

The Hundred Point Boy

The pounding on the door was abrupt. “Up! Now. You know what today is. All kids in their proper rooms by ten a.m.”

The boy *did* know what today was. By the time the knocker had arrived, the boy was already up, bed carefully made, with his outfit laid out on it. Shabby black pants, at least an inch too short in the leg but a size too big around the middle. He had gotten ahold of RIT dye a couple weeks before and had been able to dye his tube socks black, so the fact that his pants were too short wasn’t as noticeable, he hoped. Button up shirt that had once been white though too many washings and wearings had rendered it a dingy light grey. It was still a little wrinkled, but the boy had hung it in the shower room for a couple days hoping to steam out the worst. Clip on tie, meant more for a younger child, nevertheless it would have to do. And then ratty old shoes, with the soles coming away from the tops. Shoelaces long gone, the boy had begged the cook for some twine to keep the sneakers on his feet. He knew the cook felt bad for him and the others like him, so it wasn’t a hard sell.

He carefully put on each item, familiar with his movements. This was a routine he knew well. He performed it every Saturday morning before heading down to breakfast, followed by the adoption room for the rest of the day, then to dinner, and finally back to his tiny room with the one small window and his lone box of belongings that night. He was cautiously optimistic today, though. The adoption center had needed to fix his glasses from the last time H had broken them on the playground. Simple tape wouldn’t hold them together this time, and one of the lens had cracked. So, into town he had gone with one of his caretakers, Emily. She was one of the nicer ones and she had even taken him to get an ice cream cone and then to get his hair trimmed. The boy was thrilled to have the attention, even for a short time and even if he knew meeting the barber’s sad eyes in the mirror would have ruined the illusion. The barber knew what he was. But he didn’t have to be. With his black curls trimmed into

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presentability, shiny new glasses, and his outfit the cleanest he had been able to get it in weeks, he could stand out against the other hundred-point kids and find a family today.

Jared looked at his outfit, laid out before him on his expansive bed which was already made and tucked into tight hospital corners. Pants with the crease pressed sharply, blinding white shirt tailored perfectly, with a silk tie that costed a small fortune. Business jacket with custom cufflinks and shoes buffed to perfection completed the ensemble. He checked his watch. Eight a.m. He had plenty of time but couldn't shake the feeling of urgency. He quickly got dressed and walked into his en suite bathroom, the lights turning on automatically at his entrance. After putting in his contacts, he styled his hair, enjoying the smell of the hair cream, and then washed his hands clean. While he dried his hands, Jared examined his appearance, making sure there wasn't a hair out of place, or a single wrinkle present. He wanted to look perfect today.

He walked downstairs into the kitchen, collecting the items needed for his breakfast. Eggs, bread, butter. He turned the kettle on for morning tea and then sat down at the oversized granite island, grabbing the paperwork sitting neatly at the end of it. He looked through every page, absorbing every detail. Jared had gone over these papers over a dozen times in the past week. Every little face was fresh in his memory, every "name", age, and talent bored into his brain. The parent point prices were cleanly listed beside each. *L is a quick learner, and already conquering violin. Her DNA heritage hails from talented musicians on both sides who excelled in their studies and went to perform in the best orchestras. She has a quiet demeanor and responds well to instruction. 150,000 pp. M's DNA heritage is one for the books. School books, that is. He was bred from an Nobel prize winning scientist whose extensive work in genetics has made this program possible and from an award-winning author whose*

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popular book series has garnered millions of fans world-wide. There's no doubt that he is destined to do great things! 375,000 pp. N is...

"Good morning!" Jared started at the cheery voice echoing from the hallway. Coming out of his thoughts, he realized that the kettle was protesting in its shrill way and that his eggs were burning.

"Ahhh, no. Damn." He jumped up to quickly flip them, grimacing at the brown that was revealed when he did so. He nodded at Sarah, who walked in, grabbing and tying her half apron around her waist. "I started the water for your tea." He referenced the kettle with a toss of his head while he took care of his eggs.

