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What Bubba Bear Found

“Okay! I’m looking for your Bubba Bear! Just relax!” I cried, trying to mask the frustration and panic on my face. Little Jason, whom I was babysitting, had fallen off his bike and the only thing that he said would calm him down was his old, tattered stuffed bear and, naturally, I couldn’t find it when he needed it most.

“Bubba Bear! I want m-m-my Bubba Bear!” he blubbered from the couch, cradling his leg to his chest, resting his chin on his knee, rocking back and forth. The snot dripped from his nose and onto his already Band-Aid covered knee, which disgusted me to no end, but he didn’t seem to care – little kids never do; they just let their gross bodily fluids flow, wipe it on the closest soft object around them, and continue with whatever it was they were doing, hardly realizing what’d happened.

“Wipe your nose, buddy. With a tissue,” I called as I flipped the living room inside out in search of this stupid damn bear. I tossed a travel pack of tissues onto the couch and grimaced at the large amount of yellow-green oozing from his nostrils. He looked at the pack of tissues like he’d never seen one before but grudgingly unfolded one and awkwardly wiped at his nose. I offered an encouraging smile. “Good job, bud.” At this, there was a momentary reprieve from the uncontrollable sobs. In fact, a small smile

started to appear, but one of those smiles where he didn't really want me to see that I'd made him feel a little bit better.

It was clear from the complete mess I'd made of the living room – pillows and couch cushions strewn about, blankets all unfolded, not to mention all the toys Jason had gotten out to play with earlier – that I was not going to find his bear in this room. I sat with a huff, cross-legged, and looked at him with a sigh.

“Where's Bubba?” I could see the tears begin to well up again and that brief smile began to waver again, his chin quivering. I winced.

“No, no. I haven't given up looking yet. I'm gonna go look in Mommy and Daddy's room, okay? You were playing in there earlier; maybe he's there.” I was reaching a point of desperation; I needed to find this damn bear.

I hurried into the master bedroom, just the next room over, leaving Jason to blubber by himself. I stopped in the doorway, taking a cursory glance of the room to see if the bear was in plain sight. No such luck. I walked over to the perfectly made king sized bed and dropped to my hands and knees, hoping that by some stroke of good fortune, I'd find the bear under the bed. I lifted the skirt and shoved my arm underneath, blindly feeling around: some old men's socks (gross), a pen without its cap, and some dust bunnies. Shit. I crawled to the other side, which was more obviously the mother's side, and repeated the process. This time I recovered what felt like a high heel and, to my relief, a fuzzy stuffed animal! “Jason! I found him!” I cried. I dragged it out from under the bed and sighed happily; it was Bubba. Finally. But what I'd also unintentionally dragged out with Bubba was a small piece of folded paper. I swear I hadn't intended to

read it, but written on the outside was “For your eyes only... ;)” in messy print. My heart began to race and my palms to sweat. What had I just discovered? What do I do?

I heard Jason’s feet padding quickly into the room. He’d clearly forgotten about the seemingly life ending pain from his skinned knee (also a common characteristic of small children). “Where is he?” he practically screamed. “Bubbaaaaaa!” I handed him the bear.

“Here you go, bud...” I stared down at the piece of paper in my hand. He snatched the bear from my hand and hugged it tight enough to kill it, had it been a living creature. By now, the smile on his face was the biggest I’d seen all day; he was so excited to be reunited with that bear. Kids are like that: such high highs and such low lows, both of which I’d just witnessed.

When he noticed that I wasn’t sharing in his excitement, he stopped what he was doing. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Hmm? Nothing,” I quipped, quickly throwing the piece of paper back under the bed before returning his gaze.

But he was a perceptive little four-year-old; he slowly handed me Bubba Bear and said, “Do you need a hug from Bubba?” in the sweetest, most innocent voice. I smiled and accepted his offer.

