



About Era I: The First Watch

The First Watch marks the beginning of Tom Smith's story.

At the beginning of Era I, Tom is only five years old. He is still a child, attending school, spending time with his family, and discovering the world around him.

Through his family and the experiences he encounters, Tom begins developing an early understanding of the people who protect and serve the community.

His father, **John Smith**, is an Officer First Class with the Blackridge City Police Department. During Era I, John is promoted to Corporal.

His mother, **Samantha Smith**, is a firefighter with the Blackridge City Fire Department. She begins Era I assigned to Ladder 4 before later being reassigned to Engine 4.

Tom's childhood is not defined by a career or a decision about his future.

It is defined by **watching, learning, asking questions, and growing up.**

Before the Badge

Tom's life during Era I is still that of an ordinary child.

He has school to attend, family time to enjoy, and an entire world to discover.

But having parents who work in emergency services gives Tom opportunities that most children never experience.

Through conversations with his father and mother, Tom begins learning about police officers, firefighters, emergency equipment, radios, uniforms, and the responsibilities that come with serving the community.

At this point, however, Tom has not decided what he wants to become.

He is simply curious.

And sometimes, curiosity is where a journey begins.

Two Sides of the Same Family

Tom experiences both sides of emergency service through his parents.

His father, John, introduces him to the world of law enforcement.

His mother, Samantha, introduces him to the world of firefighting.

Tom rides along with his father and experiences the police side of the family firsthand.

He also rides along with his mother aboard **Engine 4**, giving him a completely different perspective on emergency response.

Through these experiences, Tom begins seeing that police officers and firefighters may have different responsibilities, but both careers revolve around helping people when they need it most.

Growing Up

As Tom grows from five years old toward eleven, his understanding of the world around him changes.

The questions he asks become more detailed.

The things he notices become more important.

Emergency radios, uniforms, vehicles, equipment, ranks, and the people operating them all begin to capture his attention.

But Tom still has something else to focus on:

being a kid.

School remains part of his everyday life.

Family remains at the center of his world.

And the future is still undecided.

The Rides Along the Way

Tom's ride-alongs become some of the most important experiences of his childhood.

Riding with his father allows him to see law enforcement from inside a police vehicle.

Riding with his mother allows him to experience the fire service from inside an engine.

Neither experience immediately determines Tom's future.

Instead, they give him a closer look at the people behind the uniforms.

He sees that emergency service is not simply about sirens and flashing lights.

It is about people.

It is about responsibility.

And sometimes, it is about answering a call when someone desperately needs help.

A Family Growing Together

Era I is also the story of the Smith family.

John's promotion from Officer First Class to Corporal marks an important point in his career.

Samantha's reassignment from Ladder 4 to Engine 4 changes the way Tom experiences his mother's work.

And as Tom grows older, the family continues making memories together.

By the final part of Era I, the focus shifts away from emergency-service ride-alongs and toward something much simpler:

family.

Stories 7 and 8 follow the Smith family on a trip together, bringing Era I to a close.

The First Watch

By the end of Era I, Tom has grown from a five-year-old child into an eleven-year-old beginning to understand the world around him.

He has attended school.

He has spent time with his family.

He has ridden along with both of his parents.

He has watched his father advance in his career.

He has experienced his mother's work as a firefighter.

And he has begun asking questions about the people, equipment, and careers that surround his childhood.

But Tom still does not know what his future holds.

There is no badge waiting for him yet.

No uniform has been chosen.

No career has been decided.

For now, he is simply a young boy watching the world around him...

and beginning to wonder where he belongs within it.

“Every journey begins with a first watch.”

Chapter 1 — The Smith Family

Blackridge was quieter in those days.

It was still a growing city, already larger than the small settlement it had once been, but it had not yet become the massive metropolitan center people would one day know. New buildings rose where open land had once stood. Roads stretched farther into surrounding communities. Districts continued to develop as more people arrived.

The city was growing.

And so was Tom Smith.

At only five years old, Tom did not understand any of that.

He did not understand city expansion, politics, crime statistics, or why his father sometimes came home hours later than expected.

He only understood that his father wore blue.

And his mother wore red and black.

To Tom, that was enough.

The sound of boots against the hallway floor woke him before the alarm clock did.

Tom slowly opened his eyes and looked toward his bedroom door.

He heard his father's voice from somewhere down the hall.

"Tom? You awake?"

The young boy sat up immediately.

"Yeah!"

The door opened, and John Smith stood in the doorway.

John was already dressed for work.

His Blackridge Police Department uniform was neatly pressed. His duty belt rested around his waist, carrying equipment Tom had been repeatedly told never to touch.

Tom's eyes immediately went to the badge.

It always did.

"You're leaving already?" Tom asked.

John smiled.

"Morning shift."

Tom looked toward the clock.

"But it's still dark."

"That's usually how mornings work."

Tom frowned.

John laughed quietly.

"Go get dressed. Your mom's making breakfast before she leaves."

Tom's expression changed immediately.

"Mom's working too?"

John nodded.

"Looks like it."

Tom climbed out of bed.

Both of his parents worked.

That wasn't unusual.

It was simply how life worked in the Smith household.

Sometimes John left first.

Sometimes Samantha left first.

Sometimes they both worked different shifts and barely saw each other until the following day.

Tom didn't think much about it.

Not yet.

The kitchen smelled like coffee and toast.

Samantha Smith stood near the counter, already dressed in her Blackridge Fire & Rescue uniform.

Tom walked into the room and stopped.

"Both of you are leaving?"

Samantha turned toward him.

"Good morning to you too."

Tom climbed into his chair.

"You're both working."

"We are."

Tom looked between them.

"Again?"

John sat across from him.

"People don't schedule emergencies around our days off."

Tom thought about that for a moment.

"That's rude."

Samantha covered her mouth to hide a laugh.

John nodded seriously.

"Extremely rude."

Tom smiled.

For a few minutes, the kitchen was normal.

Breakfast.

Coffee.

Conversation.

The television played quietly in the background.

Then the news changed.

A reporter appeared on the screen.

Tom wasn't paying attention at first.

He was more interested in finishing his breakfast.

But John's expression changed.

Samantha noticed it too.

The reporter stood outside a police station somewhere in Blackridge.

"Authorities have confirmed that an officer was injured overnight during an armed confrontation in the western section of the city."

Tom looked toward the television.

The image changed to flashing emergency lights.

Police cars.

Crime scene tape.

He looked at his father.

"Was that your friend?"

John was quiet for a moment.

"No."

Tom relaxed.

Then John continued.

"But he's someone's friend."

Tom didn't understand what that meant.

Not completely.

He simply nodded and continued eating.

A few minutes later, John stood.

"Alright. Time for me to go."

Tom immediately jumped from his chair.

"I want to see the police car."

John looked toward Samantha.

She gave him a small smile.

"Five minutes."

Tom ran toward the door.

Outside, the morning air was cold.

Tom stood beside his father near the patrol vehicle.

To him, it was enormous.

The lights.

The radio.

The equipment.

Everything about it fascinated him.

John opened the driver's door.

"Remember what I said?"

"Don't touch anything."

"Correct."

Tom pointed toward the radio.

"Can I touch that?"

"No."

"The lights?"

"No."

"The siren?"

"Definitely no."

Tom crossed his arms.

"What's the point of having a police car if I can't touch anything?"

John laughed.

"One day you'll understand."

Tom looked up at him.

"Can I be a police officer?"

The question came suddenly.

John paused.

Tom waited.

John leaned against the side of the vehicle.

"You can be whatever you want to be."

"Even a police officer?"

"Even a police officer."

Tom smiled.

John continued.

"But you don't have to be one because I'm one."

Tom tilted his head.

"Why not?"

"Because it's your life."

Tom thought about that.

Then he pointed toward the police car.

"But it's cool."

John laughed again.

"That's not a good enough reason."

Tom looked offended.

"It has lights."

"Still not good enough."

"It has a siren."

"Nope."

"It goes fast."

John shook his head.

Tom sighed.

"Okay."

John placed a hand on his son's shoulder.

"If you ever decide you want to do this job, you should do it because you understand what it means."

Tom looked toward the badge on his father's chest.

"What does it mean?"

John looked toward the city beyond the driveway.

For a moment, his expression changed.

The smile disappeared.

"It means people call you when something goes wrong."

Tom remained silent.

John continued.

"And sometimes, you're the person who has to go."

Tom looked confused.

"Why?"

"Because someone needs help."

Tom slowly nodded.

It was the first time his father had explained it that way.

Not the lights.

Not the car.

Not the badge.

Someone needs help.

John got into the patrol vehicle.

Tom stepped back with Samantha.

The engine started.

The radio came to life.

John waved.

Tom waved back.

Then the patrol vehicle pulled away.

Tom watched until it disappeared down the street.

Samantha looked down at him.

"What are you thinking about?"

Tom didn't answer immediately.

"Dad helps people."

"He does."

"And you help people."

"I try to."

Tom looked toward her fire department uniform.

"What happens if both of you need help?"

Samantha smiled.

"Then someone else comes."

Tom considered that answer.

He looked down the empty street.

Somewhere, his father was driving toward work.

Later, his mother would leave for hers.

Tom didn't know it yet.

But for the first time, he had started paying attention.

Chapter 2 — Behind the Uniform

Tom loved visiting his parents' workplaces.

At least, he loved visiting the parts of their workplaces that adults allowed children to see.

The Blackridge Police Department Headquarters was unlike anything he had ever seen.

Officers moved through hallways.

Phones rang constantly.

Radios transmitted voices from places Tom had never been.

People walked quickly.

Everyone seemed busy.

Tom stood beside John near the lobby, staring at everything.

"Do they all work here?" he asked.

John looked around.

"Some of them."

Tom pointed toward an officer walking past.

"What does he do?"

"Patrol."

Another officer.

"What about her?"

"Detective."

Tom pointed toward a group of officers near an office.

"What about them?"

John looked.

"Probably paperwork."

Tom's face immediately changed.

"I don't want to do paperwork."

John smiled.

"Bad news."

Later that afternoon, Samantha brought Tom to Blackridge Fire & Rescue Headquarters.

Tom immediately noticed the difference.

The police department felt busy.

The fire station felt alive.

Firefighters checked equipment.

Ambulance crews moved supplies.

Engines stood ready inside the apparatus bays.

Tom stood in front of one of the fire engines with his mouth open.

"That's huge."

Samantha smiled.

"Yep."

"Can I drive it?"

"No."

Tom looked at her.

"Nobody lets me drive anything."

"You're six."

Tom crossed his arms.

"Still."

Samantha laughed.

Tom eventually climbed into the passenger area of one of the engines under the supervision of several firefighters.

He looked around at the equipment.

"Do you get scared?"

Samantha looked toward him.

"Sometimes."

Tom blinked.

"You get scared?"

"Everyone gets scared."

Tom looked confused.

"Then why do you go?"

Samantha sat beside him.

"Because being scared doesn't mean you stop helping people."

Tom looked down.

She continued.

"Sometimes people are having the worst day of their lives."

Tom listened.

"And when they call us, they need someone to come."

"Even if it's dangerous?"

"Especially then."

Tom remembered what John had told him.

Someone needs help.

And sometimes, you're the person who has to go.

That night, Tom sat between his parents on the couch.

The television played quietly.

A news reporter discussed an upcoming community event.

Tom wasn't listening.

He was thinking.

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"Mom?"

Samantha looked toward him.

"Yeah?"

"Do you both help the same people?"

John smiled.

"Sometimes."

"Police and firefighters work together?"

"All the time," Samantha said.

"What about ambulances?"

"They work with us too."

Tom leaned back.

"So everyone helps?"

John looked toward Samantha.

She smiled.

"That's the idea."

Tom stared at the television.

For the first time, he began seeing the uniforms differently.

They weren't costumes.

They weren't jobs with flashing lights.

They were people.

People who left their homes because someone else needed them.

Tom didn't know what he wanted to become yet.

But something had begun to grow inside him.

A question.

A curiosity.

A path.

Chapter 3 — The City Changes

As Tom grew older, the news became harder to ignore.

At first, the stories had seemed distant.

A crime somewhere else.

An officer injured somewhere he had never been.

A fire on the other side of the city.

Those things didn't feel real to him.

Until they did.

Tom was eight when he first heard the name.

Kings of the City.

He was sitting on the floor in front of the television, playing with a collection of toy cars.

The news interrupted the program.

John was standing behind the couch.

Samantha sat nearby.

The reporter's voice filled the room.

"Blackridge Police continue investigating increased gang activity connected to a group calling itself the Kings of the City."

Tom stopped playing.

The screen showed police vehicles in Gravemont.

Crime scene tape stretched across a street.

Officers stood near a damaged building.

Tom looked back toward his father.

"Kings of the City?"

John didn't answer immediately.

"That's what they're calling themselves."

Tom looked toward the television again.

"That's a stupid name."

Samantha almost laughed.

John remained serious.

"They think they're important."

"Are they?"

John looked at the screen.

"They're becoming a problem."

Tom looked back toward the television.

"Can you arrest them?"

John sighed.

"We're working on it."

Over the following months, the name appeared more frequently.

Kings of the City.

Gravemont.

Gang violence.

Arrests.

Investigations.

Officers responding to incidents.

Tom began hearing words he didn't fully understand.

Organized crime.

Retaliation.

Weapons charges.

Officer-involved incidents.

The city was changing.

And Tom was old enough to notice.

One evening, John arrived home late.

Very late.

Tom had already gone to bed.

But he wasn't asleep.

He heard the front door open.

Then silence.

No conversation.

No television.

Nothing.

Tom quietly climbed out of bed and walked into the hallway.

He saw his father sitting alone at the kitchen table.

Still wearing his uniform.

His head was lowered.

Tom stood in the doorway.

"Dad?"

John looked up.

His expression immediately changed.

"Tom. Why are you awake?"

"I heard you."

John looked toward the clock.

"Go back to bed."

Tom didn't move.

"Are you okay?"

John looked down.

"Yeah."

Tom knew that wasn't true.

Even at eight years old, he could tell.

John eventually removed his duty belt and placed it on the table.

"One of the officers I work with got hurt tonight."

Tom slowly walked closer.

"Bad?"

John nodded.

Tom looked at the floor.

"Is he going to die?"

John didn't answer immediately.

"We don't know yet."

Tom felt something tighten in his chest.

It was different when the officer on television didn't have a name.

Different when it wasn't someone his father knew.

Tom looked at the badge on John's uniform.

Suddenly, it didn't look as shiny as it used to.

Chapter 4 — The Cost of the Badge

The officer survived.

Tom learned that several days later.

But the feeling never completely disappeared.

For the first time, Tom understood that his father didn't just know police officers.

They were his friends.

They had families.

Children.

Parents.

People waiting for them to come home.

Months later, Blackridge lost another officer.

This time, the officer did not survive.

Tom didn't know him.

But John did.

The entire city seemed to know.

Police vehicles filled the streets.

Flags lowered.

News stations covered the story continuously.

Tom watched from the living room.

His parents sat nearby.

The funeral procession moved through Blackridge.

Hundreds of emergency vehicles followed.

Police.

Fire.

EMS.

Vehicles from agencies Tom had never seen before.

Tom watched silently.

Then he noticed something.

His father wasn't watching the television anymore.

John was staring at the floor.

Samantha reached for his hand.

Tom looked between them.

"Dad?"

John looked toward him.

"Yeah?"

"Are you going to die?"

The room became silent.

Samantha looked toward John.

John didn't answer immediately.

Finally, he stood and walked toward Tom.

He sat beside him.

"I don't know."

Tom felt his eyes begin to water.

"Then don't go."

John looked at him.

For a moment, Tom was afraid his father might be angry.

Instead, John placed an arm around him.

"I wish it worked like that."

"Then quit."

Samantha quietly looked away.

John sighed.

"I can't."

"Why?"

John looked toward the television.

The funeral procession continued moving through the city.

"Because if everyone quit when the job became dangerous, there wouldn't be anyone left."

Tom wiped his eyes.

John continued.

"People still need help."

Tom remembered those words.

Someone needs help.

Tom looked at the television.

The flashing lights stretched farther than he could see.

John looked down at him.

"You should never become a police officer because of me."

Tom looked confused.

John continued.

"And you should never become one because you think you're invincible."

"I'm not."

"I know."

Tom frowned.

John smiled slightly.

"My point is... this job can be dangerous. So can your mother's."

Samantha nodded.

"We don't get to control every situation."

John looked back toward the television.

"But we can decide whether we answer."

Tom didn't say anything.

He simply watched.

Police officers.

Firefighters.

Paramedics.

All standing together.

Honoring someone who had died while serving others.

Tom didn't fully understand everything.

But he understood enough.

The uniforms were not invincible.

The people wearing them weren't either.

Chapter 5 — The Path Begins

By the time Tom was ten, Blackridge had changed.

New roads.

New buildings.

New businesses.

New neighborhoods.

The city continued expanding.

But so did its problems.

The Kings of the City continued appearing in the news.

Gravemont remained one of the areas frequently mentioned during gang-related investigations.

Tom's parents continued working.

John continued leaving in uniform.

Samantha continued leaving in hers.

And Tom continued watching.

Learning.

Remembering.

One afternoon, Tom sat outside the Blackridge Police Department Headquarters with his father.

John had just finished his shift.

The sun was beginning to disappear behind the buildings.

Officers walked in and out of the headquarters.

Tom watched them quietly.

John noticed.

"You're thinking again."

Tom looked at him.

"I do that sometimes."

John laughed.

"Apparently."

Tom looked toward the building.

"Do you like being a police officer?"

John thought about it.

"Most days."

Tom frowned.

"Only most days?"

John smiled.

"Some days are difficult."

"Like when people get hurt?"

"Like when people get hurt."

Tom looked down.

"Do you ever wish you picked a different job?"

John became quiet.

Tom looked back up.

"Mom said I can ask questions."

"Your mother is dangerous."

Tom smiled.

John looked toward the headquarters.

Then toward his son.

"No."

Tom waited.

"No what?"

"I don't wish I picked a different job."

Tom looked confused.

"But you said it's dangerous."

"It is."

"You work late."

"Sometimes."

"You miss stuff."

"Unfortunately."

"You get sad."

John nodded.

"Sometimes."

Tom looked toward the police department.

"Then why do you like it?"

John leaned back.

For several seconds, he didn't answer.

Finally, he spoke.

"Because sometimes I get to help someone."

Tom remained quiet.

"Sometimes it's something small. Someone's lost. Someone needs help getting home. Someone is scared."

Tom listened.

"And sometimes it's something bigger."

John looked toward the city.

"But at the end of the day, I know I tried to make something better than it was before I arrived."

Tom looked at him.

John smiled.

"That's enough for me."

They sat quietly for several minutes.

A patrol vehicle pulled out of the parking area.

Tom watched it disappear down the street.

"Do you think I could do that?"

John looked toward him.

"Do what?"

"Help people."

John smiled.

"You already can."

Tom frowned.

"I'm ten."

"Helping people doesn't require a badge."

Tom thought about that.

Then he looked toward the headquarters again.

"Maybe one day."

John didn't respond immediately.

He simply smiled.

"Maybe."

That night, Tom stood in his bedroom.

His parents were downstairs.

The television was playing quietly.

He could hear the distant sounds of Blackridge outside his window.

Traffic.

Sirens.

The city moving.

Always moving.

Tom walked toward the window.

Somewhere out there, his father had spent the day answering calls.

His mother had done the same.

Police officers.

Firefighters.

Paramedics.

People who left home every day without knowing exactly what they would face.

Some calls were small.

Some changed lives.

Some ended lives.

Tom knew that now.

At ten years old, he understood something that he hadn't understood at five.

The uniforms weren't about power.

The badges weren't decorations.

The lights and sirens weren't there to look impressive.

They existed because something had happened.

And somewhere...

Someone needed help.

Tom didn't know exactly what his future would look like.

He didn't know about the academy.

He didn't know about SWAT.

He didn't know about the team he would one day lead.

He didn't know about the shotgun.

He didn't know about the Kings of the City.

Not really.

He certainly didn't know that one day, the same city he loved would take his life from him.

And he had no way of knowing that death would not be the end.

For now, Tom Smith was simply a ten-year-old boy standing at his bedroom window.

Watching the lights of Blackridge.

Wondering where his path would lead.

Below him, a distant siren echoed through the city.

Tom listened until it faded.

Then he smiled.

Somewhere, someone was answering the call.

And one day...

He hoped it would be him.

END OF ERA 1 — STORY 1

The Path Begins

"Every journey begins before the world knows where it will lead."

Chapter 1 — A Normal Day

Ashford was usually quiet.

Not silent.

Blackridge City was never truly silent.

There were always cars moving through the streets. People walking to stores. Dogs barking behind fences. The occasional distant siren somewhere deeper in the city.

But Ashford was different from places like Gravemont.

It was calmer.

Neighborhoods stretched between small parks and local businesses. Children played in yards. People walked their dogs along quiet sidewalks. Small stores sat along the main roads, serving residents who had lived in the district for years.

To eight-year-old Tom Smith, Ashford was home.

And on that particular morning, it seemed like nothing could possibly happen.

Tom sat cross-legged on the living room floor, surrounded by pieces of a toy police station.

A patrol car sat upside down beside him.

A plastic officer was missing one arm.

Tom stared at it.

"Dad."

From the kitchen, John Smith answered.

"What?"

"My officer got hurt."

John leaned around the corner.

"What happened?"

Tom held up the toy.

"He lost his arm."

John looked at the plastic figure.

"That's serious."

Tom nodded.

"I think he needs an ambulance."

Samantha, standing near the kitchen counter, looked over.

"He's going to be waiting a while."

Tom looked offended.

"Mom."

"What?"

"You work for ambulances."

"I work with ambulances."

"Same thing."

"It is absolutely not the same thing."

John walked into the living room carrying his coffee.

Tom held up the toy officer.

"Can you fix him?"

John examined it.

"Looks like a line-of-duty injury."

"Can you fix him?"

John handed it back.

"No."

Tom stared at him.

"You're both terrible at your jobs."

Samantha burst out laughing from the kitchen.

John shook his head.

"Good morning to you too."

It was a rare day.

Both of Tom's parents were home.

John had worked the previous evening shift and had the morning off. Samantha had returned home late from Blackridge Fire & Rescue Headquarters and wasn't scheduled to return until later that afternoon.

For once, nobody was rushing out the door.

No uniforms.

No radios.

No flashing lights disappearing down the street.

Just breakfast, coffee, and Tom's severely injured plastic police officer.

Tom eventually abandoned the toy and climbed onto the couch.

The television played quietly in the background.

A local news channel discussed traffic delays somewhere in Corvane.

Tom wasn't paying attention.

He looked toward his father instead.

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"What's the worst call you've ever been on?"

John slowly lowered his coffee.

Samantha looked over from the kitchen.

Tom smiled.

"I knew you'd have one."

John stared at him.

"You're eight."

"I can still ask questions."

John sighed.

Samantha smiled.

"He has a point."

John looked between them.

"I don't think we're having this conversation before breakfast."

Tom leaned forward.

"Why?"

"Because I said so."

Tom crossed his arms.

"That's not an answer."

"It is when you're a parent."

Tom looked toward Samantha.

"Mom?"

She immediately raised both hands.

"Don't bring me into this."

The morning continued normally.

That was what Tom remembered most later.

How normal everything had been.

His father complained about the coffee being cold.

Samantha complained that John had taken too long to drink it.

Tom complained that neither of them would fix his toy police officer.

Outside, the sun climbed higher over Ashford.

Cars passed through the neighborhood.

A neighbor mowed their lawn.

Somewhere nearby, a dog barked continuously at absolutely nothing.

Tom eventually disappeared upstairs.

His parents remained downstairs.

For a while, the Smith home was exactly what it was supposed to be.

Quiet.

Safe.

Normal.

Then the phone rang.

John answered it.

At first, his expression didn't change.

"Smith."

Tom couldn't hear the person on the other end.

He continued playing upstairs.

Then John's voice became quieter.

More serious.

"Where?"

Tom stopped.

He looked toward his bedroom door.

Downstairs, Samantha had gone silent.

John continued listening.

Tom couldn't hear the entire conversation.

Only fragments.

"...armed suspects?"

A pause.

"...Ashford?"

Tom slowly stood.

Ten blocks away.

He didn't know that yet.

He only knew his father's voice had changed.

Then John said something that made Tom move toward the door.

"I'm on my way."

The call ended.

A moment later, another phone rang.

Samantha answered hers.

Tom stepped into the hallway.

He could hear both of them downstairs.

Then something happened that he had rarely seen before.

Both of his parents began moving quickly.

Chapter 2 — The Robbery

Tom reached the bottom of the stairs just as John disappeared into the bedroom.

"Dad?"

John's voice came from inside.

"Give me a minute."

Samantha stood near the kitchen counter with her phone in one hand.

She was listening to someone speak.

Tom had never seen his mother look like that at home.

Focused.

Completely focused.

"Understood," she said. "I'll respond to headquarters."

Tom walked closer.

"What's happening?"

Samantha looked at him.

For a moment, she seemed to return to being his mother instead of a firefighter.

"There's an emergency."

"What kind?"

Before she could answer, John returned.

He was no longer wearing his regular clothes.

His police uniform was on.

Tom stared.

"Dad?"

John moved toward the front door.

"I need to go."

"To work?"

John grabbed his duty belt.

"Yes."

"But you're off today."

"I know."

Tom looked toward Samantha.

She had disappeared down the hallway.

A few seconds later, she returned carrying part of her duty gear.

Tom's stomach tightened.

Both of them.

They were both leaving.

"What's happening?" Tom asked again.

John knelt in front of him.

"There was a robbery at a bank."

Tom blinked.

"A bank?"

John nodded.

"Some people went inside with weapons."

Tom immediately looked toward the window.

"Where?"

"In Ashford."

Tom looked back at him.

"Here?"

"Not here. You're safe."

"But Ashford is here."

John paused.

"It's about ten blocks away."

Tom's eyes widened.

Ten blocks.

That wasn't far.

Tom knew the streets around the neighborhood.

He knew where the grocery store was.

The park.

The small shops.

Ten blocks didn't sound like another part of the city.

It sounded close.

Too close.

Samantha knelt beside John.

"Listen to me."

Tom looked at her.

"You're going to stay here."

"By myself?"

"No."

Samantha looked toward the front door.

"Mrs. Carter is coming over."

Tom knew Mrs. Carter.

She lived two houses away.

She had known Tom since he was younger.

Tom didn't look relieved.

"But why are you both going?"

John and Samantha exchanged a glance.

Tom noticed.

"Is it bad?"

John answered honestly.

"It's serious."

Tom looked down.

"Are you going to get hurt?"

John placed his hand on Tom's shoulder.

"I don't know."

Samantha looked at him.

"But we're going to be careful."

Tom looked between them.

He hated that answer.

Because it wasn't the answer he wanted.

He wanted:

No.

Nothing will happen.

We'll be back soon.

Everything is fine.

But neither of his parents said that.

John stood.

His radio came to life.

Tom heard voices.

Fast.

Professional.

Unfamiliar codes and locations.

John adjusted the radio volume.

Samantha's phone began ringing again.

She answered immediately.

"Smith."

Tom watched them.

His parents weren't acting like they did when they left for normal shifts.

There was no casual goodbye.

No discussion about dinner.

No reminder to clean his room.

Everything had changed.

And it had happened in less than five minutes.

A knock sounded at the door.

Mrs. Carter entered shortly afterward.

She immediately understood the situation.

"Tom, sweetheart."

Tom didn't move.

John grabbed his keys.

Samantha checked her equipment.

Tom followed them toward the door.

"Dad."

John turned.

"Yeah?"

"When are you coming home?"

John looked at him.

Tom waited.

"I don't know."

Tom felt his stomach tighten again.

Samantha stepped forward and hugged him.

"We'll come home as soon as we can."

Tom hugged her tightly.

Then John joined them.

For several seconds, none of them spoke.

Finally, John stepped back.

"I love you."

Tom looked at both of them.

"I love you too."

Samantha smiled.

"Be good for Mrs. Carter."

Tom nodded.

John opened the front door.

The morning air rushed inside.

Tom watched his father move toward his vehicle.

Samantha followed shortly afterward in her own direction.

Two different emergency responders.

Leaving the same house.

Going toward the same danger.

Tom stood in the doorway beside Mrs. Carter.

Then both vehicles disappeared.

And the house became quiet.

For a moment.

Chapter 3 — When the Sirens Came

The first siren came less than two minutes later.

Tom looked toward the window.

Mrs. Carter stood behind him.

A Blackridge Police Department patrol vehicle raced down the street.

Its emergency lights reflected against nearby houses.

Tom watched it disappear.

"That's Dad's department," he said.

Mrs. Carter nodded.

"Yes."

Then another came.

A police SUV.

Then another patrol vehicle.

Tom moved closer to the glass.

More sirens.

More lights.

The quiet Ashford neighborhood was changing.

Within minutes, the street outside seemed completely different.

Police vehicles continued passing.

Some traveled alone.

Others followed one another.

Supervisors.

