

Handsome is as handsome does

by Tanaqui

Heather tried to keep the smile off her face. It was hard to tell who was more splattered with mud: the Roadrunner, who'd dug herself several inches deep in the muddy track leading to the ranch; or Jake, who'd clearly been trying for a while to get her out.

The sound of Charlotte pulling up on the small concrete apron where the track met the road made Jake look up from messing about around one of the wheels. Trying to put something underneath it that would give him some traction, Heather guessed. Even from the best part of twenty five yards away, and in the rapidly falling dusk, she could see the mixture of embarrassment and annoyance on his face.

Leaving Charlotte's engine running and her headlamps on, Heather climbed out of the pickup. Jake abandoned what he was doing—she could see now that he'd been trying to slide a board under the tire—and began to squelch his way along the edge of the track. This morning, both cars had crunched over frosted peaks of mud, but there'd been a sudden thaw midday and, on its heels, a heavy rain shower. The track was now at least a couple inches deep in mud.

Heather stood on the edge of the concrete and called down to him. "Got a towline? We'll pull you out." She jerked her head back towards Charlotte.

Jake nodded. "There's one back at the house. I'll—" He gestured wearily back past the Roadrunner and began to turn away.

"Wait." He stopped and looked back at her. She flapped her hand. "See if you can find a couple of feed sacks to put under the tires. They'll work better than boards."

He waved a hand in acknowledgment and set off to cover the sticky hundred yards to the house. While she waited for him to return, she turned Charlotte and lined her up so they could hitch the towline. She looked out across the blacktop. It was about ten yards to the far side, and she knew it dropped off into a steep ditch. Since she had no desire to drive into that and risk getting Charlotte stuck as well, she reckoned they'd need to shorten the rope at least once—unless Jake managed to get enough traction once they got the Roadrunner moving to reverse the rest of the way out by himself.

Jake rapping on the window startled her out of a pleasant daydream about warming up with dinner and a drink, and maybe a long soak in a hot bath, when she finally got inside.

"Hey." Climbing out, she reached up and kissed his cheek, careful to make sure she didn't transfer any of the mud coating him to her work clothes.

"Where shall I...?" He gestured with the end of the rope he was holding.

Heather sighed. "The bumper, I guess? But if it gets pulled off saving your girl's ass, you're buying my girl a new one, Jake Green."

He gave her a hurt look. "You're really enjoying this, aren't you?"

She smirked. "After all the things you've said about Charlotte? You bet I am."

He huffed for a moment, and then relaxed and gave her one of his lopsided smiles. "You two get me out, I'll never say a bad word about her again. I promise."

Turning away, he headed for the back of the truck and began hitching the line.

"Sound your horn when you're ready," she told him. "Oh, and when you start moving, turn the wheel a bit either way to—."

"I know." He grimaced at her as he finished securing the line. "I'm not a complete idiot." Straightening, he glanced ruefully back down the track at the Roadrunner. "Current appearances to the contrary."

"I know." She nodded and gave him a conciliatory smile.

He set off back towards the Roadrunner, while she climbed back into the pickup. Traffic was light at this time out here—there still weren't nearly as many cars running as there had been before the bombs—so she only had to wait for one car to pass once Jake signaled he was ready. Pressing carefully on the gas, she eased Charlotte forward, feeling the resistance as the towline went taut and, slowly, began to drag the Roadrunner out. Once they got her moving, Jake managed to keep her going until he reached the concrete, where he swung the car to one side.

They unhitched the towline and left her parked there, while Heather drove them both carefully down the track, keeping the pickup moving steadily. She wasn't surprised the Roadrunner had gotten stuck; even Charlotte was struggling for grip.

Making his way up the steps to the front door, Jake looked back at the dim shape of the Roadrunner out on the road. He sighed. "I guess I should trade her in for something more practical."

Heather looked at him in surprise: the Roadrunner was so much a part of Jake that she couldn't imagine him without her. "It's not usually a problem, is it?" she asked, watching him unlace his mud-caked boots, while she unlocked the door. "Unless there's something you've not been telling me? I mean, we don't get many days when the mud's this bad."

"No, but—." Jake shrugged as he followed her inside. "What if you and Charlotte aren't around to come to the rescue?" He gave her an embarrassed smile.

Heather chuckled as she laid her purse on the table and hung up her coat. "We'll buy you a bag of kitty litter to keep in the trunk." Seeing his puzzled look, she laughed. "You put it under the wheels and it soaks up the water and goes hard, and then you can get some grip. Little trick my dad taught me."

"Okay." He sounded relieved, although he was frowning down at his mud-splattered clothes. "I guess I should—."

Heather waggled her eyebrows at him. "I could help you with that, too?" she offered, with a grin.

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