward's face tighten for a moment, before he sucked in a breath and let it out slowly. When he spoke again, Heather could hear how he'd forced himself to speak evenly and calmly. "Giving them excuses to make things worse—."

"Yes. I get it." Jake cut him off with an impatient shake of the head, his voice clipped, though his mouth still twisted in disgust.

Edward gave him a long, hard look, before he turned to Heather. He tilted his head a little to allow himself a better look at the mess her hair was in, before catching her eye again. "When we get out of here, you *are* going to tell us his name." He spoke quietly but fiercely. "And we're going to make quite sure—."

"Yes." She nodded. Her head was throbbing, either from the intensity of the events of the past few minutes, or from where Jake had sideswiped her, she wasn't sure. She lifted a hand and rubbed her left temple, wincing when she hit a tender spot. Edward gave her a concerned look, but she didn't want to dwell on what had happened. Hurriedly, she said, "We should...." Clenching her hand into a fist, she signed "Intel."

Edward nodded. She signed, "Cell. C. 203." She had to improvise for the zero, because she had no idea what the sign for that was really supposed to be, but they seemed to understand. They signed their own cell numbers: Edward was in A-wing and Jake in B. That they'd been separated into different wings didn't much surprise her.

She signed, "Layout." and then drew a rough hexagon in the air between them. "Interr." She didn't bother to sign the whole word, reckoning they'd get it. "Cells." With her left hand, she marked three lengths running at less than right angles from each other, while her right signed "A, B, C" in order. She circled her hand to indicate the space around them and pointed to between where she'd marked A and B wings. Looking up, she saw Jake and Edward nodding in agreement.

Edward signed "Guards. Change. Two hours." She wasn't sure how he knew that, except maybe he was better at estimating the passing of time than she was. Or perhaps he'd tracked a particular pair of guards and figured it out, because the next thing he signed was "Total shift. Twelve. Access. Cards everywhere. Thumbprint onto, off wing."

Heather thought that tallied with what she'd seen, although she hadn't really been paying attention to that. She tried to push away the headache she was developing, perhaps from the extra effort of

concentrating on signing. Absently, she rubbed at her temple again.

"Are you all right?" Edward's softly spoken question caught her off guard.

She nodded. "I'm fine. I just think I got hit when—" She shot an apologetic glance in Jake's direction.

"Here, let me see." Edward reached up and put his fingers just behind her ear, tilting her face gently so he could examine her forehead. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see abrasions on his knuckles. "You'll probably have a bruise, but it doesn't look too bad."

He let his hand drop and she caught it and examined the scrapes and shallow cuts on his skin. He curled his fingers around hers and gave her hand a brief squeeze, while he offered her an it-doesn't-matter smile.

Letting go of Edward's hand, Heather turned to Jake. He was looking down at his feet, his cheeks red. "Sorry," he muttered.

"It's okay." Heather touched his arm. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence between the three of them, and then Edward cleared his throat. "What else?"

Jake roused himself and looked from Edward to Heather and back again, before he signed, "Guards carry...." He paused until Edward nodded at him, showing he was paying close attention, and then signed, "Glock 19, 12 mag. Stun baton. Hurts." Glancing up, Heather saw Jake grimacing at the memory. "Pepper spray. Radio: looks US Army MBITR. Plastic cuffs."

Heather didn't understand all the technical jargon, but it seemed to mean something to Edward. She wasn't sure how, with all that stuff ranged against them, they stood any chance of overpowering the guards, especially as they seemed to come in twos, but Jake and Edward both knew a lot more about fighting than she did. And she had no doubt that Hawkins or Chavez would have taken them down in a heartbeat; some of the Rangers told hushed stories about what Hawkins had done the night Goetz had besieged the med center.

Out loud, Edward asked, "Anything else?"

Jake shook his head. "Not that I've seen." He glanced over Heather's shoulder, his eyes narrowing. Turning, Heather saw the guards were looking more alert, joining together in pairs, and she guessed their time together would soon be over. Jake touched her arm to draw her attention back to him. "Same questions?" he signed, and she and Edward both nodded.

There wasn't time to share any more before one of the guards called, "Green!"

Jake made to reach for her and then halted. She saw the uncertainty in his face, his gaze going to her forehead, and the pained look in his eyes. Not stopping to think, not doubting herself for a second, she stepped closer and drew him to her instead. His arms came around her for a moment, and she heard him whisper "Sorry" against her hair, before he let her go and walked past her. Tears stung her eyes and she dashed them away with her hand. By the time she turned, Jake was already almost back inside the building.

"Heather?" Edward's touch on her wrist called her attention back to him. He looked as unhappy as Jake had. "I—" He gave a helpless shrug.

Heather glanced to where Morgan and Conrad stood together, and then looked back at Edward. She

shook her head. "There's nothing you can do. Like you said, we have to endure...."

Edward turned his head a little, looking to where she'd looked, and nodded absently.

"Beck!" One of the remaining guards called his name.

Edward swung back toward her and, to her surprise, caught her hand and gave it a squeeze for a moment. The feel of his fingers against hers lingered even after he'd let go and marched away, just like the memory of Jake's arms around her had stayed with her.

Both gave her strength. When Morgan called her name, she squared her shoulders and headed for the steps with a determined air.

The trip back to her cell was less awful than she'd feared. She walked quickly, so that Morgan would have no reason to touch her to hustle her along. And although he was at her shoulder, closer than she liked, she couldn't see him and whatever expression he wore. The worst moment was when they reached the guard post at the end of the wing. It seemed news had spread: one of the guards on duty there high-fived Morgan before he pressed the button to unlock the door that led onto the wing. Some lewd comments passed between them, but she was learning to tune those out.

It was what might happen when they reached her cell that worried her.

Stepping through the door onto the corridor that ran down the center of the wing, she could hear noise coming from the far end, as if someone was banging on the door of one of the cells. It was the first real sign she'd come across that there were other prisoners being kept there, although she'd guessed there must be.

The banging didn't let up as she walked the short distance to where the door to her own cell stood open. At her side, Conrad sighed. "Jeez. Someone needs a taste of Mr Zappy. Go deal with the bastard, will ya?" He jerked his head toward the far end of the corridor.

Morgan hesitated. "Shouldn't we—?" He gestured toward Heather.

"Oh, come on, you said it yourself," Conrad shot back. "*She's* not going to cause any trouble."

Morgan shrugged and set off down the corridor at an amble.

Heather stepped into the cell, casting a longing glance at the shower. It'd have to wait until she was sure Morgan had left the wing.

"Lisinski?"

She turned in surprise at the quiet way Conrad said her name. He glanced anxiously down the corridor after Morgan before he looked back at her.

"I'm gonna shut the hatch when I lock the door. Can maybe keep Morgan down there ten minutes." He shrugged. "Shower only lasts five, anyway."

Heather stared in disbelief while he pulled the door closed and, good as his word, flipped up the hatch. Hearing the rattle of the lock, she shook herself out of her bewilderment and backed away from the door toward the shower.

Not quite believing the hatch really was going to stay closed, she grabbed a towel and put it close at

hand, and then made sure she stood with her back to the door while she stripped off her soiled clothes, hit the shower control and stepped under the blissful stream of hot water. She kept glancing over her shoulder as she quickly worked at the crusted mess in her hair and on the back of her neck, and sluiced the rest of her body, but the hatch remained closed.

The water cut off, as Conrad had said it would, and she hurriedly reached for the towel and wrapped herself in it. The hatch was still closed. Grabbing the spare scrubs she'd put away on the shelf above the table, she retreated under the bedclothes, still a little damp, to get dressed.

She'd pulled on the top and was wriggling into clean pants when the hatch banged down.

"—idiot, Conrad!" The tail end of Morgan's words floated through the hatch. Aware of his eyes peering at her, Heather stopped moving. Her pants were still around her hips, but the thought of him watching her wriggling to pull them higher made her skin crawl.

From somewhere beyond him, she heard Conrad say, "Hey, I forgot, okay. Just followin' normal routine."

"Ain't nothin' normal about this one." Heather could hear Morgan's leer in his voice.

"Come on." Conrad sounded bored. "I need a smoke. She'll still be there when we get back."

"Oh, yeah." Morgan flipped the hatch so it banged—to remind he was there, or to startle her, she guessed—before she heard two sets of footsteps retreating, and the sound of the door at the end of the corridor being buzzed open.

She finished getting dressed and hopped out of bed. Her hair still didn't feel completely clean—there wasn't any shampoo—so she fought with the short bursts of cold water from the tap in the sink, and lather from the bar of soap that had been provided, until she finally felt clean.

Toweling her hair dry as best she could, she curled up on the bed under the blanket. Somehow, Conrad's unexpected kindness was the final straw. She didn't understand why he'd been so nice and it was as if her confusion had undone the tight knot of self-control that had held her together all day. Tears leaked from her eyes, and she scrubbed at them with the heel of her hand. Foolishly, uselessly, she wanted Jake to be there with her, his arms around her making her feel safe even if they weren't. She wanted Edward's solid presence beside her, his quiet smile telling her they'd figure something out between them, like they always did. She wanted to stop having to be so strong, all the time....

She choked down another sob and took a deep breath. If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride. Taking another deep breath, she scrubbed away the last of her tears. Jake and Edward needed her to go on being strong, so that's what she'd be.

oOo

Jake lay on his cot, his arm across his eyes, trying to get some rest. Everything about him seemed to ache—knees and back and thighs—from the positions the guards had forced him into before his interrogation, while his arm and shoulder were tender from where he'd hit the concrete when Beck had tackled him. But none of that compared to the sick feeling deep inside as he thought about what had happened to Heather and how powerless he was to do anything about it.

She and Beck had been right, of course. Launching himself at the guards was only going to get him killed, or beaten senseless, or in cuffs, and he'd be in even less of a position to protect Heather. But

she was wrong when she said it wasn't important. The thought of the guard using her like that. Of what else they might do to her.... Jake forced back the wave of nausea that surged through him.

Twisting onto his side, he slid his hand down between the mattress and the wall. When the guards had brought him back to his cell the afternoon before, he'd first checked the multi-tool was where he'd left it, and then used the blade to carefully slice the stitching of the mattress and unpick just enough that he could slip the tool inside the cotton cover and easily retrieve it. When the routine on the second day had turned out to be the same as the first, he'd decided he'd risk trying to pass the tool along to Beck, since the major would know how to handle it better than Jake did. He'd been about to tell Beck, when Heather had arrived and they'd found out what had happened to her.

He poked a finger through the hole to check the multi-tool was still there. The logical part of him knew it still made sense to hand it over to Beck, but when he thought about what had happened to Heather.... When he thought about finding out which guard it was....

Another shudder ran through him, and he wrapped his arms around himself. Turning onto his back, trying to ease his aching muscles, he closed his eyes and wondered how badly Heather's head was hurting where he'd hit her. He bet the guards had gotten a real kick out of seeing that.

It has been such a relief when she hadn't seemed mad at him, or scared of him, after. When she'd pulled him close before he left. He wished she was with him now, so that he could hold her and comfort her. She was doing her best to hide it, but he could see how frightened she was. For herself, and for him.

That she was able to still think about him, still care about him, even in the middle of her own fear, eased the lump that sat like a stone in his chest, just a little. Her arms around him had felt good: as good as the hug they'd shared when she'd first come back to Jericho and the one she'd given him when he'd returned from Texas. As good as the feel of her lips on his as she'd flung herself at him the day he and Eric went to Rogue River....

His eyes shot open and he stared up at the gray concrete of the ceiling, not really seeing it as he remembered just how very good that had felt. Realized that he didn't just want to hold her close but to kiss her again. That it wasn't *just* the thought of the guards hurting her, though that was bad enough, but of them touching her like *that*, doing and saying *those* things to her.... That even Heather letting Beck touch her—when she'd let him examine the bruise on her forehead that afternoon—irritated him, although Heather clearly didn't mind that. Didn't mind it at all.

I love her, Jake thought in wonder to himself. *I've been in love with her ever since we met on that school bus*. All the clues were there. How it had been easier—no, safer—to stay away from her after she kissed him. How his blood had run cold at the way she'd greeted Ted Lewis at Black Jack, and how much he hadn't wanted her to go to New Bern. The way something had shriveled inside him when Eric had told him she was dead, and the sense when he'd gotten back with Emily that, amid all the comforts of the familiar, something was missing. All the excuses he'd found to hang out with Heather since he'd come back from Texas, and how good the time with her had been....

God, he'd been such an *idiot*.

He wrapped his arms around himself, shivering. He wanted to have her in his arms so badly that he ached with it, the pains of what the guards had done to him paling in comparison. But would she want to be there? Would she want to hear what he now wanted to say? She might have forgiven him for the unintended blow he'd landed that afternoon, but he suspected he'd hurt her far more deeply when he'd ignored her for a month. That getting away from him had factored in to her being so eager to go to New Bern with Ted and Russell. Maybe part of the change he'd seen in her when

she'd returned was simply that she'd gotten over him and was no longer so eager to be around him.

In fact—. Jake huffed to himself as he realized his animosity toward Beck was only partly because he thought the major had designs on Heather. It was just as much because he was afraid Heather returned those feelings: she seemed, in the little Jake had observed of them together before and after their daily meetings, to genuinely enjoy Beck's company, and she was always ready to jump to his defense.

Am I too late? Jake wondered. He didn't think Heather would be so cruel—cowardly—as to ignore him if he made his feelings plain. But if she no longer felt the way she had six months ago, things would become very awkward. Better not to speak, then. He'd already been unbelievably selfish and thoughtless in the way he'd treated her—in the way he'd taken her continued friendship for granted when she'd returned to Jericho—that he shouldn't compound his crime by burdening her with this now. One day, he promised himself, they'd get out of here, and then—.

The clatter of his cell door being unlocked dragged him from remembering what it had been like to kiss her, and imagining kissing her again. He sat up quickly, wondering: *what now?*

"Green! Out!"

He recognized the guards in the hallway as the two who'd marched him to his cell the first evening, and he guessed there'd been a shift change. He was a little surprised when they took him off the wing, marched him past the interrogation rooms in the cell block, and hustled him back across the yard to the building where they'd been taken initially when they'd arrived at Loomer Ridge. But by that point, he wasn't at all surprised to discover Valente waiting for him in one of the interrogation rooms.

Just like last time, the guards shoved Jake into a chair, taking up position behind him. Valente had a file in his hands, and spent what seemed like a long time to Jake turning through the pages and reading whatever they contained. Jake had the strong urge to snap at him to get on with whatever he was here for.

Valente finally closed the file and laid it down on the table. Planting the cane that had been tucked under his right arm on the floor and leaning on it, he looked up and met Jake's gaze before he broke his silence. Though not in the way Jake expected: he'd thought Valente would cut straight to the chase and ask him—again—to give up Hawkins. Instead, Valente remarked, as if the concept of caring about someone was entirely alien to him, "You seem to be very fond of Miss Lisinski."

Jake tried hard not to react, although he wondered frantically where Valente was going with this. What new torments were in store for Heather. He guessed the guards had reported back on what had happened earlier in the day, and Valente's next words confirmed it.

"This really can't be a very pleasant experience for her. I've done my best, but—." Valente gave a slight shrug.

Under the table, Jake balled his hands into fists in his lap as he heard the undercurrent in Valente's cool, measured tones: the bastard was enjoying this.

Valente lifted his cane and shifted it a little before planting it again. "Agree to help me find Robert Hawkins, and I will send Miss Lisinski home."

Jake's heart leaped, but he tried to keep his face neutral. "I've told you before. I don't know where he is."

"But you can find him." Valente sounded very confident. "I'm sure you know a way to contact him, or someone who can get a message to him. Your new friends in Texas, perhaps?"

Valente was right about that, of course. Jake was pretty sure Chavez and Mack knew what Hawkins was up to. Still, he gave a slight shake of the head.

"Agree to work with me and I will let Miss Lisinski go," Valente repeated.

Jake stared at him, his mind racing. He wanted nothing more than to be able to get Heather out of this place and away from these people. And yet he wasn't sure he could believe a word Valente said. They were pretty much entirely in his power; even if Jake did help him, Valente could simply tell Jake he'd let Heather go while he had her transferred to another prison. Heck, he could even keep her here, and Jake wouldn't be any the wiser. And Jake really doubted Valente would let her go completely until he had Hawkins in his hands.