Patrol units.

Specialized vehicles Tom couldn't identify.

Their sirens overlapped.

One after another.

Then several at once.

Tom pressed his hands against the window.

"There's so many."

Mrs. Carter didn't answer.

She was watching too.

A few minutes later, the first fire engine passed.

Tom recognized it immediately.

"Mom's department!"

The massive vehicle moved through the neighborhood with its lights flashing.

Another followed.

Then an ambulance.

Then another.

The sound of the sirens echoed between houses.

Tom ran from one side of the living room to the other, trying to see everything.

"Where are they going?"

"Toward the bank."

"Are they all going there?"

"Probably."

Tom stared through the window.

He had seen emergency vehicles before.

Of course he had.

His parents worked in emergency services.

But this was different.

He had never seen this many responding to one place.

The sirens kept coming.

Blackridge Police Department vehicles.

Blackridge Fire & Rescue.

Ambulances.

Command vehicles.

More supervisors.

The entire neighborhood seemed to know something was happening.

Neighbors stepped outside.

People stood in driveways.

Cars slowed.

Phones appeared.

But the emergency vehicles didn't stop.

They continued toward Ashford.

Toward the bank.

Toward Tom's parents.

Then Tom heard something heavier.

At first, he didn't understand what it was.

The sound was deeper than the engines he had already heard.

A large vehicle approached.

Tom ran toward the window again.

"What is that?"

Mrs. Carter joined him.

Then the first armored vehicle came into view.

Tom froze.

It was enormous.

Dark.

Heavy.

Nothing like the police cars his father drove.

Another followed behind it.

Then another vehicle carrying officers Tom had never seen before.

They were dressed differently.

Helmets.

Heavy protective equipment.

Large vests.

Rifles and equipment Tom didn't understand.

These weren't patrol officers.

Tom knew that immediately.

"Dad doesn't look like that."

"No," Mrs. Carter said quietly.

Tom watched the armored vehicles continue down the street.

"Who are they?"

Mrs. Carter hesitated.

"Police officers."

Tom looked at her.

"Those are police officers?"

"Special police officers."

Tom turned back toward the window.

The last armored vehicle disappeared around the corner.

He continued staring at the empty road.

"Where are they going?"

Mrs. Carter already knew the answer.

"To the bank."

Tom remained silent.

He had no idea what he had just seen.

No idea that years later, he would wear equipment like that.

No idea that he would sit inside an armored vehicle like the ones disappearing down the road.

No idea that one day, other children might stand at their windows and watch him respond toward danger.

For now, he was simply eight years old.

And the sirens kept coming.

Chapter 4 — Ten Blocks Away

By noon, the entire city seemed to know.

The television stations had interrupted their regular programming.

Tom sat on the couch beside Mrs. Carter.

The news showed a live image from Ashford.

A familiar street appeared on the screen.

Tom leaned forward.

"I know that road."

Mrs. Carter looked toward him.

"Which one?"

"The one by the grocery store."

The news camera moved.

Police vehicles filled the street.

Crime scene tape stretched across intersections.

More officers stood behind vehicles and barriers.

Tom watched carefully.

"That's only a few blocks from the park."

Mrs. Carter nodded.

The reporter continued speaking.

"Blackridge Police have established a large perimeter around the bank as the armed incident continues. Authorities have not yet confirmed the number of people remaining inside."

Tom's eyes widened.

"People are still inside?"

Mrs. Carter looked toward the television.

"It sounds like it."

"Are they trapped?"

"We don't know."

Tom looked down.

The television continued.

The reporter described road closures.

Emergency staging areas.

SWAT teams.

Police command.

Fire and EMS waiting nearby.

Tom heard words that sounded important but didn't fully understand them.

Perimeter.

Negotiators.

Command.

Hostages.

He understood that one.

And he didn't like it.

A helicopter passed overhead.

Tom immediately jumped.

The sound rattled the windows.

He ran outside.

Mrs. Carter followed him.

The aircraft moved across the sky toward the emergency.

Tom shaded his eyes against the sunlight.

"Is that police?"

"Probably."

The helicopter continued.

Tom watched until it disappeared behind the buildings.

Then another siren sounded in the distance.

Tom looked toward the road.

It was still happening.

Hours later.

He returned inside.

The news remained on.

The same bank.

The same streets.

The same flashing lights.

Tom looked at Mrs. Carter.

"When are Mom and Dad coming home?"

She looked toward him.

"I don't know."

Tom frowned.

"Everybody keeps saying that."

Mrs. Carter sighed.

"I know."

Tom looked down.

"Are they okay?"

"I hope so."

Tom didn't like that answer either.

He wanted certainty.

But there wasn't any.

That was the part he had never understood before.

His parents left for work.

Sometimes they came home late.

Sometimes they came home tired.

But Tom had always assumed they would come home.

He had never truly considered the possibility that something could happen between leaving and returning.

Now, for the first time, he did.

And he hated the feeling.

The afternoon moved slowly.

Tom tried watching television.

He couldn't focus.

He tried playing with his toys.

He couldn't focus.

He went upstairs.

Then came back downstairs.

He checked the window every few minutes.

Nothing.

No John.

No Samantha.

Only occasional emergency vehicles still moving toward the bank.

Mrs. Carter eventually made him eat.

Tom barely touched his food.

"You need to eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"You haven't eaten since breakfast."

Tom stared at his plate.

"What if Dad gets hurt?"

Mrs. Carter stopped.

Tom continued.

"What if Mom gets hurt?"

She sat across from him.

"They have training."

Tom looked at her.

"That doesn't mean nothing happens."

Mrs. Carter had no answer.

Tom already knew.

He had seen the news.

He remembered the officers.

The funerals.

The injuries.

His father had told him himself.

Nobody was invincible.

Tom pushed his plate away.

"Why do they go?"

Mrs. Carter looked at him.

"Because that's their job."

Tom shook his head.

"But they don't have to."

The words surprised even him.

His parents had been off duty.

They had been home.

Safe.

Then the phone rang.

And they left.

Mrs. Carter looked toward the television.

Then back at Tom.

"Sometimes people need help."

Tom stared at her.

He remembered his father's words from years earlier.

Someone needs help.

And sometimes, you're the person who has to go.

Tom looked down.

For the first time, those words felt different.

They weren't exciting anymore.

They were frightening.

Outside, another helicopter passed.

Tom barely looked up.

The afternoon continued.

Then evening approached.

And Tom waited.

Ten blocks away.

An entire emergency was unfolding.

Police officers stood behind vehicles and barriers.

Firefighters and EMS waited for permission to enter safe areas.

Supervisors directed resources.

Tactical officers surrounded a building.

Negotiators worked to bring the situation to an end.

And eight-year-old Tom Smith sat inside his home.

Waiting for his parents.

Chapter 5 — Home

The sun had nearly disappeared when the news changed.

Tom was sitting on the couch.

He had fallen asleep at some point.

Mrs. Carter gently touched his shoulder.

"Tom."

He opened his eyes.

"What?"

She pointed toward the television.

The reporter was standing outside the police perimeter.

Behind him, emergency vehicles were beginning to leave.

"Authorities have confirmed that the armed incident has ended. All remaining civilians have been safely removed from the bank, and the suspects are now in police custody."

Tom sat up.

"What?"

Mrs. Carter smiled.

"It's over."

Tom looked toward the television.

The reporter continued.

"No civilian fatalities have been reported. Several people are receiving medical evaluation, though officials have not released further details."

Tom barely listened.

"It's over."

Mrs. Carter nodded.

Tom stood.

"Can Mom and Dad come home now?"

Mrs. Carter looked toward the television.

"Eventually."

Tom sighed.

He hated that word too.

Eventually.

The roads around Ashford remained partially closed.

Emergency vehicles continued leaving the area.

But not everyone could simply drive away.

There were reports to complete.

Equipment to return.

People to speak with.

Scenes to clear.

Tom didn't understand any of that.

To him, the emergency was over.

His parents should be home.

Immediately.

Instead, he waited.

Again.

It was dark when headlights finally appeared outside.

Tom jumped from the couch.

He ran toward the window.

A familiar vehicle stopped.

"DAD!"

Mrs. Carter barely had time to stand before Tom was already running toward the door.

"Tom, wait—"

The door opened.

John stepped inside.

Tom crashed into him.

John caught him immediately.

"Dad!"

"Hey, buddy."

Tom wrapped both arms around him.

For several seconds, he refused to let go.

John held him tightly.

"I'm okay."

Tom didn't answer.

John looked toward Mrs. Carter.

She quietly smiled.

Then Tom finally pulled back.

"Where's Mom?"

John looked toward the street.

"On her way."

Tom immediately moved toward the window.

"She's coming?"

"Yes."

Tom looked back at John.

"Are you hurt?"

John looked down at himself.

"No."

"Did you get shot?"

"No."

"Did someone try?"

John paused.

Tom's face changed.

John quickly placed both hands on his shoulders.

"Nobody shot at me."

Tom relaxed slightly.

"But were you in danger?"

John looked at him.

"Tom—"

"Yes or no."

John sighed.

"Yes."

Tom looked down.

John knelt in front of him.

"But I'm here."

Tom nodded.

"And Mom?"

"She's okay."

Twenty minutes later, another vehicle arrived.

Tom saw it before anyone else.

"MOM!"

He ran again.

This time Samantha barely stepped through the door before Tom wrapped his arms around her.

She laughed softly.

"Hey."

Tom buried his face against her uniform.

She hugged him.

"I'm okay."

Tom looked up.

"Are you hurt?"

"No."

"Did you help people?"

Samantha smiled.

"Yes."

"Did you see Dad?"

"Briefly."

Tom looked between them.

"You were both there?"

John nodded.

"The emergency scene was large."

Tom thought about that.

"I saw all the police."

John looked surprised.

"You did?"

"And the fire trucks."

Samantha smiled.

Tom continued.

"And ambulances."

John nodded.

Tom looked at both of them.

"And those other police."

John's expression changed slightly.

"What other police?"

"The ones in the big vehicles."

Samantha smiled.

"SWAT."

Tom repeated the word.

"SWAT."

John nodded.

"They're a specialized police unit."

Tom thought about the armored vehicles.

"They looked scary."

John laughed quietly.

"They're supposed to."

Tom looked toward the window.

"Where do they work?"

John smiled.

"All over the city when they're needed."

Tom nodded slowly.

That was enough.

For now.

Later that night, the three of them sat together in the living room.

Nobody turned on the television.

Tom sat between his parents.

John looked exhausted.

Samantha did too.

Their uniforms were no longer perfectly neat.

Their faces showed the kind of exhaustion Tom had never fully understood before.

Not just physical.

Something deeper.

Tom looked toward his father.

"Dad?"

John looked down.

"Yeah?"

"Were you scared?"

The room became quiet.

John didn't immediately answer.

Samantha looked toward him.

Tom waited.

Finally, John nodded.

"Yes."

Tom looked surprised.

"You were?"

"Of course."

Tom thought about that.

"Then why did you go?"

John leaned back against the couch.

For several seconds, nobody spoke.

Then he looked directly at Tom.

"Being scared doesn't mean you don't do what's right."

Tom listened.

John continued.

"Being scared means you understand that something can go wrong."

Tom looked down.

"But people still need help."

John nodded.

"Exactly."

Samantha placed an arm around Tom.

John continued.

"Sometimes courage isn't about not being afraid."

Tom looked back up.

"It's about what you do even when you are."

Tom remained silent.

He thought about the day.

The phone call.

His parents changing from normal clothes into uniforms.

The patrol cars.

The fire engines.

The ambulances.

The helicopters.

The armored vehicles.

The people standing at the bank ten blocks away.

And then the waiting.

The long, terrible waiting.

Tom leaned against his mother.

"Did everybody come home?"

John looked toward Samantha.

Then back at Tom.

"Most people did."

Tom noticed the answer.

But he didn't ask another question.

Not that night.

Instead, he sat between his parents.

Alive.

Home.

Together.

Later, Tom stood at his bedroom window.

The neighborhood had returned to normal.

The streets were quiet again.

The emergency vehicles were gone.

No helicopters crossed the sky.

No police lights reflected against the houses.

Ashford looked the same.

But Tom knew it wasn't.

Not to him.

Earlier that morning, emergency vehicles had been something exciting.

Something to watch.

Something connected to his parents' jobs.

Now he understood a little more.

The sirens meant someone needed help.

The lights meant something had happened.

And when enough sirens came at once...

Something was very wrong.

Tom looked toward the distant city lights.

Ten blocks away, the bank stood behind police tape.

Tomorrow, people would begin talking about what happened.

The robbery.

The suspects.

The SWAT teams.

The officers.

The firefighters.

The ambulances.

For Blackridge City, it would become another major incident.

For Tom Smith...

It would become something else.

A memory.

The first time he watched his parents leave for danger.

The first time he understood what it meant to wait.

The first time he saw the armored vehicles.

The first time he heard the word:

SWAT.

Tom eventually stepped away from the window.

Downstairs, he could hear his parents talking quietly.

They were home.

That was all that mattered.

For tonight.

Tom climbed into bed and pulled the blanket over himself.

Outside, Blackridge City continued moving.

Somewhere in the distance, another siren began.

Tom opened his eyes.

For a moment, he listened.

Then he closed them again.

Because now he understood.

When the sirens came...

Someone was going to answer.

END OF ERA 1 — STORY 2

When the Sirens Came

"Courage is not the absence of fear. Sometimes, it is simply answering the call anyway."

Chapter 1 — Corporal Smith

Tom Smith had seen his father wear a police uniform hundreds of times.

He had seen the dark fabric hanging neatly in the hallway before an early shift. He had watched his father clip equipment onto his duty belt. He had heard the familiar sound of boots crossing the kitchen floor.

But this morning was different.

Tom stood in the living room, staring at the new insignia on his father's uniform.

"That's different."

John Smith looked down at his sleeve and smiled.

"You noticed."

Tom stepped closer.

"What is it?"

John crouched slightly so they were closer to eye level.

"Corporal stripes."

Tom's eyes widened.

"So you're in charge now?"

John laughed.

"Not exactly."

"But you're a Corporal."

"I am."

Tom crossed his arms and looked thoughtfully at the stripes.

"So... are you in charge of everybody?"

John looked toward the kitchen.

Samantha immediately laughed before taking another drink of coffee.

"Careful," she said. "He's been a Corporal for less than a week. Don't give him any ideas."

John shook his head.

"Thanks for the support."

Tom continued studying the stripes.

"So what does it mean?"

John's expression became more serious, though still warm.

"It means more responsibility. I still patrol. I still answer calls. But sometimes other officers may need help, guidance, or a supervisor on scene."

Tom nodded slowly.

"So you help the other officers?"

"That's part of it."

Tom smiled.

"That's cool."

John smiled back.

"Yeah. It is."

Across the kitchen, Samantha watched the two of them with amusement.

Tom had always been proud of his parents.

His father was a police officer.

His mother was a firefighter.

To Tom, that had always seemed perfectly normal.

Other children had parents who worked in offices, stores, restaurants, or factories.

Tom's parents wore uniforms.

They carried radios.

Sometimes they left suddenly.

Sometimes they came home exhausted.

And sometimes, when Tom was lucky, they told stories about the strange and unusual things they had encountered during their shifts.

Not everything, of course.

There were things adults did not tell eight- or nine-year-old children.

But Tom knew enough to understand that his parents' jobs were different.

And now his father was a Corporal.

That made it even better.

"So," Tom said, trying to sound casual.

John immediately narrowed his eyes.

"What do you want?"

Tom looked offended.

"What makes you think I want something?"

Samantha started laughing again.

John folded his arms.

"Because you've had that exact look on your face since you woke up."

Tom looked toward his mother.

"Mom."

"Don't bring me into this."

Tom sighed dramatically.

"Dad..."

John waited.

"Can I go with you?"

John raised an eyebrow.

"Go where?"

"To work."

Samantha immediately looked toward John.

Tom continued before either parent could answer.

"Just for a little while."

John leaned against the kitchen counter.

"Tom."

"Please?"

"You're nine."

"I know."

"And I'm going on patrol."

"I know."

"And patrol isn't exactly a place for children."

Tom looked down.

For a moment, John said nothing.

Then Samantha looked toward him.

The two parents exchanged a quiet glance.

Tom noticed.

He knew that look.

It was the look parents gave each other when they were silently discussing something without actually speaking.

John finally sighed.

"Just for part of the shift."

Tom's head immediately snapped upward.

"What?"

"You're going to stay where I tell you to stay. You're going to listen the first time I tell you something. And if anything happens that makes me think you're unsafe, you're going home."

Tom's eyes widened.

"Really?"

John nodded.

"Really."

Tom nearly launched himself across the kitchen.

"YES!"

Samantha covered her ears.

"Inside voice!"

"Sorry!"

Tom was already running toward the hallway.

John called after him.

"Tom!"

Tom stopped.

"Yeah?"

"Breakfast first."

Tom groaned.

"Dad."

"Breakfast."

"Fine."

Samantha smiled.

"Welcome to police work. Hurry up and wait."

Later that morning, Tom sat in the passenger area of his father's patrol vehicle.

He still couldn't believe it.

He had seen Blackridge Police Department vehicles his entire life.

But sitting inside one felt completely different.

The vehicle smelled faintly of fabric, plastic, coffee, and something Tom couldn't identify.

John had already explained that the patrol car was Unit 890.

Tom looked toward the dashboard.

"So this is your office?"

John started the engine.

"Pretty much."

Tom looked around.

"Your office has sirens."

"Perks of the job."

"It also has lights."

"More perks."

Tom grinned.

John backed the patrol vehicle out carefully.

Before they left, he looked toward Tom.

"Seatbelt?"

Tom immediately clicked it into place.

"Seatbelt."

John nodded.

"Good."

The patrol vehicle rolled out of the Blackridge Police Department headquarters.

Tom watched the massive city move past his window.

For the first time, he wasn't simply watching police officers drive through his neighborhood.

He was riding with one.

With his father.

With Corporal Smith.

And Tom Smith was convinced it was going to be the best day of his life.

At least...

That was how the day started.

Chapter 2 — Unit 890

The Blackridge Police Department headquarters was even more impressive from the inside.

Tom had visited before, but usually only briefly.

Today, he had been allowed to see more.

John had completed his patrol preparation while Tom remained nearby under supervision.

He checked the patrol vehicle.

Radio.

Emergency equipment.

General vehicle condition.

Nothing exciting, according to John.

Everything exciting, according to Tom.

"What's that?"

Tom pointed toward a piece of equipment.

"Emergency equipment."

"What does it do?"

"Depends which one you're pointing at."

Tom pointed again.

"That one."

John looked.

"That one helps us do our job."

Tom frowned.

"That's not an answer."

John smiled.

"You'll make a terrible detective."

"I'm nine."

"Good point."

Tom continued watching everything his father did.

Other officers passed through the patrol area.

Some greeted John.

Others congratulated him on his promotion.

"Corporal Smith."

"Still sounds strange," John muttered.

Tom immediately looked at him.

"It sounds awesome."

John smiled.

"Glad someone thinks so."

Eventually, Unit 890 left headquarters.

The first part of the patrol was almost disappointingly normal.

Almost.

Tom watched traffic move through Blackridge City.

He listened to the police radio.

At first, it was difficult to understand.

Voices spoke quickly.

Unit numbers.

Locations.

Short updates.

Requests.

John explained some of it when he could.

"Dispatch keeps track of where units are."

"All of them?"

"As many as they can."

"How?"

"Computers. Radios. A lot of work."

Tom looked toward the radio.

"Do they know where we are?"

John smiled.

"Usually."

Tom thought about that.

"That's kind of creepy."

John laughed.

"Sometimes."

The morning continued.

They drove through several areas of Blackridge.

Tom watched officers conduct traffic stops.

He saw patrol units parked near businesses.

He watched people walking through the city.

It wasn't dramatic.

There were no explosions.

No gunfire.

No criminals crashing through storefront windows.

Tom was slightly disappointed.

John noticed.

"Bored?"

"No."

John glanced toward him.

Tom stared out the window.

"Maybe a little."

John smiled.

"Most police work isn't exciting."

Tom looked toward him.

"Really?"

"Really."

"But on television—"

"Television lies."

Tom thought about that.

"Everything?"

"Not everything."

John paused.

"Just enough."

Tom laughed.

Unit 890 continued through Blackridge.

The streets gradually changed as they moved through different parts of the city.

Older buildings appeared.

Historic architecture.

Narrower streets.

Morrowgate.

Tom looked through the window.

"I like it here."

"Morrowgate?"

"Yeah."

John nodded.

"A lot of history here."

Tom looked toward several older homes.

"They're old."

"Very old."

"Older than you?"

John glanced toward him.

"Watch it."

Tom smiled.

Then the radio changed.

It was subtle at first.

A voice.

Then another.

Then a dispatcher speaking with more urgency.

John's attention immediately shifted.

Tom noticed.

The relaxed expression disappeared.

His father's hands adjusted slightly on the steering wheel.

The radio crackled again.

And the normal patrol ended.

Chapter 3 — The Call

"All units, stand by for priority traffic."

The dispatcher's voice came clearly through the patrol vehicle.

Tom stopped looking out the window.

John reached toward the radio controls.

A moment of silence followed.

Then:

"Blackridge Fire & Rescue units responding to a reported residential structure fire in Morrowgate District."

Tom looked toward his father.

The dispatcher continued.

"Engine 4. Engine 8. Ambulance 3. Ambulance 6. Ladder 2."

Tom froze.

"Ladder 2?"

John glanced toward him.

Tom already knew the answer.

"That's Mom."

John nodded.

"Yeah."

The radio continued transmitting additional information.

Tom suddenly imagined his mother at the fire station.

The alarm sounding.

Firefighters moving quickly.

Ladder 2 leaving the station.

His mother inside.

"Blackridge Police units requested for traffic control and scene security."

John's hand moved toward the radio microphone.

"Unit 193 responding."

Another voice followed.

"Unit 899 responding."

Tom looked toward his father.

John pressed the radio button.

"Unit 890 responding."

The dispatcher acknowledged him.

Tom stared ahead.

His excitement had changed.

Something felt different now.

His father wasn't just driving around the city anymore.

His father was responding.

And his mother was responding too.

"Is it bad?" Tom asked.

John kept his attention on the road.

"We don't know yet."

"Are people inside?"

"We don't know that either."

Tom looked down.

John glanced toward him briefly.

"Hey."

Tom looked back.

"Listen to me."

Tom nodded.

"We're going to the scene. But you're going to stay safe."

"Okay."

"If I tell you to do something, you do it immediately."

"Okay."

"No arguing."

"Okay."

John reached toward the emergency controls.

The interior of Unit 890 suddenly changed.

Red and blue reflections flashed across nearby buildings.

The siren began.

Tom had heard that sound thousands of times.

From sidewalks.

From his bedroom.

From his family's home.

From far away.

But now he was inside it.

John accelerated carefully into traffic.

Vehicles began moving aside.

Tom looked through the windshield.

Another emergency vehicle passed through an intersection ahead.

Then another.

Somewhere in the distance, he heard additional sirens.

More units.

More responders.

All moving toward the same place.

Tom looked ahead.

And suddenly remembered the bank robbery the year before.

He remembered standing near the window.

Watching emergency vehicles disappear down the street.

Watching SWAT armored vehicles move toward danger.

Watching the sirens go.

This time...

He wasn't watching.

He was going with them.

Chapter 4 — Following the Sirens

The streets of Morrowgate blurred past the windows.

Emergency lights reflected against historic buildings.

Traffic pulled aside.

Pedestrians stopped and watched.

The police radio remained active.

Tom couldn't understand everything.

But he understood enough.

The fire was real.

And it was serious.

Ahead, a fire engine turned through an intersection.

Tom watched it disappear around the corner.

"Engine 4," John said.

Tom immediately looked.

"How do you know?"

"Unit markings."

Tom pressed closer to the window.

The fire engine was already gone.

Another siren echoed through the streets.

Then another.

Ambulances.

Police vehicles.

Fire apparatus.

Everyone seemed to be moving toward one point in the city.

Tom watched the flashing lights.

For the first time, he understood why people called it an emergency response.

The city itself seemed to react.

Traffic moved.

Roads changed.

People stepped away.

And the people in uniform moved toward the problem.

Not away from it.

Unit 890 turned onto another street.

Then Tom saw the smoke.

His expression changed immediately.

A dark column rose above several historic homes.

"That's it?"

John didn't answer immediately.

His focus had completely shifted.

"Looks like it."

Tom stared through the windshield.

The smoke seemed enormous.

The closer they got, the more emergency vehicles appeared.

Engine 4 was positioned near the burning home.

Firefighters moved rapidly around it.

Engine 8 arrived shortly afterward.

Ambulances staged farther back.

Police units blocked nearby intersections.

People stood behind police tape, watching.

The house itself was partially obscured by smoke.

But Tom could see enough.

Flashing emergency lights.

Firefighters wearing protective equipment.

Hoses stretched toward the structure.

Smoke rising into the sky.

And then—

Ladder 2.

Tom immediately recognized it.

"Mom!"

John looked toward the fire apparatus.

"That's Ladder 2."

Tom watched as firefighters moved around the vehicle.

For a moment, he searched desperately through the scene.

Every firefighter looked similar from a distance.

Protective gear.

Helmets.

Heavy equipment.

Then he saw her.

He wasn't completely certain at first.

But something about the way she moved—

"That's Mom."

John looked.

Tom pointed.

John followed his finger.

After a moment, he nodded.

"Yeah. That's your mom."

Tom watched silently.

It was strange.

He had seen Samantha in her uniform before.

But never like this.

Not surrounded by smoke.

Not moving with other firefighters toward a burning home.

Not working at someone's worst moment.

For the first time, Tom didn't simply see Mom.

He saw Firefighter Samantha Smith.

John parked Unit 890 at a safe distance.

Then he turned toward Tom.

"Alright."

Tom knew immediately.

His father was about to become Corporal Smith.

Not Dad.

John looked toward Unit 193 nearby.

"I need you to stay with Officer Harris."

Tom looked toward the other patrol vehicle.

"You're leaving?"

"I'm working the scene."

Tom looked toward the fire.

Then back at his father.

"Will you be okay?"

John placed a hand gently on Tom's shoulder.

"I will."

Tom hesitated.

John continued.

"But I need you to listen to Officer Harris."

Tom nodded.

"Okay."

John opened the vehicle door.

Before stepping away, he looked back.

"Stay where you're told."

"Okay."

"And Tom?"

"Yeah?"

John smiled slightly.

"I'm proud of you."

Tom smiled.

Then John stepped out of Unit 890.

Within seconds, he was gone.

Not far.

Tom could still see him.

But he had become part of the emergency.

Officer Harris approached.

He opened the rear door.

"Hey, Tom."

"Hi."

"You ready to hang out with me for a little while?"

Tom looked toward the burning house.

"Do I have a choice?"

Officer Harris smiled.

"Not really."

Tom climbed into the other patrol vehicle.

From there, he watched.

Time passed differently during emergencies.

Tom didn't know how long he had been sitting there.

Minutes.

Maybe longer.

The scene constantly changed.

Firefighters moved.

Police officers communicated.

EMS personnel remained prepared.

More smoke rose from the house.

Then less.

Then more again.

Tom watched his father working near the perimeter.

Speaking with officers.

Helping keep the area secure.

Occasionally directing traffic.

Occasionally communicating over the radio.

Tom saw his mother several times.

Always moving.

Always working.

Never standing still for long.

It made him realize something.

His parents had never told him everything about their jobs.

Not because they were hiding things from him.

But because there were things you couldn't understand by hearing about them.

You had to see them.

The radio crackled.

Officer Harris responded.

Tom watched.

"Is it always like this?" he asked.

Officer Harris looked toward him.

"Like what?"

"Everyone working together."

The officer followed Tom's gaze.

Police.

Firefighters.

EMS.

Emergency vehicles.

People communicating across radios.

"On scenes like this?"

Officer Harris nodded.

"Yeah."

Tom looked toward the fire.

"Why?"

Officer Harris was quiet for a moment.

"Because everyone has a different job."

Tom waited.

"Police make sure the scene stays safe. Firefighters fight the fire. EMS takes care of people who get hurt."

Tom looked toward him.

"And everyone helps?"

Officer Harris smiled.

"That's the idea."

Tom looked back through the window.

The scene suddenly felt different.

Not smaller.

Not less dangerous.

But more organized.

Like a giant machine.

Everyone had a place.

Everyone had something to do.

And together...

They answered.

Chapter 5 — The People Who Answer

Eventually, the fire began to lose.

Tom didn't understand firefighting terminology.

He didn't know the exact moment when the danger changed.

He only knew what he could see.

The smoke slowly became thinner.

The frantic movement around the structure began to slow.

Firefighters continued working.

But something had changed.

The emergency was no longer growing.

It was ending.

Officer Harris listened to his radio.

Then smiled toward Tom.

"Looks like they're getting it under control."

Tom looked through the window.

"Really?"

"Really."

Tom smiled.

"Mom's okay?"

Officer Harris looked toward Ladder 2.

"Looks that way."

