



# Having His Back

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Child Psychologist Kerry Sutherland's life gets turned upside down with a phone call. His sister is gone and his two nephews need him. Rushing from Seattle to Olympia, he finds the boys in shock and the police everywhere. Even the dog is affected. The only eventual bright spot in the mess is the detective handling the case, who it turns out not only truly wants to find out what happens, but awakens Kerry's heart in a way he never thought possible.

The last thing Brian expected was to find someone to touch his soul at a crime scene. He is a professional, and this is not the time for things to get messy... well, more than they already are. Kerry and the boys truly get under his skin... in the best way possible, but Brian has a job to do and that must take priority... for now.

Kerry's priority is the boys, and Brian's is finding out what happened to their mother. Each has information the other needs, so working together, they hope to figure out what happened, help the boys begin to heal, and stop a further threat that could tear this fragile family apart. Time is of the essence if they want to be able to build a family after all the pieces come together.

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# Page 1

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What the hell am I doing? Kerry Sutherland asked himself, clinging to the edge of the bed next to Trevor, his boyfriend, who had spread out across the mattress the way he always did. They had been dating for a month, and Kerry strongly suspected that the end of this particular relationship was zooming up on them.

“Hey,” Trevor said as he woke, stretching out like a sleek cat, making no effort to provide any room for Kerry. “What time is it?” He rolled over to check the clock, the covers pulling away, giving Kerry a flash of Trevor’s incredible ass.

Heck, it might be worth staying with him just for that ass. But no. Kerry got out of bed even though his first client appointment wasn’t for a few hours.

Trevor jumped out of bed and began pulling on his clothes.

“What’s the rush?”

“I have to be at work in forty-five minutes. You let me sleep too late.” That was typical and reminded Kerry why this relationship had to end. Everything was always someone else’s fault, and no matter how hot, well endowed, or talented with his backside that Trevor was, this was not going to work. Trevor pulled on his shirt. “Do you want to get together on Wednesday? We could have dinner or something.”

Kerry shrugged. “I think this is probably about as far as we can go. We had some good times and all, but I don’t see things moving forward for us. Do you?” He really hoped he could end this in as friendly a way as possible.

Trevor stared at him, not blinking. “You’re dumping me?” He actually put his hands

over his chest in disbelief. “You have to be kidding me. Don’t you know that I’m a catch?”

Did he actually fucking say that? It took Kerry a few seconds to make sure he had heard him right.

“Sweetheart, if you have to tell someone you’re a catch, then believe me, you aren’t. You’re a nice enough guy and great in bed, but beyond that, we don’t have much in common. Besides, do you really think I don’t know about the fact that on nights we don’t see each other, you’re cruising down at the Triangle? And that’s why things aren’t going to go anywhere between us. We want different things. So go on and have your fun.”

“Is there someone else?” Trevor asked, and Kerry shook his head.

“I want more than what we can have.” He stayed calm, even though he wasn’t sure if Trevor was going to blow up or not. But eventually, Trevor sat down and pulled on his shoes. Then he gathered the few things he had in the apartment before swooshing out of the room and slamming the door hard enough to rattle the dishes.

Kerry sighed as he wondered exactly what he’d just done. It wasn’t like he was interested in anyone else, but it seemed that no amount of good sex was worth being second best in your own relationship.

He dressed and double-checked his client schedule before sitting at the table with a cup of coffee, snatching up his phone when it rang. “This is Kerry.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” the woman on the other side of the line said. “I’m Karen, and I’ve been trying to find the number for you. I’m Caroline’s neighbor. She and I have been friends for years, and I have Henry and Phillip at the house with me.”

Instantly, Kerry was on edge. “What’s happened? Where is Caroline?” She and the boys were the only family he had left after their parents’ death in a car accident five years ago. When it came to men, his sister was a loser magnet. But for her boys, she was a tiger and a wonderful mother.

“Phillip came over this morning because he couldn’t find his mother. I went back to the house with him. Henry was still there. I got them settled and then went to look for Caroline. I found her in the garage.” She began to cry. “The police are here, and they are going through Caroline’s house right now.”

Kerry gasped. “Are you telling me that she’s...?”

“She passed away,” Karen said, and cried harder. “The boys are fine. They’re playing with my daughters, and I’m doing the best I can to keep everyone calm and away from the windows in front.” She sounded broken, but Kerry could only imagine how those boys were going to feel once someone told them that their mother was dead.

“I’m going to clear my schedule, and I’ll get on the road down from Seattle as quickly as I can get there. Don’t let the police talk to the boys. I’ll explain to them about their mother. Please don’t let anyone else do it. I’ll call you at this number when I’m on the road.”

“Good. These boys need their family.”

“I’m on my way.” He ended the call and made another to the scheduling department at the practice. He explained what had happened, and Shirley said not to worry about anything—she would clear the week and reschedule all his appointments.

“Thank you. You’re a gem,” he told her as he pulled out a bag from his closet.

“Chocolate,” she told him, and Kerry half smiled. Shirley’s sweet tooth was

legendary.

“You got it. Let me know if there is anything super urgent.”

“I will. You take care of your family,” she told him as he shoved pants, socks, shirts, and underwear into the bag. He also packed a sweatshirt as he said goodbye. Then he got the rest of what he needed and locked the door behind him before hurrying out of the apartment. Less than fifteen minutes from the initial call, he was in his car and on the road south toward Olympia.

Traffic was a pain in the ass south of the airport, with clouds obscuring everything. On days when it was clear, Mount Rainier could be seen to the west, but on a day like today, she was shrouded in gray, just like Kerry’s mood. But he kept all that at bay, just thinking about his nephews and knowing that they needed him. That was all there was to it. Each and every mile of the trip increased his anxiety about Caroline, the boys, and what the hell he was walking into.

It was hard for him to believe that his sister was gone. She was vibrant, one of those people with a zest for life. The men she chose were terrible, but that never seemed to bother her. She’d kick them out, and if the men showed up again, she’d kick their asses. That was Caroline. And she loved her boys with everything she had. Those boys were the center of her life, and she doted on them. And for them to lose her.... Kerry felt himself speed up just to try to get there faster. But of course, he was stuck in traffic, and there was no place for him to go.

As soon as the traffic broke, he pushed his Toyota Sienna as fast as he dared to go until he reached the turnoff for Olympia. He took the exit and made his way directly to the residential neighborhood where his sister rented a house.

He parked just down the street, away from the police vehicles, and approached a scene of sheer chaos. Phillip was out in the yard, still in his pajamas, screaming at the

top of his lungs in absolute agony. Henry held the hand of a lady that Kerry assumed was Karen.

“What the hell is going on?” Kerry asked as he marched over to Phillip and lifted him into his arms. “Remember me? I’m Uncle Kerry.”

Phillip clung to him, tears running down his cheeks. “They said Mommy is dead and then they took Pebbles.” He began crying all over again.

“Is this Miss Karen?” he asked Phillip, trying to give him something to focus on other than his grief, at least for a few seconds. Phillip nodded. “Do you like her?” He nodded again. “Then will you stay with Miss Karen while I see what’s going on? I promise I’ll be right back.” He gently set Phillip down, and Phillip took Karen’s other hand. Then Kerry took a few deep breaths, which only increased his anger, but what the fuck. He marched over to where a number of officers were gathered.

“Sir,” one of them said, but Kerry ignored him.

“I want the man in charge, now!” he snapped, using the voice he’d perfected when he taught high school psychology for a year. After that, he knew he wanted to go back for his masters.

“Detective Morrow is in charge here,” he said after a second. “But I’d...,” he began, though Kerry, under a full head of steam, was already on his way over.

“What is going on here?” Kerry demanded as he approached the officer.

“And you are?” He had the look of someone who was used to being the center of attention and taken seriously.

“Kerry Sutherland, Caroline’s brother, and uncle to two very upset boys. Apparently,

one of you took it upon yourselves to tell the boys that their mother was gone.” He looked around at each of them, waiting for the slight incline of a head that would show the guilty party... and he got it. “Smooth move. Are you happy? This sort of news should be delivered by a family member if possible. Not someone the kids don’t know. Secondly, you have two kids who have lost their mom, and you left them traumatized and screaming on the grass... and you took away the dog.” His indignation kept building. “So, detective, I think you have a lot of explaining to do.” Kerry took a moment and got a good look at the man in question. His eyes were piercingly dark, his hair clipped short, and his clothes had to have been made for him, because nobody got that kind of sinful fit by accident.

“Are you done?” he asked, as calm as could be.

“No. These kids are my first priority. So, I expect someone to return the dog now. Unless you did something to Pebbles—then you’ll all be in deep shit. And the officer who spoke to the kids, incorrectly and possibly illegally, will explain to me exactly what he said so I can try to help these kids.”

