

Jeremy scooted his chair away from the kitchen counter but not soon enough. Milk sloshing over the edge drenched his soccer uniform and trickled down his legs.

He'd rather have been eating breakfast alone but since his mom Nicole married Antoine he never had time to himself. There were too many kids. Teen-aged Makayla and Reginald, both dark-skinned like their dad. Jeremy's younger brother, nine-year-old Ethan, with blue eyes and blonde hair like him and Mom. And finally baby Nina, the color of chocolate milk.

Jeremy grabbed Ethan. "This is your fault."

"No, it's not." Ethan struggled to break Jeremy's grip.

"Wa-a-a-a-a!" Nina's pudgy legs thumped against her high chair. She covered her head with her bib smearing avocado in her curly dark hair.

Mom rushed into the room. "What's going on?" She looked madder than the bear on the *Don't Mess With Mama Bear* t-shirt she wore. Mom tossed towels to Ethan and Jeremy before wiping green goo out of her daughter's hair.

Jeremy dried his legs. "Ethan knocked over the milk carton."

"That's because you smacked me."

"Did not."

"Did too."

One *hush* from Mom quieted the boys. "What did Antoine and I tell you about hitting?"

Jeremy glared at Ethan. "No one hits anyone in this house."

"Never, ever. Now clean up the mess you boys made."

Makayla stumbled into the kitchen. Her black skin glistened with sweat. “Water. Tough work out. I need water.” She kicked off her running shoes and pulled a pitcher from the fridge.

Exiting the bathroom, Reginald caught sight of her and sprinted across the kitchen. “No, you don’t.” He grabbed the pitcher. “I chilled this agua to fill my water bottle. Lifeguards gotta stay hydrated.”

Makayla pushed past him. She turned on the tap at the sink and drank straight from the faucet.

Reginald shook his head. “Real classy, girl.” Then, to no one in particular, he asked about the sticky floor.

Jeremy’s eyes darted from Mom wiping down Nina’s high chair to Ethan offering Reginald his version of how the milk spilled and finally to Makayla singing to Nina as she danced her around the room.

“We got too many kids living in this house!” Jeremy shouted.

He ran to the room he shared with Ethan and Reginald, locked the door and stripped off his wet clothes. Jeremy kicked Legos and puzzle pieces out of his way to reach the dresser cluttered with candy wrappers, orange peels and ear studs.

Jeremy heard a knock at the door as he pulled on a pair of Reginald’s hand-me-down shorts.

“Go away,” he yelled.

“Son, we need to talk.”

“Who’s we?”

“Just you and me. Can I come in?”

“Yeah. I guess so.”

Jeremy unlocked the door and flopped on his bed. Mom sat next to him. He crossed his arms and stared at the water-stained ceiling.

“What’s this about too many kids?”

“It’s true. I have to share everything. The bathroom, food, the computer, clothes.”

Jeremy sat up and wrapped his arms around his mother breathing her scent of fresh baked cookies and baby powder. “I even have to share you!”

Mom gave him a squeeze. Holding Jeremy at arms’ length she said, “When Antoine and I blended our families I grew love for Makayla and Reginald just like Antoine’s love grew to include you and Ethan. Our love continued to grow when Nina was born. There’s always been more than enough love to go around.”

He pulled away and slouched against his pillow. “I still think too many kids live in this house.”

Mom smoothed the bedspread. “Okay, which one should we give away?”

“Give away?” Jeremy laughed. Mom didn’t.

“It *would* solve your problem.” She picked up Jeremy’s milk soaked clothes. “I’ll expect your answer by the end of the day.” Mom didn’t smile, blow a kiss, or even wink when she left.

Jeremy decided to play along. After what happened at breakfast, he’d tell her the family could do without Ethan.

He returned to the kitchen to find no one there *but* Ethan smearing peanut butter on a banana. “Wanna play soccer?” Ethan asked.

“No.”

“Ride bikes.”

“No.”

“Corn hole?”

“NO!”

Playing games ruled Ethan’s life. Video games with Reginald. Game shows with Makayla. Pat-a-cake and peek-a-boo with Nina. Being the family game boy made Ethan too valuable to give away.

Ethan licked peanut butter from a spoon and scooped more from the jar.