"Thank you, you didn't have to do that! Here, let me take that from you. I'm sure you have other things you could be doing?" Sarah gently nudged the him out of the kitchen and to the other side of the island again. "These eggs look a bit more done that you typically like. Do you want me to remake them?" She looked at Jared, her arms poised to either toss the eggs in the trash or return them to the stove.

Jared sighed. "No, I'm trying to learn. I guess this will be my consequence this time." Forcing a laugh, he sat down. Sarah smiled brightly and returned the eggs to the burner, expertly scrambling them.

"You know what, I think they will be fantastic!" As she finished cooking them, she took a plate out of the cupboard and slid the eggs onto it just as the toast he hadn't realized she'd started popped up from the toaster. She slid both the plate and a pat of butter towards him on the island. Then she poured him a glass of orange juice and carefully placed it in front of him. Jared smiled his thanks and hesitantly began eating his ruined breakfast.

Sarah poured herself some water from the kettle and dipped a tea bag into it, standing across from Jared at the island. Even if Jared wasn't an unusually observant man, he still would have been hard

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pressed to not notice how her slender fingers played with the string coming rising connected to the bag. He looked up to see her bit her lip, brow furrowed. He sighed.

“Spit it out.” He shoveled another forkful of egg into his mouth, cursing himself for not only burning them, but also for forgetting to season them.

“I don’t know if it’s my place—”

“If it’s not your place to say what you’re thinking, then whose would it be, Sarah? I can’t read your mind so if you don’t tell me, how would I know what you’re thinking?” Her doe brown eyes flashed in anger for just a second as his tone, then her face smoothed into calm.

“I know you’re nervous about today and I know you want it to go perfectly but you don’t have to do this alone. Making your breakfast...starting my tea. You know I’m here every day to do those things for you. *That’s what you pay me for.* And if you start doing my job in order to prove that you can be a responsible parent...then what exactly am I here for? I can almost bet if I went to your room, your bed would be made.” She pushed her words out quickly, as though she were afraid she would lose her courage to do so before finishing what she needed to say, but still noting the guilty look that swept over Jared’s face at the mention of the made bed. “I think you’re going to be a wonderful dad, Jared,” She hurried on, clearly aware that this was by far the most forward she had ever been with him, “And I will be here to help in any capacity you need. You know that.”

Jared did know that. He had hired Sarah five years before and she had been exemplary at her job as his housekeeper. In fact, there were times she went above and beyond by filling in as his personal assistant when he couldn’t keep them (which was often because of his tendency to work long hours) and by coming on weekends, like she did today, because he had asked her to go with him to help keep him calm.

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“If you weren’t here today, what would you be doing? I don’t want to take you away from your life.” Jared often felt guilt over this. The small brunette often worked long hours and was there almost any time he called. It didn’t leave much time for a social life.

Sarah flashed a bright smile and waved her hand at the floor length windows on the opposite wall. “This weather calls for thick blankets, hot tea, and a hefty book.” In response, the thunder rumbled lowly. “But honestly, if you hadn’t asked me to go with you today, I would really be sitting in my apartment waiting for you to call and need my help. I know how important today is and I would have been dying to know how it went. There. All clean.” Wiping her hands on her apron, Sarah removed it again and placed it on the counter. Jared hadn’t even realized that she had been working on the dishes while they talked. He also hadn’t noticed she’d finished her tea, collected his plate of half-eaten food, or started straightening up the mess from breakfast. He glanced at her outfit as he downed his orange juice, knowing they would be leaving in just a moment.

Sarah’s thick sweater/skirt/leggings combo were well taken care of and still in style. Nothing looked too worn or old, but clearly not new. While she was well paid, he made sure of it, Jared knew that she went to class at night, trying to finish up her degree in English education. Sooner than he would like, he would be losing her as his housekeeper. He didn’t want to think about that.

“Your outfit looks good. Warm.” Jared pushed words around in his head, trying to allow himself to say what he was going to next. “Thank you for coming with me. I don’t like needing people...but I don’t think I would have asked anyone else.” He saw her soften and then some emotion quickly flittered across her face before she could stop it. Throwing on a bright smile again, she nodded.

