

A Gift of Love

Ice crackled in two plastic cups as David poured tea in them. He stole a glance at his mother's red-rimmed eyes. His chest tightened. *Oh Mom, I'm so sorry.*

"Mom?"

"I'm fine, sweetie." She patted his arm and gave a weak smile. "I love you."

"I know, but still."

Giving his shoulder a tight squeeze, his mother rose on her tip-toes and kissed his cheek.

If only he could change the past.

"Hey, David—"

He grabbed the cups and turned at the sound of his girlfriend's voice.

Vickie held a dark blue baby album.

"I didn't know your first name was John."

His eyes widened and jaw dropped. *No. Please no.* The cups slipped from his hands and crashed across the floor. Golden brown liquid splashed onto his pants legs and cabinets, and pooled on the black and white kitchen tile.

"W-where did you get that?" David choked.

"It was on the coffee table in the living room." She placed the album on the kitchen table.

"Don't move. I'll get some towels from the bathroom. It's a good thing those cups weren't glass."

His heart raced as his gaze connected with his mother's. *This couldn't be happening. No one in town knew. No one. Today was hard enough. Now this?*

"Honey." His mom's hand rested against his rapidly beating heart. "Relax. It'll be okay."

“How can you say that? I don’t want you to go through that pain again.”

Vickie hurried in and mopped up the tea mess. His mom bent down to help her, leaving him standing statue still.

His mom scooped up the towels. “I’ll put these in the wash. Be right back.”

Vickie sat down at the table and opened the album. “I didn’t know your first name is John.”

The step he took toward felt like wading through mud. Panic clawed up his throat. “What do you mean?”

“See. It says John David born August 16, 1996 to Helen and Ray Stewart. You were so cute.”

“You...I...Mom...” The world spun and darkened. David stumbled backward.

A hand grabbed his elbow. His mom’s hushed voice broke through the haze. “It’s okay, David.”

Vickie flipped the page and froze. “Wait. I thought your birthday was in September.”

He swallowed the lump in his throat. “It is.”

“Then this isn’t you?” She cocked her head to one side. “But, you don’t have a brother.”

“No. I don’t. I mean—”

Vicki’s brow furrowed. “I don’t understand.”

Helen cupped his cheek. “You need to stop hiding from the truth, honey.”

He gaped at her. “I don’t care about me. But you ... Dad ... John ...”

“Vickie’s a wonderful girl. You don’t need to protect us anymore. It’s time we celebrate the time we had. That’s why I had the album out.”

Tears stung David’s eyes. He nodded. “I love you, Mom.”

“I know, sweetie. But it’s time to let go of the past.” She patted his cheek. “I’ll give you two some privacy.” Helen gave Vickie’s shoulder a squeeze as she left the room.

They moved here after his father’s job offer three years ago. No one knew their family history. No one to remind them of what they’d lost. He blew out a long ragged breath. Plopping down in the seat next to Vickie, his fingers skimmed the edge of the baby album. *I’m sorry John. You should be here. Not me.*

“David?” Vickie brushed back his bangs that had fallen over his forehead.

He scrubbed his face and clasped her hands in his. “You see, five years ago, the day I turned sixteen, I sneaked out and borrowed my foster parents’ car.”

Vickie’s eyes narrowed and she shook her head. “Your foster parents?”

He tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “Let me finish.”

“Go ahead.”

David cleared his throat. “For the most part, I was a good kid. I had a few anger issues, but who wouldn’t when you’d been in the system for six years.”

“My dad died overseas on active duty when I was eight and my mom died two years later during an armed robbery.” He huffed. “Who can say that? Right?”

Vickie wiped away a stray tear trickling down her cheek.

*I hope you still love me when you find out the truth.* David rubbed his eyes with his index finger and thumb. “Anyway, with the *borrowed* car and my brand-new license, I headed to a local grocery store parking lot where all the teens hung out. When I pulled up, my buddies started hooting and hollering about my wheels. Of course, I was a cocky teenager strutting around.” He ran his hand through his hair. “That’s when my friend Danny gave me a shove and challenged me to a street race.”

