

Laid To Rest

by Tanaqui

Beck drew the car to a halt in the almost-deserted church parking lot. Switching off the engine, he rested his hands on the wheel for a moment and peered up through the windshield at the modern gray stone building ahead of him, steeling himself for what was to come.

His cousin Max had offered to make the trip with him, but Beck had politely refused. He'd needed a few hours away from the burden of his family's concern. They meant well, but the task of constantly reassuring them—of keeping his face guarded, of making sure his thoughts didn't wander too far in company—was wearing on him. It didn't help that he often felt like a fraud, like he wasn't grieving the way they expected him to, but he'd spent the sharp, bright pain of his anger in the months he'd been in Jericho. Now the memories conjured up as he wandered around the ranch or talked to his family were mostly bittersweet, as likely to raise a smile as bring a lump to his throat. In an odd way, it felt like he was finding his wife and daughter again, not losing them.

This, though.... Shaking his head slightly to dismiss his doubts, he climbed from the car and headed up the steps.

Inside, the church was quiet and airy. Near the altar, a priest was talking to an old woman. He looked up as Beck moved towards the rows of chairs, intending to take a seat and wait. The priest gave him a nod and, with a touch on the woman's arm, finished his conversation and came to meet him.

"May I help you?"

Beck's tongue seemed stuck to the roof of his mouth. "Lieutenant-Colonel Beck. I called...."

"Of course." The priest inclined his head. "I'm Father Gutierrez. Perhaps we could talk for a moment in my office?" Beck knew the tone; there were things that needed to be said, that he needed to hear, though they would be hard.

Nodding, he let the other man lead the way to a room to one side of the church and usher him into a chair. Rounding the desk, the priest also sat down and, unlocking a drawer, drew out an envelope. He laid it on the desk in front of him.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Losses." Beck couldn't help correcting him, his voice hoarse. "My wife and daughter."

"Of course." Father Gutierrez dipped his head. "My apologies. A terrible loss. Both so young."

"Yes." Beck bit off the word, trying not to be curt, aware that even for a priest there were few words that sat well in these circumstances.

Father Gutierrez clasped his hands together, resting them on the envelope. "As I believe you already know, there was some delay in bringing their bodies here for burial. It was... unfortunate. The weather was very bad, the roads were unsafe and your family's accident took place on the interstate

some miles out of town. It wasn't until the Army—."

"I understand," Beck interrupted, wishing to spare the priest the discomfort of explaining what Beck understood all too well. "My battalion was in Nebraska and Kansas clearing road gangs from I-70 and I-80."

"I see." Father Gutierrez was silent for a moment, watching Beck, evaluating him. His gaze slid away when Beck caught it. Picking up the envelope and tapping it on the table, he cleared his throat. "We were, of course, able to carry out only cursory post-mortems...."

"Father." Again Beck interrupted. "My unit recovered a number of bodies. I saw the kinds of things that happened." He licked his lips. "I would rather know than... imagine the worst."

The priest nodded. "Yes. I see that would be a comfort. As much as anything can be." He paused again before lifting his gaze to Beck's and speaking steadily. "I was among those who helped bring them back here. I saw them both before they were moved. It's impossible to be sure, of course, but the medical examiner believed both died quickly, as a result of the crash. There had been some... disturbance by animals some time after death."

Beck flinched at that, but if it was the worst, it was no more than to be expected.

Father Gutierrez hesitated again, and then added, "I believe the bodies were... otherwise untouched."

Beck knew what he meant. He looked down, blinking back sudden tears. It had been hard enough after he'd learned of their deaths to know they'd lain unburied for months. He'd tried not to think about what they might have suffered before they died. To know that it had only been rats that had troubled them, once they were past caring, was a consolation of a kind. "Thank you," he whispered.

He sensed the priest stand and move around the desk, and then felt his hand on his shoulder. "I know it's not much comfort." The priest held out the envelope and Beck took it. "Let me show you where—."

oOo

The priest left him beside the grave, letting Beck know that he or one of his colleagues would be in the church if he needed anything later.

Beck had noticed, approaching the plot, that several of the metal markers to either side carried only the plot number. He supposed it was fortunate—looking down at the grave, he pressed his lips together, because *nothing* about this was fortunate—that the road gang who'd run Alondra and Isa off the road had left enough clues for the authorities to identify the bodies.

The sun beat down on his neck, promising another hot afternoon. He shucked his jacket, laying it and the envelope to one side as he knelt.

"I'm here." He reached out and touched the grave marker, running his fingers lightly over where someone had printed their names in neat block capitals. "I'm sorry it took me so long. There was a while when I couldn't come, and then...." He gave an apologetic laugh. "They were keeping me busy."

