

# The First Seventeen Hours

by Tanaqui

"Are they really leaving?" Emily was looking down Main Street to where soldiers were piling into the furthest humvee. Beck had bypassed the nearest one, now guarded by a lone soldier leaning against the driver's door, and entered the J&R offices.

"Looks like it." Eric slipped his arm around Mary's waist. "Hard to believe, isn't it?"

Mary leaned against him, covering his hand with her own, too wrung out and relieved to say anything, too grateful that she still had Eric, after all that had happened.

On the other side of Eric, Jimmy frowned. "So, did we win?"

"Hell, yeah!" Bill gestured around, grinning. "We're back in charge, aren't we?"

"For how long?" Heather was walking down the steps, still looking down Main Street after the departing soldiers, a frown on her forehead. "Beck's expecting Cheyenne to come for him—and us."

"Let's worry about that tomorrow." Gray put a hand on Heather's shoulder. "Come on. Let's go have a drink and celebrate. Assuming Bailey's is open for business now?"

Mary gave a wry smile. "Assuming the place hasn't been wrecked, then... yes."

When they'd pulled down the closure notice and pushed inside, they found the place was just fine—Mary had to give Beck his due that his men were disciplined—even if the beers weren't very cold: Beck had only turned the power back on to the rest of town an hour or so before. Despite that, they were soon settled in one of the booths, drinks in front of them, while they caught up on everything that had happened over the past few days.

Mary noticed that Heather was quiet and had barely even sipped at her beer. Of all of them, she seemed the least jubilant, and Mary wondered about that. Of course, she'd worked closely with Beck. Maybe too closely; Russell had told them that the advice she'd given Beck about New Bern had crippled the resistance there, and maybe she'd done the same in Jericho.

On the other hand, she had come and told them Beck had arrested Jake, warned them that Beck's searches would find them sooner or later, continued to feed them what information she could about what Beck was up to. After what had happened to her in New Bern—not that anyone really knew the details—Mary couldn't entirely blame her for wanting to help Beck take down Constantino.

Mary leaned against Eric's shoulder. After what Constantino had done to him, she wasn't sure she wouldn't have helped Beck herself.

Gray was telling them about Cheyenne, the Constitutional Convention—which sounded a hundred times worse than they'd imagined—and Jake sending him back to Jericho. Eric's breath ruffled her hair as he asked Gray, "And Jake and Hawkins didn't tell you what they were doing in Cheyenne?"

Gray shook his head. "Just told me I needed to get back here."

"I think they were trying to get the bomb back." Silence seemed to ripple out from Heather's softly spoken words. They all turned and looked at her, mouths agape. You could have heard a pin drop.

"The... bomb?" Gray forced out eventually.

Heather was rolling her beer bottle between her hands, gaze fixed on the label. "Hawkins had one of the bombs used in the September attacks. The last of them. It was the evidence that Cheyenne was lying about where the bombs came from, and that people in the Cheyenne government were behind the attacks. But Beck and his men got hold of it and sent it to Cheyenne."

"Beck told you that?" Gray still sounded disbelieving.

Heather looked up at him. "That he'd sent it to Cheyenne?" She nodded. "But I've known about the bomb for a week or so. Hawkins told me about it."

"Hold on a minute..." Bill held his hand up. "I thought North Korea and Iran were behind the attacks. That's what the news said."

Heather shook her head. "The bombs were made from ex-soviet nuclear missiles. The US government brought them into the country to dispose of them, and someone stole them. Hawkins was some kind of government agent—."

"FBI," Jimmy interrupted. "Gray and I found that out a while back. And then, when the radio broadcasts said the terrorists used fake FBI badges, Jake and I checked him out again. Jake talked to him; said he was okay."

"Yeah." Heather smiled weakly at Jimmy. "Yeah, he was. Kinda scary, but okay. Before the bombs went off, he was part of a team working on getting them back before they could be used. Obviously they didn't manage to stop the attacks. Hawkins was trying to work out who was behind it all, and expose them."

"Cheyenne?" Mary still couldn't quite believe it, and yet it made a horrible kind of sense. The way Cheyenne was remaking the country, the kinds of things they were doing....

Heather nodded. "When I first told Colonel Hoffman about what was going on in Jericho and New Bern, he wasn't interested. Then Cheyenne was suddenly all over it. My guess is, someone knew the bomb was somewhere near here and wanted to find it. When Beck wasn't..." she hesitated, and Mary saw her swallow, "kicking the crap out of us and New Bern, he spent most of his time on a manhunt for a terrorist who was supposed to be in the area."

"Hawkins?" Gray raised his eyebrows.

"Yes. Except obviously he's not a terrorist." Heather gave him a wry smile.

There was a silence as they all digested the information. Eric shifted in his seat, jostling Mary, but she didn't mind because he was there, alive and free, and mostly in one piece. She settled herself more closely against him as he spoke. "So why did Hawkins tell *you* about the bomb?"

Heather sighed and put down her beer with a small click. "He and Jake needed me to steal something from Beck's office. A page from an aerial radiation survey that would have helped locate the bomb. Jake couldn't do it." She scrubbed a hand across her eyes. "They'd just put in the new security system, and I was the only one with access."