“I’m honored, Jared. Really. Are you ready to go?” He nodded, and she walked to the hallway to collect her jacket and umbrella.

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Jared glanced at the paperwork laying on the island one last time. He hesitated, wondering if he was doing the right thing, and then went to collect his coat as well.

The boy, having finished breakfast, rushed upstairs as quickly as he could to brush his teeth before he needed to arrive in his designated adoption room. They all needed to be present and accounted for before the potential parents showed up, but he didn't want meet anyone with any bit of egg or bread in his teeth. That would not make a good first impression.

He squeezed the toothpaste tube tightly and settled for the tiny dollop that came out. They would be getting new toothbrushes and toothpaste tomorrow and he was glad for it. They didn't get it as often as they needed it and he had almost fine-tuned rationing his toothpaste so it would last the entire time. His teeth never felt as clean when he could only brush them with water. Spitting the remaining paste out of his mouth, he rinsed his mouth with some of the water from the tap and then ran his tongue over his teeth. Not as clean as if he hadn't run out of floss, but it would have to do.

The boy hurried back downstairs and down the hall to his adoption room. H and L were already there, shoving each other back and forth in a mostly light-hearted way, but with competitiveness and hostility running underneath. Adoption day was tense for all the hundred-point kids. They knew what was at stake. They were essentially the clearance rack at the store. Either kids who'd had great potential but aged out of the thousand and up point rooms, or kids like himself who weren't bred but conceived spontaneously.

It had been decades since anyone had intentionally conceived and carried their own children. They'd much rather leave that messy business for the birthing-class women—women who'd failed in their prospects or had no other option but tested well on all fertility and health screenings. When couples were looking to become parents, or in the rare cases of successful singles wanting to be a

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parent, they had two routes to go. They could either “bake” their own genetic mashup, which was a minimum of five hundred thousand parent points, or they could choose the characteristics they were already looking for pre-designed in a child at an adoption center. Most parents nowadays wanted an early age toddler—barely walking but past the “up all night and constant and immediate attention” stage. However, once the child was old enough to hold conversation their value began to decrease. It was a small section of time in which to get the attention of a potential parental unit and usually depended highly on a child’s genetic makeup folder or GMF.

The boy never stood a chance. He didn’t have a genetic folder. He wasn’t even born in what was considered a secure location. He was found at a few days old on the doorstep of his current adoption center with nothing but a shabby blue blanket wrapped around him to protect him from the early fall chill. He originally started out in the fifty thousand-point infant room but without a much coveted GMF, he was quickly moved to the thousand-point room. On the morning of his fifth birthday, he joined the ranks of the other older kids which came with the bonus of having his own private room but the devastating downside of being moved to the hundred-point room. It was the kiss of death and he knew it. Unless the kids were large and looked promising for the fighting ring or they were small, delicate, and appealed to a certain abhorrent clientele, they usually aged out of the program at seventeen and left to figure out their futures. The adoption centers gave them a small sum of money and a list of places willing to hire them but nothing beyond that. They had too many other worries.

The boy knew the odds, but he didn’t care. He worked hard to read every book and textbook available to the hundred-point kids. He kept himself fit by running the length of the yard during outside time during the day, and he maintained his personal hygiene meticulously. If he could just spark the attention of a potential parent, he could show that he was more than his point value.

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Jared pulled into the parking spot in front of the ivy covered building and put his black SUV in park. He stared up at the red brick, the green ivy standing out as a stark contrast. The grounds here were well trimmed and there wasn't a single kid anywhere on the grounds-- which meant they were all assembled in their assigned adoption rooms, waiting. He felt a tightening in his chest that hadn't made an appearance in years. Nerves. They were nerves and he had forgotten the uncomfortable way they made him feel.

"Do you remember your adoption center?" Jared croaked, then cleared his throat, repeating the question. "Did your parents ever show it to you?" He turned his head to Sarah, waiting for her response. She smiled a little bit. It was clear she had fond memories running through her head from her childhood.

