

*Taylor Law*

OMISSIONS



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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## OMISSIONS

**By Taylor Law**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## Photo Description

A naked man sitting with his knees pulled to his chest and his head hanging down. He is in the middle of an overgrown field, surrounded by woods. Another naked man is crouched at his back, holding his shoulders, and he has his face buried in the back of the seated man's neck.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*My established couple has plans to finally tie the knot and take their relationship into happily-ever-after territory. Unfortunately, life... especially a life that is a completely fabricated lie... always has a way of sneaking up on you. One of my guys is living a lie, living a life that is completely fake and, he thought, his horrid past was buried forever. Just as he is ready to believe that there is a chance for him to move on and live the fairytale, the past comes knocking on his door. And now the bright future is looking really dim.*

*Would you, dearest author, please run my guys through the wringer, break them down and then help them build their new life together without the lies and the fear so that they can finally, finally be happy, forever.*

*Tags: Angst, abuse, graphic violence, dubious consent, tearjerker BUT with a HEA*

*Sincerely,*

*Susan65 :-)*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary, thriller

**Tags:** abuse, angst, criminal, law enforcement, non-con, tearjerker

**Content Warnings:** graphic violence; forced sexual favors; mentions of sexual assault, including underage

**Word Count:** 23,197

*Author's Note*

Dear readers, *Omissions* was an enjoyable challenge for me to write. It is quite different from other things that I have written in the past. I'm thrilled with the way it turned out. It allowed me to expand and grow. I wanted to throw out a little warning for you. If you have any triggers, please be careful reading this story. It has some dark moments. People who read and enjoy dark books may not think so, but some others may not be able to handle them. I don't want anyone to be hurt.

Thank you, Susan, for the prompt. I hope you all enjoy the story as much as I did.

**OMISSIONS**  
**By Taylor Law**

## Chapter 1

THE DISTINCTIVE SOUND of skin slapping skin reverberated around the room two seconds before pain radiated up Caleb Stevens's jaw and through his right eye. He shook his head a few times to clear away the stars, and then winced when Mr. Psycho violently wrenched him upright again by his hair.

The same psycho that had kidnapped him and tied him to this damn chair.

The same one that was now holding a knife to his throat and adding just enough pressure to make Caleb freeze, but not enough to do any real damage. Even so, he could feel a warm trickle of blood run down the side of his neck as the cold metal bit his skin.

"Ah, ah, ah," the man said in a singsong voice. "Look at him. Isn't he beautiful?"

Caleb couldn't help but do as he was told and glared at the main attraction of his nightmare. Reflexively, he tugged at the bonds that held his wrists to the back of the wooden chair and flinched when the sharp steel at his neck dug deeper.

Directly in front of him was the love of his life, his fiancé, Jake Thomas. The one person he thought he would spend the rest of his life with, on his knees with another man's cock in his mouth.

"That's it, boy! Give it to him good."

And he was. Jake was giving that blowjob everything he had.

A sob tore up Caleb's throat and came out muffled by his clenched lips. The sound was loud enough that Jake heard it and glanced his way. When they locked eyes, the tears that Caleb had held back overflowed, trailing down his face to drench his torn and bloody T-shirt.

He didn't know how they got here. Everything was so perfect between them, but then maybe that should have been a clue. Nothing in life was perfect, or not for long at least. Fate, that crazy bitch, had a way of fucking it all up.

Two weeks ago, the future had looked so bright. Caleb had never been so content, so safe, in love... happy.

Two weeks ago, Caleb was still living in complete ignorance.



Now that everything was out in the open, that picturesque life Caleb had been living fell off the wall in a blistering crash, shattering into a million tiny pieces. Humpty-fucking-Dumpty.

Broken. Everything was broken: his relationship, his life, his very reality. He didn't know of anything that could put it back together again.

A low moan broke him from his momentary pity party, and he focused on the scene in front of him again. Jake had closed his eyes and had his head angled slightly back. He was rolling the guy's balls in his hand while the brute face-fucked him. As he watched, Jake gagged and jerked back. Once he'd caught his breath, though, he was back at it with a fierceness Caleb had never seen. Jake was a man on a mission.

"You like watching, don't you? Don't you?" Psycho man barked. Jonathan Harboro had spewed a running commentary for the past five minutes straight, like he wanted Caleb to involve himself in this little game. Or maybe he just liked the sound of his own voice. Either way, Caleb wasn't playing.

He ignored the bastard, which earned him punishment, of course.

"Answer me!" Jonathan screamed before releasing him, only to hit him in the temple with the handle of the knife. Agony consumed him, making it feel like his head was going to explode in a shower of gore. He blinked as the stars returned, this time followed by a lovely white fog.

Caleb knew he probably had a slight concussion from the treatment he'd suffered thus far. Another hit to the head and he would be out, and that wouldn't do. If he was going to die, Caleb wanted to face death head on, not on his back like some pussy.

He took several deep breaths, having to sniffle back some phlegm from the tears he'd shed. He'd be damned if he would give this fucker any more. Concentrating on his breathing, and what he was going to do to his captor as soon as the opportunity presented itself, he was able to fight off the blackness.

Once his head was clear, he glared at Jonathan, letting all of those murderous thoughts show dark and deadly in his eyes. The response he got was unexpected and not reassuring in the slightest.

Jonathan, psycho that he was, threw his head back and roared out a maniacal laugh that sent chills through Caleb's body.

After a few minutes, he calmed himself enough to talk again. "You've got some balls, don't you? You and me, we are going to have so much fun together." He petted Caleb's sweaty blond hair.

Caleb jerked his head and ducked, attempting to shake him off.

A loud groan caught their attention and they both looked over to see the brute finishing off down Jake's throat.

*Jake.*

Caleb was here because of Jake. He didn't even know Jake. Not at all, or not like he thought he did. Omission after omission, compounded by sidestepping and covering, all boiled down to one glaring thing: everything he knew was a lie.

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*Two weeks earlier*

A car door shutting pulled Caleb's attention off the news, and he automatically looked at the door, like he could actually see through it or something. He glanced down at his watch to see it was nearing eleven at night, and only five minutes had passed since the last time he performed the same routine. This time was different, however, because Kira, their yellow lab, jumped up from her perch at his feet and ran to the window, moving the curtains out of the way with her nose to look outside. Her tail started swaying back and forth before she hopped and darted over to the door. She squatted, gave another little jump, and then her whole back end shook along with her tail. The sound she was making was not her typical bark for a stranger but more like she was trying to talk.

It was easy to know what that meant—Jake was finally home.

Actually, Caleb could understand Kira's reaction. Part of him wanted to do a full-body jig too. As it was, his heart picked up speed, thumping hard against his ribs.

Had it been just a week? Man, it seemed far longer. The bed was cold. Hell, the whole house was cold when Jake went on a business trip.

When he heard keys jingling, he realized he probably should have gone to open the door instead of sitting there, staring at it like a dunce. He stood and walked over, pushing Kira out of the way with his knee, but the doorknob turned before he could touch it. He backed up, pulling the dog with him by her collar. The door opened and there he was, Jake, the love of his life. Caleb's breath caught and his dick stiffened.

One would think that a year living with the same person would tamp down some of these feelings. That he wouldn't still have this reaction at just the sight of Jake, but he did. He probably always would.

“Hey, handsome. God, did I miss you!” Jake grinned, shut the door, put his duffle bag on the ground and opened his arms. Caleb let go of the dog collar to go to him.

Big mistake. Kira jumped up in Caleb's place, causing both men to laugh.

“You better say hello to your girl first. She missed you too.”

Jake pushed the eighty-pound animal to the floor and followed, squatting to face her. He was still smiling, and Caleb knew his face was a mirror of that expression because his cheeks were starting to hurt. Kira must have thought kisses were in order, because she started licking Jake, bathing every part of him she could reach, until he made spitting and “bleck” sounds, and pushed her away.

“Ooo, you got tongue.” Caleb snickered.

Jake stood while simultaneously wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Yeah, definitely not the kind I want though. C'mere.” He opened his arms again and wiggled his fingers.

“Nuh uh. No way I want to put my mouth there, after where it's been.” Caleb shook his head and pointed down at the dog, who was now contorted in a circle with her leg lifted, licking herself.

Jake's shoulders shook in silent laughter, and his brown eyes sparkled. “Come here.”

“No. No, thank you. I'm good. Really.” Caleb started backing up toward the couch with Jake stalking him.

Jake lifted the neck of his navy polo shirt and swiped it over his mouth. “There, now come give me a kiss.”

Caleb chuckled, shook his head, and kept backing up, his hands outstretched in a “keep away” position. He was only doing it now because the look on his lover's face was priceless. Jake was in full-on hunting mode, playful. It made Caleb's heart swell and warmth travel his body. It also made his dick hard. Well, harder.

Suddenly, Jake stopped walking, so Caleb did too. Then Jake smirked, and Caleb had a second to think, “uh-oh,” before he was tackled onto the couch. They landed half on the brown leather sofa and half on the floor, but Caleb was too busy laughing to care.

He tried to get away for about two seconds before he succumbed. There's nowhere he would rather be than in the arms of the man on top of him right now.

He looked up and studied Jake's face. Chocolate eyes that still held a hint of amusement in their depths. Wavy hair, so dark it was almost black. It was in need of a cut, curling around his ears and neck. Lush, plump lips he couldn't wait to taste. Dark hair on his jaw where his five o'clock shadow had turned into scruff.

He was the most beautiful thing Caleb had ever seen. "Hi," he whispered.

Jake's eyes softened. "Hi, babe. God, when you look at me like that..." Jake crushed their lips together for a few seconds before backing off and gentling the kiss. It became sweet, succulent, an expression of the feelings that were coursing through Caleb's body.

Caleb lifted his hands against Jake's grip until he was free and could wrap his arms around Jake's broad shoulders. He pulled him in close and squeezed, hugging him tight. Jake groaned against his mouth and flexed his hips, grinding against Caleb's thigh for a moment and then breaking the kiss.

Jake leaned his forehead against Caleb's. "I need a shower. I feel gross, and I'm exhausted. I just missed you, so much."

Jake gave him one more sweet peck on the lips before standing and helping him to his feet. "Has Kira been out?"

"Yeah, I just let her out about fifteen minutes before you came home."

"Okay. Why don't you get in bed? It's late, and I know you stayed up to wait for me. I'll go grab a quick shower and meet you there."

"Okay. Hurry though."

"You got it." Jake smiled and popped him on the butt as he walked toward the bedroom.

Caleb started to strip as soon as he hit the hallway. He was exhausted, now that he thought about it. He'd been so anxious to have Jake home that sleep hadn't entered his mind, but now he was crashing. Dammit, he wanted to have more time with Jake, but he had a feeling that as soon as his head hit the pillow, he'd be out like a light.

He toed off his shoes and kicked them into the closet, dropped his jeans and underwear in one go and flung them toward the hamper. Hopefully they made it

in, because he didn't care enough to look. Once naked, he pulled back the bedding and crawled in. The cool sheets felt wonderful, and he cuddled in deeper, though he tried to keep himself awake. He wanted at least one more kiss first. He heard the shower running, and the combination of the soothing noise, the knowledge that his Jake was home, and the comfort of the bed lulled him to sleep.

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## Chapter 2

CALEB WOKE slowly, the bright light of morning turning his closed eyelids red from the inside. He blinked a few times and reached over toward Jake's side of the bed, but it was empty and already cold. Disappointment washed over him. He could smell coffee brewing, so he knew Jake was in the kitchen, but he'd hoped for some fun.

He glanced down at the hard-on tenting the sheet. "Sorry, buddy. Looks like you're going to have to wait."

He swung his legs out of the bed, got up, grabbed some clean boxers and headed toward the bathroom for his daily routine. The triple "S"—shit, shower and shave. Once he felt somewhat human, he walked toward the kitchen to get a hit of caffeine. He was not a morning person, but Jake was up at the butt crack of o'thirty every day. The plus side to that was Caleb usually had coffee waiting for him when he finally dragged his sorry ass out of bed.

When he turned the corner, he came across a scene right out of his favorite wet dreams. Well, sort of. Jake was only in sleep pants, hung low on his hips. His long, lean back and broad shoulders were bare, the contours of his muscles flexing. He was bent in half, giving Caleb a glorious view of that luscious backside. Yeah, it was only so he could feed the dog, but semantics. It was still a sight for sore eyes.

Jake was stirring wet food into the dry. Why he didn't do that on the counter, like Caleb had suggested numerous times, was beyond him. But Caleb took full advantage of that now. He walked up, positioned himself behind Jake, got a good hold on his hips and ground his crotch into the crack of Jake's cheeks. His softening morning hard-on jumped back to life, and he groaned.

Jake started to fall over but slapped his hand on a cabinet door to stop himself. He looked over his shoulder and smirked. "Can I help you with something?"

"Yeah. Something is up, and I need you to take a look at it for me."

Jake rolled his eyes and straightened. "Oh, that was bad." He turned around and pulled Caleb to him for a kiss. "Good morning. Are you ready for your coffee?"

He turned away and reached up for a mug, elongating his back and making the muscles shift. "I'm ready for something all right."

