

## SECOND CHANCE

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“I don’t care what your friend says, they’re my dishes and I want you to pack them the way I say so!” Salome, a middle-aged mother, shouted in her shrill voice at her son, in his mid twenties. They were standing in the living room of her house surrounded by boxes and piles and piles of her possessions. “Now, stand the plates on their side when you pack them. I read in a magazine once that that’s the way to keep them from breaking.”

“I’ve moved lots of time and packed lots of dishes,” replied the son. “None have ever broken.”

“They’re my dishes!” She screamed at him, as rain beat on the windows. “Pack them the way I tell you!” Lightning flashed and thunder rolled in the background.

Pictures flashed in Jared’s mind, a steady stream of previous times in his life when his mother had insisted on doing some task in a particular and difficult way. The outcome wasn’t any different from what he was going to do, her way was just more work for him.

*“I told you to fold the towels THIS WAY!!” Jared’s mother screamed at him when he was ten. She held up the towel lengthways, folded it in half, then folded it in half again the other way. “That way you get the whole towel when it’s taken from the shelf! Now refold them all the way I said!” She pointed to the stack of towels he had just folded.*

*Jared had thought he was done because the clean towels were all folded. Now he had to unfold and refold them all over again. It was a nice day outside, but he couldn’t go out, he had to redo the stack of towels and finish the rest of the laundry.*

*“What do you think you’re DOING!” Jared’s mother screamed at him when he was eleven. He*

*had just stacked all the clean dishes on a towel laid crossways on the kitchen table.*

*“I wanted them to look fancy, like they do in hotels.” He murmured with his head down.*

*“That’s a dirty towel,” stated his mother as she picked up the stack of clean dishes and put them in the dirty dishwater in the sink. “Now wash them all again!” She swept up all the silverware and dumped it all into the water too, and then piled all the drinking glasses on top*

*It didn’t matter that only the bottoms of the plates and cups had touched the towel, which was no dirtier than yesterday when he’d dried the dishes with it. No one was going to eat off the bottom of the plates, nor touch the bottom of the glasses. That didn’t matter now, they were all in the dirty dishwater. Jared looked out the window, it would take the rest of the afternoon to rewash all the dishes. He would not be able to go out and play at all that day.*

*“You’re supposed to move everything out of the room BEFORE you sweep the floor!” Jared’s mother yelled at him when he was twelve. “You can’t just sweep AROUND the chairs, now move them to the hall and sweep the floor again. And you need to mop and wax the floor, too! Next time do it the way I told you the first time!” She stomped out of the house, slamming the door behind her. A few moments later, Jared heard the sound of her car pulling out of the driveway. He rested his head on top of his hands as he held the top of the broom. The job was now going to take the rest of the afternoon.*

*“No, No, **NO!**” Yelled Jared’s mother when he was nine, as she came over to the mounds of laundry. He was sitting on the floor sorting clothes into piles to be washed. “Don’t put my silk blouse into the pile of your shirts! I’ve told you that has to be washed separately, in the sink, by hand. Now set it aside so it won’t get mixed up again!”*

*Jared sighed and leaned back against the washing machine.*

*“Get busy!” she screamed. “Don’t just sit there like a bump on a log! Pull out enough colored clothes for a load and start them while you sort the rest. You don’t have to take all day! I’m going to lie down. When I come back the first load should be done and in the dryer and a second load in*

*the washer!” She turned and walked away without a response from Jared. He slowly stood up and began to put clothes of assorted colors into the washing machine.*

*“And remember!” His mother called back. “Turn all the socks inside out, shake them, then turn them right side out again, before you wash them. The dirt can’t get out of them otherwise, especially your brother’s and your father’s.” Then he heard the door to her room shut firmly. He sighed and laid his head on his arms on top of the clothes dryer.*

The room was lit by a flash of lightening and, moments later, a deafening crashing sound filled the air.

“That was pretty close,” remarked Jared.

“Yes, but it’s outside. We’ve got to get this stuff packed. I have to be out of here by the end of the week.”

“This would be a good time to sort out the stuff you don’t need.”

“Don’t tell me what I need or don’t need! Just pack the way I told you!

The telephone, an older one connected to a land line, on a table by the couch, gave a short, partial ring.

“Who could be calling me now?” Salome wondered as she took a step to the phone.

“It may not be wise to talk on the phone right now,” Jared cautioned his mother.

“Just pack, I’ll talk on the phone whenever I want to!