"Yeah, actually. My parents would take me back once a year and just drive by, telling me the story of how they chose me. Then they took me out for a special dinner and gifts. It was always nice. My parents weren't well off, you see," She glanced at Jared, cheeks pinkening a little. Jared knew that his income status and parent point accumulation was probably higher than both of her parents combined in their lifetime. "And they always wanted more than just one child. They went to all the classes necessary and saved up all the points they could. They would even take on extra community service and community events to increase their parent points. So that they could have the large family they wanted. But they loved all of us so much. Even if we weren't fifty thousand-point kids. Or even ten-thousand-point ones."

Sarah's cheeks were flaming by this point. Jared knew why. The scale went from hundred-point to thousand-point to ten-thousand-point and from there it went up by tens of thousands. If she was less than a ten-thousand-point kid, she was most likely a thousand point one. Jared highly doubted she had been a hundred-point one. Hundred-point kids had a hardness to them that wasn't present in Sarah.

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“Your parents sound amazing.” Jared smiled awkwardly. They didn’t talk about her family much. For as close as they were, they didn’t actually know much personal detail about each other. He felt a sharp pain of something resembling regret over that. He was about to lose her as an employee when she graduated, and he didn’t know anything about her background. He knew that her favorite chocolate was dark and that she put upbeat vintage music from at least half a century before, a time called the 1980s, when she cleaned and would dance and sing off key to it. Jared knew that she preferred earth tones to jewel tones and that she responded more highly to a book than to almost any other form of gift. He knew that when she came to work for him, she had come out of a broken engagement and had kept everyone at an arm’s length since. And Jared knew, even if he wouldn’t admit it to himself, that their relationship had been shifting in ways that he wasn’t sure either one of them knew what to do with.

“What about you, do you remember your adoption center?” Sarah’s innocent question brought his internal musing to a grinding halt. He should have anticipated this question. After all, hadn’t he asked her the same thing? It was only polite to ask in return. He shifted in his seat, looked down at his hands, and then back out at the building in front of them.

“I do. It looked a little like this. Less ivy. More limestone...my adoption center was in Kansas. Pretty different from North Carolina, flatter, dryer,” He sighed. “It was a long time ago and my experience there was...difficult.” He saw understanding flash across Sarah’s face. Children didn’t have memories of their adoption center if they were lucky. And the unlucky ones usually didn’t have good memories. “But it was a long time ago. A lifetime ago. And I am thankful for my mom and dad.”

Sarah nodded, sympathy oozing from her in comforting waves. She undid her seatbelt and grabbed her purse, smiling a bright smile.

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“Well, let’s make it feel like two lifetimes ago. Are you ready?” Jared felt an upwelling of emotion for her. One that was easy to identify but terrifying to put a name to. This is exactly why he brought her along for this experience. Sarah knew how to respond to the few details he did give about his past. She didn’t push or ask any questions. She took what he gave and made sure she brightened the memory. He undid his seatbelt and exited the car, walking around it to open the door for her.

“That sounds like a fantastic idea.” He put his hand on the small of her back and led her towards the double doors at the front of the building.

The boy could hear activity picking up in the hallway beyond the double doors of his room. He tried to act nonchalant and read his tattered copy of Harry Potter, but the shaking in his hands belied his real emotions. He wondered if he should switch to a different book, one that was maybe considered more scholarly? No, this was fine. He was only eight, so being able to read and understand a novel even as large as this was an accomplishment, right? The boy chastised himself for his self-doubt. This was a familiar mental argument of his and one that occurred at least once a week, on Saturday mornings. The day the parents came.

As the hours dragged by, the boy saw both H and L sized up by large men with close crew cuts and muscles straining through their shirt sleeves. H was chosen, but L was left behind. The boy tried to feel bad for H because he knew that being chosen by that type of “parent” was never good. His fate probably lay in the “Hundred-point ring fights.” If H could survive past them, he might end up becoming one of these unsavory types looking for a boy like himself. But if not...The boy shuddered. He’d read that they used to do these fights with dogs and roosters but that the audience soon grew bored and moved on to kids like himself. The unwanted and discounted.

