

Be All My Sins Remembered

By Scribblesinink

From the back yard, the sound of children's laughter rang through the quiet of the Saturday morning, rising and falling on the gentle breeze. Jake was pruning the apple tree near the paddock, birds chittering high above him in the treetops and the spring sun on his back warm but not yet hot. As he snipped off another new shoot, he thought that maybe he should take Mikey up in the Cessna later that afternoon. The boy reminded him a lot of himself at that age; perhaps he'd take over the business some day.

Green and Son Aviation.... That sure had a nice sound to it. Jake chortled at his own flight of fancy. Fact of the matter was, he didn't really care what Mikey—or any of his children—did once they grew up, as long as it was something that they enjoyed doing.

Jake was ripped from his daydream when a shrill cry shattered the peace of the day. His father's instinct recognized Lily's voice even before her shout cut off mid-shriek. The silence that followed was all the heavier for the abrupt end to the noise: for a long second, the world seemed to hold its breath; even the birds had stilled their song. Then Mikey started hollering, his voice filled with panic, screaming for his mom and dad to please come quick.

Letting go of the clippers, Jake jumped from the ladder and sprinted around the house as fast as his feet could carry him, heart thumping against his ribs. Rounding the corner, he skittered to a halt. Lily was lying on her back near the fence, her dark hair fanned out around her face, her eyes closed, not moving. Blood thundered in Jake's ears, the back yard narrowing to a single focal point.

She looked just like—.

oOo

Hearing her daughter's cry, Heather pulled out from the engine she'd been working on so fast she clipped her head on the hood. Not caring about the pain that brought tears springing to her eyes, she dropped the wrench and snatched a rag. Wiping grease from her hands, she dashed off in the direction of the scream. Reaching the back yard, she stopped and briefly surveyed the scene.

Lily was sitting in the dirt, looking dazed, as if she wasn't quite sure how she got there. Mikey crouched next to her, his face red. Catching sight of his mother, he jumped up, snatched her hand and pulled her along the last few feet to his sister's side. But it was Jake who really scared her. Her husband seemed rooted to the dirt, a couple of feet away from

where Lily sat, the expression on his face one of such utter horror that it made Heather's blood run cold. Though he was looking directly at his daughter, Heather was quite sure he wasn't seeing Lily at all. What the...?

Before she could finish the thought, her daughter flung herself into her arms, the child's face scrunching up as she started to wail. Heather glanced over at her younger son. "What happened?"

"She fell off the fence." Now that his mother was there to take care of things, Mikey was looking on in fascination. "What's wrong with Dad?"

"I don't know," Heather replied absently, quickly checking her daughter over for injuries. Aside from a scrape on her leg and an egg-sized bump on the back of her skull, Lily seemed all right, even though she was crying in big, heaving sobs. Heather figured it was more from shock than anything else.

Hugging her baby girl close, she murmured soothingly in Lily's hair. Looking up, she saw her elder son had run over from the barn, no doubt alerted by the same scream that had brought her and Jake running. "JJ, get a dish towel, and some ice from the fridge."

"Yes, Mom." JJ darted away, and she watched him go for a moment. He'd been mucking out the stables; under normal circumstances she'd have told him to clean up before going inside. But the circumstances were anything but normal. She twisted around to look at Jake again. He'd come back from wherever he'd been, but his face was ashen, and he looked ready to throw up.

"You okay?"

He slowly found her gaze and nodded miserably. "I thought...." He swallowed, and tried again. "I thought she was dead."

Then he turned around and did throw up.

oOo

Late that same evening, Heather found Jake outside on the porch, slouched on the bench, an unopened bottle of beer dangling from his hand. He was looking out over the paddock, but she doubted he saw it. She sat down next to him, putting a hand on his knee. "Kids are asleep. The doctor says Lily'll be alright, just a bump to the head. She got lucky; she doesn't even have a concussion."

Jake nodded. It wasn't news to him; she'd told him the same thing earlier, after she

returned with Lily from having the head injury checked out at the Med Center just to make sure.

They sat in silence for a while. Finally, Heather gathered up her courage. "Jake? What happened?"

Jake didn't answer right away, but when he turned toward her, she could see his eyes were dark and filled with an anguish that took her breath away.

He chewed his lip a moment. "Years ago, before the bombs—before we met—" He looked away. "I spent some time in Iraq." He gave a soft snort. "Working for J&R, if you can believe that." He paused again and she reached over, taking the beer bottle from his unresisting fingers and giving his hand a light squeeze. She placed the bottle on the ground next to her; he didn't even seem to notice she took it.

"One day, we passed by a village called Saffa...."

oOo

He told her everything that happened in Saffa. Didn't give her only the sanitized, factual version that he'd given Eric, either. No, he told her the full tale, in all its gory details. It was as if, once he started, he couldn't stop. Not until he'd explained the panic during the ambush; the sound of bullets zinging, and the thud-thud-thud of automatic weapons being fired nearby; the immense heat of the desert; the smell of gunpowder, mingling with goat dung, and then blood, as he and the others entered the village. It hadn't been the first time he'd come under fire, and it was far from the last, but it was the time that stood out clearest in his memory, even twenty years later.

He described how he'd found the girl, lying in the dust like a discarded doll, her unseeing eyes staring up at him accusingly. He could still picture her so clearly. "Her scarf had come loose. She had long, dark hair. Like—" Jake swallowed. "And when I saw Lily lying there, I thought—" A lump stuck in his throat and he cleared it. He realized his cheeks were wet and he raised a hand to smear away his tears. "It was like... like I was seeing that girl in Iraq, not Lily. And all I could think of was that this was my due."

He snuck a peek sideways, noticing for the first time that Heather's cheeks were glistening with tears of her own. She held his gaze. "You thought it was your punishment?"

Another sob rose and forced itself out. The terror he'd felt when he saw Lily.... He'd never experienced such fear before, despite everything that had happened after the September '06 attacks. He hoped he'd never have to feel it again, either. "It would seem

just, wouldn't it? My little girl for theirs?"

"Oh, Jake..." Heather didn't say anything else; she just pulled him to her, and he twisted on the narrow bench, burying his face in her stomach, finally letting go of the guilt and shame that had been festering for so many years. She let him cry, quietly running her fingers over his hair while his tears soaked her shirt.

Finally, he ran out of tears, and they sat together in silence for a long while, until she broke it at last. "It's getting late. We should get some sleep."

oOo

Heather woke a few hours later to find herself alone in the bed. The sheet next to her was rumpled, but empty. Moonlight filtered through the curtains as she threw back the covers and slipped out. She reckoned she knew where Jake had gone.

Right enough, she found him in Lily's bedroom, perched on a chair near the wall watching their daughter sleep. He glanced up at the sound of her soft footfalls, before turning back. "She looks so innocent."

Heather rested a hand on his shoulder, and he reached up to twine his fingers with hers. "Come back to bed," she whispered.

He nodded. "In a little while."

Heather gave his fingers a light squeeze, before disentangling her hand from his and heading back to bed.

oOo

Jake didn't return until the first light of day slanted through the window, waking her to make frantic, desperate love that wasn't very satisfying—not that it mattered. It wasn't until she lay snuggled up against him, sticky and warm, with his arm squeezing her tight, that he finally fell asleep. She drew her head back a little so she could study his face, the worry lines smoothed out as he slept.

Maybe, she hoped, now he'd at last told his story, this wound could finally heal, turn into nothing but another old scar. 'Cause, God knows, they both had plenty of those.

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