"I'm sure you'll agree this prison is no place for a woman." Valente's words dragged Jake from his thoughts, from trying to figure out whether he could trust the man. Again, there was that suggestion in Valente's voice that he was enjoying this. Whether he was just enjoying watching Jake struggling with the dilemma he'd placed in front of him, or whether he was getting a kick out of what was happening to Heather as well, Jake didn't know.

He felt his anger rising. "Then why did you bring her here?" He began to get up from his chair, but a guard's hand on his shoulder forced him down.

Valente ignored the question. "Give me Hawkins, and Miss Lisinski will be sent home." He paused for a second and then added, "You have five minutes to make up your mind. This is a one-time offer. It will not be renewed."

Five minutes? Jake straightened in his seat and leaned forward. "Wait—."

Valente had been turning away to leave the room, but he stopped and raised an eyebrow at Jake.

"I need to talk to the others."

"I'm afraid that's not possible." Valente resumed his journey toward the door. "Five minutes, Mr Green."

Jake sank back into his chair, trying to sort through the jumble of thoughts in his head. He kept coming back to what he knew of Valente: that he'd been prepared to let millions of Americans die, and two dozen cities be destroyed, to seize power. Somehow, Jake didn't think Valente would have gone soft over one prisoner, no matter how sweet and innocent she seemed.

He closed his eyes. God, he so wanted to hold her, right now. Or to know she was hundreds of miles away and safe. To know that more of that sweetness and innocence wasn't being stripped away. And yet—.

He heard again her words that afternoon. "It's not important." They echoed in his head with Hawkins telling him, "I am not important." If Valente knew he could break Jake over Heather, he'd use that again and again and again. Use it to roll up the resistance, or to infiltrate Texas, or to get Jake to betray the wider cause in any of a hundred different ways, over and over.

And Jake and Heather and Beck might know things that would be useful to Cheyenne, but Hawkins

knew so much more. Letting him fall into Valente's hands would be a big mistake. Hadn't Jake had the same thought back at Rogers Field, when he'd dragged Hawkins into the Cessna over the other man's protests.

As for Heather.... She was sweet and innocent, but she was also tough as nails. When she'd found out what New Bern was up to, she hadn't simply run back to Jericho to warn them; she'd tried to break the machine. She'd agreed to steal the page from Beck's office, even though Hawkins had made it clear how severe the penalty would be if she was caught. She hadn't told anyone about New Bern's bounty, and Jake knew that if she'd gotten a chance to clean up before being taken to the exercise area, he would have never known what the guard had done to her.

He imagined the look on her face when she found out he'd given up Hawkins for her. How disappointed she'd be.

He heard the door open, and the tap of Valente's cane. "Mr Green?"

Jake opened his eyes and looked directly at him. "No."

"No?" Valente raised his eyebrows.

"No." Jake clenched his fists again, hating himself for what he might be condemning Heather to, and yet knowing it was the right answer.

"I'm very sorry to hear that." There was a flicker of disappointment on Valente's face, but it was quickly replaced by a slight smirk. "I shall have to consider whether your lack of co-operation means I won't be able to protect Miss Lisinski even to the extent I have."

Jake stared at him in horror. He'd never expected his choice to make things *worse* for Heather.

He barely noticed Valente tilting his head at the guards behind Jake and ordering them to take him back to his cell, or their rough hands on him as they yanked him up. "No," he whispered to himself. "No." He had to believe Valente was lying about this too. What point was there in telling him that after he'd rejected the offer? It was pure vindictiveness. It had to be. And Valente had shown himself plenty capable of that.

And shown he wasn't to be trusted an inch. It was still the right choice. Jake had to go on believing that, otherwise he wouldn't be able to live with himself at all.

oOo

Beck gratefully lowered himself into the chair as his interrogator settled himself opposite. He was feeling every one of his forty five years, his muscles protesting the treatment they'd received as he'd been forced to hold one stress position after another. He guessed he maybe deserved this for what he'd put Jake through at the hog farm.

In an odd way, that past shame only strengthened his resolve now. He'd fallen so far from grace—though every step along the way to violating his oath as an officer and his duty as a member of the US military had seemed logical and right at the time—that the only course for him now was to do the right thing, no matter the consequences for himself or those he cared about.

He closed his eyes for a moment, remembering Valente's offer last night: the surrender of his troops for Heather's freedom. As a man, as her friend, he wanted nothing more than to be able to say yes, to be able to spare her any more suffering. As a soldier, he had to say no. Had said no. Quickly,

before he had a chance to think about the consequences or remember that he did have a choice. Just not a choice he could let himself make.

After, though, he'd lain awake for much too long last night—he really needed to get what sleep he could—thinking about what his answer meant. Thinking about how Valente had implied he'd withdraw the little protection he'd offered so far, and what *that* would mean. Hoping Heather could forgive him. She seemed so strong, so sure when she'd told Jake that what the guard had done to her didn't matter. But Beck knew how well she lied when the chips were down. Knew the way she'd looked him straight in the eye and denied looking at anything but the New Bern material. The way she hadn't blinked when he'd told her someone must know where the Rangers were, though he'd learned later that she'd been the one to go straight to their hideout and tell them he'd arrested Jake.

And he knew how she'd been trembling when he'd examined the bruise on her forehead, and when she'd looked at the scrapes he'd gotten on his hands fighting with Jake. He didn't want her to have to be that brave

Opening his eyes again now, he saw his interrogator was getting something out of a file and spreading it across the table. Photographs. Beck resisted the temptation to lean forward and look at them more closely. Flicking his gaze across them, he realized they were aerial reconnaissance of Camp Delaware, the checkpoints and positions his men were dug into around Jericho, and the town itself.

"I'm sure you know what you're looking at here." The interrogator was moving the pictures around to his satisfaction, making sure that one of Camp Delaware—possibly even with his own command tent at the center—ended up in front of Beck, alongside another that, he decided from the shape of the roof, must be City Hall. The colors just visible on the building half opposite confirmed it: they matched the paintwork on Bailey's.

Beck looked up from the pictures and tried to judge the mood of his interrogator. The man, still shifting pictures around, remarked in an absent tone, "You seem to have grown quite fond of Jericho. I understand from your commanding officer at the time that you were reluctant to begin Phase Three operations when ordered to do so, even though the majority of the townspeople were providing aid and comfort to insurgents. And, of course, you must be concerned about what's happening to the troops you used to command...."

The interrogator lifted his head and met Beck's gaze. "I'm sure you'll also agree that, even though Jericho and the troops you had with you are now clearly in open insurrection, we've been very moderate in our response. So far." He paused to let the last two words sink in. "However, the ASA is running out of patience. If town and troops don't surrender, it will become necessary to... escalate matters."

Again the interrogator paused, obviously with the intention of letting Beck's imagination run wild over just what "escalation" would involve. Beck held his gaze steadily, refusing to think about the pages in the AS Army manual that detailed what would happen to towns resisting ASA control.

The interrogator was the first to look away, his mouth compressing into a thin line that signaled his displeasure at Beck's lack of response. He flipped open the file the photographs had come from and ran his finger down a page. "The population of Jericho is... just under five thousand. And you had nearly a thousand men under your command." His tone turned apologetic. "Casualties would be regrettably high with a bombing campaign, no matter how carefully targeted. But I'm sure, as a military man, you're aware such unfortunate consequences are a necessary evil in the wider scheme of things."

Beck tried not to show the instinctive horror he felt as the interrogator forced him to face the likely results of Cheyenne finally bringing its full firepower to bear. When they'd first broken away from the ASA—and then, again, just a few days ago, after they'd found out Constantino was planning to attack—he'd heard people talk about what it had been like when Constantino had shelled them as a prelude to New Bern's ground assault. There was still fear in their voices two, three months later—and Constantino had only sent five low-yield mortars into the town. What Cheyenne would mete out would make New Bern's attack look like a handful of firecrackers. But Beck could understand how scared the people of Jericho were of the little they'd seen of aerial bombardment: he'd experienced the same kind of attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq, when insurgents had used RPGs. Seen the effects on checkpoints and camps. Seen the bodies, or what was left of them.

The interrogator looked up and caught Beck's eye. Beck knew that, despite his best efforts to keep his face neutral, the man could read what he was thinking.

The interrogator gave him a conspiratorial smile. "Of course, you could help us avoid all that if you'd just give your troops the order to surrender. We can set up a video broadcast so you can speak to your company commanders. We'll even put you back in uniform...."

Here it was again: the same offer, even as the stakes got higher. Beck breathed in deeply. Did he have the right to condemn several hundred—maybe several thousand—people to death? Civilians—women and children—as well as soldiers? My God, he had been so sure of himself when he'd arrived in Jericho, hadn't he? He'd never imagined that place would make him betray his oath and his code of conduct so easily, or make it so hard to stay loyal to it. What right did he have to condemn six thousand Americans—?

He sucked in another breath. Six thousand Americans who would expect him to do his duty. To act as a US soldier should. To defend them and their country against all enemies. To keep them as Americans: true Americans, citizens of the United States. What was it Patrick Henry had said? About life not being so dear or peace so sweet that we should pay for it with chains and slavery. Something like that. Or, as New Hampshire put it so much more succinctly: *Live free or die!*

Steeling himself, Beck clasped his hands on the table in front of him, nudging the nearest picture slightly, and met the interrogator's gaze. "You know my answer has to be no."

He caught a flicker of disappointment in the other man's eyes. "Just think about it. Look at the pictures." The interrogator got up and gestured at the photographs, before he left the room.

Beck resolutely kept his gaze straight ahead, ignoring the pictures. Which meant, instead, that he found himself examining his reflection in the mirror opposite.

The man looking back at him seemed a stranger. Perhaps it was just the orange scrubs; how long since he'd seen himself out of uniform? His last leave, he supposed, before the September attacks, when he'd spent those glorious weeks over the summer with Alondra and Isa. Squeezing his eyes shut, he tried not to cry out as he realized that, among all the other things they'd taken from him when he'd been stripped of his gear back at Hoffman's headquarters was the picture—his only picture—of his wife and daughter.

His nails dug into his palms as his hands curled into fists. Unbidden, the Hail Mary sounded in his mind, his lips forming the words automatically. The repetition of the familiar phrases calmed him, gave him strength, and he went on praying. No matter what fate awaited him personally, he had faith that God would take care of the people he cared about.

After about five minutes, he heard the interrogator come back in. Opening his eyes, he saw the man

whispering something to one of the guards. A moment later, the guard grabbed Beck by the elbow, hauled him to his feet and marched him outside.

To Beck's surprise, they didn't take him back to his cell or out to the exercise yard. Instead, they escorted him just a few yards along the corridor and into another interrogation room. Jake was in there, sitting at the table with what looked like the same set of photographs spread in front of him. He looked up at Beck, his sullen posture replaced by something a little more eager when he saw him. Beck couldn't help feeling a touch of amusement at how Jake's attitude had changed in the past week.

The two guards who'd been keeping watch on Jake unfolded themselves from lounging against the wall and left the room. Jake watched them go, a slight frown creasing his forehead, before he transferred his attention back to Beck.

Beck took another pace into the room. Before either of them could speak, the door opened again, and Heather was pushed into the room as well. Jake was instantly on his feet and moving toward her. Then he hesitated and stopped. Beck supposed he still felt guilty about yesterday: a faint purple bruise was clearly visible on Heather's forehead.

Heather headed toward Jake, taking Beck's arm as she passed him and giving it a squeeze as she used it to tow him with her in Jake's direction. As they approached, Heather let her hand fall away from Beck, and reached out for Jake instead. She, too, hesitated slightly, Jake's unease apparently making her unsure, before she grasped Jake's arm. There was a moment more of awkwardness between them, and then Jake abruptly enfolded her in a brief but fierce hug.

"Are you—?" He held Heather away from him so he could scrutinize her. Beck could hear the anxiety in his voice as he added, "Valente told me he might not go on protecting you...."

"Yeah." Heather made a derisive noise. "He told me that too." She tapped Jake gently on his wrist with her closed fist, and looked at Beck to make sure he was watching as well as she signed, "Not guards."

"He didn't change their orders?" Jake's whispered question sounded incredulous.

"No." Heather shook her head confidently.

Beck stepped a little closer and murmured the question that had instantly sprung to mind: "How do you know?"

Heather smiled at him and shook her head again, though this time more like she didn't believe what she was about to say, and signed, "Friendly. Told me."

Beck raised his eyebrows. "You believe him?"

Heather nodded. She gave a shrug and signed, "Did more."

Beck guessed she meant that the guard had done more to help her than just tell her about the unchanged orders. "Who?" he signed.

Heather spelled out "Conrad".

Beck remembered seeing the name on the name-tag of one of the guards who'd brought her to the exercise area once or twice. He wasn't sure how much help a friendly guard would be—not much

unless he was a secret revolutionary, he guessed—but it was something to bear in mind. He tucked the name away in his memory, before concentrating on the present. "So I'm guessing Valente made both of you an offer yesterday evening as well?"

Jake nodded. "He said he'd let Heather go if—." He looked at her miserably.

She gave his arm a quick squeeze. "I hope you said no." She glanced at Beck. "Look, it's not as if I want to be here. And I know it's making it harder on both of you that I am. Which," her voice cracked a little, "means the world to me. But we can't...."

"Can't trust Valente to keep his word," Beck supplied.

Heather nodded unhappily.

Jake huffed. "And we can't trust him not to keep asking for just one more thing. That once we start...." Jake reached out and cupped Heather's face. "I so want you to be safe, but...."

"I know." Heather put her hand over Jake's. "I know." Giving herself a little shake, she pulled Jake's hand away from her face and let it drop. Lowering her voice, she murmured, "Look, I'm supposed to be in here persuading you two to do what they want. That's what Valente wanted me to do last night as well. Get *you* to give up Hawkins," she nodded at Jake, before turning her gaze on Beck, "and you to surrender your troops."

Beck tilted his head toward the photographs spread across the table. "And I'm guessing they just threatened us all with a bombing campaign against Jericho and my troops if we don't?"

Heather and Jake both nodded. Jake scrubbed a hand through his hair. "That's a lot of people...."

"When—." Heather stopped and cleared her throat. When she spoke again, Beck realized she'd probably changed what she was going to say to make it sound a little more tactful. "When Jake was in custody and the town was under lockdown...." She turned to Beck. "Do you remember I told you people weren't just going to give the Rangers up?"

He nodded, recalling all too vividly the way she'd argued with him. How right she'd been, about everything.

"That wasn't just a few troublemakers." She gave a slight shrug. "You know, Eric and Emily, or Mary and Bill and Jimmy. That was *everyone*. Nobody thought Stanley should be handed over, and nobody thought we should give in to what you or Ravenwood or J&R were doing to us. To what *Cheyenne* was doing to us. If Jake hadn't been rescued, and you hadn't gotten hold of Hawkins' laptop...." Again, Heather shrugged. "They wouldn't have given in. They knew they were right and Cheyenne was wrong. And they still know that."

Jake let out a soft snort. "God, I remember lying there hoping that...that they weren't mad at me.... That they weren't cussing me for being so stubborn...."

Heather ran her hand up and down his arm and smiled up at him. "They weren't. They didn't fail you. And they won't fail us now."

"They'd want us to carry on saying no?" Beck still wasn't entirely convinced: there was a world of difference between curfews and clampdowns and being shelled.

It was Jake who answered. "Yeah. Yeah, Heather's right. Even before Goetz murdered Bonnie," his

mouth twisted in disgust, "we were... kinda planning a revolution. So yeah, they'd want us to go on standing up to Cheyenne. They'd want us to go on saying no. So that's what we're going to do."

oOo

The buzzer jerked Heather awake from a sleep that didn't seem to leave her any less tired than when she'd finally dropped off. Blinking at the sudden brightness as the lights were switched on, she turned and looked at the open hatch, wondering if Conrad would be delivering breakfast again, and if he'd bring her more hope. Because, God, she needed it. She'd spent hours last night tossing and turning and wondering what was happening to Jericho and Camp Delaware: had Cheyenne started dropping bombs, and where, and how many people had died, and who....

She got out of bed and rushed through the sketchy morning routine that was all she could manage in the circumstances, wanting to be ready when breakfast came. Yesterday, she'd still been trying to comb her hair with her fingers—it had dried in tangles—when Conrad hissed her name through the hatch. "Lisinski?"

