

# The Way Things Were

by Tanaqui

*I'm fine.* Heather's reassurance rang falsely in her own ears. She shuffled a step sideways and turned her head away so she couldn't see the deputy from New Bern any more. In some ways, that didn't improve things. She found herself looking straight into Jake's concerned gaze. His hand still lightly gripped her arm, reminding her that it had felt good—more than good—to be hugged by him.

She still wasn't quite sure what to make of how ridiculously pleased to see her he seemed to be. She was trying very hard to squash the little voice inside her that wondered whether, in the months she'd been away, he'd begun to regret ignoring her after she kissed him. Because his arms around her had confirmed one thing for her: she still hadn't gotten over him in the least.

But she sure as anything wasn't about to make a fool of herself again.

"So," she chuckled nervously, "I was told I have to register...?"

"Right." Jake was still looking at her in a slightly distracted way, a frown furrowing his forehead. He shook himself. "Oh, right. Yeah." He steered her along the counter—thankfully away from the New Bern deputy; looking back, she saw he was still giving her that creepy look—and nodded at one of the soldiers. "There's a form...."

"And then I need to go home." Heather accepted the form the soldier offered her. She looked around blankly for a pen, aware that Jake still had his hand under her elbow. Was still standing way too close. "Assuming I still...."

"Here."

Jake had swooped along the counter and snagged a ballpoint lying on top of some papers. Somehow, he'd managed it while *still* holding on to her. He held out the pen to her, and she took it with a muttered, "Thanks." It was only when she bent over the form and began filling it out that he let go of her arm to give her room to work.

"About that. Going home...." He leaned on the counter; a quick glance up told her he was watching her write. "We had some break-ins over the winter...."

She stopped in the middle of writing down her place of birth, the bottom loop of the B turning jagged, and twisted to look at him. "Is everything...?" She imagined people pawing through her things, breaking the glass in the pictures of her parents, maybe chucking her precious books on the fire....

"It's okay." He reached out and gave her arm a squeeze, his hand lingering. "They didn't do too much damage. Mostly looking for food." He gave her a reassuring smile. "We fixed the window and tidied up the mess."

Heather blushed. "Not sure I left the place that tidy anyway," she mumbled, bending back to carry on filling out the form. "Thought I'd be back sooner."

Jake's hand tightened on her arm. "Thought for a while you weren't coming back at all," he murmured. "Eric...."

His voice trailed off, but she didn't really notice. The mention of Eric's name reminded her of all the questions she'd had churning inside her as she rode the supply convoy into town. The surprise of seeing Jake, of the way he'd greeted her, had driven them from her mind, but now they came crowding back. It was her turn to exclaim, "Oh my god!" She peered back up at Jake. "Eric! Is he okay? After we got separated...."

"He's fine." Jake gave her a weak smile. "As much as any of us are. Constantino's deputies roughed him up a little trying to get information out of him, but he's okay." He spoke the last words absently, as if the topic was unimportant. His intent gaze still searched her face, while he stroked his hand gently up and down her arm. "He told me you were dead," he said at last.

It looked like it hurt him to say the words, even though she patently *wasn't*. Suddenly, his enthusiasm for seeing her back in town made a lot more sense. It was nothing more than relief that she wasn't dead, and that he didn't have to carry the guilt of letting her go to New Bern in the first place.

She focused her attention back on the form, very glad that she hadn't given in to temptation and flung herself at him. She should just get the form finished—thank goodness it wasn't very long and she was nearly done—and get home, and get away.

"How's everyone else?" She added her signature to the bottom of the form, along with the date.

He didn't answer for a moment. When she'd returned the form to the soldier with a nod of thanks, she turned to look up at him. His jaw was set and his eyes glittered with anger.

"Dad...."

It was her turn to reach up and squeeze his arm briefly. "I heard. I'm sorry."

He twisted his head away. "Constantino...." Heather saw him swallow. "He's going to pay for that. For everything he's done to us."

Heather turned her head away as well, because it was too hard to look at Jake. Too hard to see all that anger and pain, and know there was nothing she could do about it. Her gaze fell on where the New Bern deputy was being hauled away, feet scuffing as he was dragged by one arm across the office. She just wanted to forget. Forget the fear that had tied knots in her stomach: not just for her own safety, but for all the people she'd left behind in Jericho.

Forget, too, how—back at Camp Liberty, when she'd been badgering them yet again for a chance to return to Jericho—they'd shown her the casualty list, and she'd read *Green, Johnston Jacob*, and her heart had seemed to stop. And then she'd realized it meant Johnston, and for a split second had been *glad*.

She licked her lips and said again, without looking back at Jake, "I should go home."

"Yeah." He sucked in a deep breath; when she did look at him, she saw he'd masked his anger. "I'll walk you." She started to object, but he waved her protest away. "You might need some help getting in...."