"What about Dad?"

Officer Harris pointed.

Tom immediately saw John walking near the patrol perimeter.

"Also looks okay."

Tom leaned back against the seat.

For the first time since the call came in, he allowed himself to relax.

He hadn't realized how worried he had been.

Not completely.

He knew his parents did dangerous jobs.

Everyone knew that.

But knowing something and seeing it were different.

He had watched his father leave for work hundreds of times.

He had watched his mother leave for the fire station.

He had seen their uniforms.

Their vehicles.

Their equipment.

But now he understood a little more.

When the radio called...

They went.

Eventually, John returned.

Tom immediately opened the patrol vehicle door.

"Dad!"

John smiled.

"Hey."

Tom ran toward him.

John met him halfway and hugged him.

"Everything okay?"

Tom nodded.

"Yeah."

John looked toward Officer Harris.

"Thanks."

"No problem."

Tom looked toward the burning home.

Firefighters were still working, though the situation was much calmer now.

"Mom?"

John looked toward Ladder 2.

"She'll be over soon."

Tom waited.

A few minutes later, Samantha finally emerged from the area near the fire apparatus.

She removed her helmet.

Tom immediately ran toward her.

"Mom!"

Samantha barely had time to react before Tom hugged her.

She laughed.

"Hey, kiddo."

Tom held on tightly.

"Are you okay?"

Samantha looked surprised.

"I'm fine."

"Really?"

"Really."

Tom stepped back.

His father joined them.

For a brief moment, the three stood together.

The fire scene continued behind them.

Emergency lights flashed across the historic streets of Morrowgate.

Firefighters continued cleanup operations.

Police officers remained at their posts.

Ambulances waited nearby.

But for Tom, everything seemed quieter.

He looked at his parents.

Then toward the emergency vehicles.

"Do you always have to go to things like this?"

John and Samantha exchanged a glance.

"Not always," Samantha said.

Tom looked toward the burned home.

"But when someone needs help..."

He paused.

"You're going?"

John looked toward him.

"Usually."

"Even if you're scared?"

The question hung in the air.

Samantha looked toward the fire.

Then back toward Tom.

"Sometimes being scared is part of the job."

Tom thought about what his father had told him the year before.

Being scared doesn't mean you don't do what's right.

John placed a hand on Tom's shoulder.

"When someone needs help," he said quietly, "someone has to answer."

Tom looked toward the fire engines.

Then the ambulances.

Then the patrol vehicles.

All different.

All with different jobs.

But all there for the same reason.

To help.

Tom nodded slowly.

"That's the job?"

John smiled.

"That's the job."

Samantha looked toward her crew.

John looked toward the officers still working.

Neither of them was finished yet.

The emergency was under control.

But there was still work to do.

Tom understood that now.

His parents weren't superheroes.

They didn't have special powers.

They weren't fearless.

They were ordinary people.

People with a home.

A family.

A nine-year-old son.

And when someone else's ordinary day became an emergency...

They put on their uniforms.

Got into their vehicles.

And answered the call.

Tom looked toward Unit 890.

His father's patrol vehicle waited beneath the flashing lights.

Nearby, Ladder 2 stood with the rest of Blackridge Fire & Rescue.

Two vehicles.

Two careers.

Two parents.

And one boy standing between them.

The sirens were beginning to fade.

Emergency vehicles would eventually return to their stations.

Police officers would return to patrol.

Firefighters would clean their equipment.

EMS crews would prepare for the next call.

And Blackridge City would continue moving forward.

But Tom would remember this day.

Years later, he would remember sitting inside Unit 890.

He would remember the emergency lights reflecting across the streets.

He would remember the smoke rising above Morrowgate.

He would remember seeing his father become Corporal Smith.

He would remember seeing his mother become Firefighter Smith.

And he would remember the moment he finally understood something about the people behind the uniforms.

They were ordinary people.

Until someone needed help.

Then they answered.

Tom had once stood at home and watched the sirens race past his neighborhood.

He had wondered where they were going.

He had wondered who was inside the vehicles.

He had wondered what waited for them at the end of the road.

Now, one year later...

He knew a little more.

This time, he hadn't watched the sirens disappear into the distance.

He had followed them.

END OF ERA 1 — STORY 3

Following the Sirens

He once watched the sirens pass by. Now, he followed them.

Chapter 1 — The Morning

At ten years old, Tom Smith had learned that mornings had a rhythm.

The alarm clock went off.

His father complained about how early it was.

His mother reminded him that complaining about being tired did not make school disappear.

Tom tried to find a reason why breakfast should somehow count as a substitute for getting dressed.

And every morning, somehow, they still made it out the door.

That morning was no different.

Tom sat at the kitchen table, slowly eating his breakfast while watching his father prepare for work.

John Smith stood near the counter, already dressed in his Blackridge Police Department uniform. His badge was secured to his chest, his duty belt was being checked, and his Corporal's insignia was clearly visible on his uniform.

Tom still thought the rank looked important.

He had spent the last year occasionally calling him "Corporal Dad" just to annoy him.

John had stopped correcting him.

Mostly because he had started finding it funny.

"Backpack?" Samantha asked.

Tom looked toward the front door.

"...Yes."

"Homework?"

"Yes."

"Lunch?"

Tom paused.

Samantha raised an eyebrow.

"...I knew I forgot something."

She laughed and walked toward the kitchen.

"You're going to school, not deploying overseas."

"I know."

"Then why does it look like you're preparing for a six-month expedition?"

Tom shrugged.

"Because school is dangerous."

John looked over.

"Dangerous?"

"Math."

John nodded seriously.

"Fair point."

Tom laughed.

Samantha shook her head.

"Both of you are ridiculous."

For a few minutes, there was nothing unusual about the morning.

No sirens.

No radio traffic.

No emergency calls.

Just a family preparing for another day.

Tom looked toward his father's radio.

He had become fascinated with it over the past few years.

He knew enough to understand that it connected John with dispatch and other officers, but he still didn't understand most of what he heard.

There were words.

Numbers.

Codes.

Unit numbers.

Locations.

Sometimes everything made sense.

Sometimes it sounded like another language.

John noticed him staring.

"Curious?"

Tom nodded.

"How do you understand all that?"

"Practice."

"Do you know everything?"

John smiled.

"No."

Tom looked surprised.

"You don't?"

"Nope."

"What don't you know?"

"Plenty."

Tom seemed genuinely relieved.

"So you're not secretly a robot?"

"Not yet."

Samantha laughed from across the kitchen.

"Give him another cup of coffee and we'll find out."

John glanced at the clock.

"Speaking of which..."

He picked up his equipment bag.

Tom's expression changed slightly.

The joking was over.

The day was beginning.

John had work.

Samantha had work.

And Tom had school.

Three different destinations.

One family.

John walked over and gave Tom a quick hug.

"Have a good day."

"You too."

Samantha leaned down and hugged him as well.

"Be good."

"I always am."

John and Samantha both looked at him.

Tom sighed.

"...Mostly."

Chapter 2 — Leaving for Work and School

Outside, the morning air was cool and quiet.

The Smith family stood near the driveway.

John's patrol vehicle was ready.

Samantha's firefighter equipment was already prepared for her shift.

Tom adjusted his backpack.

For a moment, none of them moved.

Then John opened the driver's door.

"See you this afternoon."

Tom nodded.

"Bye, Dad."

Samantha gave Tom another hug.

"Have a good day."

"You too, Mom."

The family separated.

John headed toward the Blackridge Police Department.

Samantha headed toward Blackridge Fire & Rescue.

Tom walked toward the waiting school bus.

He climbed aboard and found a seat near the window.

As the bus pulled away, Tom watched his parents disappear behind him.

He had seen this happen hundreds of times.

His parents went to work.

He went to school.

They spent their days helping people.

He spent his day learning about fractions, history, science, and everything else adults insisted would somehow be important later.

Tom leaned against the window.

He watched Blackridge slowly pass by.

For him, it was simply another school morning.

He had no idea that before the day was over, he would hear sirens again.

Chapter 3 — Sirens Heard from the Playground

Recess was Tom's favorite part of the school day.

There was no contest.

The playground was loud with children running around, talking, laughing, and arguing over whose turn it was to use the equipment.

Tom was near the edge of the playground when he heard it.

A siren.

He stopped.

At first, it was distant.

Then louder.

Tom turned toward the road.

Red and blue emergency lights appeared between the buildings.

A Blackridge Police Department patrol vehicle came into view.

Tom immediately recognized the unit number.

890.

His father's patrol car.

Tom's eyes widened.

"That's Dad."

He moved closer to the fence, staying within the area supervised by the school staff.

Unit 890 passed the school with its emergency lights flashing and siren sounding.

Tom knew what that meant.

John had explained it before.

Code 3.

Emergency response.

Lights and siren.

Tom watched the patrol vehicle disappear down the road.

His excitement was quickly replaced by concern.

Why was his father responding to something?

What had happened?

Was someone hurt?

Was his father okay?

Tom reached into his backpack.

Inside was the small backup police radio John had allowed him to bring to school.

It wasn't something Tom carried around to play police officer with.

John had allowed him to have it so he could listen when appropriate.

Tom switched it on.

Static filled the speaker.

Then a dispatcher spoke.

Tom listened carefully.

He recognized his father's voice a few moments later.

"Unit 890, copy."

Tom's attention immediately sharpened.

His father was okay.

At least, he sounded okay.

Tom listened.

He didn't understand everything.

There were locations and unit numbers he didn't recognize.

There were terms he hadn't learned yet.

But he understood one thing.

Unit 890 was responding to help another officer.

Tom stayed near the fence, listening.

And then the radio conversation took a turn he wasn't expecting.

Chapter 4 — The Radio Conversation Tom Was Overhearing

"Unit 890, update."

John's voice came over the radio.

"890, go ahead."

"The officer is requesting assistance with a vehicle access issue. No injuries reported."

Tom blinked.

No injuries?

He listened harder.

Dispatch continued.

"890, respond Code 3."

John acknowledged.

"890."

Tom's eyebrows rose.

Code 3.

Lights.

Sirens.

Emergency response.

He had seen his father's patrol car racing down the road.

For a moment, Tom imagined something terrible.

Then the radio continued.

"890, be advised, officer has locked the vehicle keys inside the patrol vehicle."

Tom stared at the radio.

"...What?"

He wasn't sure he had heard correctly.

The dispatcher repeated the information.

Tom slowly lowered the radio.

His father had just responded Code 3...

Because somebody locked their keys inside a police car.

Tom couldn't help himself.

A tiny smile appeared.

He tried not to laugh.

One of the teachers supervising recess noticed.

"What is it?"

Tom shook his head.

"Nothing."

The teacher gave him a suspicious look.

Tom looked back toward the road.

Somewhere out there, his father was dealing with the emergency.

An emergency that apparently involved a locked car.

A few minutes later, John's voice came over the radio again.

"890 on scene."

Another voice replied.

"Copy, 890."

Then John spoke.

"Vehicle is secure. No further assistance required."

Tom waited.

He knew Code 3.

But he didn't know what happened next.

Then dispatch transmitted:

"890, downgrade to Code 1."

Tom frowned.

Code 1?

He knew Code 3 meant emergency response.

He didn't know Code 1.

John's response came through.

"890, Code 1."

The sirens were gone.

Tom suddenly understood.

The emergency was over.

His father wasn't racing anywhere anymore.

He was probably standing next to a patrol car helping another officer get back inside it.

Tom looked at the radio.

"So that's what that was."

He had just learned something important.

A siren didn't always mean someone was dying.

A Code 3 response could be sent for an urgent situation that ultimately turned out to be completely manageable.

The response code system existed to get officers where they needed to be quickly when circumstances warranted it. In the fictional Blackridge system, Code 1 represented routine response while Code 3 represented emergency response with lights and siren.

Tom had only just started learning the difference.

And today, he had learned it in the funniest possible way.

Somewhere nearby, his father was probably helping a fellow officer retrieve keys from a locked patrol car.

Tom quietly laughed.

"That's Dad."

Chapter 5 — Back in the Classroom

Recess ended.

Tom returned to his classroom and put the radio away.

The teacher continued the lesson.

Tom tried to pay attention.

He really did.

But his mind kept wandering.

He thought about Unit 890.

He thought about the sirens.

He thought about his father.

And then he thought about the locked patrol car.

Tom smiled to himself.

The teacher noticed.

"Something funny?"

Tom looked up.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

The teacher continued teaching.

Tom looked down at his work.

For the first time, he began thinking about something he hadn't really understood before.

When his parents went to work, he knew they responded to emergencies.

But "emergency" didn't always mean disaster.

Sometimes people needed help with something simple.

Sometimes something sounded serious over the radio but turned out to be completely manageable.

And sometimes...

Someone just needed help getting into their own car.

Tom still knew that his parents could face dangerous situations.

He had already seen that firsthand.

But today was different.

Nobody had died.

Nobody had been seriously injured.

His father had simply answered a call.

And then he came away from it just fine.

Tom smiled.

Maybe that was something worth remembering.

Chapter 6 — Going Home from School

The school day eventually ended.

Tom climbed aboard the bus and settled into his seat.

He was tired.

His backpack felt heavier than it had that morning.

The bus pulled away from the school.

Tom watched the familiar streets pass by.

Then the driver took a different route.

Tom noticed almost immediately.

"Why aren't we going this way?"

The bus continued through Morrowgate.

A few minutes later, Tom saw emergency lights ahead.

He sat up.

Police.

An ambulance.

And then—

A familiar red apparatus.

Ladder 2.

Tom recognized it instantly.

His mother's truck.

He leaned toward the window.

The bus slowed as it approached the scene.

A vehicle accident had occurred.

It wasn't catastrophic.

There was no massive wreckage.

No flames.

No screaming.

No chaotic evacuation.

Emergency personnel were simply doing their jobs.

Unit 700 was nearby.

An ambulance crew was speaking with the people involved.

And Samantha was working with her crew around the scene.

Tom watched his mother carefully.

She was focused.

Professional.

Moving between the people involved and the other responders.

Tom smiled.

"Mom."

He knew she couldn't hear him.

But he watched anyway.

The ambulance crew evaluated the people involved.

Nobody appeared to have suffered major injuries.

There was no need for a hospital transport.

It was another emergency response.

Another scene.

Another group of people who needed someone to show up.

Tom looked at Ladder 2.

He remembered the fire from the previous year.

He remembered watching his mother work that night.

But today was different.

Today he was simply watching her help people after an accident.

No tragedy.

No disaster.

Just help.

Tom leaned back into his seat.

For some reason, that made him feel good.

Chapter 7 — Tom Gets Home Before His Parents

Tom arrived home before either of his parents.

A nearby neighbor checked in on him, making sure he got inside safely.

Tom dropped his backpack near the door.

He grabbed something to eat.

Then he headed toward his room.

His police toys were still exactly where he'd left them.

Tom sat down on the floor.

He looked at them.

Then he remembered the day.

Unit 890.

The sirens.

The radio.

The locked patrol car.

Ladder 2.

The accident.

He picked up one of his toy police vehicles.

"Unit 890 responding."

He pushed it across the floor.

Then another toy.

"Unit 700, you're on scene."

Tom paused.

He looked at the toys.

He wasn't simply pretending to be his father.

Not anymore.

He was recreating things he had seen.

Trying to understand them.

He arranged the vehicles around a pretend accident.

One became a police car.

Another became an ambulance.

Another became a fire truck.

Tom moved them carefully.

"Scene is safe."

He made a tiny siren sound.

"Wooooo..."

He stopped.

Then laughed at himself.

He was ten years old.

He didn't know what he wanted to become.

He didn't know where life would take him.

He only knew that the people he loved went to work every day and came home with stories.

And somehow, he wanted to understand those stories.

Chapter 8 — John and Samantha Smith Come Home

The front door opened.

Tom looked up.

John walked inside.

"Dad!"

"Hey, buddy."

Tom immediately noticed something.

There was a small tear in John's uniform sleeve.

"What happened?"

John looked down.

"This?"

"Yeah."

John sighed.

"Tree branch."

Tom stared at him.

"You lost a fight with a tree?"

John laughed.

"Apparently."

Tom grinned.

"Did you arrest the tree branch?"

John shook his head.

"Sadly, the handcuffs don't work on tree branches."

Tom laughed.

John dropped his equipment bag and sat down.

"So how was school?"

"Good."

"Learn anything?"

"Yeah."

John raised an eyebrow.

"Like what?"

Tom smiled.

"That police cars can go Code 3 because somebody locked their keys inside."

John paused.

Then slowly smiled.

"You heard that?"

Tom nodded.

"At recess."

John laughed.

"Well, now you know that not every Code 3 response is the end of the world."

"That's what I thought."

"And you also learned something else."

"What?"

"That you shouldn't assume you know everything from hearing half a radio transmission."

Tom thought about that.

"Okay."

"Good."

A few minutes later, the front door opened again.

Samantha stepped inside.

Tom immediately ran toward her.

"Mom!"

She hugged him.

"Hey, sweetheart."

"I saw Ladder 2 today!"

Samantha smiled.

"You did?"

"At the accident."

"I thought I saw your school bus."

Tom looked surprised.

"You saw me?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you wave?"

Samantha laughed.

"I was working."

"Oh."

Tom smiled.

"So you really saw me?"

"I did."

He hugged her again.

For a moment, Tom thought about it.

His mother had seen him.

His father had heard him talking about the radio.

And both of them were home.

That was what mattered.

Chapter 9 — Gaming With the Family

The evening was quiet.

There were no emergency calls.

No sirens outside.

No radio traffic demanding anyone's attention.

Just the Smith family.

Tom brought out a game.

"Dad."

John looked over.

"What?"

"Game."

"I'm tired."

"Mom?"

Samantha looked at John.

"You've been outnumbered."

John sighed.

"Apparently."

Tom smiled.

They sat together.

The game began.

Tom talked about school.

John talked about his shift.

Samantha talked about the accident.

Tom listened carefully.

"So nobody went to the hospital?"

Samantha shook her head.

"No. Thankfully."

Tom nodded.

"Good."

John looked at him.

"You worried?"

"A little."

John smiled.

"That's okay."

Tom thought for a moment.

"Does every call you get end okay?"

John and Samantha exchanged a brief glance.

"No," John said honestly.

"But today it did," Samantha added.

Tom nodded.

He didn't need a long explanation.

He was learning.

Some days were terrible.

Some days were ordinary.

Some calls were dangerous.

Some calls were simply locked keys.

But every time the radio called, someone had to answer.

Tom looked at his parents.

He didn't say anything.

He just smiled.

Chapter 10 — That Night

The house eventually became quiet.

The game was over.

The dishes had been put away.

Tom had gone from energetic to exhausted in what seemed like seconds.

John sat on the couch.

Samantha was beside him.

She had slowly fallen asleep with her head resting against him.

John looked down at her.

Then he looked toward the floor.

Tom was asleep there too.

He had apparently lost his battle with exhaustion while still holding one of his toys.

John smiled.

He carefully reached down and pulled a blanket over Tom.

For a few seconds, he simply watched his son sleep.

There were no sirens.

No emergency lights reflected against the windows.

No voices coming over the radio.

No calls waiting.

Just silence.

John looked at Samantha.

Then back at Tom.

He knew that one day his son would grow older.

He knew Tom would eventually have to choose his own path.

For now, though, none of that mattered.

He was just a ten-year-old boy.

A boy who liked police cars.

A boy who listened to radios.

A boy who recognized Ladder 2 from halfway down a street.

A boy who was slowly discovering what his parents did every day.

John reached over and turned off the television.

The room became darker.

Tom shifted slightly in his sleep.

John smiled.

For one night, there were no emergencies.

No danger.

No sirens.

Everyone was home.

And for the Smith family...

that was enough.

END OF ERA 1 — STORY 3

The Sirens Don't Always Mean Danger

Tom had spent years watching emergency responders from the outside.

He had watched them leave.

He had watched them arrive.

He had watched the sirens disappear down the road.

But now he was beginning to understand something his ten-year-old mind had never fully grasped before:

A siren meant someone needed help.

Not necessarily that someone was dying.

Not necessarily that disaster had struck.

Sometimes it meant an accident.

Sometimes it meant a fire.

Sometimes it meant helping another officer retrieve locked keys.

Sometimes it simply meant someone needed someone to show up.

And every time the call came...

Someone answered.

Chapter 1 — The Early Meeting

Samantha Smith's alarm went off before sunrise.

She opened her eyes, stared at the ceiling for a moment, and immediately remembered why she had set it so early.

There was a meeting at Blackridge Fire & Rescue Headquarters.

It wasn't an emergency.

It wasn't a call.

It was simply work.

Still, it meant getting out of bed earlier than usual.

Samantha quietly got dressed, gathered what she needed, and made her way through the house.

The Smith home was still mostly silent.

Tom was asleep.

John was asleep.

For a few minutes, Samantha moved around as quietly as possible, trying not to wake either of them.

She almost succeeded.

Almost.

John opened one eye.

"What time is it?"

"Early."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Early enough that you should go back to sleep."

John closed his eye again.

"Excellent answer."

Samantha smiled.

She gave him a quick kiss before heading toward the door.

"I'll see you later."

John barely opened his eyes.

"Drive safe."

Samantha grabbed her things and left.

By the time she arrived at Blackridge Fire & Rescue Headquarters, the sun was beginning to rise.

The meeting was already underway.

Staffing assignments were being discussed, along with personnel changes and adjustments needed across the department.

Samantha listened quietly.

Then came the announcement.

Because of new personnel and staffing adjustments, several firefighters would be moving between apparatus assignments.

Samantha's assignment was one of them.

She had spent time on **Ladder 2**.

Now she was being reassigned.

Engine 4.

Samantha took the news calmly.

Assignments changed.

That was part of the job.

She finished the meeting and gathered her equipment.

She hadn't even had much time to think about the change when the station's tones sounded.

A smoke-alarm activation.

Samantha climbed aboard Engine 4 with the rest of the crew.

The engine rolled out.

The call sounded more serious than it ultimately was.

When they arrived, there was no fire.

No smoke filling the building.

No emergency requiring a major response.

The alarm had been triggered by a faulty battery.

Samantha helped check the situation, confirmed there was no fire, and assisted with getting the alarm situation resolved.

Another call answered.

Another problem handled.

Nothing dramatic.

But Samantha didn't know that across the city, her son was about to spend his day surrounded by nearly every branch of public safety.

And Tom didn't know his mother was no longer riding Ladder 2.

Chapter 2 — Where's Mom?

Tom woke up later that morning.

He stumbled out of his room, still half asleep.

He reached the kitchen.

Then stopped.

Something was missing.

"Where's Mom?"

John looked up from his breakfast.

"She had an early meeting at the fire department."

"Oh."

Tom sat down.

He looked toward the empty chair.

"She left already?"

"Yeah."

Tom nodded.

He wasn't upset.

He was simply surprised.

Usually, his mother was there in the morning.

John slid breakfast toward him.

"Eat."

Tom looked at it.

"I'm awake."

"That doesn't mean you're functioning."

Tom smiled.

"That's fair."

The morning continued normally.

Tom ate breakfast.

John prepared for work.

Tom got his school things together.

Neither of them knew about Samantha's reassignment.

As far as Tom knew, his mother was still assigned to Ladder 2.

As far as John knew, she was simply attending an early meeting before beginning her normal duties.

Neither had any reason to think differently.

For now.

Chapter 3 — Ready for School

Tom stood near the front door, backpack over one shoulder.

John looked him over.

"Homework?"

"Yep."

"Books?"

"Yep."

"Pencils?"

"Yep."

"Anything else?"

Tom thought.

"Nope."

John nodded.

"Good."

Tom reached for the door.

Then stopped.

His expression changed.

"Wait."

John looked at him.

"What?"

Tom turned around.

"My homework."

John stared at him.

"You just said you had it."

"I thought I did."

John smiled.

"Go."

Tom ran back toward his room.

John shook his head.

"Ten years old."

Tom shouted from down the hallway.

"I heard that!"

"You were supposed to!"

A few moments later, Tom came running back with his homework.

"Got it."

"Excellent."

Tom put it into his backpack.

"Now I'm ready."

John opened the door.

"Now you're ready."

Tom stepped outside.

The morning was ordinary.

No sirens.

No emergencies.

Just a father getting his son ready for school.

Neither of them knew that the day ahead would give Tom another glimpse into the world his parents worked in.

Chapter 4 — Unit 890

John arrived at work and prepared for his shift.

His uniform was neat.

His equipment was secured.

His patrol vehicle was ready.

Unit 890.

Before heading out, John reached into the area where he kept a small family photograph.

He looked at it for a moment.

Tom was smiling.

Samantha was smiling.

And John couldn't help but smile too.

He put the photograph back.

Work was work.

Family was family.

He had learned over the years that keeping those two worlds balanced wasn't always easy.

But they were both important.

John climbed into Unit 890.

The engine started.

He checked his radio.

Then he pulled away.

Another shift had begun.

Chapter 5 — Blackridge Public Safety & Emergency Services Day

Tom knew something was different the moment he arrived at school.

There were emergency vehicles everywhere.

Not responding to an emergency.

Not rushing anywhere.

Just parked across the school grounds.

A large sign announced the event:

BLACKRIDGE PUBLIC SAFETY & EMERGENCY SERVICES DAY

Tom stared.

His eyes widened.

Police vehicles.

Fire engines.

Ambulances.

Hazmat equipment.

And then—

SWAT.

Tom couldn't help smiling.

This was going to be a good day.

The school grounds had been transformed into a public-safety showcase.

There were firefighters explaining equipment.

EMS personnel demonstrating medical equipment.

Police officers showing students their vehicles.

Hazmat personnel explaining protective equipment.

And a mass-casualty unit from Stoneward demonstrating how emergency services could respond when a large number of people needed assistance.

Tom moved from one display to another.

He recognized some of the police vehicles.

Unit 700.

Unit 740.

Unit 800.

Then—

Unit 890.

Tom's face lit up.

"Dad!"

John turned.

There was his son.

John smiled.

"Hey, buddy."

Tom hurried over.

"You came!"

"Of course I came."

Tom looked around.

"Where's Mom?"

John nodded toward the fire and EMS displays.

"She had work today."

"Oh."

Tom looked back at the vehicles.

He wasn't disappointed for long.

There was simply too much to see.

Unit 895 was there.

So was **Unit 130**, with Lieutenant Jack Grummy.

Tom recognized some of the officers from around the department.

Then he saw the tactical vehicles.

SWAT 103 — Charlie Team.

And beside it:

SWAT 104 — Delta Team.

Tom stared at the equipment.

He had seen SWAT before.

He remembered the first time he'd seen heavily equipped tactical officers responding to the bank robbery years earlier.

Back then, they had seemed almost unreal.

Now he was standing beside their equipment in broad daylight.

Nobody was rushing anywhere.

Nobody was shouting.

Nobody was in danger.

They were simply talking to children and answering questions.

Tom listened.

He watched.

He asked questions.

A firefighter showed him equipment from one of the engines.

An EMS responder demonstrated part of their medical equipment.

Police officers explained parts of their patrol vehicles.

Hazmat personnel showed students protective equipment.

Tom watched the SWAT teams demonstrate some of their equipment as well.

There was something fascinating about seeing all of these agencies together.

Police.

Fire.

EMS.

Hazmat.

Specialized teams.

Different uniforms.

Different vehicles.

Different responsibilities.

But all working toward the same basic purpose.

Helping people.

Tom looked around.

For the first time, he wasn't just seeing individual emergency responders.

He was beginning to see a system.

A whole city full of people whose jobs connected in ways he was only beginning to understand.

Chapter 6 — Three Hours

The event lasted nearly three hours.

To Tom, it felt much shorter.

There was always something else to see.

Another vehicle.

Another demonstration.

Another piece of equipment.

Another question.

He spent time around the fire apparatus.

He watched the EMS demonstrations.

He looked at the Hazmat equipment.

He asked his father questions about police vehicles.

And he kept returning to the SWAT displays.

Not because he knew what he wanted to become.

He didn't.

He was ten.

He simply found it interesting.

At one point, John noticed Tom looking toward the fire apparatus.

"Looking for your mother?"

Tom nodded.

"Yeah."

"She's working today."

Tom looked back toward the event.

"Okay."

That was enough.

There was no mystery.

His mother had work.

That happened.

The event eventually came to an end.

Vehicles remained parked while personnel packed up their displays.

Students began returning to their classrooms.

Tom looked back one last time.

Three hours.

Police.

Fire.

EMS.

Hazmat.

SWAT.

His father.

And a whole lot of questions.

He walked back toward his classroom smiling.

Another day.

Another memory.

Another small piece of the world he was growing up around.

Chapter 7 — The Ride Home

School dismissal came later that afternoon.

Tom grabbed his backpack and headed toward the buses.

Then he stopped.

Something looked different.

His normal bus wasn't there.

Instead, another bus was waiting.

Tom walked over.

"Is this our bus?"

The driver nodded.

"Today it is."

"Where's the other one?"

"It broke down this morning."

Tom looked surprised.

"Seriously?"

"Yep. They'll use this one until it's repaired."