“And who are you?”

Was he bemused? Kerry wanted to smack that look off his face, but he held himself in check.

He cleared his throat. Clearly he hadn’t been listening. “Dr. Kerry Sutherland, with Randall and Sutherland. We specialize in child psychology. I helped the state write the rules regarding child victims and interactions with law enforcement.” Let Officer Sanctimonious chew on that for a second or two.

“And I’m Brian Morrow, the lead detective on this case. Yes, you can definitely speak to our officer.” He opened his notebook. “We took the dog because we found blood on him, and we need to get it tested as quickly as possible. It could be from the

person who killed your sister. As soon as we get the samples we need, I will bring Pebbles back.”

“All right.” At least that was something he could tell the boys.

“We’re still gathering evidence in the house, and I’d like to talk to the boys to find out if they saw anything.”

Kerry shook his head. “Not right now. They have been through too much at the moment, and what I need to do now is to try to explain to them that their mother isn’t coming back.”

“Do they have a guardian?” Detective Morrow asked.

“Yes. Me.” Lord help them all. Caroline had made a will a year earlier because Kerry had told her she had to. She had asked him to raise the boys if she couldn’t. And now it looked as if that unlikely event was coming to pass.

“Good.”

“Can we go into the house?”

“We’re done in the main rooms there, but stay out of the garage. We’ll seal it off when we’re done, so stay out of it for a few days until we know that there isn’t more we need to see.”

Kerry returned to where Karen stood with the boys. He introduced himself and apologized for ignoring her earlier. Then he took Phillip into his arms, and Henry silently wrapped his arms around Kerry’s legs. “We can go inside if you want,” Kerry said. At least they could sleep in their own beds and have their own rooms. Kerry would figure out what he was going to do eventually, but right now, all he could do



was look after the kids and try to help them through their grief. He had been trained in things like this, but helping others was one thing. Trying to help your own family was quite another. Still, these kids needed him, and he would be there come hell or high water.

“I’m hungry,” Phillip told him softly, and Kerry led them inside to see what he could find to eat.

The house looked pretty much the same. He could tell that people had been through it, but at least there wasn’t a mess. He went with Phillip to check out his room and then did the same with Henry, who took his hand but didn’t say a word. He just kept looking up at him with his huge blue eyes, seeming adrift and at a loss. It sucked that these boys had to go through this.

Kerry knelt in front of Henry. “It’s going to be okay. I promise you that. You and Phillip are going to stay with me, and I will look after both of you.” He waited for some sort of reaction, but all he got were a few blinks and then a slight nod.

He had worked with traumatized children before, and he’d had some that were nonverbal, at least for a while, so all he could do was give Henry some time and hopefully he’d work things through. If not, then he’d step in and help him as best he could.

“You don’t have to talk if you don’t want to. But if there is something you want to tell me, then you can do that too.” He hugged him, and Henry went into his arms, holding him, but other than a sigh, he didn’t make a sound.

“Are you hungry?” he asked, and Henry blinked. He might have nodded a little, and Kerry took him to the kitchen and went through his sister’s pantry. He found some pasta and put water on the stove to cook.

“We like buttered noodles,” Phillip said, calming down as he sat in his chair. “Is Mommy really gone and not coming back?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so.” He believed in telling kids the truth. “But I’m going to be here, and you’ll live with me. I’ll care for you and do my best for both of you. Okay?” He had had this kind of conversation with a number of kids, but never before had he been a party to the situation.

“But I want Mommy back,” Phillip said softly, looking down at the table.

“I know you do,” Kerry said as gently as he could to both of them. “And if I could, I’d bring her back for you. But I can’t. No one can.”

“Why not?” Phillip asked, and Kerry knelt between the boys. “Grownups can do anything.”

Kerry sighed. “No, we can’t. Not really. But it’s okay to be sad and to cry if you want.” He tried to be as soothing as he could.

“When will Pebbles be back?” Phillip asked. “I want him.”

“I know you do, and the police will bring him back. I promise.” He was doing as much reassuring as he could. “Let’s have some lunch, and after that, we can find something to do.” He returned to the stove, got the pasta on, and pulled out some butter. He got the pasta cooked and drained, then put butter and a little garlic on it before making up their plates and setting them on the table.

The kids ate quietly, and Kerry got them each a glass of milk before sitting down with them. He wasn’t hungry, but he didn’t want them to be alone. Phillip talked through much of the lunch while Henry ate and stayed quiet.

After they were finished, he took care of the dishes and let the kids go to their rooms. Phillip played quietly in his room, while Henry lay on his bed staring up at the ceiling. Kerry went into the room and sat on the side of the bed. He figured he'd keep him company. "You can talk to me if you want."

Henry shrugged.

"It's perfectly okay to be sad and to feel bad."

Again, he got a shrug. Knowing it was best not to push him, he squeezed Henry's hand and then left the room. He knew it would help if six-year-old Henry talked about what he was feeling, maybe yell or even cry, but the silence was unsettling. Still, he knew he had to let things happen in Henry's time.

Kerry cleaned up the kitchen and then wandered down the hall to Caroline's room. He slowly opened the door and peered inside. The bed was unmade, but the room was spotless. He went inside and wished she was there to give him hell for being in her room, the way she had when they were kids. He sat on the side of the bed, wishing to all hell that she was still there. "Those boys need you. I know you wanted me to look after them, but I don't know if I'm going to be good enough for that. What they really need is you, but you're gone, and they're stuck with me." And he didn't know what he was going to do.

## Page 2

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### Chapter Two

“Get the testing done as soon as possible,” Brian barked once they had finished with the scene.

They had gathered a ton of evidence, and now it was time to get it processed so they could figure out what it would tell them.

“Especially the dog. That evidence has a very fast expiration date.” Brian knew that the sooner he could get the dog returned to the family, the happier those kids would be.

The officer was holding the dog as still as possible, trying to muzzle him to prevent it from licking away any evidence. He nodded and hurried back to his vehicle, placing the dog into a crate and then taking off in the car.

Brian directed the rest of the officers processing the scene. Thankfully, this particular scene wasn’t gruesome, though it definitely left a feeling of violence in the air. He shook it off and continued his work.

Once they were done and Brian had reviewed the scene himself, they sealed up the garage in case it was needed again, and the various units left.

Brian looked over the main portion of the ranch house and sighed.

Then he went over and gently knocked on the door.

Dr. Kerry Sutherland answered the door, his gaze narrowing in a few seconds. “I come in peace, okay?”

Kerry huffed and opened the door farther. The house was quiet and surprisingly free of emotional chaos. Or at least the loud kind. “What can I do for you?”

“How are the boys?”

“After getting something to eat, they were both wiped out. Phillip is up in his room asleep, and Henry is in his room as well. He isn’t speaking to anyone right now.”

Brian nodded. “I’m going to need to talk to them.”

“Not right now. They are going to need a chance to grieve. They both know what happened and what it means for them, to varying degrees, and they need a little time.” The challenge in his tone, even though he didn’t raise his voice, was impressive.

“A few days is fine. I’m not sure what they can tell me, though we do believe that they were home at the time of the... incident.” He was trying to be as gentle as possible. “I will have additional information for you once I can release it.”

“How did Caroline die?” Kerry asked.

Brian was reticent to release any information, but the family deserved to know some things. “She was strangled, I’m afraid. Whoever did this tried to make it look like she hung herself by stringing her up afterward. At least that is what I believe. Testing will confirm it.”

A little of the tension eased out of Kerry’s impressive brown eyes, grief hanging just under the surface.

“I thought I was going to have to give you the list of what Caroline had to live for. She would never commit suicide. Those boys meant everything to her. She had built a good life and was doing well. I think my sister would be the last person to take her own life.”

“I didn’t know her, and in my job, we have to look at everything.

But I tend to agree with you, and initial evidence seems to back up that conclusion.

I sent one of the officers ahead so that samples could be taken from the dog right away.

We have a forensic veterinarian that we work with, and he’ll get what we need quickly, so we can get...

.” He looked through his notes for the dog’s name.

“Pebbles,” Kerry supplied.

“Yes, Pebbles, back to the boys.” He hated this kind of conversation, but he had to have it. “I need to know... do you intend to take responsibility for the care of the boys?”

The frigidity in those eyes was back in an instant. “Of course I do. They’re my only nephews, and they need their family. Such as it is. Caroline and I spoke about this a few times, and I believe I am named in her will.”

Brian nodded. “Good.” He smiled slightly. “I just have to ask these kinds of questions. I’ll have child services get in touch with you to make sure that you have everything you need.”

“Actually—” Kerry began.

“Look, I know you don’t think you need anything, but you will.

You’re better equipped than most to do this, but you will need help and support too.

