

Past Recall

by Tanaqui

Women hope that the dead love may revive; but men know that of all dead things none are so past recall as a dead passion— Ouida (Marie Louise de la Ramée)

oOo

The house was silent when Jake woke. From the angle of the sunlight slanting through the window, he guessed it was around noon. His mother would be at the clinic and Emily.... As the memory of his last thought before he fell asleep came back to him, he tried not to feel too relieved that she'd slipped from his side without disturbing him.

Grabbing a T-shirt and jeans—God, it was good to be back in his own clean clothes again—he padded downstairs in search of something to eat. He found an insulated bag sitting in the kitchen with a note in Em's handwriting propped against it: *Didn't want to wake you. Enjoy!* Inside, he discovered foil-wrapped pancakes that were still warm, and tasted almost as good as his mom's. Seemed Em had picked up a few things from her cooking lessons.

Mopping up the end of the syrup with the last pancake, Jake sighed. The pancakes were yet another sign that Em was developing a decidedly domestic streak. He shook his head, remembering how envious he'd been of Eric at his little brother's wedding. How he'd have begged Em to marry him if he'd thought there was any chance of her saying yes. And now it looked like she was the one who wanted to settle down—that ridiculous suggestion last night that they start a family right there and then—while he.... He didn't know what he wanted any more. Somehow, playing happy families in the middle of a war he'd helped start didn't seem right.

Pushing back from the table, he made up his mind to go out to the Richmond Farm. Eric'd told him last night that Stanley had finally come out of the weird funk he'd been in since he shot Goetz, but Jake wanted to see for himself. At the very least, he could pay his respects at Bonnie's grave. And he could take the Roadrunner out for a spin; she'd been languishing in his mom's garage for the last month, ever since he'd smuggled her back from where Hawkins had hidden her outside New Bern.

He was busy checking the car over when Em's voice behind him made him jump. "Hey."

He glanced over his shoulder at her and then turned back to testing the charge on the battery. "Hey."

"I kept her turned over for you while you were away." She came and stood next to him, resting her hand on the edge of the raised hood. "So, are you taking her out?"

"Uh-huh. Thought I'd go see Stanley." He unscrewed the radiator cap and peered inside, before replacing it.

"Can I come?" She edged a little closer to him.

"Better if I go on my own." Jake reached in and pulled out the dipstick to check the oil, forcing

Emily to take a step back.

"Sure." She walked a couple paces to the right and leaned against the workbench, crossing her arms. "Just been into town. Heard all about your adventures." She wriggled her shoulders. "Quite the hero."

Jake slid the dipstick back in place and wiped his fingers on a rag. He looked up and gave her a conciliatory smile. "I'll tell you the bits I didn't tell them later, okay?"

"Okay." She smiled back. "Met your Texan friends too. I, uh," she uncrossed her arms and rested them on the bench either side of her. "I loaned them my house in The Pines. Thought they'd need their own place to stay."

"What?" Jake ducked from under the hood and stared at her in disbelief. "Where—?" He stopped. Why was he asking where Em was going to live when she lived *here*?

Emily had raised an eyebrow. Jake dipped his head in embarrassment and took refuge back under the hood, checking connections that almost certainly hadn't come loose but—. "I'm sure they'll appreciate it." He flapped a hand out sideways at her "Just don't let Mack declare it sovereign Texas soil or anything."

She laughed. "I won't." He heard her move again, and felt her come and stand next to him. "If you're going to visit Bonnie's grave, you should take flowers. I could cut some for you?"

He glanced up at her. "Thanks." He knew she was trying to be nice, just like she'd tried to be nice last night, and with the pancakes this morning. But all he wanted to do was be on his own, with nothing to concentrate on but the sound of the blacktop under his tires and the engine's growl.

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Mimi didn't recognize the car when it pulled up, and she was even more surprised when Jake got out. She'd thought he was still in Texas.

He paused for a moment at the bottom of the steps, looking up at the house with an uncertain expression on his face. As she pushed out through the screen door, it occurred to Mimi that this was probably the first time he'd been back here since Bonnie died. And that the place held other memories for him too. She herself still couldn't quite forget every time she made dinner that his father had died on their kitchen table.

"Hey." She walked down towards him.

"Hey." He gave her an awkward hug and stepped back. "How are you doing?" He gestured at her arm, which she still carried in a sling to rest it.

She made a dismissive noise. "I'm okay." She tilted her head to one side. "When did *you* get back? Last we heard, you were sending cryptic faxes to your spy in Beck's office."