"Huh." Eric snorted. "I thought Emily was the only one round here helped Jake steal stuff." He smirked at Emily, but Mary noticed Emily was stony-faced in response, and she was looking at Heather with anger in her eyes. Mary guessed she wasn't too happy Jake had been keeping secrets from her while sharing them with Heather.

"And you didn't think to tell anyone else?" Gray sounded positively put out.

Heather shrugged. "Hawkins said only five people outside the Cheyenne government knew, and that they'd kill to keep it secret." She looked around the table, her face shadowed. "That's why Cheyenne's coming for us. That's why this isn't over."

The euphoric mood of a few minutes earlier had evaporated. Eric scratched his beard. "So Beck found out all of this, and that's why he's refusing orders from Cheyenne?"

Heather nodded. "He got hold of Hawkins' laptop when he captured the bomb. Seems like whatever was on it was pretty convincing." She locked eyes with Eric. "I know you're not gonna like me saying this, but we're going to need him when Cheyenne comes. Beck, I mean. He's got hundreds of men, weapons, trucks...."

"After all he did to this town? After all he did to *Jake*? You want to ask him *back*?" Emily sounded incredulous.

"I know he did bad things." Heather met Emily's gaze unflinchingly. "But I don't think he's a bad person. He was just....," she bit her lip, "taking orders from bad people. And it took him a while to figure that out." She looked around at the rest of the group. "You were all happy enough with what he was doing when he was clamping down on New Bern. Most of you didn't think he went far enough." She looked back at Emily, her expression hard. "*Jake* didn't think he went far enough. So don't tell me he's somehow evil and we're not."

She took a deep breath. "At the very least, we need to know what he's going to do when Cheyenne sends more troops. Because they're not gonna just let this go."

Gray crossed his arms and rested them on the table. "If he comes back, he's not going to be in charge." He caught Heather's gaze and held it. "He's not giving the orders."

"I know." Heather bobbed her head slightly.

"Okay." Gray looked round the table and nodded. "Nine o'clock tomorrow morning. Eric, Jimmy, you take one of the fire trucks and go round the streets telling people the troops have left, the curfew's lifted, and it's safe to come out. Tell them we'll hold a Town Meeting tomorrow night to let everyone know what's happening." Eric and Jimmy nodded.

Mary noted with amusement that, for all that Gray Anderson had repeatedly proved he was a ditherer and had a hard time facing cold facts, he was good at taking control once he'd made his mind up. She started when he said her name.

"Mary?" He turned to face her. "Can you get round all the shopkeepers and get them to re-open? We need to know what supplies we've got, whether we can get our hands on any of J&R's inventory, and whether we can still trade outside Jericho. Start with Dale and Skylar." He made a sour face. "They can help."

His gaze moved on. "Bill, Emily, grab some of the Rangers and organise a clean-up of Main Street and anywhere else that needs it. Bill, keep an eye out for any trouble, too—although I don't expect much. Heather..." He paused. "You can go talk to Beck if you like. Find out what his intentions are. If he's willing to help us, fair enough. But he is not taking charge of Jericho again, and we do our own policing." Heather gave a subdued nod. "And as you're heading out that way, stop by the Richmond farm, too. See if Stanley and Mimi are up to joining us."

Gray once more swept his gaze around the table. "Then we'll meet back at the police station at two o'clock, and work out what we're going to do next."

oOo

Heather steered Charlotte cautiously along the dirt road that snaked around to the valley below the Richmond farmhouse, keeping to second gear and trying to tune out the occasional misfire. The old girl didn't go so badly really, even if Heather would probably never have a chance now to replace the half dozen parts she'd been planning to swap out before the September attacks. She'd do what she could to keep her limping along until... well, until the world changed again, or Charlotte finally gave up the ghost.

Charlotte crested a rise and Beck's camp came into view. Heather's mouth went dry as she wondered what he'd say to her request—and what the town would say to him if he agreed to it and returned with her. Her mind slid away to the previous night, after Gray had assigned them their tasks and the group had broken up.

Emily had caught Heather by the arm as she was leaving. "Do you have any idea what Beck did to Jake? What kind of state he was in when Eric and the others rescued him?"

Heather had felt a flash of irritation—*does she think I don't care?*—but she'd checked it. Truth was, she didn't know, not the details. But hadn't she said herself, on the evidence of what he was doing to everyone else, that she couldn't tell the difference any more between Beck and Constantino? And she'd gotten plenty of idea what Constantino was capable of.

She stopped trying to pull away from Emily. "Not really, no." She licked her lips, not sure if she wanted to know more or not.

"He nearly killed him, that's what. No sleep for four days. No food. Just enough water to keep him alive. And then your precious Major Beck took Gail out of her house—just like that murderer Goetz did during the siege at the clinic—and made her come and see what he'd done to her son. So don't you try to tell me he's not a bad person."

Emily had dropped her arm then, and left Heather standing there struggling not to cry out, not to deny it. Because she knew Emily wasn't lying, and she knew Beck had done those things.