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Later, a tall slim looking business man came in. The boy didn't like the look in his eyes and feared the worst for the attractive girls and boys in the room. Sure enough, about twenty minutes later, the man left followed by D, a pretty girl with long blonde curls and big blue eyes currently filling with tears. Her fate was just as bad as H's, but she probably didn't have to fear a short life...just a deplorable and sickening one.

The boy tried not to worry or think pessimistically. There were stories all the time of parents who wanted hundred-point kids. Parents that wanted to give the unloved ones the love they needed and so longed for. All he had to do was wait and his parents would come. He knew it. He just had to believe and stay optimistic and make sure he never lost his smile on Saturdays.

The adoption center director met Jared with a huge smile, her black suit pressed to perfection and not a single hair out of place. Jared wasn't sure he'd ever seen Julie Temple looking less than her absolute best. Certainly not in any of her commercials or billboards, nor in the times he'd spoken with her in the past ten years. He was on the board of the adoption center, and his business worked closely with monitoring adoption center procedures and guidelines.

"Mr. Atherton! How great to see you this morning!" She turned her smile on Sarah, who smiled back and introduced herself, shaking the director's hand. "Now, I have a great list of possible candidates for you. You said you were interested in a little boy? We currently have M—I'm sure you saw his blurb in the packet..."

"You didn't have any hundred-point kids in your pamphlet." Jared interrupted abruptly. Director Temple's smile fell a little, revealing confusion, and then brightened back up.

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“Yes! Well...if we included every child in our center in the pamphlet, it would read more like a textbook, from thickness alone, wouldn't it?” Her forced laugh tinkled like a bell. She was clearly used to being put on the spot. “We try to put our best kids in the pamphlet to showcase how extraordinary our gene donor selections are and give potential parents, like yourself, an idea of the very best we have to offer.”

“Are there no hundred-point children that meet that criteria?” Jared persisted. Sarah glanced at him, eyebrows furrowed. She rarely saw this sort of passion out of him. Jared tended to be more of a gentle giant type, quiet and even keel.

Julie Temple was clearly getting aggravated with this line of questioning. She smoothed her hands down her pinstriped skirt, and her heel started making the tiniest of tapping sounds against the tile.

“Typically, our hundred-point children are older than what our most of our clientele is looking for. Since most potentials want children who are just out of infancy or well established in the toddler demographic, we try to the limited space we have in those flyers accordingly. Are you wanting to inspect our hundred-point room? I was under the assumption you, too, were wanting the typical age for your adoption.”

Jared smiled what Sarah called his “business smile.” It was broad and genuine, but with no underlying indication of what he was thinking. That smile terrified her.

“You know what, Julie? That sounds fantastic. Lead the way.” Director Temple visibly bristled at the use of her first name, then plastered her fake smile back on and gestured down the hallway in the opposite direction that she had first been taking them.

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“Right this way, Mr. Atherton.” She bit off the last syllable of his last name like she wanted to spit it at him.

The boy had just made it to the part of the story where Hagrid had arrived at the small, storm battered shack when the director walked in with a couple. He glanced up. Tall man, wearing glasses—*like me!* he thought excitedly—and an expensive business suit. The woman had kind eyes and a face that clearly smiled often. The director gesture to his room and he suddenly saw it the way the couple must. Smaller than the other rooms, but still nicely appointed with second hand arm chairs, tables, and bookshelves. The shelves were scattered with well-read and worn out books, and there were a couple baskets of miscellaneous and broken toys. The heater didn’t always work, like today, and it was slightly chilly in the room. The boy hoped that none of this would deter them and he smiled brightly but didn’t say anything. He was afraid of scaring them off.