Jake started laughing. "You are such a horn dog today."

"Today?"

"Okay, so you're a horn dog every day." He said it like it was a bad thing, but Caleb could see he had his own tent in his pants.

Jake lifted his eyebrow and went to get the milk out of the fridge. Caleb sighed and sat down on one of the kitchen stools at the counter. He got the subtext, "not right now, but if you're a good boy, soon."

"So, how was your trip?"

Jake topped off his own coffee and leaned against the counter, sipping. "It was okay. The shipment of parts was delayed for three days. Could you imagine? I told them that if this was going to be a habit, we were going to change our supplier. Finally, we got everything calmed down. I think the new manager is going to do well. He was on top of it."

Jake was a sales distribution manager for a major auto-parts chain. It was a good position, but one where he had to travel often to check in on the other stores all over the state.

It sucked when he was away, but there was no way that Caleb would ask him to change professions for him. Jake liked his job. He was good at it and well respected.

"How was everything here while I was gone? Did you ever catch that guy you were after?"

Caleb was a homicide detective with the Sheriff's Department. Young girls kept going missing and then showing up dead. Their main suspect had disappeared off the face of the earth, and they were out of leads. He sighed. "No. He's just gone. We've talked to all of his known associates, and either they're covering for him, which I wouldn't put past them, or he really is gone. With some of the things he's into, I wouldn't be surprised if he shows up in the Indian River here soon."

He put his mug down and ran a hand through his still damp hair. "The shitty thing is another girl went missing two days ago. Get this, she was taken from her bed, or that's what it looks like. Fucking sixteen years old." He shook his head and looked Jake in the eyes. "We have no leads. None."

Jake looked like he'd seen a ghost. His face had lost color, and his eyes were glazed over, staring at nothing.

“Jake?”

He shook himself and gave a very unconvincing smile. “Sorry. That’s just... It’s horrible. That poor girl’s parents.”

Caleb stared at Jake for a few seconds longer, checking to make sure there was nothing he was missing. Some people couldn’t handle the violence of this world. Jake was one of those people. He was good, through and through, and had a tendency to see that good reflected in others, whether it was there or not. It scared Caleb sometimes, because he worried that Jake would learn the truth the hard way. The thought made a shiver skate down Caleb’s spine.

Once he saw Jake’s color return, he picked up his mug and took another lifesaving sip of the bitter brew. “Yeah. I just wish we could do more. I don’t know what, but... something.”

Jake’s warm hand on his arm brought his gaze from the depths of his cup. The look on Jake’s face was intense. “Caleb, you do all you can do. You push yourself beyond sleep, beyond hunger, beyond everything, to try to save people. Don’t torture yourself. It’s people like you who make this world a good place to live in.”

Heat traveled from Caleb’s chest, up through the top of his head and back down, before finding a home in his heart. He leaned over and gave Jake the gentlest of kisses. “Thank you.”

Jake smiled and backed away, visibly trying to lighten the heavy mood. “So what’s on the docket for today? You’re off, right?”

“Of course I am. We have our poker game with the boys tonight. Besides, I want to spend time with my guy. He’s been away for a week and I missed him.”

“What guy is this?” Jake gasped and plastered a humorous surprised expression on his face. “You have a guy? What the... how?”

“Oh, yeah. He’s a hot little thing. Younger, and extremely sexy. He would look like a swimmer if it weren’t for the body hair.”

Jake grinned mischievously. “So, we have all day to ourselves before the poker game?”

“Yes. What did you have in mind?” Caleb’s now deflated dick had an idea and started to thicken.

“How about we go to the farmers’ market? I’m in the mood for your guacamole.”



Caleb groaned. *Aaaand, that's a no-go. Abort. Abort.*

“What?” By the look on Jake’s face, he knew exactly what.

“You’re killing me, you know that, right? It’s been a week, seven days, one hundred and sixty-eight hours, a shit-load of minu—”

Jake shut him up with a kiss.

When they broke apart, both of them were panting. Jake smiled in that sexy, “do-me-now” way he had perfected, and Caleb thought he’d won; they were going to get it on. Well, he thought that for about three seconds, because as Jake walked toward the bedroom, he called out over his shoulder. “Come on. Get a move on, or we’ll miss all of the good stuff.”

“Killing me,” Caleb mumbled. He adjusted himself and followed Jake into the bedroom to get dressed. He really would do anything for the man, even at the cost of blue balls.

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Caleb was squeezing the Florida avocados, trying to find one that felt like it would be a good consistency for guacamole without being all brown in the middle. They had already picked out some beautiful, vine-ripe tomatoes and some sweet onions. They just needed to get the avocados and some limes and they would be good to go.

It was May, and already the heat was stifling. The sun shone bright and clear with very few clouds in sight. The humidity was probably close to one hundred percent, and it was only ten in the morning. By one, it would be hard to breathe.

Even so, he was having a good time. He was relaxed, and Jake had him laughing. He’d forgotten how much he enjoyed these moments. Yeah, the sex between them was crazy-hot, but the down times, when they could just be themselves and hang out—those were the best. He was in love with his best friend. There was nothing better in this world. He was a damn lucky bastard.

He looked over at Jake, who was staring at the Hass avocados a few feet away. Jake must have felt his gaze, because he glanced up and smiled. “I think these will probably be better. They’re softer.”

“You always say that.”

“I’m always right too. Besides, I like the lumpy ones better.”

“They’re Hass avocados.”

“Yeah, they are boss.”

“No.” Caleb chuckled. “Hass. Say it with me. Hhawss.”

“Shut up, or I’ll ‘haws’ you, buddy.” Jake threw the empty plastic bag in his hand. It hit Caleb’s shoulder before fluttering to the ground.

“That’s what I was trying to get us to do this morning, but you decided you wanted to come here instead.”

Jake laughed, grabbed Caleb by the arm and pulled him into a headlock. “Don’t worry. We’ll get to that. I just wanted to have some fun today, and if it was up to you, we would have never made it out of the bed.”

*Well, that was true.*

Jake started to give Caleb a noogie, but Caleb stopped him by poking a ticklish spot just under his ribs. He let go immediately, and still chuckling, backed away. Caleb straightened and tried to pat down his hair, knowing it was probably standing in all directions now.

“You turd.”

“Ha! Me? What about you, with that—” Jake stopped mid-sentence and froze. He didn’t even blink. He was staring at something over Caleb’s shoulder. When Caleb turned to look, he didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. People out shopping; kids hopping around, begging for snow cones; little old ladies chattering—the normal weekend activity.

Caleb looked back at Jake and grabbed his arm. A whole body tremor shook him. His eyes were wide, and there was fear written in the lines of his face.

“Jake? What is it? Jake!” Caleb looked around again, trying to ascertain what would cause his fun-loving man to look so vulnerable.

All of a sudden, Jake seemed to break his trance. “I’m good. Let’s just get the rest of the stuff and go.”

He wouldn’t meet Caleb’s eyes, and his movements were jerky. “What’s going on? What was that?”

“Nothing.” He flinched away from Caleb’s hand. “Let’s just go, okay?”

Oh, that was bullshit. He went from laughing to being an asshole in a nanosecond flat. This wasn’t the time or place for a confrontation though. There

were too many people around to gawk, and something had spooked Jake. Caleb needed to grab their shit, get them home and then find out what was wrong so he could fix it.

Caleb snatched some Hass avocados and limes, paid the vendor and then headed toward the parking lot. He tried to reach out for Jake's hand, but the man was having none of it. He strode toward the car like he was trying to escape. *Not good.*

The ride home was silent and stilted. Jake stared out the window the whole time, but it didn't look like he was actually focusing on the scenery. Whatever he was seeing was in his head.

Caleb hadn't seen him like this in a long time.

For months after they first got together, it seemed Jake was always looking over his shoulder or lost in thought. That scene they had in the kitchen wouldn't have happened even a few months ago. Jake would have freaked had Caleb come up behind him then. He tried to laugh it off, but Caleb knew something bad had happened to Jake in his past. He didn't know if it was childhood abuse or an abusive relationship, but whatever it was, it had damaged the physical trust most people had ingrained in them.

Which made it all the more remarkable that Jake was able to see good in people. Everyone liked him, and he was welcoming and inclusive. "The more the merrier" was his motto. He was always inviting people over for dinner or to the poker game, some of them virtual strangers. It was like he didn't think twice about the bad things that could happen.

But when it came to physicality, that was a whole other story. Caleb would never forget their first fight. They were arguing, and Caleb spoke with his hands. Jake jumped about a foot off the ground and cringed into himself. They both wound up in tears after that, but the reaction wasn't discussed in depth. Caleb just made sure Jake knew, without a doubt, that he would never lay a hand on him in violence.

Those times had slowly become more infrequent, until they stopped altogether. But it was during those first few months Jake would get into these moods. He would stare at nothing but seem to be seeing everything inside his mind. And whatever he was seeing was not good.

Caleb knew better than to try to confront him though. Whenever he'd tried to in the past, it seemed that Jake pulled deeper into himself, creating a wall between them that would sometimes take weeks to heal. He'd just got his Jake

back from a weeklong separation. Call him selfish, but he didn't want to taint that.

Jake skulked into the house and then looked around like he was lost. Caleb didn't understand what was going on, but something was really bothering Jake, and he couldn't stand to see him that way. He had to try to help.

He walked over and put a hand on Jake's arm, but Jake jerked away. "Hey. What's going on? Talk to me."

Jake seemed like he was trying to decide what to say, but then just sighed. "Sorry. I'm tired. I think I didn't get enough sleep, and my body's worn out." He walked over and kissed Caleb's forehead. "I'm going to take a nap. I'm sure I'll feel better when I get up."

He patted Caleb's shoulder and shuffled toward the bedroom, watching his feet the whole time instead of where he was going. Something had set him off at the farmers' market. They'd lived together for almost a year now. Caleb knew all of Jake's moods, and this was not how he acted when tired. He looked like he'd seen a ghost and was acting skittish, almost like when their relationship first started.

Caleb realized he was still standing there, staring at the door with the plastic bags of vegetables still in his hands. He sighed and strode over to the kitchen counter to set them down. The one-eighty turnaround from the happy Jake of this morning to the shadow of that man from five minutes ago was torturing him. He knew he had the habit of overanalyzing things. That was what made him a good cop.

As he started to prepare the guacamole and snacks for the poker game, Caleb tried to piece together what he knew of the situation. He knew he shouldn't do it—it was a good way to destroy a relationship—but since he cared about Jake, and there was no communication going on, he felt his hands were tied. There wasn't much to work with, really. Jake was skittish and didn't like to be surprised. Sometimes he looked over his shoulder when they were in public together. He didn't like to sit with his back to a room, but he didn't want to sit side-by-side either.

Caleb just didn't know what to think. Did Jake not like to be seen in public with him? Was he afraid of what people would say to a gay couple?

He didn't seem to be in the closet, but now that Caleb thought about it, he'd never met one of Jake's coworkers. Not one friend, or any family. Jake said he

didn't have family, that he was the only one left. Caleb knew it was a possibility, but it was strange that Jake had no one in his life.

Caleb heard a noise from the bedroom and glanced up from the bowl of delicious green goop he was stirring. It sounded like Jake was talking. He hadn't had a nightmare in months, but after the way he was acting, Caleb was compelled to check on him.

He wiped his hands on a kitchen towel and walked over to the door.

"Why aren't you calling me back, dammit. Listen, I think I saw..." Jake's voice was drifting away and coming back, as if he was pacing the room. Even though Caleb knew it was wrong, he stepped closer to listen.

"That's not supposed to happen. I need to know what's going on. Call me back. Agh!" There was a crash on the other side of the door, so Caleb opened it.

Jake was standing in the middle of the room, combing his hand through his hair. A phone Caleb had never seen before was on the floor, a little crack splitting its screen.

Caleb frowned. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, sorry."

He picked up the phone. "This is new. Is this your work phone? Damn, it's a piece of crap. You'd think they would provide something better."

Jake came over and snatched it out of Caleb's hand. "Yeah. You'd think."

Caleb studied Jake's face while he swiped at the screen of the junk phone with his thumb.

"Are you sure you're all right? You know, you can talk to me about anything, right?" Caleb walked toward Jake, but before he could make it, Jake pulled back the covers and climbed into bed.

"Yeah. Thanks."

Caleb gave a short nod. *Alrighty then. That went well.*

"Get some rest. Love you."

"Love you, back."

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### Chapter 3

THE DOORBELL started ringing at six on the nose. Jake strode out of the bedroom with his hair still wet, right after the first guests arrived. Caleb didn't have the chance to talk with him, but he did look better. His cheeks were flush from the heat of the shower, and that crooked smile he adored was back in place.

Their next-door neighbor, Matthew, was there, along with a couple of the guys from the force. Caleb liked Matthew. He was a congenial older man with silver hair at his temples and a white goatee. He and his much younger wife had moved in with their four-year-old son several months ago. They lived catty-corner to Caleb and Jake, and with no fence, it seemed as if they shared one big back yard. Matthew was a mean gardener and was always bringing them something or another—vine-ripe tomatoes, a cucumber the size of a grown man's arm, some oranges from his tree. He was always very nice and had a giving soul. Jake had asked him over for poker two months ago, and he was a regular there every week since.