Not so busy he couldn't have taken some leave before now. Trish had been the one who'd pushed

him in the end. She had a knack for that: she didn't read him nearly as well as Alondra had—or Heather, for that matter—but she wasn't at all shy, once she did figure out what was going on, about maneuvering him into doing things that would be good for him. He thought Alondra would approve of that; she'd never been one herself to shirk difficult decisions or tasks. It was part of why he'd held on so long to the belief that they were okay, even when all the evidence, or lack of it, suggested otherwise. She was a strong woman, and she could look after herself and take care of Isa. Even if—

He gripped the metal marker tightly, feeling the edge of it digging into his palm. "I don't blame you, you know." The whispered words were fierce. "I don't blame you. I know you made the best choice. Maybe the only choice. I've heard what it was like in Santa Fe. How bad it got. Trying to make it down to the ranch.... I would have done the same."

Though maybe he would have gotten them there safely if he'd been with them. But, no. That kind of thinking? That way lay madness. He knew where to lay the blame: with "John Smith" and Thomas Valente and all the others who'd plotted to throw the lives of ordinary people into chaos just so they could grab power.

Letting out a breath, he slowly unclenched his hold on the marker. "Anyway, I'm here now. I'm here now."

He sat back, closing his eyes, letting the quiet of the cemetery calm him. In the distance, the occasional car swished past on the road. After a while, he began to talk, telling them about the past two and a half years. About how they'd heard the news of the bombs while they'd been at a training camp up in Alaska, and how there hadn't been time for the shock to set in before they'd found themselves on a plane heading south. How they'd landed in California and helped organize relief efforts for refugees streaming away from San Francisco. How, after California threw in with Cheyenne, they'd been ordered east, pushing on into Nebraska. How, a few weeks later, he'd arrived in this little town called Jericho....

oOo

The heat of the day had drained away and an evening breeze was stirring the bedroom curtains as Beck carefully slit open the envelope and let the contents slide out onto the bed. Alondra's wedding ring glinted up at him from the top of the pile, strung on a chain alongside the cross she always wore. He guessed she'd done that herself, to keep it safe and out of sight as they traveled south. There was a second chain and cross tangled up with hers: the one they'd given Isa for her confirmation.

Although it wasn't absolute proof, the jewelry was an extra confirmation that Father Gutierrez hadn't been telling a comforting lie when he'd said their bodies hadn't been disturbed.

Beck picked up the wedding ring and turned it around, the gold smooth and warm under his fingertips. While regulations permitted it, the demands of the job meant he'd rarely worn his own wedding band, even when commanding a desk. He'd carried it with him to the far side of the world, though, tucked in his toiletry kit. It was still there now, sitting on the dresser under the window.

Taking Alondra's ring off the chain, he slid it onto his little finger. It fit snugly and while it felt a little odd, it also felt right. He picked up Isa's cross: regulations permitted a cross, too, as long as it was out of sight. With a slight smile, he slipped the chain over his head and tucked the cross inside his shirt, where it clinked faintly against his dogtags.

Gathering Alondra's cross and chain together, intending to put them back in the envelope for

safekeeping, his gaze fell on the documents underneath. He was tempted to shove them back into the envelope too, leaving them for another day. But no—better to get it over and done with.

Making sure Alondra's cross was secure, he began working his way through the pile of documents. The two death certificates were on the top; he put them aside quickly, already knowing enough of what they said. Underneath, he found Alondra's driver's license, birth certificates, social security cards, a miscellany of other documents: Alondra, practical as ever, must have gathered up everything she thought important before she set out.

In the middle of the pile was a cheap plastic photo album. Flipping it open, he saw the first photo was one of the three of them together, taken down here at the ranch when Isa was eight. He was in the middle, with his arms around them both, and all of them were grinning. Last time he'd seen it, it had been where it always was: in a frame standing on a shelf in the living room.

The next photo showed Isa laughing and eating an ice-cream: that had been on the nightstand in his and Alondra's bedroom. Then came one of Beck in dress uniform, but an informal snap, not a posed portrait; he couldn't even remember when it had been taken but he thought he looked ridiculously young. Next, a small version of their wedding portrait, the one that had been in their wedding album. Going on through the photos, he realized Alondra had collected pictures from all round the house or from the dozen large photo albums stored in the dining room.

He suddenly found it hard to breathe. He squeezed his eyes closed, trying to swallow down the lump in his throat. All this time, all he'd had was that one picture, carried in his helmet and now on his desk back in Columbus: creased and battered and starting to fade. Their house in Sante Fe had caught fire at some point and probably been looted too; there'd been nothing much left when he'd stopped by on his way down to the ranch. And now here....

He opened his eyes again and leafed back through the photos to find the one of Alondra taken when she'd been pregnant with Isa. She always had known how to give him what he needed, even when he didn't know himself what he wanted. And now she'd given him this last gift.

He brushed his fingertips over the photo, murmuring, "Thank you. Thank you for everything."

Gathering the rest of the documents together, he put them back in the envelope, keeping the photo album out. Outside, he could hear Max's wife Carla calling the kids in for dinner, and he knew she'd be calling him soon. He'd look at the photos again later. And later still, back in Columbus, he'd show them to Trish and tell her the stories, and maybe cry a little. But that would be okay too.

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.