



*Strawberry  
Wine*

*E. James*

# Strawberry Wine

By E. Jamie

## **Strawberry Wine**

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## Chapter One

It was a good day, Laura thought, blinking the sweat out of her eyes. Though, judging by the sting on her forehead, she wasn't entirely convinced it was just sweat.

She pushed her knee a little harder into the squirming man's back, snapping the handcuffs shut with a final, satisfying click. Pulling him to his feet with her, she ignored the barrage of obscenities he shouted at her over his shoulder and pushed the two-hundred pound man up against her squad car.

"Hey. Don't you know there's a lady present?" Laura asked and smacked the back of his head before pulling open the door to the backseat.

"Some might call that police brutality," Officer Karl Matthews pointed out as he came out of the car parked behind her.

"That's right!" Terry Moave exclaimed, struggling against Laura's repeated attempts to shove him into the back of the car. "I'll sue. I'll sue the whole goddamn NYPD. Starting with you, you goddamned slut!"

Karl tucked the lollipop in his mouth over to the left side of his cheek and helped Laura push the drug dealer into the car. "You know the Sarge is gonna kick your ass for not waiting for backup."

"No, he's gonna kiss my ass for bringing in Terry here." Laura lowered her head to give the criminal a cheeky grin. "You know, you just might make me the Sarge's favorite."

"Up yours!"

Laura sighed and straightened, turning toward her friend and fellow officer. "I don't think he likes me."

Karl lifted his hand to her forehead, and she wasn't surprised to see the crimson stain on his fingers.

"Terry here likes it rough," Laura explained with a shrug. "It's not that bad."

Her best friend shook his head. "Right. It never is for you, huh? Should I even bother telling you to get this stitched up?" His voice was tinged with a beat of sadness, and Laura's stomach tightened in apprehension.

She forced her friend off the uncomfortable path with a bright smile. "Let's get Terry here back to the station. Shall we?" She leaned back down to face Terry in the car. "Then you can explain about all the teddy bears filled with cocaine." Laura slammed the door shut and went to explain her findings to the three of her fellow officers who had arrived with Karl.

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Terry was a talkative sort, only too eager to toss out names of bigger criminals than his petty self to save his own behind.

For a price, of course.

He smiled at Laura across the table in the interrogation room, and she had to grit her teeth to resist the urge to lean across the table and sock him in his bulbous nose.

"We'll have to get the okay from the Sarge on that," Karl pointed out, tearing the wrapper off a lime-flavored lollipop and popping it in his mouth.

"I can wait," Terry tossed back.

"Sure. You can wait here with me, or we can stick you in a nice comfy holding cell," Laura said.

“Choose wisely,” Karl warned. “She has a way of...um...loosening tongues.”

Terry rolled his eyes. “That supposed to scare me? Bet she doesn’t weigh one thirty soaking wet.”

“Took you down, didn’t I?” Laura countered with an arched light brown eyebrow.

He glared at her. “I’ll wait here.”

Karl pushed back his chair and went to relay Terry’s conditions to Sergeant McKinney.

“Met cops like you before,” Terry said to Laura when they were left alone.

“Oh yeah?”

“Stupid broads who think they can be tough like us guys. Ain’t right. Biology don’t lie. Only way you could get the drop on me was to lie, to trick me into thinking you were on the level, wanting to work for my club.”

“Ah, right, while you are the model of integrity. That it?” Laura asked with a snort.

“Just sayin’. One on one, man to...well...you, it’d be a different story. Just one use for you bitches. That’s your problem, all of ya. Just need to be poked on a regular basis to get out all that aggression. Put you in a better mood.”

Laura propped her chin on her fists, listening with feigned intense concentration. It was nothing she hadn’t heard before. She rested her elbows on the long black table. “Please, tell me more. Your views on feminism are just fascinating, Terry. Did your daddy teach you that crap?”

He smiled at her. “This where you try all that psychology shit?”

“Wow, multisyllables. I’m impressed.”

“What about you, huh? Daddy didn’t pay you enough attention, so you thought you’d grow a pair by being a cop?”

Laura stood up and got some water from the cooler next to the door.

“Get me some too, would ya?”

She downed the cool water from the cone-shaped paper cup in one long gulp. “Sorry. Not your maid. Feminism and all that, ya know?”

“Oh, I got it now. Daddy liked to kick Momma around and she took it, right? Never gonna be like her, right?” Terry asked.

Laura crumpled the paper cup so tightly her short nails pressed into the skin of her palm. She tossed it into the garbage can and fought a flicker of fury that heated her belly; she forced her expression back to its nonchalant mask before sitting back in her seat.

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*Her mother must have smelled Caleb on her skin, because her eyes went dark and angry when Laura came into the house that had never been a home. When she passed her on the way to her room, Karen blocked her way and asked Laura where she'd been. Her stomach fluttered with panic and she stammered, “N...nowhere. T...t...took the long way h...home.” Only Caleb knew that she stammered when she was frightened. And one of the few things that frightened Laura was her mother.*

*Karen Thatcher sniffed the air around her daughter and then backhanded the fifteen-year-old girl into the wall. “Whore!” Laura heard through a haze of pain. She struggled to her feet, only to have her mother grab her by her blonde hair and press her face*

*against the pale yellow wall. "Rolling around in the gutter, huh? Spreading your legs already? You stupid whore!"*

*Another smack and Laura fell face first into a stack of old magazines in the corner of the room. The carpet smelled of dirt and beer.*

*"Was it that McKinney boy? Was it?" her mother asked, towering over Laura as the girl blinked back sweat, tears and hatred.*

*"Nah. It was Santa Claus," she joked through a mouthful of blood. That was another thing she didn't understand about herself. She could be trembling with fear, her blood ice cold in her veins, and yet she would goad her mother further. She was rewarded with another slap and a kick to the gut with a thankfully bare foot for fun.*

*"Don't you mock me, you little slut." And on it went for about twenty minutes.*

*When Karen's parental lecture was finally concluded, she fell into the chair in front of the TV with only four channels because nobody paid the cable bill.*

*Laura dropped onto her bed, every muscle in agony, her face on fire, and cried herself to sleep.*

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Word came back from the D.A.'s office that they'd agreed to the deal. Laura tried to tell herself that the important person was whoever Terry was working for, not Terry himself. She was used to the way things worked by now, but it still pissed her off that the drug dealer would be getting no more than a slap on the wrist just because he knew how to work the system to his benefit.

"I can take it from here if you want to get a start on writing up your report," Karl offered.



Normally, she'd rather poke her eyes out than have to deal with paperwork, but faced with the other option of dealing with Terry's smugness, Laura threw the pen down and got up out of her seat and stormed out.

"Nice talking to ya, Officer," Terry called out cheerfully.

She forced herself not to turn around but gave into the urge to slam the door on her way out.

Laura had just settled into her seat behind her desk when Sergeant McKinney popped his head out of his office and called out to her.

"Thatcher?"

It was a sympathetic "Thatcher" this time. She was well attuned to the different variations of her name her boss used and what each was a prelude to.

She closed the door to his office and stood with her arms crossed over her chest, glaring at him.

The old man looked at her with tired blue eyes. "I know. It sucks. You just have to look at the big picture here."

"No. *You* have to look at the big picture. I get to stand here and fume over the fact that we are out there risking our asses every damned day to bring scum like Terry Moave in just so the D.A. can let him out in.... Are they even giving him any time at all, or will he be back on the street by dinner?"

"Three months," William McKinney replied, anger evident behind his resignation.

Laura rolled her eyes. "Well, thank goodness for small mercies, I guess."

“Look, the paperwork can wait until tomorrow. Why don’t you take the rest of the day off?”

She nodded, her eyes falling for a moment on the picture propped on his desk. The back was to her, but she knew it was of his two sons, Mike and Caleb, as youngsters.

Her heart always moved into her throat when she remembered his sons.

There was Mike, the youngest, whom she had loved but not nearly enough. Now he was dead, and she could never make amends.

And there was Caleb, whom she’d loved too much, and though he was still alive, she knew she could never make amends with him either.

“Yeah.” Laura nodded, taking a deep, shaky breath. “I think I will.”

She turned to go, and he called out to her again when she pulled open the door.

“One more thing. You go after a suspect again without backup, I will personally kick your ass off the force. Understood?” he growled at her.

“Yes, sir.” She loved the old man. He was the closest thing she had to a father and had given her a chance when no one else would have, when a lesser man might let her wallow in her grief and die like she had wanted to. She shouldn’t give him such a hard time, considering she had killed his son.

Laura drove home to her apartment in a small four-story walkup in The Bronx. She could afford something a little better, but she felt that she should stay where she could do the most good. Penance for her sins, maybe, she thought, tossing the keys on her vanity table in the hallway.

She kicked off her shoes and made her way in her black socks across the white, painted wood floor to the kitchen to switch on the coffeemaker before turning towards her bedroom.

Laura went to her closet and reached up on the shelf to pull down the small gray metal box.

His dog tags were in there, from his tour in Iraq four years ago, along with his badge. She didn't look at them often because the loss still made her ache with a power that took her breath away.

Mike hadn't really ever wanted to be a cop. He was a gentle soul, but trapped by the McKinney legacy, he'd felt it was the only way to gain his father's approval and to live up to the example set by the older brother he adored.

She remembered when she'd seen Mike again after breaking Caleb's heart. After leaving him because she was too much of a coward to tell him what she had done. She'd been on the force for a few years, and after two suspensions, the last because she'd punched the ever living snot out of a male fellow officer she'd caught smacking his wife around in the parking lot, Laura was a hair's breadth away from being kicked off the force.

The solution? Spend a year at the police academy in Philadelphia training new recruits. Her boss at the time, a Sergeant Moss, told her she was being saved because she was one of the best.

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*Sometimes, being the best sucked lemons.*

*Laura was writing some notes in yellow chalk on the wide green board when the door swung open and rushed footsteps made their way towards her. Latecomers.*

*“You’d better have a damned good excuse. It doesn’t pay to get on my bad side, as you should know by—” The words stuck in her throat when she turned to give the late student hell. She wondered if she looked as pale as he did.*

*“Laura?” he asked, his voice a shocked croak.*

*The other students turned to look at the new recruit with growing interest.*

*She gripped the edges of the podium to keep from falling when her knees buckled. “Good God,” Laura murmured. Then, remembering she had a class to teach, she licked her lips and straightened her spine, forcing her eyes away from Caleb McKinney’s brother.*

*“We’ll pick this back up in a minute. Can I see you outside?” She didn’t look at Mike but knew that he was following her out into the hallway.*

*“What the hell are you doing here?” Laura demanded.*

*He was taller now. How old was he? Nineteen? No. Twenty. His birthday was in May. He was broader than Caleb had been when he was around the same age but had the same brown hair. His eyes, though, were brown like his mother Caroline’s, whereas Caleb had inherited his father’s blue eyes.*

*Caleb... The name sliced through her with lethal ferocity, and Laura had to hold onto the wall. Her nails scraped a bit of the old pale green paint off.*

*“Where have you been? God, Laura. Does Caleb know where—” His eyes roamed over her in shock, like he couldn’t believe she was standing before him.*

*“No! And you’re gonna shut your damned mouth about it, all right?” she snapped.*

*Mike jerked back, unprepared for the violence in her tone. “Laura, I can’t just—”*

*“What are you doing here? Why aren't you in New York?” she asked, thinking he would surely want to be at the same police academy as his brother.*

*“I wanted to learn to be a cop without having Caleb’s example held up to me all the time. Being at the same school he graduated from would have made that impossible,” Mike explained, his eyes full of questions. “You know he graduated early? He's in his second year of—”*

*Laura wanted to know. Wanted to know everything. Every single minute Caleb McKinney had spent apart from her. But she cut Mike off before he could continue. Down that road lay insanity.*

*“I want you out of my class.” She poked his chest with her forefinger. A gesture she remembered used to piss him off when she'd do it to tease him. They both remembered. Mike narrowed his eyes, and right then, he looked too much like Caleb and Laura wanted to cry.*

*“First of all, I didn't know it was your class. My sheet says Tracey on it.” He showed her the admissions form.*

*“Mrs Monti is blind as a bat. Her days are numbered,” Laura explained, trying to remember to breathe.*

*“Why, Laura? Why the hell did you just leave like that? Do you have any idea what that did to Caleb? You wrecked him. Completely wr—”*

*Laura couldn't look at him anymore. “I'll get you transferred to Hatfield's class. Go down to Mrs Monti—”*

*“Like hell,” Mike snapped, and now it was Laura who jerked in surprise.*

*She'd seen him depressed, cheerful, surly, but she didn't remember ever seeing him well and truly angry. Like now.*

*"You owe me some answers, for my brother's sake. What the hell happened that you had to ditch him without so much as a goodbye?"*

*"I left a note," she replied, knowing how pathetic and weak that sounded.*

*"Caleb never mentioned a note. But it must not have been very clear, because he's spent the past five years wondering what the hell he did to make you dump him like a sack of garbage—"*

*"Stop it! God, just stop!" Laura pleaded, wrapping her arms around herself. Mike's eyes softened, and he shook his head. "We have to talk about this, Laura. I'm not gonna let you ignore me. If you transfer me, I'm getting on the phone to Caleb right now and telling him where you are, got it?"*

*Her eyes widened. "You can't!"*

*"We'll get something to eat after class. How's that?"*

*"It's not a good idea for me to get too chummy with my students." For once, she was more than happy to follow the rules.*

*"Fine. We'll go some place out of town,"*

*"For God's sake!" she cried, feeling trapped.*

*"Laura, if you ever loved my brother, you'll meet me at D'Angelo's tonight at seven. Got it? Now we should get back in there before we give the other students more to wonder*

*about than we already have.” He held the door to her class open, and Laura forced herself to walk through it, being very careful not to touch him.*

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*It took a whole bottle of wine for her to come up with enough half truths and outright lies to satisfy him.*

*Fear of commitment.*

*Not good enough.*

*Different worlds.*

*Her feelings had changed. (Yes. If anything, she loved Caleb more now than she ever had.)*

*Didn't want to hurt him.*

*That one made Mike choke on his steak. “You think it hurt him less ’cause you were too much of a coward to say all that to his face?” he asked her, eyes wide in disbelief.*

*Laura lowered her gaze and ran her finger along the edge of her plate, thinking, it hurt me less.*

*She was very drunk by the end of the evening, and Mike drove her back to her apartment. He carried Laura through the sparsely furnished living room to her bedroom and untangled her hands from around his neck. She gave a small whimper, protesting at being released. He was so warm, and she hadn't felt anything but cold in so long. She nuzzled his skin. He smelled like Caleb. The same cologne. Laura remembered that scent, like spiced warm leather, mingling with his natural scent that reminded her of wet grass after a violent rainstorm, filling every pore so that she could still smell Caleb on her skin days later.*

*"You're gonna have a hell of a hangover come morning."*

*Not Caleb, Laura told herself, trying to straighten the tangle of her thoughts. The voice was different, deeper. Mike. That's right. It's Mike here. Not Caleb. She squeezed her eyes shut, wanting to see Caleb when she opened them again.*

*Still not Caleb.*

*Then Mike brushed his lips across her forehead before leaving her.*

*Just like Caleb.*

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Laura set the badge back in the box and brushed the tears away. She hadn't meant to get so close to Mike, to love him in that safe way that she could never love his brother. But he was too close to her memories of Caleb. She could share the stories of the good times with him, growing up with the McKinney brothers because her own home was not a place she wanted to be.

She knew it was wrong. She knew she shouldn't have done it, but she allowed herself to open her heart to Mike because it felt like she could be close to Caleb too.

When he had wanted to tell his older brother about them, Laura had put him off again and again. He'd told her that Caleb had moved on, was seeing someone new, and jealousy she'd known she had no right to feel had flared up hot and vicious in Laura and she'd very much wanted Caleb to know then, wanted to throw it in his face.

But they'd never gotten the chance to tell him, and Caleb hadn't found out until after Mike had died.



It had felt like God was punishing her yet again at the time. How dare she try and be happy after what she had done? How dare she try and substitute Mike for his brother? So while out on one of his first patrols, he had been shot, and just like that, Laura's one bright flicker of light had been snuffed out.

She got up off the bed and went back to the kitchen to return her cold coffee and replace it with a bottle of brandy. Bringing it back into bed with her, Laura poured her first glass and knew she wouldn't stop until the memories in her head were crushed under the blissful oblivion of alcohol.

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The blare of the phone the next morning was like a hot poker being inserted through one ear, inch by inch until it pushed out the other side and just stayed there, throbbing. Cursing out loud, Laura blindly reached for the receiver to make it stop.

Sergeant McKinney wanted her to come in early.

She opened one eye and stared at the digital clock on her night table. Six a.m. Her reply was nothing more than a groan of pained dismay.

After a deliberately cold shower and three cups of coffee, Laura made it into the station and felt halfway human again when she knocked on the Sarge's door.

He snorted when he saw her. "Hard night?"

It figured he would be able to see past her façade when she thought she looked pretty put together. Those old blue eyes missed nothing.

Now they looked at her with something close to dread, and she wondered just what it was that he was going to make her do.

Paperwork duty for a month?

No. That would have amused him.

“Have a seat.” His gravel-like voice was soft and serious. He ran a finger down the bottom of the frame around the photograph of his sons.

“What’s going on?”

“That list of names Terry gave us. One of them is a person of interest in a separate investigation we’re in on over at 114<sup>th</sup> in Queens. Some of our officers are being transferred over to help with the investigation into a child sex slave ring. I gave them your name.”

Laura blinked and sat up in the gray leather chair, instantly awake. “What? Why would you...What?” Inside, she felt nauseous at the idea of children being abused in such a disgusting way and knew she would like nothing more than to help bring down such monsters. At the same time, she felt there was more to why William McKinney had volunteered her for the transfer.

“I thought you’d want to be in on this...especially after what you’d been through.”

“You know better than to question that.” Though her abuse hadn’t been sexual in nature, unless she were to count the many of Karen Thatcher’s boyfriends who had sometimes gotten overly friendly with the young Laura, any kind of abuse sent her blood boiling. She was well known for roughing up suspects whose crimes were physically or sexually abusive against those weaker than them. She ran a hand through her blonde hair. “I just expected you to keep me as far away from that case as possible. You’re always on my ass about getting too emotionally involved, and I know it must have taken some convincing to get the higher-ups to give the okay.”

He nodded. “It did. But I know how important it is that you be a part of this case. You’re gonna be pissed at me when I tell you why.”

Laura felt a shiver of inexplicable dread go down her back, and her short, clear-polished nails dug into the flesh of her palms while she waited for him to go on.

Sergeant McKinney took a deep breath, and his next words made Laura freeze in her seat.

“Caleb has just been made the lead detective on that case. You’ll be working with him on this.”

The room around her seemed to shrink, and Laura held her breath for so long only the pressure in her chest reminded her that she wasn’t breathing. When she tried to take in air, she choked on it and coughed violently.

Sergeant McKinney stood up and got her some water from the cooler in the corner of his office.

She downed it in one gulp and crunched the paper cup. Her hands shook when she wrapped her arms around her middle.

“I thought...” Her voice cracked, and it sounded muffled in her own head. Laura felt like she was moving through water. “He said he was going to leave the force after Mike...” She didn’t like reminding William about the loss of his son and the horrible break with his eldest son on the day of the funeral, but she could see the pain there in the old man’s eyes every time Mike’s name was mentioned.

She hadn’t dared attend the funeral, though she wished every day that she had been braver and been able to face Caleb and his family. She visited Mike’s grave in upstate New York often, though.

William had managed to track her down a little while after the funeral when she’d been in her apartment wishing she had died as well, but not brave enough to kill herself.

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*“Are you Laura Thatcher?”*

*She was taken aback by the soft, gravelly voice. She nodded and welcomed him into the apartment after he introduced himself.*

*She knew her place smelled like booze, but he didn't comment. He didn't comment on the mess either.*

*William McKinney was not the fierce, imposing war hero. He was not the demanding, unyielding sergeant. The weight of his grief made him...small, fragile. He was not invincible. Not immune to pain. He was a father who had lost his son.*

*She had spent years wondering how this meeting would go. Worrying if little, insignificant Laura Thatcher could ever gain the respect of a man like William McKinney. Now, she just wanted to ease the pain she saw on his face.*

*Caleb was wrong, she thought while William told her he wished they'd met again under better circumstances. He was not the coldhearted, angry man Caleb had painted him to be.*

*Laura steered her mind away from Caleb and the memories his name conjured up.*

*William told her that Mike had called him with the news of their relationship, and Laura looked away, biting back tears. Mike had told her it was time to come clean. It would make sense he would tell his father first, not yet ready to inform his older brother that he was in love with Caleb's ex.*

*He offered to put in a word for her to be assigned to his precinct. William offered her a life she didn't deserve. She knew she should turn him down. But here was her chance. Little, no-good Laura Thatcher could have a future doing the one thing she dared.*

*Fighting. The only thing she was good for anymore. Maybe by throwing herself into that life, she could make it all worth something. Make up for betraying Mike in so many different ways. Serve under his father. Get away from everything...from Caleb.*

*He wouldn't forgive her if she went to work with his father. Another betrayal. Laura almost smiled. What was one more after the ways she'd already betrayed him? A part of her cried out against cutting herself off from Caleb this little bit more. The weak part. The stupid part. The part that reminded of her the little girl who believed that if she was quiet enough, good enough, smart enough, Mommy would love her.*

*She didn't need anyone to love her. She was strong enough on her own, thank you very much! Laura stiffened her spine and accepted William McKinney's offer.*

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"I don't know what happened between the two of you," William said, bringing her back to the present.

And he didn't know. He had no real clue. He'd seen her now and then when she was a child over at the McKinney house on the rare occasions he wasn't working.

He'd known Caleb had a girlfriend, but they had never really spent time with William after he divorced Caroline because Caleb went out of his way to avoid his father, blaming him for leaving his family.

Laura didn't correct William's assumption that she avoided Caleb because of Mike, but she knew he wondered if there was more to her avoidance of his son.

"I have faith that you are the best cop for this case. You won't rest until you find these monsters. Can you put your personal feelings aside to get these guys?"

There it was. Could she face Caleb, work with him and risk all the devastating emotions she knew would come with that for the sake of the innocent lives who were suffering such brutality?

Was it time to face her past so that these children could have a future?

This man across from her had had faith in her when she'd been at her lowest point. He'd picked her up and saved her. How could let him down now?

Before she could give in to her fear, Laura took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay. Yeah. I'll do it."

## Chapter Two

Caleb fought back the urge to vomit when the boot connected with his ribs a second time.

“I told you he was a goddamned cop!” a thick Jersey voice barked above him.

*Just a little bit more...* Caleb thought, trying to focus through the pain, seeing the shine off the blade by one of the crates on the cold black cement floor. He mentally judged the distance between how far his arm could reach and grab it and where he was now. *Not enough.*

He rolled over with a groan and tried to move imperceptibly another few inches to the right. It hurt to breathe, and he wondered if he’d cracked a rib.

“Well, what the hell do we do with him now?”

Caleb recognized that voice. The youngest in Jackson’s gang. No older than eighteen and eager to prove himself. That made him the most dangerous member of the gang right now. He knew if Jackson told Kevin to blow his brains out, he’d do it.

“We ice him and make sure no one finds his body,” Jackson snapped.

“But he’s...a cop,” Kevin reminded him, his voice shaking.

“You deaf? I said, we make sure no one finds his body.”

“Not too smart...” Caleb groaned. “Cops gonna come sniffing around when I go missing.”

“You think I give a shit ’bout the NYPD?” Jackson asked, kicking him in the side. “Only one who’s got proof of anything is you.”

Blinking the sweat out of his eyes, Caleb heard the gun cocking above him and knew he had seconds. He shot his arm out and gripped the steel blade, feeling it slice into his skin at the same time that he brought the point down as hard he could into the toe of Jackson's boot. The shot went wild, and Jackson let out a cry, falling backwards.

Caleb brought his foot up and hooked it around the back of Kevin's knee, bringing him down before the young man could get his shot off. He caught the gun when it dropped from Kevin's hand as he hit the floor and fired two bullets into the young man's chest. He forced himself to look away from the teenager's now vacant eyes.

The one they needed alive was Jackson. Caleb kicked the gun out of his hand when the gang leader scrambled to reach it and fired a bullet into his knee.

The bald black man curled into a ball and howled, letting loose with a string of obscenities. Caleb struggled to his feet through the haze of pain at the same time that the other cops burst into the warehouse.

"We got it!" he called out, pointing to Jackson's trembling body still curled up on the floor, blood pouring through his fingers while he held his legs. "It's in his back pocket."

He pointed to the ass of the man's jeans where Jackson had stuffed the envelope of wire transfer receipts Caleb had found—receipts that proved Jackson and his men were doing business with an underground group in the Philippines.

There was no proof that was the group behind the trafficking of children, but it was their strongest lead so far.

"You okay, McKinney?" Detective Marlow asked, looking Caleb over with growing concern.

Caleb tried to take a deep breath but found it much too painful. "I'm good."



The red-haired older man cocked an eyebrow with obvious skepticism. “Right.” He called out for the other cops to scour the entire area for evidence; meanwhile, he was going to drive Caleb and Jackson to the hospital before booking the gang leader.

“Hey, I said I’m fine!” he countered but hissed when pain sliced through him while he got to his feet. He wanted to be the one to grill Jackson. The others would go too easy on him.

Caleb made it as far as the squad car before pain seized him again, and this time he did throw up.

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He had three bruised ribs. The doctor ordered him to take it easy for at least two weeks, and Sergeant Morrison agreed, refusing to let him come back to work.

“Are you insane? We can’t afford to lose two weeks!” Caleb protested into his phone before groaning as he tried to slip his white shirt on without sending another spasm of pain through his body.

“We’re getting some help from some of the best over in the Bronx. That should help pick up some of the slack. We’re going to be partnering you up with one of them on this. A... Hang on a sec. I got her name here somewhere. Christ, Sheila’s always after me to be more organized. Maybe I should start listening, huh?” he asked, and Caleb heard the shuffling of paper on the other end of the phone line before Morrison spoke again. “Ah, here we are. Thatcher. Detective Laura Thatcher.”

Caleb squeezed the receiver, feeling a tight fist of apprehension sock him in the stomach. “Say again?” He’d heard wrong. Of course he’d heard wrong. Laura had left him. Disappeared.

*I’m sorry.*

He struggled to breathe when Morrison confirmed that it was indeed Laura Thatcher who'd be working with him.

Well, there had to be more than one Laura Thatcher in the world.

Who was a cop?

Who worked in the same department as his father?

Fate had never been kind to Caleb McKinney. Here was proof of that yet again.

Part of him wanted to be there when Laura arrived at the station. He would finally have the answers he'd wanted after ten years.

The other, weaker, part of him wanted to run as far away from those answers as he possibly could, because what could ever be an acceptable reason for what she had done? It was obvious that she had never truly loved him. He never considered himself a coward, but he knew he didn't have the courage to see those answers there in her eyes.

So he agreed to take the time off. Anything to avoid looking at her lying face.

Even though he knew that face would follow him into his dreams, because she always did.

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*He was thirteen years old when he first saw her. Sitting outside of the principal's office in faded jeans and a yellow tank top, she held a purple cloth wrapped around what he guessed was ice to her eye. He stood there for a moment, hand poised to grab the silver doorknob, but he couldn't make himself do it just yet.*

*Caleb McKinney was late, thanks to his brother, who'd insisted that he could not leave the house without his dad's leather jacket despite the fact that it was about ninety degrees that day and the jacket was about three sizes too big for him.*

*"Whatcha lookin' at?" The soft but curt voice jarred him, and Caleb realized he was staring at her.*

*"What happened to your eye?" he replied when he found his voice. She was kinda pretty, he noticed. But not like Kelly McGrath, whom he had a mad crush on. Kelly McGrath was so pretty, with long, dark hair that she liked to wear in a single braid down her back. She wore pretty dresses with flowers on them sometimes.*

*This girl's blonde hair was too short, coming just barely past her ears in a cut Caleb was convinced she'd done herself.*

*"None of your business, Rich Boy," she snapped, and he stiffened.*

*He took a deep breath to push down the burn of resentment and forced himself to turn the doorknob and leave her. He hoped her eye hurt. A lot.*

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He spent the next few days recuperating at his mom's house upstate. Caleb told himself it was because he needed the rest, and he also knew how offended Caroline McKinney would be if she found out her son was in his apartment hobbling around and hadn't asked for his mother to take care of him.

That it put that much more distance between him and Laura was just a bonus.

He should have known things would never be quite that simple. He sat eating lunch at his mother's round maple table. She shut off the faucet when the phone rang and turned to him with a look of such white-faced surprise that Caleb felt a surge of both excitement and dread, knowing right then who was on the other end.

“That was...um... Oh dear,” Caroline said, bringing a hand to her mouth, her brown eyes wide.

“What did she want?” he snapped, his heart racing, the tuna in his mouth now tasteless. He took a long gulp of beer, trying to swallow.

“She...wants to come visit.”

Caleb raised an eyebrow. “Oh she does, does she? After ten goddamned years? After everything you did for her and her walking out on not just me but you like you were nothing, and you just say yes, she can come? What the hell are you thinking, Mom?”

His mother stiffened. “I’m thinking you should watch your language in my house, young man.”

Chastised, Caleb looked away from his mother. “I can’t believe you’re just ready to welcome her back here like nothing’s happened.”

Caroline sighed and placed the pale yellow hand towel on the handle of the black-topped stainless steel oven door. She took a seat across from her son. “You’re forgetting that she’s going to be working with you on this new case. She likely knows you’re up here recuperating and wants to make peace.”

He finished his beer and began picking off the label. “You always had a soft spot for her.”

“So did you.”

“Yeah, well, I sure as shi—” He caught himself in time and shook his head. “Won’t make that mistake again.”

“Caleb, no one knew better than us what that young woman went through before she was finally taken away from that horrible mother of hers to live with her grandmother.”

“Oh, Ma. Come on! A crappy childhood doesn’t excuse what she did.” He leapt up off of his beige cushioned seat, fury boiling through his veins as the old wounds threatened to reopen. “She’d been out of her mother’s house for years. She was living in her own place over Greeley’s garage, and we were talking about getting married, for Christ’s sake. Then all of a sudden. Poof! She’s gone, with nothing left but a fucking note!” he cried. He waited for his mother to jump on him for cussing, but she just looked sad, and somehow that was worse.

“Very well, Caleb. But now she’s back. You must be curious to hear what possible explanation she has. I think it says much for her that she wants to come here and face you, knowing how you’re going to react.”

“I cared ten years ago. I don’t give a damn now,” Caleb replied, stuffing his hands in his jeans so his mother wouldn’t see them trembling. “I’m leaving tonight and going back to my apartment. Then I’m telling Morrison to reassign either me or her to another case, because there is no way in hell I’m working with her.”

Caroline stared at him and pursed her lips before crossing her arms over her chest. “My son the liar and the coward. Never thought I’d see the day. You will do no such thing. You are going to stay right here and listen to what that poor girl has to say. Then if you still want to leave, you can go with my blessing.”

He opened his mouth to argue, but the determination in his mother’s brown eyes warned him not to test her. “Fine. I’ll stay. But only because you’re making me.”

“Of course. It certainly won’t be because you want to hear what Laura has to say or because you want to see her again.”

