

MIGHTIER THAN A LION

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Unexpected Birthday Gift

By Kimberly Rae

Birthdays should be fun. Presents. Cake. Kevin hadn't expected his dad to show up.

"Hey, buddy!" Dad always talked as if they were best friends, even though he'd left when Kevin was a baby, and hadn't been around much since.

"What are you doing here?" Kevin asked.

"Can't a guy visit his son on his birthday?"

"You didn't last year, or the year before that."

"Well, I've been busy. But I'm here now with two hundred and fifty dollars." Dad pulled a stack of money out of his wallet and handed it to Kevin. "Enough for that band camp your mom says you've been wanting to go to."

"For real?" Kevin really, really wanted to go to camp, but he and Mom never had enough money for extra things.

"That was nice of you, Jack," his mother said, coming up from behind. "Where'd you get it?"

His dad backed away. He always left once anyone started asking questions. "Just be happy for the kid, OK?"

Then he was gone.

The day passed in a blur, and at supper Kevin finally admitted his

biggest fear to his mom. "I'm scared I'll end up like him."

"You're not anything like your father," she reassured.

But Kevin knew she was wrong. She had told him about the day she and Dad had both heard about Jesus. She had accepted Jesus, but Dad had not. He hated one of his coworkers. He wouldn't accept God's forgiveness for his many sins, because he couldn't forgive one little sin someone else had done to him.

Kevin knew deep down that he was the same. He wanted to hate his dad, and that dark feeling had kept his heart in a tight knot for

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a long, long time. If he couldn't forgive, wasn't he just like Jack Walker? Would he continue to make his dad's wrong choices?

During the next week, Kevin got more excited about going to band camp. Saturday night, as he headed out to practice with his friends, a picture on the news stopped him in his tracks.

"This man mugged a seventy-eight-year-old woman," the newscaster said. "She was returning to her car after visiting her husband's grave."

"Oh, no." Kevin walked toward the TV. It couldn't be.

"Jack Walker stole seven hundred dollars, as well as the woman's purse. He was arrested, and the purse recovered, but the money was gone. If you know anything . . ."

Kevin found his mom's cell phone on the kitchen counter and called the number on the TV screen. "I need to contact that woman," he said to the operator. Once he told them who he was, the newspeople connected him to Sally Matthews, the woman who had been mugged. She was wary, but agreed to meet Kevin in his church parking lot the next morning.

As they parked near the cross at the front of the church building, Kevin told his mom, "She needs an apology. If not from me, then who?" He felt the bitterness rise up. How could his dad do something so terrible?

He walked toward the elderly woman, who stood by a group of camera operators. The news was going to record this? Kevin swallowed his

nervousness and took the woman's hand. "I'm sorry for what my dad did to you," he said. "It was wrong."

He reached for his wallet. "He gave me two hundred and fifty dollars to go to band camp." Kevin held the money out. "I want you to have it back."

The cameras recorded the scene as Mrs. Matthews took the money and said, "I accept this money."

He nodded and tried to feel happy.

"Since this money is mine," the woman continued, "I can do whatever I want with it." She put it back into Kevin's hands. "I want you to use it to go to band camp."

He stood there, stunned. He heard his mother sniff behind him. One of the cameramen wiped his eyes and almost dropped his camera. She pulled him into a hug. "Thank you," she whispered. "You have given me hope in humankind again with your goodness."

"Not mine," he said. "It was Jesus." He stepped back and suddenly forgot all the people in the crowd. The money was not the only right thing that needed to be done.

God, he prayed silently, I'm sorry for not forgiving my father. You have forgiven me, and I choose to forgive him, not just for the sin of leaving us a long time ago but for all the sins since—and all the ones he will probably keep doing in the future. In Jesus' name, amen.

It was a short prayer, but even before he opened his eyes, Kevin felt that hard knot in his heart untie, as if he'd been in jail himself and just got set free.

Mrs. Matthews smiled at him. "Jesus," she said. "That's not Someone I hear about much from young people these days."

Kevin grinned. For the first time in a long time, he didn't feel the shadow of his dad hanging over him. He looked down and realized he was standing in the shadow of the cross. He gestured toward the building behind them. "Church will be starting in a few minutes. Do you want to come with us? You could sit by me."

She put her arm through his. "I'd love that. Let's go."