

The Unexpected Mistress

by Tanaqui

The discomfort of lying curled up with his knees up by his chin was probably what brought Jake slowly out of unconsciousness. Stubbing his bare toes on something that clanged faintly as he tried to stretch out brought him more sharply awake. When he prised open his eyes, though, it took him a moment to figure out that the criss-crossing black stripes in front of him were the wire mesh of a cage.

What the—? He tried to sit up and quickly discovered the cage wasn't much higher than it was square. He mostly found that out by hitting his head on the solid metal above him, the blow adding to the dull ache already emanating from a point just above and behind his right ear. Lifting a hand as he squirmed around in the small space, trying to get into a position where he could figure out what was going on, he felt a lump, tender to his touch.

His eyes had now adjusted to the dim light falling through a couple of small, dirty windows high up in one wall, and he began to make some kind of sense of his surroundings. Squinting, he could see that opposite him, a few feet away, were more cages, stacked two high. Some were occupied by other cramped figures; some were empty. He guessed there were probably similar cages to either side of his, and below him. A rustling sound and a cough from one side a moment later confirmed the idea, and that there was at least one other unfortunate soul on this side of the room.

Because it didn't take a lot of brainpower, even for a brain as befuddled as his currently was, to figure he was probably in some slaver's compound.

Jake slapped at the mesh of the cage door in frustration, rattling the heavy padlock that held it closed. *How the heck—?* Last he remembered, he'd been keeping an eye on Heather while she examined a piece of machinery. He'd been hovering a few feet away from her, watching her from under lowered lashes, trying not to crowd her. Judging by the sore spot on the back of his head, he'd been distracted enough to let someone sneak up behind him and hit him over the head.

His chest tightened as his thoughts drifted on to what what might have happened to Heather after that. God, had they snatched her too? Shuffling further forward, he tried to see into the other cages. She didn't seem to be among the six or seven people who filled around half the cages opposite, but he couldn't see at all into the ones on his side of the room, no matter how much he pressed his face against the mesh of the door and twisted his head.

Not knowing what else to do, he quietly called her name. There was no response. Maybe she was still unconscious or too far away to hear him. He tried again, more loudly. The only reply he got was a muttered, "Jeez, keep it down, will ya?" from somewhere opposite.

"Hey." Jake clawed his fingers through the mesh and hauled himself to his knees. When there was no answer, he called again, "Hey!"

"Are you deaf, or what?" Jake saw one of the figures opposite shift a little. The gleam of eyes glaring at him accompanied the hissed words.

Jake swallowed. "Sorry," he whispered back. "Look. There was a girl with me when they grabbed me. I just... need to know if they got her too."

The derision in the snort from the shadowy figure opposite was unmistakable, but Jake could see the guy shaking his head. "Wasn't anyone with you when they brought you in."

Jake let out a sigh and slumped back against the side of the cage. Maybe they hadn't picked her up at all, and she'd managed to find Dad and Dale. His mind shied away from other possibilities: that maybe she'd been picked up by a different group of slavers, or was here but in another room, with unspeakable things happening to her....

After a few minutes, he realized that dwelling on what might have happened to Heather when he couldn't know—and *might never find out*, a little voice in his head pointed out—was useless. Instead, he ought to be figuring out what he could do to get himself out of this jam.

Apart from the bump on his head, he didn't seem to be hurt in any other way; roughing up the "merchandise" more than strictly necessary was probably bad for business. They had taken his boots and socks off him while he was knocked out, probably to make it harder for him to run away if he got free. He'd also lost his coat, although they'd left him the hoodie he'd been wearing underneath. Luckily, wherever he was being held—peering around again, he thought it might be some kind of veterinary kennels—was fairly warm. He wasn't sure if that was also to keep the merchandise in good condition, or just because of the heat generated anyway by a dozen people crammed into a room not much bigger than his parents' living room.

Patting the pockets of his jeans, he discovered they'd cleaned those out too. Most of the things he'd lost didn't bother him: gloves, a small flashlight, a coil of wire that had found its way in there after he'd help fix a damaged fence for Mrs Herbert.... He could've sure used Grandpa's pocket knife, though: he might have been able to pick the padlock or prise free the ends of some of the wire mesh in the cage door.

His wallet had been in there too, and losing that maybe wasn't the best news either. There hadn't been many bills in it—not that they'd do anyone much good these days—but it had contained his now out-of-date driver's license. Eric's license had likely led Ravenwood to their door. They had Jake's house keys, too. If they put the two together....

He reassured himself with the thought that home was a couple hundred miles away. Maybe more; he didn't know where he'd been taken. The distance was likely to discourage casual thieves, while the Rangers were finally starting to figure out how to protect the town and how to deal with anyone who arrived at the town limits. The other comfort was that at least Dad had the keys to the Roadrunner; he'd taken them off of Jake when they split up, so Dale could get the things he'd brought to trade, and never gotten a chance to give them back. So Dad and Dale—and Heather, if she was all right; God, let her be all right—could at least get back to Jericho. And—.

Jake's hand went to his neck to confirm what he already knew, really, from the slight touch of it against his skin: they'd left him the chain with his St Christopher medallion. Maybe they hadn't noticed it, or maybe they didn't care. Not that it would help much, but he would have felt oddly naked without it. Vulnerable. Whereas he still felt like maybe someone was watching over him after all, despite what had happened.

As he settled the chain more comfortably around his neck, his fingers brushed against a raised weal like an insect bite. He guessed they'd pumped him with some kind of sedative after they'd hit him over the head to keep him quiet while they transported him. It'd explain the dry taste in his mouth and the way his limbs ached dully more than could be accounted for by being crammed into the too-small cage.

Arranging himself as best he could—back to the rear wall, knees bent, his hands hanging loosely between his thighs—he contemplated his options. He reckoned they had to take the prisoners out of the cages sometimes: to use the restrooms, at least. He wondered whether they'd take them all at once, or one by one, and if they'd be handcuffed, and how many guards there'd be. Even if he managed to deal with the guards, what would he find once he got through the double doors he could see to his right? More guards? More locked doors? Fences? Miles of bare and chilly Nebraska wilderness?

The more he thought about it, the more futile it seemed to make plans when he just had no idea what he'd face. But he was going to do *something*, he was sure of that. He damn well wasn't going to sit here and let them sell him off to—.

That pulled him up for a moment as he wondered just who would want to buy *him*. Snatching women he could understand; it had been in the back of his mind when he'd said no to the idea of Heather coming to Black Jack, an extra layer of danger for her on top of the dangers they all faced. He snorted quietly to himself. He was the one who'd gotten caught. Assuming Heather—.

Again, his mind shied away from the thought of her also having been captured. He *had* to believe she was okay, that she'd found Dad and Dale, and gotten home safely. Because if she wasn't....

He closed his eyes and grimaced, before taking a deep breath and turning his mind back to his own predicament. Farm labor, he guessed: that was what they wanted guys for. Without gas, they'd have to go back to working the land by hand. He tried for a moment to imagine Stanley coming to a place like this, or the rest of Jericho tolerating him keeping slaves if he did, and felt a swell of pride: not in my town. Hell, even Jonah, who reckoned that what belonged to who was getting to be kinda fuzzy—not that Jonah hadn't *always* believed that!—wouldn't stoop to this.