I’ve seen it before. The kids are quiet now because they’re in shock and hurting.

But once they start to deal with the hurt and loss, all that will change, and they’re going to need you, and you’re going to need some support as well.

They can do that.” Brian held Kerry’s intense gaze until those eyes filled with sadness.

Brian guided Kerry to a chair and got him to sit.

“I’ll do anything for the boys. They need me.” Determination filled Kerry’s voice even as grief threatened to overwhelm him.

“Yes, they do. But this is a huge amount of change.” He knew that whatever life Kerry had had up until now, it was going to look very different in the future. Brian had seen this more than once in his career.

“I know. But I will not leave those boys hanging out in the wind.” The strength Kerry displayed was just what they were going to need. “Is there anything else?”

“Just stay out of the garage. We are finished, but we may need additional access to the scene for a few days.” He handed Kerry one of his cards.

“If you or one of the kids thinks of anything, call me. Heck, if you need anything, give me a call. I’ll do my best to help.

” Brian left and closed the door behind him.

He checked that the scene was sealed before heading back to the station.

He had a lot to do, and the best thing was to get to it, so he didn’t think about Kerry and his huge kicked-puppy eyes...

or anything else about the handsome man.

“Did you get anything?” Brian asked the veterinarian when he finally called.

“Yes. There was plenty of viable material on Pebbles’ coat, as well as his mouth. We found a few bits between his teeth that may be tissue of the attacker. I’ll have all of it sent to the lab.” He seemed excited. “Usually with dogs, we don’t get much, but it seems Pebbles was most cooperative.”

“Excellent. Are you done with the dog? He belongs to a couple of boys who are grieving the loss of their mother, and I’d like to get him home as soon as I can.

” If Brian was honest, he was also a little anxious to speak to their uncle again.

There was something about Kerry that intrigued him.

Maybe it was the fact that he would do whatever it took for his nephews, including coming up to Brian at full throttle to take him on.

Not many people were willing to do that, and it piqued his curiosity to know the kind of person who would act like that, especially with a police officer.

“I’m done with him, so someone can pick up Pebbles any time.”



“Thank you. I’ll be by in an hour to collect him.

” Brian ended the call and spent the next hour doing paperwork and reviewing all the evidence reports.

This was a crime of passion and of opportunity.

She had been strangled and then strung up using an extension cord that was most likely found at the scene.

It was a sloppy way to cover up what had really happened.

No one seemed to have seen anything, and though the boys were apparently home at the time, he had no idea if they knew anything or not.

“You got anything yet?” the captain asked, standing in his doorway.

“Just a few hunches, but nothing else yet. We might have DNA from the dog. It’s been sent to the lab. We know how she was killed and that it was covered up to look like a suicide, but other than that....” Brian set an evidence bag on his desk. “We have a lot to go through.”

“Check her history. This kind of crime usually starts there. It wasn’t a random passerby.”

“Right. I’m going to speak with the neighbor again.

She watched the kids, and according to her, they were best friends.

I’ll also speak to her brother. Maybe he can give us some insight into her dating past.” He stood and gathered all the evidence into its box and set it aside.

What he needed was some context for all the things they had gathered, and he wasn't going to get it sitting at his desk.

"Keep me informed," the captain said as Brian grabbed his jacket, returned the evidence to the lockup, and strode out of the station.

He got into his car and pulled out of the lot.

He headed to the veterinary office and picked up Pebbles, who seemed happy to see him, wagging his tail, though Brian suspected the dog was happy most of the time.

Nonetheless, Pebbles clearly understood when his owner had been in danger and had tried to protect her.

Pebbles was quiet most of the ride home, but as soon as Brian made the turn onto his home street, he grew excited, whining softly in the carrier.

Once Brian parked and got out, he went to the back and hefted the carrier off the back seat.

He carried it to the front door and knocked softly.

It was getting dark, and maybe it was a little late for this kind of thing, but he wanted to get Pebbles back with his family.

Kerry opened the door, and Brian actually got a smile when he saw the carrier. "You brought him back already?" He stepped aside, and Brian opened the carrier. Pebbles raced into the house and trotted through the rooms before hurrying down the hall. "The boys are going to be so happy.

"Pebbles!" Phillip called in delight, and Kerry grinned at him.

“Thank you.” Kerry moved inside, and Brian set the carrier out of the way and entered the house.

“How are the boys doing?”

“Phillip has been crying sometimes and is talkative. Which is good. Henry has closed himself off from everything. He hasn’t said a word to anyone. I’m worried about him, but I’m hoping he just needs some time.”

Brian nodded. “And what if he requires more than that?”

“Then he and I will figure it out together. He needs a chance to process some of his grief, and maybe then he can talk about it. But I want it to be on his own time instead of pushing him into it.”

## Page 3

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“I do too. But I may not have the luxury of time. The longer the person who did this stays at large, the better chance they have of either getting away or the trail going cold. I need to speak to each of the boys in the next day or so. You can be there, and so can child services if you’d like, but I can’t wait much longer. ”

“I understand. This isn’t my first rodeo, and I’ll speak to the boys in the morning.

” He held up a finger and then turned, leaving the room to go down the hall.

Kerry was gone for a few moments and then returned with another smile.

Damn, Brian could get addicted to that expression.

“The boys are both in Henry’s room, with Pebbles between them.

It’s the most contented I’ve seen them all day, so thank you for bringing him back as quickly as you did. ”

“I’m glad I could help.” Brian’s stomach rumbled, and he excused himself. “I’ll be in touch as soon as I have anything.” He left the house and paused at the sidewalk out front, looking up and down the quiet residential street.

There were only so many ways to get into the garage, and he was convinced someone knew something. Brian turned to both sides of the house and then looked across the street. Every house seemed quiet, with lights on, but no other activity.

“Do you need something?” Kerry asked as he came outside.

“Maybe...,” Brian pondered as Kerry padded down the walk in slippers. “Do you know the neighbors?”

“Some. My sister rents the house, and a lot of the others here are renters as well. Karen has been here for quite a while, and she owns her home as far as I know. There are renters over there, and an elderly couple across the street.” He pointed to a light blue ranch-style home.

“They might have seen something because they’re the neighborhood busybodies, at least according to Caroline.

” Just saying the name sent a wave of hurt across Kerry’s features.

“I’m so sorry about your sister,” Brian said, hoping that the opening-up portion of the evening wasn’t over. “What was she like?”

“Caroline? She was a fun person. Loved to do things with the boys. She put all her effort into them. As for rest of her life... well, Caroline was a loser magnet. She met these guys who were nice enough, but when things got tough, they were gone like a fart in the wind. One left her after Henry was born, and another took off unexpectedly. It was after that she found out she was going to have Phillip. She said good riddance to both of them and raised the boys herself. I believe she got child support for Henry. Mostly, Caroline was one of those people who loved life and didn’t let the shit that came her way get her down. She knew what was important.”

“Do you have the names of these guys?” Brian asked.

“Henry’s father was Reggie Weathers. I met him once, but I haven’t seen him at all since.

He lives somewhere in Seattle. At least that’s what Caroline told me a while ago.

As far as I know, his support checks came in every month, and he hasn't made an effort to see Henry at all.

I believe she might have told me that Reggie got married and has a family of his own.  
”

Brian nodded. “I'll check it out. Make sure he's up to date on his payments.”

“She had sole custody,” Kerry told him. “And if you talk to him, make sure he knows that I will fight him if he tries to get custody. I have Caroline's will, and she states that he walked out on his son on multiple occasions and that he isn't to get Henry. My sister could be blunt as all hell.”

“I get that.” Brian nodded and made a few notes. “Has she had a boyfriend since Phillip was born?”

“I don't know. She dated a little last year, but nothing seemed to last. The last time we talked about that sort of thing, she was giving me grief for my dating habits.

” He smiled a little. “I don't think she had a boyfriend at the time of her death.

When we spoke a week ago, she told me that she was putting her energy into the boys. ”

“Okay. I still think this was done by someone close to her. I don't think it was a thief or someone passing the house. They knew her well enough that she let them lure her out to the garage, probably so that they could talk without the boys hearing.”

“That makes sense, I guess. But I don't really know who it could be.” Kerry's eyes widened. “Do you think one of the boys might know?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I need to speak to them. It’s not like we can use their testimony in court. Children aren’t considered reliable witnesses. It’s felt that they can be easily coerced. But anything that they might know could help us in finding who is behind this.”

“Let me talk to the boys and see if I get a sense of anything. But I have to say that if either of them saw anything, the most likely one is Henry. That could explain some of the reasons behind his withdrawal. He’s only six, and if he saw something that really disturbed him, he wouldn’t know what to do with it, so his system is sort of overloaded.