Lying awake that night, dog tired but unable to sleep, turning it over in her mind, Heather had tried to square the man who'd shown compassion to Christina in Fall River with the one who'd ruthlessly repressed a town and tried to break its leader. As the sky was beginning to lighten again, she'd finally reached the only conclusion that made any sense to her. That Beck was a hard man, but not a cruel or selfish one. He hadn't done those things with pleasure, or to cover up his own greed, like Goetz, but because he'd thought it was the right way to maintain peace and order and justice. He'd crossed lines, yes, but hadn't they all crossed lines since the September attacks? And, in the end, he'd come down on the side of the angels.

No, she wouldn't give up on him just yet.

She drew Charlotte to a halt in front of the gates to the camp. One soldier stood in front of her, his gun held across his chest, while another came to the side of the car.

"Ma'am?"

"I'd like to see Major Beck, please."

Another soldier wandered out of the guard post to one side of the gate and joined the first: a sergeant she recognized slightly, and who obviously recognised her. "Miss Lisinski." He nodded at her. "I'm afraid the major isn't in camp at present."

"Could you tell me where he is, or if he'll be back soon? I need to speak to him this morning." Heather noticed the sergeant had signalled to the first soldier to circle round and check what was in the bed of the pickup.

The sergeant flicked his eyes across to other soldier, now on the other side of the truck. "One moment, ma'am." He stepped away and spoke briefly into his radio, before turning back. "The major is expected back in an hour. You can wait for him at his command tent. If you park over there —," he gestured to one side of the gate, "—the corporal will show you where."

oOo

She was approaching the row of tents that served as the camp's admin area, the corporal at her side, when an unexpected voice hailed her. She turned to see Trish Merrick walking towards her.

"Heather? What are you doing here?" Trish's pink shirt stood out starkly against the camouflage that surrounded them.

"I could ask you the same thing." Heather halted, and then took a few steps in Trish's direction. The corporal escorting her hesitated, before carrying on towards Beck's tent. Glancing across, Heather saw him talking to the two sentries stationed outside, and supposed he was explaining her presence to them.

"Major Beck evacuated the J&R staff last night." Trish pushed a loose strand of hair back off her face. "Most of them are returning to Cheyenne. Or wherever...."

Heather didn't know Trish well, but something in her demeanour, coupled with the fact it was the first time ever she'd ever seen Trish not wearing a pale blue J&R polo shirt, clued her in. "But not you?"

"No." Trish crossed her arms around the clipboard she carried and hugged it to her. "Major Beck explained why—why he's no longer taking Cheyenne's orders. And that J&R are mixed up in it." She turned away and looked out across the bustle of the camp, but Heather suspected she wasn't seeing any of it. "You know, I used to be so proud of what we did at J&R. How we helped communities get back on their feet. But the last few weeks.... It wasn't about help, was it? It was about control. About keeping people dependent. The only things that mattered to J&R were money and power...."

"Help us," Heather blurted out. "Come back to Jericho and help us." God knows what the others would think; J&R were only second to Beck in unpopularity around town. But Trish was damn

good at making stuff happen, and they'd need people like that.

Trish looked at her, clearly equally surprised. "Is that an... official offer?" Her tone was cautious.

"No," Heather admitted. She gave a nervous chuckle. "Mayor Anderson is probably going to have a heart attack when he finds out. He's already not exactly thrilled I'm here to find out whether Major Beck is willing to come back and help us."

A faint smile crossed Trish's face. "No. I can't imagine he is."

"Look." Heather gestured back towards the gate. "We're meeting at City Hall today—Gray, Eric, a few other people—to decide what we do now. Come to that and see...."

Trish tilted her head on one side, considering, while Heather smiled at her encouragingly.

A slight cough at Heather's shoulder made her start. "Ma'am?" It was the corporal again. He gestured towards the tent. "The sentries will take care of you."

Heather nodded and watched him trot off back towards the gate before she turned back to Trish.

The other woman was fingering the edge of her clipboard. She gave Heather an uncertain smile. "I'd... I'd like to come back and do it right. For Bonnie's sake."

Heather didn't know exactly how Trish was involved in what had gone down with Bonnie, Goetz and Stanley—that night had been quite interesting enough on her own account—but now wasn't the time to ask. Instead, she returned the smile. "I'll come and find you when I head back to town."

Trish nodded. "See you later." She headed for a tent further down the line, while Heather made her way towards Beck's command tent.

oOo

The sentries had allowed her to wait inside, Beck's aide-de-camp finding her a chair and a cup of coffee. In the end, it was an hour and a half—during which she'd had to stop herself starting up every time someone came in and out—before the tent flap was thrown back and Beck marched in, face like thunder.

"Lieutenant, what's that heap of junk doing outside the main gate?"

"It's mine." Heather stood up from the dim corner where she'd been sitting.

Beck swung round, the anger on his face replaced by surprise. "Oh." His gaze slid away from hers.

"Miss Lisinski is here to see you, sir." The aide couldn't keep the smirk out of his voice.

"I can see that." Beck put his helmet down on the table, still not looking at Heather. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm here to...." Heather stopped, feeling even more awkward than she'd expected to. She took a breath and tried again. "I'm here on... on behalf of the people of Jericho. To find out what your intentions are and... and maybe to ask you for help."

