

Making History

by Tanaqui

When Jake got home from work, he found JJ sitting on the kitchen table with Heather dabbing antiseptic onto his face and hands. Mikey was standing at her elbow, looking at his brother with a kind of awed fascination that even his dad's arrival home didn't break, although Lily, strapped into her high chair, gurgled and chuckled and held out her chubby arms to Jake when she saw him.

Crossing the kitchen to pick up Lily, Jake asked carefully, "What happened?" although he had a pretty good idea. He met Heather's worried gaze over the top of JJ's head.

"JJ got in a fight!" Mikey made the announcement proudly before Heather could reply.

JJ shot Jake a look that was three parts defiance—*I'm not sorry*—and one part distress, before he bent his head back down. Unlike Mikey—unlike Jake on numerous occasions in the past—he seemed far from gleeful.

Jake could remember plenty of scuffles between his sons, but very few actual fights. Most of those had happened when Mikey had been small and hadn't yet learned to share, and had been particularly annoying his brother. Jake had always got the impression that, if anything, JJ was the peacemaker in his group of friends, the one who stopped fights from escalating.

"There." Heather dabbed the last of JJ's grazes and began collecting used cotton balls. "All done." She cast Jake another worried look and shrugged slightly, and he knew she hadn't been able to get to the bottom of what had happened.

He nodded—*I'll deal with it*—and reached out and ruffled JJ's hair with his free hand. "Run along outside and play with your brother, and we'll talk later, okay?"

JJ was off the table and out the door in an instant, Mikey at his heels.

Jake shifted Lily to his other shoulder and moved up behind Heather, now washing her hands at the sink. He slid his arm around her waist and dropped a kiss in her hair. "So what happened?"

She turned off the tap and reached for a towel to dry her hands. "The school says he got into a fight with some older boys." She turned her head and smiled at Lily, who'd reached out and grabbed a handful of her mom's hair. As Heather disentangled her daughter's fingers, before Lily had a chance to start tugging, she added, "He wouldn't tell the teacher or me what it was about, and the other boys are just saying he hit them first."

"If it had been Mikey," Jake snorted, "it wouldn't have needed to be about anything. But JJ...."

"I know." Heather sighed quietly.

Jake pulled her closer for a moment. "I'll talk to him after dinner."

When Heather had hauled a protesting Mikey off to bed, Jake signalled to his older son to join him in the living room. He took his usual chair, while JJ perched on the edge of the couch, resting his hands on either side of him, looking worried. Jake was sharply reminded of him and Dad in much the same position. He suddenly had a lot more sympathy for Dad, and a lot more remorse over what he must have put him through.

"So...." He cleared his throat. "Not such a great day at school, huh?"

JJ gave a non-committal shrug.

"Wanna tell me what the fight was about?"

JJ shrugged again and muttered, "Nothing."

If he hadn't been so worried, Jake would have laughed at how familiar all this was. Instead, he leaned forward and tried to catch his son's eye. "Look, JJ, I know you don't get into fights for no reason. Did those other boys say something?"

JJ shifted in his seat. Jake waited patiently, letting the silence stretch out, trying to keep an encouraging smile on his face. JJ snuck a look at him, but quickly looked away when he caught Jake's eye. After another minute, he muttered, "They said you and Mom did bad things."

Jake raised an eyebrow. "What kind of bad things?"

JJ put his hands between his knees and hunched over. "You know how, in school, Miss Leigh's been telling us about the bombs and the bad people and having to fight...?"

Jake nodded. The town had been buzzing with preparations for marking the tenth anniversary of the New Bern War and, later in the year, Jericho's "liberation" from Cheyenne control. Jake and Heather had tried to stay out of it as much as possible; neither of them had any desire to hash over what had happened back then.

"Well, Lennie Olsen came up to me in recess after and said you and Mom did things... bad things." JJ's face had gone all tight, like it did when he was about to cry. "He said Mom stole things, and you had a bomb, and ran away to Texas, and Mom... Mom....," JJ sniffed hard, "Mom *killed* somebody. Killed them dead."

Jake gaped at him. It was all true, in a way, and yet so very far from the truth. JJ looked up at him and must have caught his shocked expression, because his face crumpled and the threatened tears did begin to fall.

Pulling himself together, Jake got up and went and sat next to his son, and put his arm around him. "Hey." He hugged him close. "Lennie's a bigmouth who doesn't know what he's talking about, okay? And if I'd been you, I'd've probably hit him too."