Jared looked around the room, his stomach in knots. It was pretty much what he expected. Made to look cozy and inviting but, upon closer inspection, everything was hand me downs or worn down. There were kids spread around the room, playing with old toys or coloring on recycled printer paper. A few of them looked up when he entered, curious. Clearly, he was not the type they were used to seeing in the room. He felt Sarah’s hand sneak into his and squeeze gently. His heart did that hard-thumping thing again, the one that told him he knew exactly what he felt for her. He squeezed back. Once he got through this, he was going to need to address that.

He saw a small boy sitting in an armchair by the unlit fireplace. He could tell the boy was struggling not to stare and that made Jared smile. The boy’s unruly curls fell over his face, almost hiding the black lenses of his glasses. He was clutching a novel, but Jared couldn’t make out the title. He

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glanced at Sarah and then back at the boy. This was the one he wanted to talk to. Jared strode over to him, settling himself in the armchair across from the boy. Harry Potter. Jared's chest tightened further. This entire scene felt familiar. The boy finally looked up and smiled a small, cautious smile. Jared smiled encouragingly back and leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. Sarah smiled at him, and then went and sat with a young girl in a faded blue dress sitting at the table, drawing. He could see her easily pick up a conversation, making the girl feel at home. He hoped he had that ability right now. He looked back at the young boy and the book in his hands.

"Hi, I'm Jared. Did you know you are reading one of my favorite books?" The boy's eyes widened as he shook his head mutely. "Well, you are! I read them all growing up. I felt like Harry and I had a lot in common."

The boy nodded quickly, clearly becoming more excited. He pushed his curls out of his eyes and Jared could see that the glasses he wore had a strong prescription, giving him the coke bottle effect. It served to accentuate his strikingly green eyes.

"Me too!" The boy burst out and then clamped his lips shut, clearly afraid he'd spoken too loudly. Jared's heart twisted sympathetically. The boy was too scared of doing anything to scare him off and he needed to put his mind at ease.

"What's your designation?" Jared asked. Adoption centers didn't use names. That was for the potentials to decide post adoption.

"E." The boy pushed the bridge of his glasses up with his finger. "I'm seven."

"Seven is a fantastic age. What do you enjoy doing and learning?" Seven. Another squeeze of the heart. Seven was usually four or five years too long in a center like this.

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“I like reading. And learning about everything. My caretaker says that I’m really good at learning and reading. She was proud of me for learning to read this!” E held up the worn book. “But I’m not very athletic, cuz I’m so small, so I have a lot of time to read and I like this. Harry is like me and people are mean to him but then he finds out about Hogwarts and magic and his parents. It’s like a dream come true!” E’s face lit up as he talked about the book. His wistfulness at Harry’s situation poured from every line in his body. Jared could tell that more than anything, E wanted to switch places with Harry and discover that he wasn’t a mistake or a discount or a failure. He wanted to find out that he was loved and needed and wanted by someone.

“E, can I tell you a secret?” Jared leaned in and spoke in a half-whisper. E nodded excitedly and leaned in too. “When I was in an adoption room, I used to dream about what name my parents would give me. Do you ever do that?”

E nodded. “Evan. I read it in a book once and really like it. Plus it begins with E...and I like that.” He whispered back, eyes wide with the now told secret he had been holding to himself.

Jared knew. He didn’t think he would just know and he had been afraid that this was all a huge mistake. But sitting here now, looking at this little boy with his hopes and dreams and his secret name made Jared realize that this is exactly how today was going to end all along. Fate had already decided for him.

“E...”, Jared paused, feeling the momentous decision that he was about to make well up in his mind and chest, “Would you like me to be your parent? I would very much like to have a book loving, glasses wearing Evan around the house to have adventures with. Is that something you would like too?”

Julie Temple stepped forward and Jared suddenly realized she had never left. “We typically don’t give the children the choice, Mr. Atherton. Usually it’s the potential parents prerogative.”

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Jared leveled his gaze at her. "I think E is old enough to decide that for himself, don't you?" His withering tone made her take a half step back, and she nodded shortly, again smoothing her skirt down with her hands. Jared turned back to E, the little boy's eyes wide and filling with tears.

"Really?" E whispered, holding the book up to his face to hide his emotion. "You really want me? I'm not little and I don't know how to play the violin. I don't even know who my gene donors were."