"What's up, guys? I brought your favorite." Matthew held up a twelve pack of Stella Artois, Caleb's beer of choice. "You know these things cost more than some people's cars, right?"

"Who do you know with a car that costs under twenty bucks?" Caleb grinned and took the beer to put it in the fridge.

"Hey, it could happen."

"Definitely not to you. What are you driving around these days?"

Caleb could swear the man blushed, and then he mumbled something.

"What was that? A Ferrari? No, it was a Firebird, right? Fully refurbished and what color? Pink?"

That time Caleb got a glare. "I don't drive no pink car. Shut your mouth."

Jake started laughing, and it took everything for Caleb to keep a straight face. "What? I could have sworn it was pink?"

"It's dark purple, you little shit."

Caleb waved his hand. "Same thing."

When Matthew went to punch Caleb in the arm, he was ready for it and dodged, chuckling the whole time.

“Hey, now. No touching. You know I’m taken.”

“Yeah, like I’d want to touch that hairy ass.” Matthew gave a mock shiver.

Scott and Jason came into the kitchen to get a refill and stopped dead. Scott smirked, which never meant anything good. “Umm... why are you talking about Caleb’s ass? I didn’t know you swung that way.”

“I know, right? I get first dibs.” Jason smiled at Matthew and started shifting closer to him.

Caleb couldn’t stop chuckling long enough to comment. The look on Matthew’s face was priceless.

“Umm...” Matthew sputtered.

Jake saved the man. “Don’t have a coronary, Matt. Jason’s fucking with you.”

“Oh. Right. I knew that.” But it didn’t look like he knew anything of the sort.

Caleb let out another burst of laughter before clapping his hands. “Okay, let’s get this party started.”

The men all gathered around the table, and Jason dealt the first hand. They were all verbally sparring and dissing each other. Except Jake. He just sat there with a half-smile on his face, picking the label off the beer bottle. After an hour of this, Caleb found it hard to concentrate on the game because he was so focused on Jake. Before he could say anything, Jason did it for him, and it being Jason, there was no filter on the words.

“What crawled up your ass, got stuck, and died? Wait, maybe it wouldn’t have gotten stuck, being as you use that hole so much. So, let me rephrase: What crawled up your ass, passed out from the smell, and died from suffocation or gas inhalation?” Then, of course, because it was Jason, he found himself hilarious and started laughing, smacking the table and repeating, “Get it? Gas inhalation?”

“Nice, Jay.” Caleb rolled his eyes.

“He has been awfully quiet tonight.” Matthew studied Jake.

“Nothing’s wrong, and my digestive system is just fine, thanks. I’ve been working like crazy, and I’m dead on my feet.” Jake stretched his arms over his head, showing a good portion of his lower belly and happy trail.

Caleb licked his lips and... “Wait. You had a nap.”

“So, maybe I’m coming down with something. All in.” Jake shoved his coins forward.

“Oooo, I hope you haven’t been kissing His Royal Sickness over there, Caleb. You might be contaminated,” Scott said.

“He was contaminated a long time ago. They swap slobber constantly, among other things. I mean, come on, Scott, you should know this. We may need a HAZMAT suit to even come over here next week.” Jason snickered. “Get it? HAZMAT suit. Contaminated. Come on, that was funny.”

Scott looked at Jason like he had grown horns, which wouldn’t be altogether impossible for him. “No. It really wasn’t.”

“Call.” Caleb put his remaining coins into the pot. Matthew and Scott folded, and Jason suggested strip poker before putting his coins in as well.

Jake showed his hand. Full house. There was a round of groans while he pulled the pile of money to him. “You know, we can make this a semiweekly poker game, or maybe even more. I like it when you guys come over.”

“We’re going to stop if you don’t quit robbing us blind,” Scott griped.

“It’s a good thing we only play for change then, huh?” Jake smirked and stacked his winnings in dollar increments.

Matthew stood and pulled out his keys, which was funny since he only lived next door. It must have been a habit. “All right, it’s time for me to get home. I’m sure Sara has dinner in the microwave for me.”

“She knew you were coming here, so why would she do that?” Scott said, as he put away the cards.

“Because she knows we only eat junk while we’re playing, and for some reason she wants to keep me around for a while. She’s always going on about healthy food.” Matthew smiled fondly when he said this, a faraway look in his eyes. Sara was a good woman.

“You’re a lucky bastard,” Caleb said.

“Don’t I know it. See you guys later.”



A round of “good nights” followed him to the door. The cleanup didn’t take long at all. Everyone pretty much had their jobs down to a science since they did the same thing every week, when they could. The day changed because of Caleb’s schedule, and occasionally, he would get called away. Scott and Jason were road cops, and they had a more regular schedule. Homicide detectives didn’t usually get that. Unfortunately, murder wasn’t a nine-to-five job.

Jake walked Scott and Jason to the door while Caleb finished cleaning off the table. He covered the remaining guacamole and put it in the fridge. When he turned back around, Jake was almost in his face. “Whoa. What—”

Jake slammed him up against the refrigerator door and crushed their mouths together in a brutal kiss. Caleb grunted and froze for a stunned second before diving in. He’d wanted this from the moment Jake walked in last night.

All thought flew from his mind as the blood drained from his head to his dick. Jake’s rough hands gripped him tight, pulling at his shirt but not really trying to remove it. It was as if Jake couldn’t get close enough to him. The sound of the fabric tearing broke them apart.

“Let’s go to bed,” Caleb panted out. His lips stung, and when he licked them, he tasted copper. He didn’t give a shit, though, because Jake was already leading him to the bedroom. Well, it was more like Jake was dragging him there.

As soon as the door shut behind them, Jake shoved Caleb against it, and with a grunt, Caleb raised his lips for another hard kiss. They haphazardly tore their clothes from their bodies in their haste to get to skin. There was no sophistication, no smoothness or romance. This was straight up chaos.

Caleb loved it.

When they were naked, Jake spun him around and pushed him toward the bed. He tripped over their clothes but caught himself and backed up, never taking his eyes from Jake’s. There was something in his gaze that Caleb couldn’t read. It was wild and dangerous.

Jake pounced the second Caleb was on the bed. His head didn’t even make it to the pillows before Jake was on him. Jake wedged himself in between Caleb’s thighs and thrust against Caleb’s hip while kissing the breath from his lungs.

Caleb wrapped his arms around Jake’s wide shoulders and then ran his hands down the contours of Jake’s back to his firm, hairy backside. Warm skin

and soft hair tickled his palms. He squeezed and molded the cheeks of that gorgeous ass while pulling him closer to grind hard against him.

Jake shoved his tongue in Caleb's mouth as far as it would go, and Caleb sucked on it. Their movements were frantic, hectic and rough. Both of them were past their limit, their separation and teasing making them rush.

Jake broke the kiss to nibble on Caleb's jawline and neck, down to his collarbone. Caleb's back arched, and he let out a loud groan. His cock was so hard it hurt.

Suddenly, Jake twisted Caleb around onto his stomach and lifted his hips, positioning him ass up. When he was sufficiently raised, Jake bit his butt cheek, spread him open and dove face-first into his crack. Caleb moaned low, fisted the bedding, and thrust back for more.

Jake sucked and licked, stabbing that perfect wet tongue against him, nipping at his flesh. Pleasure surrounded him, and he didn't know how much more he could take. It turned out he didn't have to beg. "Jake."

Jake's moan added vibration that nearly made Caleb come on the spot. Before that could happen, Jake pulled back, smacked him hard on the butt and turned him onto his back. While Caleb was still arranging himself, Jake leaned over to grab the lube. Caleb pulled his legs up to his chest. His patience was running low, and he needed to be filled, now. Jake popped the top on the lube, slicked his dick, and dribbled some on Caleb's hole. When Jake's finger breached him, Caleb cried out. It was too much, not enough. He needed more. "Stop playing and fuck me!"

Jake took him at his word, moved closer, guided his cock into place and finally pushed inside. The familiar burn and ache was exactly what Caleb needed. He wasn't going to last long.

Still on his knees, Jake thrust hard. The bed springs creaking and slapping skin were the only things they could hear besides their own sounds of pleasure. Jake fell on top of him, buried his face in Caleb's neck and wedged Caleb's legs up higher. With every thrust, Caleb moved closer to orgasm. He hadn't even touched his dick, but it didn't matter. Jake's chest hair abraded his nipples. Jake's hands gripped his legs roughly, holding him open. Jake's breath was hot on his ear, Jake... Jake... Jake... "Fuck, yes!"

Caleb's whole body tightened and then spasmed, arching him off the bed as he came hard. He yelled and threw his head back, his cum painting their chests.

Jake's hips snapped a few more times as he came too, filling Caleb up, making the glide slicker and easier.

Finally, Jake collapsed. He let go of Caleb's legs, and shoved his hands under Caleb's shoulders until he could squeeze him in a tight hug. Jake's face was still buried in Caleb's neck, and he was trembling.

When Caleb felt wetness start to gather there, he froze. "Jake? Jake, what's wrong?"

In response, Jake just shook his head and squeezed Caleb tighter. Caleb could barely breathe, but he was more concerned about Jake than worried about oxygen.

"Jake? Talk to me. What's going on?"

"Just... hold me. Hold me tight, and don't let go, okay? Don't let go." The last word was little more than a sob. It was followed by Jake's body jerking while he silently cried.

Caleb didn't know what to do, so he wrapped Jake up tight in his arms. "I won't let go."

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"Hey, how are you this morning?" Caleb walked into the kitchen, still sweaty from a run, and gave Jake a kiss. He was sitting at the kitchen table reading the newspaper and drinking coffee.

"Good. I just got a call. I have to be in Tampa tomorrow by ten thirty in the morning."

Caleb's good mood dropped a few degrees. Things had gotten back to normal in the past couple of weeks, and this wasn't the first time Jake had to travel for business since the weirdness at the farmers' market, but it seemed like when Jake came back from his trips now, he was distant. It would take a few days for Caleb to get his Jake back. Even when he was home from a trip, he wasn't really there. Not how Caleb wanted, at least.

"Okay. How long are you going to be gone?"

"Four days, probably. Maybe longer, but hopefully sooner." Jake looked up, an apology in his eyes. "Listen, I know I've been away a lot lately. I'm trying to get my team up and running. Once I have good managers in place, then I can slow down. Just visit stores once a month or so, to keep a handle on things. I know it sucks."

Jake stood and came in for a hug. Caleb tried to give him an extended arm hug, because he didn't want to get him dirty, but Jake wasn't having any of that. "Don't. I'm all sweaty, and you're dressed for work already."

"I don't care. I like you sweaty."

Caleb smiled and returned the embrace. His cell phone rang, and he let go of Jake with one arm to pull it from the clip on his hip. "Stevens."

"Detective Stevens? This is Lieutenant Johnson. We have another one, sir."

Caleb pulled away from Jake. "Where?"

"The body was found tied to a dock about two miles north of the port. It's... it's bad. I think she was in the water for a while, sir."

Caleb's head dropped to hang between his shoulders. "Dammit. Are CSI and forensics on scene?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, I'll be there in twenty minutes." Caleb disconnected the call and looked into Jake's concerned eyes.

"I guess I have to work today after all. When are you leaving for Tampa?"

"Early tomorrow morning, probably around six."

"Okay, well, I don't know when I'll be home. Hopefully we can have a nice dinner together before you go."

"That sounds good. Call me when you're done, or when you have a break, and we can go to the diner. I know that's your favorite."

Caleb smiled and cupped Jake's jaw, leaning in for a soft kiss. "I love that you know me so well. Have a good day at work."

"You too."

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## Chapter 4

CALEB CALLED Jake the second he finished at the crime scene. He just needed to hear his voice.

When Johnson said it was bad, he wasn't exaggerating. The poor girl had been beaten to death. There were premortem bruises and lacerations all over her body. Her wrists had been tied, because there were abrasions around them where the rope had rubbed her skin raw. That wasn't the worst though. There was no doubt the girl had been sexually assaulted. Her thighs also had abrasions on the inside, like they were tied open and she fought the bonds to close them.

She couldn't have been older than sixteen, and her life was snuffed out.

A body that's been in the water for a while could be disturbing on its own, but combined with everything that had been done to her, she looked like a sea monster. It was horrendous, a vision that Caleb would have a hard time shaking, if ever.

Caleb knew his eyes were haunted, because when they finally met up at the restaurant and Jake saw him, Jake flashed white and ran over to wrap him in a tight embrace.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Caleb. God!" Jake kissed his neck and rocked him slightly.

Caleb took the comfort for a few minutes and then broke away. "It's okay. Well, no it's not, but it's part of the job. I just wish we would catch this fucker before he hurts somebody else."

Jake's warm brown eyes were soft with compassion. "I know. You will. Your team is well trained." He squeezed Caleb's shoulder. "I know you want it to happen faster than it is, but you're doing all you can."

