

Local Interest

by Tanaqui

Jake held open the door to Bailey's with one hand, and let Heather lead him over the threshold by the other. She smiled back over her shoulder at him, and he hurried to close the small gap that had grown between them.

They were two or three steps into the main bar when he noticed the growing silence. Another step or so and there was chatter only in the furthest corners. Then someone somewhere started to clap; a moment later, the din of clapping, cheering, whistling and stamping was overwhelming.

Jake looked down at Heather in confusion as the two of them faltered and came to a stop. She had gone red as she looked around at the noisy crowd; her fingers, interlinked loosely with his, curled to clasp his hand more tightly.

Realization dawned. "Oh." He looked up at the grinning faces around him and grinned back. Because the way they were reacting was pretty much the way he'd been feeling ever since Heather had made her choice a few days ago, and chosen him.

He couldn't resist drawing her a little closer and dropping a kiss in her hair, before he managed to get them moving the final few feet to the bar, to where Mary was waiting to serve them.

The cheering tailed off—though there was a buzz that suggested they were still the topic of conversation—and Mary didn't have to raise her voice too much as she exclaimed, "Finally!" with a wide smirk.

Jake gave an embarrassed shrug. "What can I say? I'm an idiot."

"Uh-huh." Heather squeezed his hand again. She exchanged a shy smile with Mary. "I'll have a beer, please."

She settled herself on a stool and Jake leaned against her, letting go her hand so he could slip his arm around her waist. He nodded at Mary. "Same here."

"Hey!" Someone slapped him on the back and he turned and saw Chavez grinning at him. "Glad to see you two crazy kids finally sorted things out." Chavez raised his hand and Jake reached over between himself and Heather to grip it for a moment.

As he pulled back, he saw Heather give Chavez an inquiring look. He cleared his throat. "I believe Chavez here considers himself our unofficial matchmaker."

Chavez turned his grin on Heather. "What can I say? I'm a hopeless romantic."

Jake tilted his head at him and added quietly, "And a good friend." He wasn't sure he was ever going to be able to repay Chavez for the few quiet words that had opened his eyes.

"Here you go." Mary had come back with their drinks. Putting them down in front of Jake and Heather, she turned and reached for a clipboard stashed at the back of the bar. "So...." She ran a finger down the page, before she stopped and looked up at them. "Wait a minute. When did you two actually get together? This week or last week?"

"Umm.... Last Saturday." Heather dipped her head a little and began fiddling with her beer bottle.

Mary gave a quick nod. "Last week, then." She backtracked her finger up the page a little. "Okay, that means...."

"Hang on!" Jake leaned forward and snatched the clipboard out of Mary's hands. His eyes widened as he saw the list of dates and names. "You were running a *pool* on us?"

Mary gave a shrug that was somewhere between amused and apologetic.

"And—." Jake blinked as he looked at the list more closely. "This thing goes back *months*."

At his side, Heather chuckled unexpectedly. She tilted her beer at him in salute, her cheeks dimpling. "Well, you were kinda slow."

Mary held out her hand for the clipboard and Jake passed it back to her. He scratched the back of his neck and muttered, "I guess."

He'd got it right in the end, though, hadn't he? He put his arm around Heather again, and she let him draw her close, smiling up at him: a small, shy smile, though the expression in her eyes made his breath catch.

Tipping up her chin, he dipped his head to kiss her. To his surprise, she put her fingers to his lips to stop him. He raised an eyebrow, puzzled—until he realized that maybe she wasn't quite as comfortable as he was at showing their affection in public.

Giving her a slight nod, he caught her hand and turned it so he could kiss her palm instead. He felt her tremble; when he met her gaze, there was gratitude in her expression, but also the suggestion that she only didn't want to kiss him here, now, because she wanted more. It was his turn to shiver.

"So, who's going to be buying the drinks?" Chavez was resting his arms on the bar on the far side of Heather, waiting for Mary to serve him. His words brought Jake out of the little private world he and Heather had created.

When Mary—she'd put the clipboard back where it came from and was pulling a couple of draft beers for another customer—gave him a questioning look, Chavez added, "Who won the pool?"

"Oh." Mary laughed. "Bill." She handed across the beers and took Chavez's glass. "Point of fact, he might have been the one to get the whole thing rolling. Started out as a bit of a joke between me and Eric. Then Bill and a couple other people found out, and it kinda snowballed from there."

To the point, Jake thought, where there'd been maybe forty names on the list: he'd noticed quite a few of the Rangers, and some of the guys who worked for Dale, and a few from the mine. Suddenly, the occasional strange remark he'd gotten from people, unexpectedly interested in whether he and Heather were planning on working on any more projects together, made a whole lot more sense.

He shook his head. He really *had* been the last to know, hadn't he?

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