As she brought the phone up to her ear a violent blast of light split the air outside the window and an earth-breaking crash of sound filled the room. A flash of light jumped from the phone to Salome’s head. She screamed and collapsed on the floor.

Jared stood paralyzed for a moment. Through his mind flashed brief memories of times when he was little and had been helpless under her tyrannical rage. Now she was helpless on the floor and relief flooded through him.

*“Here is a blanket for your new baby.” Said Jared’s mother, when he was five, as she gave a brightly colored blanket to a woman Jared had never seen before. It was his favorite blanket. He used it to make a tent over his bed and fashion other spaces to play in. It was one of the few things in the house that was brightly colored. It was also special because it was the only sheet-blanket in the house: soft and cuddly, yet light-weight. That was fascinating to Jared. His mother had taken it away from him just that morning, washed it and wrapped it up. What was he going to use now to make special places? He watched helplessly as he saw it leave his life.*

*“Fill these boxes with strawberries.” Jared’s mother instructed him when he was twelve. He and his two younger brothers were standing at the edge of a large strawberry patch. “I’m going in to talk to Mrs. Wilson.” She turned and walked toward the farmhouse next to the berry patch. The two little boys, aged five and six, picked and ate a few berries then wandered off to the shade of some trees and played there. Jared was alone in the hot sun filling the boxes. He was there a long, long time before his mother came back and they went home. She was not satisfied with the number of boxes he had filled, but she didn’t want to wait for him any longer.*

*“Now clean the strawberries,” his mother instructed that evening at home in the kitchen. “And pack the nicest ones in this basket. Put the rest in this bowl.” She sat a large, but shallow, woven basket on the kitchen table and left the room.*

*The next morning Jared was instructed to bring the basket brimming with berries to the car, they were going to run errands.*

*“Whose place is this?” Jared asked when his mother stopped the car in front of a house he’d never been to before. He thought he knew where all his mother’s friends lived.*

*“Just bring the basket of berries and don’t bother me.” His mother instructed sharply as she got out of the car and began to walk to the front door. Jared obediently followed.*

*“Good morning, Mrs. Baker,” Jared’s mother greeted the woman who opened the door. “We were just driving by and I thought you and your husband might like to have some strawberries that I picked yesterday.” Jared’s jaw dropped at that clear-cut lie.*

*“Why that’s awfully kind of you, but he can’t eat strawberries.”*

*“Well, you and the children can enjoy them for him.” Jared’s mother took the basket from Jared’s hands and thrust them into the hands of Mrs. Baker. “We can’t stay, we have lots of errands to run.”*

*“Thank you, they look very nice.” Mrs. Baker said as she took the basket as Jared’s mother ushered him back to the car.*

*“We don’t even know those people.” Jared objected as they drove off.*

*“You don’t, but I do. She was the wife of our state representative. He knows me and I’m going to ask him to do something for me and he’ll remember the strawberries.”*

*“But he can’t even eat them.”*

*“That’s beside the point. It’s the thought that counts. Now, as soon as we get home I want you to start cutting up the chicken to fry it for supper tonight.”*

*“Where else are we going today?”*

*“No where. We’re going home now.”*

*“But the errands...”*

*“Pfft.” His mother waved her hand as if that lie was unimportant. Jared sat in silence the rest of the way home. He had had to do all that work, just so she could impress a stranger!*

*“Jared!” Called his mother when he was nine. “Go get your cowboys and Indians and clean them real good with dish soap and a toothbrush.”*

*“Why?”*

*“That’s none of your business! I saw a way to make the cutest fence with pretzel sticks to decorate a cake and your brother’s birthday is tomorrow.”*

*“But they’re my cowboys and Indians!”*

*“Go get them! Don’t talk back to me!”*

*“But he’ll want to keep them!”*

*“Don’t talk back to me, I said! Just get them!”*

*Jared was right. After he had cleaned the toys vigorously with a toothbrush and his mother put them on the cake, Tom assumed they were now his – it was his birthday and his cake. He had wanted the toy figures for a long time anyway. When Jared objected his mother just said, “You don’t need to play with them anymore. Be quiet!”*

*“Don’t even think of it!” Jared’s mother screamed at him across the dinner table when he was ten. “I cooked it – you’re going to eat it.”*

*Gagging sounds began to come from Jared’s throat as he choked on the food he could not swallow.*

*“Don’t you **dare!**” She jumped up from her place, ran around behind Jared, and clamped her hand over his mouth. He was obviously vomiting, but nothing could come out, her hand was held too tightly over his mouth. “You can just keep it down!” She ordered.*

