

## SAMPLE CHAPTER

“The long white hallway on the fourth floor of the Fairchild Medical Center was mostly empty and rather quiet. Occasionally a nurse or a doctor walked by with their head buried in a set of papers on a clipboard, their shoes clicking against the tile floor with every step. It was night, and with visiting hours coming to an end, most everyone, patients and family alike, had either drifted off to sleep or returned home. On an empty bench near the end of the hallway sat ten-year-old Tommy Jarvis. Too short to reach the floor, his legs swung back and forth over its edge. His hands rested softly on his lap as he twiddled his fingers quietly, trying his hardest to think about anything other than this place. His mother and father were just behind the door on his right.

For almost a year now his mother had become progressively sicker. At first the trips to the doctor had been for small things like high fevers or sore throats or pain in her joints. In the last few months, the trips had become more frequent. She had been admitted to the hospital three weeks ago, and it was here that she remained. Every night like clockwork his father left him and Nicky with Auntie Carol so that he could visit her. On the weekends – like today – he would bring them along. Nicky might be too young to really, truly understand every nuance of what was going on, but Tommy believed the young boy understood the basics of the situation. Their mother was sick and she was not going to get better.

She was dying.

No doubt Nicky could not make total sense out of the concept of death, but he knew that a time would come very soon when he would never see his mother again.

Tommy looked up as the door to his mother’s room opened; his father stepped out with a sleepy-sad Nicky pressed tightly against his chest. He looked in Tommy’s direction. “Hey buddy...how are you feeling?”

Tommy did not know quite how to respond. The idea of summing up everything going on in his head seemed like a task more impossible than anything he had encountered in his young life. He saw no point in trying.

Chris Jarvis gently laid the half-awake Nicky on the bench next to his older brother, softly brushing the hair from the boy’s eyes. When Chris looked down he noticed that his hand was shaking. He could feel a torrent of emotions building up inside him, but he forced himself to ignore them. Chris needed to be strong, even if he wanted to cry and scream, and denounce his faith in God, the universe, and whatever unseen force was putting his family through this. He wanted to yell at the doctors for not doing more, or curse the nurses for their pointless pitying looks, or simply run away and leave all the sadness and the stress behind, but he could not. Chris could not do any of these things or a number of others. Not in front of his boys, and not now. These were things better left to the nights alone, shrouded within the darkness of his room, while lying on the marital bed with soaking wet eyes. He had to be bigger than that; he had to be better than that, for them – even if it hurt more than he could stand.

After taking a deep breath and wiping away a single tear from the corner of his eye, Chris knelt down in front of Tommy, gazing into the soft blue eyes of his eldest son. “Hey big man, your mom...your mom wants to see you alone for a minute. Would you like to do that? Are you going to be okay, or do you want your ol’ dad to go with you?”

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Tommy noticed as well his father's shaking hands. He spotted the very faint glimmer of wetness, catching the pale glow of the fluorescent lights in the corner of his father's eye.

Despite trying so hard, Chris Jarvis could not hide his emotions well.

Tommy wanted badly to see his mother - to hug her and kiss her and hear her tell him that she loved him...and that she would always be there for him...but he knew that was not going to happen. Maybe it was the look on his father's face or the eerie, bordering on downright frightening, silence coming from his mother's room, but something inside the boy told him that if he went through that door, it would be for the last time. After today he was never going to see her again.

"Well buddy, is that something you think you might want to do? I know your mom would really like to see you."

Despite his brain telling him to say "no", Tommy nodded yes. He carefully slid off of the bench and moved toward her room.

Gently his father patted him on top of his head, mussing his hair a bit, whispering in a shaky voice, "It's okay, buddy...everything will be all right."

Despite his best efforts, Chris Jarvis was not convincing anyone – least of all, himself.