” Kerry wiped his eyes. “It isn’t bad enough that he lost his mother, but to have this sort of trauma heaped on top of it... .”

“Do you think you can help him?” Brian asked.

“Yes. But only up to a degree. I’m a relative, and I’m probably too close to him to be truly effective, but I’ll contact a friend who does excellent work with child witnesses.

She has had excellent results not only in getting children to open up, but in getting them on the path to start healing.

I thought I’d give her a call this evening. ”

“Good. Please do whatever the kids need. I’ve contacted child services, and they’ll be in touch tomorrow to ensure you have any and all the support Phillip and Henry need.

” He was wearing out, and after shaking hands with Kerry, Brian returned to his car, making notes on the things he wanted to do the following morning.

Then he pulled away from the small house and headed home to his apartment on the

south side of town.

As he walked inside, he put his keys on the table and locked up his gun.

Then he put a frozen dinner in the microwave and sat at the table.

He was really getting tired of all these days alone, but it seemed that was his lot in life.

All the boyfriends he'd had in the past seemed to tire of his work schedule and the fact that he got calls at all hours.

Most guys only took so much of that before they packed their stuff and were gone.

So he wasn't hopeful about the future, even if there were sex-on-a-stick hot guys out there like Kerry.



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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:23 am*

### Chapter Three

Kerry woke in the middle of the night, uncomfortable as hell, the sofa hitting him in all the wrong places.

He hadn't been able to bring himself to sleep in Caroline's bed, so he'd watched TV until his eyes grew heavy and hoped he could sleep.

It had worked for a few hours, but now it seemed his mind was way too active.

He got up and went to check on the boys.

They were in the same bed, with Pebbles between them.

Each boy had a hand resting on the dog. Pebbles lifted his head when Kerry peered into the room, but didn't make a sound.

"I know. You'll watch over them," he told the dog, who lowered his head again, and Kerry left.

They were safe, and he hoped the boys were dreaming of happier things than the fact that their mother was gone.

At least they could have a rest from their grief.

Kerry's seemed to stay with him no matter what.

He returned to the sofa and turned on the television, finding a late-night rerun marathon and proceeding to ignore it. Three's Company was dated and didn't hold his interest. He kept the volume low and eventually fell sleep.

He cracked his eyes open as a weight joined him on the sofa.

Pebbles pranced around Kerry's feet until he moved them and then settled down.

The boys sat on the living room floor, watching cartoons in their pajamas.

Phillip got up when he realized Kerry was awake and came over.

He rolled onto his side, pressing to the back cushions, and Phillip lay down in front of him.

He didn't say anything, and Kerry didn't want to break the quietness around them, holding Phillip as they watched SpongeBob's antics.

"Are you hungry?" Kerry asked after a while. Phillip nodded. Henry turned to look at him and then turned back to the television. "Then I should get up and make you something to eat."

"Cereal," Phillip said. Kerry waited to see if Henry expressed a preference, but he shrugged, and Kerry went to the small kitchen and got some cereal in bowls with milk. The boys sat at the table and ate in silence.

"Go ahead and brush your teeth and get dressed," Kerry told them.

Phillip hurried off, but Henry sat staring at his empty bowl.

Kerry went over to him and waited. Finally, Henry slid off the chair and stood still,

like he didn't know what to do.

Kerry lifted him up and held him tightly.

He understood the loss and how it made you feel hollow and empty.

Kerry had the words to express those feelings, but Henry and Phillip didn't.

So, he just hugged him, and Henry put his arms around Kerry and buried his face in his neck, finally letting the tears come.

"I want Mama," Henry said softly into his ear. "I just want my mama." The request was so reasonable, and Kerry's heart broke for him.

"I know you do. I want her too. But I can't bring your mama back.

I'm going to be here, though." He had years of training, and yet that was the only answer he could give.

Kerry felt helpless. He should be able to do more, but there was nothing.

Caroline was gone, and nothing was going to bring her back.

Henry cried on his shoulder, and when Phillip returned, it wasn't long before Henry's tears brought some out in his brother.

Kerry carried Henry to the sofa and sat down, and Phillip curled up next to him.

Kerry did his best to comfort both boys, with Pebbles pressing against Phillip, doing his best to give comfort in a terrible situation.

“Uncle Kerry, the police man is here,” Phillip announced as he turned away from the front window. He ran over toward the front door. Kerry still held Henry. At least he was calmer, and his tears had dried up for now, though he knew there would be more.

“You can let him in if you want,” Kerry said, and Phillip opened the front door. “Is it Detective Brian?”

“Yes.” The voice was definitely not Phillip’s. It was way too deep and rumbly. “I was wondering if this was a good time.” Brian came into the room, took one look, and shook his head. “I can see it isn’t.”

“I don’t think things are going to get much better over the next few days.

” Kerry wanted to ask a bunch of questions, but he wasn’t going to do that with the boys listening.

“Do you want to watch more cartoons?” he asked Henry softly, and got a nod.

He set up both boys in front of the television, with Pebbles joining them.

Then Kerry went into the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee. They were going to need it.

“We haven’t found much. There are a few fingerprints, but they’re really smudged. The cord seemed to have been in the garage. I’m fairly sure it was someone your sister knew. I’m going to be speaking to the neighbors today, and hopefully, someone saw something.”

“I hope so too.” It was bad enough that his sister was dead, but to have her taken this way only made things worse.

Whoever did this not only took her life, but changed his and the boys' lives forever, robbing Henry and Phillip of the mother they should have had.

It made him angry, and he closed his eyes, pressing down the urge to punch something.

He wanted to lash out, not that it would do any good.

Kerry knew the stages of grief very well and understood that his feelings were normal.

But he didn't have time for that. The boys needed him to be calm and there for them, not acting like some kind of out-of-control idiot.

"I'll do everything I can to find who did this," Brian said firmly, his eyes hard and determined. "This sort of thing...." He stopped, and Kerry found himself leaning closer. "It just...."

"You've lost someone too," Kerry supplied. He had worked with enough children and families to know the signs. It didn't matter if the person was a police officer or a janitor—a death like this left a mark, and all you had to do was know what to look for.

"My sister, when I was seventeen," Brian told him, then cleared his throat. "Anyway. I'm going to speak to people and see what I can find. Please talk to the boys and see if you think either of them might have seen something. I don't want to traumatize them further, but I need to know."

Kerry nodded. "I'll do what I can." He wanted to solve his sister's murder more than anything, except hurting those boys.

They had already been through enough and were going to have to endure even more.

“Please let me know when the body can be released so that I can arrange for a memorial service. Caroline wanted cremation, and under the circumstances, I think that’s probably best. Let the boys remember her the way she was. ”

Brian nodded slowly. “I’ll be sure to let you know.

” He thanked Kerry and then left the house before Kerry could offer him some coffee.

He wished he knew why, but he liked having Brian here.

It made him feel safer. But he had a job to do and so did Kerry.

He poured himself a mug of coffee, then checked on the boys before hurrying to the bathroom to clean up and dress in fresh clothes.

The boys were still watching TV when he returned.

Kerry turned off the show and got them ready to go outside.

He figured he could take them to the park near the house to get them out for a while.

Staying indoors wasn’t going to do them any good, yet he still wondered if he was doing the right thing even as he held their hands as they walked down the block and over to the play area.

Thankfully, it was empty, so the boys had the place to themselves.

For a little while they could be like they always were.

Whenever Kerry came to town, he brought them here, and it felt normal for the three of them to play.

Like the tragedy from yesterday hadn't happened.

"Are you ready to go home for lunch?" Kerry called later, the boys still running and playing, though without as much energy and laughter as usual.

They hurried over, and Kerry walked them home, keeping an eye out in case someone was watching them.

He didn't see any signs of it, but figured it was best to be careful.

Pebbles greeted them at the door, and the boys rushed inside. They turned on the television while Kerry let the dog outside to do his business.

He found himself looking out the windows every now and then and kept telling himself he wasn't trying to see if Brian was there or maybe catching sight of him as he went from house to house.

There had to be a rule somewhere about being attracted to the police officer who was investigating your sister's death.

Actually, as soon as he said the words in his head, he knew there was, because he should not be having those kinds of thoughts.

"Uncle Kerry... can we have cookies?" Phillip asked.

"Sure. Do you know where they are?" Kerry asked, knowing boys this age always knew where the cookies were.

Phillip ran to the kitchen, and when Kerry followed him, he found him climbing on a chair.

“Not like that, you little scamp. Show me.” Phillip pointed to the cupboard, and Kerry got out the package of Oreos, giving Phillip one for him and one for Henry.

Once he put him down, Phillip ran back in the other room, and Kerry put the package away after taking a cookie for himself.



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After finishing his cookie, he looked in on the boys and checked out the front window.

