

Fathers and Sons

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Fathers and Sons

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Summary

Wesley is fifteen, with a dead father, when his mother leaves for Starfleet Medical.

Will is fifteen, with a dead mother, when his father leaves for a mission and never returns.

His dad built their log cabin in Alaska by hand. He said so maybe two times a month, every month, for the first fifteen years of Will's life. The first time Will remembered was age five, when he was lying on his stomach on the living room floor, trying to click a set of Lincoln Logs into place. They didn't have Wilderness Scouts in Valdez (not enough kids) but Will had downloaded a Scout Guide on his PADD while Kyle was away, and now he studied the illustrations on how to build a shelter — examined his toy logs — tried to visualize the right path.

Kyle sat nearby like a statue, his legs the only part of him visible from Will's point of view. Every now and then his feet shifted, a slow slide of expensive soles across the wooden floor — or he took a deeper breath than usual, a hiss of air through his nostrils — but otherwise he was so quiet Will could happily forget he was there. He sat up to study his log structure from above. The porch he was trying to tack on was too high up; it didn't look right. If he—

“Will,” said Kyle conversationally.

Will slowly sank back down to the floor. He fixed his eyes to his half-finished cottage.

“Do you like building things?” Kyle asked.

The pleasant tone didn't fool Will. He rested his chin on folded arms. “Yes, sir,” he said.

“You know, I built this house myself.”

Will didn't know what he was supposed to say to that, so he said nothing. But he glanced sideways, eyes shining with a new begrudging admiration. He looked Kyle over from head to toe, trying to imagine him hard at work. He'd seen Kyle fishing, hunting, hiking, but no matter how often Kyle proved himself to be an outdoorsman, the image in Will's mind stayed the same: his dad, polished and cosmopolitan, wearing fancy clothes that were fashionable in Starfleet but not down in Valdez, standing on the transporter pad and saying goodbye.

“Your mother always wanted a log cabin,” Kyle said, leaning forward. “I grew up in one, and I told her stories while we were dating. My father, he built the stairs with great gaps between them, and I was always afraid I'd fall through while I was climbing up to bed.”

Will let his gaze drift over to their own staircase, where Kyle had stacked the logs just-so to create an awkward, rolling hill up to the second floor. “Mom didn't like these ones, though,” he remembered.

Kyle blinked. He sat back slowly, his suit creaking. “No,” he said. “I suppose I built them more for a man's stride than a woman's. She always said they were a bit awkward for her.”

Will nodded. He turned back to his Lincoln Logs, but he'd lost the motivation. He disconnected his porch, his sprawling cabin with its three windows, his pointed roof, and tucked the logs back into the tin. When he climbed up the stairs for bed, he had to mount them like a hiker scabbling up a rock wall — each step too far apart, too tall.

He wouldn't be able to take those steps normally until he was fourteen, maybe fifteen. By then the house was empty. Just Will remained. He stood at the foot of the stairs, taller than his father ever had been, and stared up toward the bedroom where he'd slept as a child, with stary patterns on his sheets and model starships on his shelves, where a kid-sized Starfleet uniform hung in the closet, a souvenir his father had

brought back for him when he was six.

You'll be Starfleet too, someday, Kyle said. Just like your dad.

He decided he'd just sleep on the couch.

Wesley had two memories of Jack Crusher: only two.

The first was during shore leave. Wesley knew some of the details, but couldn't actually remember them himself. He'd been three at the time. He knew there must have been a reunion when Jack came home; his mother had told him that at first Wesley didn't believe Jack was his dad, and tried to bully him right out the door. He'd hidden behind Beverly's leg for an hour, acted like a brat, insulted and threw tantrums all through that first night.

After that, as Beverly said, Wesley and Jack were best friends.

But that wasn't the memory. Wesley's memory came a little later that week. He remembered coming home from pre-school, with Jack driving him in a rented aircar; and he remembered chatting with his dad so eagerly that he forgot his backpack in the aircar when they got home. It wasn't until much later — when it was dark out — that Wesley remembered.

"I'll go get it for you," Jack said cheerfully. "What's it look like?"

"It's got a Starfleet badge on it," Wesley said, following his dad to the door. He yanked hard on Jack's trouser leg. "It's dark out," he cautioned.

"I know." Jack gave him a dazzling grin. "And I bet there's all kinds of mosquitos out there waiting to eat me alive."

"Mosquitos?"

Jack laughed. "Little bugs that bite you, especially in night and during the summer. They suck your blood and make you itch all over."