“Yes, I do. Thank you, Jason,” I said. I hugged Bubba close before returning him to Jason’s loving embrace and followed him back into the living room. “What do you say we put on a movie?” Jason eagerly picked out his favorite film and clambered up onto the couch next to me, his head resting on my thigh – his favorite place to lie.

I was determined to push the image of that note that was burning into my brain out of my mind – it wasn't my business and it wasn't my place to get involved. But during the whole movie, I couldn't manage to stop thinking about it. "For your eyes only... ;)" That can only mean one thing, right? I looked down at the naïve little boy next to me on the couch: his smile was so real and genuine; he didn't deserve to have his world flipped upside down, to have to witness his parents fighting, arguing over who would get custody when. I should just keep this to myself for him, to protect him.

My thoughts were interrupted when I heard the low rumble of the garage door opening. Shit. I practically jumped, causing Jason to look up at me, his big brown eyes looking into mine. "Mommy and Daddy are home!" He bulletted off the couch and into the doorway to the garage, watching his parents' car pull in. What the fuck was I supposed to do? I heard the door close and Jason talking a mile a minute. "Mommy! Daddy! I was riding my bike with Kenzie today and I fell off and scraped my knee and she put a Band-Aid on it but it still hurted and all I wanted was Bubba Bear but we couldn't find it so she went on a wild goose chase around the whole house to find him but couldn't find him so I was crying and then she found him under your bed and then we watched a movie and she even let me have candy!" I flinched when he revealed the location in which I found Bubba and reddened at the revealing of my giving him candy, an act that was nearly punishable by death in this household. By this time, the whole family was in the living room, Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong putting their coats and shoes away in the coat closet. But, surprisingly, when Mrs. Armstrong turned around, she didn't say anything about the candy.

She just smiled and said to Jason, “Well, I’m glad Kenzie was able to take such good care of you and save the day by finding Bubba Bear for you, sweetheart.” She patted him on the head as she said this, an action I perceived to be very artificial. She then turned her attention to me. “John has your check for this evening. Thank you for staying later than usual; we don’t get to have Date Night very often anymore, what with John’s promotion at work causing him to travel more frequently.”

I glanced down at my feet uncomfortably, playing with my fingers. “Oh, it’s nothing, no big deal at all. My pleasure.” I tried to act as normal as possible, but I could tell I wasn’t very successful at it. Still, neither of the Armstrongs seemed to notice. Mr. Armstrong approached me with the check.

“Just fill in the amount with whatever it is we owe you and let me know what it comes out to be,” he said cheerily. “And add a ten dollar bonus for staying late. Jason just adores you; he’s always talking about how much fun you two have together, so it means a lot to us that you’re so willing to babysit him every day after school, right, Linda?” These were the first words he’d said since his arrival home, but Mr. Armstrong had always been the quieter of the parents. That was why, when I thought about the note lying haphazardly underneath Mrs. Armstrong’s side of the bed, I felt terribly sorry for him. Mrs. Armstrong nodded an uninterested agreement.

“Oh, thank you so much, John! That’s very generous of you. I’ll see you both tomorrow!” I said, a fake smile plastered on my face, as I quickly grabbed my hoodie and keys off the couch and headed for the door. “Bye, Jason! See ya tomorrow!”

As I walked through the door, I heard behind me, “Well, that was strange,” from Mr. Armstrong, followed quickly by,

“She’s probably just having an off night,” from Mrs. Armstrong.

The next day at school, I couldn’t stop thinking about the note. I needed, for my own satisfaction and to tame my curiosity, to find out whom it was from. I knew that Mr. Armstrong was going to be out of town for the remainder of the week, which would leave Mrs. Armstrong the prime opportunity to pursue this apparent tryst. It would also leave me the perfect chance to be a detective, I told myself. That afternoon, upon arriving at the Armstrongs’ home, I found a note on the kitchen counter from Mrs. Armstrong saying that she was going to get drinks at Maria Maria with a friend after work that night and that she’d be home a bit later than usual. While it was typical for Mrs. Armstrong to leave notes like this, it seemed a little too convenient to me that the very same day that Mr. Armstrong left on business, Mrs. Armstrong had plans. After much deliberation, while Jason was eating his favorite snack of peanut butter and Cheerios, I returned to the master bedroom and, more specifically, the place where I’d replaced the note. I pulled it out again, but this time, I unfolded it to read its contents. It was signed: “Love always, Ryan.” Well, that was a start. I was honestly hoping that I’d just be able to Google the name of whoever signed the note to find out more about him, but only having a first name wouldn’t get me very far.