He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans, looking embarrassed. "Yesterday. Brought in a supply truck with a few gifts from our Texan friends."

"Chocolate?" She gave him a hopeful, if not too serious, grin. It had become a running joke between them last winter when he'd come by once a week to check up on them: if he couldn't produce

Stanley for her, the least he could do was bring her a bar of chocolate. She remembered how he'd spent hours talking to Bonnie, his rusty sign language becoming increasingly fluent. There'd been more than a few stories about all the stuff Stanley had got up to before Bonnie was born; Stanley had joked later he'd have to kill Jake for sharing those—before recounting a few tales of his own that had Jake blushing.

Now, Jake laughed at her expression and showed her his empty hands. "No. Sorry." He hunched his shoulders. "Is Stanley around?"

"He's out back, fixing the chicken coop and cursing foxes. Coyotes. Whatever...."

When she led him round the other side of the house, Stanley eagerly downed tools to give him a bear hug that Jake returned enthusiastically. When he offered to lend a hand with the repairs, Mimi took it to mean they wanted some man-talk. She retreated back to the kitchen, where she'd been trying to follow a recipe for preserving rhubarb that Gail Green had given her.

Later, she brought out refreshments. Jake looked more relaxed than when he'd arrived, apparently relieved to discover Stanley was okay. Once they'd finished their iced tea, he fetched a bouquet of early roses from the car—picked from Gail's garden, Mimi supposed—and they walked up the hill so he could lay the flowers on Bonnie's grave. He stayed crouched down a few moments longer than she'd expected; when he stood, there was a renewed tension in him.

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Driving away from the farm, Jake gripped the steering wheel tightly. He'd been relieved when he first arrived to discover that the terrible blankness he'd seen last time he'd looked in Stanley's eyes had gone. And while the conversation between them as they fixed the chicken coop had been banal, even that had been reassuring: Stanley wasn't back to normal, not by a long shot, but he was dealing with his grief as well as could be expected. Watching Stanley and Mimi together as the three of them sat and talked on the porch, Jake was reminded sharply of his own parents, and he reckoned Stanley—Mimi, too—would be all right.

It was his own demons he wasn't sure he could handle. Once, he'd stood in a dusty village and looked down at the body of a twelve-year-old girl and thought of Bonnie, who'd been about the same age when he'd last seen her. This afternoon, he'd crouched beside Bonnie's grave and thought about that girl, whose name he'd never even known. Both of them victims of Ravenwood, and he wasn't sure he was any less complicit in this death than the other one. He *was* sure that he was going to do everything he could to make certain Ravenwood and their like never touched this town—or any other—again.

A mile past the Tacoma bridge, his attention was pulled from considering just how he was going to do that, now he was back in Jericho, when he spotted a familiar truck pulled up on the shoulder, its hood up. Slowing, he drew alongside, leaned over and rolled down the window. "Hey."

Heather looked up from where she was peering disconsolately at the engine. "Hey."

"Got a problem?"

She shrugged. "I think the ignition coil is shot." She pushed her bangs off her face with the back of her hand, but still managed to leave a streak of dirt on her temple. "I think I may be able to find a replacement back at the garage...."

Jake pushed open the door. "Hop in and I'll run you back to pick it up."

"Sure?" Heather puffed out her cheeks. "I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble."

"It's no trouble." He grinned. "Gives me an excuse to drive this old girl around some more. Come on." He sat back and pointed to the passenger seat. "Get in."

"Okay." Heather dropped the hood and rescued a large tote bag from the pickup, before climbing in next to him. As the Roadrunner growled its way back to town, she tilted her head. "You've got her running well."

He laughed. "She does okay. So what were you doing out here anyway?" He glanced across at her.

"Visiting the camp." He noticed she hugged the tote bag a little closer.

"The—? Oh, Beck's camp. I forgot. You're still his liaison." He couldn't quite keep the disapproval out of his voice.

She gave him a weary look but didn't say anything.

They drove another mile in silence before he began, "So, what—?" at the same time as she started to ask, "So, did—?" Seemed like they'd been doing that a lot since he got back from Texas. This time, she was the one to say, "You first."

He shrugged. "I was just wondering what you were doing out at the camp. I thought you usually had your meetings in town."

"We have so far, but Gray ran out of ways to stall Colonel Hoffman this morning, and he finally worked out we're not siding with Cheyenne. So Edward—" she must have noticed him tense, and quickly corrected herself "—Major Beck couldn't make it in to town." She gestured at the bag on her lap. "Do you mind if we swing by City Hall? I could do with dropping these files off."

