

In Charge Until Four O'Clock

One afternoon babysitting a little brother,
the milk that spilled, and what
responsibility actually feels like

For ages 12-15



Chapter 1

The Offer

"You'll be in charge from one to four on Sunday," Mama said. "Just Avi. The neighbors are home if you need anything, and Mrs. Adler next door has my number."

Shani was thirteen and a half. She had been campaigning for this for six months.

"I know the rules," she said. "No cooking on the stove. Door stays locked. If anything feels wrong, call Mrs. Adler first, then you."

"And?"

"And he's five, so he thinks the rules are for other people."

Mama smiled. "You've met your brother."





Chapter 2

The First Hour

The first hour was glorious, in the way that being the captain of a very small ship is glorious.

They built a fort. Shani directed construction with great authority. Avi contributed mostly cushions and noise.

She gave him his snack at the right time, apple slices and milk, the way Mama did it, in the blue cup with the lid.

Being trusted felt like standing an inch taller.

"I'm in charge," she told Avi, for the pleasure of the sentence.

"You're not the boss of the whole world," Avi said, which was his standard position on the matter.





Chapter 3

The Spill

At two-fifteen, Shani did the thing she'd been warned about without ever being warned: she relaxed.

She took her book to the couch. Avi was playing quietly with his trucks. The fort was stable. The ship was sailing itself.

At two-twenty there was a crash and then Avi's cry - the hurt one, not the angry one, and Shani knew the difference the way every older sister does.

He'd climbed the fort to make the truck fly, the fort had objected, and he'd come down with the cushion pile and the blue cup, and the milk was everywhere and his elbow was bleeding.

Not badly. She could see it was not badly. But it was bleeding, and he was crying, and she was In Charge.





Chapter 4

What Her Hands Did

Here is what Shani noticed, afterward, when she replayed it: her brain had frozen solid, but her hands had kept going.

Her hands got Avi to the kitchen chair. Her hands wet a cloth. Her hands held his arm gently and her voice said, in a copy of Mama's voice she didn't know she owned, "Let me see, tzaddik. It's okay. I'm looking at it."

Small scrape. Already slowing. She washed it, pressed the cloth, got the bandage from the drawer where bandages lived, and put it on slightly crooked.

"The plane crashed," Avi informed her, sniffing.

"The plane had a very brave pilot."

By two-thirty-five, he was rebuilding the fort with the bandage displayed like a medal.





Chapter 5

The Report Question

Now came the hard part, which was not the bleeding. It was the milk.

The milk was all over the rug. And the rug was the good rug. And the spill had happened while she was reading on the couch, which was - if you told it in an unfriendly way - being In Charge While Reading.

Shani cleaned the rug carefully, the way she'd watched Mama do it, blotting instead of rubbing. It came out fine. Almost fine. Fine unless you knew where to look.

She knew where to look.

She could tell Mama: Avi fell, I handled it, bandage, everything's great. All true. The milk could stay in the version nobody asked about.





The rug would eventually tell on her anyway. Rugs do that.

Chapter 6

The Full Version

When Mama came home at four, Avi showed her the medal-bandage and gave a lively account of the crash, featuring sound effects.

Mama looked at Shani. "How was it?"

"The plane crashed at two-twenty," Shani said. "His elbow got a scrape. I washed it and bandaged it, and the bandage is crooked, and he was fine in fifteen minutes. Also, the milk went on the rug, and I blotted it, and it mostly came out, and it happened because I was reading on the couch instead of watching him."

The kitchen was quiet for a second.





"Thank you for the full version," Mama said. "The scrape sounds well handled. The rug is a rug. And the couch part - that's the part a lot of people would have left out."

"That's why I said it."

Chapter 7

What Being Trusted Meant

Later, Shani asked the question that had been sitting on her since four o'clock.

"Are you going to trust me again? Or was this the end of being in charge?"

Mama considered. "Did you freeze?"

"For a second. My hands didn't."

"Did you call anyone?"





"No - it was a scrape. Mrs. Adler is for real problems. This was a bandage problem."

"Did you tell me the whole thing, including the part that made you look worse?"

"Yes."

"Then you learned what being in charge actually costs," Mama said. "It costs the comfortable version of the story. Anyone can be trusted when nothing spills."

Chapter 8

The Crooked Bandage

Avi wore the crooked bandage until bath time, showing it to everyone including the mirror.

Shani wrote in her notebook:





In charge means your hands know what to do even when your brain freezes. The full version is the only version that counts. A rug is a rug. A brother is a brother. Don't mix up which one you're protecting.

She thought about the moment between the crash and the chair - the frozen second - and how it hadn't decided anything. What decided things was what her hands did next.

The next Sunday, Mama asked her again.

Shani said yes, and she didn't bring her book to the couch.

Being trusted the second time felt different from the first.

The first time, it felt like a prize.

The second time, it felt like a job she knew how to do.