Jake was brought out of his thoughts by the sound of the doors being unlocked. He shaded his eyes against the brightness as the fluorescent tubes flickered on. One of them went on flickering, and a voice said, "Goddammit! Danny, see if we've got another tube out back when we're done here."

Squinting, Jake saw the remark came from the leader of the three figures that had entered the room, a man in his fifties with graying ginger hair and a straggly beard. His words were probably directed at the one bringing up the rear: a pasty, round-faced kid in his late teens or early twenties. Maybe the first one's son; Jake could see a slight family resemblance between them. The third man looked to be in his fifties as well. He had an air of suppressed excitement about him that made Jake's skin crawl, and Jake guessed he was the customer. All three were dressed in jeans and plaid shirts and workboots. All of them looked like they hadn't seen water, much less a bar of soap, since the attacks.

"Right along here." The leader spoke over his shoulder to the customer as he headed along the line of cages under the uncertain lights.

"Hey." Jake lurched forward onto his knees and tried to reach through the mesh to grab the guy as he passed.

The holes were too small to let him stick more than a couple of fingers through at a time, and the guy stepped sideways anyway. He glared at Jake, his eyes a watery blue in his weather-beaten face. "Keep it down! Rules says you don't make no noise when we got customers." He nodded his head toward the man walking just behind him. Jake automatically looked at him, but the guy wasn't looking at Jake. Instead, he was peering ahead, almost tripping over the first man in his eagerness to

make it to the other end of the line of cages.

Jake thought it was a bit much to expect him to know the rules when he'd only been brought in a few hours back and hadn't seen any of the slavers since he'd woken up. Besides, he'd never been very good with rules, had he? Curling his hands around the mesh, he rattled the door, calling after the first man as he moved on, "Hey!"

Something poked him in the shoulder, and he looked up to see the younger man—Danny—was prodding him through the mesh with what looked like a police nightstick. "Uncle Joe there told you: keep it down." He jabbed Jake again with the nightstick.

"I need to use the restroom...." Jake tried to sound a little embarrassed.

Danny smirked at him. "You'll just have to hold it."

When Jake opened his mouth to argue, Danny brought the nightstick down across Jake's knuckles where Jake still clutched the mesh door. The blow wasn't particularly hard, but it stung. Jake automatically snatched his hand back, stifling a cry.

Danny's smirk widened. "You'll get your chance. Morning and evening. Till then, shut it, or I might forget Uncle Joe's instructions," he jerked his head towards the older slaver, "'bout not damaging the stock."

Jake sank back against the side of the cage, nursing his sore knuckles, and watched as Danny sauntered after the other two. They were standing in front of one of the cages, the customer bending down to peer into the one on the lower tier. In the uncertain light coming from the mix of the steady and failing fluorescents—*flick, flick, flick*, grating on Jake's already rubbed-raw nerves—Jake saw the man tilt his head, like he was trying to get a better view, and lick his lips. The gesture made Jake shiver.

As the kid joined the other two, the older slaver—Joe—also bent and, producing a heavy bunch of keys, unlocked the padlock on the cage. He swung the cage door open and stepped back, but whoever was inside clearly didn't want to come out. Joe and Danny exchanged a look, and Danny reached in and hauled out the cage's occupant, the hunched figure sliding across the smooth, tiled floor.

"Get her up." Joe gave a nod, and Danny moved behind the crouching woman—no, girl, Jake saw, bile rising in his throat; she couldn't have been any older than Bonnie—and grabbed her shoulders. He dragged her upright, putting his hand under her chin to tilt her face up and force her to look at the buyer, while the light went on strobing overhead like some horrible parody of a nightclub.

"Nice." The customer licked his lips again as he eyed her. He turned his head slightly toward Joe. "She clean?"

Joe shrugged. "Ain't been touched since she got here. Can't give no guarantees 'bout where she's been and who she's been with 'fore that."

The customer grunted, sounding a little displeased, before he reached out towards her. She tried to back away, but Danny held her in place. The customer ran his fingers down her cheek, before letting his hand fall to her breast, grasping it and squeezing it. Jake saw a shudder pass through her, and the gesture unlocked him from the horrified, disbelieving numbness that had possessed him as he watched the scene unfold.

"No!" He hurled himself at the cage door, battering at it with his hands and using his weight against it. A part of him knew it was useless: the cage was designed to hold a big dog, so the door wasn't likely to give way. But just let him get out and—. "Leave her alone, dammit."

"Jeez!" Danny shoved the girl toward the customer and strode back in Jake's direction, blocking Jake's view of the girl for a moment. Jake was too busy trying to see past Danny, trying to see what the goddam bastard of a buyer was doing to the girl to make her whimper like that, to register the canister of pepper spray before the stinging mist hit his eyes. He reeled back, whacking his head against the side of the cage as he fell, but managed to stop himself just in time from scrubbing at his eyes with the heels of his hands. Instead, he curled his hands into fists and let the tears stream down his cheeks as his eyes protested the spray. Right at that moment, the pain seemed almost as bad as when he'd gotten hit by that piece of shrapnel back in Iraq.

Perhaps because his eyes were useless, his hearing seemed to have sharpened, despite the pain biting into him. He heard every word as the buyer haggled with the slavers, agreed a price, and departed with his purchase. By that point, the sting from the pepper spray had eased, but Jake still lay curled in on himself, wrapped around the dull, sick ache in his chest.

He carried on lying like that, focusing on the pain in his eyes and the nausea from where he'd hit his head—it felt like he'd caught the tender spot where they'd knocked him out—even after the slavers left because it helped block out the images that kept flashing onto his closed eyelids. The brief extra illumination of the flickering light seemed to have imprinted perfectly and starkly in Jake's mind the leer on the buyer's face and the way the girl had struggled as she recoiled from him.

He was brought out of his thoughts by a clatter of metal and a tuneless whistling. Coming back to himself, he became aware that he'd been clutching his medallion through his clothing and repeating over and over, "Not Heather. Please God, not Heather...."

Drawing in a deep breath, he forced himself to let go of the medallion and to concentrate again on his current situation. He wriggled into a sitting position and cracked open his eyelids, blinking away renewed tears as the slightly dusty air hit his irritated eyes. In the half-light that fell in through the wedged-open door, he saw a stepladder had been erected in the middle of the room. The tuneless whistler was perched on it, although all Jake could see of him was a pair of feet a few rungs up. Leaning forward to get a better view, he saw it was the younger guard, Danny; he was panting as he clumsily waved around a fluorescent tube, flailing the far end toward the socket and missing. His T-shirt had rucked up, revealing a roll of fat hanging over the waistband of his jeans.

Remembering the pinched look of many of the kids in Jericho, Jake thought sourly that most of the profits of the slaving business must be going toward sustaining Danny's gut. What was of more interest, though, was that Danny probably wouldn't prove much of an opponent in a fight if Jake got free. And while his uncle had looked tougher, Jake had at least twenty years on him. Jake leaned back again, once more resting against the rear of the cage and settled himself in to wait for the right moment to make his escape, trying not to think what he might find if—*when*, he promised himself—he eventually made it back to Jericho.