Jared got down on his knees in front of the little boy, scarcely realizing that Sarah had noticed the interaction and walked over to see what was happening. He took the book out of the boy's hands and put it aside. Then he very gently grasped the E's hands in his own, feeling how small and soft they felt.

"You know what, Evan? I was once a hundred-point kid too. My designation was J but I dreamed of being a 'Jared' and I didn't know my gene donors. I still don't. I couldn't play sports and I wasn't big and strong and I wore big black glasses that the bullies used to break all the time. I loved to read and every Saturday I would wait for my potential parents to come and sweep me away to their house full of books and fun and family." Jared struggled to keep his voice even. The emotion he felt at these buried memories threatened to ruin his smooth demeanor.

"And did they?" Evan asked. Unconsciously, he gripped Jared's hands a little tighter in anticipation of the answer. "Were your parents amazing?"

"I wasn't adopted until I was a teenager, but yes my parents are amazing. But I don't want you to have to wait that long to be adopted. And I certainly don't want you aging out of the system. I think you would be a perfect fit for my home. It appears to be missing a seven-year-old boy who likes to read and loves the name Evan."

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Evan smiled big and nodded, and Sarah rushed forward and gathered him into a huge hug lifting him up off his seat. She turned her brown and teary eyes to Jared and mouthed *"You're amazing."*

Jared nodded, putting one hand on Sarah's shoulder and the other on Evan's back. Without turning to her, he addressed Director Temple.

"I think we are ready to fill out some paperwork, Director."

"I mean, if you're sure..." Jared's back stiffened at her words and she trailed off. They both knew that if this was a different room, a different point total, a different child that she would have never questioned him. "Alright then, come right this way. Such a big day for you, E!"

E, now Evan, looked around the adoption room one last time. While the adults filled out paperwork, he headed upstairs and grabbed his little box of belongings and touched his bed one last time. He grabbed his toothbrush from the bathroom and headed back down the stairs of the adoption center. To his dad. And his new home.

"Are you ready for dinner?" Emily's voice rang through the empty room. The kids were allowed to leave it at four, but the boy always stayed until five, when the adoption hours officially ended. The presence of Emily and mention of dinner meant it was well after five, closer to six even. He sighed and put away his book. The couple that had come in earlier hadn't stayed for very long before leaving, probably to a more point appropriate room, with younger kids who had more talent.

"Maybe next week, hon." Emily wrapped her arm around him and led him to the staircase so he could get cleaned up for mealtime. The boy turned and looked at her, using his index finger to push his glasses up.

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“Yeah. Maybe.” He knew they were both lying to each other. The boy knew that the older he got, the less likely there was any potentials waiting for him. He sighed.

Emily glanced down at the book in his hand. “What do you have there, J?”

“This?” The boy motioned to the book and Emily nodded. “It’s called ‘Formulating Perfection: A History of Adoption Centers and the Protocols Involved.’” He stumbled over the word protocol at first but then got it out. Emily laughed a short, inquisitive laugh.

“A little light reading, huh? I think that’s probably a little over your head, J. You won’t be able to understand most of it. Where did you even find it?” J hugged it closer to his chest.

“In the hundred-point room. I’m just going to keep reading it until I understand it. I think I’m going to study.”

Emily looked truly curious now and stopped to look at J full on. “What are you studying?”

J kept walking to his room, head held high.

“For my future. I’m going to get out of this place and make sure that hundred-point kids get adopted. Cuz we matter too. And we deserve to be happy. I’m going to be named Jared, and run a big company, and have a family full of hundred-point kids.”

Emily Atherton, aged twenty-three, and seven years too young to be permitted to start her own adoption process smiled at the little boy in front of her sadly. She knew when her shift ended today that she would go home to her apartment, where her dogs and new husband were waiting. She made a mental note to call her parents and tell them she loved them. She caught up to J and stopped him, giving him a spontaneous hug.

“Jared, I think that’s a fantastic idea. And you are going to be a wonderful dad someday.”

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