He swore under his breath and walked out of the kitchen to the backyard to get some air and figure out how the hell he was going to look into Laura Thatcher's face and not commit murder.

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He'd forgotten his cell phone charger in the car. Caleb got only as far as the front door when he saw her, sitting in the driveway in a light brown car. She jumped in the driver's seat when she saw him, her eyes going wide.

Caleb watched her close her eyes and ease out of the car, her gaze locking on him

*Oh God. She's so beautiful!* That was the first thought that ripped through his chest when her green eyes meet his. Her hair was shorter than he remembered, coming just to her shoulders. He recalled running his fingers through the long mass while they made love. She wore a baby blue t-shirt stretched across breasts that used to drive him insane.

Used to.

No longer. Yet he couldn't stop drinking her in. Her jeans were snug but looked comfortable, and he could make out tight, toned thighs. For a second, Caleb could almost still feel those smooth thighs, sliding along his, and he forced himself to push that memory aside.

"Laura." He spat the word out like a curse and a plea all at the same time.

*His voice panted her name in her ear, soft and urgent while he pushed into her.  
Laura...Laura...Laura...*

"Caleb. Hi." She forced out the sounds through choking breath.

*Her nails dug into his back, moving upwards to press him deeper into her body.  
Caleb...Caleb...Caleb...*

Caleb's eyes stayed on hers.

*"Is it this way with other couples, do you think? Do you think they feel this too, Caleb?"*

He watched her catch sight of his car, and she gasped. He knew she recognized it.

*The rain was pouring on them, but they didn't care. Laura bit into the soaked yellow fabric covering his shoulder. "Someone is gonna catch...oh my God...like that...oh God..." Her body slid desperately, pulling at Caleb's hips as he thrust, surging up into her with hard, deep movements. He leaned down to kiss her, her mouth wet and warm, her skin damp and steaming.*

"Uh... Is your mom home?" she asked, jolting Caleb from his thoughts for a moment.

*"So we're like...kinda official now, right?" a sixteen-year-old Caleb asked, spread out on the carpet next to her.*

*Laura looked up from her textbook. "I dunno. Do you want to be?"*

*"Yeah."*

*She leaned over and kissed him softly. "Me too."*

"Uh. Yeah," he replied, trying to settle on any one of the dozens of emotions running through him. He felt rage, desire, uncertainty, sadness, panic. He'd thought for sure that when he saw her he would unload years of rage on her, but having her mere steps away from him now, Caleb had no idea what to say or do. Instead he turned away, forgetting what he'd come outside to get, and didn't look behind him to see if she was following.

He could feel her eyes on him while they walked into the house.

That mouth. Caleb remembered what that mouth used to do to him. How hot and soft it was.

*“Laura, you don't have to... Oh my God...” Caleb arched off the seat when she slid her lips down over him. Heat, explosive and intense, raced through every nerve ending to gather right there, and Caleb clenched his eyes shut tight because to watch her would make him come all that much sooner.*

She followed him into the living room and wouldn't really look at him. She was still so damned beautiful. But her body was a little different. Tighter, yet rounder in places, and oh my God, her breasts. He tore his eyes away and forced his desire back to rage. He watched the nervous look on his mother's face when she came into the living room and hugged Laura before gesturing toward the pale green-and-white striped couch.

“Can I get you something to drink? Beer?”

“Ah, hell, Ma. You should let Laura just take a look in the fridge and pick something out herself. She's practically family, isn't that right?” Caleb asked, dropping an arm on the back of the couch, dangerously close to her shoulder.

Laura turned and stared at him, her face flushing, and clenched her jaw but said nothing.

“I don't think any of us were all that surprised when we found out Laura took up with Mike. I mean, Laura always did love our family, seeing that things weren't all that great with her own.”

Now both she and his mother glared at him. Caleb felt a burst of triumph at the flash of pain in Laura's eyes. *That's right, bitch. Hurt. Hurt till you bleed.* Though he knew it would never come close to what she'd done to him, maybe he could make things a little painful for her in his own way.



“Laura, honey, would you like to help me with the salad?” Caroline asked, giving Caleb a look that mimicked the 'wait till your father gets home' glares she used to give him when he was a child.

They came back out a few minutes later with some wine. Caroline handed Caleb a glass, and he watched as Laura now took the matching armchair seat furthest away from him.

“You know what I miss? That non-alcoholic strawberry wine you used to give us when we were kids. Man, I haven't had that in ages,” Caleb said, watching Laura choke on her wine.

“I thought you kids hated that stuff.” Caroline took her place next to Caleb.

“Nah, it was all right. Remember, Laura? It was an acquired taste,” Caleb reminded her.

*Laura poured the wine over Caleb's head and then licked a path down his bare shoulder to his chest. “Hmm, doesn't taste half bad this way.” She smiled, settling on his lap.*

“I can't even really recall what it tastes like anymore,” Laura replied, narrowing her eyes at him.

*Bitch*, Caleb thought, scowling.

“I saw some in the grocery store a few weeks ago. I can pick some up,” Caroline offered. He watched Laura cringe and felt a punch of satisfaction.

“Sure.”

*Yeah, you remember.*

Caleb had to stop looking at her. She had one arm behind her head, absently playing with her hair and staring out the window. Her cheeks were flushed with a hint of red, and he knew she could feel his gaze on her. He'd taken her many times on this very couch when they'd had the house to themselves. He wondered if she remembered that too.

She looked around the room. Anywhere but at Caleb.

*Bitch.*

A very long time ago, he'd dreamt that he and Laura would be partners in every way. But Laura had killed that dream. Killed all his dreams. He felt his rage begin to churn more violently, and he was afraid he would jump on Laura and strangle her with his bare hands.

"Excuse me," he said, rising, needing to leave the room so he could breathe. "Gotta go to the bathroom."

He bumped into her in the hall upstairs a short while later. Her eyes widened when she saw him coming towards her, but she lifted her chin, determined to say whatever lie she was getting ready to spew.

"Hey. Listen, Caleb. I know that we need to talk, to somehow make our peace. I don't want us to partner up under hostile—"

She smelled of lilac water and smoke, and he found himself getting aroused even though he tried to be disgusted by the fact that she smoked now.

"I know we need to talk about what happened between—"

"Oh, so you do remember that I was up inside you before my brother, 'cause you're acting like you don't."

“I am? Me?” Laura asked, wide-eyed, and damn it, he wanted to kiss her so hard it would make her lips bleed. Bite off her tongue with his teeth.

“So what's the deal now, Laura? Working your way through the McKinney boys? Or is that how you got my dad to hire you?” he taunted her.

*Slap.*

Her hand met his cheek hard and stinging, and Caleb grabbed Laura's arm, pushing her against the wall. Then he stared at her, looking down at her mouth, open in surprise and more than a little fear. He stepped closer. His chest pressed against the fullness of her breasts, and he swelled harder in his jeans.

He would take her right here, hard and fast up against the wall, and then Mike would look down on them and see that she was nothing but a whore who used and discarded the McKinney men.

Reason tried to fight through his haze of anger and lust. His brother would look down from Heaven and hate him too.

“Caleb—”

He gripped her jaw tight with his fingers. “Don't. Don't you say my name, damn you.” His breath came in warm pants against her face, and her cheeks glistened with the heat. “I'm sorry that—” she tried again, but he cut her off.

“So am I,” he replied gruffly and closed his mouth over hers. His entire body exploded at the taste of her. Like a man who'd gone too long without water, who'd almost forgotten what it tasted like and was suddenly reminded, Caleb pushed his lips against hers and swallowed her whimpers into his mouth. He felt her digging her fingers into his shoulders, and her tongue sought out his own. He gave it to her, sliding along her mouth. Knowing

this had gone beyond anger to pure want. Pure, barely restrained lust. Not love. Not love, Caleb told himself. Not anymore. He reached down and cupped her behind and pressed her against him, wanting her to feel him. He rolled his hips against her and felt the heat of her, remembered that tight, wet heat and felt like he was going to come so damned hard. Her hands cupped his face, her fingers shook and he sucked her lips, teased her tongue with his own. Nobody tasted like Laura. Oh God, how he'd missed her taste. He pressed her tight against the bulge in his jeans.

His mind was spinning. What was he doing? Shit! What the hell was he doing? Ready to screw her senseless in his mother's hallway with his mother downstairs.

Self-loathing ripped through him, and he pulled away with a groan. Laura hit the back of her head against the wall.

Her mouth was swollen and wet, and it took all his willpower not to go after it again.

She had tears in her eyes when she looked up at him, and Caleb forced himself to smile while his blood calmed in his veins.

“I could have pulled your pants down and shoved myself in you right now, and you would have loved it, wouldn't you?” he sneered, panting against her face. “Guess it's a good thing Mike's dead, huh?”

At the mention of his brother, she closed her eyes.

“Then he'd know what I know. You, Laura Thatcher, are nothing but a whore.” Caleb felt a sickening clench in his stomach at the horrified look on her face and forced himself to turn and walk away from her.

### Chapter Three

This was a huge mistake. Bigger than huge. What was that word Karl used? Ginormous. This was a ginormous mistake. Laura stared up at the champagne-colored ceiling, the moonlight making strange patterns around the light fixture. She had told herself that she had been prepared for Caleb's anger. But the intensity of it shocked her.

Mike had led her to believe that Caleb had moved on. He had been so cold to her when they'd sat in the living room. Ice pick jabs straight to the heart. One after another.

Poor Caroline had looked about ready to strangle her firstborn.

Then upstairs, his rage had flamed hot, burning and vicious. The cold, ice blue stare had become intense, livid, sparks shooting off him to singe her down to ashes. Then there had been a brief flash of something else and his mouth was on hers and *oh*.

Years had done nothing to dull the all-consuming want between them. He had been her first. Her best, she thought traitorously, remembering Mike. Caleb's mouth, his hands were everywhere, and Laura fell. Fell into a sizzling mess of *please, please, more*, rubbing up against him like a cat in heat.

*You, Laura Thatcher, are nothing but a whore.*

Laura's eyes burned at the memory, and she squeezed them shut to stop the threat of tears. *I hate you, Caleb McKinney. I hate you!* He had turned and walked away, and Laura felt discarded like a piece of garbage.

Garbage, just like her mother had said.

The one person she had been sure would never hurt her had treated her like something he needed to scrape off the bottom of his shoe. She'd been right to leave. That young girl, afraid she wasn't good enough to be Caleb McKinney's wife, afraid she would end up screwing up and hurting him, had instead been the one smashed to pieces.

She punched the pillow and turned onto her stomach, glaring out the moonlit window. She'd been right. Any man who could be that brutal, that cold, would just destroy her in the end. When she was a teenager she had seen the sweet, loving side of Caleb McKinney. This vicious bastard had been hidden. Marriage would have revealed that Caleb's love for her would only last as long as she remained what he wanted her to be. Some infallible angel. She'd been right to run.

Laura's stomach clenched tight with unpleasant memories, and she decided she'd had enough of her stupid ass. Slipping out of bed, she slid her feet into the violet satin slippers Caroline had loaned her and quietly made her way downstairs, desperate for some McKinney-free air. She went out onto the porch for a few minutes and smoked a cigarette, hoping she could ease the tension in her body enough to sleep.

She loved this house. It had been the place she had truly thought of as home, much more so than her own house. Caroline had always been wonderful to her. If Laura could have picked the perfect mom, it would have been Caroline McKinney. She had always made Laura feel welcome in her home and sometimes would sit and talk to her while Caleb and his little brother were playing catch or working on the tree house they never finished.

Sometimes, when Laura helped them with the tree house, Caroline McKinney would roll up her jeans and sleeves and climb up with them. She helped them out and always asked questions, genuinely interested in her children's activities. She never ignored them.

She had always sent Laura home with leftovers, insisting that since she enjoyed the food so much, she should take some home so her mom could see how to make the various dishes.

Laura wondered if Caroline McKinney ever knew that she used to hide the food from her mother.

Her mother didn't know at first that Laura sometimes visited the McKinney's and that she loved it more than her own house because it was a real home. Karen Thatcher was usually too drunk to even know whether her daughter was home or not.

Laura never brought Caleb to her house. She never wanted him to see how awful it was there. She used to fear that he would change his mind and not want to be her friend anymore. He might have seen that it really didn't make sense for them to hang out because his life was so much better than hers.

She finished her cigarette and turned back into the house. She didn't bother turning the light on in the kitchen. The light left on over the oven was good enough for Laura to see her way to the sink and pour herself a glass of cold water. She decided against the ice, not wanting the noise from the fridge to alert anyone to her sleeplessness. She gulped down the water and let the humming and warm light in the room soothe her before making her way back up to her bedroom, where she was startled by Caroline coming out of her own room.

"Oh, I was wondering who was pattering around downstairs. I figured it was Caleb raiding the fridge like he used to do. Would you like to come in and chat with me for a little while? It can wait until morning if you like, but I think we have much to discuss, don't you?" Caroline asked. "I thought it would be easier now than with Caleb... Well, you know." Her voice was so soft and full of gentle warmth, Laura didn't think she would make it another step before blubbering out the whole truth.

This is what it must feel like to be on your way to be executed, Laura thought with a shudder after she nodded and followed the older woman into her bedroom.

Caroline stood fiddling with the jewelry box for a minute before pulling out a pair of violet glass drop earrings. "Did you love Mike?" she asked, looking into the mirror at Laura behind her, who took a seat on the edge of the canopy bed.

She blinked in surprise, not expecting the conversation to have started there. "Yes.

I... I did," Laura replied, her voice cracking.

"The way you love Caleb?" Caroline countered. Her big brown eyes locked on her, and for a few seconds, Laura couldn't breathe.

Love. Not loved. Love.

She stiffened her spine. She was a grown woman, for goodness' sake! She didn't owe any explanation to anyone.

*Please don't hate me....*

Caroline deserved an explanation. This woman, who had been the mother Laura always wanted, deserved more than half-truths and outright bullshit. She couldn't deal with the idea that Caroline could possibly not love her anymore. A sob caught in her throat, and Laura tried to blink away the tears that threatened.

"Loved," Laura corrected, choking on the lie.

Caroline's eyes softened sympathetically, seeing through that. "When Caleb told me he had proposed to you. I was going to give these to you at the engagement dinner," she said, turning and sitting beside her on the pale pink bedspread. She took Laura's left hand and placed the earrings in her palm.



“Oh,” Laura said, shoulders sagging. *Oh God...save me from this. Let me close my eyes and be somewhere else when I open them!* Squeezing her eyes shut only succeeded in loosening the tears hanging on her lashes. When Laura opened her eyes, she was still in Caroline's bedroom.

“Should I take them back?”

Without thinking, Laura possessively closed her hand around the earrings.

The older woman caught the gesture and gave Laura a sad smile. “What happened, Laura?”

She bolted from the bed; unable to look the woman she loved in the eye. She wrapped her arms around herself and tried to take a breath to calm her aching heart. Her eyes fell on a picture on Caroline's night table. Caleb and Mike were on both sides of their mother, lips pressed to her cheeks. The woman was beaming at the camera, at Laura who was taking the picture. It had been a mere few months before Laura left them all like the coward she was.

“Laura...” Caroline pressed a gentle hand on Laura's hip.

“I loved Mike. Caleb and I were over a long time ago. Now can I go back—”

“Not yet. I deserve better than that, Laura Thatcher,” Caroline pointed out. “Now sit down.”

Chastised, Laura tucked a leg in under herself and sat back down on the bed, her other leg dangling over the side.

“I watched you with Caleb for years. The two of you adored each other. You don't just give up that kind of love with no explanation. You left him without so much as a goodbye.

I expected better from you, Laura. My heart broke for my son, but also because I thought we all meant more to you than that.”

“Please...stop...,” Laura begged, digging her nails into her palms, the backs of the earrings pressing into her skin while the tears dripped off her chin.

“Whatever you're feeling right now, you could have prevented, Laura. You know that. I love you like a daughter, but that didn't matter to you. That was very selfish of you.”

“I know!” she snapped. “I know I'm a selfish bitch who always manages to screw up her life, and God help anyone who happens to get caught in the crossfire! You should be glad I dumped Caleb,” she burst out, burning with self-loathing.

“I'll thank you to watch your language in my house, young lady,” Caroline insisted, glaring at Laura. “In regards to the rest of that little tirade, while I don't flatter myself into thinking you see me as a mother, I would expect you to have more respect for me than to think I would ever see you as a screw-up. You're better than that. Now while I do want you to be happy, I'm not entirely sure you can be happy without dealing with what happened between you and my son.”

“Caleb and I are over—”

Caroline held up her hand. “Please. I'm not finished. The day you left, I sat with Caleb all through that night. He kept asking me why. Why you had just left him? There is no worse feeling in the world, Laura, than seeing one of your children in pain and not being able to help them. I think the two of you should take some time tomorrow and have a long talk. For myself, I would love nothing more than for you and Caleb to be together again, but I cannot fully give you my blessing until I know you are the woman I always believed you to be. Someone who would never intentionally hurt those she loves. Maybe I can still believe that, if you tell me the reason you left my son. And please, don't even try and tell

me it was because you grew out of your love for Caleb and it was just some puppy-love romance. I know better.”

Laura bit her lip. She knew that she could never ask Caroline to keep her secret. She wouldn't keep that information from her son. But maybe...maybe she might be able to tell her just enough of the truth so Caroline would accept why she had to leave.

“I went to visit my mother in the hospital when she was dying on the day I left...” Laura began, wiping her damp cheeks.

When she'd concluded the story, Caroline looked at Laura like she thought there was more, but she didn't push. Laura explained how Karen Thatcher had ranted and raved at her, taunted her with the promise that she would never make anything of herself. Laura was not worthy to be a McKinney. She was garbage, and Caleb would know it and abandon her like her daddy had.

Caroline pulled Laura into her arms and hugged her, then drew back and shook her head. “You should have talked to Caleb, Laura. Or you should have come to me. You should have known that your mother was just a bitter woman who couldn't stand to see anyone happy if she was miserable.”

“I know that now. But back then...” A shudder went through her. “I was so afraid she was right. That I had no business being happy 'cause I would just mess it up. I was young and scared.”

“And an idiot, young lady,” Caroline added.

“I'm so sorry I hurt Caleb. You'll never know how sorry I am.” Laura lowered her head, tears dripping into her lap. “And that I hurt you, after you had been so good to me. But I was about to get everything I wanted, and I panicked. I wasn't ready to marry anyone if I couldn't get past my mother's influence. She still had the power to wreck me, and I knew

I'd always hear her voice in the back of my head if I jumped into marriage. I was so young, and she had pounded into me that I wasn't worth a damn thing.”

“You should have told Caleb all this,” Caroline insisted, taking Laura's hands.

“He would have tried to convince me my mother was full of shit.”

“She was.” She nodded, wiping at Laura's damp cheeks.

“Yeah. But I needed to figure that out from myself. I needed to be happy myself. Build myself up and learn that everything my mother told me was a lie. I was worth something because I made myself be.”

Caroline sighed and pulled back with a quiet look of understanding.

“You know very well how persistent your son is. If I tried to explain any of this, he'd try and convince me he could fix it all.”

“That's my Caleb. Mr. Fix-It,” Caroline admitted with a small smile. Then the smile wavered. “So you left without a word. I still can't approve or condone what you did, Laura. It was cowardly and hurtful. But I can understand the reasoning behind it. Now tell me how I can hope that you and Caleb find your way back to each other and not worry that you'll hurt him again?”

“I don't know if I can convince you things are different now. I'm different. So is Caleb.”

“Oh, I have no doubt about that,” Caroline agreed, crossing her arms. “You honestly expect me to believe that you don't love Caleb anymore?”

Laura took a deep breath and tried her hardest to make her face echo her words. “I'll always love him. But we were both so young. We barely knew ourselves and were so

wrapped up in each other that we never developed into whole people. He was my first love. That'll never change. We just... We're not those people anymore. He's moved on too. We've both grown up. Maybe we can be friends."

Caroline snorted. "My son is not the forgiving kind. You know that."

"No. But maybe after we talk, I can make him see I was right to break it off."

"Oh, I'm not sure it won't take a miracle for that to happen." Caroline ran her fingers through her blonde hair, a habit both Caleb and Mike echoed often.

"I want your forgiveness first," Laura admitted in a small voice, daring to hope that it would be granted to her. She picked at the light green fabric of the pajama pants Caroline had let her borrow.

The older woman was silent for a good few minutes. She got up and paced her bedroom, stopping to push aside the curtain and look out the window for a minute.

Laura waited, watching her and holding her breath.

"You have my forgiveness, Laura."

She got up and threw her arms around Caroline, feeling a rush of relief surge through her body. Was it stupid of her to hope Caleb would ever be as forgiving?

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She should have known better. The next morning while she sat across the table from him, Laura noticed that he wouldn't meet her eyes. A small part of her hoped it was because he was ashamed of his actions towards her yesterday and not because he couldn't stand the sight of her.

“So, what would you like for dinner tonight?” Caroline asked her son, though her eyes remained on Laura with unmistakable insistence. When would she get to it and talk with Caleb so they could clear the air?

“Whatever you want to make is fine,” he grumbled, taking a drink from a red coffee mug. He hadn’t shaved in what looked like days. Was that habit or just laziness due to his injuries? Laura remembered him being clean shaven. She closed her eyes briefly and was hit with the memory of soft skin smelling of the spicy cologne she’d bought him for a gift when he’d first started shaving.

“I was thinking lasagna for a special treat, but I have to go into town to pick up some ground beef.”

There it was. Her opening. She was giving Laura her time alone with Caleb. Laura’s heart shot up into her throat, and her hands grew cold with panic.

Caleb suddenly lifted his head, as his mother’s words seemed to penetrate and he was presented with the prospect of being alone with Laura. Wide blue eyes met hers for a brief second before darting away. “I can drive you.”

Of course, Caroline shot down his suggestion. “No, you’ll stay here with Laura until I get back. If you two would like to get started chopping the vegetables, that would be a big help to me.”

Caleb and Laura cooking together? Playing house? She was all for having her time alone to talk with Caleb, but she thought Caroline was laying it on a little thick, and her glare told her so.

The older woman just smiled sweetly and grabbed her blue cardigan off the doorknob on the back of the kitchen door.

The moment she left, Caleb got up out of his chair and spilled the rest of his coffee in the sink. Laura stood up with him and watching with growing nervousness when he turned to leave her alone in the kitchen.

“Um...sweet peppers?” she blurted, grasping for something to keep him there so she could get out the things she so desperately needed to say.

“Huh?” Caleb asked, turning around and glowering at her.

“The vegetables and stuff? You wanna start with the peppers? We should get started on that, to help out your mom. Do you know where the knives are?”

“How considerate of you,” Caleb sneered, but he scratched his arm, bare in a black undershirt, and moved past her to the drawer closest to the fridge. He pulled out two knives and handed one to her before opening the fridge and pulling out what they would need.

Her face was hot while she stood next to him and struggled over the next few minutes to find the words to explain why she had done what she had. “Caleb, listen—”

He slammed the knife down and stared at her. “Let’s get one thing straight, okay? What I did yesterday, it won’t happen again. I lost control, and that’s on me.”

“I understand you were—”

But he didn’t let her finish. “We’ll go back to Queens and get to work on this case, and that’s it. I don’t want any of our past crap interfering with this investigation—you got that? If you can’t pull that off, you let me know now.”

“I... just...” she stammered, floundering now. Didn’t he want her to explain?

“Well?” he snapped, and his tone made her stiffen.

“I can do my job,” she hissed, determined not to cry. There would be no chance to explain, no chance at forgiveness.

“Good,” he replied, then lowered his head and continued chopping his stalk of celery.



## Chapter Four

It took just until the afternoon of their first day together on the case for them to be at each other's throats again.

"So, what? You're not gonna speak to me at all while we're on this case? This will be damned difficult if we're not speaking," Laura said, facing him from the passenger's side. She had gotten sick of the thwump thwump of the windshield being the only sound in the car.

They were on their way back from Long Island after interviewing an ex-employee of an adoption agency Terry Moave had named on the list he'd given in exchange for his freedom.

He continued to ignore her.

"May I remind you that I've tried to tell you what happened, but you're the one who didn't want to hear—"

He snorted. "If you're so eager to confess your sins, go visit a priest. I could care less."

"Caleb. You have every right to be pissed, but maybe if I told you—"

"To hell with this." He pulled the car over and unbuckled his seatbelt. "Go ahead and take the wheel. Drive yourself home." He got out and slammed the door, leaving her inside.

"What the— Oh no you don't!" Laura burst out in frustration and slid out, slamming the door and following him outside into the rain. "Look, Caleb. I just want—" Furious with his unwillingness to hear her out, she trailed after him while he charged down the road.

“Take the car, Laura. Go home. Leave me the hell alone.”

“I’m following you the whole way back to Queens like this, and it’ll be a hell of a bonus when some jackass steals your car!” she shouted after him.

As if suddenly remembering no one was in the car, Caleb turned and stared from her to the car. “Oh shit!” He sprinted back to his black car, Laura close on his heels while the rain showers pummeled them both. “Laura! Tell me you have the keys!”

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They looked like a couple of drowned rats, or maybe drowned nuns, Laura amended. They both had the collars of their shirts up over their heads in a feeble attempt to stay dry. It didn’t work very well. She swore while her soaked feet squished in her sneakers, and she was sure that if they didn’t find shelter soon, she’d eventually have rainwater in her underwear.

They stuck to the paved shoulder of the road to search out shelter after, in true New York fashion, no one would risk picking up two hitchhikers on the side of the road.

It was a while before they finally came upon a small two-story house. Laura thought it looked like something straight out of a Norman Rockwell painting. White picket fence and swinging bench on the porch. “Lord, how corny,” she remarked, but she felt a tightening in her chest.

Caleb knocked on the door, pushing his shirt off his head and straightening the soaked fabric as best he could. He reached over and pulled Laura's shirt off her head too.

She noticed the lace curtain at the window to their left move against the glass, and then a little voice boomed on the other side of the wall.

"Mooommmmyyyy Sunody's on poooosssshhhhhh!"

Laura blinked at the powerful lungs in what she assumed was a child and then laughed.

Caleb took a step back when the door opened and a plump young woman looked at them not without a little bit of sympathy at their bedraggled state.

“Can I help you?” she asked and her voice had a soft, raspy quality to it.

“Hi, my name's Detective Caleb McKinney.” He pulled his wallet out of the back of his jeans and flashed his badge before turning to Laura next to him. “This is Laura...my partner.” He added that last bit reluctantly, she noticed. “She accidentally locked my keys in my car, and I was hoping I could use your phone to get the garage to unlock it?”

Laura thought Caleb was deliberately avoiding her gaze now so he couldn't see her glaring at him. *And whose fault was it that we both got out of the car, McKinney?*

“Oh sure, sure. Come on in. Come and get dry. Lordy, is it ever pouring. Might be time to start gathering animals two by two, huh?” she joked and ushered them inside.

Laura noticed that the woman's plumpness was due to what looked like a pregnant belly. She had soft brown eyes and dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. The woman looked about ready to pop, and Laura prayed that the kid didn't decide to arrive while she and Caleb were here.

“I'll get you some dry clothes if you'd like, and we can dry those off,” the woman offered.

“Oh, we don't want to be any trouble—” Caleb said, at the same time that Laura replied, “Sure, thanks.”

*Politeness, my ass. I'm freezing!* Laura conveyed her message with her eyes to Caleb, who conceded.

“Okay, that'd be really nice of you,” Caleb replied. “If you're really sure it's no trouble,” he insisted, but the woman was already stepping back and sizing him up.

“You're a bit smaller than my husband, but I think I can find something. Follow me.” Then she turned to Laura “Laura, right? You can get out of those wet clothes. Bathroom's straight down the hall. I'll come bring you something in a minute.”

“Honey, who was that at the door?” a man's voice called from the top of the yellow carpeted stairs.

Laura guessed this was the bigger-than-Caleb husband, and the smile on the woman's face clinched it. She wondered if she had ever looked at Caleb with that same moony expression when they were together. Lord, she hoped not. How embarrassing. Yet she found that she just couldn't tear her eyes away from the couple while the handsome man's eyes met his wife's. He was considerably taller and wider than Caleb. The woman was right about that. The look on his face matched the way Caleb used to look at Laura a lot of the time, and she felt a lump in her throat.

“This is Caleb and Laura. They're NYPD. They got caught in the storm. He seems to have locked his keys in his car.”

Laura watched Caleb open his mouth to correct the woman, but then Maggie turned to her and winked.

“Ah. Sucks when that happens. All too familiar with that,” the husband admitted with sympathetic brown eyes. He extended his hand first to Caleb and then Laura. “Jack Martin. This is my wife Maggie.”

“We appreciate your help a lot. I'll just call the auto shop and we'll get out of your hair,” he promised.

“Not until you're dry, you won't. And we were about to have lunch,” Maggie insisted.

“Oh no, really. No. We don't want to intr—”

“Son, don't even try,” Jack told him with an indulgent grin at his wife.

Laura could swear the woman was blushing. People like this actually existed?

While she changed out of her sopping wet clothes, a soft knock came from the other side of the bathroom door.

“Whatcha doin'?” a much more quiet version of the screaming boy they'd heard earlier asked.

“Baking a cake,” Laura replied, rolling her eyes.

“In da bafroom?” a curious voice pressed.

The 'bafroom' was bright and smelled of lemons. Clean yet lived in, with a small sock draped over the rim of the hamper in the corner and a soft baby blue robe hanging off the doorknob. The medicine cabinet was half-open, and Laura couldn't resist taking a peek. Various makeup items here and there, children's cough syrup, some kind of cream for hemorrhoids (OUCH!), razors, multivitamins, tablets for heartburn...

“See my fingers?” the small voice asked. Sure enough, four tiny fingers poked in from under the door.

“Uh no, sorry,” Laura lied with a grin. The fingers slipped further inside, and she bit her lip to keep from laughing, imagining the poor kid on his knees trying to shove his hand further under the door.

“’bout now?” he asked.

“Nope. Sorry,” Laura replied, biting her fist.

“Jamie! Leave the girl in peace!”

She recognized Maggie's voice and swallowed a burst of sadness. Never, when her own mother had scolded her, had Karen Thatcher's voice held that undertone of amused, loving indulgence. Laura's eyes burned, and she tried to blink the threat of tears away.

“How do they fit?” Maggie asked her.

Laura tightened the blue sweatpants securely around her waist and straightened the sweatshirt. “Fine. Thanks a lot.” She turned the doorknob and cleared her throat. She was greeted with a tiny male grin.

“What's your name?” Jamie asked her. He was all impish grin, sandy blond hair and blue eyes that reminded her so much of Caleb.

“Laura. You're Jamie, right?” she asked, bending down so that she was eye level with him.

His blue eyes widened in surprise. “How'd you know?”

“I have magic powers,” Laura joked, hearing Maggie snort behind her son.

Following them downstairs, she spotted Caleb also garbed in a grey sweat suit. It had the words ‘I'd Rather Be Fishing' across his chest.

“They'll be here in about three hours, thanks to this mess outside,” Caleb informed her.

Three hours with the perfect family. Laura bit her lip uneasily.

“Hi. I'm Jamie.” The little boy extended his hand to Caleb, who smiled and tried to look serious when he took it.

“Caleb McKinney. Pleased to meet you.”

Laura watched them up close. The hard shell around Caleb seemed to crack just a little, and he seemed almost...*warm*, almost like his old self, and the desire to step closer to that warmth and envelop herself in it, even if it wasn't directed at her, was so strong. *If only...*

Caleb's brows drew together in concern when he looked at her. She shook away the wistful thought and forced a smile.

