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Chapter 3

Liam opened his eyes to an unexpected sight. Cassie was staring at him while poking a finger at a strawberry birthmark he had on his left shoulder. She was watching the birthmark go from white to strawberry colored again every time she pressed her finger against it.

“Hey kiddo, how ya doing, did you sleep well?” Liam asked.

“Uh huh,” she responded.

“Are you hungry? Let’s go check on your brother and then we can head down and get some breakfast. How does that sound?” Liam said as he picked up Cassie and headed down the hall towards Chris’s room.

“Okay,” said Cassie, then followed up with, “can I have pancakes?”

“We’ll see, I’m not sure I have everything we need to make pancakes.”

When he arrived at Chris’s room, he poked his head in and saw that Chris was still asleep.

“Shhh, Crissie asleep.” Cassie whispered, while at the same time putting her little hand over Liam’s mouth. Liam only nodded in response, then turned and headed down stairs to see what he could fix for breakfast.

Leaving Cassie in front of the TV, he started going through his cupboards and refrigerator. There wasn’t much. Both he and Jack didn’t eat breakfast much, usually just coffee. *‘I’m definitely going to have to go to the store today,’* he thought to himself as he decided on eggs and toast. But, first, he needed coffee.

Once Liam had finished his first cup of coffee and had breakfast ready and on the table, he went into the living room to find both Cassie and Christopher watching TV.

“Hey guys, breakfast is ready. Sorry Cassie, no pancakes today, but we’ve got eggs and toast. After breakfast, we’ll head out to the store to pick up some food that you guys might like better. How does that sound?”

“Okay,” Cassie said as she got up, grabbed Chris’s hand and dragged him to the kitchen for breakfast.

Liam chuckled, thinking, ‘Well, that was easy.’

While the kids were eating breakfast, Liam headed upstairs to shower and get dressed.

When he came downstairs, Chris and Cassie were quietly watching TV, again. “Okay guys, why don’t you head upstairs and get dressed while I clean up the breakfast dishes, then we’ll head out.”

Liam was just about finished with the dishes when his doorbell rang.

He opened the door to a tall woman with flaming red hair.

“Hi, I’m Stacey. Rick sent me over to take you out and help you finish getting everything for the kids. He said you seemed a little unsure of what you needed.” She stated, while walking into the room and plopping down on the couch.

As soon as she sat down, she stopped talking and stared at Liam. Liam, still confused about who this woman was, where she had come from, and what she was doing here, just stared back, dumbfounded.

“Ok, so Rick didn’t send me, but he would have if he’d have thought about it. I just saved him the trouble. So, here I am, ready to help.” She continued.

Liam again, just stared, while trying to process everything she had just said.

”Okay, okay, he probably wouldn’t have sent me, probably would have told me to keep my nose out of things. Mitch would have told me the same thing, but I know what’s best and I know you’ll need help. Men just don’t have a clue about these things, especially those two men.” She said as she finally stopped to take a breath.

Just as Liam was finally going to respond, the kids came down from upstairs.

“Oh. My. God! You must be Chris and Cassie. Aren’t you two just adorable? Cassie, how old are you?” She asked.

“I’m two,” Cassie replied, and then added, “Crissie is seven.”

“Wow, seven, Chris, I would have thought you were older than that. What grade are you in?” She asked, turning to Chris.

Chris stood a little taller, smiled a little. *‘Wow, first smile I’ve seen since he arrived yesterday,’* Liam thought to himself, while Chris replied that he was in second grade.

“Well, you’ll just have to tell me all about your school and your teacher while we are on the way to the grocery store.” She said, causing both Cassie and Chris to look at each other and grin.

Liam, still confused about who she was and why she was here, finally spoke up.

“I’m sorry, but I’m confused. Who, exactly, are you?” He asked.

Oh, I’m sorry. Sometimes I ramble on so much that people can’t keep up with me. I’m Stacey Peters. I’m the administrative assistant at the fire department. I work for Rick. I’m also Mitch’s girlfriend.” She responded.