Danny finally managed to get the light fixed, flicking it on and off a few times to test it before he left. After that, the next couple of hours passed slowly. Only the occasional shuffle or cough from the other occupants of the cages and footsteps passing once or twice in the hallway outside broke the silence. Then, at last, there was the creak of the door opening, and Joe's voice again.

The polite way Joe said "This way, ma'am." let Jake know that the slaver was showing another

customer around. He kept his head bent and squeezed his eyes shut, knowing it was best to try not to notice what was about to happen, even as he hated himself for attempting to ignore it.

Joe was still talking. "Fraid we ain't got no blacks in today, ma'am." His apology carried a hint of worry that he might not make a sale.

"Oh—" Jake heard a woman's nervous chuckle. "That's just fine. A white boy will do me." Again there was that nervous chuckle; a chuckle, Jake realized with a shock, that he recognized. "You know, to help around the farm."

Jake shuffled forward again, reaching out and clutching at the cage door. Swallowing hard, afraid he was imagining things, he opened his eyes and squinted into the light. Standing in the doorway beside Joe was the owner of that familiar laugh.

"Heather!" Her name escaped him before he could bite it back. From the way she turned her head a little toward him, he knew she'd heard him, though the dryness in his mouth meant he'd mercifully not spoken above a whispered croak. He hoped it was only because he'd spoken her own name that she'd caught it, and that Joe hadn't heard him.

Because Heather must be here to buy him back. And in the instant he'd called out her name, Jake had realized that if Joe got so much as a whiff of the idea that it was one particular piece of merchandise she was interested in, the price would be more than they could afford.

oOo

Even though their problems were far from over, Heather felt a surge of relief when she heard Jake call her name. She'd been so afraid they wouldn't even be able to find him again, and that they'd never know what had happened to him.

She felt the knot of tension in her gut unclench a little for the first time in hours. For the first time since it had formed after she'd started arguing with the guy who'd thought she was a hooker, looked around for Jake so they could get out of there—and not found him.

She'd taken a few frantic paces toward where she'd last seen him, ignoring the guy who'd propositioned her and was now calling after her, "Hey, I said—."

"Jake?" She peered around again, trying to find him in the throng of people. He must have simply stepped away a little and the crowd had come between them. Because he wouldn't just abandon her, would he? "Jake?"

She still couldn't see him. Growing more alarmed, she swung around to look behind her, but he wasn't there either. She turned back again and pushed forward, bouncing off someone.

"Hey."

A man caught her arm. She tried to snatch it away. "I told you, I'm not—!" She twisted, trying to look past the guy, trying to push around him and get past him, because—.

"Heather? Hey, Heather, it's—."

The use of her name, and something familiar about the voice, made her finally look properly at the man who had hold of her arm. "Ted?" She gawped at him. "Oh my God! Ted?"

"Yeah." He grinned at her, before his expression sobered. "Are you okay?"

"No." A half-sob escaped Heather as her relief at discovering she was being accosted by someone she'd known since kindergarten mixed with her renewed fear for Jake. "I was with this guy, Jake, and now I can't find him...." She carried on peering around, still hoping to catch a glimpse of Jake, but she didn't miss the frown that settled on Ted's face, or the way he lifted his gaze away from her to someone standing at her side.

"This Jake, what does he look like?"

Heather turned to the speaker, an older man dressed in rough work clothes and in need of a shave.

"This is Russell." Ted nodded his head towards the man who'd just spoken, before gesturing slightly with his free hand at a third man. "And Mike. They're from New Bern as well."

Heather dipped her head in greeting. "Jake? He's—." She pressed her eyes closed and saw Jake's face, wearing the lopsided smile that always made her stomach flutter. She took a deep breath and opened her eyes and looked back at Russell. "He's about six foot, dark hair, green jacket...."

Again Russell and Ted exchanged glances, before Russell turned back to her. "I'm sorry." He spread his hands. "If we'd realized...."

"What?" Heather stared at him in horror. "What happened?"

Russell gave an embarrassed shrug. "We saw a guy fit that description get knocked over the head by a couple of thugs a few minutes ago."

"What?" Heather twisted around, once more searching the crowd. "Then where—?"

"They dragged him off." Ted gripped her arm more tightly; when she turned back to look at him, he gave her a miserable look. "They were probably working for one of the slave traders."

For a moment, Heather's brain refused to process what her ears had heard. Then Ted's words sank in, and a wave of dizziness swept over her. Ted caught her other elbow, steadying her.

"You okay?"

Ted's words seemed to come from a long way away. She looked up at him, shaking her head to clear it. "I have to get him back!"

"On your own?" Mike sounded incredulous.

"No, I—. Oh God." Heather put her hands to her face. "We were here with Jake's dad. Mayor Green. I mean, Mr Green. He's not the mayor any more. And Dale, he—."

"Johnston Green?" Russell interrupted, drawing her attention back to him. His eyebrows had shot up toward his hairline. "The guy you were with is Johnston Green's son?"

Heather nodded mutely at him, her hands still pressed to her mouth. She was imagining the look on Jake's father's face when she told him that she'd lost Jake, and that he'd probably been taken by slavers. The knot in her stomach tightened some more. She groaned quietly. "Oh God. He's going to

so mad at me for letting something happen to Jake."

"Letting something—?" Russell snorted. "Wasn't this Jake supposed to be making sure nothing happened to *you*."

"I—." Heather stared at him for a moment and then snapped her mouth shut, not wanting to waste time arguing. She took a deep breath, steadying herself. "I need to find him. Jake's dad, I mean. So we can find Jake."

She started to pull away from Ted, but he held on to her. "Hey, not so fast." He tilted his head at the crowds around them. "You shouldn't be running around out there on your own."

He lifted his gaze from her face and exchanged a look with Russell. The older man reached out and gently squeezed her shoulder. "We'll help you find your friends. And then we'll do what we can to help you get Jake back."

In the end, it took them twenty minutes of determined searching before they found Jake's father and Dale. They were not far from the main tent, examining a board listing the commodities that various traders were looking for. Dale spotted her first, and touched Mr Green on the arm to draw his attention to her. Jake's father began to smile at her, but then his gaze slid past her, taking in the three men around her, before looking past them and clearly not finding what he was looking for. His smile faded as he took a few quick strides towards her.

"Where's Jake?" His voice was gruff, almost angry.

Heather licked her lips. "He...." Her voice stuck in her throat. "He's been kidnapped. Ted said he saw him get knocked out by some men who... who work for slave traders." She managed to get the words out at last, although her voice cracked on the last two.

Mr Green stared at her with narrowed eyes, before he lifted his gaze to the three men surrounding them. "And who are these guys?" he asked coldly.

Russell tried to speak, but Heather waved her hand to silence him. "They're from New Bern. Ted and I grew up together." She nodded in Ted's direction. "They saw Jake get taken, but they didn't realize... they didn't... they didn't realize until they ran into me right after that I was with him. That I...." A sob escaped her, because God, it was all her fault. If only she'd been keeping an eye on Jake, like he was keeping an eye on her....