Caleb nodded and looked at his feet. He didn't feel like they were doing all they could. Instead, he felt useless and defeated. If they found another girl this way, he didn't know how he could live with himself. Maybe he took too much on his shoulders, but this was murder, not yard work. If he didn't do his job right, someone lost their life.

Caleb rubbed his eyes with his fingers and then squeezed the bridge of his nose. "I know you're right."

Jake draped an arm on his shoulders. "Come on. Let's go in and have a nice dinner. Let me see if I can take your mind off it for an hour or so at least."

At first, Caleb didn't move. He was not in the mood to be in public, and food wasn't really appetizing to him at the moment, but when he looked up into Jake's face, the hopefulness he saw there made him capitulate.

They walked into the diner and were immediately shown to a table in the corner. The tantalizing smells coming from the kitchen revived Caleb's appetite a bit. The place was a favorite haunt of theirs, so the staff knew them by name. Slowly, his muscles relaxed, and after some much needed banter with the cute waiter, he was feeling more himself.

They ordered their meals, and Jake made sure to ask for Caleb's favorite beer. Caleb smiled at that and shook his head. He didn't know what he did to get so lucky to have Jake in his life. Whatever it was, he was thankful.

"So, I was thinking..." Caleb looked up from his chicken dish to see Jake staring at him. "What about a vacation? Not right now—I mean, I know you have to get this case wrapped up first—but after. We could go down to the Keys for a week, or maybe Vegas. I've never been to Vegas."

"Damn. You know, I don't know when the last time I took a vacation was."

Jake smiled, causing the creases at the sides of his mouth to deepen. "Exactly. Me too. I think we need it."

Caleb returned his smile. "I think you may be right. So what were you thinking?"

"I don't know. Maybe..." Jake swallowed looking nervous all of a sudden. "Maybe, a... um... honeymoon?"

Caleb froze and then dropped his fork on his plate with a clatter. Food splattered onto the table, but he couldn't take his eyes off Jake. *A honeymoon? But that would mean...*

"Tha... umm..." Caleb cleared his throat. "What are you saying, Jake?"

Jake looked down at his plate of food, carefully set his fork down on the table, methodically straightened it, and just as Caleb started to squirm in his chair, Jake glanced up again. "Caleb, I love you. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me. I feel safe with you. You make me want to be a better man." He reached over the table and took Caleb's hand, leaning forward. "I never thought I would find someone like you. I didn't think I deserved it. You're my best friend, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

Caleb searched Jake's face, his throat closing up. He was speechless. Obviously, Jake didn't get that memo because he started to look worried. "Say yes," Jake whispered.

Caleb let out a laugh that could be confused with a sob. It wasn't though. Or he would never admit it, at least. "Yes. Of course, yes."

Jake grinned, and tears filled his eyes. He leaned over the table for a kiss, and Caleb met him halfway. They brushed their lips together in a tender meeting, once, twice, more, before finally breaking away. They were both leaning over the table and gazing at each other with goofy grins on their faces. They didn't speak, just stared.

Caleb finally broke the spell by chuckling and shaking his head. "With how this day started, I didn't think I would be smiling by the end. You really took your job of making me forget seriously."

"So, you're happy?"

Caleb laughed. "No. I'm thrilled. I'm ecstatic." He looked at Jake seriously, trying to tell him without words all that he felt. "Happy is too sedate a word for how I feel at this moment."

Jake blushed and nodded. "Me too. Me too."

He leaned in for another kiss, this one more passionate than the first. Caleb grabbed onto the back of Jake's neck to try to ground himself. He was floating on the clouds and had no real desire to come down again. Caleb ran his hand from Jake's neck to his jaw, and the stubble there scraped his palm, so he swiped his thumb over it a few times. Time held no meaning. He forgot where they were for a moment. Someone coughed and reminded him that they weren't at their dining room table at home, but in a public place, so he slowed them down by giving Jake a few closed mouth pecks. When Jake pulled back from the kiss, he was beaming, his chocolate-brown eyes nothing but slits.

They were getting married.

The idea fully hit, and Caleb's eyes started to sting. "I love you so much," he said, thickly.

Jake cupped his cheek and leaned over the table for another kiss, but movement caught his attention first. They broke apart and sat back in their chairs.

Caleb expected to see their waiter, but there was a beautiful blonde woman standing next to their table instead. She was young, maybe in her early twenties, but she looked like she just stepped off a runway. She was perfect, her make-up accentuating her big blue eyes, and not one hair out of place. But she was scowling at Jake, making what would have been a gorgeous face turn ugly.

Caleb looked at Jake, perplexed, just as Jake jumped out of his chair, causing it to scrape across the hardwood flooring with a screech.

“Jessica? What... what the hell are you doing here?” A look of utter shock was on his face.

“That’s what I would like to know? I come into town to surprise you, and this is what I find?” She flung her hand in Caleb’s direction, barely sparing him a glance.

Caleb frowned, his confusion increasing.

“I don’t know what you are talking about. I haven’t seen...” A vicious slap to Jake’s right cheek cut off his words. His face swung with the impact and then turned bright red.

Caleb jumped up, ready to intervene, but before he could, Jake grabbed both of the woman’s wrists and pulled her in close.

Jake’s nostrils flared, and his cheeks twitched as he clenched his teeth. It looked like the woman was saying something to him, but Caleb couldn’t make out the words. Jake’s eyes widened, and he wildly looked around the room, then out the windows, before meeting Caleb’s gaze.

Caleb faced the woman, palms up. “Look... um... Ms. I... uh... I think there’s been some misunderstanding.”

She wrenched herself out of Jake’s hold and turned on him. “There’s no misunderstanding. I’m his wife!”

Caleb’s world stopped, along with the beating of his heart.

The word echoed in his head over and over. Wife?

Wife.

*Wife!* He looked back at Jake, for confirmation, but Jake’s head was hanging, and shaking back and forth. This wasn’t happening. It couldn’t be real. Five minutes ago everything was great, his future bright. He was so happy.

“What? That’s ridiculous. I... I...” It couldn’t be true, could it? I mean, they were just talking about their future. Jake had just proposed to him, and the look in his eyes... There’s no way Jake was married to this woman.

Caleb squared his shoulders and crossed his arms. “Listen, lady. I don’t know who you are or what the hell is going on, but—”

“No, you listen, you faggot,” she spat. She took a step back and wiggled her left hand in his face. The hand that held a nice-size diamond on the ring finger.



“He’s my husband. We live in Orlando, and he works here in Miami. He travels back and forth.”

*What the hell?* “You have the wrong guy. Jake lives with me. We’ve lived together for almost a year, so there’s no way…” Except Jake did travel for work. Sometimes he stayed for over a week at a time wherever he went. But they always spoke. They kept in touch the whole time. Wouldn’t there have been some kind of suspicious behavior, some clue?

No, Jake loved him.

“Tell him!” The woman gave Jake a look that made Caleb take a step backwards and then grab the back of the chair for support.

Caleb gazed intently at the top of Jake’s head, willing him to meet his eyes, to tell him this was all some kind of sick joke. “Jake?”

A small, hysterical laugh came from Jake before he raised his head and met Caleb’s eyes. There was something there in those brown depths. Pleading? Pity?

“No,” Caleb whispered. He realized he was shaking his head back and forth without conscious thought. A flash of heat traveled up his chest to his forehead, and there suddenly wasn’t enough air in the room. “No, this is bullshit!”

Jake swallowed and nodded his head.

That was his answer? He didn’t even have the balls to tell him to his face? “Say it,” Caleb snapped.

“It’s true,” Jake said, just above a whisper. He cleared his throat and looked away.

At the confirmation, something reached into Caleb’s chest and ripped his heart out. He blinked rapidly and clenched the back of the chair until his fingers ached. A year. A whole fucking year filled with bickering and laughter, frustration and love.

Really, it had been a year’s worth of lies. All of those happy memories crumbled into dust at his feet.

“What about me? Was this a joke? Was I some kind of game to you?” He was yelling now. It was hot in the room, and he felt like his head was going to explode from the pressure in his brain. People at the nearby tables had stopped eating to stare at the floorshow, but he couldn’t give a shit. His whole life had just imploded on itself.

Jake stood straighter and crossed his arms. “What were you? Let me see. A pleasant distraction. A warm body to ease the lonely nights. Someone fun to hang out with. Take your pick,” he stated flatly. Like he was listing items off the menu. Steak or chicken, pick.

Jessica screeched. “Really? What the hell, Jake?”

“Shut up, Jessica,” Jake growled back at her.

Caleb ignored her completely and ground his teeth together, trying to regulate his breathing. “You just asked me to marry you. What the fuck was that?”

Jake raised an eyebrow, then rolled his eyes and flopped his hands down, hitting his thighs with a smack. “Come on, man. You’ve been hinting at wanting to get married since all of these states started making it legal—saying it was just a matter of time before it was Florida’s turn, and all that. I had to give you something. I wasn’t ever going to go through with it. Obviously.” He was talking with his hands, flicking them around just as fast as the words were coming, and his voice was flippant, condescending. Caleb wanted to punch him in his betraying face.

Jake chuckled. It didn’t sound like his usual laughter that lit up a room. It was dull and lifeless. “I can’t believe you actually thought someone like me would want this long term, would want someone like you. I’m not gay, not really. I just like to dabble for some excitement. You know, a little change. You, on the other hand... well, you are a cocksucker of the highest order... and damn, you’re good at it. I can’t believe you didn’t figure that out. I must be one hell of an actor, huh?”

The more Jake talked, the angrier Caleb became. He was huffing like a bull and ready to jump the table and tear Jake limb from limb.

“Agh!” Jessica got in Jake’s space and poked him in the chest. “You’re disgusting. Such a pig! You promised this would never happen again. You promised!”

The manager came over and looked at them one at a time. “Is there a problem here?”

Jake gave him a charming smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “No, not at all. We’ll be out of your hair momentarily. I apologize for the commotion.” He reached into his back pocket, pulled out a fifty-dollar bill and handed it to the

man. The manager gave them all another concerned glance before nodding and walking away.

“Let’s go, Jake. I want to get out of here. We need to talk.”

“Just give me a minute, would you? For Christ’s sake!” Jake snapped.

“You know I can’t do that. Let’s go. Now.” They shared a look that Caleb didn’t have the will to try and decipher. With the manager’s appearance, all of his anger evaporated like so much smoke. In fact, every emotion fled. His eyes no longer focused, and he felt so tired, numb.

He stumbled around the chair and slumped into it, looking across the room but not seeing anything.

Out of his peripheral vision, he could see Jake squat in front of him. “Look, Caleb. It’s nothing personal. We had fun, and now it’s over.” Jake touched his arm, but Caleb flinched and pulled away, clenching his fists. “Go home. Just... go home, Caleb, and forget about me.”

Jake stood again, mumbled, “I’m so sorry,” and walked away with Jessica on his arm. Funnily enough, those three softly spoken words seemed the most honest thing said in the past five minutes.

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Caleb didn’t remember how he got home. He was just suddenly standing in the foyer of the house, soaking wet. Damn rain. He’d always hated the rain.

And in Florida, there was really no escaping it.

Numbly, he staggered into the bedroom, bumping into walls as he went, like some drunkard. There was no alcohol in his system... yet. It wouldn’t stay like that for long though.

He was going to get dry and then plastered. He wanted gone from this world, if only for a little while. He wanted to go to a place where he couldn’t remember his own name, never mind the name Jake Thomas.

As he walked, he peeled his soaked shirt from his body. When he stepped over the threshold of the bedroom, he flung it, not caring where it went. He toed off his wet shoes and pushed out of his pants and boxers, kicking them away and leaving them where they landed. He reached into his drawer, pulled out some clean underwear and put them on, nearly falling on his ass in the process. Stumbling over to the closet, he pulled open the door and froze.

Half of the space was taken up by Jake’s clothing. Jake’s shoes were still lined up besides his. He looked around the room, picking out objects that

belonged to the man he loved. His cologne was still on the dresser. The gray comforter that they purchased together was still on the bed. Pictures of them hung on the walls, and small trinkets littered the room. It looked the same as it did this morning, but everything had changed.

He turned back to the closet and pulled down one of Jake's shirts from a hanger. Bringing it to his nose, he took a deep breath. The shirt was clean, and there was no lingering sent of Jake there. For some reason, that made his eyes well up. His throat closed, his chest tightened, and he lost his fucking mind.

He threw the shirt onto the bed and tore into the others, wrenching the clothes from the hangers without a care and tossing them into the middle of the bed. He was breathing hard, trying to hold back the grief and cover it with his rage.

Once he was done with the clothes, he started on the shoes, followed by the pictures of them together. Pictures showing their happiness. Memories of a life. A life that was a lie.

He threw them across the room, aiming for the mattress. The sound of glass cracking didn't stop him. He had to clear out any trace of Jake. Any trace of the pain. He didn't care. He didn't stop to think if he would want these things, if he would want the memories.

He wanted none of it.

When Jake's belongings from the room were all on the bed, he started in on the bathroom. Anything that didn't belong to him got piled in his arms, and he stomped back to dump the products onto the mound he'd created.

When he was done, he looked around, trying to find something else to add, trying to find his sanity, trying to find something that wasn't there.

