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## Accountability

I sat there in the hospital lobby. Quietly, holding my hands in my lap. Shame and guilt pressed on my head, squeezing my heart, and crushing my stomach. I dare not look up at my parents in front of me, who were obviously angry.

Noisily, nurses pulled patients' beds to and from rooms, people anxiously waited in the lobby like me, and faint conversations echoed in the sterile hallways. The scent of hand sanitizer and rubber clung to the air, while anxiety and restlessness filled the atmosphere...I hate hospitals.

With a microscopic fraction of confidence, I lifted my head and peeped through my thick curls to spot Mom staring into nothingness, sinking deeper into her chair with her arms wresting across her stomach. Dad sat stubbornly in his chair, his elbow leaning on the arm of the chair and hand supporting his temple. He scowled at the ground.

This is it. I thought to myself. This is where I die and my soul goes and complains to God about being stuck with such a horrible person...Even my conscience hates me! I should've written a will before this.

Thankfully, a doctor with a white coat and tidy hair approached my parents and interrupted my thoughts. My parents stood up and faced her

"Mr. and Mrs. Carter," the doctor said seriously. "I'm Dr. Hew." She shook hands with my parents. "Your son, James, is going to be fine. He only needed stitches in his right calf and a splint for his wrist. Plus, a tetanus booster for his cut."

Dad nodded and Mom thanked her.

"I am curious to know, however," Dr. Hew added. "How this happened."

Mom and Dad glanced at each other, then at me with an are-you-going-to-tell-her-or-do-we-need-to-pry-the-information-from-you? expression on their faces.

I sighed, defeated and stood up. Dr. Hew turned her attention towards me.

This morning," I began. "Mom and Dad decided to go out for breakfast--just the two of them-- and left me with James. After they left, James and I got our own breakfast, then settled on going outside. We were walking through the woods behind our house when we found this old shed. There was a ladder on the side of it and James, of course, wanted to climb to the roof--and might I add that the shack didn't look that old so I thought, 'why not!'. And as we were climbing the latter, I got a text from my friend, Jeremy, saying his cat died. So, I had to help him with that." Dr. Hew nodded as she listened to my explanation. "Once we got to the top, Jeremy called me, so while I

was on the call with him, James was showing me how he can walk across the top of the shed." I decided to speed up the story. I was getting sick of telling it. "Then, a few minutes later, he slipped off the top and fell to the ground. So, I called neighbors for help."

Dr. Hew nodded after my conclusion and thanked me, then turned back to Mom and Dad. "Would you like to see James now?"

"Yes," Mom responded.

We followed Dr. Hew through a long hallway with cream-colored doors on both sides. She stopped us at a door and let us in. There I found my little brother, James, sitting on the hospital bed with a thick, black splint on his wrist and ugly stitches along his calf. I could tell he was doing his best not to peak at the irritating iv on his right hand. "How are you doing, kiddo?" Mom asked him as she sat on the bed beside him.

"I'm fine, I guess," James replied.

"James is very brave," Dr. Hew commented with a smile. "Especially for a nine-year-old."

Dad half-smiled in agreement.

"H-hi, James," I greeted as I entered the room.

James' smile dropped at the sight of me. "Hello, Caleb. Did you tell Mom and Dad what happened?"

"Yep! Every bit," I lied. Anxiety filled my stomach. Please, don't mention it! Please, don't mention it!

"Oh really...?" James questioned.

He's going to mention it.

"Even the part when you neglected me for your stupid friend?" James raised his voice a tad. All the attention in the room was now on me.

Well, soul... You're free to leave now...

"I didn't neglect you—"

"Yeah, ya did!" James protested.

"Jeremy really needed my help and, besides, you are old enough to watch yourself for, like, two minutes!" Now, my voice was rising. "And, Mom and Dad said to 'keep an eye on you'. Not 'play parent on you'!" I rested my case.

"Well, you could've at least noticed that I was about to fall to my death...You weren't keeping an eye on me there!"

"Well, guess what!"

"What!" His high-pitched voice shrieked.

"I need some fresh air!" And I burst out the door, storming through the hall way.

Mom and Dad called objections to me, but I turned the corner and hid in the bathroom just before Dad left the room to hunt me down.

Minutes later, I guessed Dad gave up the hunt and returned to James' room or he is in a different part of the hospital, still looking for me. Cautiously, I cracked the door and peered through. No sign of Dad...now's my chance.

Doing one last check of my perimeter, I left the bathroom and sped-walked to the hospital's exit.

The fresh air felt good and my head cleared from the choking, hand sanitizer smell. Casually, I strolled through the hospital parking lot, crossed the street, and entered the park across from the hospital. I walked past trees and lampposts and other people walking. Finally, I sat on a bench to cool down.

What a tattletale! My mind raged. It's because of him I'll end up dead when I come back. Wait...what if I don't come back. I mean, I'm probably old enough to find a job. Maybe I can ride a bus to Richard's house in Raleigh! He'll understand my situation, and I bet his mom would love to see me again... Or maybe I could—

"What's the matter, there?" A voice interrupted my planning. I glanced up to an old man sitting on the bench next to the bench I was sitting on. He had soft eyes with a slightly concerned expression.

"Oh, uh...nothing," I replied.

"Are you sure it's nothing?" The man asked. "Your face says otherwise."

I checked my face and realized I'd been scowling since I sat down.

"Well, to be truly honest, sir," I signed. "I had a little incident with my younger brother..." The man turned his body towards me, ready to listen.

I told him the same story I told Dr. Hew and added the argument in the hospital. When I finished, the man nodded, "So, sounds like your brother is mad at you because he believes you were more concerned about your friend than him, and he fell due to your neglect."

"Exactly!" I exclaimed. "And how old are you?"

"Fourteen,"

"I see...So—and be honest with me—is that true?" His dark eyes were serious, yet gentle; I couldn't imagine lying to him.

I thought about my side of the issue for a moment. "Yeah...I guess it was true."

"You know," The man said. "There is a great quote by a very intelligent—Aberjhani was his name—saying: 'Democracy is not simply a license to indulge individual whims and proclivities. It is also holding oneself accountable to some reasonable degree for the conditions of peace that impact the lives of those who inhabit one's beloved extended community.'"

"What?"

"And that means..." My mind was having a hard time comprehending the meaning of the quote.

The man chuckled. "It means: hold yourself accountable for your actions and that will hold peace in for the people in your community."

Oh... that makes sense.

I signed again and released my pride. "I guess I wasn't really holding myself accountable for what I did...or been honest about it."

The man nodded. "That's right. And I think it's about time for you to head home. Look at the sky."

I looked up and the sun was almost down and the lampposts were turning on. "Yeah, I probably should...It was nice to meet you." I held out my hand to him.

"The pleasure was all mine," The man responded, shaking my hand with a smile. I began walking off when I caught myself. "Oh! I forgot to ask for your name!"

"The name's Able Keens!" The man called back.

"Thank you, Able!" I called as I walked away.

On my way back, I rehearsed the full story of what happened and my apology to James...

The End