“Does she have magical powers?” Jamie asked, pointing at her.

“Oh, she told you about that, huh?” he asked. “She sure does.”

She was almost afraid to imagine what dark, evil powers Caleb believed she had.

Her heart slowed back to its normal rhythm while Maggie led them to the table for lunch.

As they ate, Laura learned that Jack worked as an engineer, and Maggie was a school teacher for the second grade. High school sweethearts, they'd married against everyone's advice right after graduation and, from the look of it, didn't regret the decision.

Laura was almost embarrassed by the obvious love the two had for each other, but there was something kind of comforting about them. They let her know that sometimes, good things do happen, and people can be happy.

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She and Caleb were sitting on the couch, drinking coffee as they waited for their clothes to dry, when Jamie climbed on next to Laura.

“Do you have a little boy at home too? Like me?” Jamie asked.

Laura choked on her coffee. “Oh shit, I'm sorry!” she said, wiping at the hot liquid on her pants.

Caleb smiled into his mug at her obvious discomfort, and she wanted to punch him.

“That's not a nice word!” Jamie exclaimed in shock. “Daddy says it all the time when he drops stuff, and Mommy says it's bad.”

“Right. Sorry about that.” Laura nodded and then smiled apologetically at Jack and Maggie.

“No we don't, Jamie. We're not like your mommy and daddy,” Caleb explained.

*You could say that again!* Laura thought.

“How come? She's pitty,” Jamie pointed out.

Laura's cheeks warmed, and she wanted to sink into the couch.

Caleb cleared his throat but otherwise didn't comment. His eyes were on Laura, and her cheeks were hot now.

“You don't have a ring. You need a ring to be a mommy,” Jamie informed them.

*Oh God, just shoot me now. Please. A bullet in the head. Anytime now,* Laura pleaded mentally.



“Maybe when I get bigger, I get a ring and we can be mommy and daddy?” Jamie asked, looking at Laura and smiling.

“Sure kid, look me up,” she replied, laughing, glad for the moment of levity.

“So now you can't ask her anymore, okay?” Jamie told Caleb, who raised his eyebrows and looked as red faced as Laura was sure she must. “Oooh! I know!” Then the little boy bolted off the couch and charged up the stairs.

“Where's he going?” Laura asked his parents.

“I'm almost afraid to guess,” Maggie replied, laughing.

Small footsteps thumped in one direction followed by a few seconds of silence, and then the footsteps began again, coming closer and closer until he was charging back down the stairs. In his haste, he tripped over the last three steps and fell the rest of the way, falling on his side.

All four of them rose in surprise, and Maggie rushed over to her son, who stared at the floor and blinked for a second before his lower lip quivered and he started to cry.

“Awww. Come here, baby.” His mother gathered Jamie up into her arms, and he buried his face in his mother's neck.

”I falled down!”

“I know, baby. I know. Bad stairs. Bad!” Maggie made a point of making sure Jamie saw her smacking the stairs.

He reached down and copied his mother's actions, smacking the railing. "Bad!" He sniffled, holding his arm.

Laura had a brief flash of memory of her mother backhanding her into the stairs when the young girl had told her one of her mother's boyfriends touched her in a bad way.

Laura blinked, and suddenly she couldn't breathe. It was all too much. If she didn't get out of this house right now, she was going to scream. "Excuse me," she mumbled and almost raced for the door. She stood on the porch, taking in deep gulps of heavy, metallic-tasting air. The gusts of rainy wind rushed past her. She stood outside for a good five minutes before Jamie poked his head out the window. His eyes were a little puffy and glistening, but he was no longer crying.

"I'm all better now," he assured her, and Laura cracked a small smile.

"Good for you."

"I have a pezent for you."

She stepped closer, curious, and he handed her a small toy soldier through the window.

"When I get bigger, I give you a ring, promise. But this is okay too, right? Till I get lots of money?"

"Honey, are you sure you want to giver her Sergeant Buck?" Maggie asked, kneeling next to her son.

"I'm sure. But you gimme Buck back when I get a ring. Deal?" Jamie extended his hand.

Laura took a deep breath, this boy's sweet gesture easing the pain in her heart a little bit more. "Deal." She took his small hand in hers.

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She fingered the toy soldier while Caleb drove them back to the city.

“You okay?” he asked grudgingly from the driver’s seat.

Laura turned her face to the window. “Yeah, like you give a damn.”

He was silent for another minute before he spoke again. “You kinda flipped out back there. I just wanna make sure you’re not gonna flip out when things get hairy.”

She turned back to face him, and her fingers clenched tightly around the small toy. “Wow. You’ve got some nerve. Let’s get something straight. I’ve been a cop for a while now. A damn good one. Don’t you dare doubt my ability to handle the stress of my job.”

He lifted his hands off the steering wheel for a second. “Hey, relax, Jesus! I won’t do it again. I was just trying to...” His voice trailed off, and he focused back on the road.

“What?” Laura asked.

She saw him clench his jaw.

“Nothing. Forget it.”

She felt a twinge of guilt in her stomach as she wondered if he actually had been trying to comfort her. She could have laughed at that stupid thought. He hated her. Those days were long over.

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*There was a sudden commotion outside her small room and what sounded like Caroline McKinney's voice. Laura carefully opened her door and poked her head out. She saw Caleb's face. Her heart did that funny squeeze thing in her chest that'd been happening a lot now whenever she looked at him.*

*Caleb spotted her and walked towards her, his eyes widening. "Laura, geez! What did she do to you?"*

*Caroline McKinney looked at Laura, and the woman's eyes grew large, horrified.*

*Laura's stomach clenched with guilt because no one was ever supposed to know, especially these people. Before she could even come up with a believable excuse for why she was all bruised and scratched up, Caroline, who hardly ever yelled, even when Mike switched the bad milk with the good as a joke, shoved Karen Thatcher up against the wall.*

*"You miserable bitch," Caroline hissed into the other woman's face, and both Laura and Caleb stared at his mother in surprise. "I suspected something like this but, my God, woman. How could you?"*

*"Who are you to tell me how to raise my child? You look down your nose at me. The little whore deserved it, running around like a common tramp. How many times has your golden boy had her on her back, huh?" Karen sneered through a haze of alcohol.*

*Caroline looked over at Caleb, whose cheeks were two bright spots of red, and pushed Karen Thatcher against the wall again. "You will be silent!" When Karen's eyes widened, but she made no comment, she continued. "Laura, honey, I want you to go with Caleb and wait in my car, okay? This is gonna end right now. You will not harm another hair on that precious child's head. Caleb, hand me the phone."*

*"No!" Laura cried, rushing past him to the two women. "No, Mrs. McKinney. Please! It was nothing, honest. It was my fault. I was hanging out with Caleb when I should have been at home. My mom was just worried about me, I promise. Please don't call anyone," the young girl pleaded pulling Caroline away from her mother. Blind fear made the tears roll down her face. They'd take her mother away, and then send Laura to a home somewhere, and she'd never get to see Caleb or his family again and she couldn't*

*imagine anything worse than that. If getting knocked around sometimes was the price she had to pay, then that wasn't so bad.*

*"There, see? She told you herself. I love my baby. She just has to learn not to worry me so—"*

*"Shut up, you sick woman," Caroline demanded. "Laura. Your mother hurting you like this is not right. I'm going to call some people who'll make sure she gets help and never hurts you again. You understand?" she asked, her voice softer now that she pleaded with Laura to help her stop this.*

*Laura shook her head but said nothing, her tears dripping off her face and stinging the scratches that hadn't yet healed.*

*"Caleb. The phone." Caroline held out her hand.*

*"Caleb, please. They'll take me away. Don't make them send me away." Laura threw her arms around her best friend to stop him and trembled while he held her.*

*"Laura. Do you want her to keep hurting you?" he asked, stroking her hair.*

*It felt so good, and he smelled so good and right that she never wanted him to let go. "It doesn't matter. It's not so bad. Please," she murmured into his chest, letting his scent wash over her like a cloak of protection.*

*"Come on, Laura. Look at me. Look." He pulled away and cupped her face with his hands. His eyes were taking in her bruises, and she could see the glistening of tears beginning to form in his eyes. "We'll figure something out, okay? We're friends, right? The best? You trust me?" he asked her, and Laura knew she'd follow this boy to the ends of the earth. "I won't let anybody split us up, okay?"*

*“Ah, that's right, sweet talk her. Laura, honey, trust me. It's all sweet words and empty promises. Then when he gets out from between your legs, he'll leave skid marks on his way out the door. Course, it's nothing more than a slut like you deserves. Ain't nobody gonna stick around for you, baby. Not your daddy, not golden boy over there. Just me is all you got,” Karen Thatcher taunted, smiling at her daughter.*

*“You shut up, you mean, evil woman. You don't deserve to be her mom. Laura is gonna grow up to be a hundred times better than you. You're nothing but a drunk. Too stupid to see this special girl,” Caleb hissed at her.*

*Laura stared at him and saw her knight in shining armor. Her defender. And how she loved him! She pulled out of Caleb's arms and walked towards the phone. She picked up the receiver and handed it to Caroline McKinney.*

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Laura looked back down at the toy in her hands. “Watching them back there with their little boy. It just reminded me of my mom,” she admitted in a small voice. She didn’t meet his gaze but saw him look at her briefly out of the corner of her eyes.

“Not much of a comparison, I’d say,” he said, and she lifted her head and saw his fingers tight around the steering wheel.

“No. Definitely not. Anyway, it had nothing to do with the job. Just so you know.”

He gave a curt nod and cleared his throat. “So. Phillips. Do you think he knows more than he told us?”

She took a deep, shaky breath and pulled herself away from the past, accepting what she hoped was a crack in the wall of his hostility toward her. “That depends on whether you believe his story about being fired for always being late.”

“So that’s a no?” Caleb asked, cocking an eyebrow.

She snorted. “That’s a no.” Then she felt a bit surprised that her lips were tempted to curve into a smile. She didn’t think they were ready to share smiles just yet. Laura bit her lower lip to stop the gesture.

“You think it could be the adoption agency?”

“But how would they pull it off, and how would they stay under the radar yet still manage a very public business?”

The car slowed, and Laura realized with a jolt of disappointment that they were now in front of her apartment.

“I guess I’ll give you a call tomorrow, and we can see if we can find out more about that agency.”

“Yeah, sure,” she nodded, suddenly reluctant to leave. She forced herself to push the car door open and get out before she started to forget how she hated that she’d been assigned to this case, hated that she had to see Caleb again after all these years.

She especially hated how being next to him made her feel, how it made her want to stay with him in the car.

## Chapter Five

*Something was wrong.* Caleb sat in the car, watching Laura make her way up the stairs to the front door of her apartment building, and yet he didn't pull away. A fist of unease twisted in his stomach while he watched her stick the key in the lock and give him a last glance before she pushed the door open and disappeared.

He scanned the area, recognizing a few of the neighborhood's less savory inhabitants, but could find no real reason for what was still holding him in his car. Then he noticed a flicker of light coming from the cement window ledge. He put the car in reverse and got a better look at the left window on the first floor, seeing the source of the flickering light. Broken glass. The window was shattered. Had it always been? He wished he could know for sure.

An explosion of gunfire brought his attention back to the front of the building, and Caleb wasn't even aware of pushing open his car door. He was just running, gun in hand, across the sidewalk and up the stairs.

He needed to get to Laura. That was his one thought, pumping through his brain like a heartbeat, over and over. Shooting the lock, Caleb ran through the doorway when the door swung open and took in two images at the same time; legs sliding out the window and Laura in the corner against the wall next to the stairs, holding her arm.

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Caleb's heart dropped into his stomach, and for a moment he stood paralyzed, watching the crimson stain her fingers. He took a step toward her, but she shook her head and with wide, angry green eyes shouted, "I'm fine. Get the son of a bitch!" He hesitated no more than a split second before jumping out the window, and could just see white sneakers make it over a tall fence.



He aimed and fired and felt a satisfying burst of adrenaline when he saw the blond guy with close-cropped hair clutch his leg and go down on one knee. The shooter struggled to his feet and tried to hobble away, but Caleb was able to grab him before he could get much further. "Get up!" he barked, grabbing the young man up by his black t-shirt and pushing him against the chain-link fence. Fury made him want to ram the guy's face through the metal.

"Hey man, it's not my fault! I was just doing what they told me! Watch my leg, ass wipe!" he howled when Caleb snapped one handcuff around his wrist and pushed him back towards the street. Laura was already standing next to the car, talking into the police radio with her free hand.

Her injured arm was bare now, part of the sleeve having been torn off and wrapped around her wound.

"You okay?" Caleb asked, his eyes roaming over her to make sure she wasn't hurt anywhere else.

"Yeah. Just a flesh wound. Come here." She grabbed her assailant by the hair and pulled him towards her, then released him just long enough to punch him in the face.

"Jesus Christ, you crazy bitch! Look! Hey. I'm totally innocent here, man. It wasn't my fault. They didn't tell me you was no cop. Jesus, I'm bleeding all over the ground here."

"They who?" Caleb demanded.

"You stupid or something? They don't give me no names! I'm in goddamned pain here, man!"

"Then talk fast before we let you bleed to death all over the street," he warned. "Or do you want a matching set?" He pointed his gun at the other leg.

“No! No. All I got was the order to wait until the blonde got home and take her out. They didn’t mention nothin’ ‘bout her being no cop. Jesus Christ!”

“Who gave you the order?” Laura demanded.

“Came down from the head of my crew. Can I at least sit down, goddamnit?” He groaned and sat in the backseat, facing them with his legs outside the car. His pale face was clammy with sweat, and he was in obvious pain. Through clenched teeth he managed to continue. “Got the feeling he was being ordered to get it done by someone else. Don’t know who. Some guy in a suit come walking in the club one day. All I know. Swear to God, ’kay? I swear.”

“Would you recognize him if you saw his picture?”

The young man’s brown eyes went wide, and he frantically shook his head. “You crazy? I ain’t snitchin’. They bust my ass if they find out I fingered one of ’em!”

Laura lunged toward the open car, but Caleb snaked an arm around her and pulled her back, trying to ignore the tight, smooth expanse of skin his hand met when her green t-shirt lifted above her hip.

“I’ll bust your ass, you son of—”

“Okay, look. We’re taking both of you to the hospital first and then to the police station, and you’re going to take a look at some pictures,” Caleb informed him.

“I’m fine. Jackass here just grazed me,” Laura insisted, but he heard her breath coming in fast gasps and knew she must be in pain.

“Well, then it shouldn’t take too long, should it? Let’s go.” He opened the door on her side and waited.

Laura scowled at him but didn’t argue further, which told him just how painful the wound really was.

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He was out of his goddamned mind. Really, Caleb thought, it was the dumbest thing he could possibly do. But watching Laura going over the pictures with their trigger-happy friend, seventeen-year-old Matt, the idea of her going back to that apartment alone sent an ice cold flash of panic through him.

Damn her. Damn her to hell for making him care again. He clenched his fists tight under the table while he sat on the other side of her assailant. What was he even thinking? Inviting her to stay at his apartment was just asking for trouble, just asking for her to walk on in, grab his heart and squeeze the lifeblood out of it with her bare hands like she had the first time.

He couldn’t go through that again, Caleb told himself. Only an idiot would open himself up to that kind of horrific pain a second time.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Caleb took the stairs to Laura's small apartment two at a time. Nervous energy was pumping through him. A place of their own! They still had to iron out the details, but the guy he'd spoken with had said he could set them up with a small place just a few blocks from where Caleb and Laura would be training at the police academy this September. A trade off on the McKinney name, he knew; but hell, if there was ever a time to play the 'Do you know who my father is?' card, getting a deal on a house was sure as hell it. The place was tiny, but heck, he and Laura were pretty small people. They didn't need much.*

*Caleb had told his father that he wanted to introduce him to someone special. His father had seemed pleased and curious. The permanent grin on Caleb's mother's face*

*Had certainly added to that. The woman's ear-splitting shriek at the news of her eldest son's engagement still rang in his ears weeks later. He knew his father was going to love Laura. She was beautiful, ballsy, and she was going to make a hell of a cop. Heck, he thought with a laugh, she was more like his dad than Caleb was himself.*

*Though they'd probably have to duct tape Mike's mouth shut.*

*Caleb wanted to wait until dinner tonight so that he and Laura, together, could tell his dad that they planned to marry.*

*He banged vigorously on the door and almost fell into the room when it swung open on its own. It took him a disoriented second to understand what he was looking at. Or not looking at would be more appropriate. The closet across the living room was open and empty. The photo Laura kept of the two of them on her TV set was gone. The couch and bed were still there, kitchen was still stocked, but he felt a sickening clench in his stomach when he noticed little things that were gone. Clothes, shoes, makeup, toothbrush...though his extra one was still there. The jewelry box on the nightstand was gone too.*

*That's when he saw it.*

*A folded piece of paper with his name on it propped up by the digital alarm clock by the bed.*

*I'm sorry.*

*That was all.*

*His vision blurred, and he shook his head to clear it. Sorry about what, Caleb wanted to ask, but he couldn't make his voice work. Where was she? Where was Laura...and why*

*was all her stuff gone? She didn't just...leave? "Laura." Her name came out like a plea in the empty room.*

*Caleb's eyes fell again on the bed, and he saw them just last night entwined, arching against and with each other, her soft voice whispering "I love you" in his ear as she slid, hot and wet, beneath him and her nails dig into his back. Then Caleb fell to his knees and lifted up the blankets to look under the bed where she kept all her drawings. She wouldn't leave without them.*

*They were gone.*

*Caleb didn't make it to the bathroom. He threw up on the carpet, next to the bed.*

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The man Chadwick identified was a Hugo Medeiros, a Portuguese crook who had ties to the Bambetti crime family. His rap sheet was long, but they couldn't find anything to link him to the child trafficking.

It took him a few minutes to realize Laura was talking to him. "What?" Caleb asked.

"I said, so could it really be the mob then?" Laura repeated after the kid had been taken away.

He scowled, his thoughts still wrapped up in the decision he knew he had to make. "How could you let Chadwick get the jump on you like that?"

Laura stared at him. "Come again?"

"You're a cop. Alert at all times. We're never off duty. What the hell were you thinking just walking into your building without checking it out first? You keep telling me what a good cop you are, and then you pull an amateur move like that."

He watched her cheeks flush and anger flare in her eyes and had to fight the most insane urge to grab her and kiss her senseless.

“Oh, I don’t know. I figured my life had been going so well so far that getting shot would be just the perfect way to cap off my day!” Laura snapped at him. “God, you’re a real bastard, you know that?” she snapped, getting to her feet and storming towards the door to leave the interrogation room.

“Hang on,” he called after her as she left and he had to follow her out of the room. He hadn’t meant to lose his temper like that. He still had to make her understand that she couldn’t stay at her place alone. Of course he had to screw that up by pissing her off first. *Nice going, McKinney.*

The other officers turned to watch the unfolding scene.

“Laura, damn it, wait!”

“Trouble in paradise, McKinney?” a voice called out.

Caleb turned to see Officer Hampstead grinning with amusement. “Up yours,” he tossed over his shoulder and followed Laura down the steps to the exit. “Laura, hang on!”

She whirled on him. “Look, we’ll meet up tomorrow to check up the lead about the money being wired, but right now, if I don’t get away from you, there’s a very good chance that I’ll be kicked off the force for assaulting a fellow officer.”

“Just wait a second, okay? You can’t go back to your apartment,” Caleb insisted.

She narrowed her eyes and shook her head. “Why the hell not?”

“They sent someone to your building,” he reminded her, and he saw realization dawn in her eyes.

“Well, okay, but that’s my home. I’m not going to make the same mistake twice. I was just dist— Never mind. I’m infuriated enough right now that, trust me,... What? Why are you shaking your head at me?”

“You’re not staying alone so they can try again.”

“

I’m a big girl, Caleb. I can take care of myself. Hell, I would think you’d be leading the parade to get me wiped off the map.”

He grabbed her and pushed her against the wall. “That is not funny in the least.”

She stared at him, and he watched her eyes move down to his mouth. The memory of their kiss back at Caroline’s house seemed to sizzle like an electric current between them. She licked her lips, and Caleb fought back a groan, his jeans suddenly too tight. “No, I remember the only time you ever had a sense of humor was if you were hammered.”

The comment was too close to their old life, and he saw a flicker of sadness in her eyes. *Did she miss it?*

He watched her stiffen and push against him so that he had to take a step back, and then she slipped away from him.

“I know what you’re saying, though. They know we’re on to them, and so they came after me. Okay. So I’ll stay with Karl, I guess.” She shrugged.

He felt like someone had punched him in the gut. “Who the hell is Karl?”

She crossed her arms over her chest and met his gaze, holding it for a long moment before she replied. “He’s a friend. A cop. So, see? You’ve got nothing to worry about. If I’m too much of an amateur to take care of myself, Karl will be there.”

*I just bet*, Caleb thought, clenching his jaw. “No.”

“No, what?” Laura asked blankly.

“You’re not staying with...Karl,” he informed her, the name sticking in his throat.

“Oh, for shit sakes, Caleb. I’m going home and packing up my stuff.” She turned back towards the door and pushed it open.

“Yeah. Then you’re coming to my place,” he forced himself to announce, before he could change his mind.

She turned so fast that she crashed into him. He held on to her arms, careful to keep his fingers away from the bandage on her bicep.

“What? What the...what?”

Her eyes were round as saucers, and Caleb went very still, unsure if he’d just made the worst mistake. Those eyes had always haunted him, beautiful as liquid emeralds. Now he couldn’t speak; he was mesmerized. He couldn’t breathe, wanting to just sink into the depths of those eyes.

“We...” His voice cracked, and he felt fifteen again and could have kicked himself. He tried again. “We’re working together on this. It just makes sense.”



“No it doesn’t!” Laura cried, jerking away from him. “It makes the absolute opposite of sense. It’s...insane, Caleb. You hate me. Why the hell would you even suggest that we—”

“You said at my mom’s house that you wanted to tell me what happened.”

She bit her lip and shook her head. “Right, and if I remember correctly, you pretty much told me to shove it.”

Caleb closed his eyes, remembering what else he had said. *You, Laura Thatcher, are nothing but a whore.* With the passage of time, getting over the shock of seeing her again, he could concede that had been out of line. “I know. I should have heard you out. I don’t know if I could stand to hear it now, but... Just think, okay? We have a lot of crap to figure out in addition to working on this case together. It’s easier to just come to my place than going back and forth.”

“Easier?” Laura wrapped her arms around herself and laughed bitterly. “Oh, you must be drunk or high or I don’t know what but, God, Caleb.”

“Just until we wrap this case up. You want to explain yourself, fine. I can’t imagine what the hell your excuse is, but...I’ll listen. Just don’t make me go home and wonder if someone is going to try and take you out again.”

He saw her eyes glisten with tears, and she looked away from him as if to hide them.

She’d left him. What the hell did she have to cry about? What the hell had made her leave him if she was so torn up about it? There were so many questions that just seemed to pile up on top of each other and add to the fire of his fury because he was so frustrated. Knowing how good they had been, and then she was just gone.

“Okay,” she replied in a small voice, looking up at him with those damp eyes, and again he wondered if he was making the biggest mistake of his life.

## Chapter Six

“Oh God, can I get ringside seats to that? Pleeeeeaaasssee?” Karl begged, sitting on Laura’s bed while she packed up her belongings and explained about Caleb’s plan.

“This isn't funny!” she insisted. The knot in her stomach tightened, and she questioned agreeing to stay at Caleb’s apartment for the hundredth time.

“Are you kidding me? You're telling me that, if my ex-girlfriend wanted me to move in with her, you wouldn't be laughing your ass off at me?” he countered.

“Yes, I would. But this is me, and you're not allowed to find humor in my crisis.” Laura snapped, smacking Karl with her brown leather jacket. “I hate this job. I swear, after we wrap up this case I’m moving to a farm somewhere and raising goats!” She flopped down on her bed and leaned her head on his shoulder. “God, Karl. What am I gonna do?”

“Well, seems to me you've got two choices. You can keep carrying around this secret like a cancer when you look him in the eye day after day, or you can finally come clean. I’ve seen what it’s done to you all these years, Laura, and it’ll just be harder having to face him every day. You went to his mom’s house to tell him anyway. Why not now?”

Laura covered her mouth with a hand and tried to blink back tears. “Damn it. Goddamnit. He’s going to hate me, Karl.”

Karl wrapped an arm around her. “I don’t want to pour salt on the wound, hon, but he pretty much already does. You’ve got nothing else to lose.”

“I don’t know.” She sniffled. “I kinda got the feeling that lately he might...not hate me so much anymore. Maybe it’s working together or just wishful thinking, but...”

“Okay, Laura, look, let’s say he is feeling something for you again. Do you really want to rekindle your romance with this terrible secret between the two of you, or would you rather just come out with it and finally unburden yourself?”

She wiped her eyes. “How the hell are you so damn sage after three failed marriages?”

He laughed. “Oh, it’s easy to dispense advice when you’re not the one who has to actually follow it—not so easy to hold the mirror up to yourself. But honey, I wouldn’t trade places with you for all the hookers in Amsterdam.”

She giggled and jumped when there was a knock at her door. That could only be one person. Laura shivered and got to her feet. Karl followed her out, and with clammy hands, she pulled the door open.

Caleb’s eyes met hers, and when his gaze moved to the person behind her, Laura saw the cold flicker of jealousy in his eyes. Maybe it was stupid, but it made her feel hopeful. If he was jealous, maybe that meant...well, she didn’t dare finish that thought. It felt too much like tempting fate.

“I’m Karl.” Her friend came forward and extended his hand.

Caleb hesitated but then took his hand.

“So you’re the Sarge’s kid, huh?”

Laura winced, not sure if Caleb still got irritated when people brought up his father. He clenched his jaw but just nodded.

“Ready to go?” he asked her.

Laura gave Karl a last wary glance. “Now or never,” she replied in a trembling voice.

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“I’ll take the couch,” Caleb informed her after taking her bag and carrying it into what Laura guessed was the bedroom.

“Oh, hell, you don’t have to do that. I’ll sleep on the couch,” she assured him, looking around the sparse one-bedroom apartment. It smelled faintly of beer and...Doritos? She fought a small smile. Typical bachelor.

There were no feminine touches, which made her breathe a little easier. Whatever relationship Mike had referred to years ago was over now. Or at least she thought so. Caleb hadn’t been forthcoming, and Laura hadn’t dared to ask.

The couch was brown leather, and the floor was gray carpeting. A black entertainment center took up most of the front wall, and there was a small kitchenette behind her.

She peeked into the bedroom, watching him prop the bag next to a wooden sliding door closet. Laura reminded herself that this was a temporary arrangement. Someone knew they were getting close and wanted to keep them from discovering the truth. Once the truth came out, the criminals would be behind bars, the danger would be over, and she and Caleb could go back to their lives. Separately.

“I think you’ve got enough room for your stuff. Let me know if you need an extra shelf or more hangers or something.” Caleb came towards her, and Laura backed up and turned while he led her to the kitchen. “Hungry?”

“Mmm? Yeah, sure,” Laura replied, trailing after him. “Look, Caleb, you didn’t have to do this. I could have taken care of myself—”

“I didn’t want to take the chance, okay? You always could take care of yourself. That’s not what this is about. Beer?” he asked, opening the fridge.

She knew what it was really about. The truth. Their truth. The truth she had denied him because she had been too much of a coward. She'd built a wall around herself to protect her from that truth, but now she felt she like she was scattered, like the bricks of the wall were starting to chip away. He was going to know soon because the wall would come down. He'd know, and he would hate her.

Well, more than he already did, anyway.

Karl was right, though. If he already hated her, what the hell was there to lose now? Her mouth went dry, and her voice cracked when she gathered up her courage to speak. "Caleb—"

He lifted his head and shook it. "No."

The flicker of panic in his eyes told her all she needed to know. No. Not yet.

Laura pressed her lips together and remained silent, a lead weight in her stomach.

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She sat next to him in the station while they looked at the tapes from the security camera at the Western Union for the money transfers they had found receipts for. They tried to capture who had come in at the times stamped on the receipts. Laura paid special attention to the times on the receipts, and on twelve different occasions, someone different walked into the building. The money was being wired to everywhere from Thailand to the Philippines to as far as Russia.

"Well, there are your child trafficking meccas of the world," Laura said, disgusted.

They were able to capture the faces of at least four of the men who'd walked into the building. She watched Caleb working on the computer. He might not look like the same straight-laced brainiac she had grown up with anymore, but it warmed her heart to see a little glimpse of that sweet boy now and then.

He checked the captured images against the computer database they had of criminals and clapped his hands together when one of them matched a member of Jackson's gang.

"So there's our proof Jackson's in on it. But where is this money going?" Laura asked.

"We're getting the account numbers checked out and should have the addresses any day now. I say we pay our ex-employee from the agency another visit." Caleb grabbed his jacket off the back of the chair.

"Okay, but can we please grab something to eat first? Not that mini-mart burritos two days in a row aren't appetizing, but it'd be nice to see something on a plate," Laura pleaded.

He tossed her an amused smile over his shoulder, and her heart skipped a beat.

For that brief moment, he looked at her the way he used to, and she wanted to soak in it like a flower being showered with cool, clean water on a blistering hot day.

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"Look, I have nothing else to do with that place anymore. Why the hell do you two keep bothering me?" Stephen Phillips asked, scowling, when he opened the door to see the two of them standing on his porch.

"Must be your raw sexual magnetism," Laura joked, pushing her way into the house past the short, balding man. "Just can't stay away."

He handed them each a cup of coffee and sat across from them on his black armchair.

"We just wanted to ask you a few extra questions. Play catch up," Laura told him.

“We arrested this guy, and he gave us your boss’s...right, ex-boss’s name. Any idea why?”

“Look, I don’t want to get involved in any of the shit that’s going on there. Why do you think I left?”

“I thought you were fired?” Caleb asked, leaning forward.

Stephen groaned. “Yeah, I was, but trust me, I was only too happy to get the hell out of there.”

“Why?” Caleb and Laura asked in unison.

He shook his head. “I’ve got a family, you understand? I’ve got to protect them, and there is no way those guys can find out I’m talking to you.”

“You have a family. Kids?” Laura pressed. “If you have any idea that the agency is involved in some kind of abuse, how can you just sit there and allow someone else’s kids—”

“Hey, that is not my problem!” Stephen shouted, his face flushed. He leapt to his feet. “I am doing what I have to protect the people I love. No one else comes before that.”

“Right, not your problem,” Laura hissed. She looked at one of the pictures on a shelf of elegant carved wood. She picked up the one with a little boy and little girl and showed it to him. “Some little girl the same age as your daughter is being shipped off to God knows where to endure God knows what, and it’s just not your problem!” By now she was shouting and trembling, and she could feel Caleb’s hands on her arms pulling her back. All she could see was the little girl she had been and how no one had helped. Until she had met the McKinney’s, it hadn’t been anyone’s problem, so if anyone had known, he or she had behaved like Phillips and hadn’t gotten involved.

“Hey, it’s okay. Calm down. Easy,” Caleb soothed behind her, and Laura’s anger suddenly faded, replaced with the strongest urge to cry. “We’re not asking you to put your kids in danger. We can make sure your name never gets out about this. We’re just asking for whatever information you can give us.”