He strode toward the bed, pulled the comforter up at the corners and lifted, throwing the bedding and the goods it contained over his shoulder like a demented Santa, and carrying it toward the living room.

That was as far as he got before his emotions overwhelmed him. A moan of pain escaped, and he stopped, dropping everything to the floor. He fell to his knees and roared at the heavens, throwing his head back and screaming for all he was worth.

*Why? How? What. The. Fuck!*

Body-wrenching sobs escaped him, and for the first time since he was a child, he wept. He cried for the future he would never have, for the betrayal that

was eating a hole in his soul, for the love that had so quickly turned to bitterness and hatred.

How could this have happened? How had Jake deceived him for so long and he not known it? He was a detective, for Christ's sake; he should have seen it, seen the signs. It explained so much. That was why Jake looked over his shoulder when they were out in public. That was why he had a phone that Caleb didn't know about, and why he had snatched that phone out of Caleb's hand so quickly. That was why he flinched away from Caleb's touch. He wasn't used to a man's touch at first. Before Caleb, he probably just had random fucks. No one was stupid enough to fall for his crap for long, except for Caleb.

He was that stupid. All this time, he was just seeing what he wanted to see.

He'd opened his home and his heart to Jake. For what? Jake used him. No matter how much of a bastard it made him, he would rather Jake had died than for this to happen. At least then, he would be able to remember their time together with fondness. At least then, he wouldn't doubt every single thing about their relationship over the past year.

He knew he was in the middle of a Grade A pity party, but for the life of him, he didn't know how to stop it. Everything had changed in one evening, with one word: *Wife*.

Caleb felt a cold wetness on his cheek and looked up to see Kira staring at him with dark, soulful eyes, nudging his chin with her nose. He sobbed harder and wrapped his arms around the dog, burying his face in the golden fur around her neck. She whimpered and pushed closer to him, trying to offer him comfort.

"I—It's okay, girl. We'll make it... we'll... we'll make it through this. Somehow." Caleb hiccupped and tried to swallow down the boulder in his throat. "We'll be okay. It's going to be okay." He repeated the words like a mantra, rocking into the dog. Swaying, with his arms tight, he let his tears fall, drenching her fur.

He didn't know how long he knelt there. Eventually, his tears slowed and then stopped. A deep, searing pain had taken up residence in his chest and didn't seem to be going anywhere any time soon. Kira lay down with her head on his lap, and he wiped his face with his hands, trying to pull himself together.

Caleb was numb, and so tired. His emotions and energy drained from his body, released into the universe through his grief. It was time to move on. He had to, there was no other choice.

Just as he prepared himself to stand, there was a knock on the front door. His first instinct was that it was Jake. He'd come to say that it was all some mistake and he was back. He looked at the clothes sprawled on the floor, and it was the first time Caleb realized that Jake hadn't taken anything with him when he left. Maybe he had come just to collect his things.

Caleb smacked that down just as quickly as the thoughts came. If he lived with his wife and had another life that Caleb knew nothing of, more than likely he had clothes and belongings there too.

There was no mistake, and Jake wasn't coming to pick up his things. Jake was gone.

Before he could break down again, another knock sounded at the door, louder this time, more insistent.

He pushed himself from the floor, groaning as the blood circulated in his legs and his knees cracked. He must have knelt there longer than he'd thought.

He limped over to the door and opened it to see Matthew's concerned face.

"Is Jake here?"

"What?" Caleb's graveled voice was unrecognizable, even to him.

Matthew pushed into the house and looked him up and down. "What the hell happened to you? You look like shit warmed over. And why are you standing here in your underwear?"

Caleb let out a bark of laughter and ran a hand through his hair. "Long story."

Matthew studied his face for a moment before shaking his head and looking around. He toed the pile of clothes and stuff on the floor. "Where's Jake? I spoke to him earlier, and he said you guys were going to dinner and he was going to propose." He pointed at Jake's belongings. "What happened?"

"Yeah, about that. It seems Jake is married." Caleb tried to make it come out flippantly, but his voice cracked on the last word, ruining the effect.

"What?" Matthew yelled.

"Yeah, his wife showed up." Caleb paced the floor. "Can you believe that shit?"

"Caleb, Jake is not married..."

Caleb interrupted. "Yeah, that's what I thought too."

Matthew was shaking his head. "He's not married."

Caleb stopped and gaped at him. "You weren't there. This blonde chick showed up and started yelling, and he's marrie—"

"He's gay, you idiot! And in love with your stupid ass." Matthew grabbed hold of Caleb's arms to stop him from pacing again. "Tell me what happened."

"I did."

"No. Go back to the beginning and tell me step by step what happened tonight." Caleb had never seen Matthew look so serious, and there was something in his eyes that compelled Caleb to talk. As he was describing the scene, Matthew started to look angry. Finally, he was getting the picture.

Then a worried look took over. "Shit!"

That stopped Caleb in his tracks. It wasn't a "shit, this sucks," or a "shit, that bastard." The way he said it... He knew something Caleb didn't.

"What's going on, Matthew?"

Instead of answering, Matthew pulled out his cell phone and dialed, which pissed Caleb off completely.

"They got him. Those bastards took him right from under our nose." Those words sent ice through Caleb's veins.

Now Matthew was the one pacing, and the more he spoke into the phone, the more confused and freaked Caleb became. "Yes... I don't know how they found him, but they did. What? ...Fuck!" He kicked a shampoo bottle, and it smashed into the wall and exploded. "That prick. If I ever get my hands on him... Yes. Track the GPS on his phone and let's hope that he still has it on him... Right."

Matthew ended the call and then looked up warily at Caleb. "I think it's best if you sit down. I have some things I need to tell you, and you're not going to like them."

"Matthew..." The warning in that one word could not be mistaken.

The man sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "Please. Jake's in trouble. Just sit."

Those words sent a stab of fear to his gut and got him moving. Caleb walked over to the couch, the cold leather reminding him he was still only in boxers. He couldn't give a fuck though. The look on Matthew's face said this

was way more important than pants. Once seated, he took a deep breath and then nodded at Matthew.

Matthew sat down in the armchair across from him and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. "I'm retired FBI. And Jake... Jake is in the Witness Protection Program."

*What. The. Fuck?*

Caleb leaned forward. "I'm listening."

"About eight years ago, Jake was placed into the program." Matthew spoke slowly, measuring Caleb's reactions carefully. "He turned in a big player in human trafficking. One of the largest organized human trafficking groups in the United States was brought down because of his testimony and the evidence they were able to compile with Jake's help. After the case was tried, and the major players were convicted and in prison, Jake was given a new identity and placed in Florida."

Caleb shook his head and frowned. What? "How the fuck did Jake get involved in human trafficking?"

Matthew hesitated. "The leader was his father."

Caleb's heart stopped dead in his chest and his breathing picked up. For the second time that day the ground beneath his feet lost substance. It became a dark, murky water, and he fell through until his head was fully submerged. Sound muffled, and the thumping of his heart as blood rushed to his head became a roar. He jumped off the couch.

*No. No, this was a dream. All a dream. He was going to wake up. He had to wake up, dammit.*

Caleb swung his body around and threw his fist into the wall so hard the plaster gave and a gaping hole swallowed his hand. He absorbed the pain as it traveled up his arm and into his back. He slowly withdrew his hand, watching his fingers extend and flex, then clenched once again. Blood welled on his knuckles and dribbled down the side of his fist. "I guess it's no dream," he said, flatly.

Everything sped up again, sound rapidly returning as he came back to his body with a snap.

Jake was in trouble.

Pain dropkicked his chest. He turned back to Matthew. "We need to find him. Now."



He didn't wait for an answer but instead strode to his room, ripped clothes from their hangers and threw them on as fast as possible. He couldn't think about the fact that this didn't change anything. Jake had still lied. Jake... Wait, that wasn't even his real name. He didn't know anything about the man that had shared his life and his bed for almost a year. Nothing.

Once fully dressed, he came out of his room to see Matthew on the phone again.

"Yeah, I understand." He disconnected the call, looking defeated. "They found a GPS signal, but it was in a park not far from where you were supposed to have dinner tonight."

"Well, we can't stay here. Let's go to the station and see if I can get a team together. We need supplies at the very least. On the way, you can tell me what you know of what's going on, and why you know it." Caleb raised his eyebrow at Matthew and pushed past him, snatched his keys and wallet from the table by the door and opened it.

On the step were Sara and Samson, Matthew's wife and son. Sara had her hand raised to knock, and her face was red and wet. Samson was clinging to her legs and crying. She looked up at Caleb, lowered her arm and whispered, "I'm so sorry," before bursting into tears.

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## Chapter 5

WALKING AWAY from Caleb was the hardest thing Jake had ever done in his life, and that was saying a lot. His life had not been the easiest, to say the least. But he would carry that look of betrayal and pain in Caleb's eyes to his grave.

Which, if things went the way he thought, wouldn't be long in coming.

Once they stepped outside the restaurant, Jessica went from leaning on him to dragging him by the arm. There was a black sedan with dark-tinted windows parked at the curb, which seemed to be her destination. "Let's go, *Jake*."

The only thing that made him go along with the ruse that Jessica concocted was to save Caleb's life. There was no way he would have done it otherwise, but then Jessica must have known that. Or someone did. Jake stopped and looked back over his shoulder, the pain in his chest almost unbearable.

"Do I have to remind you that your boyfriend in there has a rifle aimed at his head? You know Master wouldn't think anything of taking him out either. If you want him to live, start walking." Her nasally voice, reminding him the love of his life was in a sharpshooter's sight, made him want to rage. He wanted to punch her in the throat just to shut her up but knew that would mean certain death if anyone was watching. Not for him—he didn't care about himself—but for Caleb. She was right; they would kill him without a second's pause.

Jake shuffled to the car, knowing he was walking toward his own death. It seemed he never really escaped his past. All of those years of therapy, watching his back, wondering when they would come for him, it had been exhausting. Finally, he'd met Caleb and felt safe for the first time ever. He'd become complacent. He'd thought it was over, that he could finally live a normal life and be happy.

He was wrong.

He never should have moved in with Caleb. All his life ever brought him was pain and danger, and now Caleb was smack-dab in the middle of his nightmare.

Jessica opened the back door of the car, and Jake started to get in only to come up short. "Sara?"

"Just shut up and get in the car, Jake." Sara's eyes were wild, and she was trembling.

Jake got in the vehicle, and Jessica climbed in after him and shut the door.

“Sara, what are you doing here?” She looked over at Jessica and then back to him. She shook her head slightly and opened her eyes wide, like she was trying to tell him something.

“We didn’t need you after all, little bitch. Master was right. All he needed was the knowledge that his lover was in danger.” Jessica glared at Sara and then laughed. “Master will be so pleased. Tie him.”

Sara shook her head. “I did my part. I told you where he would be, and I came along in case he needed more incentive to come with you. I just want my son and I want to go home.”

*Oh, shit!* It all made sense now. They took Samson in order to coerce Sara into helping them. Like most mothers, Sara would do anything to save her child. Guilt ate at Jake. This was all his fault, every bit of it. He had brought this monster into their midst, and now everyone he cared about was in danger.

“I. Said. Tie. Him.” Jessica ordered and then smiled sweetly. It seemed a life as a slave had taken Jessica’s sanity. She spoke of Jonathan Harboro with complete adoration instead of the fear and loathing she should have felt.

Sara snatched the zip ties from Jessica’s outstretched hand and looked up at him apologetically, her bottom lip trembling. “I’m sorry, Jake.”

Jake smiled gently at her and held his wrists out. “It’s okay.”

Tears fell silently from Sara’s eyes as she tied his wrists together. She made sure the bonds weren’t too tight, and he was grateful for that. Zip ties could be vicious.

Once he was tied, Jessica patted him down. She took his wallet and phone from his pocket, pulled the cash from the wallet, put it in her bra, and then threw the rest out the window. He watched as his only means of calling for help bounced on the sidewalk and grass before coming to a stop under a swing-set in the park.

“How did you find me?” Jake asked.

“Oh, well, you know... money talks, and luckily Master has a lot of it. There were people who knew where you were. All Master had to do was find one.” She waved her hand and shrugged as if it was no big deal.

Jake sat back without responding, resigned to his fate. At least Caleb would be safe now.

After a few minutes, they pulled up to a hotel, drove around the back and then stopped. Jessica got out of the car and pulled him out by his arm. He nearly fell, and she scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Walk much? God! Let’s go.”

A big man came around the front of the vehicle and boxed in his other side. Sara climbed out, quietly trailing behind. They led him to the delivery entrance of the hotel, and to a back set of elevators that must have been reserved for staff. They rode up silently, and the closer they got to their destination, the more spastic energy radiated from Jessica. She must be expecting one heck of a reward.

Jake closed his eyes and flexed his fingers, trying to relieve the ache in his hands. The doors opened with a ding, and they stepped out into an opulent hallway. Nothing but the best for Jonathan.

