

For the Kids

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At 5:45 AM, thundering booms jar me awake. I roll over, blinking the fog from my mind as I read the green glow of the clock.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

I realize it's my door being pounded on. I sit up alarmed, as I wonder who would be knocking. My phone rings to life, and I see that it is my brother calling. Instinctively, I answer.

"Hello?" I grumble.

"Wes, wake up. Let me and the kids in. It's freezing out here," my brother, Scott, pleads.

I'm moving for my door before I even think and find myself unbolting the lock. I swing it open and the blast of cold shocks me awake in spite of my budding hangover.

"Uncle Wesley!" squeal my niece and nephew as they spill through the door and wrap themselves around my legs.

"Because of the snow, Dad says we get to play with you all day!"

I look up at my brother with eyes full of betrayal.

"Wes, you know I wouldn't ask you if I didn't absolutely need it. School is closed today, and I need the kids with someone I trust," he explains. "I can't take the day off, and I know you need the money anyway."

He stuffs a few hundred dollars in my hand. I look at my older brother and see the determination in his eyes. His mind was made up before he even got here. I know his job in the service is important, and he knows that I'm in between jobs. I'm not sure who is doing the favor here.

"No problem. I can take care of the munchkins today. I mean, they can be pretty self-sufficient," I assure both my brother and myself.

He gives the kids a hug and, with a wink, tells them to look after me. If I'm ever a father, I hope I'm like him. He leaves quickly, and I'm left staring at Aubrey and Jackson. They size me up, and I realize I'm going to need coffee.

"You two hungry?" I ask as I fill a coffee pot.

Jackson doesn't answer; he is fixed on my Xbox, but he hasn't the courage to ask. Aubrey, on the other hand, is full of energy. She smiles at me with gleeful eyes.

"I will have some coffee."

"I doubt that Aub, how about some cereal?" I counteroffer.

She concedes, and I make the same for Jackson. I set Aubrey's down on the table and Jackson's on the coffee table. His eyes light up as I turn on the video games for him.

"I could use some help on my gamer score, Jackson. Just don't tell dad."

He just snatches up the controller while Aubrey happily eats her breakfast. It occurs to me that it isn't even 6:00 AM, and these two are wide awake and beaming. I pour coffee into my mug and sit next to my eight-year-old niece. I take a long sip of the scalding liquid and use it to chase an aspirin.

"You seem awfully excited. You this happy to be off of school?"

"Daddy is helping Mommy be happy in heaven," Aubrey squeals.

I nearly drop the coffee. "What did you say?"

Jackson looks up and, in the sternest five-year-old voice I've ever heard, tells his sister to hush. She blushes, trying to hold her excitement back. It's like trying to turn a river off with a sink faucet.

"It's okay," I nudge her. "What do you mean?"

Their mother was murdered three-and-a-half years ago. It was a random act of violence that shocked a community. The killer was never caught, and my brother has never let it go. For a brief



time, he had seemed almost happy again, but lately a bitter Scott was leaking through. He had been working a lot lately, and now I finally wanted to know on what.

“Daddy says he found another bad man, and he is going to make it fair again,” she explains as she stirs her milk.

Behind me, I hear gunshots as Jackson plays a violent game. I’d pause to rethink that, if I wasn’t so rattled about what Aubrey had revealed. I snatch my phone and disappear into the other room. I’m frantically dialing with shaking hands. The phone rings for an eternity until Scott picks up on the other end.

“Are the kids okay?”

“They’re fine; except for they think you’re going to kill somebody. What are you doing?” I demand.

“They don’t know anything and neither should you.”

“Scott, killing somebody isn’t going to bring her back!”

“What do you know? I see her every time I look at my kids. They deserve to know that whoever took their mom away has paid for it. I’m going to make sure this time. This has to be the right guy.”

“What do you mean this time? Scott, stop it. You can’t do this,” I plead.

“Take care of my kids until I get back. It will be over soon.”

The line goes dead.