"Hey." Mr Green reached out and squeezed her arm. "It's not your fault, okay? Jake's the damn fool let himself be kidnapped."

"It's probably not his fault either, Mr Green," Russell pointed out quietly. When Jake's father huffed disbelievingly, Russell added, "You need someone to watch your back when you're watching the back of your guy doing the trading. That's why New Bern always sends three of us." He circled his hand to indicate himself and the rest of his party. "I'm truly sorry that when we saw what was happening, we didn't intervene. But...."

Mr Green gave him a sharp nod. "Not your fight. I understand." He looked back at Heather and gave her a thin-lipped smile. "But I appreciate you helping Heather here get back to us safely."

"We hope we can do more, Mr Green." Ted stepped closer to Heather. "We saw the men who took your son. We can maybe use that to help you find which trader has him."

Mr Green seemed surprised by the offer, and it took him a moment to answer. "I appreciate that." He dipped his head. "Though I don't know what reason you've to assist us, that would be a mighty help."

"We're neighbors, Mr Green," Russell offered him his hand. "What's good for Jericho is good for New Bern. I'm sure you'll find some way to repay us in kind one day."

With that settled, Russell led the group closer to the main tent. Once there, he ducked inside on his own to find out which traders dealt in slaves. Heather couldn't quite imagine how you'd ask about something like that—she didn't think you'd just walk up and blurt it out—but she had the feeling that if anyone knew how, it would be Russell. He seemed completely at home in the rough-and-tumble of the trading post.

He came back a few minutes later with details of four places where they might find Jake—or the people who'd taken him. Russell said the guys in the tent had warned him he'd have to go off site to do the actual "hiring", so it was likely Jake had already been shipped out.

They split into two groups, hoping it would help them find the right trader more quickly. Heather went with Ted and Mike, while Russell took Mr Green and Dale off to the other end of the fairgrounds. When a quick check on the two traders they'd been allocated proved inconclusive, Heather and the others settled in to watch the comings and goings at one of the traders for an hour. If they still hadn't seen the thugs who'd kidnapped Jake, they'd do the same at the other place, switching between them until they found what they were looking for—or the trading post closed for the night. Heather tried not to think about what they'd do if that happened, and about what might be happening to Jake meanwhile.

Standing a short distance from the entrance to the trader's tent, huddled into her coat and shivering in the chill wind blowing through the fairground, Heather glanced at Ted and asked a question that had been bothering her for a while. "What I don't understand is why they took Jake. I mean, why not me?"

Ted stuck his hands in his pockets and hunched his shoulders, keeping his gaze fixed on the entrance to the trader's tent, apparently at a loss for an answer or reluctant to give the one he had.

Mike was the one who spoke. "Management takes a dim view of anyone hassling the working girls. Bad for business."

"Oh." Heather digested that. Apparently it wasn't just the guy who'd propositioned her who'd thought she was a prostitute. She gave a self-deprecating laugh. "So I guess I look like a hooker, huh?"

Ted glanced at her, giving her a wry smile. "No. But you're a woman, and you're here." He turned his gaze back to the trader's tent. "Why'd this Jake bring you along, anyway? I don't care what Russell says. He's an idiot. Even if the slavers aren't after you, there's plenty of guys'd...." He left the sentence unfinished.

Heather wrapped her arms around herself. "He didn't. I insisted." Ted shot her a surprised look, and she sighed. "We came here looking for a governor for a wind turbine. They needed someone who knew what a working governor looked like." She snorted. "Jericho's got a lot going for it, but most of the guys there wouldn't know one end of a spark plug from another. New Bern it ain't."

Ted grinned at her. "So you're still the best mechanic in a ten-block radius, then?"

Heather blushed. "I was never that." She shrugged. "They've got some good engineers and fitters at the mine, but I think they're a bit out of their depth on this stuff." She decided not to mention the way Mr Anderson and Mr Carmichael had politely but firmly declined her earlier offers of help, and how the looks on their faces had made it quite clear that she wasn't going to be able to convince them any different—not even if she turned up on the steps of City Hall with a working turbine.

Not like Jake. A warm glow spread through her as she remembered how quickly he'd handed over fixing the generator in the hospital basement. Squeezing her eyes shut for a second, she saw again his quick grin as he passed her the screwdriver. God, she owed it to him to rescue him just for that.

Pushing away unpleasant thoughts about what they might be saving him from, she went on talking about the turbines, trying to hold her fears at bay. "Even if we did come up with a design, I'm not sure they've got the facilities in Jericho to machine the parts we need anyway."

"We could do it in New Bern." Ted turned his head a little and squinted down at her. "Maybe when we've rescued your friend, you could come back with us and the two of us could figure it out? It'd give New Bern something new to trade, and that'd more than pay us back for helping you out now. Besides," Ted nudged her shoulder with his, "I've missed hanging out with you. Messing with stuff."

Heather nodded absently. Yes, maybe when they'd gotten Jake back, her leaving Jericho would be best for everyone. She stamped her feet a little to try and warm them. Yes, once she knew Jake was okay....

It was more than two hours later, and they were back watching the first trader again, when she saw Jake's father, Dale and Russell hurrying toward them. The news conveyed from several yards away by the eager looks on their faces was confirmed by Mr Green's words as they got closer. "Those guys that took Jake, Russell saw them again. Looks like we found out who's holding him."

Heather let out a sigh of relief and hugged herself. "So what do we do now?"

"Talk to management, I guess." Mr Green was already swinging away, making for the main tent. "Get them to get those traders to release Jake, turn him back over to us."

Russell's harsh laugh stopped him. "You think the management here cares? They're getting plenty enough kickbacks from the traders to turn a blind eye to the occasional customer going missing."

Mr Green rounded on him, his fists clenched. "Then what in Tarnation's name do you suggest I do?" he snarled.

Russell grimaced. "The only way you'll get your son back is to buy him back." He looked around at the three from Jericho. "You came here with something to trade, right?"

Mr Green bounced impatiently on the balls of his feet. "Salt. We brought some bags of salt."

"Right." Russell nodded. "You've got that mine, don't you? Well, that's a good start. Salt's one of the things everyone's looking for, so it should be an attractive trade for these guys. Assuming they don't get wind that it's Jake in particular you're looking to buy."

Mr Green snorted. "Well, then, we may have a problem. I can't say, for all he's my son, there's any

particular reason a stranger'd want to buy him on first look. Not as if he's—."

"I'll do it." The words were out of Heather's mouth almost before she'd formulated the plan in her own mind. The five men turned toward her.

"You?" Mr Green raised his eyebrows.

Heather nodded, a blush rising on her cheeks. She twisted her hands together. "I can pretend I'm a widow with a farm needs an extra hand for fieldwork and—" She felt herself grow even hotter. "—other things. That way I can pretend I've... seen something I like, without it being suspicious." She turned her head to look at each of them, though she couldn't quite meet anyone's eye.

There was a moment of shocked silence before Mr Green muttered, "That's quite a plan."

"But a good one." Russell gave Heather a smile when she lifted her gaze to meet his. "If you think you can manage to pull it off?"

Heather gripped her hands together more tightly. "For Jake?" She nodded. "Yes."