"I would've thought the people of Jericho'd had enough of me." Beck reached for the coffee pot and poured himself a cup. His tone was flat and Heather was reminded of the early days of working for him as his liaison, when she'd found him almost impossible to read.

She shrugged. "That's why the maybe." He glanced up at her and Heather gave him a wry smile. "I told them about the bomb, and about how Cheyenne would be coming for us. For you, and for Jericho. We need to know what you're going to do. Whether you're going to pull out, or stay and defend the area... defend us."

Beck perched on the edge of the table and sipped his coffee. "My intention is to hold our current position while we attempt to establish contact with the authorities in Columbus and Texas. If more forces from Cheyenne arrive before that...." He clenched his free hand into a fist. "We'll defend ourselves if attacked. If they occupy Jericho and New Bern peacefully—."

"That's not going to happen." Heather crossed her arms and gave him a pointed look.

He smiled slightly. "No. I don't suppose it is." He took another sip of coffee and sighed. "I was considering relocating my men so that when Cheyenne finds us, there'd be minimal danger to the civilian population. But if Jericho plans to fight...."

"You need to stay and help us," Heather urged.

He nodded. "I believe that's my duty, yes. So I need to talk to Jericho's leaders. At the very least, we need to make sure we don't get in each other's way. Share intelligence. Last thing I want is for my guys to shoot your guys by accident, or have your guys sniping at mine, thinking they're AS."

Heather grimaced. "I think the town would appreciate that too." She hugged herself more tightly. "There's a meeting today at City Hall. To sort out what the town's going to do next. Just a few people...."

"You're inviting me back into town?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Just to the meeting. Just to see...." She let out a short, harsh laugh. "Can't promise you'll get a warm welcome."

He was silent for a long moment, his gaze searching her face. "Very well," he conceded at last. "I'll come. But," he gave her a hard look, "let me make it absolutely clear, I will not be Jericho's private army. Until such time as I can establish contact with a command under the direction of the true and legitimate President of the United States," he stressed the last two words, "whoever that might be, I will consider my orders to be, and only to be, to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. I am not going to get involved in any private vendettas, and I *will* not become Ravenwood."

"I know." Heather shrugged again. "Gray Anderson made me promise to let *you* know that if you do come back and help us, you're not in charge and we do our own policing."

He frowned at her, and then the ghost of a smile crossed his lips. "Fair enough." He turned back to the table and put his cup down. "So, what time's this meeting?"

"Two. Er, fourteen hundred hours." She glanced at the clock, which showed it was now half past twelve.

Beck nodded. "I'll be there."

"Actually," Heather gave him an embarrassed grin as he looked over his shoulder at her. "I think I should drive you in myself." When he raised an eyebrow, she added, "In case you hadn't noticed, you're not exactly popular in town. If you roll up in a humvee, you'll probably be chased off—or worse...."

He tilted his head in acknowledgment. "I appreciate the concern." Then, finally, he gave her a full smile. "In which case, perhaps you'd care to join me for some lunch?"

oOo

Lunch in the mess tent had been distinctly underwhelming, but Heather had learned in the last year that nutrition beat taste or even edibility hands down. Conversation had also been stilted—Beck apparently didn't have much small talk—until Trish joined them and Heather explained she would be coming with them.

Trish had looked a little taken aback when they'd arrived at the main gate and she'd seen Charlotte. Beck's expression suggested he was remembering his earlier unfavorable assessment of the pickup, and was now regretting agreeing to let Heather drive. As she pulled open the passenger door for them, she insisted somewhat defensively, "She's sturdy."

Walking around the front to climb in the driver's side, she remembered when she'd told Jake the same thing, right before she'd kissed him.

And then Emily had got him the Roadrunner back, and he'd taken that to Rogue River instead. Which was pretty much the story of her life.

Coaxing the engine into life, she pushed away her disappointment and wondered where Jake was right now, and whether he was okay.

oOo

Mary had expected Heather to arrive at the meeting with Beck in tow, but she was surprised when Trish Merrick followed them inside. Trish crossed immediately to where Mimi stood and quietly embraced her. Mary supposed it was the first time they'd met since Bonnie had died. Mimi's expression softened a little as she hugged Trish, making her look less tired. Mary had thought that both she and Stanley, standing next to her, had looked strung out when they arrived—even compared to the rest of the assembled group, who all gave the impression they could do with a week of sleep and a month of feeding up.

"What's *she* doing here?" Mary saw Gray catch Heather roughly by the arm as she followed Trish behind the counter.

"I invited her." Heather's reply was quiet, but she lifted her chin in challenge.

Mary caught the exasperated look Gray cast at Eric, who was leaning against the counter next to her. Apparently so did Heather, because she puffed out her cheeks in annoyance. "Come on, Gray, we need help. A few months back, Jericho was on the verge of being wiped out by New Bern. Cheyenne is going to be a hundred times worse. Trish isn't working for J&R any more, and Beck's not taking orders from Cheyenne."



Glancing over her shoulder, Mary saw that Beck had moved a few steps away from the door but stayed on the public side of the counter.

Heather was still pressing her point home with Gray. "They're not the bad guys now." She gently disengaged her arm from his grip. "At least give them a hearing."