"Yes." She hurried over to the door, guessing he'd want to keep their conversation to a whisper.

"Got some clean clothes for you. Get your scrubs from yesterday and be ready to swap when I come back." He pushed the food through.

She took the bowl and cup and quickly set them on the table, before gathering the dirty clothes that still lay crumpled in a heap on the floor where she'd dropped them when she'd stripped them off. Making sure the dirty parts were tucked inside, taking care not to touch them herself, she folded them neatly so they could fit through the hatch, and then sat down to wait.

It was maybe ten minutes before Conrad returned and pushed a fresh set of scrubs through the hatch. She pushed the dirty ones in the other direction.

"Officer Conrad?" She saw him pause as he bent down to stow the dirty scrubs at the bottom of the cart. "Why are you helping me?"

She caught a gesture that was probably a shrug. "I don't know what you've done, except it must be pretty bad if you're here and gettin' personal attention from Director Valente, but... no one deserves what Morgan did. That's... not right. Besides, the Director said that stuff was off limits, and he's not told us any different."

Heather's eyes stung with tears. "Thank you," she whispered.

Listening to the squeak of the cart's wheels on the linoleum as Conrad hurried off, the implications of what he'd said sank in: that despite Valente's threats, he hadn't changed his orders. The thought of being able to tell Jake and Edward that—because she was pretty sure Valente'd told them the same thing and watched them squirm—had helped sustained her through the day. That, and being able to tell them that one of the guards might be not entirely against them.

This morning, breakfast was pushed through the slot without a word, and Heather pressed down on her disappointment. Not that she'd really expected more from Conrad: he'd already run enough risks to help her, and it wasn't like there was anything he could do for her today. Well—she snorted to herself—except maybe hand her a set of cardkeys and let them all escape.

Forcing herself to swallow the food, she let her mind slide back to what might be happening in Jericho and at Camp Delaware. During the night, she'd consoled herself with the thought that, while they'd all suffered rough treatment, there'd been no follow through on the one direct threat the

interrogators and Valente had made so far: to stop protecting her. So maybe this was just another empty threat as well.

She also tried to hold on to the notion that Colonel Hoffman and his commanders would at least try to protest any orders from Valente to start bombing indiscriminately. Edward had told them in one of his early meetings with Gray and Eric that bombardment was very much a last resort for dealing with towns that refused Cheyenne control, only used when less deadly methods had failed; Cheyenne seemed mindful that it was still dealing with civilians—American citizens—who might be reluctantly under the control of a local warlord. The fact Colonel Hoffman hadn't taken that kind of action during the weeks he'd been besieging them suggested that was still standard operating procedure.

On the other hand, her last conversation with Colonel Hoffman had only convinced her that, in a different way to Edward, he was a by-the-book soldier. There was a chain of command, and you stuck to it, and you carried out its orders without question. Whereas Edward.... She guessed she'd formed an almost unshakable respect for him, for the kind of man he was, for the kind of officer he was, ever since he'd helped the people in Fall River. He'd gone outside his chain of command and looked beyond the official line for the truth, and she'd learned she could trust him to do the right thing even when his orders ran another way. He'd tested that respect and trust to breaking point when he'd had Jake arrested and imprisoned, but he'd come through in the end—opened his eyes and seen Cheyenne for what it was—just like she'd promised everyone he would.

Thinking about Edward, and about how she trusted his judgment, helped sustain her through the long hours of the morning as she stood unmoving, her calves and back aching, and let the lewd comments from the guards wash over her. She didn't want to give into Cheyenne, and especially to Valente, knowing how deeply he was implicated in the September attacks, but there came a point where you wondered whether your principles really were worth the lives of others. That Edward—and Jake too—agreed with her choices made them seem a little less terrible.

That both of them were here with her made all this so much more bearable. And seeing them getting along together, finally learning to trust each other and put the past behind them—even if it had taken all of this to make it happen—made her oddly happy. More than just the relief of not having to deal with Jake sniping at Edward and Edward so obviously patiently putting up with Jake. Being friends with both of them had been hard work at times....

The interrogator entering the room dragged her thoughts away from contemplating the two men and pulled her back, with a guilty start, to thinking about what might be happening in Jericho. This time, when the interrogator waved her into a seat, he slipped a single photograph from the folder to lay in front of her.

It took a moment for Heather to make sense of the shadows and lines, and then she realized that the picture showed half the roof and one corner of City Hall missing. Heather stared at the photo aghast, realizing that the damaged corner had once contained the sheriff's office. She wondered, with a kind of blank detachment, who had been inside. There was bound to be somebody: Jimmy or Bill or one of the other deputies, and one of Edward's soft-voiced, courteous radio operators, at the very least. Depending what time the building had been attacked, she might be able to add Eric and Gray to the list. Or a dozen other people who worked there, liked Darcy Hawkins. And then there could be any other number of innocents who'd just happened to have business in City Hall that day, or been passing on Main Street and Jefferson: there seemed to be bits of debris strewn across the road.

She went on staring at the photo, numbed, until the interrogator gave a slight cough, drawing her attention back to him. He gave her what she supposed was meant to be a sympathetic smile.

"This was one missile." The interrogator tapped the photograph. "We'd prefer to avoid casualties—these are, after all, citizens of the Allied States—but we will escalate matters if we have to. If you make us."

"How—?" Heather swallowed, trying to unstick her tongue from the roof of her mouth. "How many people—?"

The interrogator shrugged. "We don't know. We haven't heard. But I can tell you that the attack was carried out at just after nine in the morning. How many people would you expect to be in City Hall at that time?" He raised an eyebrow at her.

"The daily meeting...." The words slipped out before Heather could stop them. She closed her eyes and breathed in sharply. She guessed someone had realized that Edward—Captain Clark now, she supposed—visited City Hall most days at around nine o'clock to meet with Eric and Gray. Maybe they'd survived the attack. And maybe not. All told, there could easily have been at least a dozen people there....

"It doesn't have to be like this, you know?" The interrogator's voice breaking into her thoughts sounded almost friendly, like he was trying to help her. "You can end this. Make sure nobody else suffers."

Heather opened her eyes and met his gaze. Hadn't she had a conversation something like this with Edward when he'd been holding Jake? When he asked her to make Jake see what he was doing to the town, and she'd told him Jake wasn't doing it. And she and Jake and Edward weren't responsible for this now, either. She had to hold on to that thought, had to go on believing that, and not think about how, if the three of them had made a different decision yesterday, then Eric and Gray and Captain Clark, and maybe Jimmy and Bill and Darcy, and maybe five or six more, wouldn't be dead.

The interrogator was still talking. "Just make the broadcast. Get Major Beck to order his troops to surrender, while you and Mr Green tell your neighbors to stop resisting and to hand over Robert Hawkins. And all this—" He gestured at the photograph. "—will end here. Life can get back to normal, and nobody else needs to die."

He stopped talking and looked at her expectantly. She looked back at him, wanting to say yes, she'd do it, just make it *stop*. Biting her lip to keep herself from speaking, because she couldn't, she couldn't....

"Just a broadcast," he urged her. "Nobody's going to think any less of you for wanting to protect your friends. Whereas if you don't...." He sighed heavily and shook his head. Again, he shifted the photograph a little, drawing her gaze back down to it, down to that gaping crater where half of City Hall should be.

He scraped his chair back and stood. "Take a few minutes to think about it, okay. Talk to your friends. Persuade them to do the right thing."

Heather was barely aware of him leaving the room as she carried on staring at the photograph, trying not to think, trying not to picture the faces of those who might be dead. After a few minutes, the guards' rough hands on her lifted her from the chair and marched her along the corridor to another interrogation room a few doors down. Probably the same one she'd been taken to yesterday, though she was too numbed to be sure. Jake was in there, anyway, with an identical photograph to the one she'd been shown on the table in front of him.

Even as Jake got up to greet her, Edward was thrust into the room behind her. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw he looked as gray-faced as she felt. Whereas Jake seemed to be thrumming with excitement when he gave her a swift hug.

Holding her away from him, he peered into her face. She looked back at him, still trying to process that his brother was probably dead, that Gray was probably dead, that—.

"Heather!" Jake gave her a slight shake, snapping her out of her stupor. "It's okay. It's okay." He raised his eyebrows at her.

She realized he was asking her to pull herself together. Swallowing down the nausea welling up inside her, she nodded at him and tried to focus on the here and now, and not what was happening two hundred and fifty miles away.

Edward put his hand on her arm, below where Jake's hands still rested on her shoulders. She met his gaze and saw misery in his eyes that mirrored her own. He jerked his head toward the table. "So...."

Jake let go of Heather's arm, holding his hand out flat to signal to Edward to stop speaking. Edward did so, though a slight frown creased his forehead.

Looking down at Jake's hand, Heather saw him sign "Multi-tool?" He'd passed it across to Edward the day before, after they'd made their decision to refuse the interrogators' offer, apparently deciding it was now or never. Which had turned out to be the case: Heather hadn't been taken to the exercise area later, confirming her suspicion that their meetings there had very little to do with exercise and a lot to do with letting them each see how much the other two were suffering.

Edward's frown deepened. He shot another glance at the photograph lying on the table, as if to say that he considered that a more urgent topic for discussion, before he shrugged and signed back, "Safe."

Jake gave him a swift grin of approval. Now it was his turn to indicate the photograph. "So they made you the same offer as yesterday? Make a broadcast and they won't do any more of that?"

Heather nodded. Scratchily, she said, "Jake. They told me they carried out the bombing right when Eric and the others would be—."

Jake stopped her words with his fingers to her lips. He was smiling at her, though he was shaking his head. Taking his hand away, he signed five letters: "Faked."

"Are you sure?" Edward's sharp whisper was loud in the quiet room.

Jake nodded, looking perfectly confident. Letting go of Heather, he went and fetched the photograph from the table. Bringing it back, he held it between them and pointed to a building on the edge of the picture, signing a B. It confirmed what Heather had thought, that it was Bailey's. Jake drew his finger along the front of the building, and then signed. "No damage."

Heather frowned at him. The mortar-damaged part of City Hall was on the far side of the building. Maybe the blast wouldn't have reached that far—she didn't know much about explosives—but how could Jake be so certain there should have been damage to Bailey's?

She reached out and touched the photograph. "Wouldn't...?"

Edward's hand dropping from her arm to her wrist stopped her. He was peering closely at the picture, but his face now wore the same keen, almost excited look as Jake's. Apparently sensing her confusion, he looked up at her and signed, "Firebomb."

She suddenly remembered Jake telling her in the humvee—days ago now—that though most of Constantino's plans had failed, one of his squads *had* managed to hit Bailey's. Jake had signed something about there not just being fire damage inside but also that half the windows had been blown out. She couldn't see a lot of the front of the building on the surveillance photo, but she could tell all the windows were all intact. And although several days had passed, she knew they couldn't have replaced the glass. When she'd come back from New Bern and discovered her house had been broken into while she was away, she'd gone to the hardware store for a replacement pane and they'd told her they didn't carry any stock. They always ordered it in specially. So even if Mary and Eric had tried to fix the windows, it would have been impossible.

A wave of relief washed through her as she realized everyone was safe. Well, as safe as they could be, given Hoffman's troops were still camped around them. She had a moment of feeling almost giddy with happiness, followed by a touch of lightheadedness as the shock of one revelation after another caught up with her.

She swayed on her feet, and Edward caught her by the arm, steadying her. "Hey. You okay?"

"Yes." She closed her eyes and let out a long breath. "Yes." Opening her eyes again, she met Edward's shyly encouraging smile and Jake's more open wry grin, and drew strength from them. With a quick dip of the head, she returned their smiles.

Edward reached out with his free hand—his reassuring grip on her arm also helping to bolster her—and touched the picture. "What do we do now?"

"Do you think they'll—" Heather switched from speaking to signing. "—still bomb?"

Edward gave a slight shake of his head. "If...." He hesitated, and she realized when he spoke again that he'd been searching for the right words so that whoever was watching and listening would think they still considered the photograph to be real. "If they've done this, we can assume they'll carry on the same way." Letting go of her, he painstakingly spelled out, to clarify his words, "If could, would already."

Jake puffed out his cheeks. "Yeah. If they can get the troops to follow orders like that...."

"Exactly." Edward's reply sounded absent-minded as he took the photograph from Jake and turned it around, as if he wanted to study it from a different angle.

"So if we say no again...." Jake raised his eyebrows again, though Heather thought he was more asking whether they should do that than wanting confirmation of what the outcome would be.

Edward shrugged. "There'll be consequences. Of some sort. They will escalate things some—."

Heather cut him short. "I think we should say yes." An idea had been forming in her mind while they talked: a wild, glorious, crazy idea.

"What?" Jake sounded genuinely startled, while Edward was looking at her like she'd lost her mind.

"I think we should do the broadcast." She raised her hand and signed "Subvert. Sign. Show w—."

Before she could finish what she'd been about to sign, Jake burst out in a snort of laughter. "My God, you're...!" He reached out and hugged her with one arm, murmuring into her hair, so she could barely catch it, "You really *are* incredible."

He held her close for a moment longer than she expected. When he stepped back, his touch lingered on her elbow for a moment and then he let go, lifting his hand away like he was embarrassed to have reacted with such enthusiasm. But she didn't mind at all: she found herself grinning at him, a flush of happiness running through her.

Clearing his throat, he took the photograph back from Beck and directed his gaze down at it, a slight blush creeping over his face and neck. "Yeah." He was nodding, half-talking to himself. "Yeah. We need to do this. Jericho needs to hear from us."

"Yes." Heather nodded excitedly. That had been what she'd been going to sign before he'd interrupted her: that Jericho needed to see they were still alive and fighting, and that the town and the troops shouldn't give up hope.

Edward squeezed her arm, drawing her attention back to him. "So you're saying we'll tell them we'll read their statements?" He let go of her to sign, "But not read?"

Looking at the unhappy expression on his face, Heather realized the flaw in her plan from his perspective. That it went against his duty to read something Cheyenne had scripted, even if he was going to sabotage it.

Heather grimaced. "May have to," she spelled out, "Need time to sign message."

He gave her an anguished look in return and signed, "Can't." The tension in his fingers as he formed the shapes indicated how much this was something he didn't feel able to compromise on.

Heather hadn't realized Jake had been following along until he put his hand out to get their attention. When they both looked at him, he pointed at Edward and gave a faint shake of his head, before he signed, "No." When Edward frowned, apparently unsure what he meant, Jake added, "Only needs one." He jerked a thumb at himself. He carried on signing, "can sign and talk" even as he added out loud, to prove the point, "Jericho needs to hear from us."

A relieved expression crossed Edward's face. "Okay."

Jake shrugged. "We have to do the right thing. All of us." He caught and held Edward's gaze. "I want all of us to be able to do the right thing."

Edward looked at him for a moment, his eyebrows slightly raised as if he didn't quite believe his own ears. Then he held out his hand. Jake's lips quirked as he regarded it for a second. Then, with a chuckle, he accepted the handshake.

Heather felt a lump rise in her throat at the gesture. How things had changed in the past week! Catching Jake's eye, she silently mouthed, "Thank you."

Jake gave her an embarrassed grin. He seemed as if he was about to say something in return when Edward cleared his throat. Heather and Jake looked back at him.

"What if...?" Edward hesitated and Heather guessed he was again trying to find a way to say what he wanted without giving the game away. "What if they don't let all of us talk?" He signed, "cut off?" and Heather guessed he meant that the broadcast might be cut short if it didn't go as Cheyenne

planned.

"All sign?" Heather offered with a shrug.

She looked at Jake and he nodded. "At least..." He spelled out "Loomer Ridge." He cleared his throat and cast a glance at the mirrored wall, a frown on his face. Heather supposed he was wondering, as she herself was, what their conversation sounded like to whoever was listening in. He turned back and said, "At least we'll have done what we can for Jericho."

"If not for ourselves." A sober expression had once more settled on Edward's face and Heather barely caught his muttered words.

She reached out and touched his arm. "What?"

He gave her a tight smile. "I was just thinking about the... consequences. About what might happen... after."

Jake snorted quietly. "Whether we do the broadcast or not, they're probably going to—." He hesitated, and Heather knew he was thinking about how they were likely to all be executed in the end, no matter what they did. "At least this way...."