*After his spasms subside, she washed her hands at the sink and returned to her place at the table and resumed eating. The other children just stare in disbelief.*

*“Now,” she said with satisfaction looking straight at Jared. “Clean your plate and then start washing the dishes.”*

*‘Why can’t she say we’re good kids?’ Jared wondered desperately when he was thirteen. ‘We get good grades in school. We don’t get into trouble. We don’t do drugs, or anything like that. Why can’t she say we’re good? Why can’t she say anything nice about us? We ARE nice. At least I think so. The little boys need to hear that they are nice. They might not know. Does she even like us?’*

*Then he remembered her screaming about the way he swallowed when he drank something, and about the way he shut his lips, and about the way he walked, and of course he couldn't do any of the housework right. She even screamed at him about the way he slept.*

*'I guess she doesn't like anything about me.' He concluded.*

*Jared was ten and standing in front of the kitchen sink. It was a wonderful day outside and he was faced with several day's piles of dirty dishes on the counter beside him. Washing dishes was boring. It was more interesting to pretend the bubbles of soap were islands: islands that could be moved, divided and recombined. Jar lids were boats. Butter knives were the best tools to move the islands and boats.*

*Jared was concentrating on sliding the knife into an island, then moving a boat around it. He barely heard his mother walk into the kitchen behind him.*

*"You should be done by now!" She screamed at him. "You don't need to take all day just to wash the dishes!"*

***WHAM!** Sudden pain filled the back of his head. Jared grabbed the front of the sink with both hands in order to remain standing up. His head swam as he tried to hold it up. He was dizzy. If he collapsed he knew he would be defeated.*

*"I knew you were stubborn and hard headed." His mother exclaimed in surprise and gave a short, hard laugh.. "But I didn't know your head was so thick it would crack the platter!" She giggled in amazement. "I have the MOST thick-headed kid! I don't believe it!"*

*"That is the most asinine thing!" Jared's mother screamed at him. It didn't matter the reason or his age, that was the word she used most with him. Most often it was part of a litany: "fat, lazy and asinine." Every time she screamed his name it sounded as if it were an obscenity. He hated his name.*

‘I won’t have to listen to her screaming any more,’ Jared thought as he looked at her crumpled form on the floor. ‘If she’s dead. But what if I’m held responsible? Damn! I guess I’d better do something. She is my mother, she did give me life. I suppose I owe her for that. I guess I can do the rapid compression that I just saw. At least I won’t have to breathe into her like CPR. Uck. But, at least I can say I tried.’ He walked over to the body of his mother on the floor.

Salome found herself in a beautiful garden. Lawns and flowerbeds were tended, trees were magnificent, some in bloom. The air was clear and fresh. There was soft, gentle, uplifting music in the air and floating lights. One of the lights approached her. She heard a voice from the light that was loving and kind but neither male nor female.

“Welcome, my child. You have arrived to begin the next stage of your journey through eternity.” The soft, loving voice came from the light.

Just then some lights shot up from the ground straight into the sky. They were out of sight before Salome could see them clearly.

“What were those?” She asked.

“Those were souls, just as you and I. They have made the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of some other soul. They gave their earthly life for the benefit of someone else. They quickly ascend into the heights of Glory,” the Light replied.

“Where am I?” Salome asked. “What is this place?” Her voice is now different, softer than it had sounded when she was alive.

“Some call it Heaven,” The Light answered. “Some call it the Kingdom of God. There are lots of names, but the name is not important. We are beyond the Kingdom of Names. You are beginning the next stage of your journey.”

“What are they?” Salome points to a cluster of lights in the air. They look like they are dancing with each other.

“Souls who are having a reunion,” The Light answered. “They are obviously sharing joy.

Possibly one has newly arrived. Such reunions often happen.”

“No one is here to greet me,” Salome says in disappointment.

“You are being greeted now.”

“But not like that.”

“That is right. Not all souls are greeted the same way. Not all souls are the same.”

Some small lights danced past them in the air like butterflies and caught Salome’s attention.

“What are they?” She asked.

“The also are souls,” the Light answered.

“But they are smaller,” she protested.

“Yes,” the Light agreed. “Not all souls are the same size nor have the same form because they are not all at the same level of development.”

“What are those?” Salome pointed to some small, slow moving, dull lights on the ground.

“The are also souls, far less development than any you have seen so far.”