"Really?" JJ pulled away a little and squinted up at him, hiccupping as he tried to stop sniffing. "You're not mad at me?"

Jake shook his head. "The only person I'm mad at here is me." When JJ gave him a puzzled look, he added, "For not telling you things I should have done. So you had to hear things from Lennie Olsen all twisted up."

He tried to smile at JJ, even though inside he was cursing himself. He and Heather should have thought about how this would come up some time. How this would come up *now*, with the anniversary looming.

Seeing that JJ was a bit calmer, Jake pulled away and turned so he could hold his son at arm's length and peer into his face. "Look...." He paused, unsure what to say, but JJ gave him such a trusting look that he found the courage to go on. "Miss Leigh told you how after the bombs went off, everything got scary and dangerous, didn't she?"

When JJ nodded, Jake took a deep breath. "Well, your mom and I... some bad things happened to us. Your mom especially. But we got through." He reached up and smoothed JJ's bangs back of his forehead. "And then the world got better, and you came along, and Mikey and Lily, and we didn't want to think or talk about the bad stuff. So we don't."

Even if he knew Heather still had nightmares about it sometimes. So did he, if he was honest with himself.

Holding JJ's gaze, he added, "But it's not a secret, and we've done nothing we're ashamed of, and nothing you need be ashamed of, okay?"

"So what Lennie said...?" JJ looked at him hopefully.

Jake turned his head away and grimaced for a moment. "Some of it's true, yes. But probably not the way Lennie told you, or he thinks it happened."

"Mom *killed* someone?" JJ was wide-eyed with disbelief.

Jake nodded reluctantly. "He was a very bad man, and he was going to hurt your mom." He caught movement in the corner of his eye and, glancing up, saw Heather was standing in the doorway. She had her lips pressed together, and she didn't look happy, but she gave him the slightest of nods, and he knew she wasn't unhappy with what he was doing.

He turned his attention back to JJ. "If she hadn't killed him, he would have killed her." It was a lot more complicated than that, but now wasn't the time to go into exactly what had happened. "It's one of the times when killing someone isn't wrong and doesn't make you a bad person."

He wasn't sure how much of this was going in; JJ was only seven, after all. But he was looking a lot more cheerful. Jake ran his hand over his son's head again, and JJ rewarded him with a smile.

"And you... you had a *bomb*?" JJ almost sounded excited by the whole thing now, now that he knew his parents weren't bad people.

Jake snorted. "Not exactly. Mr Hawkins—Sam and Allison's dad?" JJ nodded to show he knew who Jake meant. "He worked for the government trying to stop the bombs. And he got hold of one of them, and I helped him to get it to Texas so that they could find out who were the bad people who'd used the other bombs."

"So you didn't run away?" JJ seemed determined to pick his way through Lennie's story.

"Not that time, no." Jake decided there would be occasion enough for his son to become disillusioned by what he'd done before the bombs without mentioning all of that now. "And then I

came back, and your mom and I helped everyone else fight the bad people here in Jericho."

JJ cocked his head to one side. "Did Lennie's mom and dad help too?"

Jake had to work hard to keep his lips from twitching, and he definitely didn't dare look at Heather. Because Lennie's dad had *eventually* learned to handle a rifle, and his mom had certainly made herself useful making sure everyone knew everything that was going on. But they had done what they could.

Before he could answer, Heather spoke up from the door. "Yes they did. Everybody did."

JJ twisted to look at her, his face lighting up. When she smiled at him, he pulled away from Jake and scooted across the room to her, wrapping his arms around her and burying his face in her stomach. Heather hugged him back hard, and Jake could see she was near to tears herself.

After a moment, she pushed JJ away from her a little and tipped his head back. "So. Enough stories for tonight. Time for bed."

"Okay." JJ sniffed away the last of his tears.

Jake could see he was tired by the way he clung on to Heather, but there was one last thing he needed to say.

"JJ?" His son looked back at him "What your mom and I did... that isn't something we should go bragging about, okay?" Jake remembered another, earlier part of the conversation that he'd also probably better fix before Heather found out. "Just like we shouldn't hit people who say mean things, even if we really want to."

"Okay." JJ nodded at him seriously before letting Heather shepherd him upstairs.

Watching them go, Jake had to admit wryly that, while he hadn't run into anyone he'd wanted to hit for a good few years now, the last part was a lesson he probably still hadn't learned himself.

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