I looked at the time on my phone: 6:30. Normally Mrs. Armstrong was arriving home around this time, but considering the note she’d left, she should have been close to Maria Maria. This was so perfect! “Hey, Jason? You wanna go get some ice cream?” I called to him.

“Ice cream??” he shrieked.

“Yep! Let’s go, bud!” I said, once again replacing the note and heading out the door behind the eager little boy. I knew that there was an ice cream parlor in the same shopping center as Maria Maria. I wanted to see the man who Mrs. Armstrong was cheating with.

The drive there dragged on endlessly; I hit every red light in San Ramon and got stuck behind the slowest cars. All the while, Jason was in the back seat singing some song he’d made up. That’s another thing little kids do – they sing about whatever is on their mind. Today it was puppies and, appropriately, ice cream. Oh, and he’d brought Bubba along because “Bubba Bear gets scared when he’s left alone,” which, to be honest, was fine by me because it’d help to distract him while I watched for his mother.

When we finally pulled into the parking lot, Jason jumped out of his car seat and bolted around to my side of the car. He grabbed my hand and dragged me inside while I fumbled with my keys to lock the car. I paid for his ice cream at the register, giving the girl a tip because she went to the same high school as me. “Let’s sit outside,” I suggested because I wanted to be able to see Mrs. Armstrong. I’d scanned the crowded parking lot for her car but it wasn’t there, so I knew I’d beaten her despite the tediously slow journey there.

Finally, Mrs. Armstrong’s car pulled into a spot in front of the restaurant. I glanced at Jason, who was, luckily for me, still engrossed in his ice cream.

“Hey, Jason! Why don’t you go get yourself a sticker from the machine inside?” I suggested.

“Yesss!” he said excitedly, taking the coins I’d offered and heading back inside the ice cream parlor.

Mrs. Armstrong got out of the car and a woman who'd been sitting on a bench outside stood up to greet her. I saw Mrs. Armstrong happily shriek, "Ryan! I've missed you, love!" The two women looked around to make sure nobody was watching. I quickly ducked my head to avoid discovery, but looked back just in time to see them kiss each other on the lips before walking into the restaurant. Whoa. How would I approach the subject with her now? Mrs. Armstrong was cheating on her husband with a woman.

I took Jason back home and helped him practice his letters until Mrs. Armstrong came home. I knew I had to say something, I just didn't know what. I'm terrible at lying, so I knew that I couldn't keep pretending like I had no idea what was going on, and I had to protect the integrity of my job as a nanny. I'd been working with the Armstrongs since Jason was two; I thought I knew pretty much everything about their family already. When one is a nanny for a family for an extended period of time, one learns some pretty intimate things about the family. But this was something she had managed to keep a secret. So I was going to talk to her for Jason's sake; I cared about him and had his best interests at heart.

"Hey, guys!" she called from the entry way, "I'm home!"

"Hi! We're in the kitchen," I replied. She sauntered in with a big smile across her face. It made me so angry to see her so happy with someone that wasn't Mr. Armstrong, to see her so content with her secret lie. "Uhm, Linda? Do you have a minute? There's something I'd like to talk to you about..." I said nervously, my voice wavering.

The smile faded from her face and that made me happy. "Sure. Why don't we go into the computer room?" she suggested. I nodded solemnly and followed her from the

kitchen. It was an awkward silent walk down the hallway and up the stairs. “What’s wrong?” Mrs. Armstrong asked innocently.

