

Thunder Road

By Scribblesinink

Parked neatly against the curb, the blue Plymouth gleamed in the October sun. It looked so harmless, sitting there by the side of the road, but Jake approached it warily. He'd recognized it right away: it was Em's dad's car, Jonah Prowse's. Ever since her father got himself released from Lansing a couple months ago, he'd been visiting Emily and her mother once or twice a week.

Tryin' to be a family, Emily would explain, her tone bitter.

Jake wasn't too happy about seeing the car there. Each time her dad came 'round, Em ended up miserable and testy, and Jake usually bore the brunt of her foul mood—at least until he managed to distract her enough to make her laugh again.

He hovered on the sidewalk, hesitating. He knew better than to go into the house while Jonah was there. No, best wait until he was gone. Instead, he circled the car, trailing an admiring hand along the edge of the glossy roof. No matter what Em said about him, Jonah sure had gotten himself a nice set of wheels. The Roadrunner was a beauty: all sleek lines and shiny chrome, not a spot of rust in sight. Jake closed his eyes, hearing her purr in his mind, imagining the vibrations of the powerful engine beneath his hands....

"Hey!"

Jake's eyes snapped open and he twisted around, snatching his hand back guiltily.

Jonah loomed over him. "Watch the paint, kid."

Jake took a step back and narrowed his eyes. Up close, Jonah didn't look half as terrible as Em always made him out to be. Dressed in jeans, and with stubble showing on his jaw, he looked just like the rest of the men in town. And from the way he smirked at Jake, he seemed rather amused.

"You like her?"

Jake offered him a confused look.

"The car, I mean."

"Sure." Jake shrugged. "'69 Roadrunner, Chrysler B V8 engine, 300 horsepower.... What's not to like?"

Jonah threw his head back and laughed. "I see you know your cars." He crossed his arms in front of his chest, pinning Jake with another look. "Emily's boyfriend, right? Johnston Green's son?"

"Um, yeah."

"Huh." Jonah tilted his head a little, sharp eyes scrutinizing Jake.

Unsure what to make of the look, Jake stared back, fighting the urge to scuff his feet and glance away. He'd heard of Jonah by reputation, had seen him around town a few times, but never talked to him. He knew what everybody knew: when he and Em were kids, Jonah had worked at the mine, but something had happened, and he'd gone to jail. Jake's own father wasn't too well pleased about Jonah coming back to Jericho after he was released, and Emily always refused to talk about her dad; she'd leave in a huff whenever the subject came up in talk at the Pizza Garden.

"Got a name, kid?"

"Jake."

"So, Jake. You got a car?"

"No." Jake squinted into the sun, somewhat chagrined. He didn't even have an unrestricted license, let alone a car, and his dad never let him drive anything but his mom's old truck.

"But you do know how to drive one, right?"

"Yeah. Of course." Though, with the time Dad had available for him, he'd be seventeen before he could chalk up enough hours of supervised driving to get a full license. Why they couldn't let Grandpa teach him, Jake had no clue. Wasn't like his grandfather hadn't already taught him the basics of driving back when he was eleven, even before he showed him how to fly the crop duster. But, for some reason, that didn't seem to count.

"Wanna take her for a spin?"

"Wha—?" Jake blinked up at Jonah, convinced he'd misheard. He had a sudden vision of himself behind the wheel, racing along Kansas' highways, the even rumble of the V8 engine masking the hum of the tires on the asphalt.

Jonah must've caught the look on his face, because he didn't wait for Jake to say any

more. "Here, catch." He threw Jake the keys. "We can chat along the way."

"Chat?"

"Hey, I like to know who my girl hangs out with." Jonah shrugged. "And I got a package in the trunk that needs delivering. Figured I'd kill two birds with one stone. Added bonus: you get to drive a real car. Unless you got better things to do?"

"Um...." Jake glanced over his shoulder at Emily's house. She wasn't really expecting him until later. "Yes. No...", he stammered, kicking himself inwardly. "I mean, I would like to take her out. If...."

"Hop in, then."

"Really?" Jake couldn't help but grin at Jonah.

Jonah shot him a stern look. "I never say anything I don't mean." He walked over and flung an arm across Jake's shoulder, before steering him over to the driver's side. "You remember that, and you and I'll get along just fine."

oOo

Several hours later, the Roadrunner rolled back into Jericho. A couple blocks from Em's house, Jake pulled over and killed the engine. With a sigh of regret, he got out. Jonah did the same and rounded the car, before sliding behind the wheel in Jake's place. He turned the ignition and the engine roared back to life.

"Jake." Jonah leaned out of the window. "When you get your license, come see me. I could use a kid like you."

"Would I get to drive your car again?"

Jonah chuckled. "You work for me, and maybe I'll do you one better: maybe I'll give her to you."

When Jake shot him an incredulous look, Jonah winked. "If you're dating my girl, might as well do it in style, right?"

Jake was left gaping after him while Jonah slipped on his sunglasses, put the car into gear and drove off, the brake lights flaring briefly before he turned the corner.

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