He trailed off, giving Heather an intense look she couldn't quite fathom. Then he straightened a little, like he was bracing himself for some unpleasant task. "Major?" He glanced at Edward. "Would you give us a moment? In private."

Edward seemed as surprised as Heather at the request, but he dipped his head in acquiescence. "Of course." Jake handed him the photograph, and he backed up, making his way round to the other side of the table and turning his back on them.

Jake's touch on her arm drew Heather's attention back to him. The way he was looking at her reminded her a little of his expression when he'd asked to hear Robert Hawkins out; when he'd asked her to trust him. What new revelation was he about to spring on her?

"There's something...." He stepped closer, so she had to tilt her head back a little to continue to meet his gaze. He lowered his voice. "There's something I need to tell you. Something I figured out a couple days back. When..." he swallowed, "when Eric and I went to Rogue River, and you kissed me right before I left, and then I ignored you for a month.... That was a mistake."

Heather's heart began to beat faster. Suddenly, Jake's new awkwardness around her looked like it might be more than just embarrassment that he'd hit her when she and Beck needed to restrain him. Except she didn't quite believe he was going say what it sounded like he was about to say. Not after all this time. Not after.... Fiercely, she squashed down on the hope that flared within her, because she was damned if she was going to make a fool of herself again. She couldn't handle that, not here.

Jake lifted his hand, as if he was going to touch her face or tuck her hair behind her ear, and he must have seen her stiffen, instinctively guarding herself against the effect his meaningless touches had on her, because he halted, his fingertips an inch from her skin. She saw panic flare in his eyes, but he plunged on. "I love you," he whispered, his gaze holding hers. "I've been in love with you since... since we met, I think. And I guess I knew it back then, but I was scared."

He paused, as if waiting for a reply from her, but she couldn't answer. Could barely breathe. She felt dizzy again: low blood sugar, she thought absently; too many shocks in one day....

Her lack of response seemed to unnerve him, because he swallowed and, dropping his hand, moved a fraction away from her. "I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have.... It's just, we don't know what's going to happen and I wanted... I thought...." He shuffled back a step further and the miserable look on his face snapped her from her daze.

She reached out and grabbed his hand, stopping him. But even as she opened her mouth to reply, the door banged open behind her. Jake's gaze went over her shoulder to where the guards—she could see them reflected in the mirror—were smirking at them. "Time to go, Lisinski."

One of the guards stepped forward, grabbing her by the arm and pulling her away from Jake. A last, despairing squeeze of his fingers was all she could offer him in reply.

oOo

Eric hurried through the double doors into City Hall and headed for the Sheriff's Office, realizing he was close to being late for the second time that day. This morning, he'd been heading for Gray's office and the daily meeting, wishing it was Beck's quiet impatience, or Jake's restless pacing, or Heather smiling up at him from the pages of her notebook that waited for him. It was nearly a week since Captain Clark had brought the report that Hoffman claimed to have taken the three of them into custody.

Not that Clark hadn't done a good job stepping into Beck's shoes, but Eric missed Beck's quick understanding of whatever was being discussed, his firm grasp on the politics of their alliance, and his willingness to show a little flexibility now and then. Captain Clark was clearly an extremely competent soldier, but Eric could tell he really wasn't comfortable in the role of diplomat.

He also hadn't realized just how much Heather did, without being asked and without making a fuss about it. Whatever scheme was being proposed for the town, or out at Beck's camp, Gray might get out his big handshake and best beaming smile to convince people it was a good idea, but Heather was the one who actually persuaded people to sign up to things, or give what was needed, or keep the commitments they'd made. Too often in the last week there'd been an awkward silence where Heather's "I'll see to it" would have meant they could all move on to the next item knowing it would be done.

As for Jake.... Eric was worried sick about what Cheyenne might be putting him through, assuming he was still alive: he'd seen the state Jake had been in when they'd rescued him from Beck's hands. And he couldn't do anything to shield his mom from worrying either: she'd seen what Jake had been through last time, too, and knew what might be happening now. She came by City Hall every morning and evening on her way to and from the clinic to ask for news, and her face grew more pinched each time he couldn't give her an answer.

More than that, Eric just missed Jake being there. He'd spent ten years being embarrassed by his big brother, and now he'd do anything to be able to share his worries with him, see Jake's wry grin and hear his amused chuckle—and get the benefit of his advice. Even if it was just to blow off steam about Gray driving them all nuts, or to check if Jake agreed with some changes to the patrols and checkpoints. And, of course, who else was there around now to volunteer for crazy missions deep into enemy territory?

Now, as the clock on the Kansas Liberty building showed just before two—it was kept powered when few other clocks were, to give them "Town Time"—Eric's stomach churned at the thought there might be news at last. Captain Clark had informed them that Hoffman was turning on the power for a couple of hours that afternoon. "He wants to relay a broadcast over the video link at fourteen hundred hours," Clark had reported. "He says there's something we need to see."

Hoffman apparently hadn't been any more specific, but they'd reckoned it had to have something to do with Jake, Heather and Beck. They hadn't spent long discussing it though: the immediate priority had been to get hold of Harry Carmichael and make sure getting main power back didn't fry the wind turbines or set half the town on fire.

The outer office in the Sheriff's department was crowded—clearly the local grapevine was working with its usual efficiency—although people moved out of the way quickly enough to let Eric through. Jimmy stood aside from guarding the door to the small corner office where the video screen was located. The screen was flickering into life as Eric entered, showing a still image of an ASA flag.

Eric did a quick check and saw everyone he expected was present: Gray, Jimmy and Bill; Robert Hawkins—returned from Texas just three days before—with Chavez at his side; Colonel Davies; and Captain Clark, who was fiddling with the video equipment. Gray had asked Clark to watch the broadcast at City Hall, rather than out at Camp Delaware, in case there was anything that needed to be discussed immediately.

An icon started flashing in the corner of the screen and Clark announced, "It's recording." Stepping back, he nodded a greeting at Eric.

Abruptly, the picture changed to show Beck sitting at a table, looking straight at camera. He wore fatigues, and it took Eric a moment to realize what was wrong with them: there were no patches or insignia, apart from one on the left breast that said AS Army. Beck's hands were resting on the table, clasped together. With a jolt, Eric realized there was more to the pose than just one of the major's characteristic gestures: a white plastic tie held his wrists together. He looked tired and strained, the lines around his eyes more pronounced than Eric remembered, and his cheeks were dark with stubble.

Glancing at Clark, Eric saw the captain had gone rigid, while at his side he heard Gray mutter a quiet "Goddamit!"

On screen, Beck cleared his throat. "My name is Edward Beck. I am a major in the United States Army. My service number is five-two-five, two-six, four-three-eight-nine. My date of birth is October 1, 1962." His words sounded uncharacteristically distracted, like he wasn't quite all there. Eric couldn't see any obvious signs that the ASA had hurt him, but that didn't mean....

Beck was still talking in that slightly disjointed manner. "I have been asked to read a statement. As an officer in the United States military, it is my duty to make no statements disloyal to my country. I will not read this statement."

There was a moment's silence, and then, from left of picture, the barrel of a pistol was pointed at Beck's head. The sound of a gun being cocked could be heard clearly.

Beck turned slightly, regarded the pistol for a moment with a contemptuous look on his face, and then turned back to face the camera. "My name is Edward Beck," he began again. "I am a major in the United States Army. My service number—."

"Wait a minute." Jimmy raised his hand and pointed. Ignoring Gray's shushing, he said, "Is Beck *signing*?"

Eric lowered his gaze and concentrated on Beck's hands; he definitely seemed to be doing *something* with them. Which would explain why he sounded so distracted. Stepping to the door, he

scanned the crowd. "Is Stanley Richmond here?" There was some muttering, but Stanley didn't step forward. Eric's gaze fell on one of the Rangers loitering near the door. "Frank, have someone fetch him." Another thought struck him. "Trish Merrick, too, if you can find her." He'd remembered she knew how to sign as well.

Turning back, he saw Beck being dragged from the chair. Apparently, whoever held the gun had mercifully decided against shooting him on camera. Probably thinking that seeing their commanding officer getting summarily executed wasn't exactly likely to endear Cheyenne to Beck's troops. A moment later, Jake was pushed into the chair. He was wearing orange scrubs and, like Beck, his hands were tied. Also, like Beck, he looked like he hadn't slept much in the past week, and his stubble was a fair way toward making a decent beard. The resemblance to old photos of Grandpa at the same age was striking.

Jake gave the camera a resentful glare that Eric recognized only too well, before he started speaking. "My name is Jake Green. I'm not a member of the US military, so I can read this statement and you can hear how stupid it is."

Eric was only half aware of what Jake was saying as he watched his brother's hands and saw that Jake, too, was making small movements with them as he spoke. After a minute, Eric realized he didn't know enough signs—were they individual letters?—to decipher what Jake was trying to communicate; he switched his attention back to listening to the statement Jake was reading out.

Jake had his head down and was reading slowly, without much inflection, although sounding less disjointed than Beck. He was asking them to accept Cheyenne rule, to hand over "the terrorist Robert Hawkins", to refuse any more aid to the mutinying troops unless they surrendered.

Eventually he looked back up, first straight at the camera and then letting his gaze flick to something—someone—standing to one side. He gave a small shake of the head and a grimace. "This is crap." He shoved at the paper with both hands, and it shot across the table and fluttered to the floor. "Don't give in, Jericho. Don't surrender. Whatever—" Suddenly Jake launched himself from the chair, yelling, "Heather! No!" at something to his left, beyond the range of the camera. He disappeared out of shot. Immediately, there was a sickening crunch and a cry of pain from Jake, followed by the sound of a body hitting the floor.

Eric closed his eyes and grimaced, hoping Jake hadn't paid too dearly for what he'd done.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw Heather was now seated at the table. She was staring off to one side, to where Jake had headed, an appalled look on her face. She sported a large bruise on her forehead, and the dark circles under her eyes stood out against her chalky skin, while her hair hung in rough tangles. She, too, was dressed in orange scrubs and had her hands tied. Eric thought he'd never seen her look so ill and miserable, even in the middle of that terrible winter in New Bern. Even after they'd been captured trying to sabotage the munitions factory.

Someone snapped "Lisinski!" from somewhere off camera, and she slowly dragged her attention to the lens.

"My name is Heather Lisinski." Her voice was cracked and barely above a whisper, but Eric saw she too seemed to be signing. She looked down at the piece of paper in front of her and frowned. "I don't even know what this is..." She looked back up at the camera. "I do know that the Cheyenne government is corrupt—" From off-screen came a strangled cry that sounded like it might be Jake. A visible tremor ran through Heather, but she swallowed and plowed on. "—that it was behind the September bombings—" Her words were almost drowned out by another yelp of pain. "—and that it lied to cover up—."

The view of her face was blocked by a man's back as he stepped in front of the camera and backhanded her. For an instant, she could be seen falling from the chair, before the video feed cut out.

There was a long moment of silence and then Gray shook himself. "Well, I guess that didn't go quite to plan for Cheyenne," he remarked to no one in particular.

"At least we know they're still alive...." Jimmy sounded like he was trying to find something positive to say, although there was a deadened quality to his voice. Eric knew he blamed himself, despite everyone's reassurances, for not taking better care of Heather.

"For now." Bill folded his arms and nodded at the screen. "After that little display...."

"They won't kill them. Not yet." Hawkins' quiet confidence commanded everyone's attention. He met Eric's gaze. "Cheyenne's like Constantino. They'll want to make a big show of it. Put them on trial; execute them on the record as traitors."

"Hawkins is right." Chavez, lounging by the window, nodded his head. "Tomarchio. J&R. They've always been about the PR war. Manipulating public opinion."

They all digested that for a moment, before Gray cleared his throat. "So, what do we do now?"

"We need to know what else they were trying to tell us." Hawkins shifted on his chair, apparently trying to ease his side. While he'd been fit enough to make the journey back to Jericho with one of Dale's smuggling teams, it had obviously tired him out.

Eric peered out through the glass into the outer office, wondering how long it would take Stanley or Trish to arrive.

"Mayor Anderson." Clark, who'd been glaring at the screen as if he wanted to reach through it and strangle whoever was on the other side, snapped to attention. "I would like to inform you that the status of the Tenth Mountain Division stationed at Camp Delaware remains unchanged. We will never surrender to any enemy of the United States, and we will continue to defend to the best of our ability the loyal citizens of the United States. I can only hope—" His impassive mask broke for a moment, and his pride was evident in his face and voice. "—that we can do so with the courage and fortitude demonstrated by our commanding officer."

Gray nodded in acknowledgment. "Thank you, Captain." He cleared his throat. "We appreciate knowing that." He looked around the room, catching everyone's eye, before he turned back to Clark. "May I assure you that Jericho also stands firm. That," he jerked his head at the screen, "is not and never will be our government."

"Sir." Clark dipped his head in acknowledgment.

A murmur of voices from the outer office drew Eric's attention back out there; he saw the crowd was starting to look restless. "Gray?" He turned back to the mayor. "Perhaps we should say something?"

Gray nodded and made his way to the door. "People." He raised his voice a little and repeated the word, and the crowd quieted. "We have confirmation that Jake, Heather and Major Beck are alive." There was a rustle of whispering and breaths being let out, but Gray ignored it. "We need some time to look at the recording again, and find out exactly what's happening and what they were trying to

tell us. In the meantime, I can tell you that neither Major Beck's troops nor this town will be surrendering to Cheyenne. We'll let you know more as soon as we do." Eric saw Gray pause, and then wave to someone at the back of the crowd. "Let her through."

A moment later, Trish joined them. She looked around nervously at the serious faces ringing the small office.

"Trish." Eric ushered her toward the chair Gray had vacated. "We need your help. The broadcast...."

"I heard." Trish nodded at Gray, who had followed her back in as she sat down. She clutched her hands together in her lap. "How...?"

"We think they were signing." Hawkins, leaning forward, took over the explanation. "We were hoping you could look at the recording and help us work out what they're saying." He hesitated, his gaze flicking to Eric for a moment, before he added, "What's on the tape is... not very pleasant. We're looking for Stanley as well, if you don't want to...."

"No." Trish licked her lips. "I'd like to help."

"Stanley's here." Jimmy, still guarding the door, sounded relieved.

After Stanley had also squashed himself into the now rather crowded office and had the situation explained to him, he positioned himself behind Trish's chair. Clark started the recording.

Trish and Stanley watched in silence for a minute. The Trish tilted her head back a little toward Stanley. "He's fingerspelling?" she murmured quietly.

"Yeah. I think so." Stanley was frowning. "He's not very clear."

Trish shook her head. "I didn't know Major Beck knew how to sign at all."

"Neither did I. But Jake does. Maybe he taught—? Holy crap!" Stanley sucked in a breath as, on screen, the unseen guard threatened Beck with the pistol. Trish let out a small gasp. They both stared at the screen for a moment, shock written large on their faces, and then Stanley shook himself. He glanced at Clark. "Can we rewind to where he starts signing?" His voice sounded a little hoarse.

Clark nodded and sent the images reeling backward. Stanley put his hand on Trish's shoulder and Eric heard him ask quietly if she was all right. She gave him a nod.

Clark started the tape forward again.

"L... O... O...." Trish steadily named each of the shapes Beck made, though she didn't sound completely confident, but then she hesitated. "Is that an N?" She half turned her head toward Stanley.

"I think it's an M. E.... Probably R...."

"Loomer Ridge?" Hawkins interrupted, sounding not at all surprised.

Stanley nodded, still quietly reciting letters to himself. "R... I... D.... Yeah. Loomer Ridge. That's that prison in Colorado, right? The one Goetz tried to send Dale to?"

Hawkins nodded. "It's a supermax facility a couple hours drive from Cheyenne. Nice and convenient for holding enemies of the state."

Trish had tensed again as the gun was once more pointed at Beck's head, but she was still silently mouthing letters. When Beck was dragged from the chair, she turned to Hawkins and shrugged. "He just signed Loomer Ridge a second time."

Jake was now on screen and beginning to sign. After a second or two, Stanley snorted and said, "Jake's *much* clearer." A few letters later, he shrugged and added, "But it's just Loomer Ridge again."

"Hold on," Eric advised. "There's a lot more from Jake. I'm guessing they didn't know which of them would get to speak—especially not once they started being uncooperative—or whether we'd be able to understand all of them."