And with those abominably terrifying last words, he disappeared into the night and left his three-year-old son in a moral/ethical crisis. Wesley sank to the floor, his face pale. It was a backpack! Yes, the coolest backpack in his pre-school class, but he couldn't believe his dad had just *sacrificed* himself for a backpack. Awash in horror, he pictured Jack bravely pushing through the insect swarm — crying out in agony as the sharp mosquito jaws closed on his skin — crawling to the aircar as lifeblood wept from his open wounds.

By the time Jack returned, swinging the backpack from his arm and humming the Academy fight song, Wesley was in tears.

"Hey—!" Jack started, but that was all he got out before Wesley all but tackled him. He clung tightly to his dad's legs until Jack finally broke his grip and hauled him off the floor, into a hug. "What's wrong, kid? I got your backpack right here!"

Wesley garbled out his vision, burying his face in Jack's shoulder. He had to repeat it twice, through the tears, before Jack finally understood and went tense, trying not to laugh. Jack swallowed the urge successfully. He stroked Wesley's hair and kept his face turned away. Only years later would Wesley realize he probably did that to hide a smile.

"It's alright," his dad murmured. "I'm not going anywhere, kid. I promise that."

Two weeks later, shore leave was over, and Jack Crusher returned to the Stargazer. And two years after that, he was dead.

Wesley's second memory of his father — one of only two — was Jack's funeral.

In 2391, Captain Will Riker would leave the U.S.S. Titan for a home on Nepenthe. He would build a log cabin there, over the healing black earth, while his ten-year-old son stuck to his side and fetched whatever tools Will needed to get the job done. In 2396, on the same healing world, in the same log cabin, Will would wake up from his nighttime vigil and find Thad dead, a crust of dried brain fluid leaking from his nose, painting his lips a clear grey-pink, almost translucent.

But that was later. In 2365, Will Riker entered Ten-Forward and stopped in his tracks. Across the room, stationed at the viewport, Wesley Crusher was watching the stars.

"Ensign," Riker said as he joined him.

Wesley gave a vague nod. In profile, he looked younger than fifteen. Tall, thin, a little delicate. Riker, he reflected, must have looked the same way when he was left alone in Valdez. He'd noticed the uneasy looks he got when he bounced into adult organizations by himself — filling out his application for the Academy alone, or seeking an official property transfer so he could give the city permission to house somebody in the old log cabin when Will left for San Francisco. Every time he did something on his own, the adults stared at him like he was an overgrown child. The same way other officers stared at Wesley.

And Wesley was alone now too.

Riker cleared his throat. "The captain told me you want to remain aboard the Enterprise..."

"Yes," Wesley murmured, eyes still on the viewport.

"Did you talk to your mother?"

Finally, Wesley turned to face him, looking pained. “Why does everyone ask that?” he said, and Riker couldn’t help but grin.

“Okay,” he conceded. “I get where you’re coming from, Ensign. I didn’t have a rank yet, but I was out on my own at fifteen, too.”

Wesley studied him, reevaluating, and then turned back to the window. His reflection looked older, warped by glass and starlight. Maybe that was how Jack Crusher looked, before he died, but Riker wouldn’t know.

“What was the worst part?” Wesley asked.

“About...?”

“Being on your own,” Wesley said.

Riker clasped his hands behind his back. He tipped his head up, studying the ceiling as he thought it through. “Well, there were lots of *good* parts,” he said. “I got to make my own schedule. Pursue my own goals.” He let a grin steal across his lips. “Invite my friends over for parties.”

Wesley gave a half-hearted smile.

“I liked the independence,” Riker said more seriously. “I think you do, too. Right?”

“Right,” said Wesley firmly. “But...”

“But sometimes—” And he was fifteen again, cold water soaking his clothes as he tried desperately to fix a broken pipe in the crawlspace, his PADD fritzing out from the low temperatures, frustrated tears blurring his vision and making everything ten times harder than it had to be. Riker hesitated. “Sometimes it would just be easier if you had someone to lend a hand,” he suggested.

Wesley pursed his lips.

“Maybe not a parent,” Riker allowed. “But *someone*.”

He searched Wesley’s face. Starlight lit up the ensign’s profile, made him look younger, softer. Twelve, instead of fifteen. Uncertain, and a little sad. Three-year-old Wesley waiting for Jack Crusher to return with his backpack; and fifteen-year-old Will searching a newly empty house, calling his dad’s name; and ten-year-old Thad handing his dad a hammer, waiting to see what he would do next.

Those dark eyes flickered and finally met Riker’s gaze.

“Someone,” Wesley agreed.

They walked out of Ten-Forward together, side-by-side.

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