“Yeah, like the guys who are in charge of this don’t know how to get around the system,” Phillips sneered. “Jesus Christ.”

“How far up does this go?” Caleb demanded.

The man snorted at that. “This is over. I want you two to leave, and I don’t ever wanna see you again.”

“Well tonight, I hope when you kiss your little girl goodnight that you’re able to sleep, knowing how many other little girls are never gonna have their mommies and daddies tuck them in. You think about that!” Laura snapped.

Stephen shook his head but met her gaze, and she felt a beat of hope at the hesitation she saw there. He closed his eyes and clenched his jaw. “Look, just look at the adoption records. You’ll see that there are more children brought to them than are actually placed. That’s all I can tell you. Now please, I beg you, okay? Get out and leave me alone.”

They drove back to Caleb’s apartment discussing different ways they could get into the adoption agency. True to his word, he stopped at a local burger joint, and they sat down to a meal. Not a date. Of course not, Laura told herself, but it was so nice to just sit across from him and have them be at ease. Every once in a while, he seemed to remember what she had done and the soft look or occasional smile would fade, but he didn’t ask her yet. So she waited.



The question came that night. She woke up thirsty and was on her way to the kitchen for a drink of water.

He'd fallen asleep with the television on, or at least she'd thought he had. The living room was dark, the only light coming from the T.V. The sound was low, so the sound of his voice startled her as she walked past the back of the couch on her way to the sink.

“Why?”

Laura froze, debating whether should she climb up onto the pale blue counter and jump out the window or try and shove herself down the garbage disposal.

“All this time, that question has haunted me. After everything we were to each other. Everything we did. Just, *why*?”

Laura came back around to stand in front of him, and when he sat up, she wished she hadn't. He was shirtless, and they usually seemed to make a concentrated unspoken effort to stay fully clothed around each other. His dark hair was in disarrayed tufts, and his eyes were so sad. Pain. That was the same look she'd seen the second before he kissed her in his mother's house. The memory of his horrible treatment of her, justified or not, still hurt, and she couldn't resist placing some of the blame on him. “It's not like you chased me to the ends of the earth, now is it? I left, and I bet you blew a sigh of relief. 'Wow, glad I wrangled myself out of that crazy Thatcher girl.'”

He grabbed her hand and tugged her down next to him, his blue eyes nearly black with fury. “Don't even joke about that, damn you!” His fingers tightened painfully around her, but then Caleb seemed to realize he was hurting her, because he groaned in frustration and let her go. “How the hell did we get here? How did this happen to us, of all people?” He didn't look at her but down at the carpet, and she knew he wasn't really looking at that either.

“I tried to tell you. I know we need to hash this out. Yes, you deserve answers. But Caleb, it's three o'clock in the morning. Do you wanna have this out now?”

“Yes. If not now, when, Laura? I might lose my damned nerve in the morning. After this case is over, we're both going back to our lives.”

Well, there it was, wasn't it? There was no future for them. He had no desire for one. She was just a chapter in his life that he had to close. Laura looked away and willed herself not to cry, though it felt like the pain was choking her. Damn her, when would she learn to never allow herself to be weak? To hope? To love? All it got her was agonizing pain.

“You and Mike.” Caleb's voice choked on his brother's name. “I still can't believe that happened. In the name of God, Laura, why Mike? Of all people? Why him?”

“Mike loved me. Not under certain conditions. Not some idolized version of me. He just loved me.”

“Laura, I—”

“When you asked me to marry you, I didn't think it was possible to be that happy and not burst. To fill up with such an amazing feeling and not just float away. Then I went to see my mother.” Laura wanted to touch his hair, remembered the soft feeling of the dark strands beneath her fingers. She didn't dare. “And she reminded me of what I was.”

“Goddamnit, Laura. I told you that woman was full of shit!” he shouted, jumping to his feet.

“Caleb, please!” Without thinking she reached up and touched his bare thigh to calm him, her fingers coming just up to the hem of his black boxer briefs. For a second she let them linger over the skin. Teenage lankiness had developed into warm steel muscle, and Laura lifted her gaze and remembered biting into Caleb's teenage shoulders, wanting now to

bite into Caleb-the-man's shoulders. He closed his eyes while her fingers pressed ever so lightly into his thigh, and Laura quickly dropped her hand.

She could swear he sighed when he sat back down.

“She told me I was garbage. That I would never be good enough to be your wife.”

“Why did you listen—”

“Damn it, Caleb. You wanted an explanation; I'm giving you one. Now would you please shut your goddamn mouth and let me finish!” Laura demanded, lust and heartache mingling with her anger. “I know you told me not to listen to what she said. I know you didn't want me to go see her in the first place. But I did. And she made me doubt myself. I wanted to believe that she was full of shit. I wanted to believe all that mattered was that I loved you and you loved me. But she got to me. That's why I left, Caleb. Not so much because of what she said, but because she still had the power to get to me. She made me believe that you would somehow eventually see I wasn't worth spit, and then you'd leave. Or that I'd eventually somehow royally screw us up because I didn't know how to do anything else. I was garbage, and someday, you'd know it. Her words kept playing in my head, and I thought, how could I marry you with those words hanging over my head? How could I marry you and take the chance that she was right? I was eighteen, Caleb. What the hell did I know about being a wife? Hell, I knew shit about being Laura Thatcher.”

Caleb lifted his forefinger hesitantly. “Permission to speak?”

Laura rolled her eyes. “Granted.”

“You kinda lost me there. You are Laura Thatcher.”

“For me to marry you. Be your wife, God help us, have your kids, her words needed to not matter. I needed to make them not true. I needed to be strong. Make myself something I was proud of. Know that I wasn't garbage because I lived a good life and made good decisions and wasn't afraid to love someone because I was worried I' send it all down the crapper. Be strong enough and proud enough of myself, without needing you to tell me. You saved me from her. You were my little knight on a white horse. I went from being hated by her to being loved by you without a second to grow on my own.”

“So you tore my heart out and stomped on it so you could go find yourself. That's just great, Laura.”

“Caleb, please. It may not seem all that important to you, but it was everything to me.”

“Yeah, well, you were everything to me!” he shot back, glaring at her.

“And so were you! That was the problem!” While Laura spoke, she realized that underneath the one thing she hadn't told him yet, there was still a world of truth in her words. “You came from this loving family, even with your dad gone most of the time. Your mother adores you. Mike adored you. You grew up formed by that love. How could I compete with that? I knew nothing but anger, hate, pain before you. Then every step I took became this thing where I was just waiting until I did something to turn you away too. As much as I loved you, what would happen to me if you all of a sudden hated me too? If you turned me away and decided it was over?”

“Don't compare me with your mother, Laura,” Caleb insisted. “I never treated you like garbage. You were the one who chose to leave. I loved you, damn it. I would have never—”

“Caleb. The first day we came back into each other's orbit, you called me a whore,” Laura whispered sadly.

He was silent, and Laura felt encouraged by the guilt she could see in his eyes. The regret. “I should have never...I'm sorry.”

Laura throat caught on a sob, and she nodded, eyes glistening. “So I may have ruined things by leaving. And you'll never know how sorry I am for hurting you. But in the end I was right, Caleb.”

“No, Laura. Jesus, how can you say that? You were wrong. You were dead wrong.” He shook his head.

“Look how much we hurt each other, Caleb. How vicious and cruel we were. That's not good for either one of us.”

“That wouldn't have happened if you—”

“The reason doesn't matter, Caleb. Not to me. Just the fact that we could do that to each other shows me we had no business getting married.” She wiped her damp cheeks. “I don't know if you and I can ever get to a place where we're not trying to hurt each other. Or how long it'll take to fix what's broken between us. But I know I'm stronger now. I have my own life. It's an okay one.”

Caleb started, as if jerked from a dream, and he ran his hand over his face, exhausted.

“Can you forgive me?” Laura asked him, holding her breath while she looked at him, now close enough to feel his breath on her face.

“I don't know,” he replied honestly, and her heart broke just that little bit more.

“God, I'm tired, Laura. So damn tired of all of this.”

“All I can ask is that maybe you and I can put the past behind us and move on from right now, where our lives are right now. I've changed, Caleb. Honest. Can we live our lives, maybe even be...I don't know, friends, and just let go of all of the angry crap?”

“You are different,” Caleb said, reaching to cup her face, but he must have changed his mind because he dropped his hand. “You're...stronger, I guess. I don't know if 'let go' is in our vocabulary, Thatcher. But I'm tired of being miserable all the time. So...maybe. Maybe we can move past this.”

Laura shivered, excited hope in her heart, mingled with relief at the knowledge that maybe it didn't matter now that she hadn't told him everything, that perhaps it was better if she didn't because what good would it do? She'd explained one of the reasons she'd left. That had been truth. To tell him the rest would just hurt him, and hadn't they just agreed that they would stop causing each other pain?

## Chapter Seven

*Two lines...two damned lines! Laura sat on the bathroom floor, ignoring the cold against her bare legs. She shook the stick and prayed for one of the lines to disappear. She wasn't picky, either line would do. Eyes clenched tight, she risked opening one eye to see if her prayers had been answered. Nope. "Oh God," she groaned. "How did this happen?" She placed an elbow on the seat of the toilet and cradled her head in the free hand that did not hold the white plastic stick with the small, unassuming window. Well, she knew HOW it happened; she just doesn't know how this particular outcome had happened. She and Caleb were always so careful. She was allergic to the pill, but he never forgot a condom. Ever. He even went so far as to check the boxes they kept in his room, hers and the glove compartment in his car to make sure they weren't running low. When the damn things weren't even half-empty, he'd buy new boxes!*

*Ninety-seven percent effective, my ass, Laura thought. They should have a disclaimer for especially diligent, over achieving McKinney-sperm! "Shit, shit, shit!" Laura had just been getting used to the idea of becoming a wife, and now this!*

*A memory teased the edges of her mind, and Laura bit her thumb. The night she'd found the ring. "Nooooohhhh," she whimpered as the memory came back to her. She'd been so afraid. So desperate, and all she wanted was for Caleb to make it all right again. All she wanted was that sweet oblivion that came with him buried hot inside of her. Be careful what you wish for. She didn't remember them using a condom that night, but she had been so upset that she couldn't be sure... Of course they did. Of course!*

*Uh uh. The little white stick taunted her, and Laura threw it across the room. What the hell was she gonna do now? They had the police academy this year and a wedding to plan. When she dared to picture herself with a child, it was someday far in the future! So far, she couldn't even really see it at all. Sure as hell NOT in nine months! She got to her feet and paced around the bathroom. She could just see the look on Caleb's face. His*

*beady blue eyes were going to grow huge, he would go very pale, he would open and close his mouth a few times like a gasping fish. Then he would clench his jaw very hard. Laura had never seen him faint, but Caroline had told her he had passed out a few times when he was a toddler and became overly excited or agitated. Unplanned early fatherhood would certainly fit that criteria. For a moment she thought it'd be kind of entertaining to see him drop like a stone at her feet.*

*Laura suddenly stopped. Right at this second, there was another human being inside of her. The size of a pin, sure, but still. A baby. A little Caleb McKinney.*

*Could she dare to hope that maybe this was a sign from God that she was doing the right thing? Now that she'd decided to let herself be happy and fight past all her fear. Past that voice in her mind that sounded like her mother and told her Laura didn't deserve a baby, didn't deserve Caleb. Maybe God was being generous to Laura Thatcher for the first time in her life. Her chest constricted, and her stomach warmed. A baby.*

*Her mouth hurt, and Laura realized with a jolt that it was because she'd been smiling the whole time. Then her nerves played catch-up, and she threw up in the toilet bowl.*

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“Ask me why you love me?” a voice came through on Caleb's speaker phone, and Laura cocked an eyebrow at him at the unmistakable male voice.

Caleb rolled his eyes and spoke into the small gadget. “Give me good news.”

“Just hacked the adoption agency's computer, and hear that lovely music in the background? That's the sound of the records being printed as we speak.”

“Roger, have I ever told you you're my favorite computer hacker in the whole wide world?” Caleb asked, making Laura smile in the seat next to him.

“Not nearly enough, but it's always nice to hear. You on your way?”



“Be there in five.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon going over the addresses of the supposed ‘adoptive parents.’

“That’s over thirty-five,” Laura said, hanging up the phone and staring in disbelief at the pages in her hand. Thirty-five dummy addresses from people who have never even heard of the Guiding Light Adoption Agency.”

“Two hundred adoptions confirmed. They wave these under social services’ nose, and S.S. isn’t going to probe any further to come across those thirty-five,” Caleb said, pulling the fax paper from the machine.

“There’s gotta be more, right?” Laura asked, stretching her feet out on the couch. “And where is he getting these older kids from if they’re not being adopted but sent off to Thailand or wherever—”

“Orphanages,” Caleb suggested.

They visited the Immaculate Heart of Our Lady Orphanage the next day. The nuns confirmed that they worked with the adoption agency to place many of their children.

“Unfortunately, many of our infants come from women who work in prostitution, but we do get the occasional older child who’s been taken away by social services and placed with us if they can’t find a foster home for them,” Sister Madeline explained.

Laura felt bile rise in her throat when she asked the next question. “But isn’t it harder to find homes for the older kids?”

“The Guiding Light has been a godsend in that way. They seemed to have a special knack for placing the older kids.”

“Right. Could you give me some idea of how old we’re talking about?” Caleb asked.

The middle-aged nun spooned some sugar into her tea and moved the porcelain sugar bowl across the coffee table to Laura. Sadness clouded her brown eyes, and she sighed. “Well, parents often prefer infants. Once they become over two years of age or so, they’re a little harder to place. Thank the good Lord we’ve had much luck with the Guiding Light. The parents who approach them seem to actually prefer the older children.”

Laura choked on her coffee, and Caleb patted her back while she coughed.

“You mentioned some of the women who come to you are prostitutes?” he asked.

“Yes. We’re very careful not to judge the women who come to us, and we don’t believe in throwing stones. We are all God’s children after all, and who among us hasn’t made mistakes? These women know that they cannot take care of their children, so when they find themselves in the family way, we’re grateful that we can provide an alternative to the other choice they have. I only wish more women made the choice to come to us.”

“So do they come to you directly?” Laura asked when she could speak again.

The nun nodded and leaned back on her white velvet chair, cupping her mug. “Some do. Sometimes their babies are brought to us via their...er...employers.”

“Their pimps?” Caleb asked, surprised.

Sister Madeline swallowed, obviously uncomfortable with the word, and her cheeks reddened but she nodded. “I’m sorry, I don’t know any of their names.”

“But you could tell us perhaps where they usually come from?” Laura pressed. “Here in the Bronx?”

“Oh yes, we’ve had a few from here.”

“Do you get any strip...er...exotic dancers that come to you?” Caleb asked, and Laura moved forward on the white couch. The trail was beginning to lead them to the man they wanted, and she waited, anxious to hear if that final link would fall into place.

“Yes. We’ve received a few of our older children from those women. They’re in dire straits, you understand, and take up that method of employment when they can barely make ends meet for themselves, never mind their poor children, so we do what we can for them.”

Laura saw Caleb go rigid beside her and could almost feel him crackle with electricity when the final piece of the puzzle clicked.

Caleb waited until they left the convent to slam his hand down on the roof of his car and give a shout of victory. “I knew it. I goddamn knew this would all lead us back to that son of a bitch Mankell.”

“I’d say we’ve got enough to get a warrant and pay him a little visit, don’t you?” Laura asked.

“Indeed we do,” he said, grinning, looking so boyishly handsome in that instant that her breath caught and she had to look away to resist the urge to wrap her arms around him and kiss him.

Max Mankell was the son of Norwegian immigrants who’d moved to New York after the end of the Second World War. Despite being a bright student, he had no patience or

interest in school and learned in a very short time that the less savory or honest pursuits would garner him the success and power he craved much faster than going the academic route. His intelligence and cold determination brought him up the ranks of organized crime with lightning speed, and he now ran the underbelly of much of the city with an iron bloody fist in collusion with his fellow crime bosses.

One thing set him apart, however. He had a sexual appetite for children, particularly young boys, and this brought him in contact with other pedophiles and the child sex industry, allowing him to network with traffickers all over the world, so he could indulge his appetite and line his pockets with millions of dollars.

Now, if they could just get the solid proof that would put the final nail in Mankell's coffin.

"I'm heading over to your dad's tomorrow to check in with him," Laura informed Caleb while they sat on the couch watching television and eating dinner in, until then, companionable silence. She was loath to bring up his father after she and Caleb seemed to be getting along.

She wasn't surprised to see him clench his jaw. He focused on his plate and brought another forkful of rice to his mouth.

"I'm...uh, just bringing it up because, well, you can either let me go alone or you have to come with me."

"Mmm," he replied noncommittally.

She studied him for a while and then stood up and went to his television set, where a packet of cards rested on top. "I know. Poker. I win, you come with me to see your dad tomorrow. You win, you don't." She dropped back down onto the couch.

“That’s not funny, Laura. You going off on your own, out in the open without me to back you up doesn’t sound like winning to me.”

“I think we’ve already established I’ve always been the funny one,” Laura said, moving the plates out of the way and dealing out the cards between them.

He scowled at her.

“Oh, would you relax? Let’s say by some miracle you actually finally beat me, I’ll get Karl to give me a ride.”

If anything, his scowl darkened even further. She found she liked the idea that he was jealous. Very much.

He still sucked as much as he ever had. It made her feel good inside, that he had retained that part of his old self.

Though she had to admit, she wasn’t playing her best either. That, however, she blamed on the beers.

She also blamed the beers for the fact that poker had now become strip poker, Laura mused, watching Caleb on the floor across from her. He was shirtless, pant-less, wearing nothing but boxers and one sock and shoe on his left foot after a lengthy debate where he’d insisted that shoes DID count as clothes. It was sad, really, and Laura almost felt guilty when she laid down her hand. Full house.

“I hate this game,” Caleb grumbled, kicking off his other shoe.

He lost a sock next.

“You okay?” he asked, looking up from his cards.

“Hmmm? Fine.” Laura replied, distracted. Could she ever tell him? Was it wrong of her to keep this from him when there truly was no benefit she could see to him learning about a child he’d never known? Laura took another long drink from her beer bottle. This one was getting warm, but her body was starting to get heavy and lazy. She didn’t think she’d have the energy to pay the fridge another visit.

*He's gonna have a frakking aneurism. He's gonna shit himself. Could he ever love me again? Will he ever want me again? Will he think I did it on purpose?* No. Laura knew he wouldn’t believe that last one. Thankfully, a nice numbness was beginning to settle over her, and she knew soon enough she wouldn’t have to think about frightening questions or anything except the fact Caleb was here with her. They were laughing and being comfortable with each other, and it was wonderful.

There was also that other thing pulsing between them that even too many bottles of alcohol couldn’t dull. Desire. Strong and hot, and she didn’t know if it was just the beers, but she wondered if it was okay to give in to it. God, she ached for him.

“It’s just that you’re not doing that annoying happy dance you always do when you win a hand.”

“I thought I’d restrain myself. Wouldn’t want to wound your pride anymore than usual,” Laura said, her mouth dry. She took another drink.

He threw a quarter at her head. “Thanks.”

“Not to mention all that dancing would have me exhausted by now,” she teased with a smile.

He narrowed his eyes at her. “I call.”

She laid her cards down, and then Caleb followed. He blinked. Looked up at her and then down at the cards, and a slow grin spread on his face.

“I’ll be damned. I won! I freaking won! Ha!” he exclaimed gleefully. “Lookie there, you blonde midget! I won! I, Caleb McKinney, beat the great Laura Thatcher! Hee hee!”

Then he got to his feet and, in nothing but his boxers, mimicked her happy dance, which was nothing more than swinging his fists and hips side to side around the living room.

“Get your sweet ass back here, McKinney. The game ain’t over till someone gets naked,” she reminded him, giggling, glad for the lighthearted respite from her heavy thoughts.

“Oh, that’s right!” He whistled and pointed at her. “Get naked, baby!” His hair was in disarray, and he took a long drink, finishing the bottle and setting it next to the other empties. His stubbled face was flushed, making the blue of his eyes all the more intense.

Then he tackled her, pressing his fingers into her sides, and Laura squirmed and squealed beneath him. He nibbled on her collarbone and began to work his way south. The lower he went, the less laughing either of them were doing. He dotted sweet, quick kisses along her stomach, and she sighed, playing with his hair.

Caleb closed his eyes again, and when he started to breathe deep and heavy, she thought he’d fallen asleep. But instead, he brought her closer to him and moved up along her body to nuzzle her forehead, moving his mouth over the bridge of her nose and lower until he hovered just above her mouth. Laura watched and didn’t stop him when they both knew she should.

The carpet was soft against her back. It smelled faintly of lemon carpet cleaner.

Caleb kissed her. His other hand slid up into her hair, and he tilted her head back to open her mouth.

It felt so wonderfully right and excruciatingly wrong, and Laura wanted him to stop and wanted him to keep going. Her mind was spinning in a thousand different directions while she moved restlessly beneath him. Alarm bells told her they were both too drunk. This couldn't happen now because they would both regret it in the morning, but she didn't have the willpower to stop.

She'd missed this so very much, his hands on her skin, his breath against her face, the feel of his body claiming hers with deep, hot urgency. Nothing had ever matched the intensity of this man's possession of her.

Her heart was swelling and breaking all at the same time. Laura met Caleb's tongue with her own, and he gave a low whimper before rolling over on the carpet and pulling her up on top of him.

"God, Laura. Stop me. For God's sake, stop me," he moaned, running his hands under her shirt.

Laura shivered. "No," she said, pressing her hips down to feel him thick between her legs. Why not? she reasoned desperately. Hadn't they suffered enough? Didn't they deserve this moment to just let go and remember how good they used to be?

*Even if you're still lying to him?* a traitorous voice whispered through her alcohol-fogged brain. She shut it and kissed him hard, wanting to drive away everything but what was happening between them right now.

They removed their remaining items of clothes, and Caleb nibbled on her lower lip.

"Did you ever stop?" he asked her, holding her by her hips as she poised over him.

She wanted to sink down onto him and have him make her forget. Forget this churning pain and regret and hatred at herself and the world, at this man for loving her too much



and now for not loving her enough. “Never,” Laura admitted, and he pulled her down onto him, finally joining the two of them.

Her body tightened with explosive sense memory, and she exploded before she slid all the way down. Laura arched back and closed her eyes. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry*, she thought while she moved on top of him and realized Caleb was whispering the same thing out loud. She lay down on top of him, needing to feel all of him against her.

Caleb shifted beneath her and flipped them both over so that Laura was now once again on her back, wrapping her legs tight around his waist and urging him with her hips to claim her and never stop. She ran her nails down his back, and he moved his hips harder against her. His forehead pressed against hers, and their eyes locked. In that instant, he was looking at her the way he used to.

She wrapped her arms around him and knew that she would never have the courage to tell Caleb what had happened because as much as she hated it, she needed him to always look at her the way he was looking at her right now.

Like she was the only thing in the world he had to hold on to.

He told her he loved her when he spent himself inside of her.

For those few moments before she drifted off to sleep in his arms, Laura let herself believe that was true.

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*Her mother was thrilled when Laura told her that she and Caleb were planning to marry.*

*“Oh, that's good, girl. Real good. Maybe then you can help your momma out here? Get me all better. Betcha you can buy some good doctors with all that McKinney money.”*  
*The woman looked so small and frail in the hospital bed. Her skin was wrinkled and*

*paper thin, and she looked so much older than her forty years. Why was I ever afraid of this weak little woman? Laura wondered.*

*“The doctors say you're not gonna get better, momma,” she reminded her, the beeping from the monitor emphasizing her point.*

*Karen Thatcher's green eyes flared. “You wanna believe them doctors, don't ya? You wanna leave me here to die? You're gonna go off and live in your rich house with your white picket fence and leave your momma here to die. Wash your hands of me 'cause you're gonna be rich now?” she seethed.*

*“That's not what I mean. The doctors say—”*

*“To hell with the doctors! And to hell with you, you little slut. Oh yes, looks like I was right about you after all, wasn't I?” The beeping in the room intensified. “All those years I wasted when I could have had a life. All those years I took care of you, and this is how you treat your momma. You're gonna burn when you die, baby. You treat your momma like this, and you're gonna burn when you die!” Hatred came off the woman, and Laura had to step back at the force of it.*

*She shook her head, tears filling her eyes. “How you took care of me? How was that, Momma? When every day with you was a nightmare? When you weren't passed out in a drunken stupor, you were beating the crap out of me.”*

*“'Cause I knew. I was right. You're just no good, baby. You never were.”*

*Laura was shaking and fighting hard not to vomit when the nurse rushed into the room.*

*“What is going on here? Please, you mustn't upset her. I'm going to have to ask you to leave,” the petite dark-haired woman ordered.*

*“Right.” Laura sniffled and lifted her chin. “I just wanted to let you know that I’m happy now. No matter how much you tried to break me. I’m okay. Caleb loves me, and you’re gonna be a grandmother. I thought it would maybe give you a little bit of peace to know that. That’s the only reason I’m here.”*

*Her mother started to laugh. “A baby? You? What the hell do you know about babies? Garbage can’t raise babies.”*

*“Please, Ms, Thatcher. Let’s go,” the nurse insisted, touching Laura’s arm.*

*“May God rest your soul, Momma. And you’re wrong about that last bit—after all, Momma, you raised me.” Laura turned and left, certain that she’d never set eyes on her mother again. Finally, she was free.*

*When she got outside, she was trembling so hard she bit her tongue. She stopped for a moment before crossing the street and took a deep gulp of air, pushing her mother’s hateful words away. The words washed over her, no longer seeping in where they would have before.*

*She waited on the curb and then started to cross when the light changed. She didn’t see the car turning the corner until the second before it slammed into her.*

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Laura woke up with a scream. Her nightmare still feeling so vivid that she gripped the blanket with shaking fingers. She realized that she was now back in Caleb’s bed a second before he rushed into the room.

“What?” he asked, wide eyed. He was fully dressed and smelled of coffee.

Was it morning already? She looked around the dimly lit room while the last remnants of her nightmare dissipated. She could see the sunlight filtering through the blinds.

“What is it?” Caleb repeated, and his voice cut through her thoughts.

“Ow,” she groaned and fell over the mattress. Brief snatches of the night before came back to her when it occurred to her that she was naked. *Oh God. Had they...?*

She met his gaze, and he suddenly couldn’t look at her. *They had.*

Laura wanted to bury herself under the blankets. Of all the stupid things she had done in her life, making love to a man she’d ruined was way up there.

They had just begun to be able to be in the same room without killing each other. They were working well together, and she could see a day when they were...if not best friends again, at least, friendly.

*Jesus Christ, Thatcher! What the hell were you thinking?*

Obviously, *thinking* hadn’t entered into the equation.

“Bad dream?” he asked, coming into the room.

God, it felt like her whole life had been nothing but one long nightmare.

She made a muttering sound and covered her head with the pillow.

Laura heard him chuckle and promise to bring her some coffee.

When he came back, he sat down next to her on the bed and handed her a purple mug.

“Look, Laura, about last night. I... Well, we were both pretty drunk. I think we can agree that it was a huge...” He coughed, and his shoulders fell. “It never should have happened. You know that.”

She did. However, that didn't stop her for wanting to ram her fist into his face for saying the words. Her eyes burned with the urge to cry, but Laura didn't dare let herself. She simply nodded, silent.

He exhaled and nodded, getting to his feet.

"Who won?" Laura asked, remembering the whole point of the damned poker game.

He gave a sad smile. "Nobody." Then turned to let her get dressed.

## Chapter Eight

Of course she'd agreed with him. Of course she had, because that had been the smart thing to do. The right thing. They were grown-ups now. This morning had proved it. They'd slipped up, but both knew it had been wrong. There was no yelling, no anger.

So why did Caleb feel like punching something? He tightened his fingers around the steering wheel and looked over at Laura. It had been a mistake to bring her to live with him. What the hell had he been thinking? He hadn't been. His brain had always taken a vacation when it came to Laura Thatcher. In every other aspect of his life he always tried walk the straight and narrow. Laura was his one weakness. Then she'd left, and everything around him had shattered. His entire universe had seemed to upend, and all order had gone out the window.

Oh, there'd been other women. Deliberate attempts to burn Laura Thatcher out of his mind, his heart. It never worked.

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*He'd done it again. Another woman. The same name. Laura...Laura... The woman beneath Caleb glared up at him.*

*"What the hell did you just call me?" Her brown eyes narrowed to beady slits, and her passion-flushed face was now shining with fury.*

*Caleb groaned in self-disgust and pulled out of her before rolling onto his back. "Sorry. Got a bit distracted there."*

*"You shit! You lousy asshole." She moved up on one elbow and socked him in the shoulder, and he was too tired to care. He just wanted her to go so he could sleep and dream. Of her.*

*“Son of a bitch!”*

*The woman got out of his bed and started gathering her clothes. Caleb closed his eyes. A shoe came flying at his head, smacking into his cheek. Didn't hurt too bad.*

*“Well, don't you have anything to say?” she demanded. Debbie. That was her name. Short black hair and small brown eyes. Tall, leggy, small breasts. Everything Laura was not. Even now, as furious as this woman was, she didn't stir his blood the way Laura did in her gorgeous rages.*

*“Could you turn off the light?” he asked, and then he turned away from her and waited for the familiar slam of the door.*

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He was ashamed of those times now. He did not like the man he had become after Laura left, and he'd been slowly returning to someone halfway decent again.

Then she'd come back into his life, and he'd fallen headfirst into the chaos once more.

Case in point, here he was with Laura on his way to see his father. All because he didn't want Laura to go alone or with that *Karl*. What the hell was the deal with those two? Laura insisted that nothing was going on between them, but Caleb got a vibe from them that spoke of more than fellow officers or even just friends.

He was jealous. God, it ate away at him that he even cared! After holding her in his arms...what he could remember of that night, the idea of her and Karl just sent a fury rolling through him.

He was jealous. So jealous he was willing to see his father again.

His father, whose primary interest in his sons was as a reflection of himself. Caleb had it drilled into him from childhood that he'd make a hell of a cop someday if he just applied

himself a bit more. That was all William McKinney ever saw. *Caleb, the future cop who is my son.*

When he was at school, he was a damn good cadet, making good money on the side giving extra tutoring to those who were a little behind in their classes. The reason his fellow students and teachers thought he had a chip on his shoulder was that he was William McKinney's son and would, of course, never be as good as his father.

At home, he was Caleb, the guy Laura Thatcher had dumped with no explanation. Not good enough to be William McKinney's son. Not good enough to be Laura Thatcher's husband. Just not good enough.

"You sure you're ready for this?" Laura asked him as they pulled up to the precinct.

"No," he admitted, and she gave him a small, sympathetic smile. "But let's just get it over with."

"You know, you didn't have to—" she began the familiar refrain, and he pushed open the car door and got out so she would have no choice but to shut up and follow.

His heart was pounding with each step up the stairs into the building, and a few heads turned with surprise, recognizing him to be the great Sergeant McKinney's firstborn.

"Thatcher!" Karl called out, hurrying towards them with a wide smile. "I was worried you two would have killed each other by now. No offence," he added quickly, shaking Caleb's hand.

"Not quite," Laura replied with an uneasy grimace, and Karl paused, studying them both. "The old man in?"



“Yeah, sure. You want me to prep him first?” he asked, tilting his head meaningfully towards Caleb.