"She has a point." Eric nodded at Heather, who was moving away from Gray to position herself on the far side of the office, near to Emily.

Mary noticed that Emily stiffened a little as Heather approached, probably because she was still annoyed with Heather for championing Beck. She switched her attention back to Eric, who was still talking.

"Trish helped cover up the theft of the vaccinations, and we wouldn't have gotten Goetz fired without her." Eric shrugged. "At the very least, we could use her help getting our hands on whatever stores J&R have in the area. Maybe even find out from her how to work their systems so we can get more before they figure out what's going on. As for Beck?" He glanced behind him to where the major stood quietly observing the room. "I hate to say it, but Heather's right. Whatever he did, he's not our enemy any more. And we need him."

Gray looked as if he was going to continue to argue, but apparently thought better of it. "All right," he muttered snappishly. He glanced around the room, checking who was present, even as Jimmy hurried in, puffing and apologising for being late.

"Okay, people. Listen up." Gray spoke to the room at large. "We have to determine what we're going to tell the people of Jericho this evening, and what we're going to do next. Mary?" He surprised her by calling on her first. "What did you find out about our supplies?"

She pushed herself away from the counter and stood a little straighter. "Most of the traders say they're reasonably well stocked for now, thanks to either J&R merchandise or what we could smuggle in. But we've got food stores for maybe only two or three weeks, and Dale thinks we'll have trouble bringing goods openly into Jericho from elsewhere because of Cheyenne's checkpoints. But he's pretty confident he can still operate his smuggling routes—" A snort from Gray showed what he thought of Dale's high opinion of himself. "—and the same is probably true of my runners, although so far they've only been bringing in beer and bourbon, and I'm not sure what else they'll be able to supply."

"Okay." Gray nodded. "Until we establish whether we can trade or smuggle, we'll have start implementing rationing again. Not as severe as last winter, but it's a sensible precaution."

Trish raised her hand a little timidly and Gray looked at her. "There's a lot of food in a J&R warehouse outside Garden City." She smiled nervously. "If J&R doesn't know about the situation here, we may be able to get a few truckloads out before they catch on."

"That's not very corporate-minded of you." Gray's tone was cynical.

"Heather told you: I quit. And I reckon J&R owes you."

Mary, glancing around, saw she wasn't the only one having a hard time believing what she was hearing. Trish obviously noticed it too, and took a pace forward.

"Look, I know I did a lot of things that were J&R policy that, looking back, I can see really stank.

Trying to create monopolies. Hiking costs while capping prices. Bad deals for the farmers." She shot a look at Stanley and Mimi that was half apologetic and half fearful. "I can't change what I did, or pretend I didn't do it. But I can promise you that's not the way I want to do things now—or ever again. And anything I can do to stop J&R doing that to other towns like this, I want in on that."

"And what if we let you call those trucks in, and they're full of Ravenwood contractors?" Emily was the one who voiced what they were all wondering.

"I'll make sure she doesn't." Mimi spoke up with quiet authority. "I know enough about the J&R systems. Besides, Bonnie..." Mimi's voice caught for a moment, "Bonnie told me I scare her." She reached out a hand and drew Trish back towards her and Stanley.

"You'll need to move quickly." Beck didn't raise his voice, but his words carried clearly. Everyone turned to look at him. He stood at ease, hands behind him, but Mary detected a hint of tension around his eyes and in the line of his shoulders. "Cheyenne's on my back. They don't know about the situation here, or that I'm no longer taking their orders, and I'm going to try and keep it that way for as long as I can. But they'll figure it out eventually. You need to move on those supplies this afternoon."

Trish nodded, and Beck shifted his attention back to Gray. They locked gazes for a moment before Gray swung away. "Okay. We'll see if we can get any more supplies from J&R, but we still need rationing until we confirm our position." He paused, but there were no dissenting voices and only quiet murmurs of agreement. "Next, we need to think about defense. Eric, Stanley, I'd like you to reconvene the Rangers and restore the checkpoints and patrols Jake set up last winter. Unless the major has other ideas." He turned and glared at Beck.

"I've no wish to interfere in Jericho's affairs." Beck again spoke quietly and Mary noticed he didn't seem fazed by Gray's hostility. "But perhaps the Rangers can work with my patrols to provide a coordinated defense." He nodded slightly at Eric and Stanley. "If they're willing to work with me."

Eric and Stanley exchanged a look. Stanley shrugged, apparently prepared to go along with the idea for the moment. Eric turned back to Beck and nodded. "We can talk. What kind of trouble can we expect, anyway?"

Now it was Eric's turn to be on the receiving end of Beck's scrutiny. "Best guess?" The major tilted his head. "Cheyenne will send at least another battalion from Camp Liberty. Maybe more. Won't take them long to get here, and they'll have air support and artillery. We'll have to hope they'll be as reluctant to use it as my men will be to fire on them, but it could get ugly pretty quickly."

Mary saw Eric swallow. "I think we'd all prefer it if there were no casualties—on either side."

"Agreed." Beck tilted his head in respect.

"Well," Gray sounded a little testy at being left out of the discussion, "you two can talk about that in more detail later. Meanwhile, I'd like to appoint Eric as our new Sheriff, if no one has any objections."