Tom shrugged.

"Okay."

He climbed aboard.

The replacement bus pulled away from the school.

Tom sat near the window.

The day had been long.

His mind was still filled with everything he'd seen.

Police vehicles.

Fire trucks.

Ambulances.

SWAT.

His father.

His mother's absence.

He wondered what his mother had been doing all day.

Probably working.

That was all he knew.

The bus continued toward home.

Chapter 8 — Different Calls, Same Family

John's shift was coming to an end.

It had been a normal day.

Nothing particularly unusual.

Near the end of his shift, John handled a routine call.

When it was finished, he got back into Unit 890 and began driving toward home.

He was thinking about dinner.

About Tom.

About Samantha.

About getting home.

Then he noticed something.

A red-and-blue glow reflecting off nearby surfaces.

John looked toward the front of the vehicle.

The emergency lights were on.

He blinked.

"Oh, come on."

He had forgotten to turn them off.

Up ahead was a school bus.

The driver saw the emergency lights and began preparing to pull over.

John immediately switched them off.

The bus continued.

John shook his head.

"Nice one, John."

The bus eventually stopped near Tom's neighborhood.

Tom stepped off.

He saw Unit 890.

Then he saw his father.

Then he noticed that the emergency lights had just been turned off.

Tom smiled.

"Dad."

John looked at him.

"Hey."

Tom pointed at the patrol car.

"Were you responding to something?"

John shook his head.

"Nope."

"Then why were your lights on?"

John sighed.

"I forgot to turn them off."

Tom laughed.

"You?"

"Yes, me."

"You forgot?"

"Apparently."

Tom grinned.

"So you were driving around with your emergency lights on for no reason?"

John pointed at him.

"Careful."

Tom laughed harder.

"Did you get pulled over?"

"By who?"

"I don't know."

John smiled.

"Thankfully, no."

Tom walked beside him.

"So what did you do today?"

"Worked."

"Anything exciting?"

"Not really."

Tom thought about the event.

"I saw SWAT."

John nodded.

"I heard."

"Delta Team was there."

John smiled.

"Sounds like you had a good day."

"I did."

John looked toward the house.

"Good."

Then Tom asked the question that had been sitting in his mind all afternoon.

"What was Mom doing?"

John shrugged.

"Working."

Tom nodded.

Neither of them knew exactly what that meant yet.

They would soon.

The front door opened later that evening.

Samantha walked inside.

Tom immediately looked up.

"Mom!"

"Hey, sweetheart."

She smiled and hugged him.

Tom looked at her.

"How was work?"

Samantha smiled.

"Different."

John looked over.

"Different?"

Samantha nodded.

"I had a meeting this morning."

Tom waited.

"And?"

Samantha smiled.

"I've been reassigned."

John sat up slightly.

"Reassigned?"

Samantha nodded.

"I'm not on Ladder 2 anymore."

Tom's eyes widened.

"You're not?"

"Nope."

"Then where are you?"

Samantha smiled.

"Engine 4."

Tom thought about that.

"Engine 4?"

"That's right."

John smiled.

"Well, that explains a few things."

Tom looked between them.

"What happened?"

Samantha explained.

The staffing changes.

The reassignment.

The smoke-alarm call.

The faulty battery.

Nothing catastrophic.

Nothing dramatic.

Just another day at work.

Tom listened.

Then his expression changed.

"So you were working while I was at the event?"

"Yep."

"And Engine 4 got called?"

"Yep."

"To the smoke alarm?"

"Yep."

Tom thought about it.

Then he smiled.

"So I was looking for Mom at the school..."

Samantha nodded.

"...while Mom was somewhere else helping somebody."

"Exactly."

Tom grinned.

John looked at Samantha.

"Different calls."

Samantha smiled.

"Same family."

Tom smiled too.

He understood the title without anyone having to explain it.

The evening settled down.

Dinner was simple.

Conversation was easy.

Tom told them about the school event.

John told Tom a little more about his day.

Samantha talked about her new assignment.

There had been no tragedy.

No major disaster.

No terrible ending.

Just three people who had spent the day in three different places.

John had been a police officer.

Samantha had been a firefighter.

Tom had been a student.

They had all been doing completely different things.

But they had all come home.

Later that night, Tom sat quietly for a moment.

He looked at his parents.

He thought about the police cars he'd seen.

The fire engines.

The ambulances.

The SWAT teams.

The radios.

The calls.

He was still only ten years old.

He didn't know what his future looked like.

He didn't know what job he would eventually have.

He didn't know where life would take him.

But he knew one thing.

The people he loved spent their days helping others.

And somehow, that made him want to keep watching.

Keep listening.

Keep learning.

John sat beside him.

Samantha sat on the other side.

Tom smiled.

For another day, the sirens had passed.

The calls had come and gone.

The uniforms had been worn.

The vehicles had gone out and returned.

And when the day was finally over...

They were all together.

Different calls.

Same family.

THE END

Era 1 — The First Watch

Story 5 — *Different Calls, Same Family*

Tom was still following the sirens.

He just didn't know yet where they would eventually lead him.

Chapter 1 — Another Morning

Morning arrived quietly at the Smith household.

There were no sirens outside.

No radio traffic.

No emergency calls.

Just sunlight coming through the bedroom window and the faint sounds of a house beginning to wake up.

Tom opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling for a few seconds.

Then he remembered.

School.

He groaned quietly.

“School.”

He rolled out of bed and walked toward his bedroom door.

Then he stopped.

Something felt wrong.

Tom looked down.

He was wearing his underwear.

That was it.

He stared at himself for several seconds.

“...Huh.”

Apparently, sometime during the night, Tom had decided that clothes were optional.

He quickly grabbed his clothes and got dressed before heading downstairs.

In the kitchen, Samantha was already preparing breakfast.

“Good morning,” she said.

“Morning, Mom.”

Samantha looked at him.

“Sleep well?”

“Yeah.”

“That explains why you didn't hear me get up.”

Tom sat down.

Samantha placed breakfast in front of him before grabbing her own coffee.

For a few minutes, the kitchen was quiet.

Then Samantha looked over.

“You have everything for school?”

Tom nodded.

“Yep.”

“Homework?”

Tom checked his backpack.

“Yep.”

“Books?”

“Yep.”

“Pencils?”

Tom opened the backpack.

“Yep.”

“School supplies?”

“Yep.”

“Lunch?”

Tom stopped.

“...Yep?”

Samantha raised an eyebrow.

Tom quickly checked.

His lunch was there.

“Yep.”

“Good.”

Tom smiled.

Samantha took another sip of coffee.

“And you're wearing clothes today.”

Tom looked down.

“...I am.”

“That's usually a good start.”

Tom laughed.

“I don't know what happened.”

“You apparently decided your pajamas had served their purpose.”

“I guess so.”

Samantha shook her head with a smile.

“Come on. Finish breakfast.”

Tom continued eating.

It was an ordinary morning.

And for the Smith family, ordinary mornings were something worth appreciating.

Chapter 2 — Going to School

A short while later, Tom and Samantha stood outside waiting for the school bus.

The same replacement bus from the previous week was still being used.

Tom looked at it as it approached.

“Still the same bus.”

Samantha smiled.

“Apparently.”

“Do you think they'll ever fix the other one?”

“I imagine that's the plan.”

The bus pulled up.

Tom adjusted his backpack.

Samantha reached over and straightened one of the straps.

“You have everything?”

Tom nodded.

“Yes, Mom.”

“Good.”

The bus doors opened.

Tom stepped toward them, then turned around.

“Mom?”

“Yeah?”

Tom smiled.

“I love you, Mom.”

Samantha's expression softened.

“I love you too.”

Tom pointed toward the fire department patch on Samantha's shirt.

"Stay safe at work."

Samantha smiled.

"You stay safe at school."

"I will."

Tom climbed onto the bus.

Samantha watched as he found a seat near the window.

He waved.

She waved back.

The bus pulled away from the curb.

Samantha remained there until it disappeared down the street.

Then she turned around and walked back toward the house.

She opened the front door.

The house was quiet.

Far too quiet.

Samantha walked into the living room.

Then toward the stairs.

She stopped.

A thought occurred to her.

She walked upstairs.

Opened the bedroom door.

John was still asleep.

Samantha stared at him.

"John."

Nothing.

She crossed her arms.

“John.”

Still nothing.

She took a breath.

“JOHN! WAKE UP!”

John suddenly moved.

“What?!”

Samantha laughed.

“You're going to be late.”

John blinked several times.

Then he looked at the clock.

His eyes widened.

“Oh.”

Samantha walked away.

“Good morning.”

John sat up.

“...Morning.”

Chapter 3 — Parents Go to Work

By the time John was ready, Samantha had already left for Blackridge Fire & Rescue.

Her shift had begun at the firehouse.

Engine 4.

The familiar red apparatus sat inside the bay.

Captain Hammer was already there.

Lieutenant Mike was checking the day's assignments while Firefighter Lake and Firefighter Sam moved through their normal morning routine.

Samantha walked into the station.

"Morning."

"Morning, Smith," Captain Hammer replied.

Samantha grabbed her equipment.

The morning was calm.

There were no major incidents waiting for them.

That didn't mean the crew had nothing to do.

Equipment still needed checking.

The engine still needed to be ready.

The crew still needed to know where everything was.

Because the next call could come at any moment.

Samantha walked around Engine 4 with the others, checking equipment and making sure everything was where it belonged.

It was routine.

That was part of the job.

Meanwhile, several miles away, John finished getting ready.

He grabbed his equipment, checked his uniform, and headed for the Blackridge Police Department.

His patrol vehicle was waiting.

Unit 890.

John opened the driver's door and climbed inside.

He started the engine.

The radio came alive with the normal sounds of police communications.

John listened for a moment.

Nothing urgent.

He pulled out of the lot and began his shift.

Two parents.

Two different departments.

Two different vehicles.

And one ten-year-old sitting in school, completely unaware that his day was about to become considerably more interesting.

Chapter 4 — Vehicle Accident Outside the School's Playground

Tom's school day had been ordinary.

Classes.

Assignments.

A little talking.

A little boredom.

The usual.

Then, during a break, Tom happened to look toward the playground.

Something caught his attention.

A white SUV was approaching the intersection.

It didn't stop.

Tom watched as it went straight through the stop sign.

“Whoa.”

A black vehicle was crossing the intersection.

The two vehicles collided.

CRASH!

Tom froze.

The sound carried across the school grounds.

Teachers immediately began moving students away from the area.

Tom stared toward the road.

The white SUV had stopped.

The black vehicle had been pushed sideways.

For several seconds, Tom didn't know what to do.

He knew something bad had happened.

But he didn't know how to report it.

He didn't know the emergency number.

He didn't know what information dispatch would want.

Then he remembered something.

His father.

Tom quickly got permission from a nearby teacher to use a phone.

He called John.

The call was answered after only a few rings.

"Smith."

"Dad!"

John immediately recognized his son's voice.

"Tom? What's wrong?"

"There was a crash outside the playground!"

John straightened in his seat.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah! I'm okay!"

"Where are you?"

"At school! Outside the playground!"

John listened carefully.

"What happened?"

"A white SUV ran the stop sign and hit a black vehicle!"

John glanced toward the road.

"Are there people hurt?"

"I don't know! I just saw it happen!"

"Okay. Stay with your teacher."

"Okay."

John immediately contacted dispatch.

"Dispatch, Unit 890. I have a reported vehicle crash at the school near the playground. Witness is my son. White SUV reportedly ran a stop sign and struck another vehicle. Possible injuries."

"890, copy. Units responding."

John activated his emergency equipment.

Unit 890 accelerated toward the school.

Tom remained with the teacher, watching from a safe distance.

He didn't know what was happening inside the vehicles.

He didn't know how serious the injuries were.

But he knew something important.

His dad was coming.

Chapter 5 — The Scene

Unit 890 arrived within minutes.

John immediately recognized the vehicles.

The white SUV was stopped near the intersection.

The black vehicle had sustained significant damage.

John parked and stepped out.

“Stay back!” he called toward the school staff and students who were watching from a distance.

He moved toward the vehicles.

The situation was serious.

The driver of the black vehicle was injured and needed medical attention.

John contacted dispatch again.

“890. Confirm serious injury. Request Fire and Rescue and EMS.”

“Copy, 890.”

The response began almost immediately.

From the direction of Blackridge Fire & Rescue came the sound of an approaching engine.

Tom heard it before he saw it.

A familiar sound.

Then the red shape appeared.

Engine 4.

Tom's eyes widened.

“Mom.”

Samantha was inside.

Engine 4 arrived and stopped near the crash.

Captain Hammer, Lieutenant Mike, Firefighter Lake, Firefighter Sam, and Samantha exited.

Tom watched his mother move toward the scene.

She didn't see him immediately.

Her attention was on the accident.

The crew went to work.

There was no chaos for the sake of chaos.

No shouting without purpose.

Everyone had a job.

Firefighters assessed the vehicles and helped make the scene safe while EMS arrived.

A few moments later, **Ambulance 4** arrived.

The crew moved toward the injured driver.

Tom watched from a safe distance.

The black vehicle's driver was treated at the scene before being prepared for transport.

John moved toward the driver of the white SUV.

The driver's actions had caused the collision.

John gathered the necessary information and spoke with witnesses.

Eventually, the investigation led to the driver's arrest.

Tom watched his father place the driver into custody.

It was strange seeing both of his parents working at the same scene.

His father on one side.

His mother on the other.

Different uniforms.

Different responsibilities.

Same accident.

Same goal.

Help the people who needed help.

After the injured driver was transported, John returned toward the school.

He spotted Tom.

“Hey.”

Tom smiled.

“Hi, Dad.”

John crouched slightly so they were closer to eye level.

“You said you saw the crash?”

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

Tom pointed toward the intersection.

“The white SUV ran the stop sign and crashed into the black vehicle that looks like the boss's vehicle.”

John paused.

Then smiled.

“The boss's vehicle?”

“Yeah.”

John looked toward the damaged Tahoe.

“I know what you mean.”

Tom nodded seriously.

“That's what it looked like.”

John chuckled.

“Fair enough.”

Chapter 6 — After the Scene

The scene was beginning to wind down.

Engine 4 remained for a little longer while the firefighters finished their work.

Ambulance 4 had already transported the injured driver.

The white SUV driver was now in police custody.

John had one more conversation to have before leaving.

He looked at Tom.

“Can I ask you something?”

Tom nodded.

“Why didn't you call 911?”

Tom looked confused.

“I didn't know how.”

John nodded.

“That's okay.”

He pointed toward the school.

“If you ever see something serious like this and you need help, 911 is the number you call.”

Tom listened.

“Like a crash?”

“Exactly. A serious crash, somebody badly hurt, a fire, something dangerous happening.”

“What if I see something small?”

“Then you probably don't need 911.”

Tom nodded.

"So I shouldn't call them just because I can't find my pencil?"

John smiled.

"No."

Tom laughed.

"Okay."

"If you're not sure what to do, tell a teacher or another trusted adult. They can help you figure out what needs to happen."

Tom nodded again.

"I understand."

John looked toward the accident scene.

"You did the right thing by telling someone."

Tom smiled.

"I called you."

"And I appreciate that."

John stood.

"But remember, you don't have to handle emergencies yourself."

"I know."

"You're ten."

Tom frowned.

"I know."

"You're allowed to be ten."

Tom laughed.

John smiled.

"Come on."

For a moment, John simply looked at his son.

Tom hadn't handled the situation like a police officer.

He hadn't needed to.

He had seen something wrong and told an adult he trusted.

That was enough.

Chapter 7 — Tom Goes Home Early

Later that day, Tom was sitting in class when his teacher approached him.

"Tom?"

"Yes?"

"Your mother has made arrangements for you to go home early."

Tom's eyes widened.

"Am I in trouble?"

His teacher smiled.

"No."

"Oh."

"Your mother has arranged for you to spend the rest of the afternoon with her."

"With Mom?"

"Yes."

Tom smiled.

"Okay."

Everything had been arranged through the school.

There was no surprise pickup.

No confusion.

No simply walking out of school.

His teacher made sure everything was properly handled before Tom left.

When Tom finally stepped outside, he saw Engine 4 waiting nearby.

His eyes widened.

"I'm riding with Mom?"

Samantha smiled from beside the engine.

"Looks like it."

Tom walked over.

"Really?"

"Really."

Tom looked at Engine 4.

Then at Samantha.

"Can I actually ride in it?"

"You can."

Tom smiled.

"Awesome."

Samantha opened the door.

"Come on."

Tom climbed inside.

He looked around.

The interior was nothing like sitting in a normal car.

There was equipment everywhere.

Seats.

Compartments.

Radios.

Controls.

Everything had a purpose.

Tom looked at his mother.

“This is your office?”

Samantha laughed.

“Something like that.”

Tom smiled.

“It's cooler than Dad's car.”

Samantha raised an eyebrow.

“Don't tell him I said that.”

“I won't.”

“Good.”

Chapter 8 — Tom Rides Along With Mom

Engine 4 returned to the firehouse.

Tom sat inside, looking around as the crew continued their normal work.

Captain Hammer glanced toward him.

“So you're the famous Tom.”

Tom looked confused.

“Famous?”

Lieutenant Mike smiled.

“Your mother has mentioned you.”

Tom looked at Samantha.

“You did?”

Samantha shrugged.

“Maybe.”

Firefighter Lake smiled.

“Don't worry. Nothing embarrassing.”

Tom narrowed his eyes.

“That means there is something embarrassing.”

Everyone laughed.

Tom eventually relaxed.

The firehouse felt different from the police station.

There were no patrol cars lined up outside.

No police radio chatter.

Instead, there was the smell of the station, the equipment, the engine bays, and the steady movement of firefighters going about their day.

Tom asked question after question.

“What does this do?”

“What about that?”

“Why is this here?”

“How much water does the truck carry?”

“What happens if you need something that's not inside?”

Samantha answered what she could.

Sometimes Captain Hammer added an explanation.

Sometimes Lieutenant Mike did.

Tom listened carefully.

Eventually he asked:

“Do you guys just wait for fires?”

Captain Hammer smiled.

“Nope.”

Tom looked surprised.

“We train. We check equipment. We maintain the engine. We respond to medical calls, crashes, alarms, rescues, and plenty of other things.”

Tom looked around.

“So you don't know what you're going to get?”

“Not always,” Samantha said.

Tom thought about that.

“That's kind of like Dad.”

“Pretty similar,” Samantha said.

Tom sat back.

For a while, there was nothing urgent happening.

No fire.

No rescue.

No dramatic call.

Just a crew preparing for whatever came next.

Tom watched Samantha check equipment.

He watched Captain Hammer talk with Lieutenant Mike.

He listened to the radio.

He asked more questions.

Eventually, Samantha sat beside him.

“You having fun?”

Tom nodded.

"Yeah."

"Good."

"I like seeing what you do."

Samantha smiled.

"I'm glad."

Tom looked toward the engine bay.

"Dad's job is different."

"It is."

"Which one is better?"

Samantha smiled.

"Neither."

Tom looked at her.

"They're just different jobs."

Tom nodded.

He seemed satisfied with that answer.

A short while later, Engine 4 received a routine call.

The crew prepared.

Tom remained safely seated and out of the way as they handled their work.

It wasn't a major emergency.

There were no dramatic rescues.

It was simply another call.

Another group of people needing help.

Another day at the firehouse.

And for Tom, it was another glimpse into the world his mother knew so well.

Eventually, Engine 4 returned.

The afternoon continued.

Nothing exploded.

Nothing caught fire.

Nobody needed to be rescued from a collapsing building.

It was almost disappointingly normal.

Tom seemed perfectly happy with that.

Chapter 9 — Going Home

By the time Samantha and Tom returned home, the sun was beginning to move lower across Blackridge City.

John was already there.

He opened the front door.

Then stopped.

“Tom?”

Tom smiled.

“Hi, Dad.”

John looked at Samantha.

“What happened?”

Samantha immediately noticed the concern in his expression.

“He was released from school early. Everything was arranged through the school.”

John's shoulders relaxed.

“Oh.”

He looked at Tom.

"You couldn't have told me?"

Tom shrugged.

"I was with Mom."

John smiled.

"Fair enough."

Tom walked inside.

"I got to ride on Engine 4."

John looked at Samantha.

"You took him with you?"

"Yep."

Tom immediately jumped in.

"It was awesome."

John laughed.

"Of course it was."

Dinner that evening was quiet.

Not silent.

Just normal.

They talked about the day.

Tom told John about the firehouse.

John listened as Tom explained all the equipment he'd seen.

"And then Captain Hammer told me firefighters don't just fight fires."

John nodded.

"They don't."

"I already knew that."

"Did you?"

Tom paused.

"...Maybe not."

Samantha laughed.

After dinner, the family settled into their usual evening routine.

There were no sirens.

No emergency calls.

No rushing out the door.

Just the three of them.

Eventually, Tom headed upstairs.

"Goodnight, Mom."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Dad."

"Goodnight, buddy."

Tom disappeared toward his room.

Samantha and John remained downstairs.

For a while, neither said anything.

Then John smiled.

"He had quite a day."

Samantha nodded.

"Yeah."

"Police scene in the morning. Firehouse in the afternoon."

"He got to see both sides."

John leaned back.

"He's getting older."

Samantha smiled.

"He is."

Neither of them knew what Tom would eventually become.

Neither of them needed to.

He was ten years old.

He had plenty of time.

Upstairs, Tom climbed into bed.

His backpack sat nearby.

His school books were stacked beside it.

And somewhere downstairs were the uniforms and equipment that belonged to the two people he admired most.

A police uniform.

A firefighter's uniform.

Two different careers.

Two different paths.

One family.

Tom closed his eyes.

For tonight, that was enough.

And in the quiet house, there were no sirens.

No radios.

No emergencies.

Just home.

THE END

Era 1 — The First Watch

Story 6 — *Between Calls*

Chapter 1 — A Weekend Together

For once, the Smith household woke up without an alarm clock.

There was no school.

No shift briefing.

No uniform waiting to be put on.

No radio calling anyone to work.

Just sunlight coming through the windows and the quiet sounds of a Saturday morning in Ashford.

Tom slowly opened his eyes.

He stared at the ceiling.

Then he remembered.

Saturday.

A smile appeared on his face.

“No school.”

He rolled over and pulled the blanket back over himself.

Five minutes later, he heard footsteps downstairs.

That was enough to convince him that staying in bed wasn't going to work.

Tom got dressed and headed downstairs.

Samantha was already in the kitchen.

John was sitting at the table with a cup of coffee.

Tom walked in.

“Morning.”

John looked up.

“Morning, buddy.”

Samantha smiled.

“Sleep well?”

“Yeah.”

Tom sat down.

Nobody was rushing.

That alone felt strange.

On school mornings, breakfast usually came with checking backpacks, finding homework, making sure everyone had what they needed, and getting out the door.

Today, none of that mattered.

John leaned back in his chair.

“This is nice.”

Samantha nodded.

“It is.”

Tom looked between them.

“What?”

John smiled.

“Having everyone home.”

Tom nodded.

He understood.

His parents' jobs were important.

He knew that.

He had seen both of them leave for work countless times.

Sometimes one was home while the other was working.

Sometimes both were busy.

Today, though, neither of them had anywhere they needed to be.

Tom took another bite of breakfast.

“So what are we doing?”

Samantha looked at John.

John looked at Samantha.

Neither had an answer.

Tom raised an eyebrow.

“You don't know?”

“Nope,” John said.

“You're the adults.”

“That doesn't mean we always have a plan.”

Tom thought about that.

“That's probably not very responsible.”

Samantha laughed.

John pointed at him.

“Careful.”

Tom smiled.

The three of them continued eating.

For once, the Smith family had nowhere they had to be.

And that made the morning feel a little different.

Chapter 2 — The Family Makes a Plan

After breakfast, Tom wandered into the living room.

He looked around.

Then he looked at his parents.

Then back around the room.

“Can we go somewhere?”

John looked up from the couch.

“Where?”

“I don't know.”

Samantha smiled.

“That narrows it down.”

Tom thought.

“Somewhere in the city.”

John sat up.

“You want to go exploring?”

“Yeah.”

“Explore Blackridge?”

Tom nodded.

“I've seen parts of it, but mostly when we're going somewhere.”

Samantha understood what he meant.

Tom had seen Blackridge from the back seat of the family SUV.

He had seen parts of the city through school trips and everyday errands.

He had also seen plenty of it from the perspective of his parents' work.

But that was different.

Usually, if Tom saw a police vehicle or fire engine, there was a reason.

Today there didn't need to be one.

John looked at Samantha.

“Why not?”

Samantha smiled.

“Sounds like a good idea.”

Tom immediately looked excited.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“So we're going?”

“Eventually,” John said.

Tom groaned.

“Why eventually?”

“Because we still have to get ready.”

Tom sighed dramatically.

“Fine.”

Samantha laughed.

“It's going to be a long day if you're already impatient.”

Tom smiled.

“I'm ready.”

“You haven't even put your shoes on.”

Tom looked down.

He hadn't.

“I'm still ready.”

John laughed.

The plan was simple.

No reservations.

No schedule.

No checklist.

No official tour.

They would simply drive around Blackridge City, stop wherever something caught their attention, get something to eat, and enjoy the day together.

Ashford would be the starting point.

They would head toward the center of the city.

From there, they could decide what came next.

Tom grabbed his shoes.

“Let's go.”

John stood.

“Now you're ready.”

Chapter 3 — Leaving Ashford

The family SUV pulled away from the Smith home later that morning.

Tom sat in the back seat, looking out the window.

Ashford passed around them.

The familiar streets of their neighborhood slowly gave way to larger roads.

They passed houses, small businesses, parks, and people enjoying their own weekends.

Some families were walking.

Others were heading toward stores.

A few children were playing outside.

Everything looked ordinary.

Tom watched it all.

"I never really pay attention to this stuff."

Samantha looked back from the passenger seat.

"What stuff?"

"Just... everything."

John smiled.

"That's because you're usually busy looking at something else."

Tom looked out the window again.

"Maybe."

The SUV continued toward the center of Blackridge.

The neighborhood streets gradually became busier.

More vehicles appeared.

Buildings became taller.

Businesses became more frequent.

Tom sat forward.

"Whoa."

John glanced at him in the mirror.

"What?"

"It's getting really busy."

"Welcome to the city."

Tom smiled.

The three of them continued toward the heart of Blackridge.

There was no emergency driving.

No flashing lights.

No siren.

Just a family SUV moving with everyone else.

Tom liked that.

For once, he wasn't following the sirens.

He wasn't watching his father respond to a call.

He wasn't watching his mother climb into a fire engine.

He was simply riding through the city with his parents.

As they approached Blackridge City Center, Tom's eyes widened.

The city seemed to stretch in every direction.

Buildings.

Businesses.

Traffic.

People.

And somewhere among all of it were the places his parents worked.

Tom leaned closer to the window.

"That's downtown?"

John smiled.

"That's the center of Blackridge."

Tom looked impressed.

"It's bigger than I thought."

Chapter 4 — Blackridge City Center

The family drove deeper into Blackridge City Center.

Tom looked from one building to another.

He recognized some places immediately.

Others were completely new to him.

Then John pointed ahead.

"There."

Tom looked.

A large municipal building stood ahead.

"City Hall?"

"Yep."

Tom stared through the window.

"That place is huge."

Samantha smiled.

"You haven't seen the whole thing."

They continued.

A few blocks later, another familiar building came into view.

Tom recognized it almost immediately.

"Dad."

John looked in the mirror.

"What?"

"That's where you work."

The Blackridge City Police Department headquarters stood ahead.

Tom had seen the building before, but usually when John was working.

Today, Unit 890 wasn't parked outside.

John wasn't wearing his uniform.

He wasn't heading inside.

He was simply driving past it with his family.

"That's BCPD Headquarters," John said.

"I know."

"You've seen it before."

"Yeah, but usually you're going there."

John smiled.

"True."

They continued through the city.

Soon another large public safety facility came into view.

Tom recognized that one too.

"Mom."

Samantha looked.

"Fire department?"

She smiled.

"Blackridge Fire & Rescue Headquarters."

Tom looked at the building.

"You work there sometimes?"

"Sometimes."

Tom nodded.

The family continued.

They passed the **Blackridge Emergency Management Center**, where city emergency planning and coordination took place.

They passed the **Blackridge Tactical Operations Complex**, a facility Tom recognized because of the connection to the city's specialized police operations.

Then they passed **Blackridge University**.

Tom stared at the campus.

“That’s a university?”

John nodded.

“Yep.”

“There are a lot of people there.”

“Usually.”

Tom looked at the buildings.

“Do you think I’ll go there?”

John smiled.

“You’ve got a few years before you need to worry about that.”

“Good.”

Samantha laughed.

Tom wasn’t interested in thinking that far ahead.

He was more interested in what was happening right now.

The family drove onward.

Blackridge City Center continued around them.

The city wasn’t defined by police stations and fire departments.

Those buildings were only pieces of it.

There were offices.

Restaurants.

Stores.

Apartments.

People walking along sidewalks.

Families spending time together.