Once he put some distance between his father and himself, Tommy heard his father's voice crack silently as he struggled to keep from breaking down right there on the spot. It was this very tiny, yet extremely telling moment that would stick with Tommy for years afterward, because his father's voice would never sound the same again. Not only did Chris Jarvis' voice crack on that day, but his soul did, as well – a crack so deep that it could never be repaired – spreading slowly, until the dam of his emotions shattered completely, devouring everything in its path.

The hospital room was dark, barely lit by the glow of a television set hanging high in the corner, the volume turned all the way down. As Tommy approached his mother's bed he noticed how small and frail her body looked. The light blue sheet hung over her as if it were resting on a skeleton. Her breathing was labored, her face gaunt, her eyes sleepy, distant and dreamy. She looked far away, almost as if her mind were off somewhere floating above, just barely clinging onto the motionless form that had been left behind and propped upon pillows. Tommy saw her left eye move slowly to the side, independent of her face, as she spotted him standing next to the bed gazing at her. A weary smile shaped her worn face, but even the act of smiling seemed to be a painful experience for her. Her mouth opened as if she wished to speak, but only a puff of air and a gentle hum, just barely a sound, escaped.

Somewhat ashamed at her inability to form sentences, she squinted, focused her mind and tried again, "T...Tommy...ho...how is Mommy's...s...special little...guy?"

Her hand crawled across the bed sheets like a pale white spider moving toward him. When it arrived at the end of the bed Tommy reached up and held onto it gently. He wanted to squeeze it as tightly as he could, but did not for fear that it might somehow cause her pain.



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"Mommy...is...g...going to go away for a while...bu...I don't want you...to...ever forget how...much I...I love you...okay, baby?"

The tidal wave of emotions Tommy had been doing his best to keep inside started to make their way out of him in the form of hot liquid now streaming from his eyes. His face instantly grew balmy and tepid, his lip started to quiver uncontrollably and his neck felt wobbly, unable to properly hold the weight of his head. While trying to catch his breath and failing, Tommy looked up at the motionless form that only slightly resembled his mother.

In between deep breaths he did his best to form a sentence, "Bu...but I don't want you to go." It was not much, but was the best that he could manage before breaking down completely.

Megan Jarvis started instantly to weep uncontrollably, as she saw the tears pour from her little boy's eyes.

She had cried so much over the past year that she found it amazing that she had any tears left, "No...no...don't cry, baby...you need to be strong for Mommy...you...you need to be st...strong." Using every last ounce of strength buried within her, Megan leaned over the side of the bed, ignoring the incredible pain shooting throughout her body. Reaching down with one hand, she pulled her son toward her.

Tommy moved closer, his face now sobbing into the thin, flower-patterned fabric of her hospital gown.

"This is just part of life To...Tommy. Ju...just another part..." Megan stuttered softly, pulling her first-born's head away from her shoulder so that she could look him directly in the eyes, "All of life is beautiful...all of it. Even...the parts we hate, and even...when it reaches its end."

Tommy was not completely sure what she meant, but he absorbed her every word like a plant absorbing the life-giving energy of the sun, promising himself that he would never forget even a single one.

"You're a very special...boy...Tommy Jarvis. I...I...knew from the moment I saw...your tiny little...face. Promise me...promise Mommy that you'll enjoy life. Promise...me...that you'll look for its beauty. Promise me, that...you'll be happy. Promise me...that you'll do...do...everything that..."

She stopped for a moment, her lips slowly opening as if she were thirsty before she continued, "Promise me that you'll...that you'll do everything you think...you can't..." Her voice trailed off. Her eyes slowly looked away from him toward something she could see that he could not. The hot air softly blowing from her mouth and nose became shorter and colder against Tommy's skin. Her neck grew looser and her head heavier. Her hand slid off his face, floating downward, weightless, and landed softly on the sheet covering her body.

Tommy climbed onto her bed, wrapped his arms around her, and buried his face in her shoulder. Deeply he breathed in the smell of her hair, relishing it as it floated into his brain.

In between fits of tears, he whispered softly into her ear, "I Promise."