

Coulda, Shoulda, Woulda

by Tanaqui

Jake glanced across at Eric, riding shotgun, and thought it was almost like the old days: the two of them off to save the world. Except, back then, they'd been a couple of scrawny kids running round the yard, acting out dumb TV shows like the A-Team or the Dukes of Hazzard. 'Course, Jake was older, so he got to be the hero, while Eric got to be the sidekick, but Eric'd never seemed to mind.

Jake snuck another glance at his brother, head turned away, staring out at the empty landscape rolling by. When had he stopped being a hero to Eric? When had he stopped being even someone his brother wasn't ashamed to hang around with?

Jake had a sudden flash of Eric standing in City Hall, turning to cast that glance at their mom that had told Jake just how much pressure she'd put on him to ask the family embarrassment to be his best man.

He pushed the memory away and concentrated on holding the car steady, the blacktop thrumming under the tires as the Roadrunner ate up the miles.

He wondered what kind of trouble they might run into. At least the roads were good; it wasn't like Afghanistan or Iraq, where you fought all the time to keep the truck from lurching in the potholes. Where you fought off the constant fear that a broken fuel line or axle would leave you stranded somewhere you really didn't want to be stuck. Even a flat tire could be a death sentence, and that wasn't counting the IEDs....

Jake squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, trying to shake off another jumble of images and sounds and pain: Freddy, pulling him out of the cab of his truck, none too gently, but murmuring "it's okay, Jake, it's gonna be okay", while Jake gritted his teeth and tried not to cry, because it felt like his goddamn hip had been blown off, and there was blood *everywhere*.

Then he was the one holding Freddy, and the blood was Freddy's, and it was too late, always too late. Thinking, as Freddy sucked in his last breath, that he shoulda taken a swing at Hicks. Or just told him to go to hell, got the hell outta there, and dealt with whatever came later.

He gripped the wheel tighter and hoped the sonofabitch had still been hanging around in San Diego when the bombs went off. And that Anna hadn't made it to Houston—Gray'd said Houston got hit, too—and had made it somewhere safe.

A change in the engine note brought him out of his black thoughts with a start. His knuckles were white on the wheel, and he'd pushed down on the gas pedal, falling back into the old, familiar habit of driving as fast as he could, to nowhere in particular, as long as it wasn't *here*.

Letting out a long breath, he eased back on the gas. Much as he wanted to get to Rogue River quickly, the last thing they needed was to run out of gas on the way back. He needed to be smarter than that.

At least they had a decent car, although he hated that Em had got dragged into all of this. Hated that she'd been forced to face her dad, and been reminded about what'd happened to Chris. He tried not

to think about how Jonah had been right—he should have looked after Chris better—or about how he'd abandoned Em when she needed him most.

Instead he concentrated on the feel of the car as she ate up the miles. He snorted to himself. Jonah might be a terrible father and a pathetic excuse for a human being, but he was a damn good mechanic. The car felt in better shape than when he'd driven her from Denver. And a hell of a lot better than Heather's Dodge. Not that he didn't think they'd've made it to Rogue River and back in it; he knew Heather was a damn good mechanic, too, and she'd been pretty upfront about what the truck was—or wasn't—capable of. Besides, the way she'd flung herself at him....

That had been... unexpected, to say the least, though he guessed the signs had been there; he'd just been too distracted by everything else that was going on to notice. And maybe too convinced there couldn't be anyone in Jericho who didn't know him for the screw-up he was. But Heather didn't really know him, did she? Didn't know him well enough to know he hurt everyone he ever cared about in the end.

Yeah, everyone. Even Grandpa—who'd aided and abetted Jake in more crazy schemes than he could count, right back to teaching him to fly his cropduster when he could barely reach the pedals—had run out of patience with him in the end. Jake hadn't been at all surprised to learn he'd made Dad co-signatory on the money he left.

As for Dad? God, he didn't know where to start....

Jake pressed his lips into a thin line, his chest tightening like it had as he'd watched his mom and April working on Dad. Like it had when his Mom had ordered them to go. God, let them find the meds they needed. Let them get back in time....

Because he maybe owed Mom more than anyone. She'd gone on loving him unquestioningly, no matter what crap he put the family through. But just because she didn't yell at him didn't mean she wasn't hurt. Didn't mean he hadn't caused her more pain than he could ever make up for.

Yeah, he'd done a real good job of hurting everyone who ever cared about him. And now it turned out Heather cared....

And he liked her back. Even if it had taken her kissing him to make him realize how much. Because there was so much to like. Right from the moment he'd met her, she'd shown she was gutsy and smart, but it turned out she was funny and sharp, too, though there wasn't a mean bone in her body: even when she teased him, there was no malice in it. And maybe she wasn't drop-dead gorgeous like Em was, but she was still pretty. It had been no hardship, no hardship at all, to kiss her back.

And it would be no hardship to carry on pursuing everything that kiss promised. Right up until the point where her sweet nature would be soured by whatever new and spectacular way he found to mess up.

"Jake...."

"I see it." Eric's warning broke into his thoughts, but he hadn't been so lost in them he hadn't noticed. All those trips up and down Route Irish had taught him to stay sharp even while he let his mind wander. A quick glance had shown him the tire marks on the road, and that the SUV was a recent enough model that it had been run off the road before the pulse. Which meant the woman was well beyond any help they could offer.

He didn't like having to dispel Eric's illusions, but if that was the worst they saw today, they'd be lucky. And with dad's life hanging in the balance, they couldn't afford to get soft.

As they pushed on down the road, he took a deep breath and came to another decision. This world they were living in now was going to strip away everyone's innocence a little bit, but he wasn't going to add to that if he could help it. If he and Eric made it back to Jericho, the best thing he could do if he cared about Heather Lisinski—really cared about her—was to stay as far away from her as possible.

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