The police car was gone, and for a second, he was curious if Brian had found anything, but then he saw a man standing across the street, next to a beat-up blue car.

He was clearly watching the house, so Kerry went to the door and opened it.

He stepped outside, the summer wind picking up as clouds began rolling in.

Kerry looked across the street the man got in the blue car and pulled away, back tires spinning.

He wondered what all that was about. The man had clearly been staring at the house.

Maybe he knew something about what happened, or...

. Kerry hurried into the house, closing and locking the door as the possibility dawned on him that the man across the street might be the guy who killed his sister.

Kerry grabbed his phone and dialed the number that Brian had given him.

“There was a man across the street, watching the house. Blue Toyota, something or other. It was medium blue and kind of old and beat up. I didn’t get the license plate, but he drove away as soon as I came out.

” All of it tumbled out as soon as Brian answered.

“Can you tell me what he looked like?” Brian asked.

“Maybe six foot, brown hair, not too long. He was rough-complected, like he worked outside a lot. His clothes were old and kind of weathered and stained.” He wished he had thought to try to get the license plate, but he hadn’t been quick enough.

“Okay. I’ll add what you told me to the information about the case. If you see him again, call me right away, and I’ll try to get there as quickly as I can. It could be something as simple as a real estate agent. We get people who show up when people pass away. I know it’s morbid, but it happens.”

“You don’t think they’re the killer?” He had no idea about this sort of thing, and maybe he was seeing danger everywhere.

“I don’t know. But at this point, I’m treating everyone with suspicion, and I’m not ruling it out.

There are some people who like to see the results of their actions, like arsonists who show up at fire scenes or bombers who meld into the crowd outside of the scene of the disaster they caused.

So, we’ll see what we can find. You keep an eye out and let me know right away if anything else happens. ”

Kerry found himself nodding and thanked Brian before disconnecting.

Then he went on Amazon and bought a doorbell camera, put it in his cart, and paid for overnight shipping.

If this guy showed up again, he was going to have an image of him.

Once he was done, he put his phone away and found the boys still watching television.

Part of him wondered if he should be doing something.

The boys had lost their mother, and he just had to...

. God, he kept wondering if he should be doing more.

But then he knew that the boys would have good moments and bad ones, and the boys being quiet at the moment was good for as long as it lasted, which was exactly another ten minutes.

Then Phillip raced over to him, his arms around his legs, just holding on.

Henry watched them from across the room.

Kerry held out his arms, and Henry slowly got up and joined them.

Kerry lifted Phillip, and with his other arm, held Henry to him, doing his best to protect both of them from the hurt that he knew was coming... and would stick around for a long time.

"I want Mama," Phillip said.

"Me too," Henry told him. "When will she be back?"

Kerry guided them to the sofa and sat down, taking them along with him.

"Do you know what angels are?" he asked, and both of them nodded.

“Okay, so your mom went to join them. She’s with the angels, and they are watching over her, and your mom is going to be looking over you from heaven from now on. ”

Phillip watched him with huge eyes. “But I want her here.”

“Me too,” Henry added. At least he was talking more.

“I know you do. I do too. But sometimes, there are things we can’t control, and we don’t always get what we want. But I’m going to be here for both of you.”

Henry blinked up at him with Caroline’s eyes. “But what if you become an angel like Mommy?”

“I’m going to stay here with you for a long time.

Your mommy is going to watch over me too.

” He hugged both of them. Kerry didn’t have any delusions that this would be the last of their questions; there were bound to be months of them.

All he could do was be there for them and answer their questions as best he could.

Phillip burrowed next to him, holding him tightly as he hugged Henry.

“I still want Mommy.” He wasn’t going to give up, and frankly, Kerry couldn’t blame either of them.

They sat still for a while, but eventually Phillip slipped out of his arms, wandered down to his room, and returned with a bag of toys that he dumped on the living room floor.

Henry joined him, while Pebbles stayed on the sofa, curling up to go to sleep.

Kerry let them play for a while. “Did either of you see anyone in the garage yesterday?” he asked, as though the question wasn’t important.

Phillip shook his head and continued playing, while Henry seemed to ignore the question, running trucks along the floor.

Kerry wondered if that meant that Henry was avoiding the issue or just hadn’t heard him.

Still, he didn’t want to make a big issue out of it right now.

But in the back of his mind, he wondered if it was possible that Henry was suppressing something.

Phillip jabbered on about this and that, while Henry had grown very quiet.

On his previous visits, Henry was always an active, normal kid, but now he was the opposite. Different people acted differently when it came to grief, but they usually behaved along their own personalities, just more or less intensely. Henry being silent was out of character.

“I’ll make you dinner in a little while.”

“Pizza,” Phillip said, piping up.

“Sure.” He used his phone to find a local place that delivered and got a pizza with half cheese and half pepperoni. Then he set the table for when it arrived and made a call to Brian, explaining what little he had found out from the boys.

“What do you think we should do?” Brian asked. “The neighbors saw no one.”

“Well, give it a few days, and once we’re through the funeral and all that, I’ll contact a colleague and see about setting up a session with her so we can try to get Henry to open up. He may have seen something, but I’m not sure. If we push, it could hurt him, so I want to take a gentle approach.”

“Okay. We are working through the evidence collected, but there isn’t much. Your sister did scratch her assailant, and we have his DNA, but we need someone to match it to, and right now, we’re coming up empty.”

“Sorry.” He wished he could be more helpful. “I need to be able to go into the garage. I need to get into Caroline’s car so I can get the boys car seats. Is that okay?”

“Yes, but I should be there in case something is disturbed. Give me twenty minutes.”

“All right.” He ended the call and returned to where the boys were playing.

The pizza arrived a little while later, and he got the boys in their seats at the table as Brian arrived. He smiled at the handsome officer and offered him a slice before sitting down to dinner. “You need to eat the same as the rest of us.”

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### Chapter Four

This was a bad idea on so many levels. In a weird way, Brian found himself drawn to Kerry, though he knew he should stay away and just be professional. He had a case to solve, and he was going to do that come hell or high water. And yet his attention kept getting drawn to Kerry.

“How are you?” Brian asked Phillip, the younger of the boys, who sat next to him, munching on his pizza and smiling.

“Good,” he answered, and kept grinning. “Uncle Kerry says Mama is an angel now.” He sniffed but kept eating.

“I don’t want an angel mama—I want a real mama,” Henry declared, and slipped off his chair to hurry over to Kerry, who held him.

“I understand.”

“I have an angel mama too,” Brian said. His mother had passed away two years ago from complications of lung cancer.

She had smoked her entire life, and it finally caught up with her.

Even though his mother’s decline had been over a long period of time, losing her had still been hard. “She keeps watch over me.”

“How?” Phillip asked, and Brian knew Henry was listening too.

“Well, she helps keep me safe. I catch bad guys for a living, and my angel mama watches over me. She helps keep the bad guys from getting to me. It’s like she’s watching out for me.

And I’m sure that’s what yours will do too.

” He looked at Kerry, who smiled back at him and nodded gently.

“I wish my mama were here with me just like you do.”

“Then why can’t you make her come back?” Henry asked.

“Because I don’t have the power to do that. No one does,” Brian said, and Henry buried his face in Kerry’s shoulder while Brian took a bite of the pepperoni slice. “But you have your Uncle Kerry, and he loves you very much.” Brian hoped he hadn’t said anything wrong as Kerry comforted his nephew.

Henry stayed quiet. Phillip ate the rest of his pizza, and eventually Henry returned to his. Once they were done and Kerry took care of the dishes, he settled the boys in front of the television, and Brian accompanied him out to the garage.

Kerry used the keys to unlock the car and opened the back door to get the car seats out. “So, she died in here?”

“Yes.” Brian indicated where they found the body. “I think she died right here. But it’s hard to be sure. There was no blood.”

Kerry followed him over to the driver’s side of the car. “What was she doing in the garage?”

“She must have been getting ready to go somewhere,” Brian supplied.



Kerry shook his head. "I don't think so. What time did she die?"

"The coroner estimated at 7 AM or so."

Kerry chuckled nervously. "That would be unusual. The boys might be up that early, but not Caroline. She was not a morning person at all. What was she wearing? Or more importantly, was she dressed? Caroline was never seen in public without makeup, her hair done, and properly dressed. If she was in sweats or pajamas, then she was not going out for any reason."

"Huh," Brian remarked. "Then that means that whoever did this lured her out there. I had assumed that she was going somewhere."

"Caroline worked from home mostly. She was very artistic and had a number of graphic design clients. If she had been going to work, she would have done it at the desk in her room. And at that time of the morning, she never would have left the boys. She may have come out here to get something, but that speaks of coincidence. I'd be willing to bet that someone either lured her out there or she went out there to meet someone and didn't want to wake Phillip and Henry. "

"Who would she meet out there?" Brian asked.