Stanley nodded absently. He and Trish carried on watching, both of them mouthing letters. Every few letters, one or other of them would offer a word, or a correction of the previous word, until they'd gotten the next part of Jake's message: "Trying to break us. Still okay. Stay strong."

Eric allowed himself a private chuckle at the first part. Good luck to Cheyenne with that: all three of them were stubborn as mules. He reckoned the last part was aimed at those watching in Jericho, rather than Jake describing the intentions of the three prisoners.

Stanley and Trish were still following Jake as he carried on signing, but both of them began to frown. Eric saw Stanley tighten his grip on Trish's shoulder to get her attention. "Does this make any sense to you?"

Trish shrugged. "I think so." She tilted her head toward Captain Clark. "Would you rewind again, please. And we'll need a pen and paper."

"Already on it." Jimmy had his notebook open and his pencil poised.

Clark set the recording going forward again; after several seconds, Trish said, "He definitely signed 'cells'. I think he's giving us their cell numbers in the prison. 'A116. B125. C203.'" She looked up at Stanley for confirmation.

"Yeah, I get that too." He was still looking at the screen. "G... U... A... guards. Shift. Twelve... H. H?"

"Hours would be my guess," Hawkins offered.

Stanley nodded but didn't take his gaze away from watching Jake's hands. "Six A.M" He chuckled. "He thinks." Jake had wagged his hand back and forth briefly.

"Guess there aren't too many clocks in there," Chavez pointed out.

"Is he talking about when they change shifts?" Jimmy peered over the top of his notebook.

"Probably." Hawkins gestured at Trish and Stanley to go on. "What else does he say?"

"Keycard?" Trish offered questioningly. "And then he says thumbprint. He must be talking about the security. I think Loomer Ridge is a J&R facility and both of those are pretty standard in high-security areas." She frowned. "But I can't make head nor tail of what he's saying now."

"There was something about Glocks. I think he's telling us what the guards are armed with." Stanley waved his hand to indicate Clark should rewind the recording. "Go back and let's go through it more slowly."

It took them several stops and starts, and a couple more times backtracking, before they were sure they'd got the full list down correctly. After Jake had finished the list, he visibly hesitated. Then he signed, "Valente. Twice."

Eric immediately looked over at Hawkins and caught the flash of anger on his face. "Valente's visiting them?" he asked.

It was Chavez who replied, though his gaze was fixed on Hawkins. "Sounds like it. Wonder what kind of security escort he has when he makes the trip from Cheyenne...."

Hawkins' face twitched. "Not enough." He exchanged a brief nod with Chavez, before he returned his attention to the screen.

When Eric also looked back at Jake, he saw he'd stopped signing again, a slight frown settling on his face even as he continued to read the statement. Eric wondered if he'd forgotten what he'd planned to say next, or if he'd reached the end of what he'd prepared. Seemed like the latter. After a moment, he started signing again.

This time it was Trish who translated for the rest of them. "Told... bomb... Jericho... camp... think... lie... hope... U... OK...." Once Jake had once more stopped signing, she looked around, a confused expression on her face. "What does that mean?"

"Sounds like Cheyenne told 'em they'd bomb Jericho and Camp Delaware—or stop bombing us—to get them to do the broadcast." It was the first time Davies had spoken. "But they don't believe Cheyenne's telling the truth. Not sure how they've figured that out—" Davies's moustache twitched as he grinned. "—but they're right so—."

Davies's words were cut short as, on screen, Jake let out a yell and hurled himself off camera. The room descended into tense silence as they listened again to Jake's cries of pain, and then watched Heather speaking. When the guard stepped forward and hit her, Stanley's "Oh, Jeez!" overlaid Trish's quiet "Dear God." Eric glanced across and saw both of them looked like they were going to be sick. He knew how they felt: it wasn't any easier to watch second time through.

Trish took a deep breath and then turned her gaze toward Hawkins. Her voice cracked a little as she said, "She just signed Loomer Ridge again."

Hawkins nodded. He exchanged a long look with Chavez, and Eric could almost see their brains working, planning *something*, as the room once more fell quiet.

"So—," It was Bill who broke the silence. "—they want us to rescue them?" He sounded like he thought the entire notion was insane.

"No. They *want* us to go on resisting." Hawkins smiled wryly. "They're just hoping we can maybe rescue them."

Chavez uncoiled himself from where he was leaning against the wall next to the window. "Trish. We're gonna need your help. You know the J&R systems...."

"Anything." Trish nodded at him. Her hands were once more clasped tightly together in her lap, and she still looked a little nauseated. "Anything I can do...."

"And what are *you* going to do?" Gray interrupted.

Hawkins and Chavez exchanged another look. "We're going to get them back." The lazy amusement had been stripped from Chavez's voice; he was all business.

Gray snorted. "And just how do you propose to do that?"

Hawkins gave him a grin that had absolutely no humor in it at all. "We're going to give Cheyenne exactly what they're asking for. We're going to give them me."

oOo

Beck was surprised when he was pushed into the interrogation room to find Heather there. He'd been marched across to the other interrogation block: the one where they'd been taken the first night, and where he'd met Valente the second time. He was expecting to be shown into Valente's presence again.

Close on the heels of his surprise, he felt relief. He hadn't seen her since the broadcast the afternoon before. When the guard had stepped forward and hit her, his first thought was to get to her, to protect her, but two of the other guards had held him back. He would have expected Jake to be there before him, of course, except Jake was too busy writhing in pain on the floor after he'd been shocked with a stun baton for a third—or was it a fourth—time. In the end, the guards had seemed satisfied with just hitting Heather once, leaving her huddled next to the chair while they yelled recriminations at each other. Eventually, one of the guards had pulled her roughly to her feet, even as the two holding Beck had turned him around to march him back to his cell.

He'd been left alone after that for more than twenty four hours, apart from the usual routine of meals being served and lights on and off. He'd lain on his bunk, waiting for them to come for him, but it seemed the interrogators had decided it was a waste of time trying to talk to them—or had no more deals left to offer. Which had given Beck plenty of opportunity to wonder what was happening to Heather and Jake, and whether they were okay.

Now, here was Heather, at least, although she didn't seem to have noticed him. She was standing with her back to him, her hands clutching the mesh covering one of the openings that let into the next room. Her back was rigid with tension as she stared into the other room, which this time was lit. Beck hurried forward, wondering what she was looking at, and having a bad feeling he knew.

"Heather?" Her name died on his lips as he got close enough to see what she was seeing. In the other room, guards were working to strap someone into a chair. The man had been stripped to his underpants, and a hood covered his face.

Beck swallowed. "Is that—."

"Jake?" Heather nodded.

Beck reached out and put his hand on her shoulder. He could feel her shuddering.

"Jake?" Heather raised her voice a little, and Beck saw Jake cock his head slightly. "Edward's here."

Jake nodded his head slightly. The guards finished strapping his wrists and ankles to the chair, and

stepped back.

"My God...." The words escaped Beck—somewhere between a prayer and a groan of revulsion—as another guard stepped forward, and began fixing pads trailing wires to Jake's skin.

"Are they...?" Heather sounded disbelieving.

Beck swallowed, wishing he didn't have to confirm it, yet knowing he had to. Bending his head closer to hers, he murmured, "They're going to shock him, yes." The lump in his throat made it hard to get the words out.

Another shudder ran through Heather, and he heard her whisper, "No." Beck tightened his grip on her shoulder, wishing he could do more to protect her. Wishing he could do more to stop this happening. He saw with growing horror that the guard was fixing pads to each of Jake's shoulders and to his thighs. Depending on how they wired them up, the current would cross Jake's heart, and that would be bad. Very bad. Beck wondered if the guard knew what he was doing. He suspected he did.

The guard had finished working on Jake, and was now doing something with the other ends of the wires at a control panel sitting on a trolley next to the chair. Another guard stepped forward and pulled the hood away from Jake's head. He blinked at the bright lights, before glancing down to see what had been done to him. He briefly flexed his muscles against the bonds that held him: more confirmation that they were as firm as he thought than any real attempt to escape, Beck guessed. When he looked up, he met Heather's gaze.

"Jake...." Heather pulled herself closer to the wire mesh that separated her from him.

The two of them looked at each other for a long moment, and then Jake's gaze slid sideways to Beck. He shook his head slightly and mouthed the word, "Don't...."

Beck thought he probably meant "Don't let her watch." He'd already considered suggesting it to her himself and dismissed the idea, because he didn't think she'd listen. He gave Jake a helpless shrug. Jake's forehead creased in annoyance for an instant, and then he seemed to realize what Beck meant, and he gave a faint nod of acceptance. He turned his attention back to Heather. Beck stepped closer to her, hoping Jake would understand that he'd take care of her as best he could.

The guard working at the control panel had finished what he was doing, and he and the other guards left the room. For a few moments, the three of them were alone—as much as they could be with whoever was watching and listening on the other side of the mirrors. Beck could see the shapes of himself and Heather, obscured by the mesh over the opening, dimly reflected back from the mirror on the far wall behind Jake.

Then Beck caught his breath as he heard the tap of a cane and the shuffle of feet, and a familiar figure entered the other room.

Jake turned his head slightly to see who the newcomer was and let out a derisive snort when he caught sight of Valente. Valente looked down at him as he positioned himself in reach of the control panel, a slight smile playing across his lips, before he flicked his gaze up to Heather and Beck.

"The three of you have been very... troublesome." Valente turned his attention to the control panel as he spoke. He reached out with his free hand—he was leaning on his cane with the other—and appeared to do something with a switch, although the angle the panel was tilted at meant Beck couldn't see what. "That little display yesterday...."

Beck saw Valente unexpectedly stab at something on the control panel with a finger. Jake let out a yell of pain, his wrists and ankles bucking against the restraints as his body convulsed.

"No!" Heather yanked furiously at the wire mesh on the opening, as if trying to rip it from its fixings, but it simply rattled with her efforts. Beck put a hand on the frame to steady himself, bile rising in his throat as he watched Jake slump back, breathing heavily. His own pulse was racing in sympathy and shock.

He turned his attention to Valente, and noted the cold smile playing on his lips. The bastard hadn't even offered them a deal before starting in on Jake.

"The signing...." Valente was turning his head from side to side, apparently reviewing his options on the control panel. "That was very clever...." He adjusted something else. "You were wrong about the bombings, but I do admire your audacity."

His finger hovered over the control panel. Heather let out a gasp and pulled herself close to the mesh, her gaze locked with Jake's. Beck could hear her whispering "No" over and over.

Jake was still panting heavily. After a moment, he shifted his gaze to Beck and shook his head slightly, his lips once more forming the word "Don't." He flicked his eyes in Valente's direction.

Beck licked his lips, trying to moisten his dry mouth. "You know," his voice was so hoarse it was almost unrecognizable to him, "we can't tell the troops to surrender or the town to give in?"

Jake gave him a slight nod, and Beck knew he'd understood him correctly. He looked back at Valente.

"Yes, I do know that." Again Valente stabbed at the control panel with a finger, and again Jake cried out in pain as he was racked by another seizure.

Heather was shivering, tremors running through her. Stepping closer, Beck slid his arm around her and pulled against his chest. He turned his head and pressed his face into her hair. He wanted to tell her it would be alright, but he couldn't, because it wasn't going to be. He knew she must be able to feel him shaking too. "Be strong," he murmured, not even sure if she could hear him, and the words as much for himself as her. "We have to be strong."

"That was the second setting." Valente's tone was almost conversational, as if he was merely imparting an interesting aside. "I am reliably informed that the fifth setting is generally fatal."

Beck lifted his head and looked at him again, wondering if the other man could read the fury boiling inside him—and also see the impotence he felt.

Valente met his gaze. "You have made it quite clear that surrender is off the table, and that you value your ridiculous cause more than the lives of your friends, even though it has no hope of success. Which has me wondering what you *will* trade for your friends' lives."

Beck swallowed hard. The smug way Valente spoke told him that he wasn't going to like whatever Valente was about to demand any more than he'd liked the idea of surrender. "What do you want from us?" He forced out the words between gritted teeth.

"I want to find your breaking point, Major. This cosy little team." Valente waved his hand to indicate the three of them. "It really has been most annoying. But I believe everybody breaks. If you

push the right buttons." Valente glanced sideways at Jake as he almost casually pressed the switch that sent however many volts or amps or whatever it was coursing through Jake's body: not yet enough to kill, but enough to make his muscles spasm and to wring another involuntary cry from him.

This time, when the seizure passed, Jake slumped in the chair, his head lolling forward. Beck thought he might have passed out. Then he saw that Jake was pulling in deep breaths; a moment later, he raised his head and offered Beck and Heather a grimace that was probably meant to be a smile.

Beck looked back at Valente. When the other man was sure he had Beck's attention, he leaned forward and made a show of turning a dial to the next setting. Which was number three, Beck guessed, unless he'd missed Valente ramping it up as he toyed with them.

"What do I want?" Valente smirked at him. "Mr Green's life will be spared, all this will end," Valente gestured at the control panel, "on one condition. Major Beck copulates with Miss Lisinski."

The world seemed to go black for an instant—Beck could no longer hear Jake's ragged breathing or feel Heather shivering against him, or even sense his own blood pounding in his ears—and then it all came rushing back. But he must have misheard. Surely he must have misheard. Because Valente couldn't really have said that. Could he? Except that his own disbelieving "Excuse me?" was intercut with Heather's appalled "What?" and Jake's shocked "No!"

He met Valente's gaze and Valente gave him another of those cold, hard smiles. "I believe you heard me the first time, Major. Fuck Miss Lisinski, and Mr Green's life will be spared."

Beck stared at him, still too shocked to reply, still trying to wrap his head around what Valente was demanding.

Jake was the first of them to respond. "You sick bastard!" He struggled futilely against his restraints as he spat the words at Valente.

Valente arched an eyebrow at him. "I didn't quite believe the guards' reports that you were ready to launch yourself at them when you thought they'd been molesting Miss Lisinski, but perhaps you *are* willing to die for her. How terribly touching." He met Jake's furious glare with an amused smile, before he turned back to Beck. "Well, Major? I'm not asking you to betray your military oath, or this bizarre idea you all seem to have about loyalty to a country which no longer exists."

No, Beck thought savagely to himself. You're asking me to betray my friend. My friends. Because this wasn't just about what Valente wanted him to do to Heather, but also about what Beck would be doing to Jake if he agreed to this. He hadn't been able to help overhearing Jake's confession two days ago—not that he'd needed it to know how the other man felt. And he knew that she'd signed something he didn't catch to Jake before the broadcast yesterday, and that whatever it was, it had brought a relieved look and a smile to Jake's face.

As for the thought of doing that with—to Heather.... Beck's stomach turned over. Even though there'd been a little stab of disappointment when he'd seen that Heather reciprocated Jake's feelings; even though it suddenly became clear to him that deep down he'd begun to entertain the distant hope that one day he and she might be more than friends; even though the thought of what it might be like to make love with her made his heart beat a little faster. But not like this. Not like this.

"No." Beck pulled himself a little straighter, holding Heather close. He shook his head. "No. I won't do that."

"Do you really value your honor so much, Major?" Valente's mouth shaped itself into another smirk as he pushed the button again, and Jake once more convulsed, not able to hold in the cry of pain as the current ripped through him. "You're willing to watch a man die to keep it?"

Beck swallowed, tasting bile. At his side, in the circle of his arm, he could feel Heather shuddering. "Edward...." Her voice was choked with tears as she turned and put her hand on his chest, tilting her head up to meet his gaze.

He put his hand over hers. "Heather, he's asking me to...." He couldn't finish the sentence.

"He's offering you a way to save Jake's life." Heather squeezed her eyes shut for a moment and took a deep breath, before she opened them and met his gaze again. "I know what he's asking you to do. What he's asking *us* to do."

"Heather?" Jake's croak made them both turn and look at him again. His face was twisted with misery. "No." He licked his lips. "You don't.... can handle it...."

Heather stepped away from Beck and once more hooked her fingers through the mesh covering the opening, pulling herself as close to Jake as she could get. She gave a small shake of the head. "No, you can't." She spoke quietly, but with certainty.

Jake snorted and tried to shrug. "Doesn't hurt... so bad."

