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## **The First Steps**

Sundace Auburns sits, fidgeting, at the back of her school auditorium. It is her own rotten luck that she isn't in front, with her friends – the tides of students in the high school hallways were simply unbreakable. In fact, the only other person sitting at the back with her was Daniel, a classmate she barely knows. They had acknowledged each other with embarrassed glances, then made a point not to turn their heads towards the other.

The mike screeches as the principal, Mrs. Ebony, leans over the podium. There is the usual restless shifting and muttering, then quiet.

"Thank you." Mrs. Ebony glances towards the giant projector set over the stage, indicating that she was about to say something important. "I just wanted to bring a matter of significance to your attention. As you know, there was a bombing just last week in Iraq."

Everyone is silent now. Those who hadn't seen the articles at the front of the newspaper probably glimpsed a flash of the seven soldiers on the evening news. The same faces, in fact, that were being projected onto the screen.

"Seven soldiers were killed in the attempt to bring others to safety," Mrs. Ebony continues, after the announcement had sunk in. Sundace takes in her words about the amount of bravery and sacrifice displayed, while scanning the men shown. Most of them are young – one couldn't have been more than nineteen, with a face of blazing determination and fired-up green eyes. She turns away, feeling a sudden sickness at the thought of all these lives being torn away so suddenly.

It is only because of this that she sees the door to the auditorium swing open and shut. Sundace glances around, makes up her mind and follows.

Daniel sits on the front steps of the school, shoulders shaking. He turns around, startled, eyes spilling over with tears. Sundace sits down beside him, not asking anything, but he answers her unspoken curiosity anyway.

"He was my brother," Daniel chokes out. Sundace crinkles her eyebrows, ready to ask *who?*, but she focuses on Daniel's red-rimmed eyes and suddenly understands. They were the same color green as that soldier's, the youngest one dead...

Sundace tentatively takes Daniel's hand and says nothing. No matter how hard she thinks, she can't conjure up words to ease the grief. But maybe, just maybe, there's something else she can do...

Sundace comes home that day, slinging her backpack onto the kitchen counter, and, without so much a greeting, asks her mother, "We've got plenty of old junk, right?"

Mrs. Auburns turns away from the stove, hand on her hip. "Sundace Jennifer Auburns, don't you take that tone of voice with me! I'll have you know, most of that – *old junk*, as you put it – would sell for quite the penny." She then shakes her head and deflates Sundace's spirits by adding, "Not that your father and I would ever allow such a thing. Why, most of those things have such memories..."

"Are you sure?" Sundace looks at her mother pleadingly. "I've found the perfect cause. Mom, you must have heard of the seven soldiers that were killed – "

"Yes, I have, and God bless their sould," Mrs. Auburns mutters absentmindedly, intent on her cooking again. Sundace nearly stamps her foot in impatience. "You don't understand! One of those soldiers was my classmate's brother!"

"Oh, Good Lord!" Mrs. Auburns gasps, paying more attention now. "The poor family! Still, I don't think..."

"It sounds like a good idea to me."

Sundace whirls around. Her older sister, Candice, has come into the kitchen without them realizing. Sauntering over to the counter, Candice leans over and presses, "Didn't you always say that it would be worthy to give up anything for a good cause? Well, just think – if we raise enough money, we'll definitely be able to send it to the army – and possibly prevent several deaths." She glances over at Sundace and winks, completely understanding what she had wanted to do.

Mrs. Auburns stands, considering, and then a small smile creases her mouth and she starts bustling about the kitchen in her organizational mode, wiping her hands and flipping through the phone book. "Alright. Why not. It'll help ease the grief, that's for sure. I know Ms. Calburns down the road has some jewelry she'll never again wear, and maybe the grocer's wife..."

Sundace tunes her out gradually. *It'll help ease the grief.* She certainly hopes so.

Daniel's reaction is the one that Sundace can't wait to see. The school cafeteria has been transformed splendidly – all the tables moved into careful rows, floors shining, ornaments of scarlet and gold curling from the overhead lights. It's tightly packed, as well – Sundace has to shove past the hordes of people hovering over the laid-out items to get to the front door, where Daniel is standing in a daze.

It is not only the student who have come – it seems everyone has brought their friends and relatives. Even the teachers are extracting their wallets.

Sundace opens her mouth to greet Daniel, but the flash of tears in his eyes stops her. "It this all for Will?" he asks. Sundace nods slowly, hoping that she understands his meaning. "All proceeds will be going to the army," she says quickly.

Daniel remains silent. In her anxiety, Sundace notices the older couple behind him for the first time. They must be Daniel's parents – *Daniel's and Will's*, she corrects herself.

Will would have been so proud," the mother murmurs, dabbing lightly at her eyes. The father sets his jaw. He looks as if he is stopping himself from crying, too.

Sundace turns to Daniel and holds her breath, waiting for his response. His face is guarded, those green eyes bleak. "You do know," he says quietly, "That this won't change everything?" His gaze flickers to meet Sundace's, as if in fear that she would be hurt.

Sundace only nods in reply, and, boldly, places on hand on his arm. He doesn't shake it off. "I know," she answers. "But I figured...this will be the first step."

Slowly, finally, Daniel smiles.