"I have no idea. Does her car have an alarm? Maybe someone set it off and she went out to silence it."

Brian shook his head. "No alarm other than the panic button on her key ring." He had checked all that out when he was here before.

"Then I really don't know who it could be. She would never meet a client that early, and certainly not dressed like that. She might have worked in sweatpants and stuff, but she met clients looking as professional as possible. She was always proud of

that.”

Brian hummed, wishing he could figure out something—anything—about this case.

It had him perplexed. “I’m looking into her past. I still think this was personal and not some random act.

Someone got her out into the garage, killed her, and hung her to try to cover it up.

That’s someone who must hate her a great deal.

” He knew that much. “What about her ex-boyfriends?”

“I’d have no idea where they are or how to contact them.

I met a few over the years, but that’s all.

I don’t remember their names or what they looked like other than plenty of bad hair and teeth, skanky clothes, and on occasion, men in desperate need of a shower.

If I tried to remember much about them at all, I don’t think I could.

You might start with the boys’ fathers. They have to be suspects of a sort. ”

“It’s possible, but what would they have to gain?”

“I don’t know. Maybe one of them wanted their kid.

Caroline had custody of both of them, and she wasn’t going to give it up for anyone.

When it came to fighting for the boys, she was like a tiger, and no one wanted to get

on her bad side.

Ask Henry's principal. She read him the riot act a few weeks ago because Henry needed help that he wasn't getting.

Apparently, the sanctimonious bastard—her words—didn't believe that Henry was already reading at a second-grade level and could add and subtract bigger numbers in his head, as well as do basic multiplication. ”

“But... isn't that unusual at his age?” Brian asked.

“Very. He's going to be a really smart kid, and I think that's some of the problem right now. Henry thinks about everything so much. Caroline always said that Henry was either going to solve the world's problems or go crazy with everything going on in his head.”

Brian nodded slowly. “I guess I can understand that. It also helps explain why he's not talking and pulling into himself.

He's trying to figure things out, but he isn't coming up with any answers, and his poor head is going in circles.

” He really felt for both these kids... hell, every time he had a case that involved kids, it weighed on his heart.

But he was a professional, and he was supposed to deal with these sorts of things and not let them get to him.

He had to remain as detached as possible. It was the only way to survive.

“That's a possibility. I'm not sure, and Henry is only talking a little.

It seems like he's communicating only when Phillip is.

"Kerry seemed to hesitate. "At this moment, I'm trying not to draw too many conclusions.

There are too many variables. But I did speak to the boys.

I asked them if they might have seen anyone yesterday morning.

Phillip is adamant that he didn't see anything, but Henry avoided the question.

He made like he didn't hear me, but I know he did.

There isn't enough guile in him to lie."

"So, you think it's possible he did?" Brian asked, trying not to let himself get excited.

Information from children was difficult enough, and from one as traumatized as these two were...

. Brian knew Kerry was right and that he shouldn't push, but he needed to know what might be locked up inside a six-year-old's head.

He sighed and looked around the garage again, hoping for some sort of insight, but all he found was a pair of intense eyes as deep as any lake he had ever seen, filled with hurt and something else that Brian couldn't quite place.

He kept looking into them, Kerry casting some sort of spell.

He leaned forward slightly, getting pulled into Kerry's intense brown eyes.

There was something about this man that got under his skin.

Brian wasn't sure how he felt about that.

But damn, it had been a long time since anyone had stoked any kind of heat inside him.

Relationships for cops tended to suck. The hours were awful and unpredictable.

He had seen many marriages fold under the pressure, and he didn't want to go through all that...

again. Once was quite enough. Still, he parted his lips when Kerry did before realizing what he was doing and backing away.

Kerry shook his head slightly and seemed to realize what was happening at the same time Brian did.

He blinked, and Kerry's cheeks turned pink before he looked away toward the door to the main part of the house.

He finished getting the car seats and set them near the door.

"I guess...." He cleared his throat, "I guess I thought if I came out here, I'd see something that would help. "

"You already did. Based on what you said and the way she was dressed, your sister was lured out here. Can you think of anyone who would have that kind of interest for her?"

"I keep coming back to one of her old boyfriends...." Kerry lifted his gaze. "Phillip

or Henry's father maybe. But I don't see Henry's coming here from Seattle."

Brian checked his phone. "I had him checked on. One of our officers has been in touch, and according to his wife, he's been out of the country for the last two weeks.

Kuala Lumpur on business. Homeland Security confirmed that he hasn't returned to the country.

Phillip's father is another matter. We haven't been able to contact him.

" Brian looked up from the message and seemed to be going through a list in his head.

"Would you please ask the boys if their mother was currently seeing someone?"

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“I can ask them,” Kerry answered. “But I don’t think so.

I don’t know how much they’re going to know.

Caroline told me that lately she hadn’t been dating much, and when she did, she did her best to keep them away from the boys.

She didn’t want them to like someone and then have them leave if things didn’t work out.

So even if she was seeing someone, the boys may not have known about it. ”

“Who would babysit them?” Brian asked.

“Karen from next door. She is really involved in the boys’ lives.

That’s why I suspect she had them yesterday.

The boys knew that they were to go to Karen if they couldn’t find their mom.

She has been in the neighborhood for many years.

She and Caroline became friends shortly after my sister moved in.

I can only imagine how worried those boys must have been when they got up and couldn’t find their mom.

I know I would have been frantic as a kid. ”

“I guess I would have too,” Brian said. “I did speak with her, and she wasn’t aware of anyone that your sister was seeing. I just keep hoping that something from your sister’s past or her current life will present itself. There has to be some connection, especially with what you told me.”

“I’ll ask the boys and see if they can tell us anything, but I don’t expect Henry to be much help.

He’s too withdrawn and in his own head right now.

I’d like to plan the funeral, and I’m hoping that the boys being able to say goodbye to her will help.

Maybe then Henry will feel more like talking.

He’s a six- year-old boy who lost his mother, and if he did see anything or knows anything, it’s locked behind a wall of worry, pain, and lack of words.

Henry is super smart, we know that, and ideas run around his head like little bits of corn in a popper, bouncing here and there.

The thing is, we don’t know how much control he has over all of it and how organized it is.

Whatever he saw could be running around that popper amid a ton of confusion. ”

“Then how do we get to it? There has to be a way.”

Kerry nodded. “There is. But it isn’t going to happen right now.



Everything is too confused and scary. It's going to take some time and patience.

I can eventually ask the boys about a boyfriend or someone in their mom's life, but I can't do it right now.

I have to bring things up with them when the time is right.

It needs to be quiet and when they can focus, otherwise all I'll get are blank looks.

"He placed his hand on Brian's shoulder.

"I get why you need the information, but we can't rely on the boys as the sole source of information.

That's putting all our eggs in one basket... with a hole in it."

Brian's attention zeroed in on where Kerry touched him, and his mind slipped a groove for a second.

"I do understand, and if I were in your shoes, I'd probably do the exact same thing.

"He checked the time. "I should get going. See if I can dig up any more leads." They got the seats inside the house, and Brian closed the garage door.

Then he locked it and went through the house, saying goodbye to the boys before heading out to his car.

Without thinking, he looked to the east. The sky was cloudy and overcast, so the mountain wasn't out.

It was funny. He had grown up here, and Mount Rainier was tall enough that it made

its own weather.

Most days it was shrouded, and even when it was sunny otherwise, the mountain held on to the clouds.

Yet even so, he still looked for it. Rainier was magnificent, and when it was out, it was something to see, even if he had seen it a hundred times.

Turning away, he got into his car and headed back to the station.

There was something he was missing, and Brian needed to take some time to incorporate what Kerry had told him into everything else that they knew.

It was clear now that whoever had gone after Kerry's sister had lured her out there, which suggested premeditation and forethought.

He braked, bringing the car to a stop. Spur-of-the-moment killings were one thing, but this was looking more and more as though someone had put thought into it, and they went to Caroline's home to kill her.

What he needed to do was figure out why... and hopefully the rest would follow.

"Are you getting anywhere?" Smyth Barnes asked when Brian returned to the station downtown to get some files.

The guy was a real douche, at least as far as Brian was concerned.

Smyth was one of those people who always weighed everything against how it made him look or what someone or something could do for him.

So, the success of the other officers was always a threat, and their setbacks were

something he tried to leverage.

“I am, actually,” Brian told him with a smile meant to keep him off guard.

Smyth had wanted the call as soon as it came in, but Brian had been assigned, so now he wanted Brian to fail.

The guy was a real pain in the ass. “I found out a number of things that I need to fit in with the rest of the pieces I have. Thanks for asking.” Kill the jerk with kindness—at least that was less messy than punching the asshole in the throat, and it involved a whole lot less paperwork.