“What?”

“All souls do not have the same abilities or attributes. The differences are not obvious in earthly life, but they are here. There is great variation. Just like life on earth is greatly varied, so it is also here.”

“How can that be?”

“The purpose of earthly life is to develop the skills and abilities needed in this life,” answered The Light. “Just as an embryo starting it’s earthly journey develops those physical necessities to function in that earthly life: arms, legs, eyes, and all the rest of the body; so too, the purpose of that life is to develop the abilities needed to function here in this life. In that life the attributes are called by such names as: love, kindness, forgiveness, generosity, compassion, understanding – all

attributes of the soul. Those who do not develop such attributes are not as developed as souls who do.”

Salome was thoughtful as she absorbed the implications of these words. Her thinking was clear now, more clear than it had ever been while she was alive, all the earthly distractions had vanished.

“In each day of earthly life there appear many opportunities to exercise those attributes,” the Light continued. “Now, in this transition, every person sees the results of their choices. Before proceeding further, you will see the life you have just left.”

Instantly Salome saw herself as a baby smiling and felt the joy of her older sister watching who imagined, in her childish innocence, that the baby was smiling just for her. And she felt the joy of her grandmother who was delighted, once again, to have a baby to hold.

There was joy as she saw herself toddling on unsteady legs to her father. He was delighted that her first steps were toward him. There was more joy as she saw herself responding to the attentions of the people around her.

Then she was an older child hitting someone and feeling the pain of the blows. She heard her old shrill voice screaming horrible sounds and felt the pain of the sounds even more than the pain of being hit.

“No, no. Oh, no!” She moaned.

Several such scenes flashed by of her face contorted into rage while screaming at someone. Each time now she felt the pain that her actions inflicted upon that other person. She could not tell who these people were, their identities did not matter, she was now experiencing all the pain she had given to others. Even incidental actions or remarks that were merely thoughtless, not intentional at all, caused pain, and she felt it all now.

“No, no, no,” she continued to moan.

There was a long period when she felt only pain, continuous, unending pain. Years of her life passed by in vivid sequence until she was a young lady and again felt happiness and joy. She was with a young man who was captivated by her looks and entertained by her wit.

There was more pain as she bragged about what a good “catch” she made, and then joy again when she saw herself in her wedding dress, walking down the aisle of the church where she was married. She had no idea that getting married brought such joy and pleasure to her husband. She marveled at the joy. It was more joy than she had ever experienced.

Next she saw herself in a hospital bed with a tiny, new baby beside her. Now the joy she felt was more than could be contained. She didn’t know the birth of their son meant so much to her husband.

She next saw her face, huge, distorted in rage and screaming. Little baby arms reach up to her in fright wanting to be comforted, but there was no comfort. She moaned as she felt the baby’s bewilderment and fear. The scene changed. The baby’s hands become little boy hands. Soon the hands cover the view of her contorted screaming face to shut it out. Once she yanked the hands away and yelled that he was to look at her when she was talking to him. From then on she saw scene after of her face screaming and occasionally felt the blows of her hands.

“Stop, STOP! PLEASE STOP!” She called out overwhelmed by the pain she has experienced. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry!” She cried from the depths of her being.

“You can endure, you will endure.” Salome heard the voice that she knew came from the Being of Light. “Others had to endure all that you gave them. Now it is your turn until the pain is completed.”

“Ooph...” Salome moans as she continued to feel the pain she had inflicted on others. She knows the Being of Light loves her and with that love she endures the pain. The experiences continue until the very day of the packing and the lightening flash. The intensity of the pain was less because, she realized, Jared had become inured to the constant barrage of invectives from her. His affection for her had long ago died. He continued to be part of her life only because he felt a residual level of obligation toward her. His hope that she would someday return his affection had dried up long ago.

The pain finally ceases. She was once again in the garden with the Being of Light.

“What happened?” She asked. “Is it over?”

“Yes, it is over,” the Light replied. “But it seems that your life is not finished after all.”

“Not finished? I didn’t die?”

“Yes, you did die, but someone loves you enough, even though he is unaware of it, he has succeeded in bringing you back.”

As everything faded from Salome’s view, she heard the words, “Second chance,” faintly from the voice of The Light.

Jared dialed 911 and put the phone on the floor he bent over to his mother so he can hear and talk while doing the rapid chest compressions. He got on his knees and began to pump quickly and sharply in the center of his mother’s chest.

“Lightening strike.” He said between pumping motions when the phone was answered.