Workers heading somewhere.

Students enjoying their weekend.

The city was alive.

And none of it required an emergency.

Chapter 5 — Exploring the Center

Eventually, the family found a place to park.

They left the SUV behind and started walking.

Tom immediately began looking around.

“This is cool.”

John smiled.

“You’ve never walked around here?”

“Not really.”

They passed several stores.

Tom stopped at one.

Then another.

Then another.

Samantha noticed.

“You’re going to make us visit every store, aren’t you?”

Tom shrugged.

“Maybe.”

John laughed.

They wandered through the city center without a schedule.

Tom saw families walking together.

A group of university students talking nearby.

People carrying shopping bags.

Children running beside their parents.

Workers grabbing lunch.

A restaurant had people waiting outside.

Another had a line forming near the counter.

Tom looked around.

"It's busy."

"It usually is," John said.

Tom pointed toward a restaurant.

"Can we eat there?"

Samantha looked at John.

John looked at Tom.

"Why that one?"

"Because it smells good."

John laughed.

"That's fair."

They stopped for lunch.

For a while, the conversation had nothing to do with police work or firefighting.

They talked about food.

Tom complained that John had chosen the wrong drink.

John argued that Tom had chosen the wrong dessert.

Samantha sat between them, laughing.

It was normal.

Completely normal.

And that was exactly what made it special.

After lunch, they continued walking.

Tom stopped near a large window.

“Look at that.”

John walked over.

“What?”

Tom pointed.

A large display caught his attention.

Samantha joined them.

Tom stared for a moment.

Then smiled.

“I like this place.”

John nodded.

“Me too.”

They continued through the center.

Tom asked questions about buildings.

Samantha answered some.

John answered others.

Sometimes neither knew the answer.

Tom didn't mind.

He wasn't looking for a history lesson.

He was simply seeing his city.

Eventually, the family returned to the SUV.

Tom climbed into the back seat.

“That was fun.”

Samantha smiled.

“We’re not done yet.”

Tom sat up.

“We aren’t?”

John started the engine.

“Nope.”

“Where are we going?”

John looked at Samantha.

Samantha smiled.

“Crestwood.”

Tom immediately looked out the window.

“What’s there?”

“Let’s find out.”

Chapter 6 — Leaving the City Center

The SUV left the center of Blackridge and continued toward Crestwood.

Tom watched the surroundings change.

The tall buildings of the center gradually became less frequent.

The streets became wider.

Traffic changed.

The architecture became different.

Tom noticed.

“It’s quieter.”

John nodded.

“Different part of the city.”

Tom looked out the window.

There were still businesses and plenty of people around.

But the atmosphere had changed.

The center had felt crowded and constantly moving.

Crestwood seemed more spacious.

Tom looked at another large building.

“Is that part of Crestwood?”

Samantha nodded.

“Yep.”

Tom looked around.

“Everything looks expensive.”

John laughed.

“That’s one way to describe it.”

The family continued.

The farther they traveled, the more Tom noticed the difference.

The homes became larger.

The streets looked carefully maintained.

Businesses appeared more polished.

There were still ordinary people going about ordinary lives.

It simply felt different from Ashford.

Tom leaned back.

“I like it here.”

John smiled.

“Wait until you see some of the houses.”

Chapter 7 — Crestwood

Crestwood looked almost like another side of Blackridge entirely.

Large homes lined quiet streets.

Some had wide driveways.

Others had large yards surrounded by carefully maintained landscaping.

Tom stared through the window.

Then he saw one house.

His mouth dropped open.

“That's a house?”

Samantha laughed.

“Yes.”

“That's huge!”

John smiled.

“Some people like big houses.”

Tom kept looking.

“I think you could fit our whole house in that garage.”

John glanced at Samantha.

“He may have a point.”

Samantha laughed.

They continued through Crestwood.

The district had plenty of businesses as well.

Upscale stores.

Restaurants.

Office buildings.

Small shops.

People carrying shopping bags.

Families walking along the sidewalks.

Tom watched everything.

“This place is really nice.”

“It is,” Samantha said.

Tom looked at another house.

“Why are all the houses so big?”

John answered simply.

“Different neighborhood. Different people. Different homes.”

Tom nodded.

He wasn't thinking about wealth or social classes.

He was ten.

He was thinking about how big some of the houses were.

They eventually stopped near an area with several stores.

Tom looked at Samantha.

“Can we get out?”

Samantha smiled.

“Sure.”

The three of them stepped out of the SUV.

They walked together through the area.

Tom looked into shop windows.

He pointed out things that caught his attention.

He asked questions.

Sometimes John teased him.

Sometimes Samantha did.

At one point, Tom stopped beside his parents.

“I like today.”

John smiled.

“Me too.”

Samantha nodded.

“Me too.”

For once, nobody needed to hurry.

Chapter 8 — Family Time

By the afternoon, the Smith family had settled into the rhythm of the day.

They walked.

They talked.

They stopped at stores.

They found another place to eat.

Tom managed to convince his parents to buy him something he probably didn't need.

John questioned the purchase.

Samantha defended Tom.

Tom declared that Samantha was his favorite parent.

John immediately objected.

"Excuse me?"

Tom laughed.

"I said she's my favorite."

Samantha smiled.

John looked offended.

"I see how it is."

Tom grinned.

"You're still second."

"Second?"

"Yep."

John looked at Samantha.

"You hear this?"

Samantha nodded.

"I heard."

John sighed dramatically.

"I raised him better than this."

Tom laughed.

The afternoon continued.

Eventually they found a quieter place to sit.

Tom sat between his parents.

He looked around.

Crestwood was still busy, but there was a calmness to the area.

People were enjoying their weekend.

Some were shopping.

Some were eating.

Others were simply walking.

Tom looked at his parents.

"You know what?"

"What?" Samantha asked.

"I think we should do this more."

John smiled.

"Explore the city?"

"Yeah."

Samantha nodded.

"We can."

Tom looked toward the street.

"There's probably a lot I've never seen."

"There is," John said.

Blackridge was a large city.

Ten-year-old Tom had only seen a small portion of it.

Today, he was beginning to realize just how much there was beyond the places he already knew.

Not because something had gone wrong.

Not because a call had brought his family somewhere.

Just because they decided to go.

Samantha looked at the time.

“We should probably keep moving.”

Tom looked surprised.

“Already?”

John stood.

“We still have somewhere to go.”

“Where?”

John smiled.

“South.”

Tom looked toward the road.

“Toward Valcrest?”

Samantha nodded.

“That's the plan.”

Tom stood.

“Let's go.”

Chapter 9 — Leaving Crestwood

The family returned to the SUV.

Tom climbed into the back.

John started the engine.

Samantha checked that everyone was ready.

“Everybody good?”

Tom nodded.

“Yep.”

John pulled away.

Crestwood slowly disappeared behind them.

The city around them began changing again.

Tom watched the scenery through the window.

“So what is Valcrest like?”

John thought for a moment.

“Different.”

Tom laughed.

“That's not very helpful.”

Samantha smiled.

“Your father isn't wrong.”

“Is it bigger than Crestwood?”

“Not really.”

“More houses?”

“Some.”

“More stores?”

“Probably.”

Tom thought.

“What are we doing there?”

John looked at Samantha.

“We'll figure it out.”

Tom smiled.

“That sounds like today.”

John laughed.

“Exactly.”

They continued south.

The conversation shifted between random subjects.

Tom talked about something he had seen earlier.

Samantha remembered something funny from the afternoon.

John brought up the restaurant Tom had wanted to visit.

Tom defended his choice.

The family laughed.

The day had gone exactly as they had hoped.

No schedule.

No pressure.

Just time together.

As they traveled farther south, Tom noticed that the scenery was beginning to change again.

The next district wasn't far away.

Valcrest was getting closer.

But they hadn't entered it yet.

Not today.

Not in this story.

The family simply continued toward it.

Chapter 10 — Toward Valcrest

The sun was beginning to lower as the SUV continued south.

Tom looked through the window.

The scenery had changed again.

The streets ahead looked different from the ones they had traveled earlier.

Signs indicated that Valcrest was approaching.

Tom sat forward.

“Are we almost there?”

John nodded.

“Getting close.”

Tom looked ahead.

He could see more of the southern part of Blackridge opening up in the distance.

Samantha glanced back at him.

“Getting tired?”

“A little.”

John smiled.

“You've been walking around all day.”

Tom nodded.

“But it was fun.”

Samantha smiled.

“Good.”

Tom looked back out the window.

He thought about everything they had seen.

Ashford.

The city center.

City Hall.

The police headquarters.

The fire headquarters.

The university.

The stores.

The restaurants.

Crestwood.

The enormous houses.

All the people.

All the ordinary things that happened every day.

None of it had required sirens.

None of it had required uniforms.

None of it had required someone to run toward danger.

It was simply Blackridge.

A city full of people living their lives.

And Tom had spent the day seeing it from a different perspective.

Not as the son of a police officer.

Not as the son of a firefighter.

Just as a kid riding around with his parents.

John glanced into the rearview mirror.

"You having fun back there?"

Tom smiled.

"Yeah."

“Good.”

Tom leaned back against the seat.

“Can we do this again?”

Samantha smiled.

“Probably.”

Tom looked toward the road ahead.

The signs for Valcrest were getting closer.

But the family hadn't entered the district yet.

They continued south, still together, still talking, still enjoying the last part of their day.

The trip wasn't over.

Not yet.

The Smith family was simply moving on to the next part of their journey.

And somewhere ahead was Valcrest.

For now, though, the SUV continued down the road.

The city stretched out around them.

The sun continued its slow descent.

And inside the vehicle, Tom sat between two people who had been beside him through every part of his childhood so far.

Dad.

Mom.

Family.

For one peaceful weekend, that was all that mattered.

To Be Continued...

Era 1 — The First Watch

Story 7 — *A Day Together*

Chapter 1 — Are We There Yet?

The road out of Crestwood continued south.

The Smith family's SUV moved steadily along the road as the polished streets of the affluent district gradually disappeared behind them. The larger houses became less frequent. The streets changed. The scenery opened.

Tom sat in the back seat, looking through the window.

He had been quiet for almost three minutes.

For Tom, that was a respectable achievement.

He looked ahead.

Then at the window.

Then ahead again.

Finally, he leaned forward between the front seats.

"Are we there yet?"

John glanced at him through the rearview mirror.

"We just left Crestwood."

Tom nodded.

"I know."

"So..."

John waited.

Tom shrugged.

"I was just asking."

Samantha laughed from the passenger seat.

"You've been waiting for Valcrest since we left the house."

"I have not."

John raised an eyebrow.

"You asked about it before we even left Ashford."

"That was different."

"How?"

"I wasn't in the car yet."

Samantha smiled.

John shook his head.

"Valcrest is coming."

Tom settled back into his seat.

"Okay."

A few seconds passed.

Then Tom looked out the window again.

The first signs of Valcrest began appearing.

The environment became quieter.

The roads narrowed somewhat, and the neighborhoods had a more enclosed feeling. Small stores appeared along sections of the road. There were signs for local businesses, fishing areas, and recreation spaces.

Tom sat up straighter.

"There!"

John glanced in the mirror.

"There what?"

"Valcrest."

Samantha smiled.

"I think you've officially found it."

Tom watched the neighborhood pass outside.

Valcrest wasn't what he had imagined.

It wasn't some enormous destination.

It was simply another part of Blackridge.

Quiet streets.

Homes.

Families.

Small businesses.

People walking around.

A few cars pulling into stores.

A fisherman carrying equipment toward the water.

It felt peaceful.

Tom looked around with wide eyes.

"This is it?"

John smiled.

"This is it."

Tom thought for a moment.

Then:

"Are we there yet?"

John laughed.

"We are literally in Valcrest."

"Oh."

Tom looked back outside.

"Okay."

Samantha shook her head.

“Excited?”

“Very.”

And that was the difference.

Tom wasn't impatient because he wanted the trip to end.

He was impatient because he wanted to see **what came next**.

Chapter 2 — A Different Kind of Neighborhood

The Smith family continued through Valcrest without any particular destination.

That was part of the point.

There was no schedule.

No appointment.

No emergency.

No one had to be somewhere at a specific time.

For once, the family could simply explore.

Tom watched everything.

He noticed the smaller stores first.

A local market sat near the road, with a few cars parked outside. Farther down, there was a small recreational area near the water.

“Can we stop?”

John looked toward Samantha.

She shrugged.

“Why not?”

They pulled into the area and parked.

Tom was out of the SUV almost immediately.

"Slow down," Samantha called.

Tom stopped.

"I am walking."

"You're walking quickly."

"That's still walking."

John stepped out and closed his door.

"Technically, she's right."

Tom looked at him.

"You're supposed to be on my side."

"I am."

John walked around the SUV.

"I'm just not sure which side you're on."

Tom laughed.

The three of them walked toward the recreation area.

There were people fishing.

A couple of families were spending time together.

Children were running around nearby.

Someone sat on a bench reading.

Nothing extraordinary was happening.

And Tom liked that.

He watched a man cast a fishing line into the water.

"Do you know how to fish?"

John shook his head.

"No."

Samantha looked at him.

"You've never been fishing?"

"I've been near fishing."

"That isn't the same thing."

"I know."

Tom grinned.

"So neither of you knows how."

John pointed at him.

"Don't start."

Tom laughed.

They stayed for a while.

They walked.

They talked.

They looked around.

Tom asked questions about the neighborhood and compared it with Ashford and Crestwood.

Valcrest seemed quieter than the city center.

Less crowded than some of the places they had already visited.

It felt like a place where people knew where their favorite stores were, where families had regular places to go, and where a Saturday could simply be a Saturday.

Tom liked that.

After a while, they returned to the SUV.

Tom climbed into the back seat.

John started the engine.

Samantha closed her door.

Tom looked out the window.

“So where are we going next?”

“Morrowgate,” John said.

Tom nodded.

He knew that name.

He had been there before.

But not like this.

He had seen Morrowgate with flashing lights.

With fire trucks.

With emergency crews.

Now he was going to see it differently.

Tom looked ahead.

“How far?”

John smiled.

“Far enough.”

Tom sighed.

“Oh, come on.”

Samantha laughed.

Chapter 3 — The Way to Morrowgate

Leaving Valcrest took them along a different stretch of Blackridge.

The streets gradually became older.

The architecture began changing.

Newer construction gave way to older buildings.

Tom noticed it almost immediately.

“It looks different.”

John nodded.

“Morrowgate has a lot of older buildings.”

Tom remembered the last time he had seen the district.

He had been younger.

He had been riding with his father in Unit 890.

He remembered the fire.

The trucks.

The sirens.

The flashing lights.

He remembered seeing his mother working.

That memory remained with him.

But this time there were no sirens.

No smoke.

No emergency vehicles racing down the road.

Just people.

A woman walked a dog along the sidewalk.

A man carried a bag out of a small shop.

A family crossed the street.

A delivery truck pulled into an older building.

Tom watched quietly.

“This is where the fire was.”

John nodded.

“Yeah.”

Tom looked around.

“It doesn't look like there was a fire.”

John smiled.

“That's because there isn't one.”

Tom thought about that.

It was a simple observation.

But it mattered.

The places he had seen during emergencies didn't stop existing once the emergency was over.

People still lived there.

People still went to work.

People still bought groceries.

People still walked their dogs.

Life continued.

Tom leaned against the window.

“It's different.”

Samantha looked back at him.

“Different how?”

Tom considered his answer.

“I don't know.”

John glanced at him in the mirror.

“You don't have to.”

Tom smiled.

The SUV continued into Morrowgate.

Chapter 4 — Morrowgate Without the Sirens

Morrowgate felt older than the other districts they had visited.

The streets carried a different character.

Some buildings had clearly been there for decades.

Others had been restored, repainted, or converted into businesses.

Historic architecture stood beside newer storefronts.

Tom looked everywhere.

“Look at that building.”

John followed his gaze.

“Old, isn't it?”

“Really old.”

Samantha smiled.

“That's Morrowgate.”

They parked and walked through part of the district.

Tom looked into store windows.

He watched people moving through the streets.

A restaurant was busy with lunch customers.

A small shop had a display outside.

An older couple sat together on a bench.

A group of people stood near a storefront talking.

Nothing about the scene reminded Tom of the fire he'd seen years earlier.

That was what made it interesting.

The same streets.

The same buildings.

The same district.

But completely different circumstances.

Tom stopped outside an older building.

"What was this?"

John looked at the building.

"I don't know."

Tom looked at him.

"You don't know?"

"Nope."

"But you're a police officer."

"That doesn't mean I know everything about every building in Blackridge."

Tom considered that.

"Okay."

He walked away.

Samantha laughed quietly.

"Good save."

"I wasn't saving anything."

"You absolutely were."

John smiled.

They continued walking.

Tom occasionally looked back at the older buildings.

Morrowgate no longer looked like the place where a fire had happened.

It looked like what it really was.

A neighborhood.

A part of the city.

A place where people lived their lives.

And Tom was beginning to understand something that he couldn't have explained very well yet:

A city wasn't defined by its emergencies.

Emergencies were only moments.

The city itself was everything that existed between them.

Chapter 5 — Toward the Water

By the time the family left Morrowgate, Tom had begun slowing down.

Not much.

But enough for Samantha to notice.

"You getting tired?"

"No."

John looked at him.

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"You've been walking around for hours."

"I can keep going."

Samantha smiled.

"I didn't say you couldn't."

Tom looked out the window.

The road ahead gradually changed again.

The farther they traveled, the more noticeable the water became.

The city seemed to open toward it.

Signs pointed toward Bellhaven.

Tom immediately noticed.

"Bellhaven!"

John laughed.

"There it is."

Tom sat up.

"Are we close?"

"Very."

Tom nodded enthusiastically.

Then, after a moment:

"Are we there yet?"

John shook his head.

"You've got to be kidding me."

Samantha laughed.

Tom grinned.

"I was asking."

"You're always asking."

"That's because nobody tells me enough."

John looked at Samantha.

“Where did he get that?”

She smiled.

“Definitely not from me.”

John nodded.

“Right.”

The SUV continued toward Bellhaven.

The roads gradually became more open.

The air felt different.

The waterfront was getting closer.

Tom watched eagerly through the window.

For the first time all day, however, his excitement wasn't about seeing another neighborhood.

He was excited about seeing the water.

Chapter 6 — On the Waterfront

Bellhaven greeted them with the sound of water.

The district had a different rhythm from the neighborhoods they had already visited.

Boats moved along the waterfront.

People walked near the docks.

Families spent time outside.

Fishing equipment sat beside the water.

Businesses operated along the waterfront.

Tom was fascinated.

“This place is awesome.”

John smiled.

"Thought you'd like it."

They walked along the waterfront for a while.

Then Tom noticed something.

A boat was approaching the dock.

It wasn't a normal recreational boat.

The markings made it obvious.

Tom pointed.

"Is that Fire & Rescue?"

Samantha looked toward the water.

"Yep."

The BCFD fire boat was returning toward the waterfront.

The crew aboard appeared to be finishing up whatever work had taken them away from the dock.

There were no dramatic sirens.

No flashing emergency response that Tom could see.

The boat simply came back toward the waterfront as part of its normal operations.

Tom watched it approach.

"Where were they?"

John shook his head.

"Don't know."

Samantha smiled.

"They could have been responding to a call."

Tom nodded.

"Like the fire trucks?"

“Exactly.”

The boat came alongside the dock.

The crew began handling the normal work of returning to the station area.

Tom watched quietly.

There was something almost strange about seeing emergency equipment doing something so ordinary.

No crisis.

No dramatic scene.

Just a crew coming back.

A few minutes later, Tom noticed another fire boat.

This one was docked nearby.

Its crew was working around it.

Tom watched as they checked equipment and moved around the boat.

“What are they doing?”

Samantha looked.

“Probably a routine check.”

“Like checking a car?”

“Pretty much.”

Tom watched more closely.

The crew checked equipment.

Inspected parts of the boat.

Looked over gear.

Made sure everything was ready.

John looked at the two boats.

“One crew just came back from a call.”

“And the other is checking theirs,” Tom said.

“Looks like it.”

Tom looked between them.

“So they just do that all the time?”

Samantha smiled.

“Something like that.”

Tom thought about it.

The first boat had gone somewhere.

The family didn't know where.

They didn't know what had happened.

They didn't know who had called.

And they didn't need to.

The boat had simply been doing its job.

Now it was back.

The second crew was making sure its boat was ready.

There was no grand announcement.

No explanation.

No emergency for Tom to witness.

Just a small glimpse into the city continuing to work.

Tom watched the boats for another moment.

Then he looked at his parents.

“Can we get something to eat?”

John laughed.

“Of course.”

Samantha smiled.

“Finally, a question I can answer.”

Chapter 7 — Getting Tired

After spending time around Bellhaven, the family eventually returned to the SUV.

Tom climbed into the back seat.

This time, he didn't immediately ask where they were going.

He just sat down.

John looked at him through the mirror.

“You okay?”

Tom nodded.

“Yeah.”

Samantha closed her door.

“Still excited?”

Tom thought about it.

“Yes.”

John smiled.

“But?”

Tom leaned his head against the seat.

“I'm tired.”

Samantha laughed.

“There it is.”

Tom looked out the window as they left Bellhaven.

The waterfront slowly disappeared behind them.

The roads became more developed.

Buildings became larger.

Traffic increased.

They were heading toward Corvane.

Tom watched the changing scenery.

The day had started with excitement.

Then curiosity.

Then more exploration.

Now he was tired.

But it was the good kind of tired.

The kind that came after spending the entire day seeing new things.

Tom looked toward his parents.

“Are we almost there?”

John smiled.

“You’re asking again?”

“I’m tired.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

Tom grinned.

“I want to know.”

Samantha laughed.

“Corvane is next.”

Tom nodded.

“Okay.”

He closed his eyes for a few seconds.

Then opened them again.

He wasn't going to sleep.

Not yet.

There was still another district to see.

Chapter 8 — A Different Side of the City

Corvane felt completely different from Bellhaven.

The waterfront was behind them now.

The city became busier.

Office buildings stood alongside stores and businesses.

Employees moved along sidewalks.

Cars traveled through intersections.

People came and went from buildings.

Tom looked around.

"This is busy."

John nodded.

"Corvane usually is."

Tom watched an office building pass by.

Then another.

Then a large store.

Then a group of businesses.

The district seemed built around work.

People were going somewhere.

People were coming from somewhere.

Everyone seemed to have somewhere to be.

Tom noticed a military recruiting building.

He looked at it for a moment.

“What is that?”

Samantha glanced over.

“Military recruiting office.”

Tom nodded.

He didn't say anything else.

He simply watched it disappear behind them.

There were so many possibilities in Blackridge.

Police.

Firefighters.

EMS.

Military.

Businesses.

Trades.

Schools.

Offices.

Stores.

All of it existed within the same city.

Tom wasn't thinking about what he wanted to become.

He wasn't trying to choose.

He was simply seeing the world.

John looked back at him.

“Anything interesting?”

Tom nodded.

“Everything.”

John smiled.

“That's a pretty broad answer.”

“Because everything is interesting.”

Samantha laughed.

“That sounds like you.”

Tom looked out the window again.

He watched the people.

The buildings.

The cars.

The businesses.

The city.

For a ten-year-old, Blackridge seemed almost impossibly large.

There was always another street.

Another neighborhood.

Another building.

Another place he hadn't seen.

Another question he hadn't asked.

And for now, that was enough.

Chapter 9 — The Road Home

Eventually, the family began heading back toward Ashford.

The excitement of the day had settled.

Tom sat quietly in the back seat.

John and Samantha talked softly in the front.

The scenery slowly became familiar.

Tom thought about the day.

Valcrest.

Morrowgate.

Bellhaven.

Corvane.

Each place had felt different.

Valcrest had been quiet.

Morrowgate had been old.

Bellhaven had been alive with water and boats.

Corvane had been busy.

Tom couldn't decide which one he liked most.

John looked at him through the mirror.

"Which district was your favorite?"

Tom looked up.

"I don't know."

"Really?"

"They were all different."

Samantha smiled.

“That's true.”

Tom thought about it.

“I liked Valcrest because it was quiet.”

John nodded.

“And Morrowgate?”

“I liked the old buildings.”

“Bellhaven?”

“The boats.”

Samantha smiled.

“And Corvane?”

Tom looked out the window.

“I liked seeing all the people.”

John smiled.

“So you liked all of them.”

Tom nodded.

“I guess.”

The road continued.

Ashford was getting closer.

Tom watched the familiar streets appear.

He recognized the neighborhood.

The stores.

The roads.

The houses.

Home was getting closer.

Tom leaned back.

The day had been long.

But it had been good.

He hadn't needed a siren.

He hadn't needed an emergency.

He hadn't needed anything extraordinary.

He had simply spent a day with his family.

And somehow, that was enough.

Chapter 10 — One More Year

The Smith family arrived home in Ashford as the evening settled over the neighborhood.

John parked the SUV.

Tom opened the door.

Then stopped.

He looked back toward the city.

Blackridge stretched beyond the neighborhood.

Somewhere out there were the places they had visited.

Valcrest.

Morrowgate.

Bellhaven.

Corvane.

And everything beyond them.

Tom smiled.

“Today was fun.”

John nodded.

“It was.”

Samantha closed the SUV door.

“You ready to go inside?”

Tom nodded.

They walked toward the house together.

The evening passed quietly.

No sirens.

No emergencies.

No radio calls.

Just the Smith family at home.

Later, Tom sat with his parents.

They talked about the trip.

They laughed about his constant questions.

They remembered the fishing area.

The old buildings.

The waterfront.

The fire boats.

The stores.

The enormous houses in Crestwood from earlier in the day.

Eventually, Tom became quieter.

He was tired.

John looked at him.

"You had a good day?"

Tom nodded.

"Yeah."

Samantha smiled.

"Good."

Tom looked at both of them.

"Thanks for taking me."

John smiled.

"Anytime."

A moment passed.

Then Samantha looked at Tom.

"Happy birthday, Tom."

Tom blinked.

For a second, he had forgotten.

Then he smiled.

"Thanks."

John smiled too.

"Eleven years old."

Tom looked down at himself.

"Do I feel eleven?"

John laughed.

"That's not really how it works."

Tom thought about that.

"I thought I'd feel different."

Samantha smiled.

“You probably will eventually.”

Tom nodded.

Eleven.

It wasn't eighteen.

It wasn't twenty-one.

It wasn't adulthood.

It wasn't a career.

It wasn't a decision.

It was simply another year.

Another year of growing.

Another year of learning.

Another year of asking questions.

Another year of discovering the world around him.

Tom stood and headed toward his room.

He stopped at the hallway.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Tom,” John said.

“Goodnight,” Samantha added.

Tom disappeared down the hall.

John and Samantha remained in the living room for a moment.

The house was quiet.

Outside, Ashford continued its normal evening.

Somewhere in Blackridge, police officers were still patrolling.

Fire crews were still working.

EMS crews were still answering calls.

A fire boat was probably sitting ready at Bellhaven.

Another crew might already be checking equipment.

The city had not stopped simply because the Smith family had gone home.

It never did.

And Tom didn't know what his future would hold.

He didn't need to.

For now, he was eleven years old.

He was curious.

He was kind.

He was observant.

He was excited about whatever came next.

And, occasionally, he was impatient enough to ask:

Are we there yet?

But there was plenty of road ahead.

And plenty of time to find out where it led.

THE END

Era 1 — The First Watch

Story 8 — *The Road We Took*

Tom entered this era at **five years old**.

He left it at **eleven**.

He had watched the sirens.

He had followed them.

He had seen his father work.

He had ridden with his mother.

He had seen police, fire, EMS, Hazmat, and SWAT.

He had explored his city.

He had learned that emergencies were only one part of life.

And throughout it all, he had never been told what he was supposed to become.

Because that decision was never supposed to belong to anyone else.

It would belong to Tom.

One day.

Not today.

For now, the road simply continued.

About Era II: The Questions Begin

Era II continues Tom “Judge” Smith’s journey as he enters the next stage of his childhood.

Now eleven years old, Tom is no longer simply observing the emergency services around him. He is beginning to ask questions.

Questions about the radios his parents carry.

Questions about the equipment they use.

Questions about their uniforms.

Questions about the differences between police officers and firefighters.

Tom continues attending school and living an ordinary childhood, but his growing curiosity increasingly draws his attention toward the careers of his parents.

His father, Corporal John Smith, continues serving with the Blackridge City Police Department. His mother, Samantha Smith, continues serving with the Blackridge City Fire Department as part of **Engine 4**.

Through continued ride-alongs and everyday experiences, Tom begins learning more about the people behind the uniforms.

But there is still one question he cannot answer:

What does he want to become?

Growing Up

Tom is beginning to leave his earliest childhood years behind.

At eleven and twelve years old, he is becoming more independent, more observant, and more willing to question the things happening around him.

School remains an important part of his life, and his experiences there continue alongside his growing interest in emergency services.

His childhood is still relatively normal.

But Tom is starting to notice things he once overlooked.