Eric swung round in surprise, and Mary thought he seemed more likely to object than anyone, but most people were nodding and smiling, including Jimmy and Bill. Stanley reached out and punched Eric gently on the arm, while Mary slipped her hand into his. She wasn't sure whether to be happy for him or worried sick that he was now, more than ever, on the front line.

"Now," Gray again commanded the attention of the room, "seems like we're cut off here and will have to fend for ourselves for a while, but maybe we can get help from Columbus. Or even Texas." He let slip a humorless laugh. "Not sure I have the number for the president in the east, or Governor Todd...."

"Communications are compromised." Again, Beck effortlessly drew the focus of the meeting back to him.

"What do you mean?" Stanley was frowning.

"Everything in this room was provided by Cheyenne, or J&R. Everything goes through their systems. They can monitor every word you speak or type, intercept radio transmissions. We can't use any of it unless—."

He was interrupted by a beep.

"What was that?" Gray swung round like he expected someone to leap out of a cupboard with a ticking bomb.

"It's a fax." Jimmy picked up the sheet of paper that had emerged quietly from the machine sitting next to where he'd positioned himself. He frowned at the page. "It's for Heather. It's an incident report from New Bern." He held it out to her.

"New Bern? But," Heather reached forward and took the fax, "there's no one there to...." She fell silent as she scanned the writing. Then she took a step back, felt for the edge of the desk behind her, and sat down hard. Her lips moved silently as she read the sheet again.

"Heather?" Emily took a pace closer and held out her hand, apparently afraid from the color Heather had gone that she was about to faint. "What is it?"

"It's... it's...." The paper trembled in Heather's hand. "I think it's from Jake."

"Jake? I thought he was in Cheyenne." Gray sounded puzzled. "What's he doing in New Bern?"

"I don't think he is." Heather put a hand to her forehead for a moment and rubbed her temples, as if the contents of the fax were giving her a headache.

"How do you know it's from Jake?" That was Eric, his tone reasonable but suggesting that maybe Heather had made a mistake.

"The first sentence." Heather shook her head as if she didn't quite believe it. "It says: *Some months ago, Jay Verde was to take Charlotte Carr to Rogue River, but other arrangements were made.*" Heather looked up at Eric. "When you and Jake went to Rogue River to get the meds for your dad, the original plan was to take my old Dodge pickup, remember? Then Emily persuaded Jonah to give you a decent car that might actually get you there." Heather gave Eric an embarrassed smile, "My car's called Charlotte. Jake knew that." She waved a hand at the fax. "And verde is Spanish for green...." She looked around at the rest of the group. "This *has* to be from Jake."

There was an uneasy silence, as if no one was quite prepared to agree, until Stanley spoke up with his customary bluntness. "So what does the rest of it say?"

"Okay, okay...." Heather took a couple of deep breaths as if she was trying not to hyperventilate,

and looked back down at the fax. "*More recently, Verde has been seen in the company of Bob O. Read of Lawrence in the Coyote Grill.*"

"Bob O. Read? Is that Hawkins?" Emily frowned. "I'm not sure I see why...?"

Stanley cut across her. "Mount Oread in Lawrence is... was the main campus for the University of Kansas. The Jayhawks. I had a football scholarship there before... my parents died." He shook his head, as if shaking away the gloom of the memories, and nodded at the fax. "Jake used to support the Mizzou Tigers just to piss me off. Anyway, yes, sounds like Bob O'Read means Hawkins, and he and Jake are still together."

"So what's the Coyote Grill?" Jimmy was the one to ask that question.

Heather chuckled unexpectedly. "It's a Tex-Mex restaurant in New Bern." She sobered. "Or was...."

"So, what? They're in Mexico?" Bill's voice was high with surprise.

Heather shook her head. "No. Texas, I think. Listen. *Verde and Read were carrying a package, which they handed over to the owner of the Coyote Grill.*" She looked up and shrugged. "Could that be Governor Todd?"

"Hawkins was driving towards Texas when my men recovered the bomb." Beck had taken a step forward and was now resting his hands on the counter top.

"Which you then sent to Cheyenne!" Gray glared at Beck.

"Which was a mistake. Yes, I know." Beck again shrugged off the taller man's dislike. "But it sounds like they recovered the bomb and were able to deliver it to Texas." He turned his attention back to Heather. "Is there more?"

Heather met his gaze and held it for moment. Mary thought some kind of understanding passed between them, perhaps a warning from Heather that he shouldn't overstep the limits of his authority.

Heather bent back to the fax. "Yes." She licked her lips. "*After inspecting the package, the owner of the Coyote Grill declined to sell his establishment to the owners of rival Laramie.*"

"Cheyenne is in Laramie County," Gray offered.

That could surely only mean one thing. Mary's looked around the room hopefully. "So... Texas isn't siding with Cheyenne?"

"That's what it sounds like." Beck nodded at Heather. "Go on."

"Then it just says: *Verde is presently residing at Apartment B...* and then there's a ZIP code"

"In New Bern?" Jimmy still sounded like he wasn't completely following what was going on.