“924 Watson Lane.” Another press.

“Ambulance.” Pump.

“I am.” Pump.

“Door unlocked.”

“Living room.”

Time stood still for Jared. There was only the storm outside and his efforts to pump on her chest, to keep blood flowing to her brain with the possibility of keeping her alive.

As the stretcher holding Salome was carried past Jared, she noticed him and reached out her hand, calling his name. He stared at her, then reached out his hand to hers. She gripped his hand tightly and whispered something he couldn’t hear.

“Jared, come with me. Please!” He heard when he leaned down to her face.

Jared was so startled he let go of her hand, but she did not let go of his. His mother had never in her life said “please” to him. He stumbled forward to keep up with the stretcher and held her hand again as they left the house.

“She wants me to come too, but I have to lock the house,” Jared said to the attendants.

“Does it need a key?” One asked.

“No, just push and turn the knob,” Jared answered.

Jared followed beside the stretcher to the ambulance. As it was loaded in, he followed along beside it.

There was a seat beside the stretcher that an attendant motioned for him to sit in. As final preparations were made for departure to the hospital, Jared noticed his mother’s lips again were moving and leaned down to hear.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” Salome said. “My sweet baby, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I’m so sorry. Can you ever love me? I’m so sorry. Can you forgive me?”

“What are you talking about?” Jared asked bewildered.

“Everything. Every awful thing I’ve done to you. Every thing I’ve done that hurt you. I didn’t know, I didn’t know. I’m so sorry...”

“Relax, mom. Everything will be fine. Don’t try to talk now, there’ll be time for that later.”

“You need to know that now I know how badly I treated you. You need to know before I die. You need to know, I’m so sorry. How can I make it up to you? I can’t, I know I can’t. I’m so sorry. Can you ever love me?” She began to cry.

Jared was stunned. This was not his mother. At least, not the mother he knew. His mother had never ever said she was sorry for anything she had done. She had never admitted that her behavior was less than perfect or out of the ordinary. She had never considered whether she was a good mother or not. She had simply done what she felt like doing. She had never considered other people to be real, they were just in the background. They either did what she wanted, or stood in the way. Nothing else mattered. Their feelings were not important, only what she wanted was important.

Now this was totally different. Jared couldn’t believe it. What had happened? How could such a change have occurred? It was hard to believe he was hearing these words from his mother. What was going on?

In the hospital, Jared answered questions as doctors and nurses attended to his mother. He was permitted to stay with her.

“I’m going to give her something to put her to sleep,” a doctor finally told Jared. “She needs to sleep, and so do you. Go home and get some rest. Her condition has stabilized, but she’ll need rest and observation. We’ll see how she’s doing tomorrow. Go home. You did a good job. You can feel proud of yourself.” Jared numbly followed the instructions.

The next day Jared was back in the hospital, in her room. He had brought flowers, unsure of her reaction.

“My sweet baby!” His mother exclaimed when she saw him standing in the door. “You are so precious! Come in. Let me hug you.” She reached out her arms toward him.

He sat the flowers down and leaned over the bed to return her hug but warily.

“I’m so sorry. I’ve been so mean to you. Can you ever forgive me? You do love me. How could I have been so nasty to you?”

“Uh, mom...” Jared was hesitant.

“What sweetheart?”

“You’ve changed. What’s going on?”

“Oh. You’ll never believe it...”

“Mom.”

“Well, I don’t believe it myself, and I know it happened.”

“This doesn’t make sense – the things you’ve been saying. It’s not like you...”

“I know sweet boy.” She stroked his head. At first he flinched, then held himself still. She’d never touched him gently like that. If she had touched him before, it was only to hit him.

“I’m not me any more,” she continued. “At least I’m not that me, the way I was. I certainly don’t want to be that way any more. I suppose it is startling for you, but you’ll get used to the new me. I

think it will be a nice surprise.”

“But, mom...”

“Okay. I don’t know how to describe it. I don’t know where to begin...”

“The lightening hit.”

“Oh, yes. You know that, and you were right. I should’ve been more careful. I should not have picked up the phone with lightening so close. I never knew that could happen.” She paused to gather her thoughts. Jared waited patiently beside her.

“You won’t think I’m making this up?” She finally asked. “I really don’t know how to describe it.”

“I’ve listened to a lot before, I can listen a little more now.”

“I know you will,” she replied. “OH, God! You are such a wonderful boy. I love you so much, and I treated you like shit. I am so sorry!”

