

The man and the child face each other down in the middle of the kitchen. It's late. The child is clutching a crochet blanket to his chest. The man has work in the morning.

"Okay," the man, Will, says eventually. He opens the fridge, feeling a little desperate. "You want something to drink? I got, uh..." He looks over the drinks he has, hoping one of them is suitable for kids. Beer, nope. Ice coffee, nope. Half finished bottle of wine, nope. "...soy milk?" He pulls it out of the fridge and turns to the kid. "You like milk, buddy?"

The kid continues to stare. That's not yes, but it's not no either. Will pours some of the milk into his smallest glass and holds it out.

For a moment it seems like nothing is going to happen, but then the kid takes it and sits down, right there on the cold linoleum.

The milk is left over from some weird pasta dish Will made for a potluck last week but all of a sudden he's strangely glad he has it.

The kid, finished with Will's meager offering of milk, gets carefully to his feet and then holds out the empty glass.

It's Will's turn to just stare. The glass is huge in those little hands and there's a film of milk coating the inside. There's a line of white on the kid's upper lip.

Will takes the glass.

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"His name is Jack," his mother said when she dropped him off. "I know you and Mari didn't get along, but he's a good kid. Quiet, he's not going to give you any trouble."

Mari was Will's sister, who disappeared after dropping off her young son on their aging, single mother's doorstep.

She'd come, desperate, to Will and begged him to take his nephew in, at least until they could find out where Mari went.

Will didn't really want to. He had no children of his own, nor a spouse, and he was happy that way. Having a small child meant being *responsible* and a *good influence*. Will was fairly certain he was neither of those things.

But Jack looked up at him all quiet with big, trusting eyes and his tiny, tiny fingers tangled in his blanket. He wasn't crying or smiling and he didn't speak, but his fingers were twisted tightly into that blanket like it was the only thing keeping him sane.

Will stared at those fingers, white knuckled among the yarn. *He's so young, to be anxious like this. What has Mari done to him?*

He thought about how much this would upend his life, all the money he'd been saving for rainy days and vacations and hobbies, how utterly unprepared he is to raise a child.

He thought about how Jack already looked prepared to leave just as quickly as he came.

The fingers made up his mind.

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Will takes the glass and puts it in the sink. "Well," he says. "It's pretty late, should—you wanna go to sleep?"

Jack shakes his head.

*Oh man.* Will does not have the temperament or the energy for a disobedient however-year-old. "Okay..." he says slowly, trying to think of how to translate *Please go to sleep because I'm exhausted and I would like to have a breakdown about this without you staring at me because I think that might stress you out even more than you already are* into Adult Authority Figure.

"What about a movie? We can sit on the couch and put a movie on and..." *And hopefully fall asleep because we've had a long, emotionally draining day.*

Luckily, the offer lands this time and Jack nods. He follows after Will like a little shadow.

Will settles into the couch with a heavy sigh and pats the cushion next to him. Jack clambers up. For a moment, Will thinks he won't be able to make it up on his own and sits up in order to help, but then Jack gets enough leverage and turns to see the screen.

Will pulls up Netflix and starts scrolling through the kids section. There's a tiny tap on his wrist.

"This one?" Will stops scrolling. "You wanna watch this?"

Jack nods. Will figures the kid has better judgment on good cartoons, so he pulls it up.

As the movie begins to play, Jack settles back into the couch with a pleased hum. His fingers are still tangled securely in his blanket, but his grip has loosened.

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Approximately forty-five minutes later, Jack's head hits Will's leg. Will freezes, scared to even breathe too heavily in case of disturbing the sleeping child.

There's a bloom of, dare he say, *fondness* in his chest at the sight of Jack curled into his lap, one hand holding his blanket and one clutching the seam of Will's pants. Slowly, gently, Will lifts a hand and begins to gently rub Jack's back.