"That's not—." Heather's voice was still choked with tears, she but sounded surprisingly calm. Beck recognized, through the hoarseness, the even, analytical tone she used when discussing plans at their daily meetings. "It's not about the pain. That stuff...." She jerked her head toward the control panel. "It can stop your heart. The current even doesn't have to be that strong. It could happen any time. Every time. And if the current gets turned up, there *will* come a point when... when it will be fatal. Even for you, Jake. Even for you."

She put her hands to her face, letting out something between a sob and a snort. Jake was blinking at her, as if he was having a hard time following what she was saying. After a moment, he gave a shake of the head and muttered what sounded to Beck like "No." He wasn't sure if Jake didn't understand Heather's words or didn't want to accept the truth in them.

Heather dropped her hands, letting them rest on the ledge below the opening. "It's my choice." Her voice was now steadier, as if she'd gotten her emotions under control. "I'm not going to let you die, Jake. Not over something that... won't be so bad. That doesn't really matter...."

She turned back to Beck, a determined expression on her face. She straightened her shoulders a little and said quietly, "We have to do this."

"Heather—." Now he was the one shaking his head. He understood what she was saying, but thinking about doing that to her—to any woman—made him want to vomit. That he could contemplate doing it, even in circumstances like these, made him feel... dirtied, less of a man.

"Don't you understand?" She stepped closer and put her hand back on his chest. He could feel her shaking, though now it seemed to be with anger. "There *are* no good choices here. He," she gestured through the opening at Valente, who stood watching them, smiling faintly, "he's made sure of that. That's the *point*."

Beck glanced at Valente again. Heather was right. This wasn't about dealing with the resistance or

getting hold of Hawkins. This was about humiliating the three of them: payback for making a fool out of Valente over the broadcast. He remembered how, when he'd had Jake arrested, a little bit of him had—deep down—wanted to make Jake pay for not living up to the trust Beck had placed in him by appointing him sheriff. He'd tried not to let it color his actions, but he suspected it had made it easier for him to do what he did.

As for Valente.... Beck had seen it in the way he'd had ridden Beck over the search for Sarah Mason: underneath that cool exterior, Cheyenne's Director of Homeland Security could be impatient and petulant, and he didn't take well to having his orders questioned or his desires thwarted.

Almost as if he could read Beck's thoughts, Valente spoke. "You are trying my patience, Major." His finger reached out toward the control panel and hovered there. "It seems the young lady is quite willing. Maybe would even welcome it. From the reports I've had, she seems perfectly happy with the attentions of the guards."

It seemed Jake wasn't so completely out of it as Beck had thought, because he let out an angry hiss at that which mirrored the fury Beck felt. Just because Heather had managed to hide from the guards how miserable their behavior had made her didn't mean she hadn't hated every moment of it. And perhaps it was simply because Valente had kept pushing at him and pushing at him, but the remark was a step too far for Beck: suddenly, he understood Jake's urge to hurl himself at the guards. If he'd been in the same room as Valente....

Heather pressed her hand to his chest, trying to calm him. She leaned closer and whispered, "It's just bodies. It's just sex. He can't touch what's in here." She moved her hand over his heart. "Please. I don't want Jake to die." She lifted her other hand to her shoulder and signed, "I love him."

Beck closed his eyes for a moment, hating himself and yet knowing she was right: there were no good choices here. Opening his eyes again, he looked down at her, seeing the trust in him in her expression. "Very well." He swallowed. "We'll do it." He turned his head so he could meet Valente's gaze. "If you'll stop hurting Jake, we'll... do what you want."

Valente drew his hand back from the control panel, his lips twitching in satisfaction. "You have my word." All three of them let out various snorts and huffs of disbelief at that, but Beck guessed they didn't have much option but to accept that Valente would keep his end of the bargain.

Glancing around, Beck realized the room they were in was furnished with a low cot. He'd been too preoccupied when he'd first arrived and found Heather there to notice it. It was set where it would be clearly visible to anyone looking through from the other side of the opening they stood at: where it would be clearly visible to Jake, strapped in the chair.

He glanced back at Valente. "Now?"

"Yes." Valente jerked his head in the direction of the cot.

Beck took a deep breath. Now he was committed, his mind was racing with how to reduce the misery of this as much as possible for Heather. "I don't suppose—" *God forgive me!* he thought to himself. But, then, God would have bigger things to forgive him for. "—you'll provide us with a condom?"

"You suppose correctly, Major." Beck could hear the sadistic delight in Valente's tone as he added, "I'm sure having your semen inside Miss Lisinski will strengthen the very touching bond the two of you have already developed. Now, get on with it!"

Sucking in another deep breath, realizing he shouldn't give Valente any additional opportunities to humiliate them, Beck took Heather's hand, intending to lead her to the cot. To his surprise, she stepped back from him, though she didn't let go of his hand.

"Wait." She turned to face Jake again, and said his name softly.

Jake's expression was wretched as he lifted his head and gazed back at her. Beck saw him mouth her name silently.

"Jake?" Heather said again, licking her lips. "Do you remember what I signed before the broadcast?" Jake simply stared at her for a moment, and Beck thought that maybe he was too far gone to understand her, but then he drew in a deep breath and nodded, offering her something that looked like an attempt at a smile. Heather gave him an encouraging nod and a pale smile of her own. "Nothing's changed, okay? No matter what happens today, no matter what Edward and I do —" Her hand tightened on Beck's. "—that's never going to change. Do you understand?"

Jake swallowed and nodded again.

Heather put her hand up to the mesh, spread flat, looking as if she was almost half hoping that somehow Jake could place his palm to hers. "One last thing. Don't watch, okay?"

Jake nodded a third time. Heather held his gaze a moment longer, before she turned back to Beck and raised her eyes to his. "I'm ready."

Steeling himself, Beck led her to the cot and encouraged her to lie down so that, when he lay next to her, his body would shield her from Valente's view as much as possible. Jake's too, though Beck hoped he had the sense to follow Heather's suggestion.

The cot was narrow, forcing them to lie close. He was aware of how little they'd touched each other before. Until they came to this place, it had been no more than the occasional brush of hands as they passed forms and documents to each other, or a touch on the arm to draw the other's attention. Even here, he'd been surprised when she'd embraced him a couple of days back; surprised at himself, now he came to think about it, that he'd unselfconsciously drawn her to him to comfort her when Valente had first begun to make Jake suffer. Part of that distance was the respect he'd accord any woman he didn't know well. Part of it, he now realized, was because he'd very much wanted to hold her and comfort her and be comforted by her—long before they were brought to this place.

And now they were here, he found himself at a loss as to where to start. Through the arm he'd slid around her as they lay down, and the hand she'd placed on his shoulder, he could feel the tension in her, and he knew it would make things more painful, more difficult if she was still that tense when he—.

Maybe that was the place to start.

Taking another deep breath, he met her gaze. In her eyes, he saw a mixture of anxiety and trust in him that gave him courage, and he lifted his free hand and brushed the hair back from her face. Leaning forward to put his lips close to her ear, he murmured, his voice rough, "This will be a lot easier on you if you're—" He stopped, not knowing how to say what he wanted to say.

She came to his rescue, the way she always did: knowing what he wanted, what he was struggling to say, even before he could fully form the thought. Squeezing his shoulder, she whispered back, "Ready for you? Yes, I know." She pulled her head back a little so she could meet his gaze again

and added quietly, "I'm not—" she swallowed "—I'm not a virgin. That's going to help, right?"

"Yes." He nodded at her, feeling some relief. That had been in the back of his mind: not just that this might be her first time, and he didn't want *this* to be it, but that there was almost certainly no way he could make that not hurt. At least he had a chance now of making the whole thing merely very unpleasant.

Dragging in another lungful of air, he dropped his hand to her waist, letting it rest there for a moment, before he found the edge of her top and slid his hand underneath. His fingertips met her bare skin, and she tensed a little, before she let out a long breath, clearly making a conscious effort to relax.

He began to caress her side with long strokes, feeling her slowly grow less taut under his touch. Unbidden, the memory came back to him of lying like this with Alondra, of making love to her slowly and gently on the last night of his last leave before the September attacks. After which—. His hand faltered for a moment, before Heather quietly saying his name brought him back to the present. He focused again on her face, seeing the slightly puzzled look in her eyes, and forced away his memories of the past. It would do no good to think about Alondra, to think that he was betraying her too. The only good of thinking of his wife would be to remember what worked for her, and hope Heather wasn't so different.

After a minute more, when he'd resumed his steady attempts to ease the tension from Heather, she put her hand on the back of his head and drew his lips down onto hers. For a moment, he didn't return the kiss, because he hadn't expected it. Kissing her hadn't been part of his plan, because he'd thought it might make her uncomfortable, might make her think he was treating this or regarding her as if this was real or normal. Then he realized that maybe Heather needed the kiss precisely because it made things more like normal, because it would help her get aroused enough that he wouldn't hurt her when the time came.

Closing his eyes, he let his lips part under hers, accepting the kiss and returning it. He tightened his arm around her, pulling her closer, while he went on stroking her, all the while feeling her grow less tense. And though he kept the kiss light and controlled, mindful always of where they were and who was watching and why they were doing this, he couldn't help noticing how good kissing her was. How, despite the conditions they'd been living in and the conditions under which they found themselves now, she tasted and smelled and felt as good as his subconscious had told him she would. He noticed he was beginning to harden in response; a part of him was horrified that he was aroused by this, even as a part of him knew he had to be. That he needed to get hard just as much as Heather needed to relax, or they wouldn't be able to do what Valente was demanding of them.

When Heather seemed to have gotten as relaxed as he thought she was going to, he made his first foray downward, slipping his fingers under the drawstring waistband of her pants until his hand rested on her hipbone. She tensed again, but only a little, and he guessed he'd maybe startled her. Pulling back from kissing him, she caught his gaze, and gave him a slight nod, giving him permission to go on. Not breaking eye contact, he found the edge of her panties and slid his fingers underneath the elastic. He let his hand rest there a moment longer, painfully aware that he had only ever touched one other woman as intimately as he was about to touch Heather, before he moved his hand sideways.

She breathed in sharply as his fingertips brushed over the stiff curls of her hair, but she let her legs part as he gently pushed his fingers down between her thighs until he was cupping her lightly. She swallowed and gave him another nod, letting him know that she was still okay—as much as either of them could be okay doing this, here, now.

Drawing in a deep breath of his own, he prepared himself to—.

"You are trying my patience again, Major. I suggest you get on with it. Or do I need to give you another incentive?" Valente's icy tones jerked Beck out of the cocoon of intimacy he had been carefully constructing around himself and Heather. Beck silently cursed the man as he felt Heather stiffen under his hand and saw her lips shape Jake's name. Like him, she must have interpreted the word "incentive" as Valente's hand hovering over the button on that damn control panel.

Pressing down on the panic that rose within him—because, whether or not Heather was ready, he knew he wasn't—Beck looked up and caught sight of the black bulk of Valente's reflection in the mirror facing the opening into the other room. Valente had stepped up close to the opening: the better to observe them, Beck supposed. Next to him—though the combination of poor lighting, the mirror's distortions and the mesh covering the opening made it hard to be sure—Jake appeared to have his head bowed.

"Look." Beck tried to keep his tone level and not show his fear, to Valente or to Heather. "You want this. I don't. If I'm going to.... do what you want, you have to give me a chance to... perform." He gritted his teeth, not wanting to think about what might happen if he simply couldn't.

"Very well." Valente sounded amused as he added, "Perhaps I should have come to expect such dilatory action from you, Major."

Taking another deep breath, Beck turned back to Heather—and had to bite back a yelp of surprise when she put her hand on him.

She blushed as she met his gaze. "I need to help you, don't I?"

He nodded, growing hot with embarrassment at the way he'd reacted, even through his pants, to her fingers curving around him. And yet.... He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and reminded himself that it was a good thing she could get him aroused.

When he looked at her again, she tried to smile at him, before she tilted her head forward and leaned her forehead against his. "We can do this," she whispered.

He felt her fumble with his scrubs as she worked her hand up under his top, down into his pants and then inside his underpants. A small gasp escaped him as her hand closed on him, cool against his hot flesh, and as he responded involuntarily to her touch. Sucking in another breath, he tried to concentrate on her, on what she needed, as her palm and fingers settled into a steady rhythm moving over him.

His hand still cradled her, though his fingers were stiff with tension. He forced himself to relax them. Then, carefully, he slid one finger between her folds. It was her turn to let out a small gasp, but she didn't flinch from him. Even though, he was troubled to discover—if not much surprised—she was hot and dry. Hoping that, just as she was mechanically bringing him to the point where he could do his part, he could produce a facsimile of desire in her, he slid his finger on until he found her opening and could dip his fingertip inside her. Rubbing gently over her, he was rewarded after a moment with a sudden slickness.

Breathing out a sigh of relief, he continued to stroke her for a little longer, feeling her begin to open up to him. His own body responded, anticipating the moment when he would be inside her. Again, he pushed away the nausea that rose up within him as he realized a part of him must be enjoying this. Focusing on the task in hand, he leaned in so he could once more put his mouth close to her ear and murmured, "Pull your pants down below your hips. Leave your panties."

Her scrubs were like his: with a drawstring waist that, once loosened, should give her room to spread her legs enough without having to take them off. Without her having to expose more of herself than was strictly necessary to those who watched. As for her underwear.... He drew his hand away from her and out of her panties, and hooked his finger under the leg elastic so he could pull them to one side, out of the way.

Somehow, they shifted, so that she was underneath him, while his other hand worked his own clothes down far enough to free him. He had a moment when he wondered if they could fake things: if he could simply slide between her thighs and use the movement to make himself come. Then he remembered Valente's words about wanting Beck's semen inside Heather. He had a nasty feeling that if Valente had any sense he'd been duped, Heather would be subjected to a highly unpleasant examination, and Jake would suffer if the results weren't to Valente's satisfaction. No: they had to do this properly.

Beneath him, he felt Heather wriggle her pants down a little further, while her gaze sought out his. Then her hands were on him, helping to guide him into her, while she looked up at him. He wasn't sure if it was the feel of her around him, or the look of complete trust in her eyes, that made him moan quietly as he pushed into her.

From the other room, he heard Valente's sarcastic "Finally!" and, he thought, a quiet, whimpered, "No!" from Jake.

He tried to ignore both as he pushed further into Heather. She was tight around him and yet not so tight that he thought he must be hurting her, and he was afraid that he might slip out if he stopped too soon. Then he did stop.

He lifted a hand to brush her hair back from her face, supporting himself on his other arm. "You okay?" he asked quietly.

She bit her lip, but nodded at him. Taking another breath to steady himself, he began to push into her again, slowly and gently, allowing her to open up to him. She slid her hands down his back and, with light pressure, encouraged him on, her breathing long and measured as she took him in, until he was deep inside her.

Again, he paused for a moment and gave her a questioning look. "Still okay?"

Again, she nodded. Taking it as permission to go on, to get this over with, he began to move in shallow thrusts. She lay passively under him, and that was so unlike how Alondra had been that he faltered. But she gave him another nod of encouragement, and he reminded himself that they weren't here to put on a floor show. This was about doing the minimum to get through this. In another time and place, he would have wanted nothing more than for her to wrap her legs around him and match his thrusts with her own rhythm, but not now, not now.

The thought helped him, though, and he went on thinking about how it would be if they ever made love properly—which they never would, she was Jake's, he knew that—while he carried on looking down at her and moving inside her. She lifted her hands to his face, cradling it between her palms, her thumbs stroking his temples, and that helped too. And a mercifully short time later, he was holding in a groan, his eyes squeezed shut, as he came in short, jerky thrusts.

Breathing heavily, he opened his eyes again and saw her smiling up at him. She smoothed a hand over his hair, almost as if she was proud of him. Perhaps she was, for doing something so terrible with as much honor as he could manage. Tears blurred his vision for a moment—the tension,

perhaps, and its release—and he leaned down and pressed his lips to her temple, even as he slid himself out of her. Because, God, he was proud of her too, and the way she'd handled all of this.

He felt her hands leave him, and begin to wriggle her pants back up. He lifted himself a little to give her room, while still trying to cover her from watchful eyes, and worked one-handed to rearrange his own clothes. When she put a hand on his arm, he raised his head and met her gaze again, and she gave him a quick nod that said she was ready.