“I know, mom. Apology accepted. What happened?”

“I was in a place so beautiful that I can’t describe it. I learned that people there, after this life, are different sizes and different forms depending on their abilities, and their abilities depended on how they lived their lives here. I saw that I caused a lot of pain to lots of people all my life, but most especially to you. You loved and trusted me so much, and I betrayed you. I hurt you so much, and I’m so sorry.” She reached out her hand for his and he held hers. “I saw myself giving all this pain, I felt I couldn’t take it anymore, but you had no choice and so, neither did I. I don’t know how you managed to endure me. Then the pain stopped and I was back in that place and I was told that I was being called back here. You.... You brought me, your love brought me back. Despite all the pain I’d given you, you still loved me enough to bring me back. I can never say how much that means to me.”

She paused and Jared waited and continued to hold her hand.

“You’ve given me a second chance,” she continued. “I didn’t deserve one. I’ve seen what a mess I’ve made with my life, and I’m going to change. I’m going to be different. I AM different!” She

tightened her grip on his hand to emphasize her meaning.

“I can tell that you’re different,” Jared replied. “You never said ‘please’ to me before yesterday. And you never said you were sorry for anything. I can tell that you’ve changed. Thank you. I’ve tried to be a good boy...”

“OH, you have! You’ve been a wonderful boy! Better than I deserved. I’m going to try to make it up to you. I pray to GOD that I will make it up to you!”

“You pray?”

“I will now. I’m sure God exists and I’m sure He loves us. How else could you love me so much as to even try to help me? God gave you to me and you gave me my second chance.”

“Thank you, God.” She looked upward with tears in her eyes. “Thank you, so much. Thank you for such a wonderful son, and thank you for a second chance.” She turned to look at Jared and gave him a smile so filled with love that he was startled, embarrassed and had to glance away.

“I talked to your landlord about your moving.” Jared remembered. “They said not to worry about it.”

“Oh! All that stuff?” Salome chuckled. “None of it matters any more.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“It’s not important anymore. It doesn’t matter.” She laughed. “It’s just stuff – and STUFF doesn’t matter. People matter. YOU matter. And your brothers, they matter. But stuff doesn’t matter. I want to get rid of it – sell it, give it away, it doesn’t matter. I don’t need to drag it around with me. I don’t NEED it. I’m free of it!”

“Well...”

“Yes!” Her eyes lit up with a new idea. “That’s it! Sell it. Sell as much as possible and give away the rest, except the few things I’ll need for living simply. And keep all the stuff regarding your father and you boys. Actually you should each take whatever of your father’s stuff you want. He would want you to have it. And take whatever you want of your own stuff. But empty the house as much as you can, I don’t really need very much.”

“If you’re sure...”

“I’m sure! That’s one thing I learned – people are far more important than things. Things aren’t important at all. Only people, and how you treat them, is important. That, I have learned.” She was thoughtful for a moment. “You are such a sweet boy, you always were, and I never noticed. I’m so sorry.”

“That’s okay, mom.”

“No, it wasn’t okay. I was nasty and mean to you – far more than I was to your brothers.”

“Oh, I told them about the accident. Tom said he could come this afternoon. Ron can’t make it till this evening.”

“That’s fine. You’re the one I want to be with now. I made you work so hard. I’m so sorry. I love you so much. I never thought about what I was doing to you. I’m sorry. I should have taken care of you more than I did. You didn’t need to do my work. I was supposed to be the mother, not you. I’m so sorry.”

Jared began to cry. It was such a relief to finally hear his mother say what he had thought all of the time he was growing up.

“Go ahead,” she caressed him as she cried too. “You can cry, it’s a good thing to cry. I was wrong about that too.”

“I tried so hard,” he said through his tears.

“I know,” she said softly.

“It was never good enough.”

“I know, I’m sorry about that too.

“I was just a little boy...”

“And I insisted you do my grownup work. I know...”

“It was so hard...”

“It was too hard. I’m so sorry, so sorry...”

There was a gentle knock at the door and a uniformed face looked in.

“How are we doing this morning?” The nurse asked briskly as he walked in.

“Better.” Salome answered. “I feel better.”

“That’s good.” He smiled. “I need to take your temperature and check your pulse to see how your heart is doing. Not so many people get off so lucky, you know?”

“I know.” Salome answered. “I’ve been very lucky, very fortunate.” She smiled at Jared and tightened her grip on his hand. “I get a second chance.”