“Okay, but who’s Mitch?” He asked. It was obvious that she thought that he should know who Mitch was, but he just couldn’t place the name.

“Jeesh, I’m sorry,” she said as she slapped the palm of her hand against her forehead. “I do this all the time. Mitch Seavers is my boyfriend and he’s also the detective who’s working on your sister’s arson case.” She said, and then continued. “Anyway, I was talking to Rick this morning and he mentioned that you seemed a little lost, that you still needed to get things together to get the kids settled. Well, that’s where I come in. I have two little one’s at home myself, so I’m a ‘field expert’, so to speak.” She said before again taking another deep breath and then finishing with, “Plus, I figured since Rick invited you and the kids down to the fire station, that we could swing by there. Bet I could talk one of the guys into giving the kids a ride on one of the fire trucks.” She finally finished.

Liam, now that he finally knew what was going on, readily accepted her offer.

First she sat down with Liam and the kids and they made a grocery list. It was a pretty thorough list and included things like shampoo and soap and toothbrushes, basically, all of the things that Liam probably wouldn’t have even thought about. Plus, she said that it would probably be best to get the ‘no more tears’ shampoo, so he wouldn’t have to worry about getting soap in her eyes when he gave her a bath.

“Bath? I have to give her a bath?” Liam asked, obviously shocked by the idea.

“Yes, of course. She can’t do it by herself, she’s too young. She’ll end up not getting all the shampoo out of her hair and that could cause her to get an irritated scalp.” She said.

Liam just nodded, while trying to decide if he could really do this or not.

Stacy, not seeing his apprehension, just continued preparing the list.

Chris, seeing his unease, said “I’m old enough to take my own shower Uncle Liam, you won’t have to worry about me.”

“Thanks Chris, but don’t worry, we’ll get this worked out. I just might need a little help from you and Cassie.” Liam said, hoping to reassure both himself and Chris.

“Cassie, honey, are you still wearing diapers?” Stacey suddenly asked.

“Diapers? You mean Diapers? Wait, I can’t change diapers.” Liam said, realizing now that he couldn’t do this, that he would have to find someone else. Looking at Cassie, he said, “Cassie’s not in diapers. No, you’re not. Are you?” He asked, afraid of what the answer would be.

It was Chris who spoke up. “No, Uncle Liam, she’s not in diapers anymore, although, she does wet the bed sometimes, but if you make sure she goes to the bathroom right before bedtime, she usually won’t wet the bed.”

‘Okay, I can deal with that. Just wetting the bed occasionally. That I can deal with.’ Liam thought, while breathing a huge sigh of relief.

“Well, I think I’ve got a pretty good list together. First we’ll need to go to Target to pick up a booster seat, rubber sheets... *‘rubber sheets, what the hell are rubber sheets?’* Liam thought, but didn’t dare ask, as Stacey continued with her list. “After Target, we’ll head over to the station, then to lunch. After lunch, we’ll head over to the drug store. You’ll need children’s cold medicine, children’s Tylenol, you’ll also need a good first aid kit with lots of band aids, that is, if you don’t already have one.” Receiving a ‘no’ from Liam, she continued. “Lastly, we’ll head over to the grocery store and pick up everything you need to feed two growing young kids. Now, does that sound like a plan, or what?” She asked, as she looked up from her list with a very satisfied grin on her face.

Liam wanted to say, ‘or what,’ but decided to keep the sarcasm to himself. He really was grateful to have Stacey’s help.

Three hours and a car load of ‘crap’ later, they arrived at the fire station. Both the kids couldn’t contain their enthusiasm. Even Chris, who had been very quiet during the whole outing, had perked up when they pulled into the station parking lot.

One of the fire trucks was out front and a couple of the men were washing it. They stopped what they were doing when they saw Stacey get out of the car.

“Hey Stacey, where you been?” One of the men asked. “Rick’s been trying to call you. He’s not a happy camper right now.” He finished.

“Well, that’s exactly why I turned off my phone. Besides, I left him a note, so he knew where I was.” She replied. “Also, I brought the kids with me. That way they can keep him preoccupied and by the time he’s done with them, he’ll forget to yell at me. See Chipper, I got it all figured out.” She finished with another very satisfied grin.

