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Chapter 7

The alarm woke Liam at six in the morning. Quickly turning off the alarm so it wouldn't wake the kids, Liam got up and headed into the shower. He didn't bother looking for Jack. He knew he hadn't come home last night.

Liam stood under the warm water, letting it cascade over his head and down his body. Leaning back against the wall, he slowly sank to the ground, pulled his knees to his chest and hugged them, letting his tears fall. He cried hard and long, his body shaking with the force of the emotional breakdown. He would allow himself this time, this one breakdown and then he would get up, wash it off and move on. He needed to move on. He needed to be strong for the kids. They needed him. He finally stood up when the water started turning cold, quickly washed himself and stepped out of the shower.

Once he was dressed and ready, he started debating whether he should send the kids to school. They had had a tough night, they would probably be tired. However, remembering that Chris's counselor had said that the kids needed to get back into their routine, he decided to go ahead and wake them.

“Chris, Cassie, come on guys, time to get up. You've got just over an hour until we need to leave for school. You guys need to get up and get ready.” He said, while shaking their shoulders, trying to rouse them.

Both of the kids seemed to wake easily and didn't seem any worse for wear. At breakfast, Liam started questioning Chris, wondering if he remembered anything about last night.

“Chris, how did you sleep last night?” He asked, not sure if he should bring up the night terror.

“Okay.” He said, shrugging.

“Do you remember how you got to my room?” Liam pressed further.

“No, why?” He replied.

“Just wondering. I think you had a bad dream last night. Sure you don’t remember anything?” Liam asked again.

“That’s funny, I don’t remember it.” Chris laughed.

‘Okay, well that answers that question.’ Liam thought to himself, making a mental note to talk to Chris’s counselor. He wasn’t looking forward to a repeat of last night.

Today, Liam dropped Cassie off at school first, so he could take the time to talk to Chris’s counselor.

Mr. Davidson, Chris’s counselor basically confirmed what Stacey had told him, that the night terrors would probably continue, but would lessen as Chris adjusted to his new life, that Chris just needed to stick to routine and to continue to come and see him for the counseling sessions. Liam didn’t want to bring up what was going on between him and Jack, but he was really worried that it might be contributing to the terrors, so he told the counselor everything.

Mr. Davidson confirmed his fears, that the added stress was probably one of the contributing factors. That Chris may actually feel guilty, that he was somehow responsible for what was happening between Liam and Jack. He also said that Chris may also be worried that Liam would abandon them for Jack. He suggested that Liam talk to Chris and Cassie and reassure them that they would be staying with Liam no matter what happened, and to let them know that what’s going on with him and Jack was not their fault.

When Liam left, he actually felt relieved. The counselor just reconfirmed what he knew had to be done. He would start looking for a place for him and the kids right away. He and Jack could still, hopefully, work things out, but it would be better for everyone if he and the kids moved out. He would start looking tomorrow. He knew he wanted to buy a house, not an apartment like the loft Liam and Jack currently had. He wanted the kids to have a backyard, and to have other kids in the neighborhood. Where he and Jack currently lived, wasn’t really a family oriented area. There were only singles and couples in the upscale, downtown lofts. He would start his search in their current school district so they could stay at the same school.

When he got home, he called his mom and made arrangements for her to pick the kids up from school tomorrow and watch them, so he could start looking for a house. Liam’s mom had a key to their place, in case of emergencies, so she said she would just bring them back there after she picked them up. That way the kids could be at home.

After he got off the phone with his mom, he spent the morning cleaning up the breakfast dishes, doing laundry and picking up after the kids. Before he knew it, it was time to head out and meet Stacey and Rick for lunch.

When he got to the restaurant, Stacey and Rick were already there.

“Hey Liam, how are you doing? It looks like you survived last night.” Stacey said.

“Yeah, I did. Chris didn’t even remember it. I talked to his counselor this morning though and I at least know what to expect if it happens again.” Liam said.

“So have you talked to Jack?” Stacey asked.

