Chapter 1

It was Sarah's birthday.

Aaron had made sure he wouldn't forget it. He had marked the date on his Google Calendar. He had even asked his mother to remind him.

Why would he go to so much trouble?

Fear. That's why!

If Aaron ever forgot to wish Sarah a happy birthday—or worse, forgot to give her a present—she would give him a good shaking.

He had learned that lesson once before.

And he had no intention of learning it again.

That morning, Aaron got ready for school in record time. He finished his morning routine without his mother, Sharon, having to remind him of a single thing.

"Aaron, did you eat breakfast?" Sharon asked as she came downstairs and headed toward the kitchen.

"Yep."

"Lunch box?"

"Got it," Aaron replied, a little impatiently.

"Homework ready to turn in?"

As usual, the questions kept coming.

What could he do? She was his mother, after all.

Weren't all mothers like that?

And Aaron, like most boys his age, had a habit of forgetting things. Someone had to keep reminding him.

"Aaron?"

Aaron was busy eating breakfast and reading the morning newspaper.

As he grew older, he had begun talking less—at least when his mother was asking questions.

Sports news was his favorite. Once he started reading it, he forgot everything around him. Even an earthquake might not make him look up.

He decided not to answer.

Let Mom keep asking.

Sharon was running out of patience.

"AARON!"

Her voice grew louder.

If he ignored her again, the whole house might shake from the scolding that followed.

And with Dad—Nathan—out of town, there was nobody to come to his rescue.

"What, Mom? What do you want?" Aaron asked irritably.

"Do you know what day it is today? Do you remember?"

Aaron knew exactly what she meant.

"It's Sarah's birthday, Mom. I remember perfectly well."

"What are you giving her?"

"Surprise, Mom. Surprise!"

"Can't I see it? Please? Just one peek?"

"No, Mom. No! It has to be a complete surprise."

Sharon walked toward his schoolbag.

Aaron knew what she was up to. She wanted to find the present.

He said nothing. He simply sat there with a mischievous smile.

He glanced at his watch.

There was still time before school.

Sharon picked up his bag, opened it, and searched inside.

Aaron watched her, smiling.

She looked again.

Nothing.

Sharon tried another approach.

"Tell me, Aaron. Are you giving Sarah the same present again?"

"What present?" Aaron asked, pretending not to understand.

"You know. The one you gave her last year."

Sharon hoped to trick him into revealing his secret.

"Mom, I have to go to school. It's getting late."

She searched the bag one more time.

Still nothing.

She looked at him suspiciously.

"I've kept it safely in my school locker," Aaron said. "I told you, Mom. It's a surprise."

Sharon was a little disappointed.

She hadn't expected Aaron to be so well prepared.

Still, she couldn't help feeling proud of how cleverly he had planned everything.

Before she could ask another question, Aaron snatched up his schoolbag and headed toward the front door.

"Aaron!"

There she went again.

Aaron dropped his bag and turned around with a scowl.

Even though school was close to home, he liked getting there early to play with his friends.

What boy wouldn't?

"What now? I already told you I'm giving Sarah a surprise! Why do you keep asking? Why are you bothering me when I'm trying to get to school?"

Sharon didn't say a word.

She simply pointed toward the dining table.

Aaron looked.

His breakfast plate was still sitting there.

He tried to pretend he hadn't noticed and made another attempt to escape.

Sharon blocked his way.

The stern look in her eyes made one thing perfectly clear.

She wasn't playing.

Aaron lowered his head.

Without another word of protest, he picked up his plate, carried it to the kitchen, and put it in the sink.

Then he headed for the front door again.

All he could think about was the wonderful surprise he had planned for Sarah.

He was certain he would make her very happy.

Little did he know that **he was the one about to receive a terrible shock.**

End of Chapter 1