Before Chip could respond, Rick stepped out of the station.

“Woman, you’re really trying my patience. You work for the fire department, which means you need to be here, actually working. Not gallivanting all over town.” He bellowed.

“Rick, look who I brought with me, you remember Chris, Cassie and Liam?” She asked, completely ignoring his tirade.

“Liam, hi, I’m glad you came. Hey, Cassie, Chris, you kids interested in helping the guys wash the truck?” He asked as he gestured over to Chip and Darren.

“Wow, can we Uncle Liam?” Chris asked excitedly.

“Sure, go ahead, have fun, but keep an eye on Cassie.” He replied, glad that Chris was showing some excitement.

Before Liam could even finish the sentence, Chip was sweeping Cassie into his arms and carrying her over to the truck. Chris, following right beside him, was asking a million questions at once. Chip, to his credit, was happily answering each one.

Both Liam and Rick turned to each other, grinning from ear to ear and chuckling slightly, happy to see that the kids were having a good moment. As they locked eyes on one another, they grew silent, their grins slowly fading.

It was Stacey clearing her throat, which brought them out of their daze.

“Well, I’m just going to head inside.” Stacey said, as both Liam and Rick turned their attention to her.

Rick, clearing the lump in his throat before replying, said, “Damn straight, woman. I’m sure you’ve got a ton of work to do.”

“Actually, little brother of mine, I was going to head inside to call Mitch and have him meet us for lunch. So, be ready to head to lunch in about thirty minutes.” She said, as she turned and disappeared inside the station.

Liam was still trying to process the ‘little brother’ statement, when Rick turned his attention back to him.

“I’ll tell you, I sometimes wonder who’s in charge around here.” He said to Liam.

“I’m just wondering how you keep up with her. Mentally, I’m still back at my apartment, wondering what the hell happened.” Liam replied.

“Yep, she’ll do that to you.” Rick agreed, chuckling.

“So, how are you doing? Besides the fact that Stacey can be pretty overwhelming, you’ve had a lot going on. Are you doing okay?” Rick asked.

“I don’t know. I feel so lost. I don’t know what I’m doing. So far, I feel like I’m stuck on a rollercoaster with no way off and no way to stop it. I feel so out of control.” Liam said, and then added, “I’m sorry, I don’t know why I’m laying this all on you.”

“Hey, I asked, didn’t I? I can only imagine what you are going through right now. Between losing your sister and brother-in-law and having to deal with the fact that it is quite possibly murder, you also have to deal with the fact that you’re now raising two young kids. If you ask me, this is probably more than the average person could handle.” Rick replied, sympathetically.

“Yeah, I know. I’m not sure what to do about Chris. He seems so despondent. Cassie still doesn’t realize that her mom and dad are gone, that they won’t be coming back. But, Chris, he’s so withdrawn, which I’m sure is to be expected, but how am I supposed to know what’s normal in this situation. I don’t know what to do for him.” Liam said, while watching the kids laughing hysterically, while running around the truck, avoiding the water hose that Chip was chasing them with. *‘It sure is nice to see them smile.’* Liam thought to himself.

“Well, I would suggest having him see a school counselor once he starts back at school. By the time he goes back, he’ll have had enough time to deal with his grief a little bit and then the school counselor can help him work through all the other feelings that are going to be overwhelming him.” Rick offered.

“That sounds like pretty smart advice. You must see a lot of this kind of stuff because of your job.” Liam commented.

“Yeah, the department offers courses to the station captains on how to help families deal in these types of situations. Often, we are the first and last people on the scene and so we tend to be the first line of support for these families. It’s nice to be able to know how to offer help.” Rick replied.

By this time, the men had given up on washing the truck and were showing the kids the inside of the truck. Chip was showing Chris how the sirens worked and Darren was helping Cassie strap a fire helmet to her head. It made Liam laugh to see the little girl wearing a helmet that almost completely consumed her head.

Rick was thoroughly enjoying the smile showing on Liam’s face, when he noticed that Stacey had once again joined them.