"But not on your own?" Mr Green seemed to have recovered a little from his shock.

Heather thought quickly. "You can pretend to be my foreman. Make sure I'm not getting too... distracted." She blushed again and hurried on with making plans. "If Ted and the others are willing to help us out a little longer, Dale should stay with them."

Dale looked a little annoyed at getting shunted off, but Heather couldn't think how to explain his presence: he was too scrawny to be there for protection, and she wasn't old enough for him to be her son. She gave him an apologetic smile before turning back to Mr Green. He was giving her a sharp look, but after a moment he nodded. There seemed to be a ghost of a smile on his lips as he murmured, "Yes, ma'am," and she realized with a touch of embarrassment that she'd rattled off her suggestions like he really was her hired help.

"I'd like to come along too." Russell shrugged when Heather and Mr Green turned to look at him. "Watch your backs. Keep an eye on things. Mike and Ted can look after Dale."

Mr Green nodded. A moment later, Mike and Ted were hurrying Dale off toward their truck. As they moved away, Heather overheard Dale's puzzled, "I don't understand. What's Heather—?"

Mike gave Dale a gentle shove to keep him moving. "She's going to buy herself a toyboy."

"A—? Oh!" Heather caught Dale's startled expression—and his embarrassed flush—as he looked back over his shoulder at her. Clearly he was wondering if Heather had the chutzpah to pull it off. Well, she was wondering that herself.

And now, an hour later, here they were, in a former boarding kennels three miles down the road from the entrance to the fairgrounds. Mr Green—Johnston, she reminded herself, she had to remember to call him Johnston, like he'd told her—towered reassuringly behind her as she followed Joe into the room where he kept what he'd called the "merchandise". And a moment later, she caught Jake's voice whispering her name, and her heart hammered even harder in her chest. Because they'd found him.

All they had to do now was get him back.

Jake watched Heather walk down between the cages, turning her head from side to side and apparently examining them and their occupants, though he noticed her gaze swept over them quickly. She reached the far end of the room and swung back round to face Joe, who'd followed her a little way into the room. His father and Danny had remained by the door. There was something very reassuring about the way his father bulked in the doorway. It took Jake back to being tucked into bed when he was small, and his father switching off the bedroom light and then lingering to watch over Jake as he fell asleep.

"You said you had several to show me?" Heather's sharp words—there was a snappishness to her tone Jake didn't think he'd ever heard from her before—drew Jake's attention back to her.

"Yes, ma'am." Joe shuffled forwards and gestured to one of the cages opposite Jake. Jake thought it might be the one with the guy he'd spoken to when he first woke up. "This one here, he's nice and docile, won't give you no trouble, says he's handy with—."

Heather stepped forward and peered into the cage. She shook her head abruptly, cutting across Joe's sales patter. "No. Too old." She met Joe's gaze, her chin tilted up. "I'm running a farm, not a nursing home." She swung round and once more swept her gaze over the cages. "What else?"

Jake saw Joe grimace for a moment, before he smoothed out his features. "Well, ma'am, we got a new one in today is maybe more what you're looking for." He shambled across the room and rested his hand on Jake's cage.

Heather moved around Joe so she could look into the cage. Her eyes met Jake's, and he saw her lick her lips and swallow, before she dragged her gaze away from his and made a show of looking him over. "Uh-huh. This one might do. Can I take a closer look?" She took a pace back, indicating she'd like Joe to open the cage.

"Sure thing, ma'am." Joe waved Danny forward as he unlocked Jake's cage. He jerked his head at Jake. "Out!"

Jake crawled out awkwardly, his legs and back protesting the movement after hours in the cramped space. As his feet cleared the cage, Danny stepped up behind him and hauled him upright with a handful of his hoodie. Even as Jake struggled to find his balance, Danny yanked his arms behind his back and cuffed his wrists, letting Jake stumble into the cages.

When Jake finally managed to straighten and plant his feet firmly on the cold concrete, he peered up at Heather from under his lashes. She'd taken a pace to her right, and seemed to be sizing him up. After a moment, she leaned further sideways, her head tilted. With a start, Jake realized she was checking out his ass. He blushed, wondering if she'd done that before, when he wasn't looking. Because she didn't seem like the kind of girl to leer at guys, but he guessed she must have looked him over at least once or twice to be able to decide she liked what she saw enough to fling herself at him right before he set off for Rogue River.

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to force away the memory of the kiss—of how good Heather had felt in his arms—and concentrate on the present. Opening his eyes again, he saw Heather had stepped up close to him.

"Careful, ma'am." His father's soft warning broke the silence in the room.

Heather ignored him, catching Jake's chin and tipping it up sharply. She let her gaze wander across his face, though he noticed she was careful not to catch his eye again. Because her face might be set in a haughty, distant expression, but Jake could feel she was trembling slightly. His chest tightened at the thought that she'd walked into this lion's den in spite of her fear and armed with nothing but the balls to pull off this act—all to get him out of the mess he'd gotten himself into.

"What's wrong with his eyes?" Heather addressed the remark over Jake's shoulder to Danny, still lurking behind Jake, as she let go of Jake with a jerk that jolted his head. He let his chin fall back to his chest, hunching his shoulders and trying to make himself look small and uncomfortable.

"Uh." Danny hesitated a moment. "Pepper spray. We had to quiet him down a bit when he first came in."

"Hmm." Jake sensed Heather take another step back. Peering from under his lashes, he saw she was looking him up and down again. "Well, can't say I object to a man with a little spirit." She hesitated a moment, before she plunged on almost conversationally, "I guess he'll just have to be handcuffed. Not as it'll be a problem...."

Jake tried to keep the shock from his face as he realized what she meant. As he realized Heather—*Heather!*—had said—*that*. His mind flashed back to that one time when Em, with a smirk on her face, had produced a pair of pink fluffy handcuffs. He'd gone along with it, because it was what she'd wanted, but he hadn't much enjoyed it. Maybe Em had sensed that, because she'd never brought out the handcuffs again.

Now Jake found himself imagining Heather being the one snapping on the handcuffs. Heat flooded through him, and he was shocked to realize the thought had gotten him hard. He was aware that Heather was still sizing him up, as well, and that he kinda liked that too: liked that she was looking at him like that, even if it was an act. (And maybe not an act, a little voice in his head whispered to him, reminding him again of that kiss.)

He tried to slow his breathing, to force the thought away and block Heather out, block out the nearness of her and her expression. With the result that he almost yelped out loud when she leaned forward and, taking him by surprise, yanked up his hoodie and sweater, allowing a draft of cold air to hit his bared stomach.

She let out another of those nervous chuckles. "I see everything seems to be in... satisfactory working order."

Jake grew even hotter as it sank in that Heather had not only noticed his erection but drawn everyone's attention to it. Risking another quick glance as she let his clothes fall back in place, he saw there were bright red spots on her cheeks. He guessed she was shocking herself a little too.

Too much? he wondered. But squinting past her at Joe, he saw the older slaver seemed to be happily buying into her act, licking his lips and leering down at her in a way that made Jake's fists curl.

There was a moment's silence, and then Joe shook himself. "So. You wanna discuss a price?"