“Better not let Mom see you doing that.”

“Not a chance. She’s nursing Nina.”

Jeremy knew nursing babies had to stay with their mamas. Besides, he’d never tell Mom cute little Nina was their one kid too many. It had to be someone less cuddly. Someone like Makayla.

Jeremy found her sitting crosslegged on the floor of the family room entering numbers into her tablet. Makayla had her own bedroom yet her stuff cluttered the house. He’d tell Mom to give away Makayla because she hogged all the space.

“Did you finish your math homework?” she asked.

“Got stuck on the last problem.”

“I’ll help you after dinner.”

Jeremy sat on the front porch swing to think. Makayla got top grades in honors math. Without her he’d have flunked his last test. She helped Ethan with his arithmetic and coached

Reginald in geometry. Makayla was even teaching Nina to count to three on her fingers. Mom would never believe he'd send the math genius packing.

That left Reginald, the messiest kid in the house. He crammed stuff under his bed and in the closet. The dresser drawers were full of his junk.

Problem is, since getting his drivers license, Reginald gave Jeremy rides all over town. Ethan and Makayla depended on Reginald for lifts too. A slob? Definitely. The one kid too many? No way.

After dinner, Mom and the kids settled in the family room while Jeremy helped Antoine load the dishwasher.

In a low voice, Jeremy finished telling him about his conversation with Mom that morning, "...then she told me by the end of the day she expected me to name which kid we should give away."

Antoine chuckled. "Sounds like one of Nicole McAllister's famous teaching moments. Learn anything?"

Jeremy boosted himself on top of the counter so he could look Antoine in the eye. "Yep. Who to give away."

Antoine smoothed the hairs of his mustache. "I think you missed your mom's point."

Jeremy shrugged. "She expects an answer." He hopped off the counter. "It's not gonna be easy but I'm telling everyone now."

"It's not gonna be pretty either. Want my hardhat?"

Jeremy stood in front of his family shifting from one foot to the other.

“You gotta finish what you started,” Antoine whispered in his ear.

Taking a deep breath Jeremy announced that because there were too many kids in the house he had decided which one they should give away.

After Antoine restored order, he motioned Jeremy to continue.

“Nina stays ’cause she needs Mom’s milk. Ethan plays games with everybody so he stays. Makayla can’t leave. She helps everyone with homework. And Reginald can’t go ‘cause he can drive. The only kid not worth keeping is me.”

Silence amplified the swoosh, swoosh, swoosh of the dishwasher.

Jeremy glanced at Mom. She stared out a window and jiggled Nina on her lap.

With a sigh, Mom faced her family. “This is a decision for the kids.”

Tears ran down Nina’s cheeks. “Ba-la-boo. Ba-la-boo.”

Jeremy scanned the room. “Found it.” He pulled her stuffed rabbit from under the sofa and handed it to Nina whose smile revealed two new teeth.

Mom brightened. “That’s one vote from Nina to keep Jeremy because he speaks her language.”

“Jeremy’s gotta stay,” said Ethan. “When I have nightmares he climbs into bed with me ‘til I get back to sleep.”

Makayla picked at her shredded jeans and straightened her Hilfiger tee. “He’s bossy and talks with his mouth full.”

“So you don’t want him around?” Antoine asked.

“Yes, I do. When I misplace things like a bracelet, sunglasses, my Afro pick he helps me find them.”

“Jeremy’s cool,” said Reginald. “He’s good at hand-feeding crickets to my lizard.”

Jeremy wanted to happy dance but Nina had crawled onto his lap and fallen asleep.

Reginald backed out of the room. “Gotta feed Oscar.”

Ethan tagged along. “When ya gonna teach *me* how to feed him?”

“My phone’s ringing,” said Makayla.

Antoine waved her from the room.

“I’m cutting out too.” Antoine lifted Nina to his shoulder. “Bedtime for baby.”

Mom grabbed Jeremy’s hands. “I’m so relieved everything worked out. Best of all, you learned room in the house isn’t that big a deal. It’s room in the heart that counts.”

Jeremy only heard bits and pieces of what his mom said. Mostly, he thought about helping Reginald and Ethan feed Oscar, working on his math with Makayla and kissing Nina good night.