“Mitch is on his way over, should be here in just a couple of minutes. I figure we can go to Bullwinkle’s. The kids should love that.”

Both Liam and Rick groaned at that statement. Liam had been to Bullwinkle’s for one of Chris’s birthday parties and he was hoping he would never have to go again.

Once Mitch got there, all 6 of them headed out, with Liam, Rick, and the kids in one car and Stacey and Mitch in the other.

After lunch, Rick and Stacey took the kids over to the bumper boats and the video games. Stacey had said flat out ‘no’ to the bumper boats, but Rick’s face lit up at the idea. Rick grabbed both Chris and Cassie and dragged them to the boats. Cassie and Rick shared a boat, and Chris got his own. Stacey followed them, figuring she could use the squirters to make sure the kids, and of course Rick too, got good and soaked.

While the kids were gone, Liam took the opportunity to ask about the investigation.

“So, Mitch, how is the investigation going? Have you found any leads yet?”

“Right now, we’re combing through all of his current cases. Depending on how those turn out, we may have to start going through past cases. It’s going to take time. Since he was a criminal lawyer, we have a lot of potential suspects. Since you and your family couldn’t give us any leads, right now, we can only work through his case files.” Mitch replied.

“The fire inspectors are working to determine what accelerant was used to fuel the fire. That may give us a lead, but I doubt it. If it’s a commonly used accelerant, we won’t really have much use for the knowledge until we actually have a suspect. We are also waiting for the autopsy reports, just in case the cause of death wasn’t smoke inhalation. However, all the initial evidence leads to smoke inhalation, so I wouldn’t expect any possible leads from the autopsy.” He added.

“I wish there was something I could do to help. Adam never really discussed his cases with us. We knew of some of the major cases he was working on, but that was only because they were usually in the news. When he came home, he was home. With the exception of working evenings in his office, he really didn’t bring his work home, at least, not that I’m aware of. He might have discussed things with Julie, but never with us. I’m sorry that I’m just not much help.” Liam said.

“That’s okay Liam, we’ll find out who did this, it’s just going to take some time.”

Liam only nodded in response, the lump in his throat making it impossible to voice his gratitude.

Just then, Stacey and Rick came back with the kids. Rick had Chris on his shoulders and was carrying Cassie in his arms. All were laughing with excitement and completely soaking wet from head to toe. Even Stacey was wet. Actually, it looked like Stacey and Rick got the worst of it.

“Stacey, how’d you get wet? I thought you weren’t going on the boats?” Liam asked, laughing at the scene.

“Can’t avoid it much, when you’re manning the squirters. The boat’s water guns could still reach me.” She said, then added, “we should probably head out. We’ve still got to stop at the drug store and the grocery store.”

With that, they headed out, Stacey and the kids heading out in Liam's car and Mitch and Rick heading back to the fire station.

The rest of the day was pretty uneventful. After picking up the rest of the necessities, they headed back to Liam's and unloaded the car. After the car was unloaded and everything in its place, Liam actually learning what the rubber sheets were for, Stacey helped Liam get dinner ready for the kids.

After pork chops, macaroni and cheese and corn, Stacey helped Liam give Cassie a bath.

While Chris was taking his shower, Cassie curled up in Liam's lap to watch a movie, while Stacey sat next to Liam.

"Stacey, I don't think I could thank you enough for your help today. It was really great to see the kids smiling. It was nice to know that they could forget everything going on, even for just a short time. Thank you so much for that." Liam said.

"It was my pleasure Liam. You shouldn't have too many problems. They are a couple of great kids. You definitely have some adjustments to make in your life, but trust me when I say that kids can really bring a lot of enjoyment to your life."

"Yeah, I kinda see what you mean." He said, looking down at Cassie all curled up in his lap, now asleep.

"Well, I should head out. I need to get home to my kids. Rick probably has them bouncing off the walls by now and, they have school tomorrow. But, listen, if you need anything, anything at all, you call me, okay?" She said as she went into the kitchen and wrote her number down on one of the folded paper bags from the grocery store.