Laura shook her head and continued on toward the Sarge’s door. She knocked, and Caleb felt his hands go clammy at his father’s rough voice calling them in.

Blue eyes met blue, and Caleb couldn’t breathe.

“Hey,” Laura spoke through the tense silence. “Thought I’d check in.”

William stood up, and Caleb thought he looked shorter than he remembered. “Good to see you. Both of you.” His eyes never left his son’s, and Caleb’s mouth became sandpaper dry.

He wasn’t sure what he felt, looking at this man who was his father. Anger...fear, inadequacy, curiosity, all of it thrummed through his veins and made him tremble. He closed his fists tight at his sides to try and stop it so that his father wouldn’t see him quake in front of him.

“Coffee?” William asked.

“That’d be good, yeah,” Laura said, and Caleb felt her hand touch the back of his. He didn’t know if it was on purpose or not, but it did ease the tension a little, and he was grateful she had done it.

He took a seat next to her.

“How are you?” William asked him.

“We’re making some good progress on the case,” he explained, wanting to steer away from anything personal.

“I meant you, Caleb. How are you doing? I’ve spoken to your mother and—”

“We’ve got a prime suspect. Mankell. My precinct’s been tailing him for years, but I think we’ve finally got something solid—”

“Caleb, come on. It’s been years. I know that we said some pretty awful—”

“We need warrants to search his properties. His home and businesses. That’s the only reason I’m—”

“Look, I understand you’re still upset about—”

“Sarge, maybe you shouldn’t—” Laura tried to interject.

“I don’t want to get into this right—”

“—Mike. But don’t you think it’s been long—”

“Damn it, Dad. I said I don’t want to talk about this!” Caleb shouted, getting to his feet.

“But since when have you ever given a damn what I wanted? Or Mike, for that matter. It was all about falling in line with the gospel according to William McKinney, and you may think I’ll forget that you pushed Mike into being a cop when he didn’t want to, but I won’t. Not ever! You wanted to talk? Well, there you go. That is all I have to say. Laura, I’ll wait in the car.”

“Caleb, come on,” Laura pleaded, holding on to his arm.

He jerked away from her grasp and stormed out, well aware that everyone had heard his blowup with his father. He was too furious to care, but while he sat in the car and waited

for Laura's return, he admitted to himself that maybe he shouldn't have treated her the way he had, storming out on her like that.

God, he really was messed up if he was feeling guilty about being rude to Laura after what she had done. Christ, it was like being furious with his father brought out all the pain she had put him through too, and made forgiving her tangled up with forgiving his father, something he didn't think he could ever do.

It was times like this he questioned his decision to become a cop. Caleb sometimes joked that he was gonna buy Totts Diner from Mr. Totts and turn it into a bar. Totts, an old man who managed the dive where Caleb sometimes ate his lunch or dinner and used to get very very drunk, had told him he'd be bored shitless with a year. He belonged out there cleaning up the streets. Caleb didn't want to believe him but thought he might be right. Mr. Totts knew all about Laura. He'd told Caleb it was her loss, and the best revenge was to be the best damn cop he could be, marry himself to some sweet gal and have fat cop babies.

He now loved being a cop as much as he used to hate it years ago because every time he was out there, he was with her. He felt Laura so strongly when he was out in the street, he'd sometimes used to wonder if she was dead and her soul was around him.

Part of him had wanted her to be dead, because then that meant she couldn't come back to him. Because if she was alive, it meant she was choosing not to come back, didn't want him.

A year after she'd disappeared, Caleb began to think he didn't want her to come back at all. Who the hell needed her anyway? Oh yeah? You didn't want me, Laura? Well guess what? Now I don't want you.

Except he did want her. Wanted her so bad he ached with it every night and, over the years, had tried to erase her from his mind with every nameless girl he could. He stayed

away from the blondes except when he was drunk. When he got drunk, all he wanted was a little bit of Laura. Laura's hair. Laura's eyes. Laura's breasts. Laura's legs. Laura's ass. He'd take her in bits and pieces if he couldn't have all of her at the same time.

Now she was back, and he had taken her in his arms and fallen headfirst into her again, and it felt both right and wrong.

Maybe it had been a mistake to bring her to live with him? But the alternative was for her to be alone, and that was not an option. If anything happened to her...

God damn her for making him care again.

"Well, the more things change and all that," Laura said, pulling open the passenger side door and sitting next to him.

"Don't start," he grumbled. "What's the word on the warrants?"

"Not a problem," she assured him.

"Good, so let's get the hell out of here already." He turned the key and slammed his foot on the gas.

Laura looked cautiously over at him. "Wow. I would have thought after all this time had passed, you would have gotten over your anger at your dad, but I forgot forgiveness isn't your thing."

He didn't look at her and was silent for a few minutes. "I said I'd try with you. That doesn't extend to my..." His voice trailed off when he spotted the black vehicle behind them in the rearview mirror.

"What?" Laura asked, looking behind her.

“I think we’ve got company. Hang on.” He turned the corner. So did the other car.

“Seriously?” She reached into her purse, which rested on the floor of the car, for her gun.

“We’re being tailed. Call it in.” He motioned toward the radio.

“Who is that?” Laura asked after calling for backup and giving their location. “One of Mankell’s?”

“That’d be my guess. You’d think they wouldn’t appreciate us investigating their little pedophile operation.” He slammed hard on the brakes when another car cut them off and blocked them. “Shit.”

The men behind them got out of the car. Caleb pulled his gun out of his holster and met Laura’s wide-eyed gaze. “Ready to play?”

“Always.” She smiled at him, and he felt a warmth in his chest mix with the racing adrenaline.

Caleb guessed this was just a warning from Mankell and the men wouldn’t be stupid enough to actually try and kill them. At least he hoped not.

When the gunfire opened on both sides of them, he had to admit he had his doubts. He crouched down with Laura while the glass rained down on them. Raised his hand just high enough to get in some shots of his own.

Laura fired at the same time before he ordered her to press her hand down on the gas while he gripped the steering wheel.

“Say what?” she demanded.

“Do it!” He then set the car in reverse and rammed into the black car again and again. He blew out the back window of the police car and fired into the tires of the car behind them, effectively stopping the two men from getting away.

Laura picked up on his plan quickly and managed to shoot out the tires in the car blocking their front path. Her next shot caught one of the men in the leg, and Caleb then put the car in drive and pushed forward, turning the car left and pinning the wounded man against the side of the building flanking the alley.

Laura fired a second round, and a bullet hit the second man in front of them in the ass when he tried to get away.

Caleb felt a moment of amused pride before he pushed the car door open and fired at the two men behind them, hitting them both, but not before feeling the piercing fire of one shot graze his shoulder. The jolt sent him backwards, and he hit his head against the cement corner of the warehouse. His vision blurred while pain screamed in his skull.

He heard Laura call out his name before he dropped to the ground, the stickiness of blood sliding through his fingers. He could barely make out the sound of approaching sirens before the painful haze finally settled over him, and everything went black.

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*By the time they were seventeen, they were Caleb and Laura. One entity. Connected limbs on one body.*

*Nobody understood it. He was the son of one of the most respected men in the city, and she was ‘that’ girl. What on earth could he possibly see in her?*

*If Laura had no girlfriends before, there would be no hope of any now. He felt bad about that, but she assured him she didn’t care. They all hated her for taking golden boy Caleb McKinney out of circulation.*

*She was the bad influence, they thought. Not knowing that he was the one who'd convinced her to cover the principal's office with toilet paper and toothpaste, because the old fart told Laura she wouldn't fit in with the advanced math class she needed to follow him into the police academy next year.*

*It was Caleb who started the rumor that Betsy Hallaway was a lesbian after she called Laura a whore.*

*It was Caleb who pulled the fire alarm when her science teacher wouldn't let her leave early when she was sick.*

*It was Caleb who made her blush really pretty by sneaking in kisses when she opened her locker door to hide them from prying eyes.*

*It was Caleb who snuck in a hand under her top when they were supposed to be concentrating on the educational film in class.*

*It was Caleb who convinced Laura to cut class so they could drive out to the lake so he could do delicious things to her with his mouth.*

*And it was Caleb who snuck into her bedroom at night to bring them both to the brink and begged her to let him go further.*

*Laura held him off. She wasn't ready. When the blood made its return journey up into his brain, he could respect that.*

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He must have dozed again, because the next thing he was aware of was the feeling of a soft, warm weight against the back of his hand. Caleb groaned, and through blurred vision he saw Laura lift her head in surprise.

“Laura.” His voice was rough and thick with confusion. “Whahappen?” he asked, looking around the room in growing panic. “Mankell’s men—”

“Shh, it's okay. You're all right. You just hit your head when you passed out. Rest. They gave you something for the pain. Don't worry about talking,” Laura told him, covering his hand with her own.

Caleb took her hand and lifted it to his mouth. “I'm sorry...called you a whore. Not a whore. Love you,” he mumbled, then drifted off again.

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*God, she's beautiful, Caleb thought when she opened the door with a nervous smile. She's probably more scared than you are, he reminded himself, taking in her freshly washed hair and sweet, soapy smell. Her hair was a bit darker at the ends where it was still damp, and he couldn't resist taking a few strands between his fingers. Laura started at the gesture and leaned in to brush a soft kiss on his lips.*

*“I clean up good sometimes, huh?” she asked, and despite her glib tone, Caleb noticed the slight quiver in her voice. She wore a long jean skirt, and her feet were bare with what looked like clear polish—her toenails looked kind of shiny. She wore a white tank top. Simple and beautiful. That was Laura.*

*“Yep,” Caleb replied, his throat swollen.*

*“You hungry?” she asked, turning from him and pulling out a paper bag from one of the plastic bags on the table.*

*Caleb almost whimpered. Hell yes. But not for food!*

*She pulled out white cartons of Chinese food. She'd taught him to use chopsticks last year, which had led to a hilarious mess and ended with her taking him into her hand for the very first time.*



*Laura leaned across him to switch on the TV, and Caleb watched the way the skirt stretched across her bottom. She's evil, Caleb thought, taking his seat on the carpet next to her. He looked over to his right and saw her bed. When his gaze swung forward again, he noticed that she was watching him. He blushed, feeling like he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.*

*Her cheeks were a little flushed as well, and she gave him a small smile. Pulling out the thick physics textbook, she dropped it onto his lap. "Down boy," she said with a wink. "We'll worry about this head for the moment." She tapped his temple and laughed.*

*Caleb felt his nerves beginning to ease and let out a giggle too.*

*He should get some kind of award, really, he thought, watching her bite the end of her pencil while they finished up the last question. He'd managed to consume the entire meal and finish homework, all with this exuberant voice beating a rhythm in the back of his mind. Gonnagetlaidtoday. Gonnagetlaidtoday. Gonnagetlaidtoday!*

*"So..." Laura said, closing the book.*

*"So..." Caleb echoed.*

*"Did you...uh...bring, ya know?" she asked, getting to her feet.*

*"Uh huh," he replied with a nod, following her up and wishing he didn't sound like such a doofus.*

*"Good. Okay." She bit her thumbnail and looked at her bed. "So, you wanna...um...now?"*

*Caleb took a deep breath and tried not to tackle his girlfriend onto the mattress.*

*"You know, Laura. If you're too nervous or not ready, we can hold off.*

*"Yannowedon'thavetodothis today." WHAT? He mentally screamed at his brain.*

*"You don't want to?" Laura asked, and the disappointment on her face nearly made him come in his pants.*

*"No! I mean, yes, I do. I was just worried that maybe you were too nervous or changed your mind," he assured her.*

*"Oh," Laura said and gave him a bright smile while she wrapped her arms around his neck. "When you get all considerate like that, McKinney, it makes me wanna jump you even more," she confessed and pressed herself against him while meeting his mouth.*

*Gentlemen...start your engines! he thought as his entire body surged upward. He tried to pace himself, clenching his fists at his sides. While he stroked Laura's tongue with his own, she began pulling his shirt up out of the waistband of his pants.*

*"Hmmm, you smell nice," she remarked, unbuttoning his crisp white shirt.*

*Caleb ran his lips along her jaw line, upwards to the curve of her ear. She trembled against him, and her fingers fumbled on the buttons. "God...Laura...", he murmured in her ear when her hands ran underneath his white undershirt along the soft skin of his stomach. Her fingers were warm. When she got his shirt off, leaving just the white undershirt, Laura reached up to run her mouth along his throat.*

*"Caleb...I...do you think..."*

*“Right now? Not so much,” he admitted, licking his lips and capturing her mouth again. He finally allowed his trembling hands to touch her. They skimmed along her back and vibrated with the feel of Laura's soft laughter.*

*“Is it like this...with other people?” she asked, her green eyes wide and steady, and she didn't have to explain what she meant.*

*Caleb knew. Do others experience this all-consuming feeling in their blood just from looking at each other? Do their hearts feel like they're going to explode out of their chests with every touch? Every kiss? Do they look at each other and just know what the other is thinking? Are other couples so much a part of each other that one half is incomplete without the other? The thought made him a little uneasy, but right now, everything felt too good for him to care. “I don't know,” he admitted, undoing the few buttons at the top of her skirt.*

*“Ah, who wants to be normal anyway?” Laura said, pulling his undershirt up over his head.*

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Laura was staring out the window at the sliver of rising sun, drinking coffee when Caleb woke up again.

She rushed to his side. “I'm here.” She gave him a small smile, and in that moment, she looked so much like the young girl he'd once loved so desperately that he couldn't resist giving in to the desire churning through him.

Caleb grabbed her hand and pulled her forward, cupping the back of her head, and kissed her deeply.

## Chapter Nine

For a stunned moment, Laura could do nothing but fall into the kiss, her entire body surging toward him, letting her senses spin at the taste of his mouth. Nobody tasted like Caleb. A mixture of earthy and sweet. Laura pulled back, but he held her still; she told herself he was holding her too strongly for her to stop if she'd even wanted to, and so she just sagged against him.

He gave a soft grunt, and Laura eased back a little, worried she'd hurt him. It was okay to give in a little, she told herself. He was hurt, she was comforting him. That was all. He wasn't in his right mind. *But you are*, her conscience accused even while her tongue sought out Caleb's. Warmth spread from his mouth down Laura's body in exquisite shivers. His hand moved lower to her back to bring her half across his body on the bed, and then his other hand pushed her shirt up and he was touching the bare skin of her back. She moaned at his touch, her body taking over in a lust-filled sense memory, wanting to climb on top of him and have him fill her as deep and hard and deliciously as only he ever could.

He nibbled at her lips before diving into her mouth again, running his fingers through her hair. Then the hand at her back moved forward to her chest, and he cupped a full breast and gave a groan of satisfaction at encountering bare skin.

"Laura..." Caleb sighed between kisses. "Missed you...so goddamned much."

She couldn't speak; his fingers teased her nipple, and his mouth was on her collarbone, drifting lower.

"Take this off...the shirt...I want to...my mouth..." Caleb panted, lifting Laura's shirt higher.

Laura trembled, so near to orgasm that her legs were dangerously close to buckling underneath her. Her conscience pricked at her again, and she remembered Caleb telling her that last night had been a mistake. They'd been drunk. Now he was drugged. He'd just say it again. A mistake. A lapse in judgment. They could never go back to being those innocent teenagers who loved each other so completely, because that kind of love never lasted.

She pulled away, and they just stared at each other, panting in the dim light.

"Why did you stop?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, Caleb. I can't do this," Laura replied. What was one more lie on the mountain she'd already told?

They simply had too much pain between them to ever give in to the attraction she knew was still there. The knowledge seeped in between them, and she felt so sick inside she couldn't touch Caleb anymore. Did he remember telling her he loved her? Of course he didn't. He hadn't meant it. He'd been drugged out of his mind. She pulled against his grip on her arms, and he released her. Easily.

The heat in his eyes was replaced by cold resignation, and she wanted to cry.

"I need to call your mother and tell her you're here." She stood and reached for the phone on the table by the bed.

"Oh, don't bother. She'll just worry—"

"And if I don't, she'll have my head," she reminded him. "Trust me. I need to earn the points."

"Fine," he sighed, and she watched his eyes close again when sleep claimed him once more.

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Laura flashed her badge at the doorman and pushed through the heavy door before he could let her in. The blaring, pulsing music coupled with the sweeping spotlights made it hard to concentrate on the various male faces, trying to pick out the one she wanted.

The fact that all their heads were turned toward the prancing naked woman on stage didn't help matters either. She decided her best bet was the bartender. "Hey, how's it going?" she shouted over the music. "Just a beer."

The bartender took one look at her and must have smelled cop, because he rolled his eyes and slid the beer toward her, turning his attention back to the other men at the bar.

One of them, a pencil thin, pinched-faced man, smiled at her, looking her up and down. "Nice outfit, baby. How much for a lap dance?"

"Sorry, I got my shots this morning and I don't think they've taken yet, so I don't want to risk it," Laura sneered.

"Look, what do you want?" the bartender asked, clearly anxious for her to leave.

"I'm looking for Mankell. He around?"

"You got an appointment?" he asked with a laugh.

"Yeah, right here." Laura pulled out her badge and set it on the bar.

The men around her scattered like rats.

"Hey, this is a legit establishment, okay? Our dancers are over eighteen, and we got our liquor license."

“Good to know. Now if you want to keep it that way, you’ll answer my question. Where’s Mankell?”

“Let me give him a call, all right? I don’t wanna lose my job.”

“By all means,” Laura said, feigning a genial smile.

He moved off to the corner and pulled out his cell phone. He came back a minute later and pointed behind her to a table close to the stage.

She made her way through the tables to where she finally spotted Mankell and his men. He smiled when he saw her, and Laura felt a shudder go through her at the grin.

“Please, someone offer this...lady...a seat,” he insisted, his voice tinged with the slightest hint of his Norwegian accent peeking through. The man to his left stood up and pointed to his seat while he grabbed an empty one from another table.

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” Mankell asked.

He sat at ease in his chair, blue eyes lit with amusement at her presence.

“I just wanted to drop by personally and thank you for the greeting your goons gave us the other day, because you made our job a hell of a lot easier. You see, it’s a funny thing about working with criminals. They’re not so much with the loyalty. Now I’m sure you insisted that they just give us a warning and not actually try to kill us, because I don’t think you’re a stupid man. Slime, but not stupid.”

“Sweetheart, please. All this praise is getting me excited.”

Laura sneered at him. “Thing is, though, one of your men shot my partner. That’s attempted murder of a police officer. It’s amazing what a goon will do or say to save his own ass.”

The smile on his face didn’t waver. It stayed, cold and still on his face. That, more than anything else, hinted to Laura at the pure fury boiling underneath.

“I thought you just might want to know that we’re on to you. We know what you’ve been doing with all those innocent children, and you’re going to be spending the rest of your life in prison. If you make it that long. Funny thing about most criminals. They can shove ice picks into people, rob banks, but if they hear you’ve been abusing children? Well, let’s just say all the power in the world won’t save you from what will be waiting for you in prison when we finally take you down.” She looked at the other men at the table. “I’d be thinking about taking my business elsewhere if I were you.”

Mankell shook his head. “I am a simple businessman, and you come here throwing around all these accusations. I would be very careful if I were you, my dear. I might forget that I am a gentleman even if you are no lady.”

“Threatening a police officer?” Laura cocked an eyebrow.

Mankell put his hands up and leaned back in his seat. “Of course not. I’m just pointing out that it seems rather reckless of you to come here and confront me, all by yourself, if you believe I am this monster you paint me to be.”

She stood up and placed her hands on the table and leaned over him. “I’m not afraid of you. Besides, I know you wouldn’t ever hurt me yourself. You’d send your men to do your dirty work for you. Your type personally is someone a little younger, a little less female. Oh yeah. I know exactly what rings your bell, you son of a bitch. I promise you, the day you touch another child, is the day I come and personally slit your throat myself,” Laura vowed, rage making her voice shake.



He snorted, but his eyes flashed hatred at her.

“Oh, and one more thing before I go.” When she got close enough to him, she balled up her fist and punched him hard across the jaw. “That was for Caleb.”

His men made a grab for her, but Mankell jumped to his feet and held them back. “No!” he barked. He wiped the blood from his lip and glared at her. “You are right, my dear. I am not a man who enjoys violence myself. But for you, I shall make an exception. Rest assured that I will squeeze the life out of you with my bare hands right when the opportunity presents itself.”

“I’ll keep an ear out for the knock then,” Laura tossed back and then turned and left, satisfied she had done what she’d come to do.

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Caleb grabbed her with his uninjured arm the moment she walked into the apartment. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Good to see you too,” she said when her startled heart beat at a normal pace again.

“Why didn’t you answer your phone?” he demanded.

Laura grimaced. She hadn’t heard it ring in the club. “Did someone forget to take their pain medication?”

“Damn it, Laura. I woke up and you were gone.”

“Oh, would you relax?” she insisted, kicking off her shoes and walking into the kitchen.

“Right. Relax. Forgive me for being a little touchy, since the last time you disappeared, it was for ten years.”

Laura stiffened and looked at him, slamming the refrigerator door shut. “Is that supposed to be funny?”

“Do you see me laughing?” Caleb asked, glaring at her.

“Let’s get something straight.” She stormed back toward him, stopping behind the couch. “You are not my keeper. After I got ambushed in my apartment, I came here because I knew that you and I had stuff we needed to work through. Not because I needed you to protect me. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself, and I do not need to account for every second of my day.”

“Sure, you don’t need anybody, right?” Caleb sneered. “You can do it all on your own. Laura Thatcher looks out for number one, and God help any poor son of a bitch who gets in her way or is too goddamned stupid to give a damn. ” He stormed toward her so that she had no choice but to back up into the dividing wall between the kitchen and the living room. “First me, then my brother. Was is it just that easy for you to go back and forth between us?”

Laura raised her free hand to slap him, but Caleb caught her wrist and, with his free hand, tightened his fingers around it.

“You got the first one in for free back at my mom’s. The second one, I’ll hit back,” he warned. “You made the choice, Laura. You walked out.... I can’t just toss people aside the way you do.” Then his eyes softened, as did the grip on her wrist. “I understand what you told me that night. It doesn’t excuse what you did, but I know that...it wasn’t ’cause you stopped....” His voice caught, and he closed his eyes, taking a deep, shaky breath. “I can’t trust you anymore. That’s the bottom line, and no matter how we felt or feel about each other, it comes down to that. I let you in once, and you burned me,” he explained, stepping back from her.

Laura blinked through her tears. He was right. Of course he was right, she told herself. But she wrapped her arms around herself because she was afraid she was going to shatter from the pain of his words. What on earth was she doing, tearing herself up all over again with this man? Wasn't that the very definition of insanity? "You're right. You're right. We can't keep doing this anymore. Things have just gotten too intense with us being in such close quarters." She pushed past him. "If we're going to continue to work together on this case, we can't live together."

"Wait," he protested, grabbing her arm. "I didn't mean I wanted you to leave—"

"No, but I have to leave, Caleb. Come on," Laura insisted. "I appreciate you worrying about me. Karl can keep an eye—"

"Oh, of course. Karl!" he snapped, rolling his eyes.

"Would you stop?" Laura demanded. "There is nothing going on with me and Karl. He is just a friend, okay? He has been there for me during the worst times in my life."

"Yeah, and whose fault is that?" Caleb shot back.

Laura shook her head and threw up her hands. "Here we go again. Look, Caleb, you can't keep doing this to me! You can't tell me that you don't trust me and can't be with me and then turn around and act like some goddamned jealous caveman whenever I mention Karl."

"I am not jealous!" Caleb replied, though Laura saw the flush in his face that showed the blatant lie.

"Just forget—" Laura grabbed her purse and stormed toward the door, but Caleb grabbed her. Unfortunately, he grabbed her with his injured arm, without thinking, and cried out in pain.

She turned back in an instant, forgetting her anger, focusing only on the fact that he was in pain. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. Damn it. I think I just, ow, need to check the stitches,” he groaned, grabbing his injured shoulder and leaning against the arm of the couch.

“Here, let me see,” she urged, undoing the buttons of his shirt. She got halfway done before it occurred to her maybe she shouldn’t.

His eyes met hers, and Laura held her breath when his gaze moved down to her mouth.

She pulled away, not trusting herself to keep her resolve not to make the same mistake of falling into him again.

Laura lifted trembling fingers to the collar of his shirt and pulled it back, revealing the stained bandage. “I’ll...um...get you another one.” She all but ran to the bathroom in her rush to get away from the heat between them. She slammed the door shut and pressed her back against it, waiting for her heart rate to return to normal before she could even move.

Maybe it would be better if she did let him believe something was going on between her and Karl. Then Caleb would back off, and her heart would be safe again. But something recoiled against the idea. Karl was just never a potential romance for her. They had their own sad history that bound them.

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*“She’s young...should have no...conceiving again...” The voices were distant, like they were wrapped in the cotton that filled Laura’s mouth.*

*“She’s coming around.” A male voice...Caleb? Laura fought towards that voice. Her eyelids felt like they had two bowling balls sitting on top of them. She whimpered against the all-over soreness of her body.*

*"Hurts..." Her own voice sounded as muffled as theirs to her own ears.*

*"Easy, just take it easy. Don't move around." Was she moving? Every limb felt like dead weight.*

*"Caleb?" She pushed the name through her fog. Very slowly her eyelids fluttered open. She tried to make out more than white through the blur covering her eyes. Gently, the world around her cleared, and she could make out distinct shapes. There was a woman in a white coat with a badge pinned to the pocket and a man sitting by the bed she didn't recognize. "Who the hell...are you?" she asked, her tongue clumsy in her mouth.*

*He had dark hair, close cropped, and narrow blue eyes, thin lips that were set in a frown. Almost Caleb...but not. "My name's Karl. I was..." He cleared his throat. "I was in the car that hit you."*

*"Car?" she asked, groggy. What car? Where was Caleb? Her head was throbbing like a bitch, and she just wanted to curl up in bed and have him rub the base of her neck for her like he always did when she had a migraine. This was one was a doozy.*

*"Ms. Thatcher, you were hit by a car this afternoon," the lady doctor explained.*

*Laura's eyes shifted to the little twig of a woman. Big round eyes, pert little nose and dark hair pulled back in a ponytail.*

*"What?" she asked, wishing these idiots would start making sense. Just then, it came to her, like a whisper in the back of her mind. Oh yeah, Thatcher. Don't you remember? After your little heart to heart with Mommy? Whammo!*

*"Ms. Thatcher, are you aware that you were pregnant at the time of the accident?" Lady Doc asked.*

*Laura's body tensed after a shudder went through it. "Were?" She forced the word out past her lips. No...not this...God, not this. Please.*

*"I'm sorry, but the baby is gone."*

*Laura shook her head in confusion. "Gone? Where?"*

*The man beside her...what was his name again? ...went pale and looked like he was about to throw up.*

*"No, I mean...I'm sorry, but your baby is dead," the doctor replied, her brown eyes filled with sympathy.*

*Laura felt a very strange sort of click in her chest, and a feeling like thousands of pinpricks washed over her body. "No," she said.*

*"I'm afraid—" Then the doctor stopped because Laura Thatcher was laughing, curled up on her side, laughing hysterically.*

*"Is there anyone you want me to call for—" The guy at her bedside...Karl, right...placed a hand on her shoulder, and Laura drew her hand back and punched him sharply in the nose. The I.V. tore out of her hand, and now they were both bleeding.*

*"Don't touch me. I don't know you. You don't touch me, got it?" she ordered, watching warm blood slide down her fingers to stain the immaculate sheets. "Now look what you did," she said to herself, and it was almost like there was no one else in the room with her. She stared at the blood while the doctor tended to Karl's bleeding nose.*

*The sheets weren't so clean anymore. She'd made them dirty. That's what I do, she thought, starting to laugh again. She made things dirty, she ruined them. Garbage was a*

*very dirty thing. How could it be anything but dirty? She watched the doctor fix her hand. It was supposed to hurt but didn't. Laura felt nothing. Garbage didn't feel. It wrecked, it destroyed. My baby, I'm sorry I wrecked you. I'm so sorry I wrecked you. Then she was laughing again, only her face was wet. Were her eyes bleeding? She curled up again when the doctor left with that guy and was laughing so hard she was shaking.*

*The sound of Laura Thatcher's screams followed Doctor Beauchamp and Karl out of the room.*

*Karl explained later that the driver of the car that hit Laura Thatcher, Jack Kennedy, had panicked and run out of the car, leaving Karl, shaken but uninjured, behind. He'd called for an ambulance from the car and waited with a semi-conscious Laura in the middle of the growing crowd on the street. She'd repeatedly called for Caleb.*

*Laura had finally stopped screaming when the doctor injected her with a sedative, and a few hours later, she awakened to find Karl sitting next to her again. Her eyes didn't really see him, though they looked in his direction "I want you to do something for me." And her voice sounded as dead as she felt inside.*

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She'd made him go back and clear out her apartment and help her disappear. She knew she could never face Caleb, never love him again knowing she had killed his baby. He would hate her if he knew she had killed their unborn child. Over the years,

Karl had tried to remind her that she was not at fault for the accident, but Laura knew better.

Caleb had begged her not to go see her mother that day, and she had gone. She hadn't listened to him and had put herself on that curb when the car came.

Laura realized with a start that she was crying, and she grabbed at the towel to wipe her face and forced herself to push that secret pain down deep inside of her where she always kept it.



## Chapter Ten

“It looks okay,” Laura assured him while she changed his bandage.

Her fingers were warm on his skin. Caleb inhaled. Under the faint tang of blood was her perfume. It was the same vanilla scent she always wore. The scent he had bought for her when they were teenagers.

When they were perfect.

“I’m sorry I blew up at you.”

She blinked in surprise, and her green eyes softened before she shrugged. “Okay.”

“I would like you to stay,” he admitted.

She moved her gaze from his, and that oddly encouraged him. “I went to see Mankell today.”

His mouth dropped open in shock, and then he cried out when she chose that moment to pull off the bandage. “Ow!” Caleb narrowed his eyes at her when it occurred to him she had blurted that out to distract him. “Tell me you didn’t actually do that.”

She nodded. “Yep. Got to him too.”

She sounded so smug, Caleb didn’t know whether to smack her or kiss her with that little smile she now had on her face.

“You went to see that monster? Without backup? Have you completely lost your mind?”

“No, I was doing my job. Going after bad guys? Sort of in the job description.”

“Not alone. Not without backup, Laura. Hello?” He poked her side while she focused on bandaging his shoulder. “Are you listening?”

“The man was pissed that his guy shot you. He’s not stupid, Caleb. But now, he is scared because we got the shooter to talk. Scared will make him stupid. Mission accomplished.”

“Mission accom—” He clenched his jaw, trying to get his anger under control.

“He wasn’t about to do anything to me in a crowded club, Caleb. Come on. Now, when we go back with our search warrants, we’ll have a better chance of finding something incriminating, something he might have forgotten to get rid of.”

He shook his head at her. “I should take you over my knee.”

Laura glared at him. “Not unless you want a matching hole in the other shoulder. Now can you just nod and say, ‘Good job, Laura,’ and then we can have dinner?”

“You’re not kidding.” Caleb sighed, watching her walk back toward the kitchen.

“’Bout what?”

“The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

\*\*\*\*\*

She had fallen asleep on his good shoulder. Caleb looked down at the lock of blonde hair that rested against her cheek. It made him feel too good to have her pressed against him the way she was. She almost looked like that young girl he had fallen in love with. It had taken her a while to feel at ease with him, but when she had, she had been that open with no one else. Just him. It had made him feel special. To have that little glimpse of her

again, here against his side, her body rising and falling with each soft breath, tugged at his heart.