Brian headed to his desk and plopped down in his chair.

“Is he being his usual self?” Janine asked.

She had the office across from his. They had formed a friendship of sorts.

She had just joined the force six months ago, relocating from Medford, Oregon, so she and her ex-husband could co-parent their kids.

She hadn’t volunteered a lot of information, and Brian wasn’t going to pry.

“Yup...,” he told her. “I found some things out.”

She wheeled her chair over. “Spill.”

“Well, I spoke with the victim’s brother. He says that if the victim had been going out anywhere, she would have been dressed for it. Caroline was particular about her appearance. So, the fact that we found her in...”

“Night clothes and stuff...?”

“He thinks she was lured out there, and I agree.”

Janine nodded, her dark eyes lighting up a little. “Me too. So that means premeditation. At least in getting her out there. This guy came with a purpose.” She grew quiet. “My money is on an ex. Hands down. How many does she have?”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out. The neighbor told me about a couple of them.

Then there are the fathers of the two boys.

One of them I was able to rule out. The other I can’t get enough information on.

Kerry, her brother, didn’t have much to do with him, and he hasn’t been in the picture in some time. ”

“Let me check with child services. Maybe she tried to get him to pay child support. If she did, there would be a claim of some kind, and maybe we can get the details there.”

Brian smiled. “Great idea. That would be a big help. The brother also said that he saw someone watching the house. I don’t know if it’s related. He said he would keep an eye out. But I’m worried there could be more to this. So I think we need to make our presence known in the neighborhood.”

Janine rolled her eyes. “I don’t believe in coincidence any more than you do. I’ll alert patrol to put that street as a priority.”

“Thank you,” Brian said, Janine watching him closely.

“You don’t think it’s going to be enough?

” Janine asked. “Let me guess, you want to give this particular area more personal attention.” Her gaze was laser focused, and Brian looked down at the papers on his desk, picking up the ones on the top, pretending he was reading.

Sometimes, Janine saw way too damned much for her own good. “What is that blush about?”

“I am not....” He glared at her, and she rolled her eyes.

“Just make your phone calls.” He knew he shouldn’t have been having thoughts about a certain man with intense brown eyes, hair the color of rich chocolate, and a body just made for hot...

. He shook his head, because he was doing it again, and he didn’t dare even look at Janine, or she was going to know exactly what was going on inside his head.

Brian cleared his throat and forced his attention on the papers in front of him.

Janine snickered and picked up the phone.

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### Chapter Five

For the past four days, all Kerry had done was try to keep things together for the boys.

They developed a routine of their own... of sorts.

They got up and went to bed at the same time, walked to the park, and went to the store to choose something for dinner.

And Kerry answered questions, patiently, over and over again.

Caroline's body had been released, so he was able to schedule the funeral.

He hadn't been sure if he should go ahead with immediate cremation or not, but the funeral director had assured him that everything would be fine for an open casket, and he had been right.

The more he thought about it, the more he figured the boys needed chance to see her and say goodbye.

Caroline had looked as wonderful as a dead body could, and the boys had cried loudly when they saw her.

He held them and did his best to explain what was going on.

Mercifully, they had had an hour to themselves before anyone else arrived, so the

boys could grieve alone for a while.

Then there had been the viewing, and thankfully both boys had gone into a room the funeral home had set aside for them and curled up on one of the sofas.

The funeral director had a blanket, and Kerry draped it over them and let them rest. Grief was exhausting, and they had already had more than their share of it.

Brian came in toward the end and, after paying his respects, spoke softly to Kerry.

He carefully steered clear of the case itself and simply spoke of general things.

It was what Kerry needed between rounds of aunts, uncles, and cousins all peppering him with questions about what was happening to find out who had done this.

He eventually developed pat answers that satisfied no one but managed to get everyone get past that horrible topic.

“Have you had about all you can take?” Brian asked once Kerry had spoken with the last of his aunts. At least she had spared him the questions all the others had asked and offered to sit with the boys if he needed to get out for a while. Aunt Marilyn was the only relative to do that.

“Go ahead and take the boys home. There’s only half an hour left.” She patted him on the shoulder with that gentle smile she always had.

“I knew you were my favorite for a reason,” he whispered to her, and she chuckled softly.

Aunt Marilyn had never married and had had a successful career in corporate America, breaking a few glass ceilings along the way.

Now retired, she was still very active and kept quite busy.

“And thank you. I need a day to go back to my house to get some things.”

“Why don’t you pack some things for the boys and take them up there with you?” she asked.

“My place is too small. I’m actually thinking of letting the apartment go and moving back down here.

The boys have their friends, and Henry is set to start school in the fall.

I don’t want their lives disrupted any more than they need to be.

I’ve spoken with the practice, and they have agreed to let me transition to the office in Olympia if that is what I decide to do.

” There were so many big decisions looming, and yet he knew now was not a good time to make any of them.

Kerry had banked enough time off that he still had some coming, but he was going to need to return to the office fairly soon.

“I have a house where the current tenants are moving out. It’s three bedroom, two baths, with a garage.

It’s a few blocks from where Caroline was living.

It would keep the boys in the same schools but would get them out of the house where their mother died.



If you want to rent it, you can. Or if you want to buy it, that would be possible as well.

I've been renting it out for a while, but selling it would simplify things for me.

So, I'm open to either." She patted him on the shoulder.

"Think about what you want to do and let me know."

"Thank you." He was more than a little overwhelmed at the moment, but her offer was most appreciated, and it would take care of a number of items he had been mulling over.

He turned toward the door to the viewing room as a man stood in the doorway. He made no move to enter, and a chill went up Kerry's back. "Who is that?" he asked his aunt, glancing over at Brian, who made his way over from where he was speaking to Kerry's insufferable Uncle Barry.

"He was your sister's boyfriend. Chuck, or something like that, I think. I met him once when I was visiting your sister. He seemed nice enough at the time, but Caroline released him back into the wild—her words—a few weeks later."

"How long ago was that?" Kerry asked, and Aunt Marilyn put her hand over her mouth.

"Maybe four years ago or so. I'm not really sure."

Kerry watched as the man entered the room and made his way up to the front. He passed by the casket, glancing inside for a few seconds before continuing on and then back along the side before returning to the door.

“What’s going on?” Brian asked.

“Apparently, the guy leaving did a quick pass of the room. He’s one of Caroline’s former boyfriends, and my aunt here says that they dated about four years ago.

I remember his name is Charlie, that’s it, and if I’m not mistaken, he’s Phillip’s sperm donor.

” Kerry refused to call someone a father who took off before they were even born.

Brian strode out of the room, most likely following him.

“I hope everything is okay,” Marilyn said.

“I hope so too,” Kerry said as more people approached, and he made small talk until Brian returned. “Did you find him?” Kerry asked after excusing himself from Uncle Barry, who was warming up to some inappropriate story about a woman he’d met online.

“No. He was gone when I got outside. I checked around, but I didn’t see him. Is he the man you saw outside the house?”

Kerry shrugged. “He could have been, but I’m not sure.” He tried to think back, but his mind was cluttered and his memories more than a little fuzzy.

“Do you remember his last name?” Brian asked, but Kerry shook his head.

“Sorry.”

“But you believe he could have been Phillip’s father?” Brian asked, and Kerry nodded. “You’re sure of that.”

“Caroline always referred to Phillip’s father as Fucked-Up Chuck. So that is probably him.” Kerry sighed and wished his sister would have had a more... conventional personal life. But then, Caroline always marched to her own beat. It was part of who she was. “I wish I could be of more help.”

“We’re working on that angle, and I hope we’ll have some information soon.”

“Me too.”

“Did he touch anything or drink out of anything?” Brian asked, but Kerry shook his head.

He supposed Brian was hoping to get some sort of DNA.

“Okay. Well, at least we know what he looks like, and I put out a call for him as a person of interest in the case. That will get all of law enforcement looking for him.”

“I should have acted faster.” He felt like a fool.

“It’s okay. We will get to the bottom of this, and he isn’t going to be able to hide forever. Don’t worry.”

“I think I’m going to take the boys and go home.” Brian yawned as sheer exhaustion threatened to overwhelm him.

“Let me take you and the boys. I’ll take your car, and I can call my partner to pick me up and bring me back here.”

“I can do that if...,” Aunt Marilyn began, then silenced herself.

“No. You let the handsome police officer take you home.” The wicked look in her

eyes had him groaning to himself.

His aunt had always been way too perceptive for her own good.

“Go get the boys home. They’ve had more than their share of the grief parade, and it’s not over. ”

“It is for them. Karen from next door is going to come to the house and sit with them while I attend the funeral. They’ll come to the luncheon afterward.