"Sure." Jake thought about what she'd just said. "Is it safe for you to be out there?" When she gave him a confused look, he added. "If Hoffman's going to start making his move?"

She shrugged. "He's got howitzers and air support. He can hit us pretty much anywhere, if he wants. Edward reckons he's probably going to try and take out a couple the defensive batteries and punch a big enough hole in the perimeter that he can flood us with troops. If he tries that, even the camp'll be several miles away when it starts."

Jake nodded. Whatever else you might call Beck, you had to call him a good field commander. Although apparently "Edward" was what Heather preferred to call him; he noticed she hadn't bothered to correct herself the second time she did it. For some reason, her use of Beck's personal name grated on Jake more than almost anything else about the major's presence in Jericho. Maybe because it made the man seem almost human...?

Pushing his irritation away, he cleared this throat. "So what were you going to say?"

"What? Oh..." She looked embarrassed. "I was just wondering if you told *everyone* in Texas about the giant irradiated ants."

Jake felt himself grow hot. "No. It's just—" he gestured helplessly "—I guess quite a lot of people

read your reply. It did come through the communications office at Lackland...."

"Oh." She tightened her hands on her bag. "I didn't realize so many people would see it."

"Hey, it was a good thing to say." He glanced over at her and grinned. "About the only thing you could have put that would have convinced me you hadn't written that with Beck standing over your shoulder."

She turned her head away and he wondered if he'd upset her again. But when they pulled up in Main Street a minute later, and she got out and told him she'd only be a moment, she sounded fine. Maybe he was the one getting fired up over nothing?

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When Heather came out of City Hall, carrying just the small purse she'd had tucked inside the larger bag with the files, she saw Jake had been collared by Mrs Olsen. Her daughter, Lorraine, had been one of Heather's pupils the first year she'd taught at Jericho Elementary. A lovely child, but Heather had quickly learned to be careful about answering personal questions from her, as there seemed to be a direct hotline from Lorraine to her mother to the rest of the town.

Jake straightened from where he was slouched against the Roadrunner, a relieved look crossing his face. "Ready to go?"

Heather nodded, but before she could say any more, Mrs Olsen started on her. "Why, if it isn't our very own Mata Hari, too!" Mrs Olsen smirked at them. "You two are quite the pair! Off on another secret spying mission, are you?"

Heather blushed. "I, uh, no. We're just running an errand." She cleared her throat and said briskly, with practice garnered over a year at the school gates, "I'm sorry, Mrs Olsen, but I really must be getting on. I can't expect Jake to waste the whole of his afternoon driving me around."

She reached behind her and opened the car door, preparing her exit. From the corner of her eye, she saw Jake taking his cue and scooting round to the driver's side. Ignoring Mrs Olsen's attempt to spout some nonsense about how Jake surely wouldn't consider that a waste, she added firmly, "It was nice to see you." She quickly slid into the car and firmly shut the door, leaving Mrs Olsen with her mouth gaping.

Jake was already starting the engine. As they pulled away along Main Street, he muttered, "I'm beginning to remember why I left town the first time."

Heather sighed. "Yeah, it was bad enough back when I hadn't done anything notorious." She giggled. "I bet you can't remember that far back, if what I've heard's true."

He gave her a mildly annoyed look that was softened with the hint of grin. "Nope. Em and I were such brats when we were kids."

Heather felt a moment of envy for Emily and all the years she'd spent growing up around Jake, but she pushed it away. "Yeah. She told me last Halloween about how you used to go trick-or-treating round the houses five times in different costumes."

He laughed in an embarrassed sort of way but didn't reply. When she next looked across at him, he seemed lost in thought.

It took her less than ten minutes once they reached the garage to find a couple of salvaged ignition coils she thought might do; they were soon back on the road heading out of town. Jake was still distracted, and they barely spoke. She was a little surprised when he swung across the road to pull up behind Charlotte, killed the engine, and began to climb out.

She cleared her throat, and he stopped and looked back at her. "You don't have to stay," she offered. "I've got all the tools I need, and I know what I'm doing."

"I—." He almost looked like he'd surprised himself. "No. It's okay. Besides, if you can't get her going again, you'll have to walk back." When she started to protest, he waved her objections away.

While she worked on replacing the old coil, he leaned next to her, startling her by handing her tools without her even needing to ask—until she remembered he was a pretty good mechanic himself.