The equipment hanging from a firefighter's gear.
The radios carried by police officers.
The differences between uniforms and ranks.
The vehicles his parents operate.
And the responsibilities that come with each job.

The more Tom notices, the more questions he begins asking.

Behind the Radio

For the first time, Tom's curiosity begins focusing on the equipment itself.

Radios become particularly interesting to him.

He wants to understand what his parents are hearing, who they are communicating with, and why different emergency personnel use different equipment.

But the radio is only the beginning.

Tom starts asking about uniforms, protective equipment, badges, firefighting gear, police equipment, and the differences between the tools used by BCPD and BCFD.

He isn't trying to become an officer.

He isn't trying to become a firefighter.

He's simply curious.

And every answer leads to another question.

Two Careers, One Family

Tom's parents continue serving in two very different emergency-service professions.

John remains a **Corporal with BCPD**, continuing his work from Blackridge City Police Department Headquarters.

Samantha continues serving with **BCFD Engine 4** at Blackridge City Fire Department Headquarters.

Tom continues riding along with both of them when appropriate.

These experiences give him an unusual perspective.

Through his father, Tom sees policing from inside a patrol environment.

Through his mother, he sees firefighting from inside a fire department.

Neither career is presented to him as his inevitable future.

Instead, Tom is given the opportunity to see what both professions actually involve.

And slowly, he begins realizing that **both paths come with responsibility, danger, teamwork, and sacrifice.**

The Questions Begin

As Tom grows older, his questions become more specific.

Why does one officer wear a different uniform than another?

Why do some firefighters carry different equipment?

What do the different ranks mean?

Why do police officers use certain radios?

Why does the fire department operate differently from the police department?

And perhaps the biggest question of all:

What would it be like to wear one of those uniforms himself?

Tom still doesn't have an answer.

He has not chosen police work.

He has not chosen firefighting.

He has not chosen SWAT.

For now, he is simply learning.

The Road Ahead

Era II is not about Tom choosing his career.

It is about **discovering the possibilities.**

He continues going to school.

He continues spending time with his family.

He continues riding along with his parents.

And he continues asking questions about the world of emergency services.

John and Samantha remain alive and continue serving their communities, giving Tom something that will become increasingly important as he grows older:

time.

Time to learn.

Time to experience.

Time to make mistakes.

And eventually, time to decide what kind of man he wants to become.

The Next Watch

By the end of Era II, Tom is still only a child.

He has learned more about BCPD.

He has learned more about BCFD.

He understands more about radios, equipment, uniforms, vehicles, ranks, and the people who use them.

But he still hasn't made his choice.

The badge is there.

The fire service is there.

The possibility of SWAT is somewhere in the distance.

Tom doesn't know where his life will lead.

And neither does he need to.

For now, he has something far more important:

the opportunity to keep watching.

Every question he asks...

Every ride-along he takes...

Every piece of equipment he discovers...

And every experience he shares with his parents...

...brings him one step closer to understanding where he belongs.

“The watch continues, and the questions begin.”

Chapter 1 — The Morning After

The morning after Tom's eleventh birthday was quieter than the birthday itself.

There were no decorations being put up.

No presents waiting to be opened.

No birthday candles.

No big plans.

Just sunlight coming through the bedroom window.

Tom slowly opened his eyes.

For a moment, he stared at the ceiling.

Then he remembered.

Eleven.

He was eleven years old now.

Tom rolled over and looked at the clock.

He still had time before school.

Or, at least, he thought he did.

He sat up.

Then he heard voices downstairs.

That was unusual.

Normally, by this time, John and Samantha were already preparing for work.

Tom got dressed and headed downstairs.

When he reached the kitchen, he stopped.

John was sitting at the table.

Samantha was making breakfast.

Tom looked between them.

“Why are you both home?”

John smiled.

“Good morning to you too.”

“Good morning.”

Samantha placed a plate on the table.

“Happy day-after-your-birthday.”

Tom smiled.

“Thanks.”

He sat down.

“So... why aren't you guys at work?”

John looked at Samantha.

Samantha looked at John.

Then John answered.

“We decided to keep you home from school today.”

Tom blinked.

“What?”

“We thought we'd spend the day together,” Samantha said.

Tom stared at them for another second.

“You're serious?”

John nodded.

“Very.”

Tom smiled.

“Really?”

“Really.”

Tom leaned back in his chair.

That was unexpected.

He had already celebrated his birthday.

He had already turned eleven.

But now his parents had decided that the day after was going to be about the three of them.

Tom smiled.

“Okay.”

John picked up his coffee.

“Good.”

Tom looked at the breakfast in front of him.

“What are we doing?”

Samantha smiled.

“That's the question.”

Tom immediately began thinking.

Chapter 2 — No School Today

Breakfast lasted longer than usual.

There was no rush.

No school bus waiting outside.

No uniforms.

No work equipment being gathered.

No one checking the clock every few minutes.

Tom noticed it.

He had grown accustomed to seeing his parents prepare for work.

His father's police equipment.

His mother's fire department gear.

The routines.

The radios.

The early mornings.

Today, none of it was happening.

Tom finished his breakfast and looked at his parents.

"So what are we doing?"

John smiled.

"We haven't decided."

Tom looked confused.

"You kept me home and didn't make a plan?"

Samantha laughed.

"That's exactly what we did."

Tom shook his head.

"You two are weird."

John nodded.

"Probably."

Tom thought for a moment.

"Can we go somewhere?"

"Sure," Samantha said.

"Where?"

John shrugged.

"Where do you want to go?"

Tom paused.

That was harder.

He had spent so much time asking questions about where they were going that he hadn't expected to be the one choosing.

"I don't know."

Samantha smiled.

"Then we don't have to decide yet."

Tom looked around the kitchen.

He noticed something he'd never really thought about before.

His parents looked different when they weren't preparing for work.

Not physically.

Just... relaxed.

His father wasn't wearing his duty uniform.

His mother wasn't getting ready for the firehouse.

They were simply John and Samantha.

His parents.

Tom smiled.

"What if we just stay home for a while?"

John nodded.

"Sounds good to me."

Samantha smiled.

"Me too."

So they did.

Chapter 3 — Eleven

Tom spent part of the morning in the living room.

He watched television for a while.

Then he got bored.

He picked up a book.

Read a few pages.

Put it down.

He wandered into the kitchen.

Then back into the living room.

John watched him.

“You alright?”

“Yeah.”

“You seem restless.”

Tom shrugged.

“I’m eleven.”

John smiled.

“That explains everything.”

Tom laughed.

He sat down beside his father.

For a few minutes, neither of them said anything.

Then Tom looked at John.

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“When did you know what you wanted to do?”

John thought about the question.

Tom watched him carefully.

It was a different kind of question from the ones he usually asked.

John didn't immediately answer.

“I don't think I knew everything when I was eleven.”

Tom nodded.

“What did you know?”

John smiled.

“I knew I was eleven.”

Tom laughed.

“That's not helpful.”

“I know.”

John leaned back.

“You've got plenty of time to figure things out, Tom.”

Tom looked at the floor.

“I know.”

“You don't have to decide your whole life right now.”

Tom nodded again.

He wasn't disappointed.

If anything, he seemed relieved.

Samantha walked into the room carrying two drinks.

“What are you two talking about?”

“Dad won't tell me anything.”

John looked at her.

“I told him he has plenty of time.”

Samantha smiled.

“He does.”

Tom accepted the drink.

“Okay.”

He didn't ask anything else.

But the question stayed somewhere in the back of his mind.

Not as a decision.

Just a thought.

Chapter 4 — A Day of Nothing

By late morning, the family decided to go outside.

There wasn't really a plan.

They walked around the neighborhood.

Tom noticed things he'd seen countless times before.

The same houses.

The same sidewalks.

The same small businesses.

The same roads.

But somehow they looked slightly different.

Maybe the neighborhood hadn't changed.

Maybe he had.

Tom stopped near a small store.

"I've walked past this place a hundred times."

John looked at the sign.

"Probably."

"Have you ever been inside?"

"No."

Tom looked at him.

"Seriously?"

John nodded.

"Seriously."

Tom laughed.

"You work in this city and you've never been inside?"

"I don't have to visit every store."

Samantha smiled.

"Your father has a point."

Tom looked at the store again.

"Can we go in?"

John shrugged.

"Sure."

They went inside.

It was nothing extraordinary.

A small local shop.

Shelves.

A few customers.

Someone working behind the counter.

Tom walked around, looking at things.

He wasn't searching for anything.

He was simply interested.

He asked a few questions.

John answered some.

Samantha answered others.

Eventually, they left.

Tom looked back at the store as they continued walking.

"That was actually pretty cool."

John smiled.

"You've got a strange definition of cool."

Tom shrugged.

"I like seeing new stuff."

Samantha looked at him.

"You've always been like that."

Tom thought about it.

Maybe she was right.

Chapter 5 — Lunch With the Family

By lunchtime, everyone was hungry.

They stopped somewhere nearby and had lunch together.

Tom talked more than he ate.

He talked about the previous day.

About turning eleven.

About the trip through Blackridge.

About Valcrest.

Morrowgate.

Bellhaven.

Corvane.

He remembered the fire boats.

He remembered the old buildings.

He remembered the city center from the previous day.

He remembered all the places he had seen.

John listened.

Samantha listened.

Neither of them tried to steer the conversation toward Tom's future.

They didn't need to.

Tom was simply remembering.

"Blackridge is bigger than I thought," he said.

John smiled.

"It is."

"How much of it have you seen?"

John thought about that.

"Not all of it."

Tom looked surprised.

“You haven’t?”

“No.”

Samantha laughed.

“Neither have I.”

Tom looked between them.

“You guys live here.”

“That doesn’t mean we’ve been everywhere,” Samantha said.

Tom thought about that.

There were still places in Blackridge he’d never seen.

Probably many of them.

The thought made him smile.

“There are still a lot of places to go.”

John nodded.

“Definitely.”

Tom smiled.

He liked that answer.

Chapter 6 — The Questions

The afternoon was quieter.

They returned home and spent some time together.

Tom sat at the kitchen table while Samantha worked on something nearby.

John sat across from him.

Tom looked at his father.

"Can I ask you something?"

John smiled.

"You've been doing that all day."

Tom laughed.

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

Tom thought for a moment.

"Do you ever get tired of answering questions?"

John considered it.

"Sometimes."

Tom laughed.

"But I usually try to answer them."

"Why?"

John looked at him.

"Because asking questions is how you learn."

Tom nodded.

Samantha looked over.

"That doesn't mean we always have the answers."

Tom looked at her.

"Why not?"

"Because we're people."

John nodded.

"Your mother and I don't know everything."

Tom smiled.

"I thought parents knew everything."

"That's a rumor," John said.

Tom laughed.

For a moment, the room was quiet again.

Then Tom looked at his parents.

He was beginning to notice things.

Not just what they did.

But who they were.

His father wasn't simply a police officer.

His mother wasn't simply a firefighter.

They were people.

They had good days.

Bad days.

Tired days.

Quiet days.

They had questions too.

Tom didn't have the words for all of that yet.

But he was beginning to understand.

Chapter 7 — Just the Three of Us

Later in the afternoon, the family decided to watch a movie together.

Tom chose.

John complained about the choice.

Samantha immediately sided with Tom.

“You’re outnumbered.”

John sighed.

“Of course I am.”

Tom grinned.

The movie started.

For a while, nobody talked.

Tom sat between his parents.

Eventually, John reached for a snack.

Tom reached at the same time.

Their hands bumped.

Tom looked at him.

“You almost stole mine.”

John looked offended.

“I was getting my own.”

“You were reaching toward mine.”

“I was not.”

Samantha laughed.

“You two are ridiculous.”

Tom smiled.

The rest of the afternoon passed like that.

Nothing important happened.

And that was exactly what made it important.

No one needed them.

No one was calling them somewhere.

No emergency was interrupting the day.

There was simply a family sitting together.

Tom wasn't thinking about becoming a police officer.

He wasn't thinking about becoming a firefighter.

He wasn't thinking about SWAT.

He wasn't thinking about adulthood.

He was eleven.

And right now, being eleven meant sitting on the couch with his parents and arguing over snacks.

That was enough.

Chapter 8 — Tomorrow

As evening approached, the house became quieter.

The day had gone by faster than Tom expected.

He had thought staying home would become boring.

It hadn't.

There hadn't been anything spectacular.

No big trip.

No major event.

No surprise.

Just time.

Time with his parents.

Tom sat at the table while John prepared dinner.

Samantha helped.

Tom watched them.

"Tomorrow you both go back to work, right?"

John nodded.

"Yep."

"And I go back to school."

"Yep."

Tom nodded.

He seemed to think about that for a moment.

"Okay."

Samantha looked at him.

"You'll be alright?"

Tom smiled.

"Yeah."

He wasn't afraid.

He wasn't upset.

He simply seemed to realize that the day was ending.

The normal routines were coming back.

School.

Work.

Police patrols.

Fire stations.

The city continuing around them.

Tom looked toward the window.

“Can we do this again sometime?”

John smiled.

“Absolutely.”

Samantha nodded.

“Anytime.”

Tom smiled.

“Good.”

Dinner was simple.

The conversation was ordinary.

And somewhere between one conversation and the next, Tom realized something.

Growing older didn't mean everything suddenly became different.

Sometimes it just meant noticing more.

Chapter 9 — Eleven

That night, Tom stood in his bedroom.

He looked around.

The room was familiar.

The same walls.

The same bed.

The same things he'd had before turning eleven.

But he felt different.

Not dramatically.

Not enough to explain.

Just enough to notice.

He was eleven now.

A year older.

A little taller.

A little more aware.

A little more willing to ask questions that didn't have easy answers.

But he was still Tom.

Still curious.

Still kind.

Still the kid who could spend an entire afternoon asking his parents questions.

Still the kid who wanted to know what was around the next corner.

John knocked on the door.

"Hey."

Tom looked over.

"Yeah?"

"You ready for bed?"

Tom nodded.

John stepped inside.

"Good day?"

Tom smiled.

"Yeah."

John nodded.

"I'm glad."

Tom hesitated.

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for today.”

John smiled.

“Anytime.”

He gave Tom a quick pat on the shoulder and headed toward the door.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

The door closed.

Tom climbed into bed.

The house became quiet.

Tomorrow would be different.

He would go back to school.

His parents would return to work.

The routines would continue.

And Blackridge would keep moving around them.

But tonight, there was nothing Tom needed to figure out.

He was eleven.

And that was enough.

He closed his eyes.

The first day of his eleventh year came to an end.

Tomorrow, the questions would continue.

For now, he slept.

THE END

Era 2 — The Questions Begin

Story 1 — The Day After Eleven

Tom was no longer ten.

He was eleven.

He didn't know what the future held.

He didn't need to.

He had years before those decisions would matter.

For now, he had a family who loved him, a city he was still discovering, and a growing curiosity about the world around him.

And sometimes, growing up didn't begin with a major event.

Sometimes it began with something much quieter.

A question.

A conversation.

A day spent with the people who mattered most.

The questions had begun.

Chapter 1 — Monday Morning

The morning after the Smith family's quiet day together began much differently.

The alarm clock rang.

Tom opened his eyes.

For a moment, he stayed still.

Then he remembered.

School.

He sighed.

“Back to normal.”

He got dressed and headed downstairs.

John was already preparing for work.

Samantha was doing the same.

The relaxed atmosphere from the previous day was gone—not because anything was wrong, but because Monday had arrived.

John checked his things before leaving.

Samantha gathered what she needed for the day.

Tom sat at the kitchen table eating breakfast.

“You ready for school?” Samantha asked.

“Yeah.”

John looked over.

“First day back after turning eleven.”

Tom smiled.

“Does that mean I get to skip homework now?”

“No.”

Tom sighed.

“Worth asking.”

John laughed.

Samantha shook her head.

“You're still eleven, not retired.”

Tom finished his breakfast.

He grabbed his school things and stood.

“I guess I should go.”

John nodded.

“Probably.”

Tom looked at both parents.

“Have a good day.”

“You too,” Samantha said.

John smiled.

“See you this afternoon.”

Tom headed out.

The ordinary routine had returned.

Chapter 2 — Back to School

Tom arrived at school with the other students.

Everything felt familiar.

The hallways.

The classrooms.

The noise.

The teachers.

His classmates.

It had only been one school day since he'd been there, but the special family day had made the return feel different.

Tom put his things away and sat down.

One of his classmates noticed him.

"So, how was your birthday?"

Tom smiled.

"Good."

"What'd you do?"

Tom thought about it.

"Spent the day with my parents."

"That's it?"

Tom shrugged.

"Pretty much."

His classmate smiled.

"Sounds fun."

"It was."

The teacher entered the classroom.

The conversations stopped.

"Good morning, everyone."

The class answered.

Tom opened his notebook.

The day had begun.

Chapter 3 — Normal Schoolwork

The morning passed normally.

Tom worked through his assignments.

Math.

Reading.

Writing.

Nothing particularly exciting.

He occasionally looked out the window, but most of his attention stayed on the work in front of him.

At eleven, he was beginning to notice that school wasn't as simple as it had seemed when he was younger.

There was more work.

More responsibility.

Teachers expected students to remember things.

Assignments had deadlines.

Tom wasn't complaining.

He was simply noticing.

At one point, he looked at a question on his worksheet.

He frowned.

Then he raised his hand.

The teacher walked over.

“Need some help?”

“Yeah.”

She explained it.

Tom looked at the problem again.

“Oh.”

He understood.

“Got it.”

He went back to work.

It wasn't a dramatic moment.

It didn't need to be.

Learning was becoming more about figuring things out for himself.

Tom liked that.

Mostly.

Chapter 4 — Lunch

By lunchtime, Tom was ready for a break.

He sat with classmates and ate while they talked.

The conversation moved from homework to games to what everyone had done over the weekend.

Tom listened.

When someone asked about his birthday, he mentioned the family trip through Blackridge.

“You went all over the city?”

“Not all over.”

“Where'd you go?”

Tom started counting on his fingers.

“Valcrest. Morrowgate. Bellhaven. Corvane.”

“That’s a lot.”

“Yeah.”

“What was your favorite?”

Tom thought about it.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“They were all different.”

His classmate shrugged.

“Fair enough.”

Tom smiled.

He didn’t mention the fire boats.

He didn’t mention the historic buildings.

He didn’t turn the conversation into a discussion about emergency services.

It was simply a story about what he’d done with his family.

The bell rang.

Lunch was over.

Everyone got up.

Tom followed the others back toward class.

Another normal part of the day.

Chapter 5 — Meanwhile, Across Blackridge

While Tom was sitting in a classroom, John was back at work.

The familiar environment of BCPD had returned.

John was once again Corporal Smith.

His day was filled with the ordinary responsibilities of police work.

Calls came through.

Officers moved throughout the city.

Supervisors coordinated routine activity.

John handled his responsibilities as they came.

Nothing about the day required extraordinary attention.

It was simply another shift.

Elsewhere in Blackridge, Samantha was back with BCFD.

The firehouse had its own rhythm.

Equipment was checked.

Routine duties were handled.

Crews remained ready.

The city continued around them.

Neither John nor Samantha knew exactly what Tom was doing at that moment.

They didn't need to.

He was at school.

He was safe.

He was learning.

And they were doing their jobs.

The three parts of the Smith family's day were separate for a while.

But all three were moving forward normally.

Chapter 6 — An Ordinary Afternoon

Tom's afternoon classes passed without anything unusual happening.

He worked.

He listened.

He talked with classmates when there was time.

He asked questions when he didn't understand something.

And occasionally, he looked at the clock.

Not because he was desperate to leave.

He was simply ready to go home.

When the final bell rang, students began gathering their things.

Tom packed his bag.

He looked around the classroom.

Another school day finished.

He walked outside and eventually boarded the bus.

As the bus traveled through Ashford, Tom looked out the window.

The neighborhood looked familiar.

He recognized stores.

Houses.

Intersections.

The places he'd seen countless times.

But he was beginning to notice details he'd overlooked before.

A new sign.

A business he'd never paid attention to.

A building he'd always assumed was something else.

Maybe growing up wasn't about suddenly seeing the world differently.

Maybe it was about slowly noticing more of what had always been there.

Tom leaned against the window.

Chapter 7 — Home

By the time Tom arrived home, John was already there.

Samantha wasn't far behind.

Tom walked through the front door and dropped his school bag where it belonged.

John looked over.

"How was school?"

"Good."

"Anything interesting?"

Tom thought.

"No."

John smiled.

"Sounds like a successful day."

Tom nodded.

Samantha arrived home not long afterward.

She stepped inside and greeted them.

“Hey.”

“Hey, Mom.”

“How was your day?”

“Good.”

Tom sat down.

Samantha smiled.

“You survived?”

“Barely.”

John laughed.

Tom grinned.

The three of them talked about their day.

Tom mentioned a class assignment.

John mentioned that his shift had been normal.

Samantha talked briefly about her day at the fire department.

Nothing dramatic.

Nothing unusual.

Just three people catching up after a normal day.

Chapter 8 — Growing Up a Little

Later that evening, Tom worked on his homework.

He didn't need as much help as he once had.

When he got stuck, he asked.

When he understood, he continued.

John passed by and looked at the page.

“Need anything?”

“Nope.”

John smiled.

“Alright.”

Tom continued working.

A few minutes later, he stopped.

“Actually...”

John turned around.

“What?”

Tom pointed at the page.

“Can you check this?”

John walked over.

Tom showed him the work.

John looked it over.

“Looks right.”

Tom smiled.

“Okay.”

John walked away.

Tom continued.

It was a small thing.

But there was a difference.

When he was younger, Tom often needed someone to guide him.

Now he was beginning to do more on his own.

Not everything.

Not even close.

But some things.

And that was enough.

Chapter 9 — A Trip Coming Up

Before Tom went to bed, Samantha reminded him about something.

“Oh, Tom.”

“Yeah?”

“Your teacher mentioned your class has a field trip coming up.”

Tom looked interested.

“Where?”

“Morrowgate Historic Museum.”

Tom's expression immediately changed.

“Morrowgate?”

Samantha nodded.

“That's what she said.”

Tom smiled.

He remembered Morrowgate.

The old buildings.

The streets.

The places he'd seen with his parents.

Now he would get to see another part of it.

“What day?”

“I don’t remember.”

Tom nodded.

“Can we go?”

Samantha laughed.

“It’s a school field trip.”

“Oh.”

Tom thought about that.

“So... yes?”

“Yes.”

Tom smiled.

That was enough.

He headed toward his room.

Morrowgate again.

But this time, it wouldn’t be from a family trip.

And it wouldn’t be during an emergency.

It would be a school day.

A museum.

A normal field trip.

Just another place to learn something.

Chapter 10 — Tomorrow

Tom got ready for bed.

He placed his school things where he could find them in the morning.

Then he climbed into bed.

The day had been ordinary.

Exactly as it was supposed to be.

His birthday was over.

The family day was over.

School was back.

John was back at BCPD.

Samantha was back at BCFD.

Life had returned to its normal rhythm.

Tom thought briefly about the upcoming museum trip.

He wondered what the museum would be like.

What he'd see.

What he'd learn.

How old the building might be.

He smiled.

There were still questions.

There were always questions.

Tom closed his eyes.

Tomorrow would be another day.

Another school day.

Another day for his parents.

Another ordinary day in Blackridge.

And somewhere ahead was a trip to Morrowgate.

For now, that was all Tom needed to know.

The questions were beginning.

And there was plenty of time for answers.

THE END

Era 2 — The Questions Begin

Story 2 — Back to Routine

Chapter 1 — The Bus Ride

The school bus was louder than usual.

Not because anything was wrong.

Quite the opposite.

Everyone was excited.

The morning had started normally enough. Tom had gotten ready for school, eaten breakfast, grabbed his backpack, and headed out the door with the usual reminder from his mother to make sure he had everything.

Today, however, there was one difference.

He wasn't going to spend the entire day in a classroom.

His class was going to the **Morrowgate Historic Museum**.

Tom sat beside one of his classmates while the bus made its way through Blackridge.

Outside the window, the familiar streets of Ashford slowly gave way to other parts of the city.

Tom watched buildings change.

Different houses.

Different businesses.

Different streets.

He had been through Morrowgate before, but usually because his parents were working or because they were traveling somewhere else.

This time, he was actually going there to look around.

One student near the front was already talking about the museum.

"I heard there's old stuff in there."

"That's usually what a museum is," another student replied.

"Yeah, but, like, *really* old stuff."

Tom smiled slightly.

He looked back out the window.

"Do you think they have police stuff?" he asked.

His classmate shrugged.

"Probably."

Tom nodded.

That was enough of an answer for him.

Chapter 2 — Welcome to Morrowgate

The bus eventually pulled up outside the museum.

The building looked older than many of the surrounding structures.

It wasn't falling apart or anything like that. It had clearly been maintained over the years.

A large sign near the entrance read:

MORROWGATE HISTORIC MUSEUM

Students began filing off the bus.

Their teacher stood near the entrance and waited until everyone had gathered.

"Alright, everyone. Stay with the group."

The students slowly formed something resembling a line.

"Something resembling" being the important part.

One student was talking.

Another was looking at the building.

Two others were debating who got to stand first.

The teacher waited patiently.

"Everyone here?"

She counted.

Once.

Then again.

"Okay. Good."

The doors opened.

"Remember the museum rules. No running, don't touch the exhibits unless you're told you can, and stay with your group."

A student raised his hand.

"Can we take pictures?"

"Where photography is permitted, yes."

Another hand went up.

"Can we buy something from the gift shop?"

The teacher paused.

"We'll discuss that later."

A few students immediately looked more interested in the trip.

Tom followed everyone inside.

The first thing he noticed was how quiet it was.

Not completely silent.

There were conversations.

Footsteps.

The occasional sound of someone laughing.

But compared with the school bus, it felt almost peaceful.

A museum guide greeted the class and introduced herself.

"Welcome to the Morrowgate Historic Museum. Today we'll be looking at some of the history of this community and the people who helped build it."

Tom listened.

The word *community* caught his attention.

He wasn't sure why.

Maybe because he had started realizing that the city around him hadn't simply appeared one day.

People had lived here.

Worked here.

Built things.

Changed things.

And, apparently, left a lot of things behind.

Chapter 3 — Old Morrowgate

The first section of the museum contained photographs.

Lots of them.

Old streets.

Old buildings.

Families standing outside houses.

Businesses that Tom had never heard of.

Some of the streets looked familiar, but they were almost impossible to recognize because the buildings around them had changed.

Tom stopped in front of one photograph.

"That's Morrowgate?"

The guide nodded.

"Yes."

"It doesn't look like Morrowgate."

A few students laughed.

The guide smiled.

"It has changed quite a bit over the years."

Tom looked at the photograph again.

The street was recognizable in shape, but everything else was different.

There were older cars.

Different signs.

Different buildings.

Different people.

It made him think about something his father had said once.

Cities changed.

Sometimes slowly.

Sometimes quickly.

Tom continued with the group.

There were old documents behind glass.

A collection of household objects.

Photographs of community events.

Then the tour moved into a section about public services.

That got Tom's attention.

Immediately.

Chapter 4 — The Old Radio

The display contained several pieces of equipment.

An old police radio sat inside one case.

Another radio was positioned beside it.

There were pieces of firefighting equipment nearby.

Some of it looked strangely familiar.

Some of it didn't.

Tom leaned closer.

The radios were much older than the equipment he had seen his father use.

"Those are radios?" one student asked.

The guide nodded.

"Yes. Older communication equipment."

"Did police use those?"

"Police, fire, and other emergency services used various types of radio equipment over the years."

Tom stared at the display.

His father had a radio.

His mother worked around radios.

He had heard radio traffic before.

But these looked completely different.

"Did they actually work?" Tom asked.

The guide smiled.

"They did."

Tom nodded slowly.

He looked at the equipment again.

It was strange to think that something that looked so old had once been important.

Someone had depended on it.

Someone had listened to it.

Someone had probably waited for information to come through it.

The class continued.

Tom followed.

Then he saw something farther ahead.

He stopped walking.

Not completely.

Just enough that the student behind him almost walked into him.

"What are you looking at?"

Tom pointed.

"That."

The student looked.

"Oh."

It was an ambulance.

An old one.

Chapter 5 — Morrowgate Ambulance 1

The ambulance sat inside a larger exhibit area.

It wasn't polished like a modern emergency vehicle.

Its age was obvious.

The exterior showed years of use.

There were areas of wear and damage.

The equipment inside was older.

The radio equipment was older too.

But it wasn't a wreck.

It was still recognizable for what it had once been.

An ambulance.

Tom walked closer with the rest of the group.

He looked at the vehicle.

Then he looked at the sign beside it.

MORROWGATE AMBULANCE 1

Tom read it again.

"Morrowgate Ambulance 1."

The guide noticed him looking.

"That's one of the museum's larger emergency-services exhibits."

Tom looked at her.

"Why is an ambulance in a museum?"

The question was so simple that the guide smiled.

"Because it was part of Morrowgate's history."

Tom looked back at the ambulance.

"People actually used this?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Before the equipment and vehicles you see today. This ambulance served the Morrowgate community during its time in active service."