"I still have my keys." For some reason, she'd always carried them with her. A little connection to home, she guessed. That habit had allowed her to salvage them when everything had gone wrong in New Bern, and then on the road. "Unless you had to change the locks?" She raised her eyebrows at Jake.

He shook his head. "Someone should still go with you."

She was too tired to argue with him. She suspected taking care of her house was a way of making him feel better about not taking care of her—as if it had ever been *his* responsibility!—and she didn't want to make him feel any worse.

The trip out of City Hall and down Main Street was slow: they ran into some people she knew, mothers of children she'd taught. After they'd managed to extricate themselves from the breathless excitement of the second, which was at least slightly better than the purient concern of the first, and walked on, Jake put a hand on her arm to catch her attention.

"We'll have to tell Emily you're back. She'll be so pleased to know you're okay." He smiled at Heather. "I'll tell her when I get home."

The meaning behind his words took a moment to sink in. Once it did, her feet faltered. *When I get home*. He expected Emily to be there when he got home. Which could only mean....

Well, Heather had been gone a long time, and she'd always known Jake still cared about Emily. And she'd come to suspect Emily still had feelings for him, too. So it wasn't really a surprise, was it? There was really no reason for her heart to be hammering or her eyes to feel hot with tears, because, really, Jake owed her nothing.

Trying to hide her distress, she delved in her coat pocket for her keys. "How's your mom doing?" she mumbled.

"Okay, I guess." A quick look told her he'd buried his hands in his own coat pockets and hunched his shoulders. "It's been hard...."

"Right." She suddenly realized why people had mouthed all those hateful, hurtful platitudes at *her* when first her mom and then her dad died a few years back. It was because there wasn't anything good to say, but you felt you should say something anyway.

They walked the last few yards to her house and up the path in silence. Stepping onto the porch, she remembered how, almost the last time she'd stood here, it had been with Jake: he'd come with her to help collect some books on making biodiesel, and she'd discovered the shameful secret of his hole-y sock, and he'd fallen asleep on her couch while she'd darned it for him with a smiley face. For a moment, for an hour or two, it had felt like they could be friends, just friends, and it would be okay.

She turned the key in the lock and opened the door.

Inside it smelled a little musty, like maybe it had gotten damp. Everything was familiar and yet strange. Maybe it was the fact that, when they'd tidied up from the burglary, they really had tidied up. Hovering in the doorway, she saw that the afghan she'd laid over Jake as he slept was neatly folded on one end of the couch, and the books she'd left scattered about were piled tidily on the table.

"Is everything all right?" Jake sounded anxious. She was aware of him close behind her, peering over her shoulder. "I can show you where they broke in."

"Thanks." She took a couple of steps forward, and he followed, stepping around her and leading her towards the kitchen. It was very dark; when he cautiously flicked on the switch and flooded the room with light, she saw the window was boarded up.

She looked around, seeing her things, but all in the wrong places. Taking a step forward, she picked up her coffee grinder, the hand-cranked one that had belonged to her grandmother. She turned it around and decided it looked okay. Maybe a dent in the handle that hadn't been there before, like it had been dropped on the floor. She'd wouldn't know for sure until she tried it out. 'Course, there wouldn't be any beans....

Jake was still talking. He'd stepped up to the far end of the kitchen and put his hand on the boarded-up window. "Maybe now J&R are here, you can get some new glass," he was saying. He turned back to her and peered at her. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, trying to give him a reassuring smile that didn't feel like it was very successful. "I'm fine." She cleared her throat. "Just... things aren't quite how I left them."

He gave an amused snort, and she knew he was thinking what she was: that was the understatement of the year.

"I'm fine," she repeated, this time with a little more conviction. She would be; she'd survived worse than her kitchen being a mess or discovering Jake and Emily had hooked up again. She could fix what could be fixed, and learn to live with the rest. Just like—. "Oh!" Another thought struck her. "Is Charlotte okay?"

"Char—?" He frowned in confusion, and then his expression cleared and he chuckled. "Your truck?"

She nodded mutely at him, her voice stolen by the way he suddenly seemed more like the Jake she remembered: his eyes were warm and his expression more relaxed as his amusement at Charlotte temporarily replaced the anger and tension (the grief, she reminded herself) within him.

"You left her at the garage?" When she nodded again, he grinned reassuringly. "Then I'm sure she's fine." He tilted his head. "Other than sitting there for a few months, I guess?"

She nodded. Yeah, that wouldn't have done her any good. She put the coffee grinder back down and took a step back, and he took it as his cue to leave. As she closed the door behind him, she made up her mind to go over to the garage that afternoon and see if she could get Charlotte started. Might take a bit of work to get her running smoothly again, but she'd be okay. Yeah, she'd be okay.

**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.