

Back To School

By Scribblesinink

The big house in The Pines huddled beneath the thick clouds of the winter's day. Another storm was brewing, promising snow, and Jake pulled his hood a little tighter against the gusts of freezing wind beating against him. The house appeared abandoned: windows shuttered and drapes drawn tight. That would have worried him, except he knew such signs meant little in Jericho these days: with no power, and firewood being scarce, most people kept their curtains closed day and night: it helped keep the cold out, and what little heat the hearths provided in.

Still, he felt a twinge of concern as he hopped up the steps to knock on the front door. Several days had passed since Roger had been chased out of town and he'd meant to check on Emily sooner. But with Harry struggling to run things at City Hall, and the relationship between the refugees and the people of Jericho still strained, he hadn't managed to find the time.

At first, there was no reply to his knock, and Jake felt his concern rising. Emily had taken Roger's departure hard, and he really should've come by to see her before today.... He rapped at the door again, a bit more insistently this time. Just as he was about to go round and try the back door, he sensed more than heard movement inside. With a *snick*, the lock clicked open, and a bleary-eyed Emily peered out through a four inch gap.

"Hey." He couldn't quite keep the relief out of his voice.

"Oh, hey." She widened the gap and wrapped the pale blue cardigan she was wearing more tightly around herself. "Sorry, I didn't hear you." She yawned, running a hand through tangled hair. "Must've fallen asleep on the couch."

Jake checked her up and down, trying not to be too obvious about it. She looked pale and worn, her eyes red as if she'd been crying. "I, um, came to see how you're doing...."

"I'm okay." She pulled herself together with a visible effort. "Wanna come in? I could make us some tea."

Jake didn't really want tea, but it looked as though Emily could use some company, so he nodded and followed her inside. The house was chilly and dark; the small fire in the living room struggled in vain to keep it heated. On the sofa, a blanket lay crumpled in a corner against the cushions. He supposed that was where she'd been napping.

A couple minutes later, Jake found himself sitting at the dining table, his jacket draped

over the back of his chair, while Em poured hot water over a handful of tea leaves. After she finished, she took a seat across from him, toying with a spoon. Except for the soft crackle of the fire, the room was quiet while they waited for the tea to steep.

Jake cleared his throat. "How are you holding up?"

Emily gave a small shrug. "It's.... I'd just found him again, and now...." Her voice caught.

"I'm sorry." Jake wanted to reach for her, but he wasn't sure how the gesture would be received. "You know I didn't want this. I wish—."

She leaned forward, putting her hand on his wrist. Her fingers were cold. "It's not your fault." She offered him a sad smile. "Don't worry 'bout me; I'll be alright."

He took her hand, warming it between his own palms. "Once things get back to normal, I'm sure he'll come back for—."

"Jake...." She drew a shuddering breath. "Please don't."

Though more haunted, the expression on her face was as skeptical as the one she'd worn when he told her, back in September, the day of the attacks, that he'd been in the Navy. He gave her a quick nod of understanding: *you're right*. He shouldn't be trying to sell her lies and give her false hope. She deserved better; she deserved the truth. Roger's chances to survive on his own, alone, in the middle of winter.... They were slim to none, and they both knew it. Even with the gun Jake had slipped him, hidden in the coat, he didn't think they'd ever see Roger again—or even learn what happened to him. Roger's only hope was if he could make it to New Bern and find Heather or Eric.

Emily withdrew her hand from Jake's grip and poured them some tea. After putting the pot down, she wrapped her fingers around her mug, sipping from the hot brew carefully. Jake glanced around the room. An open textbook rested on the corner of the table, with a notepad filled with scribbles in Em's hand beside it. He indicated it with a nod. "What were you working on?"

She followed his gaze. "Lesson plans." She drew the notepad toward her. "I was thinking, maybe it's time we opened up the school again."

"You want to do that now?" Jake raised a brow in surprise.

"Yeah. We should start getting things back to normal, you know." She looked back at him and shrugged ruefully. "Or as normal as can be."

He pondered her suggestion for a moment. It was actually a good idea. At the very least, it'd distract Emily from Roger leaving. He leaned forward. "We can't afford to heat the school," he thought out loud, "but I'm guessing you could use the conference room at City Hall?"

A genuine smile, small though it was, flitted across Emily's face. "That'd be great. You think Gray'll agree to it?"

Jake snorted and picked up his own tea. "Gray's not really in a position to object much."

"Yeah, I guess so." Em looked away. She put down her mug and started tracing its rim with a finger. "How is he?"

"He's gonna be fine," Jake assured her. "You just wait. Before you can say *Gray Anderson for a new Jericho*—," he mimicked Gray at his most orotund, "—he's gonna be his usual pompous self again, and making Harry's life miserable."

Emily giggled softly behind her hand, and Jake let out a breath as a little of the tension that was his constant companion these days ebbed away; apparently, he'd been more worried than he'd realized. But Em was gonna be all right; he was certain of that now.

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