Tom looked at the inside.

He tried to imagine someone sitting back there.

A firefighter.

An emergency medical worker.

A patient.

Someone being taken to a hospital.

The vehicle suddenly seemed different.

It wasn't just an old ambulance anymore.

It had a history.

Chapter 6 — Still Works?

Tom moved slightly closer.

There were other students looking at the ambulance now, but Tom was focused on the details.

He noticed the older equipment.

The wear.

The damage.

The radio.

Then he asked another question.

"Does it still work?"

The guide looked at the ambulance.

"It is still functional."

Tom's eyebrows lifted.

"Really?"

"Yes. But that doesn't mean it's used for emergency calls."

Tom nodded.

"So it just stays here?"

"That's right. It's preserved as part of the museum's collection."

Tom looked at the vehicle again.

He found that interesting.

Something could still work without being used anymore.

It wasn't abandoned.

It wasn't forgotten.

It had simply become part of history.

One of the students asked, "So why didn't they just get rid of it?"

The guide answered.

"Because sometimes old equipment tells us something about how a community changed. This ambulance is one example. It represents a period when it was part of Morrowgate's emergency services."

Tom looked at the photographs displayed beside the ambulance.

Some showed older emergency personnel.

Others showed the vehicle itself.

There were old radios.

Equipment.

People standing beside the ambulance.

Tom stared at one photograph for a few seconds.

He wondered how many calls that vehicle had answered.

He didn't ask.

Not because he wasn't curious.

He simply didn't know how to put the question into words.

Chapter 7 — Before His Parents' Equipment

The guide continued explaining the exhibit.

Tom listened.

He wasn't trying to memorize anything.

He just wanted to understand it.

Emergency services had changed.

The equipment changed.

Vehicles changed.

Radios changed.

Even the way people responded to calls changed.

Tom thought about his mother.

He had seen her around modern fire equipment.

He had seen her work around trucks.

He knew what a modern ambulance looked like.

But this?

This was different.

His mother worked with equipment designed for the world as it was now.

This ambulance had belonged to an earlier version of that world.

Tom looked at the old radio again.

Then at the ambulance.

Then at the photographs.

It was almost like seeing the beginning of a story that had continued long after the people in the photographs were gone.

"Tom."

He looked over.

His teacher was standing nearby.

"We're moving to the next exhibit."

"Oh."

Tom took one last look.

Then he followed the group.

Chapter 8 — The Rest of the Museum

There were plenty of other exhibits.

The class saw more photographs.

Historical documents.

Objects from homes and businesses.

Displays about how Morrowgate had grown over the years.

Some students were fascinated.

Others were becoming noticeably more interested in the gift shop.

One student quietly asked another:

"How much longer?"

"I don't know."

"I've been here for like three years."

"You've been here for twenty minutes."

"Feels like three years."

Tom laughed.

The group moved through another section.

Tom still looked at everything, but his attention kept returning to the emergency-services exhibit.

Not because the other exhibits were boring.

He just found it easier to connect with something he had already seen in his own life.

His father wore a police uniform.

His mother worked in fire and rescue.

Tom had heard radios.

He had heard sirens.

He had seen emergency vehicles.

Now he was beginning to understand that none of those things were new.

They had been changing for years.

Maybe decades.

The thought stayed with him.

Chapter 9 — Heading Home

Eventually, the teacher gathered everyone back together.

"Alright, everyone. Time to head back to the bus."

There were a few disappointed groans.

The gift shop had apparently become the most important exhibit of the day.

Tom walked with the group toward the exit.

Before leaving, he looked back toward the museum.

He could no longer see the ambulance from where he stood.

But he remembered it.

Morrowgate Ambulance 1.

An old ambulance.

Still functional.

Damaged.

Preserved.

No longer responding to calls.

Tom wondered what it had been like when it was still in service.

He wondered who had driven it.

Who had worked in it.

How many people had depended on it.

There were a lot of questions.

He didn't have answers for most of them.

And, for once, he was perfectly okay with that.

Chapter 10 — Home

The bus ride home was quieter than the trip there.

Some students talked.

Others looked out the windows.

A few were already tired enough to sleep.

Tom watched Morrowgate disappear behind them as the bus headed back toward Ashford.

When he got home later that afternoon, his parents were there.

John looked up from where he was sitting.

"How was the museum?"

Tom dropped his backpack near the door.

"Good."

Samantha looked over.

"What did you see?"

Tom thought about it.

"A lot."

John smiled.

"That's a very detailed answer."

Tom ignored the joke.

"There was an old ambulance."

Samantha looked interested.

"An old ambulance?"

"Yeah. Morrowgate Ambulance 1."

John nodded.

"What was it doing in a museum?"

Tom answered almost immediately.

"Because it used to serve Morrowgate."

He paused.

"It's not used anymore, though."

Samantha nodded.

"That makes sense."

Tom sat down.

"It still works."

John raised an eyebrow.

"Really?"

"Yeah. But they don't use it for emergencies. They keep it there because it's part of the history."

John nodded slowly.

"That's pretty neat."

Tom thought about the old radio.

"The radios were different too."

"They change over time," John said.

Tom nodded.

He had already figured that out.

For a moment, nobody said anything.

Then Samantha smiled.

"Sounds like you had a good field trip."

Tom smiled back.

"Yeah."

It had been a normal school field trip.

No emergencies.

No sirens.

No dramatic calls.

Just a museum, a group of classmates, a teacher, and an old ambulance that had once served the same city his parents worked in.

But Tom had learned something.

The world around him hadn't always looked the way it did now.

Things changed.

Equipment changed.

People changed.

And sometimes, when something became old enough, it became history.

Tom didn't know yet what any of that meant for him.

He didn't need to.

For now, he was eleven years old.

And he had another question waiting somewhere in the back of his mind.

He just hadn't found it yet.

Sometimes, the questions begin with something as simple as an old ambulance.

THE END

Era 2 — The Questions Begin

Story 3 — The Museum

Chapter 1 — Wednesday Morning

Wednesday morning felt ordinary.

Tom had already settled back into the school routine after his birthday and the family day that followed it. Monday had been a normal school day, Tuesday had been the field trip to Morrowgate Historic Museum, and now Wednesday looked like it would be another day of classes.

At breakfast, Samantha had reminded him not to forget his backpack.

Tom had checked twice.

John had watched him leave and called after him.

"Have a good day."

Tom turned around.

"You too."

John smiled.

"School is easier than police work."

Tom thought about that.

"Probably."

Samantha laughed.

"Probably?"

Tom shrugged.

"I don't know. I've never been a police officer."

John pointed toward him.

"Good answer."

Tom smiled and headed out.

By the time he arrived at school, the building was already filling with students.

The usual conversations were happening.

Homework.

Sports.

Lunch.

Something funny someone had seen the previous afternoon.

Tom walked into his classroom, put his backpack down, and took his seat.

His teacher was writing something on the board when the bell rang.

Then she turned around.

"Alright, everyone. Before we start, we have someone new joining our class."

Tom looked toward the door.

A student he hadn't seen before stood beside the teacher.

"Why don't you introduce yourself?"

The student gave their name.

A few students nodded.

The teacher pointed toward an empty desk.

"You can sit there."

The new student walked over and sat down.

Tom glanced over briefly.

Nothing about the student seemed unusual.

Just someone new.

Tom turned back toward the board.

He had no idea that by the end of the day, that student would know something about his family that Tom normally didn't think much about.

Chapter 2 — A New Face

The morning passed without much trouble.

The new student had questions about the school.

Where certain classrooms were.

When lunch started.

Which teacher taught which subject.

A few students helped answer the questions.

Tom mostly kept to himself.

He wasn't unfriendly.

He just didn't have much reason to talk to someone he had met only that morning.

By lunch, however, the new student had started getting to know some of the class.

Tom sat with several other students.

The conversation moved around as usual.

Someone complained about homework.

Someone else talked about a game they had played.

Another student mentioned something their parent had done over the weekend.

The new student eventually looked toward Tom.

"What about you?"

Tom looked up.

"What?"

"What does your dad do?"

Tom shrugged.

"He's a police officer."

The student looked interested.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"What department?"

"Blackridge City Police."

The student paused.

"What's his name?"

"John Smith."

The student's expression changed.

"Wait. **Corporal John Smith?**"

Tom nodded.

"Yeah."

"Your dad's a cop?"

"Yes."

The student smiled.

"That's pretty cool."

Tom shrugged.

"I guess."

He didn't think much more about the conversation.

His father's job had been part of his life for as long as he could remember.

To Tom, saying his father was a police officer wasn't much different from saying his mother was a firefighter.

It was simply what they did.

The new student, however, seemed to find it more interesting.

Tom would soon discover that not everyone treated the information the same way he did.

Chapter 3 — The First Comment

The afternoon classes were mostly ordinary.

Tom worked on his assignments.

The teacher explained the day's material.

The new student was still learning where everything was.

At one point, the student walked past Tom's desk.

"Hey, cop's kid."

Tom looked up.

"What?"

The student grinned.

"Nothing."

Tom frowned slightly.

Then he returned to his work.

A few minutes later, the student made another comment.

"Does your dad let you ride in his police car?"

Tom looked up again.

"Sometimes."

"That's cool."

Tom shrugged.

"It is."

The student walked away.

Tom didn't know whether the comment had been a joke or just curiosity.

He decided not to worry about it.

When the final bell rang, Tom packed his backpack and headed home.

Chapter 4 — Wednesday Evening

The Smith house was quiet when Tom got home.

Samantha wasn't back yet.

John was.

He was sitting at the kitchen table, looking over some paperwork from work.

Tom dropped his backpack near the usual spot.

"Hey, Dad."

John looked up.

"Hey."

"How was school?"

"Fine."

John nodded.

"How was the new student?"

Tom paused.

"You remembered?"

"You mentioned there was going to be someone new."

"Oh."

Tom opened the refrigerator.

"He's alright."

John smiled.

"Good."

Tom grabbed something to eat.

He didn't mention the comments.

Not because he was frightened.

Not because he thought something terrible was going to happen.

He simply didn't think it was important enough to bring up.

Not yet.

After all, it had only been a couple of comments.

Maybe the student was just trying to be funny.

Maybe tomorrow would be different.

Tom didn't know.

He finished eating and went upstairs to work on his homework.

The rest of Wednesday passed normally.

Chapter 5 — Thursday Morning

Thursday started like every other school morning.

Tom ate breakfast.

John was already getting ready for work.

Samantha was preparing for her own day.

Tom grabbed his backpack.

"See you later."

"Have a good day," Samantha said.

John looked over.

"Remember your homework."

"I have it."

"Good."

Tom headed out.

He didn't think about the new student until he reached school.

Then he remembered yesterday.

The comments.

The "cop's kid" remark.

He hoped that was the end of it.

For the first few hours, it was.

The new student didn't say anything.

Tom started to relax.

Maybe yesterday really had just been a joke.

Maybe he had been overthinking it.

Then, during a break between classes, the student walked past him.

"Hey, Tom."

Tom looked over.

"What?"

"Your dad still a cop?"

Tom stared at him.

"Yeah."

The student smiled.

"Thought so."

Then they walked away.

Tom sighed.

He didn't understand what was so funny.

Chapter 6 — Another Comment

At lunch, Tom sat with the same group as the day before.

He was halfway through his meal when the new student walked by.

"Hey, cop's kid."

Tom looked up.

"Can you not?"

The student stopped.

"What?"

"Just don't call me that."

The student laughed.

"Why?"

"Because I don't like it."

"Okay."

The student walked away.

Tom went back to eating.

One of his classmates looked at him.

"You alright?"

"Yeah."

"You sure?"

Tom nodded.

"It's nothing."

And for the moment, it was.

There was no argument.

No shouting.

No confrontation.

Just an uncomfortable interaction that Tom wished hadn't happened.

After lunch, the class returned to their work.

Tom tried to forget about it.

Chapter 7 — Just Stop

Later that afternoon, the student made another comment.

Tom was putting his notebook away when he heard it.

"Hey, cop's kid."

Tom turned around.

"What?"

The student smiled.

"Nothing."

Tom shook his head.

"You keep doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Calling me that."

The student shrugged.

"So?"

Tom looked at them.

"I don't like it."

There was a pause.

Then Tom said it more clearly.

"Just stop."

The student looked at him for a moment.

"Fine."

Tom turned back around.

He wasn't angry.

He wasn't looking for a fight.

He simply wanted the comments to end.

For a few minutes, the classroom was quiet.

Then the teacher looked around.

"Alright, everyone. Let's get back to work."

Tom opened his notebook.

He tried to concentrate.

But the uncomfortable feeling remained.

He had finally told the student to stop.

Now he hoped they would listen.

Chapter 8 — Thursday Evening

The final bell eventually rang.

Tom packed his things and headed home.

The walk home gave him time to think.

Maybe it was over.

Maybe tomorrow would be normal.

He hoped so.

When he got home, Samantha was already there.

She looked over as Tom walked in.

"Hey."

"Hey, Mom."

"How was school?"

Tom hesitated.

"Okay."

Samantha studied him for a moment.

"Just okay?"

Tom shrugged.

"Yeah."

She didn't push.

"Well, dinner will be ready soon."

"Okay."

Tom went upstairs.

He sat at his desk and started working on his homework.

After a few minutes, he stopped.

He thought about telling his parents.

Then he decided against it.

He had already told the student to stop.

Maybe that would be enough.

He didn't want to make a bigger deal out of something that might disappear tomorrow.

Tom went downstairs for dinner.

John came home later.

The family ate together and talked about ordinary things.

For a while, school disappeared from Tom's mind.

Tomorrow would be Friday.

Maybe the week would end normally.

Chapter 9 — Friday Morning

Friday morning arrived.

Tom was tired.

He had spent most of Thursday wondering whether the situation would continue.

He didn't want it to.

At breakfast, John noticed Tom was quieter than usual.

"You alright?"

Tom looked up.

"Yeah."

"Long week?"

Tom nodded.

"Kind of."

John smiled.

"That's what Fridays are for."

Tom smiled slightly.

"Yeah."

He finished breakfast.

Then he grabbed his backpack.

"See you later."

"See you," John said.

Tom headed to school.

The morning started normally.

Classes.

Assignments.

Students talking.

The teacher moving around the classroom.

For a while, Tom forgot about everything else.

Then, during class, the new student leaned over.

"Hey, cop's kid."

Tom ignored it.

The student tried again.

"Your dad gonna arrest me?"

Tom looked over.

"No."

The teacher glanced toward them.

Tom looked back at his work.

He hoped the teacher hadn't noticed.

But she had.

Chapter 10 — The Teacher Notices

The teacher continued the lesson for another few minutes.

Then she walked around the classroom.

When she reached Tom's desk, she stopped.

"Tom?"

He looked up.

"Yes?"

"Can you come with me for a moment?"

Tom immediately wondered whether he was in trouble.

"Am I?"

"No."

The teacher smiled reassuringly.

"You're not in trouble."

Tom stood.

She motioned toward the hallway.

"Let's talk for a minute."

Tom followed her outside.

The classroom door closed behind them.

The teacher lowered her voice.

"What's been going on?"

Tom looked at the floor.

"Nothing."

She waited.

Tom sighed.

"The new student keeps making comments about my dad."

"Your father?"

"He's a police officer."

"I know."

Tom looked surprised.

"You know?"

"You've mentioned him before."

Tom nodded.

The teacher continued.

"What kind of comments?"

Tom explained.

The "cop's kid" comments.

The jokes.

The repeated questions.

And the fact that he had already asked the student to stop.

The teacher listened carefully.

She didn't tell Tom he was overreacting.

She didn't tell him to ignore it.

She simply listened.

When Tom finished, she said:

"Thank you for telling me."

Tom looked at her.

"Am I in trouble?"

"No."

She shook her head.

"You did the right thing by telling me."

Tom relaxed slightly.

The teacher continued.

"You shouldn't have to keep dealing with something after you've asked someone to stop. I'm going to handle this with the other student."

Tom nodded.

"Okay."

"And I'm going to make sure you know what to do if it happens again."

Tom nodded again.

"Okay."

The teacher paused.

"Would you like to talk to your father?"

Tom looked surprised.

"Can I?"

"Of course."

Chapter 11 — Calling Dad

The teacher brought Tom to a quiet office area where he could make the call.

Tom knew John's number.

He dialed.

The phone rang.

Once.

Twice.

Then John answered.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Dad."

John recognized his voice immediately.

"Hey, Tom. What's up?"

Tom looked at the teacher.

Then back at the phone.

"Something happened at school."

John's tone changed slightly.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Tell me what happened."

Tom explained.

The new student.

The comments.

The jokes about John being a police officer.

The fact that Tom had asked the student to stop.

And the teacher stepping in.

John listened.

He didn't interrupt.

When Tom finished, John spoke.

"First, I'm glad you told your teacher."

Tom nodded.

"I wasn't sure if I should."

"You absolutely should."

John paused.

"Tom, you don't have to solve everything yourself."

"I know."

"And you don't need to use my job to handle this."

Tom smiled a little.

"I wasn't going to."

"I know."

John's voice became warmer.

"I'm your dad before I'm anything else to you."

Tom looked down.

"Okay."

"If something at school bothers you, tell your teacher. If you need us, call us. That's what we're here for."

Tom nodded.

"Thanks, Dad."

"Anytime."

There was a brief pause.

Then John added:

"And Tom?"

"Yeah?"

"You did the right thing."

Tom smiled.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

The call ended.

Tom handed the phone back to the teacher.

She smiled.

"Feeling a little better?"

"Yeah."

"Good."

Chapter 12 — The Assistant Principal

The teacher returned to the classroom with Tom.

The new student was still there.

She spoke quietly to another staff member, then asked the student to come with her.

Tom stayed at his desk.

He watched them leave.

There was no shouting.

No scene.

No dramatic confrontation.

Just a teacher taking a student out of the classroom because something needed to be addressed.

Tom returned to his work.

A short while later, the teacher came back.

The student didn't.

Tom continued working.

Eventually, the Assistant Principal came into the classroom.

They approached Tom's desk.

"Tom?"

Tom looked up.

"Yes?"

"I understand you've had some difficulty with another student."

Tom nodded.

"Yes."

"Thank you for letting your teacher know."

Tom looked at them.

"Am I in trouble?"

"No."

The Assistant Principal shook their head.

"You did exactly what you were supposed to do. If another student continues bothering you after you've asked them to stop, you tell an adult."

Tom nodded.

"Okay."

"We'll handle the rest."

Tom looked down at his assignment.

"Alright."

The Assistant Principal gave him a reassuring smile.

"Keep doing your schoolwork."

Tom smiled.

"Okay."

The Assistant Principal left.

Tom watched the door close.

Then he looked back at his paper.

He realized something.

His father was a police officer.

But that hadn't been the solution.

His teacher had handled the classroom.

The Assistant Principal was handling the school matter.

And John had handled the situation as Tom's father.

Everyone had a different responsibility.

Maybe that was how things were supposed to work.

Chapter 13 — Back to Class

The rest of the morning passed quietly.

Tom worked.

The teacher continued the lesson.

Eventually, the new student returned to class.

There was no comment.

No joke.

No mention of John.

Tom didn't look over.

He simply kept working.

At lunch, things were quieter too.

One of Tom's classmates sat beside him.

"Everything okay now?"

Tom nodded.

"Yeah."

"Good."

Tom smiled.

He didn't need to explain everything.

The problem had been addressed.

That was enough.

After lunch, the normal rhythm of school returned.

For the first time all week, Tom stopped thinking about whether someone was going to call him "cop's kid."

He just went through the day.

Chapter 14 — Friday Afternoon

The final bell rang.

Students began gathering their things.

Tom packed his backpack.

As he walked toward the door, his teacher stopped him.

"Tom?"

He turned.

"Yes?"

"I just wanted to check in."

"I'm okay."

"Good."

She smiled.

"If you ever have another problem like this, come talk to me."

Tom nodded.

"I will."

"And you don't have to wait until something becomes a big problem."

Tom thought about that.

"Okay."

He headed toward the exit.

Outside, the school was already beginning to empty.

Students boarded buses.

Parents picked up their children.

Teachers continued their afternoon routines.

Nothing dramatic had happened.

And that was exactly how Tom preferred it.

Chapter 15 — Home

When Tom got home, Samantha was there.

She looked over as he came inside.

"Hey."

"Hey, Mom."

"How was school?"

Tom paused.

Then he smiled.

"Better."

Samantha smiled back.

"Good."

Tom put his backpack down.

A little later, John came home.

He looked toward Tom.

"Hey."

"Hey, Dad."

"How'd the rest of the day go?"

"Fine."

John nodded.

"Good."

Tom hesitated.

Then he said:

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for talking to me."

John smiled.

"Anytime."

Tom sat down.

He didn't need another long conversation.

He already understood.

Chapter 16 — Different Jobs

That evening, the family sat together.

Tom thought about everything that had happened during the week.

It had started with a new student.

Then came a few jokes.

Then more comments.

Then Tom finally said something.

And when that wasn't enough, he told his teacher.

The teacher helped.

The Assistant Principal handled the school side.

And John listened to him as his father.

Tom looked at John.

"Everybody has a job."

John looked over.

"What?"

"At school."

John smiled.

"That's true."

"My teacher handles the classroom."

"Yep."

"The Assistant Principal handles school problems."

"Yep."

"And you handle police stuff."

John nodded.

"At work."

Tom smiled.

"At work."

John leaned back.

"But when you call me because you're having a bad day?"

Tom waited.

"I'm Dad."

Tom smiled.

"Okay."

Samantha looked between them.

"Sounds like you've learned something this week."

Tom thought about it.

"Maybe."

John laughed.

"Maybe?"

Tom shrugged.

"I've had a busy week."

Chapter 17 — The Weekend

Saturday morning arrived without school.

Tom woke up later than usual.

There were no bells.

No assignments waiting for him.

No classroom.

No new student.

Just another morning at home.

He walked downstairs.

Samantha was already in the kitchen.

"Morning."

"Morning."

John looked over from the table.

"Sleep well?"

"Yeah."

Tom sat down.

For a moment, nobody mentioned school.

And Tom was perfectly happy with that.

The week had been uncomfortable.

But it hadn't changed who he was.

It hadn't changed who his parents were.

And it hadn't changed the fact that school was still just school.

Sometimes things happened that made a normal day difficult.

Sometimes the right response wasn't fighting back.

Sometimes it wasn't trying to solve the problem yourself.

Sometimes it was simply saying:

"I need help."

Tom had learned that asking for help didn't make him weak.

It meant he knew when someone else could help.

And there was something comforting about knowing that.

Chapter 18 — Questions

Later that morning, Tom sat quietly at the kitchen table.

He thought about the museum.

The old ambulance.

The old radios.

The history behind the emergency services his parents worked in.

Then he thought about school.

His teacher.

The Assistant Principal.

His father.

Different people.

Different responsibilities.

Different kinds of work.

Tom still had plenty of questions.

He didn't have answers for all of them.

He didn't need to.

He was eleven.

There was plenty of time.

For now, he was learning something much simpler.

The world was bigger than his own family.

And when something went wrong, there were people whose job was to help.

Sometimes, all he had to do was let them.

Tom looked toward the window.

Outside, Blackridge was having another ordinary day.

No sirens.

No emergency.

No major event.

Just another day.

And for Tom, that was enough.

THE END

Era 2 — The Questions Begin

Story 4 — The New Student

Chapter 1 — Saturday Morning

Saturday morning was different from most Saturdays.

Tom was awake earlier than usual.

He wasn't being dragged out of bed.

He wasn't getting ready for school.

He simply knew he had somewhere to be.

Today, he was going on a ride-along with his father.

Tom sat on the edge of his bed for a moment, still waking up.

Then he looked at the clothes he had laid out the night before.

He got dressed and headed downstairs.

John was already awake.

He was preparing for work at the kitchen table.

Tom walked into the room.

"Morning."

John looked up.

"Morning."

Tom glanced toward him.

"So... I'm actually coming with you today?"

John smiled.

"That's the plan."

Tom nodded.

He had known about it for a while.

He had seen his father's uniform.

He had ridden around with him before when he was younger.

But this was different.

Today, Tom was old enough to understand more of what he was seeing.

John stood.

"Before we leave, there are a few things you need to remember."

Tom listened.

"You stay with me."

"Okay."

"You don't touch anything unless I tell you it's alright."

"Okay."

"And if I tell you to stay in the vehicle, you stay in the vehicle."

Tom nodded.

"Got it."

John smiled.

"This isn't training."

"I know."

"You're observing."

Tom nodded again.

"Got it."

Samantha walked into the kitchen.

"Morning."

"Morning," Tom said.

She looked toward John.

"Everything ready?"

"Almost."

Samantha looked at Tom.

"Excited?"

Tom thought about it.

"Yeah."

She smiled.

"Have fun."

Tom smiled back.

"I will."

Chapter 2 — Getting Ready

John finished preparing for patrol.

Tom watched from nearby.

He had seen most of the equipment before.

But seeing it all together was different.

The uniform.

The duty equipment.

The radio.

The items John carried while working.

Tom didn't reach for anything.

He simply watched.

John noticed.

"Questions?"

Tom thought for a moment.

"Not yet."

John laughed.

"That's new."

Tom smiled.

He wasn't trying to memorize everything.

He was just looking.

There were small differences between seeing his father ready for work and seeing the finished result.

At home, John was simply Dad.

At work, he was Corporal John Smith.

Tom had seen both sides before.

Today, he was going to spend several hours watching the second one.

John checked his things one last time.

"Ready?"

Tom nodded.

"Ready."

They headed outside.

Unit 890 was waiting.

Tom climbed into the passenger seat.

John got behind the wheel.

For a moment, neither of them said anything.

Then John started the vehicle.

Saturday patrol had begun.

Chapter 3 — Unit 890

John drove toward the BCPD patrol area.

Tom looked around from the passenger seat.

The inside of Unit 890 looked different from a normal family vehicle.

There was equipment mounted and arranged specifically for police work.

The radio was nearby.

The MDT was within John's reach.

Tom had seen some of these things before.

Now he was sitting beside them.

John reached for the radio.

"Blackridge Dispatch, Unit 890. 10-12."

A response came over the radio.

John acknowledged it.

Tom waited until the transmission was finished.

Then he looked over.

"What does 10-12 mean?"

John glanced toward him.

"Active ride-along."

Tom nodded.

"So dispatch knows I'm with you?"

"Exactly."

"Why do they need to know?"

"Because dispatch needs to know what officers are doing and who's with them when it matters."

Tom looked toward the radio.

"So they know you're not alone."

"That's part of it."

Tom nodded.

John continued driving.

Tom looked out the window.

He had heard police radio traffic before.

But hearing it while sitting inside the patrol vehicle made it feel different.

He wasn't just hearing a voice through a radio.

He was watching the communication happen in real time.

Chapter 4 — What Dispatch Knows

The patrol continued.

Dispatch occasionally communicated with officers.

John responded when necessary.

Tom listened.

There were unit numbers.

Locations.

Requests.

Updates.

Sometimes the radio was busy.

Sometimes several minutes passed without anyone saying anything.

Tom noticed that too.

"Does dispatch know where every police car is?"

John nodded.

"They need to know where units are available and where they're working."

"How?"

"Different systems help with that. Radio communications are one part of it."

Tom thought about the map of Blackridge.

"So if another officer needs help, they know which units are nearby?"

"That's one reason."

Tom nodded.

He looked at the radio again.

"Does everyone hear everything?"

"Not necessarily. It depends on what information is being communicated and which channel is being used."

Tom considered that.

There was more to the radio than simply talking.

He had heard his father use it before.

Now he was beginning to understand why.

John drove on.

Tom watched the city outside.

For a while, there was nothing to ask.

And that was fine.

Chapter 5 — Just Driving

The next stretch of patrol was quiet.

No emergency.

No dramatic call.

Just driving.

Tom looked through the window as Unit 890 moved through Blackridge.

People were shopping.

Cars traveled along the roads.

Businesses were open.

Pedestrians crossed streets.

The city was simply doing what cities did.

Tom glanced at John.

"What do you do when nothing's happening?"

John smiled.

"There's always something to do."

"Like what?"

"Patrol. Watch traffic. Check information. Respond when we're called. Talk to people. Handle reports."

Tom nodded.

"So it's not just chasing people."

John laughed.

"No."

Tom smiled.

"I figured."

John continued driving.

"Most police work isn't like television."

Tom looked out the window again.

"Good."

"Why good?"

"Because television seems exhausting."

John laughed.

Tom smiled.

The vehicle continued down the road.

For several minutes, neither of them spoke.

Tom didn't mind.

He was beginning to understand something.

A large part of his father's job was simply being there.

Watching.

Listening.

Being ready.

Chapter 6 — The Traffic Stop

They had been driving for several minutes when John noticed a black Crown Victoria approaching an intersection ahead of them.

Tom was looking out the passenger-side window when the vehicle rolled toward the stop sign.

It slowed down.

But it never completely stopped.

The Crown Victoria continued through the intersection.

John watched it for a moment.

"There," he said.

Tom looked ahead.