Liam picked up Cassie and followed Stacey to the door. "Yeah, thanks Stacey, I'll be sure to do that."

After showing Stacey to the door, Liam went upstairs to put Cassie to bed and see how Chris was doing with his shower.

After putting Cassie down, he knocked on the bathroom door. "Chris, how ya doin in there?" He asked.

"I'm almost done Uncle Liam, I'm just brushing my teeth." Chris replied.

"Oh, okay. That's good. Hurry up though, it's time for bed. We've had a busy day today and we have a lot of stuff to take care of tomorrow."

"I'm done." Chris said, coming out of the bathroom.

"Well then, let's get you to bed."

“Uncle Liam?”

“Hmmm?”

“When are Mommy and Daddy coming back? Grandma said that they died in a fire at the house, but I don’t think they would have died without saying goodbye. They didn’t even tell me goodnight before they left. I just want them to come back.”

“Oh, Chris, honey, let’s go sit down in your room and talk a little bit, okay?” Liam replied, surprised by the question and hoping to buy himself a little time, in order to think about how to respond to Chris.

Once in the bedroom, Liam sat up against the headboard of the bed and beckoned Chris to come lay down with him. Once Chris was lying against him, Liam began.

“Chris, I know that Grandma already talked to you about this, but I’ll tell you again. Your mom and dad died in a fire at your house. You and Cassie are going to stay with me from now on. I’ll take care of both of you. You don’t have anything to worry about. I’m really sorry that you and Cassie have to go through this, but I’ll be here for you and so will Grandma and Grandpa. Okay? We’re a family and we love you both.” By this time Chris was curled up against Liam, crying his little broken heart out. Liam couldn’t hold back either and started crying too.

“Uncle Liam, Cassie and me should have been in the house too. If we were, would we be with Mommy and Daddy still?” Chris asked.

“Oh, Chris, please don’t say that,” Liam said between sobs. “I couldn’t stand it if I lost you guys too. Neither could Grandma and Grandpa. We need you here with us. That’s why God made sure you weren’t in the house, so you guys could stay here with us. Do you understand?” He added, while rolling Chris against him and hugging him tightly, both of them having huge tears rolling down their faces.

Pulling back slightly, Chris asked, “So, I’m never going to see them again?”

“Someday, you will, but right now, you guys are here and you have me and your Grandma and Grandpa who love you very much.” Then added, “Hey, why don’t you come and sleep with me tonight. Figuring at this point, they both needed the comfort of each other right now.

“Okay.” Chris replied, as they both got up and headed to bed.

It was three o’clock in the morning, this time, when Liam heard Cassie again, calling for Mommy. Untangling himself from Chris, he headed to her room.

“Hey sweetie, Mommy’s not here right now, remember? What’s wrong? What do you need?” Liam said, trying to sooth her.

“I went pee pee, Uncle Leem.” She replied.

“Oh, okay. Come on then, let’s get you out of these wet pajamas and cleaned up.” He said.

After he had Cassie cleaned up and in dry pajamas, he left her in his bed curled up with Chris while he changed her sheets and put all the wet bedding in the washer.

By the time he got back to bed, it was almost four thirty in the morning. It was when he was laying there, trying to go back to sleep, that he thought about the fact that Jack never called him tonight. Getting back up, he headed to his cell phone to see if he had missed any calls. Sure enough, he had missed Jack’s call last night. Crawling back into the rather cramped bed, he thought, *‘Well, nothing I can do about it tonight’*, while still feeling a little tinge of disappointment from having missed the call, *‘I’ll just talk to him in a few hours.’* However, he still silently cried himself to sleep. Even with all the support he’s had so far, he still couldn’t help feeling all alone.

Author’s Note: Well that’s Chapter 3, I hope you’ve enjoyed it so far. If you are interested in commenting, good or bad, you can e-mail me at myoregon12@yahoo.com

Also, I would like to thank Miguel Sanchez, author of “You Can Run But You Can’t Hide” for reviewing and editing this chapter. His stories can be found on the Nifty Archive under Prolific Authors.