"So where'd you learn all about cars?" His question made her look up from tightening the connections for the replacement coil.

She pushed her hair back off her face with her wrist. "My dad. He was always getting hold of old cars and fixing them up. I just kinda picked it up." She jerked her head towards the Roadrunner. "He would've really loved your Plymouth."

"You didn't want to become an engineer?" He reached out and tucked the errant lock of hair, which had fallen forward again, behind her ear.

Heather jerked her head back and found herself muttering a rather ungracious, "Thanks." She hoped her face didn't look as hot as it felt, or that he'd just put it down to the sun still beating down on them. And what had he asked her? Oh, right. "Become an engineer?" She gave him a cynical look. "Girls don't do that."

"Sure they do." He scratched the back of his neck. "Okay, maybe they don't. There weren't many girls in my class at Embry-Riddle."

"Nor in small-town Kansas." Heather shrugged and bent back to tightening the connections on the coil. "Besides, I really like teaching. I could fix engines for a living, or I could inspire twenty kids a year to learn the stuff they need to go out and fix all sorts of things."

He laughed. "As well as teaching them left from right."

"Yeah." She straightened and grinned at him. "Okay, we're done. Let's see what happens." She fished her keys out of the pocket of her jeans and slid behind the wheel. When she turned the key, Charlotte coughed into life and then settled down to a steady rattle—or at least as steady as she ever was, given the myriad other faults in the engine that Heather didn't have the parts or machine tools to fix.

She left the engine running and got out to put the tools away, only to find Jake had already packed them up and was stowing them in the back. She dropped the hood back into place and then turned to where he was stood hesitating. "Thanks for the help."

He smiled and shrugged. "You're welcome." He gestured at Charlotte. "I'll follow you back to town. Just to make sure."

She nodded. They stood there in silence for a long, awkward moment, and then he turned away and headed for the Roadrunner.

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The sun was dropping fast, although there was still a good hour of daylight left, by the time Jake got back home. Pushing open the door, he paused on the threshold. His mother was sitting in her usual place at the end of the dining table, with Emily on her right, and another empty place setting on his mom's left. He recognized the good china, and the best crystal glittered in the soft candlelight.

"Honey." His mother smiled sweetly at him, but he knew from her tone that he was in trouble. Deep trouble. She gestured at the table. "Emily made this lovely welcome home dinner for you."

Oh, crap! He closed his eyes for a moment, before seeking out Emily's gaze. "I'm sorry. I—." He stopped. This was the second day he'd spent bumming around town, doing anything but coming home. Doing anything but spending time with Emily.

He carefully and quietly closed the door behind him and took a few steps into the room. "Mom. Could I have a word with Emily, please."

His mother opened her mouth to object, but Emily shook her head and patted her hand reassuringly. Radiating disapproval in every fiber of her being, Gail stood and headed for the kitchen. From where, Jake knew, she'd be able to hear every word. But it didn't matter; it was best she knew. Best she was there for Emily.

Taking another step closer, he reached for Emily's hand and drew her to her feet. He didn't know why, but this was going to be easier to say that way. He took her hands in his; they felt like bird's bones: light and fragile.

"Emily, I'm sorry." She tried to interrupt him, but he gave a minute shake of the head. She clamped her mouth shut, but her eyes blazed as he tried to explain. "These past two weeks have been... crazy. And... everything's changed. I don't want to hurt you, but I can't be who, or what, you want me to be right now."

Emily let out a little gasp, her eyes wide. "You're leaving me?"

He squeezed her fingers, trying to reassure her. "Just for a few days. Just until...." Until what? He didn't know. "I'll stay out at the ranch and get my head straight, and then we'll be okay. You'll see." He felt like he was trying to convince himself as much as her.

Giving her hands another squeeze, he let them go and took a step back. Emily crossed her arms and hunched in on herself. He hated to hurt her like this, but he knew this way would be much less painful, because he just couldn't pretend everything was all right between them, and there'd be more disasters like tonight's missed dinner. He swallowed the lump in his throat. "I'll go pack some things."

When he came back downstairs with a bag slung over his shoulder, his mom was standing with her arm around Emily, gently rubbing Emily's hand. "You're leaving again?" The anger and betrayal in her voice was another blow.

He said peaceably, "I'm just going to the ranch for a few days. Just until—." He left the thought unfinished.

Outside, firing up the Roadrunner and gunning her angrily down the street, he found himself completing the thought. *Just until I fall back in love with Emily.*

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