"No." Heather shook her head. "It starts one zero. New Bern ZIP codes are the same as here: they start six seven. It makes no sense."

"It must be a way to contact him," Emily suggested. She had folded her arms and was leaning back against the glass window that gave on to the sheriff's office. "That's what *presently residing at* must

mean."

"Yes, but what does the rest of it mean?" Heather sounded frustrated.

Beck was tapping his fingers on the counter, a quiet tattoo that sounded louder than it was in the sudden, puzzled quiet as they all tried to work out what Jake was trying to say. He was the one to break the silence. "Is it a ZIP-plus-four?"

"Yes." Heather raised her eyebrows inquiringly.

"Nine digits..." Beck murmured to himself. "And *Apartment B*." He tilted his head. "Maybe Apartment B is the number two? That would make it ten digits, which could be a phone number. Or a fax machine."

"So that would make it area code 210. Which is..." Eric looked around blankly at the rest of them, and was met with shrugs. "Have we got a phone book? Or did we burn them all last winter?"

Gray nodded. "There's still one in my office. Probably. Since it's a mess in there." He gave Beck a dark look.

Beck pressed his lips together, apparently finally needled by Gray's attitude, but his answer was calm enough. "Wasn't me or my men. It was Ravenwood. The night," Beck hesitated, "Goetz died. I'm sorry we didn't have time to clean it up."

Gray didn't look particularly mollified. "Well, I'll go see if I can find it." He stumped out of the office.

Jimmy had taken the fax back from Heather and was squinting at it. "Why'd Jake have to make it so complicated?"

Heather shrugged. "Because he thinks Beck is still in charge, and he didn't want to get me into trouble. Or any more trouble."

"He's pretty smart." Beck gestured at the fax. "Not only did he disguise his message inside something Heather would be expected to receive, he sent it by fax, which Cheyenne will find hardest to monitor out of everything you have in here. He also dirtied up the background so it would be even harder for image recognition software to read. I'm guessing that, if that *is* a phone number, it's a fax number and he wants us to respond the same way."

Gray came back into the room, flicking through the phone book. "Two-ten, two-ten.... Here!" His finger stabbed downwards. "San Antonio, Texas.... Isn't that's where Governor Todd's based now?"

"Yeah. It's been on the newsreels." Jimmy nodded. "They talk about the San Antonio government sometimes."

There was a long silence while nobody spoke. Looking around, Mary saw uncertainty on the others' faces. Eventually, Stanley spoke. "So, are we going to answer him?"

Gray allowed himself to crack a smile. "Yes. I guess we should do that. Although quite what we're going to tell him, I have no idea."

"Why don't let me work with Heather to draft something?" Beck suggested. "You can check it

before we send it."

Mary had to turn her head away to hide her smile as Beck once more usurped Gray's control of the meeting. Though it wasn't really funny, because she was damned if she was going to roll over while he took charge again. Yet everything he'd suggested so far had been reasonable and sensible. She just hoped someone would continue to keep an eye on him and make sure things stayed that way.

Gray nodded. "Well, if there isn't anything else...?"

"Should we talk to New Bern?" Heather lifted her head from where she'd still been studying the fax.

At her side, Mary felt Eric tense

"Constantino?" He shook his head. "I talked to him yesterday, when...." His gaze flicked to Beck. He cleared his throat. "Anyway, I made it pretty clear to him we weren't going to do business his way. So I doubt he wants to do business with us. Especially not now we're...." Again, he looked at Beck.

Gray nodded. "Let's leave them out of it for the moment. Maybe when Cheyenne turns up they'll change their minds. Now, I guess we all have a lot to be getting on with...."

oOo

The meeting had broken up quickly. Eric, Stanley, Bill and Jimmy were huddled in the sheriff's office to discuss the Rangers, while Mimi and Trish had disappeared off to the J&R building, and Gray and Mary had headed for the school gymnasium to set up for the town meeting. Emily had declared that she was going to tell Gail and Darcy that their menfolk had been heard from.

Heather had settled down in front of the computer, Beck standing at her shoulder. "We should send our reply in code as well, shouldn't we?" She rested her chin on her hands as she waited for the wordprocessor to load. "Because we may not have to sneak it past an office full of soldiers, but we do want to avoid alerting Cheyenne to what's going on here?"

"Yes." Beck sounded thoughtful. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him gesture at the fax. "I guess this is another example of how much you were *not* working for me."

Heather tilted her head to look up at him and saw the hint of bitterness on his face. "Don't be like that." She sighed. "I did do my best to help you, you know. It's just there were... other things." She glanced back at the screen and saw it was ready for her to type. "So? What do I say?" She paused with her hands over the keys.

"Start with something that lets him know you got the fax." She felt her chair dip a little as Beck rested his hand on the back. "I mean, that you got it, not anyone else, and that it's you replying. Something only you would know. Just like he let you know it was him sending the fax."

"Okay." Heather bit her lip and looked again at Jake's first line about Charlotte Carr. She remembered letting loose with a ton of advice about taking it carefully, and then.... For the third time that day, the memory of the kiss surfaced within her and made her feel hot all over again. Annoyed with herself—it was months ago and it hadn't meant anything in the end, had it?—she replaced it with the memory of how mortified she'd been when she'd come out with that stupid, stupid line....