*Jesus Christ.* Just the idea of her going up against Mankell by herself made his blood freeze. Proof he was letting her get way too under his skin again. *Oh, right, as if the fact that you slept with her again didn't do that.* He squeezed his eyes shut. That had been a drunken mistake, and not one he would repeat. Ever.

He would have to work just that much harder at keeping that wall up between them. Caleb heard about exes who managed to be friends. It was hard to imagine thinking of Laura as *just* a friend.

Maybe if he found someone else? He had tried with Eve, a woman he had met and had a semi-serious relationship with a few years ago. Mike had jokingly called her the Anti-Laura because she really could not have been more different from Laura.

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*She was a nice girl. Beautiful, sweet, funny and a knockout in bed. The perfect girl to bring home to meet his mom this weekend. While Caleb stared down at Evie's sleeping face, he considered it. The perfect 'move-on' girl. He imagined what their kids would look like and shook his head violently when visions of blonde toddlers assaulted him. He ran his fingers through her long black hair and dropped a kiss on her forehead. Her brown eyes fluttered open, and she gave him a sleepy smile.*

Tell her now. Invite her home with you. *But a nervous clench in the pit of his stomach held him back.*

*"Love you," Evie murmured, wrapping an arm around his waist, and within seconds, she was sleeping again.*

*She'd made that declaration for the first time earlier tonight. Then she'd shaken her head when he'd opened his mouth to automatically respond in kind. "No you don't. Not yet. It's okay. Just wanted to lay my cards on the table."*

*They'd met six months ago when she was roaming the halls of the apartment building she shared with Caleb, looking for her dog at five in the morning.*

*He came out of his sleep hearing someone calling for Apollo. She was dressed in pink-striped pajama pants and a navy blue t-shirt, with neon orange slippers on her feet.*

*"Can I help you?" he snapped. He wasn't supposed to be awake for another two hours at least.*

*Her black eyes widened when she saw him, and her gaze ran down then up the length of his body. He realized he'd forgotten his shirt and was clad just in black pajama pants. She let out an appreciative little whistle. "Maybe later, gorgeous. Damn it, Apollo, come back here, boy! I'm gonna kick your damned four-legged ass when I find you!" And then she was stomping down the hall away from him.*

*"You named your dog Apollo?" Caleb asked, unable to hide a snort of laughter.*

*"Yeah. You didn't happen to see him, did you? A little ball of white fur? Looks like a strong wind could knock him over?"*

*"I was asleep," Caleb reminded her.*

*She grimaced. "Right, sorry about that. I'll try and be more quiet. 'Night."*

*"Well, to hell with it now. I'm not getting back to sleep, so you wanna hand?" he asked, yawning.*

*She laughed a lot, and Caleb found himself laughing a lot with her.*

*When she invited him up for drinks, he said yes.*

*When she invited him out for dinner, he said yes.*

*When she invited him into her bed, he said yes and for the first time in years, didn't think of Laura.*

*When she told him she loved him for the first time, he remembered Laura and forced himself past the pain of remembering and wanted to say the same.*

*But Eve stopped him. She knew there was something there. A pain he didn't speak of, and she told him she wouldn't push, but he must promise to always be honest with her. Caleb agreed and prayed that she never asked him about Laura.*

*He could feel the door with Laura's name on it start to close, the more time he spent with Eve. He called her Evie, and she liked that. She made him feel so good. Maybe even happy. He found himself looking forward to seeing her at the end of his day.*

*His mom noticed the change in Caleb before he did himself. When he told her about Eve, his mother smiled, but her eyes flickered with a spot of sadness. She loved Laura and missed her and, for the first year, insisted that he try and find out what happened, but Caleb's pride had been too destroyed, and he'd refused.*

*They didn't talk about Laura anymore.*

*When he finally brought Eve home to meet his mom, he was not surprised that both women got along. He knew his mother was happy her son was no longer living in a haze of pain. But Eve wasn't Laura, and he knew that his mother had hopes that someday his first love would come back.*

*Still, Caroline welcomed Eve, and the two women talked and laughed about things Caleb was not entirely sure he understood. His mother shared stories from his childhood he knew he should have been embarrassed by, but he was just glad that being with Eve was so easy. Uncomplicated. Painless.*

*He bit into a steak sandwich, half listening to Caroline tell Eve about the time Caleb made Mike swallow a garden snail when the phone rang and his mother rushed to answer it.*

*"I didn't know you had such an evil streak, McKinney. It's kinda sexy," Eve said, nudging his knee.*

*He smiled at her and offered her a bite of his sandwich.*

*Excited murmurs came from the kitchen, and his mom told him that it was Mike and that his younger brother wanted to talk to him.*

*"I'll be right back." He leaned in, kissed a few breadcrumbs off of Eve's lips, and she grabbed his sandwich.*

*"I'll hold on to it for you," she assured him with a devilish grin that told Caleb the sandwich would be gone when he finished his phone call.*

*"Hey, Mike. How ya doing?" he asked when his mother handed him the phone with a very odd look in her eyes. She stood in front of him for a second and then must have remembered she had a guest because she left him alone in the room, looking back over her shoulder at him and biting her lip.*

*"Good. Good. Classes are a bitch, but what else is new, right? I'll have some time off in a couple of weeks, and maybe we can hang out."*

*"That'd be great. You can meet Evie," he offered, again feeling that uneasy knot that whispered he wasn't ready for a relationship so serious that the girl was making nice with his family. He pushed the thought away for the hundredth time. He would just make himself ready.*

*There was silence on Mike's end for a few seconds.*

*"You still there, man?" he asked.*

*"Yeah, right. Listen...there's, um...something I think you should know."*

*A chill ran down the back of his neck, and for some reason he turned to Eve, needing to see her face. She gave him a little smile and wink from the couch.*

*"It's about Laura."*

*Caleb's vision blurred a little, and the breath was knocked out of him. His throat closed and he coughed.*

*"You okay over there?" He heard Eve's voice, and his stomach lurched. His grip on the phone tightened to the point where he thought it might shatter in his hand, and then his mom would be pissed at him because he broke her phone.*

*No. Not so okay.*

*"I've found her, Caleb. She's my goddamned instructor, if you can believe that. Small world, huh?" Mike asked with a small, nervous laugh.*

*Caleb's knees buckled a little, and he grabbed the counter. Oh God...oh God...*

*“Caleb?” Mike pressed after a few more seconds of silence.*

*“Yeah. Yeah. I'm here. That's...uh...wow. That's something.” He was gonna throw up. Oh God.*

*“Definitely. She's okay. Doing great. She told me that she just wasn't ready for marriage, you know? She feels terrible about leaving like that, but she just didn't want to hurt you.”*

*If Laura Thatcher was standing in front of him, Caleb was certain he would have choked the life out her. His blood was roaring in his ears, and he shook. Didn't want to hurt him? Bitch! Cowardly bitch! Rage like he had never known surged up in him, and it took all he had to not to pull the phone from the wall and throw it across the kitchen.*

*“Right,” he forced himself to say through clenched teeth.*

*“But it looks like it all worked out for the best though, right? I mean, you've got Eve now.”*

*“Right,” he repeated.*

*“So. Is there anything you...uh...anything you want me to let her know? Anything you want me to say? Maybe you guys can talk sometime. Work things out?”*

*The palm of his hand stung, but it took a moment through his haze of anger for Caleb to feel it. A ball of ice formed in his chest, amid the heat of his anger. Cowardly bitch. Coward. Coward. That was what he wanted to say, wanted to shout in Laura's face while he strangled her. It all meant nothing to her. It couldn't have meant anything if it was so easy for her to walk away. Oh, he could play that game. If the bitch wanted what they'd been to each other to mean nothing, Caleb could play.*



*“Tell her I said hi,” he responded. Hi, Bitch. Hi, Nothing. How are you doing today, Ms. Coward? Screw you.*

*Caleb looked down and realized with a start that he'd impaled his hand on the knife his mom had used to make his sandwich.*

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Caleb slid his finger along the lock of hair on her cheek, and Laura wrapped an arm around his waist and snuggled closer. God, she terrified him. It was horrifying the way he wanted to stay right there with her arms wrapped around him like they'd never hurt each other at all.

He shook his head. No way. There was no way he could allow it to happen again. Caleb disentangled himself from her embrace and stood up, gathering her in his arms and carrying her into the bedroom.

He set her down on the bed and forced himself to walk out, closing the door to protect himself from her, and from himself.

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Caleb was quiet while they drove to search Mankell's house.

“You wanna share with the class?” Laura asked him.

“Mm?” he asked, jerked from his thoughts.

“You're looking more brooding than usual. What did I do this time?”

“What? No. Nothing. Just trying to think about what we need to look out for at the house,” he lied. He was both looking forward to and dreading the end of this case, because then Laura would have no excuse to stay with him.

That was a good thing. It'd be easier on his peace of mind. First thing he was going to do was give Eve a call. He'd broken up with her not long after Mike's death, unable to deal with the fact that Laura had gotten involved with his brother along with his grief. It was too much. The breakup had been amicable, and he wondered sometimes if he should try again.

Then, of course, Laura walked back into his life.

"You don't think he's got like a secret passageway with kids stuck in a dungeon, do you?" Laura grimaced.

"Nah. I don't think so." He radioed in to backup that they were approaching the house. Mankell's house was an impressive Georgian-style mansion in the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

Laura shook her head while Caleb announced their arrival over the intercom in front of the black iron gates.

"Miss me?" she asked, smiling as she and Caleb showed their warrants to Mankell while the doorman let them in.

"I of course offer my full cooperation to the New York City Police Department. Just let me know if there's anything I can do to help," Mankell said with a smile. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Aw, a pedophile with manners," Caleb said, turning away from him while their fellow policemen were let in past the gates up the driveway.

"Just stay out of our way," Laura said when she turned left into what Caleb found was the den.

Caleb's disgust grew while they went over the sprawling estate for the next few hours, picking up anything that could be used as evidence or could be a lead.

"Thinking the same thing I am?" Laura asked, flipping through the papers in one of two offices.

"How many children had to suffer to pay for all this wealth?" he sneered.

"Yep. That was it,," Laura grumbled.

When they finally left the house, Caleb watched Laura shudder. "I know we didn't find anything gross in there, but I just feel like I need a shower after being in that place, knowing where it all comes from. How the hell does he sleep at night? I mean...Jesus." She leaned against the seat's headrest and picked at one of the clear plastic bags of evidence they had gathered.

"What do you say we drop this stuff off and then grab a pizza and call it an early night?" Caleb offered, seeing the tension in Laura's rigid posture. He wanted to reach over and take her hand but didn't dare.

"I can't wait until this damned case is over."

He said nothing.

"Pepperoni?" she asked after a long silence

He gave a short chuckle. "Of course."

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"No, you cannot have a beer. You're still on pain medication," Laura insisted, smacking his hand away when he tried to reach for the beer she set on the counter.

Caleb scowled at her. "Geez, Mom. Thanks a lot."

She handed him a Coke and picked up the pizza box. "Go turn the TV on. The baseball game is about to start, and I want to watch you cry like a little girl when the Yankees lose yet again."

They sat on the carpet, forgoing the couch, leaning their backs against it with the pizza box between them.

"We've got an undercover guy over in Thailand who managed to track down one of the people who was on the other end of the wire transfers. An aide to one of the diplomats at the Portuguese embassy over there," Laura informed him.

Caleb stared at her. "Are you kidding me? A goddamned diplomat?"

"One of the aides. Karl's guy says he's connected to the orphanages in Portugal that were involved in that sex abuse scandal over the past forty years."

"Jesus Christ." Caleb shook his head. "No wonder Phillips was talking about how high up this went."

"Well, they caught the aide and are extraditing him back to Portugal. If we can nail Mankell and prove the connection between the two men—"

"Happy days," Caleb said with a determined nod. "We've gotta get this bastard."

"Oh, we will," Laura said. "This might put you in a better mood. You'll never guess who Karl picked up the other day on a robbery. Jerry Stephenson," Laura added with a smile.

Caleb stared at her. "No. Seriously?"

“Hand to God,” she vowed. “There’s a surprise, huh? I think everyone in our school knew that bully would end up in prison some day.”

“Christ. What an asshole he was,” he said, shaking his head and remembering how Stephenson liked to pick on his small size.

“The day you kicked his ass is still the stuff of legend,” Laura said, meeting his gaze. Stephenson had been picking on Laura, taking her backpack, and Caleb had jumped in. He remembered being so furious that the older boy always got away with picking on the smaller kids.

His anger had given him the extra advantage, and Caleb had beaten the jerk bloody. “Right. I remember you getting pissed at me for butting in.”

Laura gave a sheepish grin. “Well, I didn’t want people thinking I needed you to come in and rescue me like I couldn’t take care of myself.”

Caleb snorted. “Yeah. Good thing you outgrew that, huh?”

Laura shrugged and rolled her eyes, then leaned her head against the couch. “This is nice, isn’t it? Just sitting here and talking. Kinda like we used to.”

Caleb felt a lump in his throat. “Yeah.” Too many things were like they used to be. He worried that the way they hurt each other would be repeated too, but this comfort with her, sitting next to her and joking around, talking, was proving an irresistible pull into the past.

“Do you think we can ever get back there?” Laura asked in a small voice. “I don’t mean ...you know...together. I mean as friends?”

*Friends.* Caleb pondered that safe boundary. He definitely didn't want to put his heart at risk again. Putting the friendship wall up seemed like the best way to get that good part of their past back. He nodded and tried to feel happy about it.

He'd have to be an utter moron to want more.

## Chapter Eleven

Laura doodled on a pink notepad while Caleb and the other officers examined the various pieces of evidence they had grabbed from Mankell's house. She was copying the bird image from a piece of stationery they had taken amid other documents. There was nothing on the paper but some kind of to-do list, but the bird held her attention for some reason. "Maybe it's somebody's tattoo?" she asked out loud.

"What?" Caleb asked, moving the phone he was talking into away from his ear.

"No, nothing. Just thinking out loud. Sorry." She pushed the notepad aside and focused on the other items. There were checks signed to various charities, household bills and payrolls for his strip club. Her attention went back to the bird. What the hell did it mean, if anything?

While they worked, talk inevitably turned to last night's baseball game, and Laura suddenly froze when the image of the bird instantly clicked and found a home in the puzzled musings in her mind. "The commercial!" she exclaimed, bolting upright in her chair.

All four officers around the table turned their heads to her in unison.

"Say again?" Caleb asked, cocking an eyebrow after hanging up his cell phone.

"This bird. It was on the commercial yesterday!" Laura informed him, getting more excited by the second.

"What commercial? What are you talking about?" he pressed when she slid the notepad across the table to him and turned it so he could see the bird.

“We were watching the game yesterday and that commercial came on, for the chartered planes? This bird was in the logo.” Laura lifted her drawing and showed it to him.

“And this is important because...”

Laura picked up Mankell’s list, showing him the bird in the letterhead. “Because of this.”

“I’ll be damned,” Officer Perry remarked, his dark face lighting up.

“He’s using a chartered plane service to ship the kids,” Caleb remarked, his eyes now lit with the same excitement Laura felt.

“I bet my life on it. But, we have to prove it,” she said, biting the edge of her pen.

“Pay the owner of the airline a visit?” Perry suggested.

“No.” Caleb shook his head, and Laura gave a small nod of agreement. “They might notify Mankell we’re poking around. He thinks we’re just canvassing his house and businesses. If we can connect him to the chartered planes without him knowing, we might be able to catch him red-handed.”

They went back to the Western Union where Mankell was having his men pick up money. He used different ones across the city, and Karl called Laura when they tracked one of Mankell’s men to a kiosk in The Bronx.

With the money received by the criminal, Laura and Caleb estimated that a shipment of children would be leaving through the airline soon.

“We have to intercept that flight,” Laura said while they had lunch at a diner. “He has to be paying off one of the pilots to keep his mouth shut and wipe it off the flight plan.”

Caleb nodded and took a bite from his burger.



“I’m going to call one of the receptionists at the airline and tell her to call in sick and—don’t look at me like that—yes, I’m replacing her,” Laura said.

“Now, hang on a sec. Look, for once would you just not throw yourself into the pit and let someone else risk their life?” he urged.

“No,” Laura replied.

“No? Just no?”

“That’s right. This is my job, and I’m doing it.”

“I’ll be the one showing up there. I’ll replace one of the guards or something,” Caleb said.

“Mankell is going to recognize you.”

“And he won’t recognize you?”

She smiled. “Okay, you win. I won’t replace the receptionist.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, not trusting her easy acquiescence.

“I’ll be on the plane. I’ll call one of the flight attendants and tell them to stay home. That way, it won’t matter if he recognizes me because by the time he sees me he’ll have got on the plane, and we’ll have the proof we need that he intends to ship those kids to God knows where.”

Caleb stared at her, and before he could object yet again, Laura reached across the table and covered his mouth.

“And you being there as a guard on the ground is a great idea. Now let’s call Karl and make sure we have enough men on the ground to make sure Mankell can’t run when we bust him.”

He scowled at her, and she stiffened. “I appreciate your concern, but knock it off before I knock that scowl off your face. This is what we do, right? Catch the bad guys? So let’s go catch them.”

He sighed but didn’t comment further. Part of her was relieved about that. She was just as good a cop as he was. Part of her wondered what was behind his concern. Laura told herself it was just Caleb’s ever-present ‘hero-gene.’ Nothing more. Certainly not based on any romantic feelings for her. That was over and done with.

They brought the flight attendant of the aircraft Mankell had chartered in for questioning and explained about their investigation. Once Carrie Shaw got over the initial

horror of what was taking place, she informed them that Mr. Mankell had chartered a plane with them that would be taking off that Thursday.

Laura explained that she would be taking her place. Ms. Shaw seemed only too happy to relinquish her connection to the airline from then on.

The young blonde promised to go home and say nothing of what was soon to take place.

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Laura’s body went rigid when a hand clamped over her mouth, and she made a grab for her sidearm when a soft, familiar voice hissed in her ear.

“Shh! It’s me.”

Caleb pulled his hand away, and she socked him in the chest on principle. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Getting my uniform and making sure everyone’s in place and out of sight.” He lifted up the black garment.

“And?”

“All ready to go.” He hung the guard’s suit and handed her the flight attendant uniform on the hook in the janitor closet before pulling off his t-shirt.

Laura bit her lip, adrenaline mixing with uncertainty. She spared a moment to grumble that the supply closet was so damned dark. They didn’t take the risk of turning the light on in case someone passed by and noticed the light coming from inside. It was a tight enough fit that they were constantly brushing against each other while clothes come off and on.

Living together for the past few months, they’d pretty much gotten over the modesty issue, but her whole body still crackled with electricity when Caleb’s tight-muscled shoulder brushed against her stomach. Her mouth still watered when she imagined and remembered running her fingers down the tight, bulging skin of his arms.

The years had done nothing to diminish her desire for the damn man. If anything, knowing there was this invisible line between them now that neither dared cross made the desire sharper, every feeling of want that much more potent. Forbidden, frakking, fruit.

Laura had to remind herself that they’d fought too hard for the close friendship they were now building between them. To give in to old feelings would just wreck what they’d built. The easy camaraderie, confidence, trust; Laura would die before she gave that up.

“Okay. Shit, Caleb! Shoes!” Laura hissed, realizing she had nothing but the sneakers she was wearing.

“Shit. Shit!” Caleb exclaimed. “I’ll be right back.” He waited a minute, and when he was certain the corridor was clear, he opened the door and stepped out. A second later he turned back. “What size are you again?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake! Never get a man to do a woman's job. You stay here.” She shoved him back in the closet.

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Caleb smiled and shook his head, silently sending a prayer that she made it back quickly. He could still feel her skin against the palm of his hand when he reached for her hip to right himself after changing his pants. His sense memory kicked into high gear, and he remembered when he would hold her hips in his hands while moving inside of her and she would make soft panting cries that vibrated through them both. He never dared to ask, but he often wondered if she ever thought about those times, when everything was right and all that mattered was the feel of them against each other, bodies and hearts so in sync they were like one person.

Now they were still in sync, but there was a wall there. In big capital letters. FRIENDSHIP. That was all they could have now, and Caleb told himself it was the way he wanted it. As much as he wanted Laura sometimes...*most of the time, you lying horndog*, he admonished himself...he was in no rush for a replay of her tearing his heart to shreds.

He knew it was the right thing to not tell Laura that for him, nothing had ever changed. No. Things had changed. He wanted her more now. The girl he’d loved had grown into the sexiest, strongest woman he’d ever known. Damn her, Caleb thought irrationally, why couldn’t she have grown into an ugly goddamned hag? That would be much easier on his nerves.

But no, fate had to butt its nose into his orderly, safe life and bring Caleb and Laura back together. Working, fighting, living, and with the exception of that one drunken night, with no relief in sight.

He'd tried to wipe Laura from his heart by being with other women, but after Eve, he'd learned his lesson. Get in, get out and make sure she wanted nothing more.

Laura Thatcher stayed firmly entrenched in his heart. Damn woman.

Since the moment he'd first realized he loved her, Laura's hold on him was like an iron casing around his heart. Solid.

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*They sat in silence for a while, eating their fish sandwiches, when Caleb looked away from the lake and over at her. Laura turned and caught his gaze. Then he looked away. He grinned at her and then started digging through the basket of food he'd brought. "I got a surprise." Caleb pulled out a pink bottle. He made a great show of popping open the bottle and grinned with satisfaction when the stopper sailed into the lake.*

*Laura leaned over and read the label. Strawberry Wine. "Caleb McKinney, you pilfered from your dad's liquor cabinet? There may be hope for you yet," she said while he filled their plastic cups.*

*"Not exactly." He tapped his cup against hers and took a drink.*

*She took a drink as well and almost choked on the terrible taste. "What the hell is that?" Laura asked, shuddering. She reached for the bottle again.*

*"It's not so bad, when you get used to it," Caleb assured her.*

*"Strawberry Wine. Non-alcoholic. How about non-edible? Lordy, Blue Eyes, you trying to poison me?"*

*"I used to hate it too. Mom gives it to us at parties 'cause we can't have the real stuff. Drink it again; it'll start to taste better," he promised.*

*By the time Laura finished her cup, she admitted that it wasn't too bad.*

*"You read that poster by the gym door about the dance on Friday?" Caleb asked through a mouthful of bread and fish, gathering up his nerve.*

*Laura stiffened beside him. "No. You going? I'd pay money to see you shake your ass on the dance floor." Her tone was glib and snarky and for once, he wished it wasn't because that made this all the more difficult.*

*"Kelly McGrath asked me," Caleb told her.*

*She looked at him for a long time. "Congratulations. She finally noticed you're alive."*

*His nervousness increased. Maybe this was a bad idea. She didn't seem to care. Maybe that meant she didn't like him back 'that way.' He sometimes wondered if she might like him as more than a friend. When she didn't think he was looking, he sometimes thought the way she looked at him was kind of moony-like. Caleb picked up a green apple. He liked those better than red, so Laura always picked a lot of them off Travis Dorsey's trees.*

*Well, friends did that kind of stuff, didn't they? Stuff that made their friends happy. It didn't mean she 'liked' him. It just made sense seeing that she lived next to the trees that grew them and he didn't.*

*He rolled the apple along the knobby bump of his knee then and took a bite. "I turned her down," Caleb said. The apple juice made him lick his lips, and he again glanced at her and then away. Something funny happened inside his chest, and for a second he couldn't breathe.*

*"You should come. It might be cool," he suggested with a shrug. "Where's the soda?" He nonchalantly turned his attention to the basket next to him.*

*“We drank it already,” Laura replied.*

*“So, you coming?” he asked, pulling out another bottle.*

*Her cheeks were sort of flushed pink, and he wondered if it was the warmth of the sun, or was Laura blushing?*

*“Huh? Where?” she asked, blinking.*

*“The dance, dummy.” His mouth felt very dry, and he took another bite of the apple.*

*“Sorry, gown is at the cleaners,” she joked.*

*“You’re hilarious,” Caleb remarked, rolling his eyes. He leaned back and laid himself flat on the warm grass. Maybe it would be easier to ask her if he didn’t have to look at her—but then she decided to lay herself next to him.*

*“It’s a school dance. You don’t have to wear a dress,” Caleb pointed out.*

*“Forget it, Blue Eyes. I don’t dance,” she snapped.*

*“I could teach you,” he offered in a soft voice.*

*She was a good student, not that he was all that great at it. He knew enough as any other fifteen-year-old guy, he guessed. He taught her how to simply shuffle her feet back and forth in time to the music, and he told her she was a good dancer.*

*When he held her hand while they walked into the crowded gym, it was clammy against his skin, and Caleb didn’t know if it was his nervousness or her own. He did know that his heart was pounding in his chest because Laura had told him that he cleaned up good.*

*He told her she looked pretty, expecting her to laugh and roll her eyes.*

*She didn't.*

*She was wearing her nice jeans and a pink tank top with a trim of white lace that he'd never seen before. The gym was dark, but Caleb knew everyone was looking at them. They were all going to rag on him tomorrow, and he guessed he was going to have to knock out a few teeth.*

*But as Caleb held her waist and she wrapped her arms around his neck, he didn't care. At the end of the night, he walked her halfway home and told her he was glad she'd decided to come, even though he knew it wasn't her thing.*

*He stopped for a moment and wondered if he should dare to kiss her like he had the most overwhelming urge to. Caleb leaned his head in a little towards her and almost did it...but then that idiot Stephenson's dog started barking, startling them both.*

*He found himself wondering what it would have felt like if he had kissed her, and when he remembered that she had moved her head in too, he almost floated the rest of the way home.*

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Laura returned with a pair of 'frak me' heels that made Caleb's mouth water when he imagined them up around his hips. He gritted his teeth and forced himself to focus back on what they were doing here. They were here to rescue these children being adopted and sold into—God help them, sexual slavery.

“How the hell are you gonna fight in those?” Caleb asked, pointing at her shoes. She steadied herself with a hand on his shoulder while she slipped them on.



She giggled softly. “You know nothing about women, Detective.” She strapped her gun around her left thigh, and Caleb thought she was surely trying to kill him.

“Ready?” Laura asked, straightening.

Mission, Caleb thought. Mission.

She walked out of the closet first, straightening her flight attendant’s uniform, wire taped securely underneath. Laura made sure nobody saw them, and after she shut the door Caleb spoke into the walkie-talkie, letting Karl know they were about to start. He waited in the dark for a few minutes until he was certain it was safe to come out.

He took his place by the sliding doors and lowered his head to pretend to speak into the walkie-talkie when he saw Mankell and a few of his goons coming toward the doors.

“You’ve come to the right place.” Mankell’s voice was clear while he spoke into his cell phone, coming closer. “Any particular preference?”

“We have mostly boys left. The girls are quite popular,” he informed whoever was on the other end.

Then he walked through towards the waiting jet and Caleb’s heart rate doubled, knowing Laura was there on the plane and until she gave the signal, he could do nothing but hang back and wait.

Through his earpiece, Caleb could hear Laura make her way through the plane, and his heart stopped at the sound of children shuffling around, sniffing and some outright weeping.

“Now,” Laura whispered, and Caleb spoke into the radio, signaling to the other cops to make their way to the plane.

His blood raced through his veins, and he despised the worry churning through him now. He was a damn good cop, but all he could think of was Laura being in the same space as that monster.

He felt sick when he heard a little girl's voice. "Go home now? Me wanna go home!" the little girl wailed.

Caleb's heart broke a little, and he heard Laura's voice, soft and low.

"What's your name, honey?" she asked, her voice cracking.

"Katie. Wan' my mommy!" she cried, and Caleb saw her wrap her arms around Laura's neck after he slowly made his way up the stairs to the jet, into the entrance by the cockpit that Laura had ordered the pilot to leave open without Mankell's knowledge.

The pilot looked at both at them with wide, nervous eyes. "Look, I don't know what's going on. I'm just hired to fly the plane. I don't—"

Caleb pressed a finger to his mouth. He heard steps coming towards the cockpit and crouched down by the co-pilot's seat.

Laura's arms tightened around the little girl, and she started to set her down. The girl shifted around in her arms, not wanting to be let go, and Caleb looked up from his place next to the empty seat when he heard a soft clatter.

Laura swore under her breath, and Caleb saw her gun slip from its holster to the floor with a little clang, loosened by the toddler's squirming feet.

The sliding door that kept the children from Mankell in the other half of the plane suddenly opened.

Mankell's eyes widened when he saw the gun on the ground, and recognition dawned when his gaze moved back up to Laura's face. "Bitch!" he swore, pulling his gun out from inside his jacket.

Caleb moved faster, coming out from behind the open cockpit area, and plugged him in the chest before Mankell could get the shot off.

Shocked into action, Mankell's guards began to rain bullets their way. Laura dropped to the ground, on top of the girl, and grabbed her gun off the floor and began firing back while Karl and the other officers swarmed the plane and joined the insane gun battle. Laura ushered the girl and six other children toward the cockpit with the pilot.

"Stay here and don't come out for anything. Got it? We'll come get you soon," Laura promised and turned away from the screams of the frightened children, shutting the door before moving back to the gunfire.

"Laura!" Caleb screamed when the chaos cleared after they'd fired the last shot and Mankell and his men were all dead. He saw the blood running down Laura's chest, and his entire body seized with panic. He rushed towards her and caught her when she swayed, white faced, and fell forward into his arms.

"Please...", she murmured, her eyes unfocused. "Let me....tell Caleb...love him...I die," she unknowingly whispered out loud before closing her eyes.

Caleb gathered Laura up in his arms, the adrenaline in his blood giving him the strength so that she weighed almost nothing to him. "Karl! Call an ambulance! No! No! No!" he pleaded, sliding along the blood on the carpet as he sat in the closest seat and held her against him. Laura's blood. "Oh God," he murmured, holding her closer. "Laura, Laura, can you hear me? Karl!" he screamed, finally setting eyes on the younger man.

Karl went pale when he set eyes on Laura's bloody form. "Oh no." He turned toward the crowd of cops behind him. "You!" He pointed to one of the other cops. The baby-faced rookie stood quickly at attention, his brown eyes wide with the shock of the fight. "Get on that. Get an ambulance here RFN! And you!" Karl jabbed a finger in the direction of another cop. "Get those kids out of there and back in the airport." He delegated orders rapidly.

Caleb stroked Laura's face, tears blurring his own vision. "Laura. Laura. Please open your eyes, baby. Please. Laura, please!" he wailed, bringing her up against him and burying his face in her neck.

*Let me tell Caleb how much I love him before I die.*

Caleb rained kisses on her face. "I heard you, Laura. Can you hear me? I heard what you said. I love you, damn it. Wake up so you can hear me say it! I love you. I love you. I love you," he chanted into her hair, damp with sweat. "You are not gonna tell me that and then die. Do you hear that? You are not leaving me after all this shit." He rocked her in his lap. She will not die, he told himself. God would not take her from him after everything. After they'd fought so hard to be friends again. After he had started to have hope that someday, somehow, they might be more.

The paramedics rushed in and reached down to pick Laura up out of Caleb's arms. For an irrational second he refused to relinquish her, afraid that he'd never hold her again, but a tiny flicker of logic told him it was okay. He needed to let her go so that they could help her. He straightened her skirt, covering her thighs, and came away with more blood.