They dragged him down the hall, and Jessica let him go to open the door. Jake knew what was in that room—fear, pain, torture... hell. He thought that was his past. The reason he’d stayed in that one room apartment with 24/7 FBI guards for so long, without the taste of the freedom he so yearned for, was to put these people behind bars. To make certain they would never hurt anyone again. Never have the opportunity to kidnap a girl at twelve and take her away from her loving family. Never humiliate and sexually assault her until she was nothing more than a shell of a human being. Never kill a girl again—beat and gang rape her until her body gave out from the pain.

Not like they did his mother.

He couldn’t stand back and allow them to treat human beings as animals. He couldn’t live with himself if he did. Watching that done to his mother was the final affront. It was why he finally built up enough courage to escape.

It didn’t seem to make much difference though, because as they walked into the room, he came face to face with his nightmare. A man he thought he would never see again, a monster.

His father.

“Well, well, well, what do we have here? The prodigal son returns.” The dark eyes he saw in his worst dreams sparkled with malice. He might sound jovial and happy, but that was the biggest act ever performed. This man was the devil incarnate.

Jake raised his chin but said nothing.

Jessica walked right to Jonathan and knelt at his feet, leaning her head on his thigh. He pet her like a dog a few times and then pushed her away roughly. She fell over and crawled into the corner to sulk. She should have realized by now that there would be no reward, no kindnesses from this man. Her Master was a brutal, sadistic sociopath with no conscience.

Sara strode around him. "I did what you wanted. Now where is my son?"

Jonathan raised an eyebrow and didn't answer for a few moments. Without taking his eyes from her, he said, "Go get the brat," and the big hulk that walked with Jake from the car left the room.

"You know, the only reason I am giving you your son and allowing you to leave is because you and your husband are FBI."

Jake's head jerked to look at Sara in surprise. She just stood there staring Jonathan down, shoulders squared.

"If your husband was home when he was supposed to be, instead of off who-knows-where, then things would have worked out a little bit differently." He smiled and a shiver traveled down Jake's spine. "You would have all just... disappeared. Unfortunately, I can't take the chance that your husband will come after me. From what I understand, he was a good agent before he retired, and I'm smart enough to know that a man with a revenge mission should not be taken lightly."

He walked over and got in her space, gripping her arms until she flinched. "Heed my words, though. You will say nothing about this to anyone. If you do, if you go to the police or your FBI buddies, if you tell your husband, I will find you. You won't see me coming this time—there will be no warning—you will just be dead. Do I make myself clear, little girl?"

Jake had to give it to her; she didn't cower in the face of his promise. That was what it was too; Jonathan Harboro didn't make threats. If he said something, he meant it. But Sara stood tall, glaring in his face. "I understand."

Jonathan scowled at her until the door opened and Samson came running into the room. "Mommy!" The little boy threw himself at her legs, crying.

Sara wrapped her arms around him. "Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

Samson didn't answer, just shook his head with his face buried in her thigh. Sara stroked his back and glanced up. Her gaze met Jake's, and he could see resolution in them. He shook his head, trying to tell her without words to let it go. To go home and be happy, not do something stupid, that would cause her

whole family to suffer. She gave him a sad smile that was not reassuring. "Come on, buddy. Let's go home."

She picked up her son, looked at Jake one last time, and strode out the door. As soon as it shut, Jonathan gave the order. "Follow her. If she stops anywhere but home, or if she talks to anyone, put her down."

Two men Jake hadn't seen peeled out of the corners of the room and left.

"Now, where was I? Ah, yes." Jonathan walked over to stand before him. Jake raised his chin, and Jonathan smirked and then slapped him so hard he saw stars. "You little shit! Do you have any idea the trouble you have caused me?"

He grabbed Jake by the hair and kicked his legs out from under him, causing him to crash to his knees. "I told you, you are mine. Did you think I was joking? Did you think that some stupid faulty court system could actually stop me?"

He let go of Jake and backhanded him. Jake's face swung back, and he lost focus for a second. He shook his head to try to clear it. "First, you killed your mother, then, you run... now this?" He jerked Jake back by his hair again.

Jake tasted copper, and his mouth filled with saliva. He spat it at his father. "You had her beaten and gang raped by six men in front of me, while I was tied to a chair. I didn't kill her, *you* did."

"That was your fault!" Jonathan delivered a brutal kick to his ribs. "If you would have just obeyed, like a good little slave—" Another kick on the other side caused Jake to fall sideways "—it never would have happened. But no! You need to get it through your head: you were born a slave, and you will die a *slave*."

Jonathan stood and straightened his suit and tie, like he was preparing for a business meeting instead of in the process of beating the shit out of someone. It never failed to amaze Jake the depravity and evilness his father was capable of.

"When will our guests arrive?" he said, not even winded. Jake tried to catch his breath, and groaned with the effort.

Jessica stood from her kneeling position and checked her phone. "They are scheduled for eight o'clock, Master. So, a half hour or so."

"Very good. I am going to go get a coffee. I will be back in plenty of time. While I'm gone, I want him stripped and cleaned. We want to make a good impression." Jonathan walked back over to stand near Jake's head, his clouded vision just making out the shined loafers his father wore. "I'm going to make

sure that, by tonight, you remember exactly what you are. You will never forget your place again.”

Jake knew what that meant, and he blinked back the tears that blurred his vision. Men were coming who were going to test the merchandise—namely, him. It would be a night filled with pain and humiliation.

He didn't think he could do this again. He didn't know how he would survive it. It was different when he didn't know any better. All he'd experienced before was pain and humiliation. It was a way of life, the way he was raised. He was an accidental pregnancy to a slave girl. He knew nothing else. When he was old enough to fight back, they used the ones he cared about to keep him in line. If he disobeyed, they would torture his friends in front of him.

The final straw had been watching the light leave his mother's eyes. Listening to her beg for his help, pleading for him to save her. The last word on her lips had been his name. He'd escaped not long after, as soon as he'd healed from the beating he received that night as punishment for her death. One that nearly took his life as well. As soon as the opportunity presented itself, he ran. Hiding in a laundry cart, naked, with no money or belongings to his name, he ran.

Now that he'd tasted freedom, how could he go back? He'd learned what love was, and what it meant to be happy. How was he going to survive the loss? What was the point, really? What was a life like that worth?

He couldn't do it. He refused. He would rather be dead than ever be forced to live like that again. Resolve filled him. They would never let him go. Never.

This time, when the opportunity arose, he wouldn't run.

No. He would take himself out of this world of pain for good.

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“Sara? What are you doing here?” Caleb showed the crying woman into the house and shut the door.

Matthew rushed over, pulled her and his son into his arms and rocked them. “Shh... shhh. What's going on, sweetheart? What's happened?” Kira came over and started whining, trying to nose between the couple, but Caleb pulled her away.

“I... Ja-Jak... they...” There was no making out what the woman was trying to say through her sobbing. She had her face buried in her husband's chest, which wasn't helping either.

Caleb jogged to the kitchen, filled a glass with water, and grabbed some paper towels. When he got back, Matthew was sitting on the couch with Sara in his lap and his son clinging to his side. "Here, Matthew."

Matthew took the paper towels from Caleb and pulled back, dabbing gently at Sara's eyes. "Try to calm down, love. You're going to make yourself sick. Here, have some water and tell us what happened."

Sara accepted the towels from her husband, blew her nose and took a few deep breaths. "They have Jake. And I..." That was all she got out before she broke down again, but it was enough.

She had information about Jake. That's all Caleb heard, and they were the most important words uttered in the world. "Sara. Sara! Calm down and tell us what you know about Jake. It's important. Please!"

Sara pulled herself together, hiccupping and trembling. "I-I was leaving to go to my parents for a visit, and stopped for gas. After I pumped... a-a man. He got in the passenger seat and held a gun on Samson. He-he... I was so scared. He told me to drive, and gave me directions to... a hotel. There was another man there. A... big, he was big, and he took Sam-Samson. They took him away and said they would kill him." All of a sudden, she looked at her husband seriously, and her voice firmed. "Matthew, they were going to kill him."

"Okay, you're okay now."

She shook her head in denial. "No, you don't understand. They made me lead them to Jake. They told me if I didn't, they would kill Samson. They brought me along, just in case I was lying or in case they needed some incentive for Jake to go with them. I remembered that you told me Jake was going to propose to Caleb at the diner tonight. I brought them there. Oh, God."

Betrayal burned in Caleb's chest, and his first instinct was to rage at Sara. His intellect won the battle with his emotions, and he held his anger in check. It wasn't her fault. If she hadn't complied with their demands, she probably wouldn't be alive.

Sara shook her head and looked at Caleb. "I'm so sorry I led them to you. That woman... Jessica, I think her name was, she went into the restaurant and came out with Jake. She told him they had a sharpshooter across the street, and they would shoot you in the head if he didn't go with her. I don't know if that was true. I don't know how it could have been, because they just found out where you were, but it didn't matter. It worked."



Shame choked Caleb, and he had to fight to swallow it down. That explained what the woman whispered in Jake's ear after she'd slapped him. God, Caleb felt stupid. He should have known that Jake wasn't married. Jake had turned into a different person, and it was because he was trying to push Caleb away, to save his life.

Sara looked back at Matthew. "They're at the Ritz-Carlton. Room two twenty-seven. Someone tailed me the whole way home, so I went into the house, left out the back door and ran through the yard to come here, hoping someone was home. I didn't know what else to do. I think they may still be watching the house." She blew out a breath and squared her shoulders. "I'm still not exactly sure why he let me go. He threatened me, but he must have one hell of an ego or be completely insane to think that would stop me. I may be a woman, and I might have been compliant because he had my child, but I'm still an FBI agent."

"Wait. You too?" Caleb gaped at her. "You know what, never mind. We have to go. We'll make a quick stop at the station to get supplies and some guys." Caleb strode to the door while he spoke. They didn't have time for any more delays. They knew where Jake was, and he was going to get him.

"I'm coming too." Sara climbed off Matthew's lap, back to her fully capable self.

"Sara..."

"No, Matthew. I left him there. I know I had no choice, but I left him." Sara ground out between her teeth. "He's my friend, and I am not an invalid. I'm going with you."

Matthew nodded. "Get Samson into the car, and we'll bring him to the station. He'll be safe there."

She scooped up Samson, and they ran out the door, not wasting a moment. They pulled out of the driveway and turned down Matthew's street to make their way out of the complex. About a block away from their house, they saw a black sedan parked along their sidewalk. Two burly men occupied the front seats. Sara slumped down as they drove past, but neither man looked their way.

"All right, while we're driving to the station, talk. I want to know what the hell is going on, and I want to know now," Caleb barked as soon as they pulled onto the main road. He was driving as quickly as possible, but he didn't have his police vehicle. Those flashing lights would've sure been handy at a moment like this.

“I told you that Jake’s father was the leader of this group. Jake’s mother was his favorite slave. I don’t know much, because I wasn’t originally on the case, but from what I understand, they killed her. Jake escaped and went to the police, who brought the FBI in. They had been looking for a way to nail this group to the wall for a long time, but couldn’t prove anything. Jake helped, and they took them down.”

As Caleb listened, emotions swamped him, and he clenched the steering wheel until his knuckles were white. No wonder why Jake flinched at his touch and looked over his shoulder.

“So if they captured all of these guys, how the fuck is Jake’s father out now? Did he escape?”

“No, they released him.”

“What?” Caleb glanced at Matthew and had to stop short when he noticed the brake lights flash on the car in front of him. He smacked the steering wheel. “Come on, asshole. Why are you stopping?”

He swerved around the car and left beeping horns in his wake.

“How the fuck did that happen, Matthew? Why would they release someone like that?”

“Jesus. Just keep your eyes on the road, okay? We won’t save Jake if you get us killed first.”

“Matthew...” Caleb growled.

“He hired a snake of an attorney. The guy filed all kinds of motions. He appealed, and when that didn’t work, they paid off one of the newbie police officers that handled the evidence on the case. They filed a habeas corpus, stating that evidence was mishandled. The judge heard it two months ago. Because a police officer admitted to it, they had to release him. Without that evidence, they didn’t have a case to try him again.”

“Well, why the fuck wasn’t Jake informed? Why didn’t he know about this?” They pulled into the station. Caleb parked and turned to glare at Matthew.

“They couldn’t serve him. It would compromise his location. There were two people who knew where he was placed at the time—my boss, and Jake’s contact. The habeas corpus was filed right around the time I retired. So, because this guy had such a long reach and there was a strong possibility he would

walk, my boss approached me, briefed me on the case and asked if I would relocate here to keep my eyes out for anything suspicious. I said yes. I had planned to retire to Florida anyway. I thought this would make me feel useful.”

Caleb's nostrils flared, and he fisted his hands to keep from reaching out and strangling Matthew. Someone should have filled Caleb in on what was going on. How was he supposed to protect Jake if they kept him ignorant of such important information?

“Why didn't Jake's contact inform him when Jonathan was released?”

“He's disappeared. When I called in after you told me what happened, they said the contact went missing. They don't know whether he was paid off and left the country, or if he was tortured for the information on Jake's location and killed. There's an APB out for him, but no one has been able to locate him yet.”

“Son of a bitch!” Caleb slammed his hand on the dashboard a few times and shot out of the car.

They went into the station, and Caleb stomped into his boss's office without stopping. The assistant called out, but he ignored her. “Captain? I need your help.”