Lifting himself off her, he scrambled his legs round so he could perch on the edge of the cot, facing her. She sat up, pulling her knees up to her chest, and he reached out his hand and cupped her cheek, not sure what to say.

Before he could find the right words, he heard the rattle of the door being unlocked. He let his hand drop away from Heather and twisted around, wondering what was about to happen now. Next to him, Heather shifted so that she could put her feet on the ground, ready to spring up.

The door opened, and Jake staggered into the room, a hard shove in the back making him stumble. He was still dressed in nothing but his underpants, although it looked like someone had pushed his folded scrubs into his arms a moment before. He dropped them as he tottered forward.

Beck leaped to his feet to catch Jake before he fell. He slung Jake's arm over his shoulder, staggering a little under Jake's weight. Heather, a step behind, put her arm around Jake from the other side and helped Beck guide Jake over to the cot. Jake clung to her as he sank onto the cot, and she let him pull her down to sit next to him.

Beck let go of Jake and backed up, retrieving Jake's scrubs from where they'd fallen on the floor. When he approached with them, Heather was stroking Jake's bangs back from his forehead, just like she'd done to Beck when—.

Beck forced away the memories and held out the scrubs. Heather must have been aware of him, because she put out her hand to take them, even though her gaze was still fixed on Jake's face. She was murmuring quietly, "It's okay. Shhhh.... It's okay."

Beck handed over the clothes and retreated to the other side of the room, wishing it were further.

Heather bundled the scrubs on to her lap, before reaching up and lightly running her fingers over Jake's chest, where the pads and wires had been attached. Jake was still holding on to her like a drowning man clutching a life preserver, his expression miserable as he gazed at her mutely.

Again, Heather brushed his hair back from his face. "Come on, let's get you dressed." Not breaking eye contact with him, she blindly groped at the clothes in her lap. She managed to get Jake into them, helping him put head and arms and legs through the right holes, just as if he were one of the third-graders she used to teach.

When he was clothed and sitting back on the cot, once more clutching Heather's arm—he seemed unsteady even seated—he reached up tentatively with his other hand and touched her face with his fingertips. "Are you...?" His voice was hoarse.

"I'm okay." He must have looked doubtful, because she nodded at him and repeated, "I'm okay. Edward—" Beck saw her swallow. "—made sure it was as... unhorrible as it could be."

Jake looked across at Beck, who was leaning against the wall with his arms folded, watching them. He knew he should have turned away as soon as he'd backed off, to give them some privacy, but he

couldn't help himself: he had to know that things were still okay between them.

Jake's dark eyes were unfathomable as he met Beck's gaze. There was a long moment of silence, and then Jake's gaze lost focus and slid away. After another moment more, he heaved a breath and looked back at Heather. He blinked a few times, apparently a little surprised to find she was still there, or maybe to try and clear his thoughts. Then he let his head fall forward to rest on her shoulder, burying his face in her neck. She pulled him closer, and he slid his arm around her, clutching at her as if he planned on never letting go.

oOo

"So Valente really forced that major who mutinied to screw her? In one of the interrogation rooms?"

Heather pressed her eyes shut and let out a long breath, trying to block out the conversation going on outside her cell door. Variations on it had been happening for what felt like most of the past twenty four hours.

"Uh-huh. Wish he'd let us at her. I'd like to—."

"Yeah...."

Seemed like every guard in the place had heard the story and wanted to gawk. The only good thing about it had been that it had forced her to put on a brave face and hold herself together, instead of curling into a ball like she wanted. Because she might have told Jake she was okay, but she wasn't. Not really.

"D'you think they taped it? Would sure love to get my hands on a copy of that."

"Yeah...."

To Heather's relief, the voices faded away down the hallway. No longer forcing herself to block them out, to be deaf and blind and numb, she found herself noticing other sensations again. Like how she still felt sore *there*, despite the care Edward had taken. Though from what she remembered, that hadn't been unusual even with the guys she'd gone to bed with willingly.

Calculating it up in her head, she realized the previous time she'd had sex had been more than four years ago. Not since she'd split up with her last steady boyfriend, back in college. To be honest, she'd never been that fussed about the sex itself: she enjoyed the kissing and cuddling that led up to it, but the act itself always left her somewhat cold and unsatisfied. Edward's tenderness and the way he'd touched her had surprised her a little. It had been, considering the circumstances, rather nice. It suddenly occurred to her that maybe neither of the boyfriends she'd had in college had been exactly good at sex. And, thinking about it, she wasn't so sure she'd really wanted to sleep with them either. She'd just felt like they expected it of her.

She shifted, trying to get more comfortable. She'd spent most of the day sitting on the bed with her back to the wall and her legs curled up underneath her. It made her feel a little less vulnerable compared with lying down when the guards came and looked at her, but she was stiff. Instinctively, she curved her hand across her stomach, wondering.... Though Edward had done what he could not to hurt her, Valente had made sure he couldn't avoid the possibility he might get her pregnant.

She'd lain awake in the night for several hours trying to work out how likely that was, but the truth was, she had no idea. Lack of food over the winter and the stress of living first under Constantino's

rule and then under the threat of Cheyenne's retaliation had played havoc with her body, and she hadn't been regular for months. In the end, she'd pushed the thoughts away: worrying wouldn't change things. It would either happen or it wouldn't, and she'd deal with it when the time came.

That left plenty of time for worrying about Jake and Edward. Jake had seemed so... out of it when she'd last seen him, and she was scared that whatever damage Valente had done was permanent. It was almost as hard waiting through the long hours of not to knowing if he was all right, or when she'd see him again, as it had been doing what she and Edward had done. And for her own sake, she wished Jake was there with her. When he'd held her close, it had seemed like none of it mattered. It had only been for a minute, maybe, before the guards came and separated them and took them back to their cells, but it had made everything so much better.

As for Edward....

A sudden change in the quality of the light shining through her closed eyelids made her snap them open. The bulb in her cell had gone out, although she could still see a little by the sliver of illumination that fell in from the corridor through the ever-open hatch. It seemed on the early side for lights-out, but maybe she'd lost track of time....

Then she heard a rattle: someone was unlocking the door. Heart in mouth, she pulled her legs from under her and sat up, hands either side of her, poised to get to her feet. Because why would anyone be coming for her after lights out? Except if....

The door swung open slowly, and the dark figure of a man stood outlined in the gap. With the light from the corridor behind him, she couldn't make out his features as he rested his hand on the door frame, his head cocked.

"So, I hear the coffee here is terrible. Reckoned I should take you somewhere we can get a decent brew."

Heather was too stunned for a second to speak. Then she croaked, "Chavez?"

"One and the same." He held out his hand. "Come on. Time to get out of here."

Not needing further encouragement, Heather leaped to her feet and hurried out into the corridor. The door leading off the wing was propped open by the body of a guard. As Chavez took her elbow and pushed her past, she tried not to look too closely. But something about the way the guard lay made her think his neck had been broken.

Out in the guard post at the end of the wing, another man dressed in Army fatigues—she realized Chavez was tricked out the same way too, with AS Army patches and an ASA flag on his shoulder—was finishing trussing up the other three guards who'd been on duty, using plastic strips from their own kit. Heather thought she recognized him as one of Beck's men. He looked up at her and gave her a nod. "Miss Lisinski, ma'am."

He gave a final jerk on the last plastic tie and rolled the guard onto his back. Chavez was pulling the clips from a pile of handguns heaped at the security station, while the soldier extracted the spare magazines from the vests of the guards.

"Are we good?" Chavez asked, and the soldier nodded. Chavez gestured with his own pistol to indicate the soldier should go first. "Let's go."

Chavez grabbed Heather's arm again and hustled her down the short corridor that led to the the

stairwell, from where another corridor connected to the central hallway. Approaching the center of the complex, she could hear someone moving in one of the corridors leading to the other wings. Ahead of them, the soldier swung round and aimed his gun at the sound, before he relaxed. A moment later, Heather saw another soldier, with Jake behind him and behind that—. Heather blinked. Hawkins? The irony that Hawkins had waltzed into Loomer Ridge as part of their rescue party brought a hysterical giggle bubbling up within her.

Then Jake was hurrying over to her, holding out his hand, and she had eyes for no one else. She reached out her own hand and took his as he smiled down at her. His eyes were clear and bright, his gaze sharp as he raked it across her face, and she let out a long breath as she saw that he seemed none the worse for his ordeal at Valente's hands.

Even as she smiled back at him, his head swung up and he turned at the sound of more feet coming from the third corridor. Heather saw Colonel Davies and another soldier.

"Where's Beck?" Jake looked from Colonel Davies to the other man and back again.

Colonel Davies made a despairing gesture. "He's not on the wing. The logs show the guards came and booked him out about twenty minutes ago."

Heather heard Chavez's quiet "Dammit!" even as she and Jake exchanged a look.

"Valente?" she suggested.

Jake nodded. "Must be."

"What's this?" Hawkins had stepped closer, looking between them.

"The only times they've taken us out of our cells in the evening—" Heather began.

"—was when Valente wanted to see us," Jake finished for her. He gave her an anxious look and squeezed her hand, and she knew he was thinking about the previous evening.

"Where?" Hawkins gestured impatiently around at the doors to the interrogation rooms. "There's no one here."

Jake shook his head. "He's always seen us in another block. It's about a hundred yards away. I can show—."

"No." Hawkins interrupted him. "You two are too visible to be wandering around. There's a humvee right outside. When we get up to the doors," he gestured at the main entrance to the cell block, "you point out where you think they've taken Beck, and then you get straight into the humvee. We'll do the rest. Now let's go."

The group headed up the corridor, Hawkins and Davies reaching the doors first. Half opening them, they cautiously scouted the outside, making sure everything was still quiet and that there was no one around to raise the alarm. Apparently satisfied, Hawkins waved Jake forward. Jake had to let go of Heather's hand as he stepped up to Hawkins to indicate the building where Edward had probably been taken, and she ached at the loss.

Then Davies opened wide the door he was holding and Chavez once more grabbed Heather's arm. He bundled her out of the building into the back of the humvee. "Stay down," he hissed, pushing her to her knees between the bench seats that lined either side of the body of the humvee. A moment

later, Jake climbed in after her. Chavez passed him a gun—she thought it looked a bit like the ones the guards had carried—and then shut the back door.

Jake crouched beside her, the gun aimed at the door. She wriggled round so her back was to the panel separating the rear of the humvee from the driver's compartment, and reached out and put her hand on his back. She heard him let out a soft chuckle.

"You okay?" He shifted a little, pressing his back against her palm.

"Yes." Heather closed her eyes, reveling in the simple pleasure of being able to touch him, even as she wondered what was happening to Edward—and whether Hawkins, Chavez and the others would be able to find him and get the lot of them out of here without being discovered.

oOo

Jake didn't know which made him feel better: the feel of Heather's hand on his back, or the feel of the gun in his own hand. Or maybe that the gun meant he could *finally* protect her, the way he hadn't been able to for the last week.

Or it might have been before that, when she'd taken his hand and returned his smile, dispelling the fear writhing that she'd blame him for what had happened to her and wouldn't be able to forgive him. Because he hadn't quite trusted his jumbled memories of her holding him when they'd been briefly reunited, helping him dress and touching his face tenderly.

That wasn't just because he'd been pretty out of it at the time or for several hours after, though he had been. The guards had needed to half-carry him back to his cell, and they'd been worried enough to call in a medic of some kind to examine him. The man had tutted, and made Jake drink lots of water with something dissolved in it, and he must have passed out or gone to sleep for a while. When he came round, it was after lights out. He'd staggered over to the washbasin—noticing he felt stiff and sore, but stronger—and drunk some water, before he lay down again and tried to put the pieces together.

That he owed Heather his life he didn't doubt. That she'd let be done to her what—. His mind had shied away from thinking too much about it, but he knew it must have been horrible for her, despite what she'd said, and that it maybe wasn't over even now, hadn't ended when Beck had finished... doing what he did. And that she'd suffered *that*, was suffering, for *his* sake....

Jake wasn't sure he was deserving of the sacrifice she'd made for him. Though if he was given the chance, he intended to spend the rest of his life doing whatever he could to make things better. He tried to squash down the thought that maybe he couldn't make things better, or that over time she'd rightly grow to hate him. And that maybe he'd never know. Because the main reason he couldn't trust those memories of her holding him close and telling him everything was okay was because he'd realized, in the past twenty four hours, just how good she was at hiding from him how scared and hurt and upset she was when she thought he needed her to.

And yet here she was, with her hand on his back: the lightest of touches, but it told him that she forgave him and still loved him. He ached to turn around and take her in his arms and hold her tightly. But all he allowed himself was the liberty of lifting one hand off his gun for a moment and groping blindly behind him. She caught his hand with her free one and he gave it a brief squeeze, before he reluctantly pulled away, once more wrapping his palm around the gun and steadying it as he pointed it at the rear of the humvee.

His ears were pricked for any sound that indicated the rescue plan had been discovered, and he

tensed at a scrunch from behind him as someone put the humvee into gear. He braced himself, pressing a knee against one of the bench seats, as the vehicle lurched forward for a short distance, before it stopped again. Probably they'd driven up to the other building.

He hoped he and Heather had guessed right about where Beck had been taken, because they couldn't scour the whole prison for him. And, despite everything that had happened between them, Jake wanted Beck to get out too. Though it made him sick to the stomach to think about what Beck had done to Heather—with Heather—Jake didn't blame him. Even through the disorientation created by the electric shocks, Jake had heard the revulsion in Beck's voice, and he knew the major had only done what he'd done because he'd been forced to, as much as Heather. Only done it to save Jake's life, and because Heather had begged him. Beck was just as much a victim as any of them here.

As Jake breathed in the smells of exhaust and dried mud, and the mustiness that came from too many men in close quarters for too long that seemed to hang around all humvees, Heather's words came back to him: *Edward made sure it was as... unhorrible as it could be*. He remembered the way Beck had gently touched Heather as he examined her forehead after Jake accidentally hit her, and he imagined Beck just as gently and carefully—.

No! He squashed down on the thought. Heather had said *unhorrible*, not *good*, and she was still his—her reassuring hand on his back told him that—no matter what had happened.

Straining his ears, Jake heard the sound of feet outside, and he tightened his grip on the Glock, his finger curving around the trigger. Heather must have picked up the noise too, because she murmured his name softly in warning, pressing her palm a little harder against his back. He nodded his head, to let her know he'd heard. He hadn't caught any shouts or shots that suggested they'd been discovered, but—.

Then the door rattled open and he saw Davies and, behind him, Beck, an oddly blank expression on his face. Davies nodded at Jake, and then pushed Beck past him and into the humvee. "Get on the floor with the others, Major," he ordered. "We need you to stay down and out of sight."

Beck began to move and then halted, his expression sharpening and his eyes growing wide as he focused on Jake, still pointing the gun at him. Jake realized with a start that Beck was probably thinking Jake might shoot *him*. Because, after all that had happened.... Pulling the gun up sharply, Jake reached out a hand. Beck blew out a relieved breath and accepted the hand, letting Jake haul him in. Squatting on the floor, he peered past Jake; a faint smile broke out on his face as he caught sight of Heather.

Then all was confusion around them in the next few seconds while the rest of their rescuers piled into the humvee, putting their feet around and occasionally on the three crouched on the floor as they squashed themselves onto the seats. Chavez was the last in; when he pulled the door closed, Davies banged on the back of the cab to let the driver know they were ready. A moment later, the humvee lurched off.

oOo

When the guards came for him after dinner, Beck assumed he was being taken to meet Valente again. His stomach churned as he was marched across the compound to the other building; it was a relief when he was shown into a room with a table and two chairs, and there was no sign of Jake or Heather. Whatever was going to happen, at least it wasn't going to be a repeat of yesterday.

The guards pushed him into the chair opposite the mirror, before retreating to slouch against the

wall behind him. As Beck sat, he caught a brief glimpse of his reflection. He dipped his head quickly, fixing his gaze on the table. He had no desire to look at what he had become: a man who would force himself on an unwilling woman—and enjoy it.

He bunched his fists under the table, resting them on his thighs, and drew comfort from the feel of the multi-tool hidden inside his right palm. When he'd heard the clatter of the door being unlocked, he'd quickly groped under the mattress to snatch it from its hiding place. If he got close enough to Valente, he was going to take his chance. As for the consequences.... Beck reckoned he'd be dead soon after, and that was probably for the best.