Suddenly, I was unable to find words. I stuttered, I mumbled, I choked on my words. But somehow I managed to get, “I...sort of stumbled across...something I don’t think I should have...in your bedroom...yesterday. But I swear I wasn’t snooping, I was just looking for Bubba Bear so that Jason would stop crying.” I was gaining confidence.

“Okay...” she began. “What did you find...?” She’d sat down on the couch but I’d remained standing, looking around uncomfortably, and not knowing where to sit. I could tell that her heart had started to race as mine had, because she wiped her palms on her legs, rubbing the sweat off. I did the same.

“A note...from someone named Ryan...” I trailed off.

“Oh,” her face dropped and she looked down into her hands, slouching into the couch. A very long, awkward moment passed. My eyes darted around the room, taking in the familiar space. I looked down at my own hands and was just about to apologize for even bringing up the note at all, when she said, “I guess I should’ve figured that you’d find out eventually, what with being our nanny and all. I mean, you’re practically family now.”

“I just... For Jason’s sake...” I quietly started, but then I stopped. I didn’t say anything more; I just looked at her, waiting for further explanation.

“No, I know; I understand,” she said. She still hadn’t looked up at me. She sighed a long, drawn out sigh.

“How can you lie to John?” I asked incredulously.

“Oh, no, no, no. He knows.” At this, she raised her gaze to meet mine. “He supports it, actually. Well, I mean, he’s not happy about it, but he understands. See, Ryan isn’t another man. She’s a woman.” I didn’t want her to know that I’d followed her, so I pretended like I had no idea.

“Oh.” I plastered a shocked expression on my face, but the blush that rushed to my cheeks was real.

She sighed in hesitation but continued. “For a long time I wasn’t happy but I couldn’t figure out why. I had a perfect gentleman, and my best friend, as my husband, a great job, a beautiful home, and perfect son. But I still felt...unfulfilled. One day, it hit me. I figured out it was because I was denying myself of who I really am. But, as you know, this area isn’t all that accepting of members of the same gender being romantically involved. So John and I agreed to stay together, to save face. We are still best friends, after all.” I honestly hadn’t expected those words to come out of her mouth, either. I couldn’t understand the concept that Mr. Armstrong not only knew about but was okay with Mrs. Armstrong’s affair. I was also humiliated that I’d meddled into their business. I felt my face burning.

“I’m sorry. I just thought – ” I began, but she cut me off.

“No, it’s okay, Kenzie. I appreciate your concern on behalf of Jason. It’s important to me that you care about his well-being. In fact, I’m almost glad you asked because now I don’t have to hide it from you anymore. And neither does John. Honest, we’ve been meaning to tell you about it, we were just hoping to do it together. It’s only been going on for a few months now. We were just waiting for the right time.”

“Yeah. But still, I’m sorry I pried. It wasn’t my place.” I felt the pink still hot in my cheeks. A moment of awkward silence passed. “But, uhm, I guess I’ll take off now... I’ll see you tomorrow?” I said.

“Of course. I’ll see you tomorrow. And, really, don’t worry, okay? About Jason, I mean. We’ll tell him one day when he’s old enough to understand.”

“Okay,” I smiled weakly. As I walked downstairs to the front door, I looked at Jason. He was playing with Bubba, an action figure, and a Barbie doll. “Bye, bud. I’ll see ya tomorrow.” I waved and smiled and he looked up, returning my smile with his beaming face.

As I drove home that evening, I thought a great deal about the Armstrongs. Mrs. Armstrong’s promise to tell Jason someday comforted me. But I was still uncomfortable knowing something like that before he did. I really hoped that this information wouldn’t jeopardize my role within their family; I hoped that I could be mature enough to accept Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong for who they were as human beings. This would be as much a growing experience for me as it was for them. They certainly weren’t a conventional family, but they were a loving one just trying to make the best decisions for themselves. And as long as Jason remained happy, I supposed that I could remain happy as well.