He quickly introduced Matthew and Sara, and as he filled in his boss on the situation, Matthew was on the phone with the FBI, calling in teams.

“I can give you three guys, but that's all I can spare. I'm sorry, Detective, but you know that we still have an unsolved murder case on going.”

Caleb had forgotten about the case, but now that it was mentioned, it sparked something in his head. “Matthew, you said this guy is into human trafficking. What are the age ranges of the girls?”

Matthew gave him a curious look. “Young. Twelve to seventeen. Once in a while they went older, but only if the girls looked young. There is a sick market out there, it seems. From what I've heard, they want them young enough to ‘train.’ That's what they call breaking them down until they don't even think of fighting back. Some of them even wind up with Stockholm syndrome and adore their Masters. It's sad.”

“What kind of ‘training’ are we talking about here? Is it that BDSM kink thing everyone is talking about?” the Captain asked, looking disgusted.

“No,” Matthew snapped. “BDSM is consensual and has strict rules. It's done for pleasure and the mutual gratification of everyone involved. This is slavery, pure and simple. There are no rules, and nothing is mutual. Some of

these men buy girls just to kill them. Others do unmentionable things to them until they die. Some of them last longer than others, but the final outcome is death.”

“Captain, the girls we’re finding are all young. They have binding marks. They’ve all been sexually assaulted. There might be a connection. The killings started here about two months ago. When did you say he was released, Matthew?”

Understanding radiated on Matthew’s face. “About two months ago. This could be your killer, Captain.”

The Captain looked at both of them for a moment, tapping his chin.

“Captain, the FBI is on the way right now. I know your team has worked hard to find the killer. I think it would be best if we work together on this. Then everyone wins. You get credit for the capture, and we get our man back. Win, win,” Matthew said.

The Captain looked between them again. “Okay. I will call in the men. Take two teams, and whatever supplies you need.” He looked pointedly at Caleb. “You’re not going.”

“What?” Caleb shouted.

“You know how this works, Caleb. This is too personal for you to keep a clear head.”

Caleb started to argue, but the Captain held his hand up and raised an eyebrow. “I could just wait until the Feds get here.”

Caleb gave a short nod.

“Show Matthew to the supply room and get him suited up.”

“Thank you, sir,” Matthew said.

“Yeah, yeah. Go! Meet in the conference room in five.” The Captain picked up the phone and started making calls.

Caleb rushed out of the office and down to the supply room with Matthew and Sara hot on his heels. Caleb grabbed weapons, vests and earpieces for the agents. While they were preparing, he suited up too. Matthew stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “What are you doing, Caleb? You heard the Captain...”

Caleb swung toward him. “I don’t give a fuck! If that was Sara out there, would you be able to sit back and do nothing?”

Matthew seemed conflicted, so Caleb continued, pushing the knife deeper. "You owe me, Matthew, you both do. They wouldn't have him right now if..." He gave Sara a pointed look, and she raised her chin, but tears welled in her eyes.

Matthew sighed. "Fine. But you will stand down and follow my lead."

*Yeah, we'll see about that.*

Five minutes later, they were in the conference room with Matthew giving the teams a brief rundown. He had a picture of Jonathan Harboro emailed over so everyone would know who they were up against. Caleb cut it short because he knew that if he didn't get to Jake soon, they may not get him out alive. Enough time had passed already. Jake had been in the hands of a monster for the past four hours at least. Caleb was afraid of what he would find when he finally got to him.

Once they arrived at the hotel, they grouped by the vans in the parking lot and Caleb took control. "Team one, you're with me. We are going up to room two twenty-seven. Team two, you take the outside of the hotel. You all know what this guy looks like. If anyone gets past us, you take them down. Use deadly force if necessary. Sara, you're with Team two. Matthew, you're with me. What's the ETA of the FBI?"

Matthew looked like he was going to argue, but he glanced away and ran his hand through his hair. "They said a half an hour about fifteen minutes ago. We should wait for them, Caleb." Caleb knew he was probably right, but he couldn't risk it.

"We can't. Too much time has already passed. This red tape may take Jake's life. We have to move, now. Stay safe, everyone. Coms in and eyes open. Let's go."

"I hope you know what you're doing," Caleb heard Matthew mumble.

*Yeah, he hoped so too.*

The teams were made up of four people each, plus Matthew and Sara. They were short, but they would have to make due. He couldn't wait any longer. God only knew what Jake was suffering at that very moment. They broke apart and jogged in different directions. Caleb watched as Sara went toward the back door with Steven.

Caleb went straight to the front desk. He told the manager who he was and showed his badge. The manager gave him a universal key card, and Caleb took

the team up to the second floor. He gave instructions for two men to wait down the hall near the elevator banks. Caleb, Frank and Matthew went up to the suite.

He gave them both hand signals. Frank was to clear the left of the room, Matthew the right and Caleb dead center. When he got nods, he prepared himself for what could be behind the door and pushed it open. He didn't prepare himself enough.

He made a rookie mistake. He got distracted.

The form that distraction took was Jake tied up to a hook in the wall so he was standing on his toes. He was naked. Some Asian-looking man was using a thin cane on him while a taller blond man jacked off. There were bleeding lacerations all over his back, butt, legs and even the bottoms of his feet. Some looked like they were made from a blade, some from a whip. His cheek was resting on the wall and tears were running down his face.

That momentary loss of attention cost him and his team. Gunfire deafened him, and he saw Frank take a bullet and fall to the ground in a heap. Caleb returned fire, taking out the first shooter, but there was a second, and Matthew went down. People were yelling and scrambling for cover. Caleb ducked behind the couch, barely missing being shot himself. He sat there for a second, back to the couch and gun raised, trying to hear what was happening. He didn't know how badly Matthew was wounded, but he couldn't take the time to look, and Frank... shit. Pain for his friends and their families tightened his chest, but he pushed it away. He'd have time to grieve later.

He peeked around the couch to get an idea of where the second shooter was and then jerked back quickly. He didn't want to accidentally shoot Jake. Once he got his bearings, he turned and squatted behind the couch, preparing to spring and shoot. He didn't get the chance.

Pain resonated in the back of his head and shot down his neck, and then everything went black.

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## Chapter 6

CALEB CAME to consciousness slowly, as if being pulled from a tunnel back into the light. Sound returned first, and he could hear someone speaking. Next came the pain. His head felt bigger than it should be, like someone was hammering it with a mallet. The pain throbbed. Shooting violently. Through his temples. Into his eyes. Down his neck.

He groaned and tried to open his eyes, which made him hurt even more. He tried to rub them, but couldn't bring his hands up. That was when he realized they were tied behind his back. He was sitting upright on a chair of some sort.

"Ah, so our guest is awake, is he? Good."

Caleb blinked a few times, his eyes watering. After a few seconds, the pain lessened enough that he could focus. He looked up and into the smiling face of Jonathan Harboro, Jake's nightmare, and now his.

"You ruined our little party, you know. You and your friends." The man tsiked at him, actually tsiked like a school marm. "You should have left well enough alone. Now that I have you, I've decided I'm going to keep you." He patted Caleb's cheek like a child.

"Fuck you," Caleb ground out.

"Hmmm, maybe. That is quite the possibility actually. Thank you for mentioning it."

Caleb glared at the man, and Harboro chuckled in response.

"First, we're going to have a different kind of fun." Jonathan moved to the side, and Caleb noticed they were in some kind of dusty, unused warehouse. He could see Jake kneeling on the dirty cement floor, naked, with his hands on his thighs. He had cuts and bruises all over him. Blood dripped down the side of his face, and one of his eyes was swollen. He was staring off into space, like his mind had shut off to protect itself.

"You see, my boy has decided to be difficult. So I'm going to help him feel a little more cooperative." With that pronouncement, he slapped Caleb hard. Caleb's head jerked to the side, where someone stuck a hot poker into his eyeball, or that's what it felt like at least. Jake looked up and whimpered, but otherwise didn't move.

“That’s right, boy. If you don’t do as I say, your toy here will be the one who suffers. If you’re good, then maybe I’ll let you keep him.” Jake looked at Caleb, and Caleb’s heart broke. There was nothing of the man he knew there. He was looking at a tortured, beaten-down boy. His eyes full of fear, no obvious fight in them left to see. Caleb knew in that moment, without a doubt, if he didn’t get them out of this soon, Jake wouldn’t survive.

Caleb’s heart picked up speed at the thought, urgency flooded his veins, and he surreptitiously started feeling his bonds with his fingers. It was rough rope, and the chair was wood. If he could find a loose screw, maybe he would have a chance to free himself. As he felt around the back of the chair, Jonathan went to the door and called out. A rough-looking man with a maniacal gleam in his eyes walked into the room and stopped about two feet from Jake.

“Blow him. Now. And do a good job, boy. Charles here missed your blow jobs, didn’t you, Charles?”

The man grunted and clumsily lowered his fly, fingers shaking with anticipation. Jake flinched and turned his head in refusal.

Jonathan sighed. “Fine, if that is how it’s going to be. I didn’t want to have to do this, but you really are leaving me with no choice.”

He strode back over to Caleb and punched him in the stomach. The chair lifted on two legs for a second from the force, and all the air left his lungs on a grunt. He couldn’t catch his breath and pain shot from his stomach to his head, upping the intensity of the throbbing and making his eyes water.

Jake cried out and then quickly crawled over to Charles. He pulled the man’s semi-hard penis from his pants and stroked it to life.

“That’s right. Now wouldn’t it be so much easier if you would just do what I say the first time? HmMMM?”

This guy was crazy. He sounded just as reasonable as if he was talking to a ten-year-old who wasn’t doing his homework, and everything he said had a singsong quality to it. It was like he was a fucking middle school teacher, but instead of history, he was teaching depravity.

This was Jake’s father. This was how Jake grew up, what he’d overcome. The pride and admiration he felt for the man grew. Not only had he pulled himself out of a horrible situation most people wouldn’t survive, but somehow, he kept his sanity and sweetness intact. Instead of the bitter, jaded soul that, by all rights, Jake should be, he was funny, happy and just plain amazing.



“You son of a bitch!” Caleb spat through clenched teeth. “When I get out of here, I’m going to rip you apart with my bare hands.”

Jonathan smiled and tilted his head to the side, studying Caleb for a few moments. Then he said, “You can try.”

He looked back up to check on Jake. “Stop playing and suck it like you mean it. That’s right. Don’t stop.”

Jonathan started to rub his own crotch, still spewing instructions. He walked over, grabbed Jake’s hand and put it on the erection visibly straining his pants.

Bile rose up Caleb’s throat as he got a good look at Jake’s childhood. Jake suffered though this torture for so many years. A man who was supposed to love him and protect him instead orchestrated and participated in his torment.

Jake ripped his hand away from Jonathan. As punishment, Jonathan came back to Caleb and hit him again, this time in the face.

The distinctive sound of skin slapping skin reverberated around the room two seconds before pain radiated up Caleb’s jaw and out his right eye. He shook his head a few times to clear away the stars, and then winced when Jonathan violently wrenched him upright again by his hair.

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Jake slurped and sucked on the rank, unwashed genitals of his father’s bodyguard, trying not to gag. He just wanted to get the man off as quickly as possible so, hopefully, they would be left alone for a while. Jake was afraid that if his father hit Caleb in the head again, it would kill him.

*Caleb.*

Oh, God, when he’d walked into that hotel room, Jake’s soul had crumbled. He’d thought Caleb was safe. He’d thought Caleb would move on with his life and be happy. Now Caleb was stuck in this hell too.

He sucked harder, rolling Charles’s sweaty balls, and a shiver of revulsion went down his spine. He’d dealt with this before, he would do it now. He would do whatever he had to in order to keep Caleb alive. Then maybe, they could both escape. Maybe... God, please, help them both escape.

His father was talking—when wasn’t he talking—but Jake ignored him and kept working. *For Christ’s sake, come already, you ugly fuck.*

Jonathan walked closer, reached down and grabbed Jake’s hand. He rubbed it on his erection, and Jake pulled away reflexively. *Shit, he shouldn’t have done that.*

His father muttered, "Fine," and then walked back over to Caleb. The distinctive sound of skin slapping skin reverberated around the room as Jonathan backhanded Caleb in the face. It took everything Jake had not to bite down and cry out.

His chest hurt, and it was hard to breathe. It wasn't the pain from his beating, although there was that too, it was watching Caleb suffer. He loved Caleb so much, and the idea that he was causing Caleb torment made him die a little. He didn't know how much of himself would be left if they ever made it out of here.

He watched his father pick up a nasty-looking knife and hold it to Caleb's throat, and his heart froze.

"Ah, ah, ah," his father said. "Look at him. Isn't he beautiful?"

*No, don't look. Close your eyes and don't look. Please. God, please don't watch this.*

Jake heard a sob, glanced toward Caleb and met his eyes. Those gorgeous turquoise eyes that had captivated him from the moment they met. The agony and regret he saw there made Jake want to curl into a ball and disappear. Caleb's tears destroyed him, and he felt like rotting garbage left too long on the street. The piece of shit that his father always told him he was.