Because he'd thought he'd sunk as low as he could go with what he'd done in Jericho, but apparently there were new depths to be plumbed. New ways to discover he was not the man he'd thought he was, and that all it took to expose the rotten core underneath the socially acceptable veneer was a little pressure. He might tell himself that he'd done what he'd done to save Jake's life, and because Heather had asked him to. But his body couldn't forget how good her touch on him had felt, and how he'd responded to her. Lying on his cot, he'd tried again and against to push those memories away, only to have them crowd back in.

The shuffle of feet and the tapping of a cane warned him that Valente was entering the room.

"Major." Even though Beck kept his eyes down, he could see Valente take up station opposite him. "I trust you slept well since our last meeting?"

Valente's words—the satisfied tone indicating that he could see quite clearly that Beck had barely slept at all—pulled Beck from his misery by reminding him that he was in the presence of the enemy. That he was still an officer, even if he was a sorry excuse for a human being. Forcing himself to concentrate, to remember his training, he lifted his gaze to Valente's face.

Valente was flipping through a file one-handedly, scanning the pages. Beck doubted he was reading anything; it was just a prop in this elaborate dance. Valente's next words confirmed it. With an absent-minded air, he added, "I'm afraid the guards report that neither Miss Lisinski nor Mr Green seemed to have passed a particularly restful night."

Beck's grip tightened on the multi-tool as he imagined Heather, alone in her cell, the realization sinking in of what he'd done to her, how he'd betrayed her trust and violated her and... and how he'd *gotten off on it*. He remembered the reproach in her eyes when she'd upbraided him about what he was doing to Jake, what he was doing to Jericho—and how she'd managed, even then, not to hate him. But not now, not any more. As for Jake? Beck remembered his anger against Constantino over the death of his father. How could Jake's hatred be any less for the man who had violated the woman he loved?

Valente met Beck's gaze, and a smirk settled on his face. Beck sucked in a deep breath, reminding himself that Valente was trying to provoke him. The fact he'd lost Heather's friendship forever and destroyed even the slight progress he'd made toward reconciliation with Jake was irrelevant right now.

Valente went back to looking at the file. "I also hear from Colonel Hoffman that the troops formerly under your command continue to resist, despite suffering heavy losses." Valente snapped the file closed. "Surely you must see what a waste of lives that is. Good, American lives. That surrender —."

"No." Beck interrupted before Valente could finish. Did he think Beck was so shamed that he would agree now? A little spark of warmth flickered within Beck as he remembered how proud and

honored he'd been that his company commanders, once they'd seen the evidence and rejected Cheyenne, had trusted his personal leadership enough to continue to follow him, wherever he led. No matter what had happened, no matter what he had done, he had to repay that trust. Though he might have no honor as a man, he could—he must—still keep his honor as a soldier.

Valente had arched his eyebrows. Beck met his gaze with a direct look. “No,” he repeated. “That’s not—.”

He stopped, realizing he'd lost Valente's attention, the other man turning his head away. Somewhere outside the room, someone had uttered a surprised “What—?” The word had been followed immediately by two dull pops and a quiet thud.

Valente swung back, his gaze going over Beck to the guards. He jerked his head toward the door.

Deep in Beck's brain, the word *silencer* was registering, but most of his attention was focused on the fact that the two guards were moving toward the door, and neither they nor Valente had their attention on Beck.

Under the table, he scrabbled the tips of his fingers along the edge of the multi-tool, feeling for the blade and pulling it out. It came free, and he shifted his grip on the handle, even as he shifted his position on the chair, preparing to spring.

The guards, their guns out, were past Valente and almost at the door now, and Valente was half turned away from Beck. He began to turn back at the sound of metal scraping on concrete as Beck shoved the table to one side and leaped forward, the knife held out in front of him, aimed at Valente's throat. Valente's movement only made Beck's stroke all the more effective as he slashed sideways, his momentum carrying the sharp blade deep into skin and muscle and cartilage.

Valente staggered back, and the knife slipped from Beck's hand as it lodged in Valente's throat. Valente put his hands up, futilely trying to stem the blood that spurted between his fingers, before his legs gave way and he slumped backward.

The guards had turned back from the door, their guns coming up to target Beck despite their mouths forming round Os of surprise that looked almost comical. Only for a moment, though, because Beck heard a couple more muffled cracks, and both men lurched forward, crumpling into untidy heaps.

Then more men were pouring into the room, dressed in army fatigues. Out of the corner of his eye, Beck was dimly aware of one of them bending to check the guards, kicking away one gun and pulling the other from the dead man's hand. Most of Beck's attention was focused on Valente, though, still with a few final gurgling breaths in him.

“Major?” Someone was shoving the guard's Glock into Beck's hand. He accepted it numbly, half-registering that his rescuer was Colonel Davies, even as the other man added, “Hot damn! Is that —?”

Valente's furious but rapidly glazing gaze continued to met Beck's for a moment, before someone else came to stand at Valente's head. Valente's eyes rolled up as he shifted his gaze to see who it was. Beck saw his lips form a word, though no sound came out. Then his eyes rolled back completely and his body slumped.

Raising his own gaze, Beck saw—with dull surprise and yet no surprise at all, because it was entirely fitting—that it was Robert Hawkins standing over Valente, an almost baffled expression on his face.

“Come on. Let’s get outta here.” That was Chavez, tugging on Hawkins’ arm, while Davies had grasped hold of Beck’s and was towing him toward the door.

The route to the main entrance seemed littered with the bodies of guards, although there could only have been three or four. Bloodstains made darker patches on their brown uniforms. Outside, as the cooling night air hit Beck’s face, he saw a black limousine—Valente’s, he supposed—with a humvee parked just behind it. Davies manhandled Beck past the limo and along the side of the humvee. Beck’s legs didn’t seem to be working too well, or maybe it was just his brain, because Davies had to stop him from heading on along the side of the building and haul him round and point him at the back door of the humvee once they got there. The image of Valente’s furious expression as he choked out his last moments was more real just then than anything else in the floodlit night.

Jake staring at him over the barrel of a pistol snapped Beck’s his attention back to the present. He saw the other man’s hand tense on the grip, and for a moment he thought Jake had told Davies and Chavez and Hawkins what Beck had done to Heather, and they’d brought him here so Jake could shoot him. Because that’s what he deserved. Then Jake lifted the gun and held out his hand, and Beck realized Jake had merely been ready for the possibility that someone else would open the door.

Letting Jake pull him in to the humvee, Beck dimly registered that the expression on Jake’s face suggested Jake was glad to see him. When he looked past Jake at Heather crouched behind him, he saw she was smiling at him too. He returned the smile, relief sparking within him. He didn’t deserve her smiles, but he’d been afraid she’d never smile again.

The rough and tumble of feet and legs around him as the rest of the rescue party climbed in after him helped bring him fully into the moment. The Glock that Davies had handed him sat heavily and reassuringly in his palm. As the humvee lurched off, he fell back into routine, automatically checking the magazine. They weren’t out of the woods—or beyond the outer prison fences—just yet.

Ignoring his creaking muscles and trying not to bump into anyone too much, he shuffled round so he was facing the back of the humvee, ready to deal with whatever came through the door if they—or the bloody handiwork the rescue team had left behind—were discovered. Steadying his grip on the gun, he drew comfort from knowing he was in the front line, that they would have to come through him to get to Jake and Heather. He smiled grimly as he sensed Jake shift and, from the corner of his eye, saw the barrel of Jake’s Glock appear over his shoulder. He’d be deafened if Jake had to fire it—but, then, that was likely to happen anyway if any of them started shooting in the confined space.

The humvee stopped twice. Low conversations between the driver and the guards at each gate drifted into the tense silence in the back of the vehicle. Though Beck’s straining ears couldn’t make out the words, he heard no sign of alarm or suspicion in the tone of them, and they were soon rumbling slowly forward again. Glancing up, Beck saw Chavez anxiously peering through the small window in the back door. After a third brief halt, when no words were exchanged, Chavez blew out a breath and announced quietly, “We’re outside the prison perimeter.”

Beck began to rise, desperate to stretch his legs, which were beginning to cramp—tension and old age catching up with him—but Chavez put a hand on his shoulder to hold him where he was. “Wait. We still need to get past the checkpoint on the edge of Fort Collins. After that, we should be able to take back roads south.”

Beck nodded, and instead let himself sink down onto his knees, sitting back on his heels. Seemed

like he wasn't the only one who was stiff with the strain of their escape: there was a general shifting and stretching, as much as was possible in the cramped, crowded space. Jake pulled his gun back and then bumped against Beck, seeming all elbows and knees as he wriggled into a new position. Wondering what he was up to, Beck glanced over his shoulder and saw Jake had turned sideways. He still held the Glock in one hand, but his other hand was curled around Heather's, and she was looking up at him with a soft smile and shining eyes.

Beck turned away, swallowing down the sudden lump in his throat, not caring to examine whether its cause was that he was glad or sad—or perhaps both—that what was between them seemed intact.

oOo

Chavez squinted out of the humvee's rear window at the retreating main gate of Loomer Ridge, not quite believing their plan had succeeded. Sneaking the humvee out through Hoffman's lines at night had been tricky enough, even with Dale's help and using the back roads Jake had been teaching him. Then there'd been the journey across Kansas and Colorado, through numerous checkpoints displaying Wanted posters with Hawkins' face. The transfer papers consigning Hawkins to Loomer Ridge, supposedly signed by Colonel Hoffman, forged by Trish Merrick, had gotten them through. A few corporals had taken a curious look in the back to get a glimpse of Hawkins, his hands bound and his head bowed.

When they reached the prison, the same gambit had worked. Chavez, becoming Parker again, had gotten them passed through into the heart of the prison complex without raising any suspicions. Trish, with help from Lieutenant Maris, had navigated the J&R systems to help them find out what they could about the place, from plans of exactly where the cells were located to guard rosters. It had been good to have as much intel as they could gather before going in—and to have confirmation of what Jake had been able to tell them on the broadcast—and Chavez, for one, appreciated that Heather had persuaded Trish to throw her lot in with Jericho six weeks ago.

It hadn't been until they'd gotten into the cell block itself that they'd begun quietly taking out guards, using the element of surprise to mostly disarm them. Beck not being in his cell had been an unwelcome development, and they'd had to be much less delicate when they'd raided the other building: the chances of someone discovering the tied-up guards in the cell block grew with every minute, especially as they'd banked on there not being much activity once the prisoners had been fed their evening meal. But they'd gotten out again without any sign the alarm had been raised. Chavez reflected that it could have all gone so much more wrong if they'd arrived a few minutes before Valente rather than a few minutes after....

The humvee swayed as it snaked its way back down to Fort Collins, jostling bodies against each other in the stuffy and crowded space. But Chavez didn't mind, because it meant success. Turning away from the window—the prison gates had long disappeared behind a turn in the road, and there was only dark woodland to be seen—he looked down at Jake, Heather and Beck, who sat squashed into the space between the benches.

Beck had his head bent, his gun resting on his knees, his free hand gripping the barrel. His shoulders were set in a tense line, although something about the way he held the gun told Chavez that it wasn't the normal alertness of a soldier still in the battle zone. More like Beck was still back in Loomer Ridge and reliving whatever impulse had caused him to stab Valente. Because Beck might have taken the opportunity presented by the rescue—Chavez guessed Valente and the two guards in the room had been distracted—but the fact he had a weapon on him indicated both planning and a reckless disregard for his own survival. Maybe, Chavez thought, Beck was just trying to come to terms with the fact he'd survived when he hadn't expected to.

Shifting his attention to Jake and Heather, Chavez had no problem reading what was going on *there*. Jake had turned sideways and was holding Heather's hand, stroking the back of it with his thumb, while she rested her other hand on his shoulder. The way they leaned toward each other told Chavez quite clearly that they'd finally figured out what they felt for each other, and were doing something about it. He grinned to himself as he went back to watching the road: about damn time. He wondered how long it would have taken them without being stuck in prison for a week.

The road leveled out as they neared the outskirts of Fort Collins, and there was another pause as they halted at the final checkpoint. It wasn't until they were navigating through the grid of residential streets on the edge of the city, making for one of the more minor roads that led south, that Chavez finally heard the distant high wail of a siren up in the hills.

He saw the others lift their heads at the sound, too, though nobody remarked on it. Then the panel separating the front of the humvee from the back slid open, and the soldier riding shotgun whispered, "We're through."

There was a collective letting out of breaths and relaxing of hands on weapons. After a few moments, the private sitting opposite Mack near the front of the humvee stood up, holding himself steady with one hand on the roof.

"Ma'am?" When Heather looked up at him, he indicated the seat he'd just vacated with a twitch of his elbow. "If you'd like to swap places? You'd be more comfortable."

Heather looked at him for a moment, and then turned back to Jake. Chavez saw that Jake had tightened his grip on her hand, and he suddenly understood Heather's hesitation. Giving a nudge to Hawkins, who was sitting next to him, Chavez got to his own feet. When Hawkins looked up at him, Chavez silently tilted his head toward the seat he'd just vacated.

"What?" Hawkins gave him a blank look.

"Come on, man," Chavez hissed back, nodding in Jake and Heather's direction. "Move up. Can't you see they want to sit together?"

"Huh?" Hawkins frowned down at them. Jake's expression as he met Hawkins gaze was somewhere between embarrassed and rueful, and it seemed to take Hawkins a moment longer to finally get it. Then his mouth twitched, and he said "Heh." in a quite different tone, before scooting along the seat to where Chavez had been sitting.

With a scramble of arms and legs, Jake hauled himself onto the seat, propping himself in the corner so he could wrap his arm around Heather as she settled herself against him. She put her hand over his, closed her eyes and leaned her head back against his shoulder.

The corporal next to Mack changed places with Beck; when the third soldier made to move, Chavez waved him back. "I'm fine." He hunkered down where Beck had been crouched, and snuck another peek at Jake and Heather. Jake was looking at the gun he now held in his lap. After a minute, he shoved it down at his side, still with easy reach, and wrapped his other arm around Heather, drawing her closer. Turning his head, he dropped a kiss in her hair.

Looking away, Chavez caught Mack's eye. The Texan's moustache twitched, and Chavez knew he was just as amused as Chavez was that Jake had finally caught up with what had been so obvious to both of them on the trip back from Texas.

Nobody spoke or moved for a few miles, only the sound of the engine and the tires on the road

breaking the silence. Then Hawkins cleared his throat. Chavez realized he'd been staring thoughtfully at Beck for a while, ever since everyone had changed places. Before that, now Chavez came to think about it, which probably partly—if not completely—explained why Hawkins had missed what was going on between Jake and Heather.

Hawkins shifted a little. “You know, Major,” his tone was dry, “I was planning on disposing of Valente myself.”

Chavez saw Beck lift his head and meet Hawkins' gaze. Before he could reply, Jake spoke.

“Valente's dead?” Jake's tone was flat, almost emotionless, except for something around the edges that Chavez couldn't quite decipher. Anger? Relief? Pleasure?

Beck turned his attention toward Jake and nodded mutely.

“Cut his throat with that knife you brought back from Lackland as a present for Miss Lisinski, by the look of it.” Mack, sitting opposite Jake, sounded immensely amused.

Jake was still for a moment, almost as if he didn't know how to react. Then he shifted, squinting down at Heather. She'd been looking at Beck—Chavez realized with a start that her expression was almost exultant—but she turned her head when Jake moved and they exchanged a glance. She sat up, letting Jake lean forward and hold out his hand toward Beck.

Beck regarded it with what seemed like surprise, before he accepted the handshake. Heather leaned forward too, putting her left hand over the men's, while she signed something with her right that Chavez couldn't decipher. Beck looked equally taken aback at that, until Heather gave a fierce nod. At last, he gave her a slight smile, his face relaxing as some of the tension left him. He pulled his hand away from Jake's and caught Heather's, running his thumb over the back of it. It was Jake's turn to clasp his hand over both of theirs.

Looking around the humvee as the three of them sat back and Jake once more wrapped his arms around Heather, Chavez could see everyone else was as puzzled by the strange exchange as he was. He guessed they all had quite a tale to tell about their time in Loomer Ridge. Closing his eyes and preparing to snatch some sleep, he supposed he'd find out all about it once they got safely back to Jericho.

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