Which would be perfect. Her fingers flew over the keys. Beside her, Beck leaned forward and read with some disbelief in his voice, "*Report received. There have still been no sightings of giant irradiated ants by Charlotte Carr.* Well, that certainly doesn't sound like something anyone else would have come up with."

Heather blushed. "It was just something stupid I said right before he left for Rogue River. About watching out for...." Her voice trailed off. It really had been such a dumb thing to say.

"Giant irradiated ants?" Beck supplied for her. "Yes, I can see those would be a hazard." There was a hint of amusement in his tone. "But it's good. Shows you understood the Charlotte Carr reference. Now," he picked up the fax, "we can use this stuff about the restaurants...."

"Oh." Heather waved her hands excitedly. "We can use the Pizza Garden for Jericho."

"The...?"

"Oh, it's not there any more." Heather hit return a few times and typed *Jericho = Pizza Garden* further down the page to remind herself. "It got closed down and turned into the Cyberjolt Cafe. Jake used to work there, washing dishes."

"Well, I doubt anyone in Cheyenne knows it ever existed." Beck put the fax back down next to her. "As long as you think," he cleared his throat, "it'll be understood."

"I think so." Heather frowned up at him. "I mean, we have to trust that he can figure this kind of thing out, too, right?"

"Yes." Beck gave her a reassuring smile. "We do."

"Okay." Heather returned the smile and bent back to the keyboard. "So... we need to tell him that the Pizza Garden is... under new management?"

"You're good at this, aren't you?" Beck definitely sounded amused now.

"Crossword puzzles....," Heather remarked absently, adding what she'd just said to the document. "And we need to tell him you're not taking orders from Cheyenne. So, how do we refer to you? I'm guessing *asshole who beat the crap out of you for four days* isn't going to—." Some sixth sense made her stop speaking and look up.

"It's not like I enjoyed that, you know." Beck's dark eyes were pained.

"I know." Heather twisted round in her chair and put her hand on his for a moment. "It's just going to take a while for people to forgive and forget. Jake, especially."

"Well, you know him better than I do...."

"Not really." She sighed.

Beck raised an eyebrow. "Well enough for him to write you a fax in a code that you'd understand."

"I guess." Heather shrugged and swung back round to face the computer again, not wanting to think about what that did or didn't mean. "I'm kinda surprised he remembered all that...."

Beck had picked up the fax again. "Well, you are a very memorable young woman," he murmured.

Heather blushed and wondered just what *that* was supposed to mean. A little flustered, she dragged her attention back to the task in hand. "Okay," she paused with her hands over the keyboard, "so, maybe we need to translate your name into Spanish? Like Jake did with his name?"

Beck shrugged. "It doesn't really translate. And major is comandante, but I think that's a little too obvious."

"Chief?" Heather glanced up at him "Leader?"

"That might work. Had a private called that in the first platoon I commanded." When Heather turned back to the keyboard, he added, "It's spelled Lima India Delta Echo Romeo in Spanish."

Heather nodded. "So, Edward Lider. Hmm.... Or maybe Ted? Ned? Eddie?" She looked up, eyebrows raised, and decided from his expression that no one had ever called him any of those. Or at least not and lived to tell the tale. Only half suppressing a smile, she bent back to the keyboard. "Eddie, then." She made the correction.

The rest of the message didn't take long to compile using the code Jake had supplied. Somehow, they managed to find a way to let him know that Beck was no longer taking orders from Cheyenne, that Cheyenne probably wouldn't take it quietly, and that Jericho needed any help the Texans could provide.

Beck went to join Eric and the others to discuss patrols while Heather tidied up what they'd written, added it to a fax header, and then spent a few minutes working out how to get the wordprocessor to put a tint on the background to make it harder to read. Getting up to fetch the printout from the printer, she saw that the group in the sheriff's office were gathered around a map. Beck and Eric were gesturing to different areas, with much nodding of heads suggesting their discussions were going amicably.

Heather gave the fax one last read through before she timidly knocked on the door frame. The five men turned and looked at her.

"The fax is ready." She held it out, unsure who to give it to first.

It was Eric who took it. He raised his eyebrows as he read it. "Giant irradiated ants?"

Heather winced inside. She was never going to live that down, was she?

Eric finished reading the fax and then looked up and smiled. "Looks good." He passed the fax to Stanley.

"I'll run it down to Gray at the school before I send it." Heather realized she was holding tightly to the door frame in her embarrassment, and carefully let go.

"Yes. Wouldn't want the mayor feeling left out." Stanley's quiet comment was only slightly edged with sarcasm. Jimmy and Bill had waved the fax away when he offered it to them, so he passed it to Beck. The major gave it a final check before handing it back to Heather with a curt but appreciative nod.

Twenty minutes later, Heather was slipping the sheet of paper into the fax machine and dialing the



number, having gained Gray's grudging approval. Pressing the "send" button, she hoped they'd worked it out right, that Jake would understand their reply—and that he'd return soon with help from Texas.

And if he ran into any giant irradiated ants along the way? She reckoned they wouldn't stand a chance.

**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.