"That's it, boy. Give it to him good."

Shame filled Jake, and he tuned out the rest of the conversation. He couldn't think of Caleb or of what Caleb probably thought of him now. He'd always hoped that Caleb would never know about this part of his life. It was too late for that though. He'd always known that he didn't deserve love, and now Caleb knew it too.

Charles started to fuck his face, and he opened his throat and let him. All the better to get this whole thing over with sooner. The bitter taste of bile rose up his throat and filled his mouth, causing him to gag. He jerked back, trying to catch his breath, but almost immediately started the sucking again. He didn't want Caleb to be punished for what Jonathan would see as disobedience. He focused on finishing this chore without breaking down completely, without losing his sanity.

Without becoming an animal.

But maybe it was too late for that. What if he'd been born that way? They do say blood begets blood, and his father was definitely an animal. His mother was too, just different, tame.

What that made him, he wasn't sure.

Maybe he was supposed to live this way. Perhaps his father was right, and he was supposed to die a slave, and everything he was outside of this horrible place was just a lie. A beautiful, wondrous dream. But this... this was his truth.

Charles finally orgasmed, his sour cum filling Jake's mouth. Jake struggled to swallow, knowing both he and Caleb would be beaten if he didn't.

When it was over, he crawled a few feet away, put his raw back against the wall, pulled up his knees to his chest and wept. Trying to hold himself together while his heart and soul broke apart.

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Caleb watched as Jake crawled to the wall and curled in a ball. He wanted to go to him and tell him it was okay, to offer comfort and take him home. To let him know that he didn't think any less of him or blame him. He wanted to say so much. Yes, Jake had kept things from him, but it didn't matter. It wasn't important that Jake wasn't who Caleb had thought, or that there had been so many things that they had never spoken about. Nothing was as imperative as getting them out of there alive.

Caleb felt around the back of the chair again for a sharp edge, something that he could use to cut through the bonds. He knew it was a long shot, but he had to try. He had to do something.

All of a sudden, the door to the room they were in burst open. Men in black, with FBI logos on their vests, swarmed in and chaos reigned. "Get on the ground," and "drop your weapon," was shouted round-robin style around the room. He tried to see Jake, but there were bodies in the way. So many people.

The knife was no longer at his neck, and Jonathan was yelling. He wasn't the only one either. The shouting volume increased and then gunfire echoed. Before he knew what happened, he was on his side, still tied to a now broken chair. Jake was on top of him, bleeding and struggling for breath.

Caleb's adrenaline spiked. "Jake?"

Jake looked up and his eyes were filled with pain and regret. "I'm sorry. I'm so..." Before he could finish his sentence, Jake slumped over. Caleb couldn't feel him breathing any longer.

"Jake?" he whispered. "Jake! Somebody? Help! Jake, wake up!"

Jake's limp body was rolled off Caleb. "Get the EMTs in here now. He's been shot, and I can't find a pulse."

Caleb fought his bonds, struggling to get free—to get to Jake. His wrists were raw, and every movement sent pain to his head, but he pushed that away as best as he could. He craned his neck around, but he couldn't see shit. "Get me the fuck out of these ropes! God dammit, cut me loose!"

Matthew crouched down into his vision. Caleb was relieved to see his friend, but he was too anxious about Jake to think about it for long. "Calm down, Caleb. The paramedics are with him now."

"Can you please cut these ropes?" Caleb gritted out through clenched teeth.

"I need you to be calm, because you aren't going to help him if you go off half-cocked. Are you calm?"

"Yes, you fucker!" Caleb shouted at him, spittle flying out of his mouth.

Matthew shook his head, but he cut the ropes. As soon as Caleb was free, he tried to sit up, but a white cloud filled his vision and the room spun. Nausea turned his stomach, and a hot spike of pain shot through him. He was panting and swallowing reflexively to try to keep from puking.

"Whoa, there. You look like you need a doctor yourself." Matthew helped him sit up. "Can I get an EMT over here?"

Caleb jerked out of Matthew's grasp. "No. Need to see Jake."

"The EMTs are working on him. They are trying to stabilize him, and if you go over there, you'll just be in their way."

"I need to see Jake, now. Help me up." He didn't wait for Matthew's help, but struggled to his feet. Once standing, he swayed and almost fell over, but Matthew steadied him.

"Caleb, you need to be checked out. You have blood in your hair and you hit your head pretty hard when you went down. You won't do Jake any good dead. Now stop being a stubborn asshole."

Caleb wanted to fight, but he could barely stand, his vision was blurry and the room was moving like a tilt-a-whirl, so he knew Matthew was right. They tried to get him on a gurney, but he glared at the paramedic until they helped him walk outside and over to the ambulance.

He struggled into the ambulance, Matthew right behind him. As they checked his vitals and shined lights in his eyes, he grilled Matthew. "I thought you were dead."

“Nice to know I’d be missed so much.”

Caleb couldn’t hear any amusement in Matthew’s voice, so he knew he was just as worried about Jake but trying to lighten the mood for both of them. It didn’t work.

“The first bullet hit my vest. The second grazed my arm. By the time I got my breath back, everyone was gone, including you.”

Caleb nodded and looked to the floor. “Frank?”

Matthew sighed. “He’s alive. He was hit pretty bad but they’ve stabilized him.”

Caleb blew out the breath he was holding and leaned his head back, closing his eyes. “How did you find me?”

“The FBI showed up about the time I was able to pull my ass off the floor. They were not happy we went in without them, by the way.”

Yeah, Caleb was sure they weren’t, and rightly so. Caleb shouldn’t have been on that mission. He was too close to the case, and his inattention caused Frank’s injury. Caleb could have easily gotten one of them killed. That would be one of his biggest regrets.

He grunted but didn’t say anything. The EMT cut off his T-shirt and started an IV.

“Anyway, Sara and Scott were at the back door when Jonathan Harboro and his crew carried you out. Scott was caught off guard and was shot, but it wasn’t serious. Sara hid in some bushes, but was able to get the license plate number of the SUV they used. We were in luck. It had a LoJack, which lead us right to you.”

*Lucky?* Caleb guessed they were that. It could have been worse. They could still be in that hellhole with no way out.

Now, Caleb just hoped Jake made it. Then, he wouldn’t just feel lucky, he would feel blessed.

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## Chapter 7

WHEN THEY got to the hospital, they ran a ton of tests on Caleb. He had a slight concussion, along with some bruises and cuts, but he wouldn't stay the night. They kept him for several hours for observation while they tried to convince him to stay, but gave up, made him sign a consent form saying that he refused medical care, and released him. He didn't mind. He'd sign anything to get to Jake.

When he finally convinced a pretty nurse to tell him where Jake was being treated, they wouldn't let him in the room. There were guards stationed at the door, and no matter what he said, they refused him entry. When he raised his voice and demanded they step aside, another FBI agent helped him find the exit.

He went home feeling worried, confused and miserable. Did Jake not want to see him? Was Jake too injured to decide? Jonathan Harboro was dead, so Jake was no longer in danger. Caleb had asked because he wanted ten minutes alone in a room with the fucker. Heck, five would have sufficed. But that would never happen.

When they'd tried to cuff Harboro, he lunged for a weapon and caught an agent off guard. He'd aimed for Caleb's head. Jake had jumped in front of the bullet and taken it instead. It just made him love the man more.

Caleb went home and took some pain pills, deciding that he would get some much-needed sleep, which wouldn't happen at all without being knocked unconscious. He would go back to the hospital the next day and persist until they let him see Jake.

The trouble was, when he went back the next morning, Jake was gone. No one would tell him where he was either. It was as if he'd never existed.

Two weeks crawled by with no word since Jake had disappeared. Matthew didn't even know where they relocated him. All he knew was that Jake was alive and well, and that the FBI had placed him somewhere else.

Caleb's chest hurt all the time. Everywhere he looked there were reminders of the happy life that they'd shared. Kira was moping around the house, just as depressed as he was. Every time they heard a car door shut, she would run to look out the window, and Caleb would glance up at the door. They were a pair, the two of them.

Waiting for a ghost to materialize out of thin air.

Caleb tried to pretend like everything was normal. He went to work, did his job and went home. He almost lost his badge for the stunt he'd pulled at the hotel, but because he had such a good record, and no one had died, they put him at a desk job while Internal Investigations performed a full review of the events. It didn't look like he would be back to regular duty any time soon, if ever. He also had to go to a shrink twice a week. For what, he wasn't sure. It wasn't as if they were going to be able to take the picture of Jake being used out of his head. Or of Jake shot and fading away right in front of him. His dreams would be haunted from now until eternity.

The good thing that came from all that happened was that they'd found their killer. They linked Jonathan Harboro to the dead girls, and he'd paid with his life. They found two of the kidnapped girls in the warehouse where Jonathan took them. They were in little dog cages, filthy and traumatized, but they would live.

Caleb was grateful that Jake was finally safe, wherever he was.

Jake's father would never darken his door again. It was just a shame that after everything, Jonathan had taken something else from him. From them both. He tore apart a relationship that had the potential to be something great—a forever type of thing, which rarely happened.

Caleb tried to stay positive, but it wasn't easy. It was his day off, and it was raining. He hated the damn rain. Maybe he should move somewhere else, like Arizona. It didn't rain there, and there wouldn't be so many memories everywhere he looked.

He couldn't do it though. He couldn't take the chance that Jake would come back and he wouldn't be there. Maybe that made him pathetic, but then, he already knew that.

He shuffled out of the bathroom and toward the kitchen, mopping his wet hair out of his eyes. The coffee wasn't made, of course. Jake wasn't there to make it. Like the fool he was, he stared at the coffee pot, the recollection of walking into the kitchen with Jake bent over feeding Kira flashing through his mind.

A knock on the door pulled him out of his thoughts. He shook his head and walked over, Kira at his heels. He cracked the door, blocking the opening with his body so the dog wouldn't sneak out, and froze when he found Jake on the

other side. He blinked a few times but didn't say anything, waiting for the mirage to evaporate before him.

His heart raced so fast he thought he would pass out, and the ache that had taken up permanent residence in his lungs increased. Happiness flooded him, but he couldn't move or speak, all he could do was stare.

Jake had a sling on his arm, and there were dark smudges under his eyes, but he was the best sight ever. He was standing in the rain, water running in rivulets off his hair. Half his body was under the awning, so his face wasn't in the rain, but the rest of him was soaked. He was holding a metal bucket in his arms with a bouquet of... beer bottles? Caleb's favorite beer, Stella Artois, was arranged in the bucket with bows and ribbons. He almost laughed at the gesture until he saw the look on Jake's face.

"Before you slam the door in my face, I just wanted to say something to you. I'm sorry. I should have told you, I know that now. But I had started my life over. I was no longer that lost boy. I *was* Jake Thomas. I remade myself. I thought my past would stay there, and I didn't want you to think differently of me." Jake winced and tried to adjust the bucket.

"Give me that." Caleb leaned out the door, took it from Jake's hands and set it on the table in the foyer. Kira was having a conniption, trying to get past him to Jake. He pushed her back, stepped onto the stoop, shut the door behind him and crossed his arms. He had to, or he would pull Jake to him. It seemed Jake wanted to clear the air, and so Caleb would be patient. He'd waited this long, a few more minutes wouldn't hurt.

"I don't even know who you are," Caleb said.

"Yes, you do. You know what's important. You know what I look like when I first wake up. You know that I am a grumpy bastard when I'm sick. You know that I leave my socks all over the house. You know *me*. You know the important things. You should know that I love you with everything I am, 'cause I do. Everything." The pleading expression on Jake's face broke Caleb's heart, and he blinked against the burning in his eyes.

He smiled at Jake. "No, I meant I don't even know your name. I don't know what to call you."

"Oh." Jake looked shell-shocked for a moment, then held out his left hand and smiled. "My name is Lucas Donovan, but you can call me Jake. Nice to meet you."



Caleb looked at that outstretched hand and broke. Patience be damned, he practically threw himself at Jake. Their bodies slammed together, and Jake grunted, stepping backwards from the impact. He hugged Jake hard, burying his face in the crook of Jake's neck. If Caleb was hurting him, Jake didn't complain. He needed this so badly. Needed to hold him, hang on and never let go.

He was squeezing so hard it hurt. That was why his breath was stuck in his throat and his chest was tight. His face was wet too, but that was because they were in the rain. That had to be it. *Fucking rain.*

He didn't know how long they stayed like that, clutched together, both of them trembling like leaves in the wind. It was a while though. Long enough for Caleb to remember Jake's scent, long enough that the sun broke through the clouds, long enough that the ache in his chest finally eased. When they broke apart and went inside their home, and he watched with fond amusement Kira's welcoming dance, he decided he didn't really mind the rain so much after all.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*Taylor Law is a northern-born, southern girl with a free spirit. If it's romance, she loves it. Taylor has lived in the southern United States most of her life, along with her huge family. She started writing at a very young age: her first poem at six, her first song at seven, and stories followed directly after. She hasn't stopped since. A romantic clear to her soul, Taylor continues to believe in the elusive "Happily Ever After." On any given day, you can usually catch her with a book in her hand, or creating something.*

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