“No, he didn’t come home last night, but I’ve made a decision. The kids and I are going to find our own place. We’re going to move out. Maybe if Jack doesn’t feel like the kids are being forced on him and he actually has time to get to know them a little better, we’ll be able to work through this.” He said.

Both Stacey and Rick glanced at each other, and then Stacey spoke. “Well, it sounds like you’ve got things figured out. That’s good. It’ll also be good for the kids.” She said.

“Oh, by the way, you guys wouldn’t possibly have a real estate agent in the family, would you?” Liam asked, somewhat jokingly.

“Nope, no real estate agent, just a nurse, a doctor, a dentist, a fireman, a couple of stay at home moms, a yoga instructor, and a couple of other careers that wouldn’t be much help to you. Sorry.” Rick said.

“Well, I figured since I seemed to be running into your family at every turn, I might just luck out and get a real estate agent.” Liam said.

“A real estate agent? You looking to buy or sell?” Mitch asked, suddenly appearing at the table.

They all looked up at Mitch, and Liam replied. “Hey Mitch, I’m looking to buy, I want to find a house for the kids and I.”

“Well, I can give you the name of the lady I used when I bought my place.” Mitch offered.

Before Liam had a chance to respond, the waiter showed up and took their orders.

After they placed their orders, talk turned to the investigation into the fire, with Liam asking Mitch if they had any leads yet.

“So far, we haven’t had anything develop from the investigation. We’ve worked through most of Adam’s case files and we’re now turning to Julie’s cases. Since Julie worked in poverty law, we really don’t anticipate finding any leads there, but we’re going to check them out anyway. We’re also going to go through Adam’s cases a second time, in case we missed something crucial. We’ve questioned a large number of people involved in Adam’s cases, but nothing substantial came out of the questioning.”

“We also don’t have much to go on from the forensic evidence. There wasn’t much left that might provide some trace evidence. They did determine that the accelerant used was diesel fuel, which is pretty common and wouldn’t be beneficial unless we had a suspect. The autopsy report confirmed they died from smoke inhalation. Based on the fire inspector’s report, this fire has been labeled as an ‘Organized Arson’. Basically there are two types of arson, ‘Organized’ and ‘Unorganized’. There are three factors that designate organized arson. One, the use of elaborate incendiary devices such as electronic timing mechanisms, or initiators; two, less physical evidence, usually, if it’s forced entry, it’s skillful; and three, methodical approach, such as excessive accelerant use or other obvious evidence that it was planned.”

“We used an arson dog to determine if an accelerant was used. Based on what they found and later confirmed by samples tested from the scene, the fire was set in several locations throughout the house, including upstairs where Adam and Julie were probably sleeping.”

“Also, based on the accounts of the firefighters interviewed on the scene, we determined that the smoke detectors were not working. The upstairs smoke detector was buried under some debris from the roof collapse, but was, surprisingly, in good condition. We checked it for fingerprints, but it was clean. However, further inspection of the fire detector revealed that whoever started the fire probably disabled the smoke detectors. So, basically, Adam and Julie probably didn’t even know the house was on fire until it was too late.” Mitch finished.

“Wow.” Was all Liam could say. He was trying really hard to hold back the tears that were threatening to escape. Rick had moved in close to Liam and was rubbing his back, trying to give him some support, trying to let him know that it was okay.

“So, it doesn’t look like you’ll catch the person who did this?” Liam asked.

“No, I wouldn’t assume that. It may seem that we’ve covered a lot of ground, but there’s still a lot to cover. You just need to be patient.” Mitch said.

“I know, but it’s just so hard.” Liam said.

Their conversation was interrupted by lunch arriving, so they moved on to more pleasant conversation while they ate. As they were waiting for the check, Rick spoke up. “Liam, I wanted to invite you and the kids out to my place on Friday night for dinner. I’m having a big barbecue. Our whole family will be there and a few of our friends too. I think the kids would enjoy it. There will be a lot of other kids there that are about the same age.” Rick said, and then continued, as an afterthought. “Oh, and bring your bathing suits if you guys want to go swimming. The pool will probably be full of kids, so you may not want to go swimming, but I’m sure the kids would love it.” Rick added.