David pushed back from the table and stood on shaky legs. He walked to the refrigerator and pulled out two water bottles. He placed one on the table in front of Vickie and sat down.

With trembling hands, he opened his and took a big swig. *You can do this.*

His gaze drifted back to the album. Moisture swam in his eyes.

Vickie's hand warmed his forearm. "Go on."

He blew out a quick breath. "I shoved Danny back, jumped in the car, and revved the engine. I didn't know that decision would change my life forever." He stared at the wooden plaque above the table. "Every good and perfect gift is from above" James 1:17. Mom's favorite verse. His mind reached back to that horrible day. He could hear the thunderous roar of engines and the smell of gas fumes. "The road, kids used for racing, stretched down the outskirts of town. Hardly anyone used that road. We thought we were safe." David closed his eyes. "We were coming up over a small hill, and I looked over at Danny in the car next to me. When I looked back, John ..." He tapped the baby album. "... had pulled onto the road from a side street. I tried to stop. I couldn't." David swallowed. "I hit his car sending it flipping through the air."

Tears streamed down Vickie's face. She still didn't know the worst part.

David slapped at the wetness on his own cheeks. His jaw clenched. "I woke up three days later in the hospital, Helen and Ray were sitting at my bedside. I had no idea who they were. My head was fuzzy due to a concussion." He put his hand across his chest. "I had damaged my lungs in the accident bad enough the doctors performed a lung transplant."

Vickie's hand covered his. "You were lucky they had a donor available."

He gaped at her. "Lucky? You don't get it. My stupidity killed their son. They gave me John's lung to save my life. He died because of me and then they sacrificed his body to save mine." David covered his face with his hands and wept.

Steps came toward him. He glanced up to find his mom kneeling beside him running her fingers over his hair. “And what were we supposed to do? Let you die, too?”

He sniffed. “You should have.”

“Son. I never want to hear you say that again,” she scolded.

Vickie’s hand went to Helen’s shoulder. “I don’t know what to say.”

She patted Vickie’s hand. “After we discovered he’d lost his parents and was in foster care, we knew his hurt ran deep. Oh, I’m not saying we weren’t angry, or the pain wasn’t excruciating. But we saw something in him. The sorrow, the regret, a lost boy with no parents of his own. We couldn’t leave him there, and we wouldn’t let him pay for a mistake the rest of his life.” Helen kissed his cheek.

“So—” David cleared his throat and stared into his mother’s eyes. His eyes blurred again. “They went before the judge and asked if he would allow them to adopt me instead of punishing me.”

“Of course, the judge couldn’t arrange that right then and there, but he did sentence David to community service and helped us get the ball rolling to make him part of our family.”

“Mom, I don’t know what I did to deserve your love and forgiveness.”

“Nothing. You’re easy to love, honey.”

He threw his arms around her and held her tight. “I’m so sorry.”

“Stop that. We’ve gone through this before. You’re our wonderful son.”

He released his mom and turned to see Vickie wiping her eyes with her sleeve. “Do you hate me, Vickie?”

“Oh David, how could I? You’re a wonderful man with a great family.” She tilted her head as her gaze fluttered back to the baby album. She opened it to the first page and pointed to the date. “Today’s John’s birthday.”

His mother’s fingers feathered across the picture. “Yes.”

Vickie shook her head. “And no one in town knows this?”

“No. But I think it’s time we quit hiding John’s life away and start being thankful for the sixteen years we had with him.”

David dipped his head to look into his mother’s eyes. “Are you sure, Mom?”

“Yes. And I think your father would approve.” Helen stood and tipped David’s chin upward. “We were blessed with two amazing sons. It’s time we acted like it.”

He blinked back more tears. “I love you, Mom.”

His mom kissed his forehead. “I love you too, Son.”

Ephesians 4:31-32 NIV “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

1 Corinthians 13:13 NIV “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”