"Not so fast." His father's low rumble made Heather and Joe turn, while Jake wanted to sink through the floor as he realized Dad had also been watching all this, listening to it all, seeing how Jake was reacting.... He pushed away the thought: time enough to be embarrassed later—or for them never to talk about it—once he was out of here.

His father moved forward and, with a hand on Jake's shoulder, spun him around. He grasped Jake's hands and forced Jake's fists open. "See those hands? Boy's never done a hard day's work in his life."

Jake couldn't help bridling, because the contempt in his father's tone—even the words—were too reminiscent of too many past conversations. Then his father swung him back round and caught Jake's eye. Though his face was set in impassive lines, there was none of the anger or bitterness Jake remembered from the previous times his father had flung those kinds of words at him. When his father gave the merest dip of his head, Jake knew he was play acting too.

Heather had crossed her arms, and was pouting slightly. His father turned to her. "Mizz Lisinski, with all due respect, it's your choice, but maybe we should see what else they have to offer before we make a decision?"

Heather grimaced, before she sighed heavily. "Yes, Johnston. You're probably right." She turned her head toward Joe. "What else have you got?"

Jake caught Joe glaring at his father, clearly annoyed that he might lose a sale he thought he'd made. However, he didn't say anything before he moved past Jake, heading down the line of cages and stopping in front of one of them. "There's this one, ma'am. Says he's done some farmwork before."

Heather and his father followed Joe along the room. Without thinking, Jake began to turn so he could continue to keep an eye on her. He suppressed a cry of pain as Danny yanked at his arms, hauling him back round. Releasing one of Jake's wrists from the cuffs, Danny chained Jake to the cage door. By the time Jake could twist round again, Joe had unlocked another cage and the occupant was climbing out. Jake caught sight of a kid who couldn't be older than late teens, before Danny joined the group and blocked his view.

With Danny and his father standing in the way, Jake couldn't really see what Heather was up to, although she was moving around like she was looking over the boy the same way she'd looked over Jake. From time to time, as Danny or his father shifted, he caught a glimpse of the kid's face, which had gone brick red with embarrassment. One time the kid jumped, like maybe Heather had goosed him. Jake clenched his fists, forcing himself to keep quiet, because he didn't want another faceful of pepper spray—or to look like he'd be more trouble than it was worth for Heather to buy him. All the while trying to fool himself into believing he only wanted to yell at Heather to get her hands off the kid because it was just like it had been earlier with the guy who'd bought the girl.

After what seemed an eternity, but could have only been a couple of minutes, he heard Heather comment, "Bit skinny, isn't he?" and Joe reply, "Look at those shoulders. He'll grow into 'em. Just needs a bit of feeding up."

Heather made an unimpressed noise, and then stepped back from the group so she could see Jake again. While Jake didn't dare look directly at her, he could tell she'd crossed her arms and was looking from the kid to Jake and back again. "You say you worked on a farm before?" She dipped her head in the kid's direction.

"Yes, ma'am. I helped with milking on my uncle's farm, and he had corn and soybeans, too." The kid's voice was husky, like he was near to tears. Jake wondered how *he'd* feel about some strange woman almost ten years his senior looking him over like a piece of meat. He guessed that right now Heather didn't look much different to the kid than the guy who'd been in earlier and bought the girl. He clamped down on the urge to protest that Heather wasn't like that, not really.

"What about you?"

Jake saw out of the corner of his eye that she was looking at him now. "I, uh...." He cleared his throat. "I helped out on a ranch sometimes. A small one. Beef cattle."

He felt Heather's gaze lingering on him, and he grew hot again under her scrutiny, once more remembering what it had been like to have her in his arms, and to be returning her kiss. He made the mistake of lifting his gaze a little further, and his breath caught in his throat as his eyes met hers. He was aware of his wrist shackled to the door, and how she could do anything she wanted to him, anything at all, and how that was just fine by him....

His father's sharp cough brought him back to the present. He jerked his head sideways, breaking eye contact. He heard Heather chuckle nervously, and he sensed her turning a little to face his father. "We could do with another stockman," she pointed out.

"Hmm." His father still sounded unconvinced. "What kind of cattle?" he shot at Jake.

Jake wet his lips, trying to find his voice. "Mostly Angus. Some Dexters."

"Huh." His father didn't sound much more impressed. "Well, I guess it's your choice, Mizz Lisinski. Assumin' the price is right."

Danny snickered. "An' if it ain't, I reckon I could be minded to help you out with some of what you're looking for for free, ma'am."

There was a sudden heavy silence. Before Jake could fully react, though his free hand had already curled into a fist ready to punch Danny, if only he could get close enough, Joe reached out and cuffed his nephew across the back of the head. "Danny! Show a little respect to the customers, dammit." He turned to Heather. "I'm so sorry, Mrs Lisinski, I—."

She cut him off with a sharp wave of the hand. "It's all right." She turned and looked at Danny, her chin tilted up. The red spots on her cheeks were back, but her voice was cool as she said, "Thank you, but I don't think so."

Danny visibly shrank back under her contemptuous gaze. She turned her head away, as if he was of no further consequence, and looked at Joe. "So, how much are you asking?"

"You got salt to trade?" When she nodded, he gestured at Jake, "For that one? Three hundred pounds."

Heather snorted. "For a troublemaker who's maybe been on a hobby ranch a few times? Don't waste my time." She shook her head slightly. "He's cute but he's not that cute. Come on, Johnston—." She began to turn away.

"Wait!" Joe waved his hands and Heather halted. "Make me an offer."

Heather gave Jake a thoughtful look. "Four bags, thirty five pounds each."

Jake could see Joe's lips moving as he calculated. "Eight?" he offered, sounding slightly uncertain.

Without looking at him, Heather shot back. "Six."

"Done." Joe sounded relieved. He held out his hand, but Heather ignored it.

"Have him brought out to the car, and we'll sort out payment." She made to move and then paused, looking down at Jake's feet. "I assume he has some boots somewhere?"

"Yes ma'am." Joe gave her an eager nod. He tilted his head at his nephew, who was busy taking the cuffs off the other kid. "I'll have Danny look 'em out."

"Good." Heather swept from the room without another glance at Jake. His father, following close behind, caught Jake's eye as he passed. He gave him the merest flicker of a smile, before heading after Heather.

oOo

Heather hovered by the car, trying to quell the butterflies in her stomach, while Mr Green unloaded the salt from the trunk. Russell, who'd stayed outside to guard the Roadrunner, stood next to him, shotgun in hand, continuing to scour the compound for any signs the slavers weren't going to honor the deal.

Not that Heather expected trouble. Business depended on customers knowing they'd be safe, and six bags of salt was a fair trade for something that hadn't cost anything in the first place. Still, she was beginning to regret asking them to find Jake's boots. It seemed like an eternity before Jake finally appeared from the main building, pushed along by Danny, and with Joe bringing up the rear.

Joe ambled over to inspect the bags of salt laid out behind the car, opening a pocket knife pulled from somewhere in his jacket as he approached. Heather saw Russell's hands tense a little on the shotgun, but the older slaver didn't seem to notice as he bent and poked the knife into one end of the sacks, checking their contents. Apparently satisfied, Joe looked up and gave Heather a nod to show the deal was good, before waving Danny back, leaving Jake to his father.