“Okay, that sounds like fun. We’ll definitely be there.” He said, thinking that he’d have to take the kids out and get them bathing suits.

When Liam and the kids got home from school, Liam got Chris started on his homework and sat Cassie down to watch television, while he called the real estate agent that Mitch had recommended. He made an appointment for tomorrow morning after he dropped the kids off at school.

After dinner, the kids took baths, and then they all settled down to watch a movie. However, before Liam started the movie, he decided to talk to the kids about some of the things Chris's counselor had suggested, and to also let them know that they would be moving.

"Chris, Cassie, before I start the movie, I wanted to talk to you." He said, as they sat down together on the couch, Cassie sitting in his lap. "Firstly, I wanted to let you know that we will be moving. I'm going to start looking for a house tomorrow. It will just be the three of us. Jack is going to stay here." Liam said, pausing to take a breath.

Liam didn't think Chris realized it, but silent tears had started running down his face.

"Also, I wanted to talk to you about me and Jack. I want you to know that what's been going on between Jack and me isn't your fault. I love you guys and there isn't anything I want more than to have you guys in my life. We are a family now, you, me, and Cassie." Liam said, as he placed his hand on Chris's shoulder and squeezed.

By now, Chris was full on sobbing. "I just want my mommy and daddy back." He said.

Pulling Chris to him in a huge hug, he said. "I know, I want them back too, I wish I could bring them back. I would do anything to bring them back, but I can't." Liam said, tears now streaming down his face as well. He looked down at Cassie and she was crying too. He wasn't sure if she really understood what was going on or if she was just crying because everyone else was, but it didn't matter, he pulled them both tightly to him and they all sobbed in each other's arms.

Once they had calmed down a little, Liam pulled back slightly and looked both Chris and Cassie in the eyes, making sure he had their attention. "I just want you guys to know that you, Chris and Cassie, are the single most important people in my life. Do you understand that?" Liam asked.

Both Chris and Cassie nodded.

"Good, now, how about we watch that movie?" Liam said, as he got up and selected a movie to watch.

The movie was almost over when Jack finally came home. Cassie was already curled up in Liam's lap asleep, but Chris was still awake and leaning against Liam.

When Jack walked into the living room, Liam looked back at him.

“Hi.” Was all he said, but Liam could feel Chris’s body tense with the knowledge that Jack was home.

“Hey, we’re just finishing up the movie. Want to join us?” Liam asked. Since he had made his decision to move out, he decided he wouldn’t stay mad at Jack. He needed to keep the atmosphere in the house as pleasant as possible, then maybe the tension would subside somewhat.

“No, that’s okay, I’m just going to jump in the shower.” He said, before he headed out of the room.

When the movie finished, Liam carried Cassie upstairs to bed, with Chris following close behind. Although he’s not quite sure she actually woke up, Liam again took Cassie to the bathroom before he put her to bed.

After he had Cassie settled and had tucked Chris in and told him good night, he went to the bedroom to find it and the bathroom empty. Jack had already finished his shower. Heading downstairs, he found Jack in the living room, getting the couch ready to sleep on.

“Jack, we need to talk.” Liam said. “I’m sorry that I thrust the kids on you like this, but you do understand that I had no choice, don’t you?” He asked.

“Yeah, I do and I’m sorry I haven’t been very accepting of them, but this isn’t how I pictured my life, Liam. I just don’t know if I can do this. I don’t want to lose you, but I really don’t want to live my life around two kids. I want to live my life around you and me.”

“I know, but my priorities have changed now. Do you know that Chris actually had a night terror the other night, the night you left us at the restaurant? I think the stress of losing his parents and now the stress of us fighting over the kids is getting too much for him. He woke up screaming at the top of his lungs and thrashing around in the bed. He was screaming for over ten minutes. I couldn’t get him to stop. If I tried to touch him, he freaked out more. The weird thing was, was that he was still asleep.” Liam said.

