

Deep Time

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One

The Diabolical Duo



Like clockwork, one of the twins started crying. Then the other began. Jack pulled the pillow over his head. It was no good; even a closed door, plush wool carpet and being upstairs were no match for their combined lung power.

Groaning, Jack threw back the covers, causing a mild meow of protest from Skittles, who was now half buried under a quilt. Jack stumbled to the wardrobe for his running clothes. Then, silently opening his bedroom door, he listened to check the coast was clear before creeping downstairs. At the bottom step, he trod on a toy truck with a loud crack. Jack froze before tiptoeing to the front door.

"Jack, is that you?" called a tired voice from another room.

Jack was tempted not to answer. The front door was within arm's reach. Jack could almost smell the dewy grass and see the morning sunlight combing fingers of mist through the neatly trimmed trees that lined the street. Freedom was only steps away.

"Jack!" This time, Mum's voice was sharp with frustration. "Could you please come and give me a hand with Daisy while I deal with Danny?"

Jack trudged towards the twins' room. Stuffed animals littered the floor. Daisy jumped on her bed as if it was a trampoline while Danny wailed and flailed his fists as Mum tried to change him.

Jack caught Daisy mid-bounce. "Come on, Daisy, how about we go find Skittles?"

Daisy beamed. One of her favourite activities was terrorising the poor cat with her clumsy, full-body toddler hugs. "Diddles hiding," she said.

"Yep," Jack replied, inhaling her apple-soap, little-kid smell. "Skittles is trying to survive."

Mum frowned as she gripped Danny tighter. "Yesterday, that cat tried to bite Daisy. If he's going to be aggressive, we'll have to find him another home."

Jack felt a sting of injustice. Skittles was *his* pet. He had been given the ginger kitten shortly after the twins were born. Maybe it was some sort of compensation for Mum and Ryan paying almost zero attention to Jack since bringing home the diabolical duo, as Ryan sometimes called them.

"It could be because Daisy's version of hugging is basically strangling," Jack muttered. But Mum wasn't listening. She never seemed to listen. Heat flooded Jack's face at being used, once again, as an unpaid babysitter.

He plonked Daisy back onto the bed, and she instantly scrunched up her cheeks. "I wanna play with Diddles!" she wailed.

Mum put her hands over her eyes and groaned. Her dark hair had already been tugged loose from the smooth bun she wore to work, and she looked even paler than usual. Her dressing gown slipped to show her work clothes beneath. She couldn't risk the many ways the twins could smear her clothes with their perpetually grubby paws, so she'd put her dressing gown back on after getting dressed. "Jack, pick her back up," she said.

"No."

"Do as you're told, please." It wasn't a request.

Jack ignored the warning tone. "No. I'm not your babysitter. And why isn't Ryan helping here, anyway?"

"He's looking for jobs on his phone, Jack."

Jack rolled his eyes. "That's what he says. Why can't he do it after you've gone to work?"

Mum sighed. "He's struggling at the moment, that's why. The company collapse has been a terrible time for him; it's a big blow."

Once again, his mother seemed to consider everyone but Jack. "And you're not struggling?" Jack demanded. "Or me? Why can't I even just go for a run without having a kid dumped on me? You know what? I would way prefer to keep Skittles and give the twins away. At least Skittles doesn't trash the house and scream all day long. Everything got worse when they came along."

Mum's dark eyes flashed darker. "Take that back, Jack. You know you don't mean it."

"Yes, I do. They have made being at home horrible." Jack headed for the front door.

"Don't you dare walk out, young man!"

Jack rounded on her, too angry to control what came out. "I'm sick of you treating me like a servant!"

His mother recoiled and, for once, even the twins fell silent, both gazing at him with wide eyes.

"I didn't choose for you to have the twins!" Jack shouted. "I didn't get to choose *anything*. I didn't ask for you to leave my dad. I didn't even get a say when you and Ryan got married."

Jack shuffled his feet, unable to meet Mum's eyes. They both knew that Ryan had always been good to him.

"If you think it's so terrible here, maybe you should go and live with your father," Mum snapped.

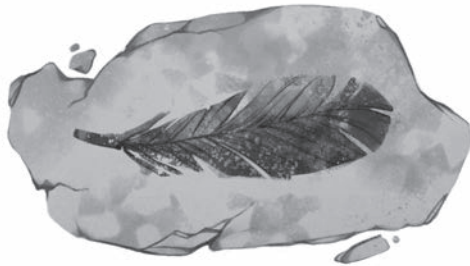
"I wish I *could* just go and live with my real dad!"

Mum's eyes narrowed. "If that's what you want, then fine. See how much better you like it. I'll call him today."

"Good." Ignoring the sudden howls issuing in stereo from the twins, Jack slammed the front door and stormed out into the street.

Two

I Think You're Right



Jack knew he was going to be in trouble when Mum got back from work. He had spent his day at school fuming over their fight. She'd probably had a tough day, too, but he didn't want to think about that. Instead, Jack brooded over the unfairness of her suggestion of getting rid of *his* cat. And the way she made excuses for Ryan all the time, and how she expected Jack to do everything for the twins.

Not once in Jack's life had Mum ever said that he should go to live, or even stay, with his father, even when she was angry with him.

Trudging through the front door, Jack could hear the twins clamouring in the kitchen. Ryan must finally be out of bed and feeding them afternoon tea.

The kitchen looked like a toddler bomb had hit it. The twins had opened all the bottom drawers and pulled out what looked like every single pot and pan. A sticky yellowish trail snaked along the floor, and floury fingerprints dusted the chairs and table legs. Ever since Mum and Ryan had stopped being able to afford childcare, there had been constant chaos in the same house that used to feel welcoming.

Ryan flashed Jack a quick grin of relief as he peeled Danny off his leg. "Reinforcement has arrived! Hi buddy, could you grab a cloth for me, please? I'm hoping that yellow stuff is honey and not something worse."

"Buddy" was what Ryan had called Jack from the time he had moved in, when Jack wasn't much older than the twins were now. A lot of the stuff they had done together – going to play catch in the park, riding the scariest rollercoasters (while Mum waved, green-faced, from below), stand-up paddleboarding on holidays – now felt like distant memories. Jack's only value now was his ability to hold a toddler or pass something to clean up the twins' mess, or worse – clean it up himself.

Jack grabbed a dishcloth and resentfully scrubbed at the sticky stuff.