"What?"

“That car didn't stop.”

Tom watched the Crown Victoria continue down the road.

“Oh.”

John checked the traffic around them before following.

“I’m going to stop them for the stop-sign violation.”

Tom nodded.

He already knew what was about to happen.

A traffic stop.

Nothing unusual.

John followed the Crown Victoria for a short distance before picking up the radio microphone.

“Blackridge Dispatch, Unit 890. 10-11.”

“Unit 890, go ahead.”

“Black Crown Victoria, license plate TTC-552, stop sign violation. Blackridge and Oak.”

“Unit 890, copy.”

John returned the microphone to its holder.

Tom looked at him.

“What’s TTC?”

“That’s the license plate.”

“Oh.”

John slowed the patrol car and activated the emergency lights.

The Crown Victoria’s brake lights came on.

It moved toward the side of the road and stopped.

John positioned Unit 890 behind it and came to a stop.

Tom remained seated exactly where John had told him to stay.

John looked over at him.

"Remember what we talked about."

"Stay here and don't get involved."

"Right."

Tom nodded.

John stepped out of Unit 890 and approached the Crown Victoria.

Tom watched quietly through the window.

He couldn't hear every word of the conversation, but he could see his father speaking with the driver and asking for the necessary information.

There was nothing dramatic about it.

No shouting.

No argument.

Just a routine traffic stop.

After a few minutes, John returned to Unit 890.

He opened the driver's door, climbed inside, and picked up the radio microphone again.

"Blackridge Dispatch, Unit 890. 10-11."

"Unit 890, copy."

John put the microphone back.

Tom looked at him.

"What were you telling dispatch?"

"Just updating them on the stop."

Tom thought about that.

"You already told them about the car before you stopped it."

"Right."

"You said it was a black Crown Victoria."

“And gave them the license plate.”

“TTC-552.”

John smiled.

“Exactly.”

Tom looked through the windshield toward the Crown Victoria.

“Why do you need to tell dispatch and the other officers the numbers on the back of the car?”

John glanced at the vehicle.

“The license plate helps identify the vehicle.”

“Just by the numbers?”

“The plate is one way of identifying it. The color and make and model help too.”

Tom nodded slowly.

John continued.

“If something changes during a stop, other officers need to know which vehicle we’re talking about.”

Tom thought about that.

“So if the car drove away...”

“Then other officers would have a description to look for.”

“The black Crown Victoria.”

“And the plate.”

“TTC-552.”

“Right.”

Tom looked at the radio.

“So everyone knows which car it is.”

“That’s a good way to think about it.”

Tom nodded.

He had seen license plates on cars hundreds of times.

Until now, they had just been numbers and letters attached to the back of a vehicle.

He hadn't really thought about what they were used for beyond identifying a car.

Now he understood that the information could be passed along so everyone involved had the same description.

John looked toward the Crown Victoria again.

The driver had been given a warning and was preparing to leave.

John watched until the vehicle safely pulled back onto the road.

Then he waited a moment before returning Unit 890 to patrol.

Tom looked ahead.

"That was pretty quick."

"Most routine stops are."

Tom nodded.

A few seconds passed.

Then he glanced toward the center console.

John had already begun entering information into the MDT.

Tom watched the screen.

"Is that where you put the information from the stop?"

"Some of it."

Tom looked at the screen again.

"So the radio tells dispatch what you're doing, and the computer keeps track of the rest?"

John smiled.

"That's part of it."

Tom nodded.

The traffic stop had seemed simple.

But there had been more to it than he had realized.

The radio.

The vehicle description.

The license plate.

The MDT.

All of it connected.

John finished what he needed to enter and returned his attention to the road.

Unit 890 continued down the street.

Tom looked out the window.

He was beginning to realize that police work wasn't only about the moments people noticed.

Sometimes it was about everything happening quietly in between them.

And there was still plenty about that computer he wanted to understand.

Chapter 7 — The MDT

Tom had been watching the MDT for several minutes.

Eventually, curiosity won.

"What's that?"

John glanced toward the screen.

"The MDT."

"What does MDT stand for?"

"Mobile Data Terminal."

Tom nodded.

"What do you use it for?"

John explained that the system allowed officers to access and enter information relevant to their work.

Tom watched the screen.

"So it's like a police computer?"

"That's a simple way to describe it."

Tom nodded.

"What kind of stuff?"

"Information we need while working."

Tom thought for a moment.

"Like the vehicle from earlier?"

"Some information related to that, yes."

Tom looked at the screen again.

"Does every police car have one?"

"Many patrol units use systems like this."

Tom nodded.

He noticed how John moved between the MDT and the radio.

Sometimes he communicated with dispatch.

Sometimes he checked something on the computer.

Sometimes he simply drove.

It was beginning to make more sense.

The patrol car wasn't just transportation.

It was part of John's workplace.

Chapter 8 — More Than a Car

The afternoon continued.

Tom had stopped expecting something dramatic to happen.

Instead, he began noticing smaller things.

John communicated with dispatch.

Other units communicated.

The MDT was used.

Information was entered.

Information was received.

Sometimes officers worked alone.

Sometimes they needed another unit.

The different parts of the system seemed to connect.

Tom looked over.

"So dispatch is like the middle of everything?"

John considered the wording.

"In some ways."

"They talk to officers."

"Yes."

"And officers tell dispatch things."

"Yes."

"And dispatch keeps track of what's happening."

"That's part of their job."

Tom nodded.

He looked at Unit 890's interior.

The radio.

The MDT.

The equipment.

The vehicle itself.

He had seen all of these things separately before.

Today, he was finally seeing how they fit together.

John glanced over.

"Starting to make sense?"

"A little."

"That's good."

Tom smiled.

"I have more questions."

"I figured."

Chapter 9 — Back at Headquarters

Later in the day, John returned to BCPD Headquarters.

Tom climbed out of Unit 890 and followed his father inside.

The building was busy.

Officers moved through the halls.

People worked at desks.

Phones rang.

Conversations happened in offices.

Tom looked around.

He had seen police headquarters before from the outside.

Being inside was different.

There were uniforms everywhere.

Different patches.

Different insignia.

Different equipment.

John led Tom through the building.

"Stay close."

"I am."

They reached the area where the briefing was going to take place.

John checked the time.

"We've got a briefing."

Tom nodded.

"Can I come?"

"You can observe."

Tom smiled.

"I'll be quiet."

John raised an eyebrow.

"That's what I'm counting on."

Tom laughed.

They entered.

Tom moved toward the back.

He didn't sit with the officers.

He didn't interrupt.

He simply watched.

Chapter 10 — The Briefing

The briefing began.

Tom immediately noticed how different it was from a classroom.

Nobody was there to teach him.

Nobody was asking him questions.

The officers were there to receive information about their work.

They listened.

Some took notes.

Others asked questions when appropriate.

John remained focused on the briefing.

Tom stayed quiet.

He looked around.

Then he noticed something.

Uniform insignia.

He had seen John's Corporal stripes many times.

But there were other insignia too.

Tom couldn't remember seeing all of them before.

He quietly watched.

The briefing continued.

Tom didn't interrupt.

He waited.

Eventually, it ended.

Officers began leaving.

Once they were outside the briefing area, Tom looked at John.

"I have a question."

John smiled.

"Of course you do."

Tom looked toward the uniforms.

"I saw different stripes."

"Different ranks have different insignia."

Tom looked back at John's sleeve.

"So one stripe is Officer First Class?"

"Right."

"Two stripes is Corporal?"

"Yep."

"Three stripes is Sergeant?"

"That's right."

Tom paused.

He looked toward a Lieutenant.

"Four stripes for Lieutenant?"

John smiled.

"There isn't four stripes."

"Why not?"

"Because after Sergeant, the insignia changes. Lieutenant uses bars."

Tom looked toward the Lieutenant again.

"So it's three stripes, then bars?"

"Exactly."

Tom nodded slowly.

"That makes more sense."

John smiled.

"Good."

Tom looked around again.

He noticed other senior personnel moving through the headquarters.

"Do the stars mean something too?"

"They do."

John explained that senior command used star insignia, with the number of stars corresponding to different command levels.

Tom listened.

"One star is Assistant Chief?"

"Correct."

"Two is Deputy Chief?"

"Yep."

"Three is Chief?"

"Right."

Tom paused.

"And four?"

John looked at him.

"Director of Police."

Tom nodded.

He looked around the headquarters again.

There were a lot of different people doing different jobs.

A lot of different ranks.

A lot of different responsibilities.

Tom didn't need to memorize all of them.

For now, it was enough to know that they existed.

Chapter 11 — The Uniform

After leaving the briefing area, Tom continued walking beside John.

He looked at John's uniform again.

"You have a lot of stuff."

John looked down.

"Yes."

"Do you actually use all of it?"

"Not every piece on every shift."

Tom nodded.

"So why carry it?"

"Because different situations require different equipment."

Tom looked at the equipment again.

That made sense.

He thought about his mother.

Firefighters carried different equipment too.

Some things were used constantly.

Some were there because they might be needed.

Tom pointed toward a piece of John's equipment.

"What about that?"

John explained its general purpose.

Tom nodded.

Then another question came.

"And that?"

John answered.

Tom thought for a second.

"And that?"

John laughed.

"You're going to ask about everything, aren't you?"

Tom smiled.

"Maybe."

John shook his head.

"That's alright."

Tom looked at his father's uniform one more time.

At home, it was simply something John put on before work.

Here, Tom was beginning to understand that every part of it had a reason.

Not every part was equally important every day.

But everything had a purpose.

Chapter 12 — Another Call

John eventually received another assignment.

Tom followed him back toward Unit 890.

They left headquarters and returned to patrol.

The call itself was ordinary.

John handled it professionally.

Tom remained in the vehicle when instructed and watched from the passenger seat.

There was no chase.

No emergency.

No dramatic confrontation.

Just another situation that needed an officer.

When John returned, Tom looked at him.

"Does it always feel different when you're working?"

John thought about that.

"What do you mean?"

"Like... at home you're Dad."

John smiled.

"And at work?"

"You're Corporal Smith."

John nodded.

"That's pretty much it."

Tom looked ahead.

"Do people call you Corporal?"

"Usually."

"Do they call you John?"

"Sometimes."

Tom smiled.

"Mom does."

John laughed.

"Yes, she does."

They continued driving.

Tom looked out the window.

He was beginning to understand that his father didn't become a completely different person at work.

He was still John.

He simply had another responsibility.

Chapter 13 — The Questions Keep Coming

The ride back toward headquarters was quiet.

Then Tom spoke.

"Can I ask another question?"

John laughed.

"You've been asking questions all day."

"I know."

"Go ahead."

"How do you remember all the unit numbers?"

John smiled.

"You get used to them."

"Do you have to memorize everyone?"

"Not everyone."

Tom nodded.

"What about dispatch?"

"What about them?"

"Do they have to remember everybody too?"

"They have systems that help."

Tom thought.

"So there's a lot of people behind everything."

"There are."

Tom looked toward the radio.

"Police work is bigger than just police officers."

John nodded.

"Absolutely."

Tom looked out the window.

Dispatchers.

Patrol officers.

Supervisors.

Command staff.

People working at headquarters.

Records.

Equipment.

Vehicles.

Information.

It was much larger than he had imagined.

John looked over.

"Starting to see why I told you this wasn't just driving around?"

Tom smiled.

"Yeah."

Chapter 14 — Heading Home

Eventually, the ride-along began to wind down.

John returned Unit 890 toward the Smith house.

Tom was quieter now.

Not because he was bored.

Because he was thinking.

The day hadn't been dramatic.

There hadn't been a major emergency.

Tom hadn't seen anything from television.

Instead, he had seen something much more ordinary.

His father getting ready for work.

His father checking in with dispatch.

His father driving.

A routine traffic stop.

The MDT.

The radio.

Headquarters.

The briefing.

Different ranks.

Different responsibilities.

Then another ordinary call.

It wasn't one giant event.

It was dozens of small things connected together.

Tom looked toward John.

"Thanks for letting me come."

John smiled.

"You're welcome."

Tom thought for a moment.

"I learned a lot."

"Good."

"And I still have questions."

John laughed.

"I figured you would."

Tom smiled.

The rest of the drive was quiet.

Outside the window, Blackridge continued moving around them.

People drove home.

Stores closed.

Families went about their evenings.

The city didn't stop simply because John Smith's shift was ending.

It kept going.

Chapter 15 — One Day

When they got home, Samantha was waiting.

She looked toward Tom.

"Well?"

Tom climbed out of Unit 890.

"It was interesting."

John laughed.

"That's all you're giving her?"

Tom thought.

"I asked a lot of questions."

Samantha smiled.

"I figured you would."

Tom walked inside.

Samantha looked toward John.

"How did he do?"

"Good."

Tom immediately spoke up.

"I stayed quiet during the briefing."

John nodded.

"You did."

Samantha smiled.

"Good."

Tom sat down.

He began telling her about the day.

The radio.

The MDT.

The traffic stop.

Dispatch.

The briefing.

The different ranks.

The stripes.

The bars.

The stars.

He explained the four-stripe question too.

Samantha laughed.

"You really asked if Lieutenant had four stripes?"

"I didn't know!"

John smiled.

"Now he knows."

Tom nodded.

He thought about everything again.

"I thought police work was mostly... I don't know. Police stuff."

John raised an eyebrow.

"Police stuff?"

Tom shrugged.

"You know what I mean."

Samantha laughed.

"I think we do."

Tom smiled.

He looked at his father.

Today hadn't shown him some extraordinary side of police work.

It had shown him the ordinary side.

And somehow, that was what made it interesting.

John wasn't just someone Tom saw leaving the house in a uniform.

He wasn't just the voice of his father's job when Tom heard a radio transmission from somewhere nearby.

Today, Tom had sat beside him.

He had watched the work.

He had listened.

He had asked questions.

And little by little, the pieces were starting to fit together.

Tom didn't know what he would do when he grew up.

He didn't need to know.

For now, he was simply eleven years old.

And on one Saturday, he had gotten to see the world his father disappeared into every workday.

Not from the outside.

Not through a story.

Not through a radio.

From the passenger seat of Unit 890.

THE END

Era 2 — The Questions Begin

Story 5 — Inside the Watch

Chapter 1 — Twelve

Tom woke up before his alarm.

For a few seconds, he lay still and stared at the ceiling.

Something felt different.

Then he remembered.

His birthday.

Tom rolled over and looked at the clock.

He was twelve.

He smiled.

For the first time, saying the number in his head felt strange.

Twelve.

It wasn't eleven anymore.

He sat up, pushed the blankets aside, and looked around his room.

Nothing had changed overnight.

His room was still his room.

His toys were still where he had left them.

His clothes were still scattered where he had forgotten to put them away.

Everything looked exactly the same.

Tom looked at his hands.

Still the same.

He looked at himself in the mirror.

Still the same.

He smiled at his reflection.

"I'm twelve."

From somewhere downstairs, he heard movement.

Tom got out of bed and headed for the door.

He had barely reached the hallway when he heard his mother's voice.

"Good morning, birthday boy."

Tom smiled.

"Morning, Mom."

Samantha looked up from the kitchen.

"Happy birthday."

"Thanks."

John was sitting at the table with a cup of coffee.

He looked over at Tom.

"Well, look at that."

Tom stopped.

"What?"

John smiled.

"Twelve."

Tom nodded.

"Twelve."

John raised his coffee.

"Happy birthday, kid."

Tom walked into the kitchen.

"Thanks, Dad."

Samantha set a plate on the table.

“Breakfast first.”

Tom looked at the plate.

Then at his parents.

Then back at the plate.

“Is this birthday breakfast?”

“No,” Samantha said.

Tom's expression dropped slightly.

“It's breakfast.”

She smiled.

“Birthday breakfast happens to be breakfast.”

Tom laughed.

John shook his head.

“You're twelve for five minutes and already trying to get special treatment.”

“I've been twelve for at least ten minutes.”

“That's not how birthdays work.”

Tom sat down.

“So when do I get special treatment?”

Samantha smiled.

“After you eat.”

Tom picked up his fork.

“Deal.”

The morning began simply.

There were no sirens outside.

No emergency calls.

No reason for anyone to rush anywhere.

For once, John wasn't getting ready for patrol and Samantha wasn't preparing for a shift.

They were simply sitting around the kitchen table with their son.

And Tom liked that.

He had spent plenty of time watching his parents work.

He had ridden with John.

He had watched Samantha and the fire crews respond to calls.

He had asked questions about radios, equipment, uniforms, vehicles, dispatch, and everything else that caught his attention.

But today wasn't about any of that.

Today was about being twelve.

And being with his family.

Chapter 2 — The Birthday Table

Breakfast lasted longer than usual.

Tom didn't mind.

Normally, there was somewhere to be.

School.

Work.

A shift.

Something.

Today, there wasn't.

Tom finished eating and leaned back in his chair.

"So what's happening today?"

John looked at Samantha.

Samantha looked at John.

Tom narrowed his eyes.

"You two are doing that thing."

"What thing?" John asked.

"The looking at each other thing."

"We're allowed to look at each other," Samantha said.

"I know."

Tom pointed between them.

"But you're definitely planning something."

John smiled.

"Maybe."

Tom sat up.

"What?"

"Maybe nothing."

"Dad."

John laughed.

"Relax."

Tom crossed his arms.

"I am relaxed."

"You don't look relaxed."

"I'm twelve."

"That doesn't mean anything."

"It means I'm more mature."

Samantha laughed.

John nodded seriously.

“Of course.”

Tom immediately noticed the sarcasm.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You're doing it again.”

“Doing what?”

“That.”

John took another drink of coffee.

Tom looked at Samantha.

“Mom?”

She smiled innocently.

“I have no idea what you're talking about.”

Tom sighed.

“Great.”

John stood up.

“Come on.”

“Where?”

“You'll see.”

Tom immediately stood.

“I knew something was happening.”

“You didn't know anything.”

“I knew enough.”

John shook his head.

“You’re definitely twelve.”

Tom followed him out of the kitchen.

For the next few minutes, Tom tried to figure out what his parents had planned.

He wasn’t very successful.

But he was having fun trying.

Chapter 3 — Presents

The living room had been decorated more than Tom expected.

Nothing enormous.

Just enough to make the room feel different.

A few birthday decorations.

A banner.

Some balloons.

And a small collection of wrapped presents sitting together.

Tom stopped in the doorway.

“Oh.”

Samantha smiled.

“Happy birthday.”

Tom looked at the presents.

“All those are mine?”

“They’re for the birthday boy,” John said.

Tom walked closer.

“Can I open them?”

John looked at Samantha.

Samantha nodded.

“Go ahead.”

Tom didn't need to be told twice.

The first present contained a new police vehicle for his collection.

Tom immediately smiled.

“Nice.”

The second was a fire engine.

Then came an ambulance.

Then another police vehicle.

Tom looked at the growing collection.

“You guys got me all of these?”

“We knew you'd like them,” Samantha said.

Tom looked over the vehicles.

They weren't replacing his older toys.

They were joining them.

Tom had been collecting emergency-service toys for years.

Police cars.

Fire engines.

Ambulances.

Figures.

Helicopters.

His collection had changed as he got older, but the interest had never really disappeared.

He picked up the police car and looked at it.

"This one's going right next to the other one."

John smiled.

"You still have that?"

"Of course."

"You've had that thing forever."

Tom looked offended.

"It's not a thing."

"Sorry."

"It's an important vehicle."

John nodded.

"Of course it is."

Tom placed the new police car beside the older one.

Then he looked at the remaining present.

There was one box left.

It was smaller than the others.

Tom picked it up.

"This one?"

John nodded.

"That's yours."

Tom carefully opened it.

Inside was a small box.

He looked at John.

"What is it?"

“Open it.”

Tom lifted the lid.

Then he stopped.

For a moment, he didn't say anything.

Inside was an old badge.

It was unmistakably a BCPD badge, but it didn't look like the newer badges Tom had seen.

The design was older.

The metal had lost some of its original shine.

There were several small scratches across the surface, and a little dust remained around the edges despite the care that had clearly been taken with it.

Tom picked it up carefully.

He looked at the front.

Then at John.

“Is this yours?”

John smiled.

“It was.”

Tom looked back at the badge.

“What kind of badge is it?”

“My Cadet badge.”

Tom's eyes widened slightly.

“You were a Cadet?”

“Before I became a police officer.”

Tom turned the badge over in his hand.

“You actually used this?”

John nodded.

“A long time ago.”

Tom looked at the scratches.

“What happened to it?”

John shrugged.

“Years of being around police work.”

Tom looked at him.

“Did people try to take it?”

“Sometimes.”

Tom looked back at the badge.

John continued.

“Badges get grabbed sometimes. Uniforms get pulled. Things happen.”

Tom carefully ran his thumb near one of the scratches.

“So these could be from that?”

“Could be.”

Tom smiled.

“That's actually really cool.”

John laughed.

“I thought you might think so.”

Tom held the badge up.

“Can I keep it?”

John nodded.

“It's yours.”

Tom looked at the badge again.

He was suddenly much more careful with it.

“Really?”

“Really.”

Tom smiled.

“Thanks, Dad.”

John smiled back.

“Happy birthday.”

Chapter 4 — The Rule

Tom spent the next several minutes examining the badge.

He looked at the front.

The back.

The old design.

The scratches.

Everything.

Finally, he looked at John.

“Can I wear it?”

John paused.

“You can wear it around the house.”

Tom smiled.

“Okay.”

“But there's one rule.”

Tom waited.

“The badge stays at home.”

Tom nodded.

“Okay.”

“You don't take it to school.”

“Okay.”

“You don't carry it around outside.”

“Got it.”

“And you don't pretend it's an active police credential.”

Tom nodded again.

“I understand.”

John smiled.

“Good.”

Tom looked down at the badge.

“So I can play with it.”

“You can play with it.”

Tom immediately attached the badge to his shirt.

He stood up straight.

His expression became serious.

John looked at him.

“What are you doing?”

Tom folded his arms.

“Police business.”

Samantha started laughing.

John shook his head.

“Oh, boy.”

Tom walked toward the hallway.

"I have important work to do."

"You've been a police officer for about thirty seconds."

"Thirty-five."

John looked at Samantha.

"I've created a monster."

Samantha smiled.

"You gave him the badge."

John nodded.

"That may have been my first mistake."

Tom turned around.

"Dad."

"Yes?"

"You're under arrest."

John stared at him.

"For what?"

Tom thought carefully.

He looked around the room.

Then back at John.

"Failure to provide cookies."

Samantha laughed.

John raised an eyebrow.

"That's not a crime."

Tom pointed at him.

"It is now."

John looked at Samantha.

"Is this how law enforcement works?"

Samantha shook her head.

"No idea."

Tom stepped closer.

"Come with me."

John laughed.

"Where?"

"The living room."

"I'm already in the living room."

Tom paused.

He hadn't thought that far ahead.

John smiled.

"What's the next step, Officer?"

Tom looked at the badge.

Then at his father.

"I don't know."

John laughed.

"Then maybe you should study before you start making arrests."

Tom thought about that.

"Can I have the cookies first?"

John nodded.

"Now you're negotiating."

Tom smiled.

“I learned from you.”

Samantha laughed again.

For several minutes, the living room became a very unofficial police station.

Tom arrested his father.

Then released him.

Then arrested him again for a completely different imaginary offense.

Samantha eventually became a suspect too.

Her crime was apparently “hiding birthday cake.”

She denied the charge.

Tom found her guilty anyway.

The badge never left the house.

Just as John had told him.

Chapter 5 — Twelve Years

Later that afternoon, the three of them sat together in the living room.

The new toys had already been added to Tom's collection.

The old Cadet badge was sitting safely nearby.

Tom picked it up again.

He turned it over in his hand.

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“How old were you when you got this?”

John thought for a moment.

"Pretty young."

"Younger than me?"

"Yes."

Tom looked at the badge.

"So this is really old."

John laughed.

"Thanks."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"I know."

Tom smiled.

John looked at his son.

"You know, I don't think I ever expected to be showing that badge to you one day."

Tom looked up.

"Why?"

"Because when I was your age, twelve seemed a long way away."

Tom laughed.

"I'm twelve now."

"I noticed."

Tom leaned back.

"Does it feel different?"

John considered the question.

"Not really."

Tom nodded.

"I thought maybe I'd feel older."

"You probably will eventually."

Tom looked toward the ceiling.

"Maybe tomorrow."

John smiled.

"Maybe."

Tom was quiet for a moment.

Then he looked at the badge again.

"Do you remember wanting to be a police officer when you were twelve?"

John thought about it.

"I remember thinking about a lot of things."

"Like what?"

"Different things."

"Did you know?"

"Know what?"

"What you wanted to be."

John shook his head.

"No."

Tom looked at him.

"Really?"

"Really."

John leaned back in his chair.

"You have plenty of time."

Tom nodded.

He had heard something similar from John before.

He didn't need to have everything figured out yet.

At twelve, there were still a lot of things he hadn't seen.

A lot of things he hadn't learned.

A lot of things he hadn't even thought about.

For now, he was happy being twelve.

Chapter 6 — Birthday Dinner

Dinner was simple.

The family stayed home.

There was no reason to go anywhere special.

Tom didn't mind.

He liked being home.

They talked about the day.

They talked about the presents.

They talked about the old badge.

And, eventually, Tom brought up his pretend arrests.

"I think I did pretty good."

John looked at him.

"You arrested both of us for crimes that don't exist."

Tom nodded.

"Exactly."

Samantha laughed.

"That's not exactly a compliment."

Tom smiled.

"I had a good day."

John looked across the table.

"So did I."

Tom smiled.

Samantha nodded.

"Me too."

For a moment, nobody said anything.

It was one of those quiet moments that didn't need to be filled.

Tom had spent years seeing his parents leave for work.

He had watched them respond to calls.

He had ridden with John.

He had seen Samantha work alongside firefighters.

But tonight, neither of them was working.

They were just sitting at dinner with their son.

Tom looked at both of them.

"Thanks."

John looked over.

"For what?"

"Everything."

Samantha smiled.

John nodded.

"Anytime."

Chapter 7 — The Cake

After dinner came the most important part of any birthday.

The cake.

Tom's cake sat in the center of the table with twelve candles waiting to be lit.

Tom looked at it.

"Twelve."

Samantha smiled.

"Twelve."

John lit the candles.

Tom watched the flames flicker.

The room became quieter.

"Make a wish," Samantha said.

Tom closed his eyes.

He thought for a moment.

He didn't wish for anything enormous.

He didn't wish to become famous.

He didn't wish for a career.

He didn't wish for some grand adventure.

He simply wished for a good year.

Then he opened his eyes and blew out the candles.

John and Samantha applauded.

Tom laughed.

Samantha cut the cake.

John handed Tom a plate.

Tom looked at the slice.

“This is a good birthday.”

John smiled.

“Glad you think so.”

Tom took a bite.

Then he pointed his fork at John.

“You’re still guilty.”

John sighed.

“Guilty of what?”

“Cookie-related crimes.”

Samantha laughed.

John shook his head.

“I should’ve known giving you that badge was dangerous.”

Chapter 8 — The Badge

Later that evening, Tom returned to his room.

The house had become quiet.

He changed into his pajamas and sat on the edge of his bed.

The old Cadet badge was still nearby.

He picked it up.

Under the light, he could see the scratches more clearly.

They weren't perfect.

Neither was the badge.

But Tom liked it that way.

It wasn't something that had been made yesterday.

It had belonged to his father.

John had worn it before Tom was even born.

Tom thought about that for a moment.

Then he placed the badge somewhere safe.

Not in his backpack.

Not in his pocket.

Not somewhere he might lose it.

At home.

Just like Dad had told him.

Tom looked around his room.

The new police car sat beside the old one.

The fire engine was parked nearby.

The ambulance was lined up beside them.

His collection was already becoming part of the room.

Tom smiled.

He was twelve.

He was still a kid.

And there was nothing wrong with that.

Chapter 9 — A New Year

Before going to bed, Tom walked downstairs one last time.

John and Samantha were sitting together.

Tom stopped in the doorway.

“Good night.”

Samantha looked over.

“Good night, birthday boy.”

Tom smiled.

“I’m twelve now.”

“We know.”

Tom looked at John.

“Thanks again for the badge.”

John smiled.

“You’re welcome.”

Tom hesitated.

“I’m going to take good care of it.”

“I know you will.”

Tom nodded.

“Good night, Dad.”

“Good night, Tom.”

Tom looked at Samantha.

“Good night, Mom.”

“Good night.”

He headed upstairs.

John watched him disappear down the hallway.

Samantha looked at him.

“Twelve.”

John smiled.

“Twelve.”

For a moment, they both sat quietly.

Their son was growing up.

Not all at once.

Not in some dramatic moment.

Just one birthday at a time.

Upstairs, Tom climbed into bed.

He looked toward the place where he had put the old badge.

Then he smiled.

Tomorrow would be another day.

Another year.

Another part of growing up.

But tonight, Tom was simply twelve.

And for now, that was enough.

THE END

Era 2 — The Questions Begin

Story 6 — Tom's 12th Birthday