Then, taking a deep breath and steeling himself, he continued. “Jack, I can’t continue to add stress to his life, to their lives. We can’t continue to live like this. The kids and I are moving out.”

That got Jack’s attention and his head snapped up to look at Liam. “What? You can’t mean that. I don’t want you to move out.” Jack said, before Liam could continue.

“I know Jack, I don’t want to move out either, but until you can accept the kids and welcome them in your life, we need to move out. It’s what would be best for Chris and Cassie’s well being.” Liam said.

“Jesus, what am I supposed to say to that? Does that mean we’re over? Don’t I have any say in this?” Jack asked.

“No, Jack, god no, we can still be together, we just won’t be living together.” He said, hoping that Jack would understand and that he would still be willing to try.

“Shit, Liam, I feel so helpless.” He said, throwing his arms up in the air in frustration and collapsing down on the couch. “If there’s no way I can stop you, then I’m not even going to waste my breath. But, I don’t like this one bit.” Jack said, feeling his anger and resentment towards the kids rising.

“I know, and I’m sorry.” Liam said, feeling guilty.

“Yeah, well so am I. If you don’t mind, I better get to sleep, I haven’t gotten much sleep the last couple of nights and sleeping on the couch tonight isn’t going to help.” Jack replied.

“Jack, you don’t have to sleep in here tonight, you can come to bed.” Liam said.

“No, I’ll sleep here tonight. Good night, Liam.” He said curtly, effectively closing the door on their conversation.

“Fine.” Liam said, and then turned on his heel and headed upstairs.

It was about two o’clock in the morning when Liam was again awakened by Chris’s screaming. Rolling over to climb out of bed, he found Cassie lying next to him, asleep.

When he got to Chris’s room, he was sitting up in bed, screaming, his arms flailing about as if trying to fend off an attacker. He was covered in sweat and his eyes were open, but they had a glazed look about them, obviously not focusing on anything.

Liam hated this. He couldn’t do anything, could only stand there and wait, watching to make sure Chris didn’t hurt himself.

Standing in Chris’s door way, he suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder, turning, he found Jack standing behind him in the hallway.

“Shit, what a way to be woken up. Is he okay?” Jack asked.

“Yeah, I’m just watching him to make sure he doesn’t hurt himself. He’ll calm down in a few minutes and he won’t even remember it in the morning. It’s still pretty freaky though.” Liam said.

“You can say that again.” Jack said. “Well, it looks like you don’t need me here. I’m heading back to bed.” With that said, Jack went back downstairs.

It was almost fifteen minutes later before Chris calmed down enough for Liam to carry him back to bed with him. Once they were all in bed, Liam couldn't help but wonder if the situation between him and Jack is what was causing the night terrors, he hated the fact that he might be the cause of so much emotional trauma for Chris, and hoped that the night terrors would stop once they moved out.

'I guess I'll find out for sure just as soon as we move out.' Liam said silently to himself, determined to try and find a place as quickly as possible.

Going back to sleep proved almost impossible. His mind wouldn't stop it's turmoil long enough to allow sleep to take over his mind. Although eventually, he must have fallen asleep, because the alarm going off startled him out of a deep sleep.

Later that morning, as they were all eating breakfast, Liam again quizzed Chris about last night and just like the night before, Chris didn't remember anything after being put to bed. He seemed just fine.

Not surprisingly, Jack had left for work before any of them had even woken up.

After Liam dropped the kids off at school, he met with the real estate agent. They spent a couple of hours going over what Liam was looking for in a home and then they headed out to tour a couple of the houses that the agent thought he would like.

Just as they arrived at the second home, Liam's cell phone rang. Looking at the caller ID, he didn't recognize the number, but decided to answer anyway.

"Hello, this is Liam."