Mr Green had used a coil of rope from the trunk to tie Jake's hands behind his back. Making a show of testing the bonds to be sure they were secure, he shoved Jake into the back of the Roadrunner, a hand on Jake's head. Heather scrambled in the other side, trying not to bump Jake's knees: she suspected he wouldn't fit well in the rear seat at the best of times, but especially not when he had his hands trussed behind his back. Mr Green climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine, and then Russell slid in to the seat in front of Heather.

Next to her, Jake started forward. "Who—?"

Heather realized Jake had no idea who Russell was, and had probably thought he was one of the slavers. She put a hand on Jake's shoulder, cutting off his surprised question. "Wait," she hissed. Now wasn't the moment for introductions.

In front of them, Danny swung open the gate that secured the compound as Mr Green put the car in gear and moved them off sedately. Heather sensed, from the way his hands gripped the wheel, that he wanted to gun the engine and hightail it out of there as fast as possible.

They were a couple hundred yards down the highway before Russell, who'd been peering into the side mirror, said quietly, "Okay, we're clear."

Heather puffed out a sigh of relief, feeling the tension drain out of her. They'd done it! They'd

gotten Jake back, and for nothing more than the loss of a few bags of salt. She turned away from watching out of the window next to her and met Jake's gaze. Something about the way he was looking at her told her he'd been looking at her for a while, and his expression made her stomach flutter. She realized she still had her hand on his arm, and she tightened her grip, not wanting to give up the reassurance of being able to touch him, tangible proof they'd gotten him back. He swayed toward her a little—.

Or maybe it was just the motion of the car. Because Jake had made it quite plain after she'd kissed him that he wasn't interested in her, hadn't he?

She tried to ignore the more recent memory of how he'd looked at her in the slaver's compound, and how he'd responded to her act. Because it *had* just been an act, hadn't it? She'd shocked herself with some of the things she'd come out with: the thing about the handcuffs, for goodness sake, and noticing he was—. She clamped down on the thought, going hot all over as she remembered what she'd done and what she'd said. But obviously *that* was the kind of woman Jake liked; he'd dated Emily for ten years, after all. Whereas geeky, boring Heather Lisinski just wasn't his kind of girl at all.

Dragging her gaze away from Jake's, she cleared her throat. "Uh. This is Russell." She flapped a hand in his direction. "He's from New Bern. We met at Black Jack when I ran into this guy I know, Ted. We grew up together over in New Bern. Ted's taking care of Dale."

Russell twisted round and half-held out his hand, before giving Jake a wry grin as he realized Jake's hands were still tied. Heather rolled her eyes at herself. "Oh. Let me...." She slid her hand down Jake's arm toward his wrists. He awkwardly wriggled round to present his back to her.

In the dim light in the back of the car, she squinted at the knots, trying to figure out how Mr Green had tied them before she began to loosen them. But even so, she seemed all thumbs once she began to pluck at the rope. After a moment, she realized she was shaking. She guessed it had finally sunk in that they'd done it: they were free and safe, all of them.

She fumbled on uselessly, her shaking fingers brushing against Jake's skin. "Sorry," she mumbled. "Sorry. I'll just...."

"Hey." She felt Jake turn a little, as if he was trying to peer over his shoulder at her. He twisted his left wrist so he could half-catch her fingers with his. "It's okay," he murmured. "Take your time."

Heather took a deep breath, and then another, calming herself. Her hands steadier, she managed to work the rope free. Jake wriggled back round, rolling his shoulders and rubbing his wrists. He met her gaze again. Before she could pull her hands back into her lap, he caught them in his, giving them a gentle squeeze. He opened his mouth slightly, and then shut it again, shaking his head as if he didn't know quite what to say.

"You okay, son?" Mr Green's question drew Jake's attention forward. Heather felt Jake stiffen; she guessed he'd caught his father's gaze through the rear mirror.

"Yeah." Jake disengaged one of his hands from Heather's and reached up and touched the back of his head. "Bit of a bump from where they knocked me out, but I'm okay." Mr Green let out a faint snort and Jake bent his head again. "Wasn't sure you were gonna come for me," he muttered.

Heather squeezed his hand tighter. "Of course we were going to come for you." She swallowed, wishing she didn't sound like she was about to cry. Because her chest had tightened at the thought

of Jake spending the past few hours crammed into that tiny dog kennel thinking his father despised him so much he wouldn't try to rescue him. Thinking Heather's declaration of indifference yesterday meant she wouldn't have turned Black Jack upside down to find him.

Jake kept his head bent, but she saw a faint flush color his cheeks. He ran his thumb over the back of her hand. "Thought you might not be able to find me," he admitted.

Heather decided it was probably best not to let him know how afraid she'd been they wouldn't find him either, or to gloss over the details of the part Ted, Russell and Mike had played. She settled for telling him, "We're got lucky."

Jake peered up from under his lashes at her, still stroking the back of her hand with his thumb. "Thought they might have gotten you too," he said softly.

Heather bit her lip, realizing he must have spent the past few hours worrying about her as well as himself. Not that it meant anything, she told herself hastily. He just felt responsible for her. But it made her insides feel strange to think he'd been thinking about her all that time.

"Yes, well, that didn't happen," Mr Green pointed out, sounding gruff. Heather felt Jake flinch. "Just as well. Not sure we'd've gotten you back without that act of Heather's."

Heather went hot again at the memory of the things she'd said and done. Of what Mr Green must think about her now. She couldn't help turning her head to look at him and met his gaze through the rear mirror. He crinkled his eyes at her in a smile. "You really are quite something, young lady."

Heather went even hotter as she realized Mr Green was actually impressed by what she'd done. She suddenly had a horrible vision of him telling everyone in Jericho about how she'd gotten Jake back, and how she'd talked about handcuffing him, and the bit where she'd commented on—.

Not daring to look at Jake, she pulled her hand out of his and wrapped her arms around herself.

There was silence in the car for a minute as they rumbled on down the deserted highway. Jake cleared his throat. "Those people back there...." He sounded a little hoarse.

"Son,...." There was a note of warning in his father's voice to drop the topic.

"We have salt." Jake scooted forward. "More salt than—."

"Jake." His father sounded exasperated. "We're not gonna solve anything by trying to buy everyone else in the place."

Jake reached out and gripped the back of his father's seat. "But—."

"Your father's right." Russell twisted in his seat so he could meet Jake's gaze. "If you buy them out or shut them down, there's only going to be someone else take their place."

Mr Green cleared his throat. "Son, I don't like leaving those people there any more than you do. But you can't save everyone."

Jake slumped back, throwing up his hands in a gesture of defeat that tore at Heather's heart. She'd been so focused herself on getting Jake back, on their success, that she'd pushed the rest of what she'd seen to the back of her mind. But now she remembered the terrified expression on the face of

the other boy she'd made a show of examining. It had been hard to look at him—much harder than looking at Jake, even though she knew Jake—because she'd known all along that she wasn't going to buy him, and that there were undoubtedly people out there who wanted him back as much she and Mr Green wanted Jake back. She wondered who would buy him, and if they'd treat him well or badly, and if he'd get a chance to escape.