*Fix her*, he thought, getting to his feet after he relinquished his hold on her and then wrapping his arms around himself when they were empty. *Fix her so I can tell her I love her too. Love her and I'm not afraid anymore.* No. Now his fear had a new direction. Losing Laura. Instead of her hurting him again. He'd be willing to let her break his heart every day until the day he died if she survived this.

*She will*, Caleb told himself. There was no other option. “Please,” he said, looking up when they wheeled Laura out toward the waiting ambulance. Nobody looked his way; they were all running around doing their assigned jobs. “Please don't let her die.”

## Chapter Twelve

*“It's not finished yet,” seventeen-year-old Laura insisted, holding the scrapbook to her chest when Caleb tried to take a peek.*

*“Oh, for shit's sakes, Laura,” he grumbled, sitting on the windowpane.*

*She motioned with her finger for him to turn his head back to the side.*

*“It's been an hour. My ass is asleep, and the sun is setting right in my eyes. You're soon gonna have to name your drawing 'Ode to Squinty.'*

*“Close your eyes then. I'm done drawing them, but stay put and quit your complaining, you big baby,” Laura insisted.*

*He turned and stared at her. “Baby, huh? Baby?” Then he dived for her, pulling her off the chair and down onto the carpet.*

*“No! Caleb. The picture. I need to—ow! My hair,” she shrieked when his elbow trapped her long blonde hair on the carpet.*

*“Oh, quit your complaining, you big baby,” he taunted, trapping her between his thighs.*

*“Oh, you pig!” She socked him in the arm, and he lowered his body onto hers until they were nose to nose.*

*“Oink oink, baby.” He smiled smugly and then kissed her.*

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*“The bullet's done damage to her heart. I can try and repair it—”*

*“Don't try. Do it!” Caleb yelled, making the poor doctor jump.*

“I can't make any promises, Detective. The damage is pretty severe.”

“Tell you what. She dies, so do you,” Caleb snapped, taking out his sidearm and pointing at the panicky doctor.

“Whoa, McKinney. Easy there!” Karl insisted, trying to push his hand down. “Everybody's a bit freaked out right now, but you need to not shoot the nice doctor here, okay?”

Caleb gave a small jolt, realizing what he was doing. “God. I'm sorry. Just...God...” He lowered his arm and took a step back, running his fingers through his hair. He realized he was still covered in blood. He hadn't yet washed Laura's blood off of him. He was afraid to. Afraid that her blood on him would be all he had left her of her when this was over.

The surgery took all night. Caleb's father came to the hospital.

Caleb wished he had Laura's rosary beads with him. She was much more of a believer than he was, but it would feel good to hold them in his hands.

As if reading his mind, his father gave him a small smile and handed Caleb the small black rosary wrapped in black cloth.

For a while, he just touched them, running his fingers along the shiny black beads; then he leaned his head on his dad's shoulder. It felt like his head was just too heavy to hold up anymore, so heavy that even hating his dad didn't strengthen him enough to stay upright. “Dad...she can't die. She just...can't.” His voice was thick and choked with tears.

Caleb couldn't seem to hold on to his anger against his father when he could see how worried the old man also was about the woman they both loved.

He made a deal with God in his mind: if Laura pulled through, he promised he would try and forgive his dad.

And now to imagine Laura dying? After how hard they'd all tried to work past their anger. After he never got to tell her that he thought he wanted to try again? Impossible. Impossible!

Caleb growled deep in his chest, an animalistic sound of refusal.

William leaned across his seat in the waiting room and wrapped an arm around his son. "She'll make it through this. She will," he assured him, but his voice trembled while he said the words.

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He kneeled against Laura's bedside. The doctor told him that he had done what he could. He didn't know yet if it was enough. Caleb held Laura's rosary in his hands. He wished he could remember how the prayer went.

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*"Shush!" Laura insisted when Caleb giggled and nudged her knee while they sat in the church. "I'm gonna hurt you if you don't stop talking."*

*She turned her head forward and resumed listening to the priest. Caleb looked around, admiring the architecture, the beautiful stained glass, tuning out most of the priest's sermon.*

*After a while, even the impressive architecture couldn't keep his attention. Bored, he leaned his head on Laura's shoulder and blew a soft puff of air against the skin of her neck. She jumped and then pinched his thigh. Hard.*

*"That hurt!" he hissed.*

*"Good!" she hissed back. "Now shut your damned yap."*



*Caleb clucked his tongue. "Swearing in church. For shame, Laura. Bad, bad girl." He smiled devilishly at her. Then he got an idea, and his hand drifted down and he played with the soft skin beneath the hem of her blouse.*

*She kicked him while she blushed. "If you stop being a two-year-old while we're here, then I'll..." She whispered her bribe in his ear, and Caleb immediately hardened.*

*He was the picture of saintly devotion for the rest of the Mass, but he still spent more time watching Laura than listening to the service. Her face was rapt and beautiful as she took in the priest's words. Silently, her hand moved to cover Caleb's.*

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"Lord... hear my prayer..." It was the only prayer he knew. The simply stated plea. Yet his entire heart was in it. "Please don't take her from me. I beg you. I know I've done things...terrible things that I'm not proud of here...but if you just give me this small thing, I promise, I'll be a better man. I just...you might as well take me too if you're going to let her die, because I can't live in a world where Laura isn't anymore. Take me too if you're going to take her. Oh God..." He lowered his head, the pain too much to bear. He rested it against Laura's stomach. "Take me instead. Please. Take me instead. Take me instead. Take me," he whispered against the blankets.

He fell asleep begging for God to let him take her place.

Caleb had been at Laura's bedside for the past four days with barely any rest. No food other than a few energy bars Karl managed to scrounge up and forced him to eat.

"Why isn't she awake?" he asked, not turning to look at Karl or the doctor. "She should be awake by now, shouldn't she?" He clutched Laura's hand. "Why doesn't she open her eyes?" he asked, reaching up to brush some blonde strands off of her forehead.

He'd been so mean to her, so cruel, and now this was his punishment. God had brought her back into his life, just like he had always prayed for, and Caleb had tossed that gift aside. He feared there would be no more chances.

He realized with a start that the doctor...what was his name, he thought, trying to think past the exhausted fog in his mind...Dr. Comel, was talking to him. "What?" he asked; his eyes burned and felt dry, and the doctor was blurry.

"The bullet to her chest did too much damage. She needs a transplant." The doctor took a small step back toward Karl and William and Caroline as well, who'd arrived the night Laura was brought in.

Caleb rose from his seat and clenched his fists at his sides. With a four-day growth of a beard, bloodshot eyes and a pale, tired complexion, he was aware that he must look more like a crazed sociopath than a policeman. "Do it," he growled, storming toward the doctor.

"I'm-m-m aff-f-f-raid, S-S-Sir, that there isn't—" Dr. Comel stuttered, red faced.

Caleb grabbed him by the collar and shoved the smaller man up against the wall. "I don't care what you have to do. Get her a new heart, or so help me, we'll use yours," he vowed while Karl pulled him back.

"Oh, brilliant, Detective. Who's gonna perform the surgery then? You?" Karl reminded him.

The doctor rubbed the back of his head where it had smacked against the wall. "There are other things to consider. Tests that need to be done. The blood types need to match, and even then, the heart might still be rejected. She's already suffering from infection. I don't dare operate now."

"So you're just gonna do nothing? That is not an option!" Caleb yelled.

“Sweetheart,” his mother urged, rubbing her son’s back. “I’m sure they’re doing everything they can for her.”

“I’m working to bring her fever down and cure the infection. It seems to be running its course. She’s strong. But...well, time is not on our side.”

“Meaning her heart could give out before you get a chance to operate, right? Right?” Caleb demanded, his fists clenching and unclenching while desolate helplessness washed over him. God seemed to be conspiring against him. As if he wanted Laura, and the wishes of a mere mortal were hardly worth considering.

Well, he would show him. “Does it have to be a female heart?” he asked, his voice slow, his mind fuzzy except for the image of Laura, alive and healthy again. That one was vivid in his mind.

“No, but the blood types do have to match. I’ve made calls to the other hospitals, but so far I haven’t been able...”

He tuned the doctor out. He knew his blood type was a match for Laura’s. Even in that, they were connected. It was his one thought when he pulled out his gun and raised it to his head.

But he was too weak from malnutrition, and his movements were too slow.

“No!” William yelled and pulled at his son’s arm; the bullet went wild, slamming into the wall behind them. “Are you out of your mind?”

He didn’t answer. Exhaustion and despair finally took their toll, and he collapsed against his father, knocking him down.

When Caleb woke up, he was in a bed in a different room, and Karl was sitting at his bedside, smiling. “Shit, how long have I been out?” he asked, shooting up in the bed. He winced at the pull of the I.V. in his right hand.

“Two days, man. 'Lot went on while you were off in dreamland.”

He was still smiling.

Caleb’s heart raced. He was afraid to hope. Afraid to believe he'd be given this gift after always having everything he'd wanted ripped away from him.

“Karl... What?” he choked, his eyes glistening.

“Now, I personally think Laura will laugh her ass off when she wakes up and finds out she's got the heart of a convicted psychopath.” Karl grinned.

“Oh God... Oh my God,” Caleb cried, turning his face away as relief shuddered through him with terrifying intensity while his every fear mocked him, telling him he was stupid to believe, a moron to hope.

Karl leaned over and placed a hand on Caleb's shoulder. “We're just waiting for her to wake up. She's gonna be okay, man.”

She was going to be okay, while Caleb thought he was going to have a heart attack.

“Turns out they had a guy up for execution this week. Handy, huh?”

Caleb couldn’t speak; his heart was in his throat, and all he could think was, *thank God!*

“There's still the danger that she might reject the heart, but Doctor Apoplexy is optimistic. He's very anxious to get Laura out of here and never have to see you again.”

“I have to see her.” Caleb pulled back the blankets and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

“Oh no you don’t, young man,” Caroline said, coming into the room. “The doctor says you need to stay in bed and replenish all your nutrients. We’ll take you to see her in another hour.” She leaned down and kissed her son’s cheek, and he wrapped his arms around his mother and fought the urge to cry.

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Caleb pressed his lips against Laura's, not caring that his father was sitting next to her bed. He was done hiding and being afraid, damn it. He loved her and did not give a shit who knew it. She was still a bit warm but no longer fevered. He didn’t say it out loud because he didn’t want to sound crazy, but she even looked better to him, as if the vitality was seeping back into her face.

He noticed something clutched in her hand. The small soldier toy that little Jamie had given her.

“I thought it might help. For luck,” Karl said with a shrug.

Caleb nodded, wiping at his tear-stained face.

“Thatcher, come on now. You've got an audience waiting,” William said, leaning forward and taking her hand.

A moan made all of them suck in their breath. Laura stirred and turned her head toward them. Her eyes drifted open slowly. When her gaze moved toward Caleb, her eyebrows drew together in confusion. “Caleb?” she croaked.

“Yeah.” He nodded his head while he tried to blink away tears.

“Why you look like lumberjack?” she mumbled and then drifted back into unconsciousness.

## Chapter Thirteen

“Mornin', Gorgeous.” Karl popped his head in behind the curtain with a grin when he saw that Laura was awake. He grimaced instead. “Oooh, let me rephrase that. Mornin', Death Warmed Over.”

Laura slowly turned her head. She felt like a truck was sitting on her chest and her mind was covered in a thick, warm fog. With great effort, she gave him the finger...but it wasn't the one she'd intended. Her pinky popped up instead. “Oy,” she groaned.

She caught sight of Caleb, asleep on the chair next to her bed, and that caused a sweet jump in her chest...which hurt like a bitch. “Whahappened?”

“Oh, this will be fun—I was hoping I was gonna be the one to tell you.” Karl all but skipped over to her bedside. “You've got a psycho killer inside of you.”

Laura blinked, not sure if she was the one on drugs or if Karl was. “Huh?”

“The bullet did some serious damage to your heart. We had to get you a new one.” Karl's voice wavered a little, and she got the feeling his amusement was a cover.

“Heart? Fak..flak..fma..shit,” Laura decided; her tongue felt clumsy and dry as sandpaper.

Karl poured her some water in a plastic red cup and helped her drink through the straw. “Yep, the Sarge decided to check out the inmates at the prison, see if any of them were up for execution. Jackpot! Guy kills his wife and two kids, and you get his pumper. God sure does work in mysterious ways, huh? Badass Thatcher isn't just crazy in the head now. All her parts are bonkers.” He laughed.

Laura groaned. “Not funny.”

But Karl kept laughing like he hadn't laughed in a very long time, and she rolled her eyes, deciding to let him amuse himself.

A new heart? There was some crazy psycho killer's pump inside of her? Shit! A body part that wasn't part of her body...yet she didn't really feel all that different. Well, okay, that wasn't quite true. She felt high. Very, very high, and she could see about two of everything. She focused back on Caleb. He looked like she felt.

“He's been here the whole time. Never left once. Hence the whole 'mountain man' look.”

Laura's eyes misted, blurring her vision. “That right?” She tried to sound like it didn't matter, but it did. So much.

“Laura, this is none of my business—” Karl began.

She felt a shiver of panic and quickly cut him off. “Then don't go there.”

Karl sighed. “The guy adores you, and any idiot can see you love him something stupid. When are you gonna just jump each other's bones and put us all out of our misery?”

She swallowed and looked away. “Crazy. We're flen..fenn..flends.... Crazy!” She burst out, annoyed with Karl and her inability to wrap her tongue around simple words.

“Friends? Friends? Laura. Not even you are that oblivious.... Scratch that—when it comes to each other, you two wrote the book on oblivion.” Karl shook his head with exasperation.

“Not going there 'gain. Shaddap,” she ordered, feeling the curtain of unconsciousness begin to pull at her again.



“God, I thought you two moved past all your crap. Oh no, that's right. You can't do that until you tell Caleb about the baby!” Karl hissed.

“Shh! Damn it! Gon' kill you.” She sent a panicked glance at Caleb, who was still asleep.

“Laura, no friend would have gone through what that man has these past few days. He held you in his arms while you gushed blood all over him. He's stayed by your side this whole time. He practically beat up the doctor when we thought we wouldn't find a heart for you in time. He even went so far as to put a gun to his head!”

Laura blinked in confusion. “Doctor's?”

“No, Laura,” Karl said, gently shaking his head. “His own head. Caleb was going to shoot himself in the head. So we could use his heart, I guess.”

Laura felt the color drain from her face. “What?” She couldn't breathe. The image of Caleb putting a bullet in his brain was too terrifying to contemplate. For her. To give her his own heart. At that second, Laura felt such a breathtaking mix of love and terror wash over her. The wall she'd erected around herself to protect her heart, the wall that told her Caleb didn't feel for her what he used to, instantly felt blown to pieces with the force of a bomb and she'd felt like she'd been ejected from a plane and was in terrifying free fall.

She grabbed onto one last tiny thread of protection. He couldn't love her, not really, because he didn't know about the baby she'd lost. Their baby. If he ever found out, he would hate her, even more than he had before. If he'd known about that, he wouldn't have nearly sacrificed himself for her. She had to remember that. Laura began to breathe a little easier. She was still safe.

“Laura, tell him. Get yourself a clean slate and let yourselves be happy, for God's sake,” Karl urged.

She blinked her tears away and turned her face. “Tired.”

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“So are we gonna talk about it?” William McKinney asked his son. His eyes were warm with amusement while he sat across from him in the hospital cafeteria.

“Talk about what?” Caleb asked.

“That little display of affection I witnessed in Laura’s room?”

His face flooded with warmth, and he knew he was blushing. “Uh...no?” He tried for lightness, but William cocked an eyebrow at him. “All right, fine, I kissed her, and you know what, dad? I'm gonna do it again and again. If you want to get on my ass for that, go right ahead. I don’t care. I'll just do it again.” He stared straight at his father, defiant.

“Caleb...”

“Dad, I lost her once. I almost lost her again. I'm not letting her go this time. No matter what. I won't survive without her. I know that now, and it should scare the crap out of me, but it doesn’t anymore. I'm going to ask her to marry me, and we're gonna be happy now, damn it! Nothing is going to stand in the way of that, and you have no say in the matter.” Caleb lifted his chin.

William nodded. “I know I have no right to butt into your love life, and you may not believe this but I do want you to be happy, both of you. Laura is like a daughter to me, but you’re my son. I’d like us to find some way to put our past tension behind us, but right now I've got a more serious question for you, son.”

Caleb stiffened, ready for opposition.

“What in the name of the God took you so damn long?”

He sagged with relief and gave his father a small smile. He would be true to his word. Laura was going to be okay, so he would try and work through his crap with his dad. Oddly it didn't seem like such an impossible feat anymore.

"Caleb." Karl met them in the hallway. "Laura is asking for you."

"Nice to see you've decided to wake up, lazy," Caleb teased, taking a seat next to Laura's bed. His heart raced at the sight of her looking at him, beautifully alive, though pale.

She smiled back at him but said nothing.

"We have a lot to talk about. But all that can wait till you're on your feet."

Again, she just smiled at him.

"So, how are you feeling?"

She crooked her finger at him. "Here."

Her voice was soft and raspy and hit him right in the groin. He eased up off his chair and leaned over Laura. His entire body sizzled with the hope that they were finally on the same page.

"Closer," Laura purred.

Caleb licked his lips in anticipation.

Then Laura grabbed his ear and twisted it hard.

"Ow! Shit! Owwww! What the—"

“You crazy? A gun to your head? Your heart. Idiot! Stupid idiot!” Laura raged hoarsely, jerking on his ear until he was certain she would rip it off.

In between blinding pain, Caleb made a mental note to kill Karl. Once she let go, Caleb's hand covered his ear. “I'm not gonna apologize for that. I would have done anything to make sure you didn't die.”

Her eyes blazed at him. “Moron! Don't want you to die, jackass!”

Caleb leaned back over her. “I would have done it gladly. You know why?” His mouth was now inches from her own.

Laura said nothing, but he could see that she held her breath.

“Because I love you, you stubborn little dingbat.” Then he closed his mouth over hers and took her squeak of surprise and sigh of surrender into his mouth.

Laura stared up at Caleb when he broke the kiss. Her head tilted upwards, wanting more. “You on drugs too?” she asked him.

He shook his head. “You're my drug, damn woman. Always have been.” He ran a finger across her bottom lip.

“Caleb, s’not a good time to talk. Fuzzy,” she warned, reaching for him again, but he sat back in the chair and cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Good, so that means you'll just have to listen for once. Now pay attention, Laura. I love you. Not as your friend, though I will always be that. But I love you as in I want to be with you and share my life with you.” He saw her eyes widen in panic and held up his hand. “Don't even try and tell me you don't feel the same. I may be oblivious, but I'm not stupid.”

She rolled her eyes at him and motioned with her hand for him to continue.

Prepared for her objection, he felt more than a little out of sorts when she let him go on and took a moment to collect his thoughts.

“We’ve wasted so much time, Laura. So much damn time.” His eyes glistened with the ache of all that time they could never get back. “For what? Because we’re afraid? Let me tell you something, I have never felt so terrified as when I was holding you in my arms and you were bleeding to death against me. Everything else is paltry compared to that. Everything. I could face every damn criminal in this city at once and me with no weapon, and it would not scare me as much as that moment when I sat with you on the floor. Yes, we’re messed up. Yes, we have huge crap to work through, but none of that means a good goddamned except for the fact that I’m am utterly useless without you. Utterly. That scares me. That I’m half a man without you—but spending the rest of my life without you scares me a hell of a lot more.”

Laura sniffled, and he felt encouraged by the tears.

“Tell me you don’t love me. Tell me I’m wrong. It won’t matter. I will go to my goddamned grave loving you. If they blow me away tomorrow, my soul will be out there, loving you and watching over you. I am who I am: the man who loves you insanely. I mean, I’d have to be, right? After everything we’ve been and done to each other? I won’t spend one more second denying how I feel. You could still reject that heart you’ve been given. We won’t know for months, maybe years if you’re completely in the clear. If that happens, from now until then, I am going to love you and you’re going to know it. No more running. Ball’s in your court now, Thatcher.” Caleb held his breath, hoping for the best, bracing himself for the worst.

Her tears were running free now, dampening the pillow beneath her. “Sappy bastard.” She picked at the pale yellow hospital blanket. “Can’t do this, Caleb. I can’t. No good at this. I’ll screw up,” she insisted, covering her eyes with one hand.

Caleb pulled her arm down, not letting her hide from him. “Laura, if it had been me who got shot, if it were me lying in that bed instead of you, would you be worrying about being a screw-up? Would you tell me the truth? How you really feel? No games. No walls.”

She took a small, shuddering breath. “Love you, damn it. Fine. I admit it. But nothing changes. You can’t fix anything with ‘I love you!’”

Caleb took a deep breath, and his whole body relaxed while he beamed at her and shook his head. “You’re wrong. That fixes everything. Because no matter how much we screw up—and knowing us, that will be a lot—as long as we love each other and remember what the alternative is, we’ll keep working at it. I’m not giving up on you, Laura Thatcher. Not ever again,” he promised, reaching over to cup her face in his hands. “You’re it for me and I know you feel the same, and we’re gonna have a life that is something besides misery and duty, damn it. Case closed,” he insisted stubbornly, kissing her again.

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There are things he doesn’t know, Laura told herself. Well, one thing, specifically. But she tried to hold on to his assurance that he loved her and would work through whatever they needed to.

She tried to tell him so many times over the next few months. Laura was confined to the hospital while she healed, and she began to fear that she would never get back out on the street. The insane amount of medication they had her on played havoc with her body. Some of the drugs she was going to have to take for the rest of her life. Never missing a dose. For heaven’s sakes, Laura sometimes forgot to eat! Now she was supposed to remember when to take what pill, forever?

Not to mention how shaky and crampy some of them made her feel. They'd had to hook her up to a dialysis machine to monitor her kidneys, since they'd looked like they were going to fail three times now.

It was hard to feel grateful to be alive when your head felt like it would explode and everything you put in your mouth hurt like a mother. She'd even had to stop kissing Caleb a few times because her gums hurt too much.

But sometimes, she just wanted him so badly that she let him, swollen gums and all. She was sure she was getting fat too.

Laura was, in a word, going out of her damned mind. She cried about everything and nothing, reminding herself of when she was pregnant, which just made her cry harder when she thought about telling Caleb and him not being able to forgive her.

He knew something was bothering her but he didn't push, probably waiting for her to tell him in her own time. Laura tried to gather her courage, but he was so happy now that she was reluctant to do anything to shatter that joy in him.

He went back to work, wrapping up the Mankell case, and his absence gave Laura a small hint of how Caleb must have felt when he thought he'd lost her. Because every time he went out the door, she couldn't breathe until she saw him again.

She always wanted to see him. Okay, she always wanted him, period. Now that they'd decided to try again, the sexual ache she'd had for the man had intensified a thousand fold.

Though she doubted he found her hacking up spit every hour for the doctor very sexy.

He snuck in sometimes during the night and touched her, massaging her chest and abdomen gently now that they'd removed the damn tubes. His hands 'strayed' to her breasts quite often.

When she was released, Caleb insisted she return with him to his apartment, and she had no desire to say no.

Caroline offered to let Laura stay at her house to recuperate, but she declined. She and Caleb wanted to be alone.

He helped her into the apartment, and she was reluctant to let go of him.

“Hungry?” he asked, tucking a lock of her hair behind her ear.

She shook her head and held his hand. “Can we just lie down for a little while?”

“Sure, whatever you want,” he nodded, kissing her forehead, and she closed her eyes at the sweet gesture.

They moved into the bedroom, and Laura sighed, burrowing herself against Caleb’s body while he wrapped himself around her. This place was home now. This apartment. Caleb’s bed. Caleb’s arms. She took a deep, shaky breath and just reveled in the silence broken by nothing more than their breathing. She sent a prayer of thanks heavenward. She’d been drifting for so long and had never believed she would find her way back to this place again.

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*He couldn’t be more different than Caleb, Laura mused, watching the blond-haired, green-eyed man across the table from her. He was all big, blustery confidence. And all he talked about was flying. Did she like the moves he used today? Did she want to come watch him at the airstrip again, and maybe he could take her up sometime this summer?*

*Caleb could talk about the mating habits of fireflies and make it sound interesting.*



*Laura shivered at the memory of him, fighting the throb of pain she kept locked away that was always threatening to burst through. It would remind her how wrong this was. How wrong it was to sit here with this man who was not Caleb.*

*Laura picked up her third glass of wine and downed it in one gulp. Stop it, Thatcher. Caleb is the past, she reminded herself. How many times do you have to be smacked in the face with the fact that you were never meant to be his? God made that clear enough when he took her baby away. She didn't despise God anymore. It took her over a year and one very determined, nosy priest, Father Morgan, to show her that God was watching over her and was helping her get through this dark time.*

*She'd had a pistol in her mouth the first time she'd gotten a sign from God. She'd had a dream about Caleb. One so real she could almost feel him. In her dream he was calling for her. Even though she was right there in the room with him, he couldn't see her. Then her mother came and laughed at her, telling her that Laura was dead and that was why Caleb couldn't find her. To him, Laura was dead. She had woken up in a cold sweat, curled up on her bed, sobbing in anguish. She'd never thought the pain would fade.*

*She didn't know which pain was sharper. The loss of the baby she never got to know, or the loss of the man who was the other half of her soul. Either way, Laura Thatcher was broken and felt she would never be fixed. What was the point of going on when all she'd feel was pain? So she sat in her car and grabbed the gun she'd bought after a few of the women on the school grounds had been raped and sat there with the pistol in her mouth, willing herself to end this agony that was now her life.*

*And then the door to her glove compartment dropped open. The engagement ring Caleb had bought for her fell out and dropped on the floor of her car. Laura had sat in her car for three hours, holding the ring and crying. There was something in that little ring that spoke to her, spoke of a tiny glimmer of hope, of someday. Someday she was gonna be strong. Someday she was not gonna hurt anymore. God wanted her to live. To live and be*

*strong and do great things with her life. Laura didn't feel she was there yet at all, but she still woke up every day. That was something.*

*“What do you say we get out of here, hmmm?” Jimmy asked, stroking her fingers.*

*She shivered with the appropriate physical response, but her heart shut off. Sex was always like that for her now. She responded physically, but somewhere inside of her, a tiny click went off, shutting the door with Caleb McKinney's name on it.*

*The first time she'd had sex after him, she had thrown up afterwards. She didn't know if it was because she was drunk off her ass or because she had felt him there in the room with them the whole time. So now she locked him away like her dirty little secret.*

*Only Karl knew about Caleb and the baby that wasn't.*

*Jimmy was a bad lover. His technique was jerky, and he had no rhythm. She likened it to the way he walked, proving her point that you really could tell how a man made love by how he moved in his everyday life.*

*Caleb moved like music. Steady and with purpose. He exuded confidence without being cocky. And he made love to her the same way. Even at his roughest, he still made sure she was right with him.*

*Jimmy took her roughly and reached his release before she did. He dropped on top of her, and Laura stared at the crown of his sweaty hair in disbelief.*

*“Unbelievable. Get off of me,” Laura seethed, pushing at his shoulder.*

*Oh, he was not!*

*Snore.*

*“Son of a bitch.” She struggled to get out from underneath Jimmy and shuddered with revulsion when she finally managed it. All she wanted now was to take a shower and get a good night of dreamless sleep. She spotted the mini calendar on her desk that Karl had given her when she’d first gotten her placement at the academy.*

*Well, when he’d helped her get her placement, Laura admitted. Wanting to get as far away from Caleb as possible, she’d let Karl help her enroll in the police academy he attended in Philadelphia. Dating the director’s daughter had its advantages. She owed Karl so much. And yet when she tried to pay him back with her body, having no money, he wouldn’t hear of it and turned her down. Their relationship wasn’t a sexual one, and Laura was so very grateful for that. Karl honestly wanted nothing more from her than to be her friend.*

*Laura froze when she saw the date. Oh God...oh my God...no. Not today. She slipped a shirt on and grabbed the calendar, a growing lump of disgust burning in her stomach. Laura had chosen a day to celebrate what would have been her baby’s birth date had it survived. Karl didn’t know the date. It was something she kept to herself.*

*She’d figured out the month would have been August and chosen a random day. The fourth. Today. Her son, she imagined it was a boy, would have been two years old today.*

*Here she was, on her dead child’s birthday, screwing some asshole. Right. No wonder God took her child away. Some mother she was. She reached over the bed and punched Jimmy hard in the shoulder.*

*“Get up and get out,” Laura demanded, shaking.*

*He just grunted.*

*“Damn it, wake up, you jerk!”*

*“Wha...?” he groaned, eyes fluttering open, and rolled himself onto his back.*

*“Get out.” She wrapped her arms around herself to try and stop her trembling. She was gonna be sick, and she'd rather this stranger not be here to witness it.*

*“In...mmmorning,” he grumbled, closing his eyes again.*

*“NO! Damn it. I want you out of here! NOW!” she screamed.*

*He paid her no mind and in seconds was snoring again. She reached for her gun under the mattress and fired a shot into the wall, right above Jimmy's head.*

*“What the hell?” He jolted awake and fell off the bed. He stared up at her, wide eyed with confusion and terror. “What the hell is your problem?”*

*“Get out of my room!” she snapped, pointing the gun at him.*

*Karl burst into the room. “What the—?”*

*Jimmy knocked into him on his way out. “Keep her the hell away from me. She's nuts, man! Goddamned crazy!”*

*“Geez, Thatcher. Put the gun down!” Karl said, reaching around to grip her wrist and lower the pistol to the ground.*

*“It's my fault, Karl,” she whispered while he led her to the bed to lie down.*

*“What?” he asked, kneeling by her bed while tucking her in, her tears falling onto his hands.*

*“My baby. I didn’t deserve him.”*

*Karl sighed and shook his head. “No, babe. It wasn’t your fault. It was a terrible accident.”*

*She meant to argue with him more, but her stomach came up to meet her throat, and she instead decided to lean over the edge of the bed and throw up on his thighs.*

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She closed her eyes and took Caleb’s hand in hers, stroking the warm skin. He was truly here with her. Laura brought his hand to her mouth and kissed his palm. “I love you,” she murmured. She’d never thought she’d have this again, but here she was in the arms of the man she loved. What good would telling him about the baby do now? They had a future now. The past was over and done with.

“...love too...” he sighed into her hair.

Laura squeezed his fingers and hoped he didn’t feel her tremble.

## Chapter Fourteen

He always remembered her medication and when to take what pill. It was a sure bet that whenever Laura turned around, she could be certain that Caleb would be standing there with a tiny pillbox and cup of water in his hands.

He'd probably be holding them when they finally made love, too.

Laura found herself getting more nervous about that as the days passed. Damn pills make her nauseous. She ate like a horse and was pretty sure by the end of the year, she'd resemble the psycho killer whose heart she'd gotten.

She was over the moon with joy when Caleb whispered in her ear that he couldn't wait to make love to her so she wouldn't be able to walk for days.

“Been there, done that,” she joked, and he smiled and held her so tight that Laura knew he was remembering how close they came to not having this.

Karl still glared at her as the days went by because Caleb was still in the dark about their lost child. Soon, she promised Karl and herself.

Caleb and Laura talked about the past; they talked about the pain they'd caused each other. They talked about Mike and how he would feel if he knew they were back together. They felt guilty but too happy to give each other up, which made them feel guiltier.