"Hello, Mr. Strickland, this is Elmwood Elementary School calling, I've got a gentleman by the name of Jason Fielding that is here to pick up Chris early for a doctor's appointment. Since he's not on the pickup list, we needed to call you to get authorization." Came the voice on the other end of the phone.

"Who? I don't know a Jason Fielding. Is he still there? I'm on my way over right now, keep him there. Don't let him leave and don't let him anywhere near Chris, got that?" He said, not even waiting for an answer before he hung up the phone and then called the police station.

"Hello, this is Liam Strickland, I need to talk to Detective Mitch Seavers right away, it's urgent." He said, as soon as someone answered the phone.

"Liam, this is Mitch, what's up?" Mitch asked when he picked up the line.

"Mitch, there's someone at Chris's school that's trying to get him out of class. I don't recognize the name. The school said it was Jason Fielding, but I don't know who the hell

that is. He said he was picking him up for a doctor's appointment. I'm going to head over there now. I asked the school to keep him there." Liam said.

"Okay, hold on a second. I'm going to put you on hold while I dispatch a couple of officers over to the school. Then I'm going to call the school and see if I can find out more information, so hold on for a few minutes." Mitch said, before putting Liam on hold.

While Liam was on hold, he explained what was going on to the agent and asked her to give him a ride to the school. Just as they were on their way, Mitch came back on the line.

"Liam, I just got off the phone with the school. The guy is gone and they don't know where he is. When the secretary came back from calling you, the lobby was empty. The school is now in lockdown and Chris is safe in his classroom with the door locked. Nobody will be able to get in or out of the school or any of the classrooms, so if he's still there, we'll get him." Mitch said.

"Thanks Mitch." Liam said, breathing a huge sigh of relief. Then a thought came to him. "Should I call Cassie's school as well?" Liam asked.

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea. I'll also send over a couple of officers to her school, just to be on the safe side. What school is it?" Mitch asked.

Once Liam had given the information to Mitch and made arrangements to meet him at Chris's school, Liam hung up and called Cassie's school. So far, everything seemed normal at her school. He told them to expect the officers and to not let anyone unknown into the school until the officer's arrived.

When Liam arrived at the school, there were two officers stationed at the front doors of the school. Liam thanked the agent and told her he'd call her and reschedule the appointment as soon as he could.

He told the officers at the door who he was, and showed them his identification. Once they got authorization over their radios to allow him into the school, Liam headed straight for the school office. When he got there, he found two more officers, the school secretary and the school principal.

"Mr. Strickland, I'm glad you are here. Don't worry, Chris is fine. I've been in touch with his teacher and he's just fine. They've got half a dozen officers doing a thorough search of the building right now, so if he's still in the building, he'll be found." The principal, Mr. Howard, said.

The two police officers were currently talking to the secretary and taking notes while she gave them the details of what happened. While Liam was listening, Mitch walked in the door.

“Liam, we’ve got several officers searching the building and we’ve also quarded off several blocks around the school and will be thoroughly searching that area as well. The officers that are currently talking with the secretary will hopefully get a good description of the suspect.” Mitch said.

It took a little over an hour to search the entire school twice and to everyone’s disappointment, they didn’t find anyone. It took just over two hours to search the neighborhood, and again, they didn’t come up with anything.

Parents had already heard about the lockdown and quite a number of them had showed up at the school to pick up their kids. Once the school and neighborhood was secured, the school started releasing the kids. It was at this point that Liam remembered that his mom was supposed to pick up the kids today. Making a quick call, he told his mom what was going on and that she wouldn’t have to pick up the kids today.

Before Mitch would give Liam and Chris the okay to leave, he made arrangements to stop by tonight to speak to both of them.

Luckily, there weren’t any problems at Cassie’s school. There we’re still a couple of officers stationed at the door and Liam had to show his identification again, but other than that, everything was fine.

During dinner that night, Liam had briefed Jack on everything that had happened. Mitch, as planned, showed up just after dinner. Liam, Jack and Mitch all sat at the dining room table, while Cassie and Chris were watching television.