Uncrossing her arms, she reached out to touch Jake's shoulder again.

He leaned into her touch, accepting the comfort she offered. Keeping his voice so low that she doubted his father or Russell could hear him, he said quietly, "There was this girl. Couldn't have been more than eighteen. This old guy came in and bought her."

Heather tightened her grip on his shoulder, her heart wrenching for the girl, and for Jake having to see that, because some things it was better not to know.

Before she could think of a reply, Russell announced, "We're here." He gestured to one side of the road.

Mr Green hit the blinker and swung the Roadrunner across and into an abandoned gas station. Peering forward, Heather saw the New Bern truck parked half out of sight behind the kiosk, with Ted, Mike and Dale huddled in the cab.

By the time Russell had climbed out the car and pulled forward the seat to let her get out, Ted had jumped down from the truck and made his way over to them. He reached for Heather's hand to help her out; as she straightened, he pulled her into an unexpected hug. She returned the hug awkwardly.

"Was worried about you," he murmured into her neck while he held her tightly.

"I'm okay." She pushed back from him a little so she could look into his face. "We're okay." She glanced over her shoulder, wondering where Jake had gotten to after he'd climbed out of the car, and then turned back to Ted. Just for a second, she caught a look of disappointment and longing on his face, before he quickly hid it. Although her mind was mostly occupied with other things right now, she was hit with the sudden realization that Ted was probably still carrying a torch for her, even all these years after High School.

Not knowing quite what to do with that news, she thrust it to one side. "We're okay," she repeated mechanically, even as Jake and Mr Green rounded the front of the car to join them.

oOo

Jake had known, even before his father spoke, that what he'd said was right and that they couldn't save everyone from the slavers, not with all the salt in the world. There was just something about the way Dad said things, though. Like Jake was too stupid or naïve to play politics with the grown-ups. Which clearly made him a disappointment to a father who'd been mayor of Jericho for more than twenty years. So Jake wasn't prepared for the way, when he got out the car, his father had pulled him into a brief, clumsy hug, muttering, "Glad we got you back, son."

Before he could respond properly, his father had broken away and was heading round the car. Jake followed, and then stopped dead as he realized he wasn't the only one who'd gotten a hug on stepping out of the Roadrunner. And this one looked like it was lasting rather longer than the one he'd gotten from his father. The guy—Jake supposed he was Heather's friend from New Bern, what had she said his name was?—still had his hands on Heather's waist, and she still gripped his arms as

she looked up at him.

A wave of red-hot jealousy surged through Jake, and he could no longer ignore what had already become pretty obvious to him back in the slavers' compound. He liked Heather. A lot. And not just as a friend.

At his side, he was half-aware of his father thanking Russell for his help. Then Heather turned her head and caught Jake's eye. She blushed and dropped her gaze. A moment later, she and the guy had separated, stepping back from each other. Jake forced himself to relax, taking a deep breath and uncurling the fists he'd formed unconsciously on seeing the two of them together.

The guy held out his hand to Jake, apparently unaware of Jake's hostility. "Ted Lewis. Glad to see they got you back okay."

Jake accepted the hand. It was hardly Ted's fault that Jake had been too stupid to notice what was in front of him—or, rather, too cowardly to face up to it.

Ted nodded in Heather's direction. "Heather here tells me you were at Black Jack looking for parts for a wind turbine."

Jake half-glanced in her direction, making sure not to catch her eye. "Yeah." He'd messed that up real good, hadn't he? Even if they went back to Black Jack tomorrow, they only had two bags of salt left, and he didn't think Gray would authorize the gas for another trip.

"Well, we've been talking," Ted smiled down at Heather, and Jake again had to squash down the urge to take a swing at him, "and we reckon we can maybe convert part of our old brake assembly plant to build what you need."

"And I know the town could use a good source of salt," Russell put in.

"Wait." Jake put up a hand to stop the conversation, while he tried to make sense of what they were proposing. "I thought we went to Black Jack because we needed to *buy* a governor?"

Heather gave a slight shrug. "Ted and I reckon we can figure it out between us." She lifted her head and met Jake's gaze. "But to do that, I need to go with them. To New Bern."

"What?" Jake felt like he'd been punched in the gut. Heather was leaving? Just like that? "Now? Can't you... come back to Jericho and do that?"

Heather puffed out a breath. "You think Mr Anderson and Mr Carmichael would let me? I've been trying for weeks to get them to let me work on it."

"Oh." Jake realized that if he'd actually spoken to Heather in the last month, he would have known that. Would have maybe been able to convince Gray and Harry to let her help. And then this whole trip might have been unnecessary.

"Besides, Ted and I," Heather lifted a hand and pushed a lock of hair back from her face, "we've worked on a few things like this in the past, so...."

Jake had a vision of Heather and Ted bent over a workbench, heads close together, talking quietly and earnestly. He swallowed hard and managed to croak, "Okay."

His father cleared his throat. "Why don't we give you guys those bags of salt we have left. Kind of like a downpayment. Ted, Russell, wanna help me here?" He gave Jake a slap on the shoulder as he set off for the rear of the car. Russell followed him. After a moment's hesitation, so did Ted.

Heather stepped closer to Jake. He shoved his hands into his pockets, to stop himself from reaching out and taking her in his arms and begging her not to go. Head bent, he couldn't help muttering, half to himself, "If we'd brought back what Jericho needed...."

"We did." Jake looked up at Heather's touch on his arm. She smiled at him, and his heart leaped. "Jake, we can find other ways to make power. Ted and I can figure out the turbines. But I'm not sure Jericho will last more than a few weeks without you around."

He dropped his head and snorted. "Not sure about that." He lifted his head, needing to meet her gaze again. "I think you're the one we can't do without. The one—" He stopped on the edge of saying what he wanted to say, because he wasn't sure she'd want to hear it. Not after the way he'd treated her.

Heather went a little red. She let out a nervous chuckle. "It won't be for very long. Just a few days."

"Just a few days?"

"Uh-huh." Heather nodded. She tilted her head and gave him a half-grin. "You worried about me?"

Jake's thoughts went back to when he'd been the one heading off to parts unknown, and Heather had shown her feelings by flinging herself at him and kissing him.

"Come back in one piece?" he offered, reflecting her own words back at her. The slight hesitation before she nodded told him she'd recognized them. And when he made a move toward her, she came willingly into his arms, accepting his embrace. He buried his face in her neck. "When you get back....," he whispered.

"We'll talk," she promised, her breath warm on his cheek.

He went on holding her, reluctant to let her go, until she gently pushed away from him. Without meeting his eye, she turned and headed for the truck, where Ted was waiting to usher her into the cab. But once she was settled in the cab, she sought out Jake's gaze again, holding it as the truck pulled away.

Feeling like he had a stone in his chest, Jake leaned against the Roadrunner, watching the truck's taillights disappear into the dark.

Just for a few days, she'd said. And then she'd be back, and they'd have a chance to fix everything.

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. Some lines of dialogue are taken from the episode 1.13 *Black Jack* written by Jonathan E. Steinberg and Dan Shotz.