Caleb's father insisted that Mike's feelings couldn't matter. He and Laura were alive. Mike was gone. They had to live for no one but each other right now.

Right now, Laura was in the shower stall shaving her legs. She examined her curves with her hands and wished she could do more exercises. Get her body a bit tighter, sleeker, but Doctor Comel insisted she be restricted to small workouts with light weights.

“You want a good ticker? Deal with the fat ass,” he remarked matter-of-factly when she complained that she wanted to do more.

Laura reached behind herself to check. Not as tight as she remembered, but not around her knees either. “Damn it, Thatcher. Get a grip.” It was just for a little while longer. Besides, she was certain that she and Caleb were gonna explode against each other when they did have sex again, so it wouldn't matter in the end what she looked like.

Then there was the scar. The ugly, jagged thing ran from her chest to her abdomen and still hurt a little. When it didn't hurt, it itched like a bitch. Laura wondered what Caleb was going to think when he saw her naked, saw that scar.

She tried to convince herself that he wouldn't care. Repeated the knowledge that Caleb loved her over and over in her head while she slipped into the nice nightgown she'd bought.

He was still stuck at work on a new case, giving Laura time to stew in her nervousness. “Thanks a bunch,” she grumbled out loud.

She checked the takeout dinner of veal and pasta she had warming on low in the oven and walked into the bedroom and smiled, feeling a shiver of anticipation. She imagined the two of them in that bed, and her body throbbed.

Laura pressed a hand against the scar on her chest. She was different, but so was Caleb. His body was no longer that of a lean teenager but a broad, muscled man. Though he still had the lean hips of his youth, he had a fighter's body now.

He had his own scars; his own wounds, most of them faded, and he'd probably have many more in his career. But he was still so goddamned beautiful to her. The knowledge was comforting. He loved her. Laura believed that. He'd feel the same when he looked at her, she hoped.

Her heart jumped when she heard the lock turn and Caleb walked in. He stopped with a start of surprise when he saw her. As his eyes roamed down and up her body, Laura felt his gaze on her skin like a physical thing.

“What—” he asked, taking in her nightgown.

“Well, I'll give you three guesses,” she said with a smile, walking towards him. “But you'll only need one.” She cupped the back of his head and drew his mouth to hers.

Caleb gave a small grunt of satisfaction and gathered her close to him, driving his fingers into her hair. She wished she'd let her hair grow long. She missed the feeling of Caleb's fingers in her long hair, and how he would bring the strands around her face in his hands and just bury his nose in it.

He ran his hands down her back, running his fingers along the back of her nightgown.

The short nightgown Laura wore stopped halfway down her thighs. It wasn't satin, which she knew would have been more romantic, but simple linen. She got a kick out of the tiny violet buds along the V-shaped neckline. Kinda pretty and understated.

Caleb never really went for the crotch-less panties and leather look, which Laura was very grateful for. He was a simple man.

She'd bought a lace teddy once, red and black, which she'd thought he would find sexy. He'd liked it, but admitted that there was something about her simple white bra or black sports bra and pretty little panties that just made him want to do bad things to her.



Now she felt a bit cold. The heating in Caleb's building was always a bit wonky. But his body was always so warm. Laura pressed herself against him, and he slid his hands down her back.

He broke the kiss, breathless. "Are you sure this is okay? It won't hurt you?" His gaze searched hers, and she could see the plea in his eyes.

She gave him a small smile. "We'll have to go slow."

He sucked her lower lip into his mouth and sighed. "Oh, trust me, I have no plans to rush."

Laura pressed her fingers into his shoulders. "Dinner's warming up...."

"Later," he urged, sliding his fingers into her hair.

She began to undo the buttons of his shirt. His mouth moved down her neck, sucking lightly while she slid her fingers along the muscled wall of his chest.

She knew she'd have marks on her skin tomorrow. She didn't care. She liked the idea of being marked by him, branded on the outside in the same way she felt branded by him on the inside.

He smelled of leather and soap, but it didn't mask the scent that was distinctly his. Like fresh wet grass.

They went on a picnic once. The skies opened up when they were halfway through their chicken salad. Before Caleb could rush back to his car, Laura hooked her legs around him and suggested they stay a little while longer. She felt surrounded by Caleb. He was

around her, underneath her, on top of her. His scent, matched with the scent of the wet grass, made her shatter three times that day.

Laura slid her hands into his now open shirt and pulled up the white tank underneath, groaning when she ran her hands up his chest and feels the hot, muscled skin.

“Disrobe, Detective,” Laura ordered, running her nails gently across his abs, feeling his body clench in response.

Caleb stepped back a little and shrugged out of his jacket and shirt before lifting the undershirt over his head in one quick move.

She pressed her mouth to his chest, pressed her tongue against a flat nipple and heard him suck in his breath. She imagined him with an ugly scar running down the middle, imagined it had been he who'd been shot. He who had almost been taken away from her. She buried her face in his chest and shuddered, trying to push the horrific thought away. “I love you,” she whispered. Laura ran her hands up his arms, digging her fingers in with gentle pressure. She felt Caleb lift the nightgown a bit to take her ass in his hands, making her jump when he pulled her closer to him. Her mouth sucked at the pulse in his neck. He bent his knees, and she could feel him hard against her.

She poked him back with her finger in his stomach, swallowing his soft laugh in her mouth.

He hooked a finger in the strap of her nightgown and eased it down. Laura's stomach tightened nervously. She eased away from his embrace and moved around behind him, kissing his back. She wrapped her arms around his waist and began to undo the belt at his jeans. She smacked his behind lightly with it, making him laugh. God, she'd missed his laugh.

“Laura, get back here,” Caleb demanded, turning his head.

“Is that an order, McKinney?” she asked, saucily lowering her hand to his erection while she kissed his shoulder blade, pressing her lips to the smooth skin.

Caleb whipped around and grabbed her hips, lifting her off her feet, carrying her into the bedroom and setting her on the bed. “You bet your ass.” His hands slid up her

Thighs, and he got down on his knees and lowered his mouth to hers, groaning when he felt soft, moist bare skin instead of underwear. “Oh, I like this.”

“Thought you might.” Laura grinned.

He nipped her collarbone and cupped her breast through her nightgown.

Again, he reached for the strap to pull it down.

Again, Laura stopped him. She felt ridiculous, but she just didn’t want to let him see the scar on her chest. She cupped his face in her hands and slid her tongue into his mouth to distract him.

He looked at her but didn’t comment. He just eased her nightgown up her thighs until she was partly bared to him. “You have no idea how much I missed the sounds you make when I do this,” Caleb groaned, his eyes darkening right before his mouth fastened on her.

Laura arched back, and her thighs parted wider, giving him better access. She cried out his name while his tongue worked its magic. She grabbed his hair, trying not to pull too hard as her hips moved forward, wanting more. Her nails clutched the cool sheets, contrasting with the heat of his mouth.

When her hips begin to dance urgently on the mattress, Caleb switched to just sucking on the nub of flesh and eased two fingers inside of her.

“Oh please...oh God. Caleb...love you...”

He crooked the two fingers and used his teeth on her with just the smallest pressure.

She came apart, her body exploding with liquid fire bubbling through her veins.

When she regained her brain function, Laura realized with a panicked start that the top of her nightie had slid down, leaving the material bunched around her waist and her entire upper body visible to Caleb, who climbed up along her body.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Smug bastard.” Laura tried to cover her chest with her arms, but Caleb shook his head and pulled her arms down.

“Laura, stop,” he urged, his eyes softening. “I love you. Not your chest, impressive though it is,” he added with a small smile.

Laura rolled her eyes at him and punched his chest.

“This scar. It reminds me how much I love you. How much you mean to me. This scar means that I could lose you at any second. It means that I almost did. Not just because of that bullet, but because of fear and pride. It'll fade, and even if it doesn't, I don't care. I have you, and I love—” He leaned down and dropped a kiss on her collarbone—“every”—his mouth moved down her chest, kissing the scar—“damned”—he cupped her bare breast in one hand—“inch of you.” He closed his mouth over her nipple and pushed her to lie down.

When he finally stretched out naked above her, Laura saw the boy she loved change into this powerful, beautiful man. Harder, tighter. His body moved with a slow, drawn-out rhythm only experience can give. When he pushed into her, Laura's body locked around

him, and she thought, *thank God*. Thank God she could touch him again, feel him again, love him again.

He took her gently, mindful of her recuperating body. His lips dropped kisses on her face and he brushed the blonde strands from her forehead while he moved deep and leisurely within her, as if they had all the time in the world. As if she couldn't feel how his breath hitched and held with the restrained urge to explode.

She cupped his behind and pushed him deeper still until they were just grinding against each other.

“Laura...my...I love you. My God...”

Their bodies were damp against each other, sliding hot and urgent as their climax neared.

They came at the same time. Bodies tightening when they dove into the warm, explosive heat that had always been between them.

He took her again in the morning.

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She couldn't be a cop anymore. It killed her at first, and she didn't know what to do with herself until Sergeant McKinney gave her a recommendation for a job teaching new recruits at the police academy.

“It's not the same, but at least I get to pass on my vast knowledge of how to beat people up,” Laura told Caleb while they shared a bath. She played with the shampoo on his hair and gave him a beard with a handful of bubbles when she straddled him.

“Vast indeed,” he agreed with a laugh.

“You know, when I woke up in the hospital and you looked like an adorable little lumberjack?” She ran her tongue down along his wet shoulders.

“Mmmm?”

“I thought it was kinda hot,” she purred into his ear.

He stirred between her legs. “Really?”

“Mmm-hmm. You looked kinda crazy. Dangerous, even.” She lifted her hips and settled down onto him.

“Don't think they'd go for the lumberjack/grizzly bear look in the department.”

“Bunch of tight asses,” Laura grumbled. “Oooh, God,” she hissed, her body responding to him fiercely, as always.

“Speaking of tight asses.” Caleb grabbed her behind and pinched it, thrusting up hard.

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She was halfway through a weapons lecture when the room swam dangerously and she had to grip the podium to keep from falling down. Laura shook it off as just simple fatigue until she passed out while preparing the next day's lesson.

She told Doctor Comel that she thought she must be having some sort of kooky reaction to the new meds he had her on.

He countered with the news that she was pregnant.

Laura swore, leaning back against the chair.

“That's how it usually happens,” he pointed out. “Now what the hell you were thinking? You never heard of condoms?”

“Of course we used protection. It just...those things aren't foolproof, you know.”

A baby? My God, my God, myGod, myGod, Laura thought, her mind working at warp speed.

“Yeah, well, you two proved that,” he grumbled, turning away. He picked up a file from a steel drawer against the wall. He threw it on the desk, across from Laura.

She picked it up and leafed through the loose pages. “What is this?”

“All the reasons you of all people should not get pregnant.”

Laura's back stiffened.

“Relax—though you're the last person I'd describe as being maternal, your attitude is not what I'm talking about. You have to stay on your drugs, Laura, throughout your pregnancy. We don't know what, if anything, that'll do to the fetus.”

“You mean they could hurt it?” Laura wrapped her arms around her stomach. “Can't I just go off them for the pregnancy and then go back on once it's born?”

“You need your ears examined too? Throughout your pregnancy, missy.”

Laura blinked. Nobody had ever called her “missy” in her life. No one else would dare. It was almost laughable. She needed to see Caleb RFN!

“You need to share this info with the father, and if you two can make a decision on whether or not to terminate the pregnancy before the kid is born, I'd appreciate it.”

“Termin—” Laura's jaw dropped, horrified. “There will be no termination.” God had given her another chance to have Caleb's child. A chance to do things right. She'd been feeling so chilled lately, Caleb had been grumbling that she kept turning the heat up in their apartment. Now she felt suffused with warmth. It felt like God had touched her head and whispered, 'You are good enough. We will give you this gift because you have suffered enough and deserve to be happy.'

“You might change your mind after you read the file.”

They should have waited two years at least before pregnancy was attempted. “Attempted my ass. The damn condom must have been defective.” Laura said under her breath as she read while walking down the hall. Damned McKinney sperm! What was it with the man? God give him a higher concentration of the stuff or something?

Premature babies, low birth weight, danger to mothers, unknown chances of deformities, etc... Geez!

“Mmm, just the woman I was looking for.” Caleb grabbed her when she walked into the apartment and wrapped an arm around her waist, lifting her off her feet and carrying her towards the bedroom.

Laura almost cried out, startled, but Caleb covered her mouth with his own, stifling the attempt. The file was crushed between them. For a few seconds, all thought flew out of her mind while his lips slid across hers, warm and sweet with coffee.

She grabbed the side of his face with her free hand and then tightened it around his shoulder, her eyes burning with tears. God, she didn't think it was possible to feel this happy. She felt none of the fear she thought she should, and she imagined Caleb would be over the moon when she told him.



He talked to her about the future all the time. His eyes clouded with worry when he talked about wanting their world to be safer, but he was happy that Laura wasn't a street cop anymore.

She wanted to tell him off when he spoke like that, but she knew he had a point. One of them should be safe if they were to have a family someday

It was very hard to kick your boyfriend's chauvinistic ass when you wanted to have his children more than anything in the world.

Still, they couldn't have a safe city unless they fought for it, and now that Laura has been demoted, Caleb was the best cop she knew. That scared her, but where in the past, that fear would have made her run, now it made her hold on to him with everything she had. Caleb pulled back. "You okay?"

"Mmm. So okay, you have no idea." She smiled, reaching for him again.

He laughed against her mouth and then gasped when she lowered her hand to cup him through his pants.

She then moved to her knees, unbuttoning his pants. "So what did you want to tell me?" Laura asked before taking him into her mouth.

"Oh God...," he moaned, pushing his hips closer to her.

"Dinner...tickets...date...penis... Oh shit...pianist."

Laura couldn't laugh at the moment, so she smiled with her eyes up at him.

He tightened his fingers in her hair, and she knew he was about to reach his climax.

When he did, Laura thought about the baby growing inside of her.

He smiled dreamily at her while she rose to her feet and pushed him back onto the bed. “It’s a date,” Laura said, patting his cheek. She moved the folder under the bed before Caleb gathered her in his arms and rolled on top of her. The date tomorrow night would be the perfect time to share her news.

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There was a high risk of miscarriages in pregnant patients who’d received heart transplants. Laura shuddered while she held her rosary in her hands, sitting cross-legged on the bed, reading the folder while Caleb was at work.

“Lord, hear my prayer. Please let me keep this one.” She placed a hand over her stomach. “I’ll try and be good. I’ll learn to be a good mom. You know Caleb will be a good father. Don’t take this chance away from him. Not again. I know I should tell him about the baby. I will, I promise. Tonight. Maybe he’ll be so happy about this baby, he’ll be able to forgive me. Please let him forgive me.” Laura trembled, tears filling her eyes. “But even if he can’t, I beg you, let us have this baby.”

In women who’d received heart transplants, pregnancy could pose a danger to the mother’s life.

“Even if you have to take me instead,” she whispered, holding her beads close to her heart.

## Chapter Fifteen

Laura was on her way out of the police station after visiting with William when she fainted.

Karl and William rushed her to the hospital, and Caleb's heart stopped when his father's worried voice informed him of what had happened.

Laura. God, no. Please! he thought, imagining the worst when he braked and turned the car in the direction of the hospital.

His heart was pounding in his ears, and he prayed the whole way to her room. When he burst in, Laura was tucked in a bed, her eyes closed. Karl was sitting beside her.

"How is she?" Caleb asked, terrified while he tried to see if the woman he loved was all right.

"She's fine. No thanks to you," Dr. Comel said, coming into the room.

His heart slowly returned to its normal rhythm. "What's wrong with her?"

"Nothing about seven months won't cure," he informed him with a snort.

"What the hell are you ramb..." Caleb's mouth dropped open when the possibility dawned on him. When he noticed Karl beaming at him, he dared to hope he was right. "Is she? She's...oh my God...she's pregnant?"

"I knew there was a brain behind that pretty face," the doctor remarked. "Though the jury's still out, considering how stupid you would have to be to get her pregnant in the

first place. I've discovered she's still got the scarring from her first pregnancy to worry about, on top of the fact that she is still not out of the clear with her heart—”

“Wait, what?” Caleb asked, his mind snapping back to the first part of the doctor’s statement.

Karl made a sound that was half a squeak, half a moan, and he dropped his head, covering his eyes with his hand.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he demanded, his chest growing tight.

The doctor’s mouth opened, then closed, uncomfortably. He looked first at Karl and then back to Caleb in obvious confusion “I thought you knew. This is her second pregnancy. Her first miscarriage left some scarring that might impede the growth of this new baby.”

Caleb felt his legs grow weak, and he grabbed for the hospital curtain. “First pregnancy... My God... Karl?”

Karl said nothing.

“Mike?” he asked, holding his breath.

“No,” Karl replied.

“Yours?”

“Come on, man!”

“Mine... It was mine?” Caleb asked, shaking.

Karl sighed and rubbed his hand over his face. “You need to wait for Laura to wake up and ask—”

“I’m asking you!” he screamed at him.

“You need to calm down,” the doctor ordered them out into the hall.

“Look, I promised that I wouldn’t—”

Caleb felt like he’d been sucker punched. He grabbed Karl’s collar and pushed him up against the wall. “You promised? How long have you known?”

“Whoa! Relax!” Karl pushed back, making Caleb almost trip backwards. “It’s not like you went out of your way to find out what happened to her after she left.”

“Hey! Knock it off, both of you!” the doctor demanded.

Caleb felt the color drain out of his face, and his stomach churned with the threat of nausea. “She was pregnant when she left?”

“You need to talk to Laura when she wakes up,” Karl repeated.

“Oh God... Oh my God!” He covered his mouth, tears springing to his eyes. He lost his footing and fell against the wall. All these years, she’d kept it from him, something so important and she’d never said a word. Caleb couldn’t breathe. “I have to...God...I have to go. I can’t...” A baby. There had been a baby. Now it was gone, and there was another to take its place. “I need some air,” he said through a blur of tears as he rushed out of the room.

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Laura opened her eyes, and the first thing she saw was Karl’s worried face. She turned her head in the opposite direction, expecting to see Caleb. He was not there. She turned

back to her friend. The somber look on his face worried her, and for a moment she was terrified she had lost this baby as well. Her hands went instantly to her belly.

Seeing her gesture, Karl quickly assured her the baby was fine.

That could only leave one other option. Her stomach knotted with a strange clench of apprehension. “Where is he?”

Karl glanced up at the doctor, who shook his head.

“Don't shake your head at him. Where the hell is Caleb?” She started to panic. Something was wrong. Caleb had gone out on the job, and something had happened to him. He was dead. He'd been shot. Oh God...Would he be this cruel? Just when Laura was about to get everything she'd ever wanted, would God take Caleb?

“Laura...” Karl began, and the doctor threw up his hands.

“Fine, but if she has a heart attack, it's on your head.”

Laura reached up and grabbed the doctor's white coat, bringing him down to her face.

“Where the hell is Caleb?”

“He knows, Laura,” Karl said softly.

His voice was so sad that she couldn't believe he was talking about the doctor.

Caleb knew.

“Knows what?” she asked, her voice hitching while her throat closed up with panic when realization dawned like ice in her stomach. *Please, no. Please.*

“They called Caleb after you passed out. The doctor told him there might be problems with this baby because of your heart meds and scarring from your earlier pregnancy.”

Laura's eyes widened, and she swung her legs over the edge of the bed. “I have to talk to him. I have to see him. No! Nononono! I have, I have...” She'd been surprised that so far, this pregnancy hadn't given her much in the way of morning sickness. But now her stomach lurched. She covered her mouth, and Karl grabbed the small bedpan, holding it under her chin seconds before she threw up.

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Caleb didn't stop driving until he found himself outside Laura's old apartment, the one she'd had above Greeley's garage where she worked all through high school. God must be enjoying himself screwing around with him. This was the last place he wanted to be. The place where he and Laura had first loved each other, where everything had been perfect and he'd still believed in their bright shiny future.

Now the decrepit building mirrored the truth. There was no future; perfect dreams were a joke. Greeley had long been out of business, and the apartment upstairs hadn't been rented in years.

She'd lied to him! This whole goddamned time! For years! Caleb had opened himself to her completely, allowed himself to trust her again, and she'd lived with him, made love to him, all with this lie in her eyes.

He kicked the door to her apartment open and let out a scream of rage as he punched the wall, sending a fiery pain through his hand and up his forearm. It distracted him from the ache in his heart so he did it again, cracking the white paint. Tears streamed down his face when he finally stopped and pressed his forehead against the wall, breathless. He'd had a baby. His baby had died, and he'd never had a chance to mourn. A son? A daughter? A tiny innocent life that was his, and Laura had lied and kept that from him. If she had told him about the baby, he could have kept her safe, kept his baby safe.

“You're going to have to pay for the damage, you know?” His mother's soft but firm voice penetrated Caleb's red haze of rage.

Her brown eyes were sad when they met his, and he knew that she had heard about what had happened.

Caleb took a few deep breaths to try and calm down. “Sorry.”

“Come. Sit.” She walked toward the window seat and motioned for him to join her.

Caleb wiped his face and dropped next to her. “Look, I'm not really in the mood to hear about how I should forgive her.” He shuddered and shook his head as bitterness filled him. “She lied to me. Laura was pregnant years ago, and she lost my baby and instead of telling me about it, she ran. Left me with no explanation. I hated her for years.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Caroline remarked, her voice dripping with skepticism.

“Okay, I tried to hate her,” he admitted with a shrug. “All this time, she's kept the death of my baby a secret. If it weren't for the fact that she got pregnant now, I would have never known my baby died to begin with. I found out from Karl, of all people! How can I forgive her for that? We've worked through so much shit and I've opened myself back up to her, and she's torn it all to shreds all over again!”

“Well, first of all, you keep saying 'my baby.' It was Laura's baby too. She carried it inside of her, nurtured it with her body. How do you think it felt to have that taken away? Especially knowing what a wounded child that woman is? I'd suggest you try and look at this from her point of view. You say she's pregnant again?”

Caleb nodded, feeling a frightening prickle of hope in his heart. “What do I do, Mom? I have no damned clue what the right thing to do here is. Do I forgive her again? Then what happens the next time she gets scared and lies to me? Do I forgive her again and



again? I can't keep letting her doing this to me." He shook his head and clenched his fists tight at his sides.

"Seems to me that God is giving you another chance, sweetheart. You two love each other in a way that is so rare. That is to be cherished, but we are imperfect creations. Always learning and changing. The way we learn is by being forgiven for the mistakes we make. You have fought long and hard to get to where you are. Are you willing to toss that away because of fear?"

"I've done everything I could to assure her she has nothing to be afraid of anymore. I've given her so many chances to trust me—"

"I'm not talking about her, Caleb," she insisted, staring at him. "There is a new little life depending on the both of you to get your acts together. Seems to me you've got a lot of thinking to do, my sweet boy." Caroline pulled him in close and wrapped her arms around him. For a little while, Caleb let himself need his mom and just lay his head on her shoulder.

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"You've seen him?" Laura asked Caroline urgently when his mother visited her at Caleb's apartment. He wasn't there when she was released from the hospital as she had been praying he would be and had now been gone for a whole day. Laura was terrified that he was going to give up on them for good. Give up on her. "Where? Where is he? William told me he'd left for a while, but he didn't tell me where."

"I asked William not to say anything."

Laura felt like Caroline had smacked her in the face. "Why the—I need to see him, damn it! I need to explain."

"No, you need to give him some time. He's had quite a shock, and he needs time to work through it all."

Laura lowered her head, and tears sprung to her eyes. “What if he wants nothing to do with me anymore? After everything...what if this is just too much? I need to see him. Please.”

“That man loves you something stupid, Laura. You have such little faith. Give him the time he needs. Have faith that your love for each other will get you through this. It got you this far, didn't it? Now you have a new little one to think about. Focus on that for now. This child is a gift from God.”

Laura leaned her head against the back of the couch and gritted her teeth. “How much time?”

“You'll know,” Caleb's mother assured her with a cryptic smile.

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“Okay, that's it! It's been two days. He hasn't called. He hasn't come back. Enough is enough. He's left me here like some godforsaken fishwife!” Laura growled in exasperation while she zipped up her jacket.

“Laura, this is a bad idea. I mean, bad like the king of bad ideas. Leave it alone,” Karl warned, following her toward her car.

“No! Laura Thatcher waits for no man. Got it? I'm going to track him down, beat his ass and bring him home, or beat his ass and leave him there.”

She'd managed to track Caleb's whereabouts to his mother's house and figured she should have guessed he would return home. She admitted to herself that maybe, deep

Down, she had known he would come here and had just been too frightened to follow him until now. Laura fought her own doubts to believe that Caleb would bring her back to the city. That they'd come back together.

She pushed past him when Caleb opened the front door. “You lying bastard!” Laura yelled before he could open his mouth.

“Me?” Caleb asked, openmouthed and caught off guard. “Me?” His jaw was dark with stubble, and it gave her a small measure of satisfaction to know that he probably hadn’t slept any better than she had lately.

“‘Trust me,’ you said. ‘Believe in what we feel for each other.’ ‘We can work through anything as long as we love each other.’ Then what happens? You find out the truth and you run!”

“Oh, you mean like you did?” Caleb shot back, clenching his fists at his sides.

“Instead of letting me explain, you copped out. All you proved was that I was right to run the first time because I knew you would never forgive me.” Laura turned away from him.

“No!” Caleb grabbed her and turned her around to face him.

Laura braced herself for his anger, but instead he cupped her face in his hands.

“But you’re right about this. I should have stayed to listen to what you had to say. It just threw me. We had a baby and that baby died, and you didn’t trust me enough to tell me. Now we’re having another baby, and I needed to figure out how to deal with it all. I got scared.”

“What, and you think I’m not?” Laura replied, shaking.

He released her and took a step back. “Will you tell me now?” Caleb asked. “I know I was a coward to run, and I know I should have kept my word to you. We need to work

through things if we have a hope in hell here, so tell me.” He sat on the couch, his eyes hopeful. “My mom is out, so we have some time to ourselves.”

Laura rubbed her arms and took a seat next to him “You were right—I should have never gone to see my mother.” Her eyes glistened while the memories came hard and fast. “I told you that I wanted to somehow make my peace with her. I was getting everything I’d ever wanted, and I felt like if I didn’t go, then I’d have that dark cloud over me that said I had let my mom die without trying to make things right between us. How could I raise our baby the right way if I did that? You didn’t want me to go, and I went anyway.”

Caleb sighed. “You were trying to do a good thing with an evil woman.”

Laura nodded. “And God, she was evil. She said awful things, Caleb. She said that I was garbage and that I could never raise a baby. But I held on to you, to us, in my heart, and I said my peace and left. I felt like I had done what I’d come to do, and I was kind of proud that I’d managed to give her what for, ya know?”

He leaned over and wiped her cheeks. “I hope she’s burning in hell.”

Laura took a shaky breath. “I guess I was distracted, because I didn’t see the car coming. The driver was speeding and had jumped the curb.”

Caleb closed his eyes, and grief stabbed through him, but he took Laura’s hands tight in his own.

“If Karl hadn’t been in the passenger’s side of the car, I might have died there on that sidewalk.”

“Karl?”

“Yeah. He saved my life, and he helped me disappear. When I came to and learned the baby was dead, all I could think was that you had begged me not to go and I had gone, and now our baby was dead. Because of me.”

“Jesus Christ, Laura. That wasn’t your fault.” He cupped her face in his hands.

“Wasn’t it, though? If you had been there in the hospital instead of Karl and the doctor had told you our baby was gone, wouldn’t you have thought that if I hadn’t been on that curb, our baby would still be alive?” Laura lowered her head. “Even though no one could have known the car accident was going to happen, it was my fault I went against you and was standing on that curb.”

Caleb shook his head. “Okay, maybe yes, in my grief, for a second I would have thought that if you hadn’t gone to see your mother, our baby would be alive. But damn it, Laura, we would have worked through that. You should have given us more credit!”

It took all his willpower not to shake her and make her see that if she’d just trusted him, they could have saved themselves so much heartache. But the past few days had given him a lot of time to think. He knew the world of fear Laura came from. He knew the hate she lived with from her mother. It was easy for him to say that she should have trusted him, but besides his loving her, where was the proof that she could? The first time she’d needed that trust; he’d let her go. Let her disappear, because he had been so lost in his own rage and humiliation.

The second time she’d needed to trust him, to believe that they really were strong enough to work through their difficulties, he’d run here and left her. They both needed to learn to trust each other. His mother was right, Caleb thought. They had something so amazing, but they didn’t have the courage to live it. Day by day, through the ups and downs. Or they once didn’t, he amended, feeling a new sense of purpose. From now on, he would be stronger for her. Stronger for their baby.

When Laura finished, the tears were streaming off her face and falling onto their joined hands.

He leaned in and kissed her forehead, drawing her into his lap. "I'm sorry I didn't look for you," he whispered, holding her close to him.

"I forgive you." Laura buried her face in his chest and sobbed.

Caleb gave a short laugh through his own tears and tightened his arms around her. "I forgive you too." He felt a weight lift from inside his chest. He left a note for his Mom, telling her they'd gone home.

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They lay side beside each other in the dark, on top of the blankets, still in their clothes.

Laura told him the day that would have been their first baby's birthday was the same day Mike had died. "I light a candle for them both. I never gave him a name.... Do you want to?" Laura asked in a low voice.

He wiped a tear rolling onto his nose. "You think it was a boy?"

"I do. Just like I think this one is a girl,"

"Really?" Caleb asked, awe evident in his voice. He lowered his hand to her stomach. God truly had given them a second chance. He was so grateful. He ran his hand down the side of Laura's face.

"You remember little Jamie? That kid who wanted to marry you?" he asked with a soft note of amusement. "How about that? Jamie?"

"I like that a lot. I'd like to have a service for him too."

“I’d like that,” Caleb said. “Jamie Michael McKinney?”

“Oh,” Laura sniffled, fiddling with the collar of his gray t-shirt. “That’s a good name.”

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They sat across from each other in the private dining room at the restaurant. The strength of their love and, finally, the trust in that love shone in their eyes. They knew they’d screw up again. Argue. Furniture would probably be broken, but they were strong enough now to hold on.

“I have something for you,” Laura said and reached into her purse and placed the small velvet box on the table.

He cocked an eyebrow, but then his breath caught when he lifted it open and recognized the simple solitaire diamond set in the gold band. He looked from the ring up to Laura’s face. “I was afraid to ask if you still had it.”

She nodded, a lump of sadness in her throat. “I couldn’t bring myself to mail it back to you from wherever I was at the time. Maybe I was afraid you’d take it and give it to someone else.”

He shook his head. “There was never anyone else, Laura Thatcher. Not to say there weren’t attempts, but I meant it when I said you’re it for me. For better or worse.”

Laura smiled at him. “Interesting choice of words, McKinney.”

Caleb burst out laughing when she came around to his side of the table and got down on one knee. He didn’t tell her until later that he could see up her skirt.

When she asked him to marry her, he said yes.

They were dancing to the soft notes of the piano when the waiters came and brought their dinner.

In the center of the table, in a golden ice bucket, as per Caleb's instructions, they left a bottle of chilled strawberry wine.

**The End**



### **About the Author**

E. Jamie lives in Toronto, Canada and loves nothing more than bringing all the heroes and heroines in her head to life for her readers. You can visit her website at [www.ejamie.net](http://www.ejamie.net) and let her know which ones are your favorites!