“First, I’ll update you on where things stand. We ran a search on the name that was given to the secretary and will be following up some leads there, but most likely, it was a false name, so I don’t expect anything to develop from that. We’ve got a sketch of the suspect and it’s already being shown on the evening news. Hopefully we’ll get some leads.

We’re a little concerned that the same person that set the fire at your sister’s, may now be targeting Chris, and maybe even Cassie. It makes me wonder if maybe Chris has seen the killer. Maybe the killer is worried that Chris could point him out. What I’d like to do is talk to Chris, to see if maybe he remembers someone coming by the house a day or two before the fire. Would that be okay with you, Liam?” Mitch asked.

“Yeah, sure, that would be fine. Anything to hopefully catch this guy.” Liam said.

Once they had Chris seated at the table, Mitch started questioning Chris.

“Chris, I was wondering if you can remember seeing anyone at your house before the fire, before you went to your Grandma and Grandpa’s for the night. It may have been a few days before the fire. Maybe someone visiting your dad? Do you remember anyone visiting? It may have been someone you didn’t know, someone visiting your dad for work maybe?” Mitch asked.

Chris looked a little apprehensive, a little scared. He looked from Mitch, to Liam, then to Jack, and then back to Mitch again before answering. "No, I don't remember." He said.

Not even aware that he'd been holding it, Liam let out a huge breath and his shoulders dropped in disappointment. He noticed too, that Jack also let out a huge breath at the same time. '*It's nice to know that he's at least concerned for the kids.*' Liam thought to himself.

"Okay, that's okay, Chris. You can go ahead and go back to watching TV. If you do remember anything, you just let your Uncle Liam know and he'll give me a call, okay?" Mitch said.

"Okay." Chris said, as he got up and headed back out to the living room.

Mitch turned his attention back to Liam and Jack. "Don't worry too much. I didn't necessarily expect him to remember anything. What I'd like to do is bring by some photos of some of Adam's clients that we haven't cleared yet and see if he recognizes any of them. Now, just keep in mind that if he does recognize anyone, that doesn't necessarily mean anything, but we'll start with this and then see where it takes us." Mitch said.

"Okay, like I said, anything to get this over and done with." Liam said.

"It will take me a couple of days to get everything ready. Probably won't be until early next week. I'll be in touch as soon as we're ready. Do you have any questions?" Mitch asked.

"Yes, do I have to worry about this guy showing up again? What should I do to protect the kids?" Liam asked.

"We'll be posting a couple of officers at the school during school hours and stepping up patrols locally here in your neighborhood. I would recommend keeping things low key for now, take the kids to school, but try to keep them out of public places as much as possible, and if you do take them out somewhere, don't let them out of your sight. If you notice anything out of the ordinary, anything at all, give me a call. Okay?" Mitch finished.

"Okay, thanks Mitch." Liam said, as he walked him to the door.

After Mitch left, Liam got the kids ready for bed. Tonight, again, he would just put them into bed with him. Jack was already making up the couch, so it didn't matter anyway. Hopefully, Chris would sleep through the night. It would be nice to get at least one full night's sleep.

As it turned out, Chris sleeping through the night didn't matter, because Liam just layed awake for hours, contemplating everything that had happened.

They hadn't told Chris what had happened at the school. They figured he wouldn't need the added stress. Liam hoped that word wouldn't get back to him. The school didn't give a lot of details about the incident, only telling parents that there had been a suspicious person in the school and that the lockdown had been a precaution, so he hoped that Chris wouldn't find out.

He also started thinking about the house hunting. He would call the real estate agent tomorrow morning and see if he could meet with her again. He really wanted to find some place for them. Things with Jack weren't getting any better.

All these thoughts and more were going around and around in his head and it was a long time before he finally drifted off to sleep.

Author's Note: I really do love hearing from all of you. Even if it's just a quick note to say "I love the story" or "I'm still reading, so keep writing". I even enjoy getting constructive criticism. If you are interested in commenting, you can e-mail me at myoregon12@yahoo.com

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