And then this part will be over.” He knew nothing was ever going to be over, not for two boys who lost their mother, but at least this phase of the process would have ended.

Phillip and Henry would have been able to say goodbye to their angel mother.

He left the viewing room. Tomorrow, the funeral home would open additional space for the funeral itself, and then Caroline would be taken away for cremation.

Kerry figured that at some point the boys might want to visit where their mother was laid to rest, so he had arranged for a cemetery plot.

In a few months, he thought he and the boys would pick out a stone for her.

The boys were still asleep. He gently lifted Phillip into his arms and went to Henry.

“Let me take him,” Brian said.

Kerry hesitated, but Phillip lifted his head.

“Will you go to Mr. Brian?” Kerry whispered, and Phillip went right to Brian, his

little arms curling around his neck.

Brian whispered soft things to Phillip, and he rested his head on Brian's shoulder.

Kerry gently lifted Henry, then carried him out of the funeral home and to the car.

He got Henry in his seat, and Brian got Phillip in his.

"I'm hungry," Phillip said just as he and Brian got their doors closed.

"We can stop and get something," Brian offered.

Kerry nodded. "Let's get them milkshakes," he said softly, and Brian started the car, pulled out of the lot, and took them to the In and Out. "What flavor do you want?"

"Rawberry," Phillip said.

"Banana," Henry said from just behind Kerry's seat.

Brian ordered, getting a chocolate for himself and a lemon for him.

Once their treats arrived, they sat in the car and let everyone drink their shakes, and then Brian drove them home.

Brian helped take the boys into the house, and Kerry got them ready for bed.

They were so tired, they barely woke up while changing into PJs, and then Kerry kissed each of them before tucking them in. Phillip went right to sleep.

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:23 am*

“Is Mommy still asleep? I wanted her to wake up.”

Kerry gently rubbed Henry’s back. “That’s just the part she left behind when she became an angel.”

“Oh,” Henry said, and rolled over, holding his stuffed dog under his arm as Pebbles settled at the foot of the bed.

Kerry quietly left the room and partially closed the door.

He went to the living room and sat on the sofa, his head in his hands.

“What am I supposed to tell them? Their mother is gone, taken away by someone we don’t even know, and all they want is their mother back.

I can’t give them that—no one can. And they deserve that. ”

“I know,” Brian said softly. “You all deserve answers, and I wish I could find them more quickly.” His phone rang, and Brian stood and left the room, going outside.

He stayed away for a while, and Kerry was happy to have a chance to get himself together.

Losing someone was bad enough, but having them killed, forced away from you, only made things worse.

And Kerry was doing everything he could to keep the boys from that horror, if it was

at all possible.

Brian returned and sat down. “We found him. The man who was at the funeral home today is Charles Westerly.” Brian showed him a picture, and Kerry nodded as he looked at it.

“At one time, your sister went after him for child support for Phillip. That’s where we got his name from.

Somehow, your sister was able to prove that he was Phillip’s father, and he was ordered to pay child support, but never did.

The records show that the state garnished his wages and tax refunds, but he still owes a great deal. ”

“Do you think he could have gone after Caroline because of that?” Kerry asked.

“It wouldn’t have made a difference. He is still in arrears, which means that he owes the money to you for Phillip’s care, and each month more will accrue.

So, if he did, it meant nothing. At least we have a name and a picture.

We can circulate this to law enforcement.

” His phone chimed, and he read the message.

“Finally. It seems that your sister was able to get DNA from Charles some time ago and the results are on file as part of the case. We’ll run the samples from the garage and see if they match.

If they do, then....” He let the words hang in the air, but Kerry got the picture.

“We can also run it against national databases, but that will take time.

“That’s good. At least it’s something to go on.” He sighed and tried to pull his mind out of the grief spiral he seemed to be descending into.

“Hey. We’re going to catch who did this, one way or another.”

Kerry turned toward Brian, taking heart in the conviction he saw there. “I know you’ll do your best. And I appreciate everything you’ve done for us.” He blinked his eyes, trying to stay awake, but he was failing quickly. “I’m sorry. The last week has been almost more than I can take.”

“Do you want some tea or something?” Brian asked.

“That sounds great.” He got up to make some, but Brian told him he’d make it. Kerry explained where the tea was kept and leaned back, resting his head on the back of the sofa. He closed his eyes for only a few minutes.

Kerry woke with a start to find a light blanket spread over him and tea on the coffee table. He blinked, wondering how long he had been out. The tea was cold and the doors locked, so he must have been asleep for a while.

A single piece of paper sat on the table next to the mug. I made the tea and didn’t want to wake you. The doors are locked. Call if you need anything. It was signed Brian .

He set the page down and got up, leaving the blanket on the sofa.

Pebbles came out of Henry’s room as Kerry passed.

Kerry used the bathroom and changed into light clothes for sleeping.



He still didn't have the heart to sleep in Caroline's room, so he turned out the lights and stretched out on the sofa, hoping to go to sleep.

"Damn you," he said under his breath to whoever had cut his sister's life short.

"I really hope you rot in hell." He missed her with every fiber of his being.

The only bright spot in this entire ordeal was Brian and the fact that he seemed to know what needed to be done.

Kerry had been floundering for days, but Brian would stop by, and suddenly, Kerry felt grounded once more.

Kerry knew it was a bad idea to count on anything from Brian.

After all, it was likely that once the case was solved, Brian would move on to something else, and Kerry would find himself with a new life as the sole parent of Phillip and Henry.

That was frightening. He might know all about children in a professional manner, but he had no practical experience raising them.

He closed his eyes and tried not to think too far into the future.

All he could do was take things one day at a time.

It was his primary job to love and care for Caroline's children and to make sure they grew up knowing their mother loved them more than anything else.

He tried to settle his mind, but it refused to stop running.

Finally, after a few hours of tossing and turning, he managed to fall asleep.

When Kerry woke, twisted in the blanket, he tried to get off the sofa, but nearly fell to the floor as someone knocked on the front door. He managed to untwist his legs and got to the door, opening it to Brian, who had raised his hand to knock again.

“You look like you’re about to fall down,” Brian said. “I was on my way to work, and I thought I’d stop by to make sure you were okay after the way I left you last night. I know you have been under a great deal of strain, and today is only going to add to it.”

“Well, thank you.”

Brian checked his phone. “I need to get to the station, but if you need anything, call right away.” He nodded and turned away.

As much as Kerry needed to go inside, he didn’t move until Brian and the car were out of sight, because he just couldn’t look away.

### Chapter Six

Sometimes, it was amazing how time seemed to warp itself.

It could seem to fly—a blink and a week was gone, two blinks and a year had passed.

This was not one of those times. Everything seemed to take longer than it should, especially when he was waiting for test results that seemed lost in a bureaucratic queue for the last ten days.

“Can you help me get these tests bumped up?” Brian asked Captain Rogers as he stood in his doorway.

“I’ve already made a call this morning, and I made one yesterday. I keep getting the same damned answer: they will get to it. But there are other equally urgent cases in the line.” Even the captain was grinding his teeth at this one. “What else do you have?”

“Fuck all is what I have. This DNA is about all that the killer left. He seemed to know his way around and lured Caroline out to the garage. She definitely knew him, and if I can get this testing done, I can either eliminate my prime suspect or nail his ass to the wall.”

“What about the kid?” Sometimes, the captain could be a little too dispassionate, or maybe it was Brian who had lost some of his objectivity as far as Kerry, Henry, and Phillip were concerned.

Most nights, he lay awake, thinking of the promises he made to Kerry and hoping like hell he could deliver, just to see the man smile every now and then.

If anyone deserved some answers and closure, it was Kerry and those boys.

Brian stifled a growl. “Henry is six, and he’s a traumatized little boy who lost his mom and had his world turned upside down.

” Fuck it all to hell, he hated what they were going to have to do.

“We have a session booked with a child psychology center in two days, and we’re hoping that they can help him give words to what happened.

We’re not even sure he saw anything.” All he could do was pray that Henry might have information that could help them.

“But you think he did?” He picked up a file from his desk, like he was coming to the end of the topic.

“His uncle does, and I tend to as well.” He just wished they knew for sure, but in investigations like this, nothing was sure until it was proven. Sometimes, you had to do a little fishing to find the answers you needed. He just wished it didn’t involve Henry.

“They aren’t going to hurt him, just try to get him to talk about what happened,” Captain Rogers said, rolling his eyes.

“No. They’re just going to ask him to talk about the morning his mother died.

” He thanked the captain for his help and left the office, checking the time before getting back to his cases.

He had other crimes to solve apart from this one, but the others hadn't gotten under his skin like this one, and the others affected weren't keeping him awake at night the way Kerry was.

He kept seeing those eyes in his mind as soon as he closed his eyes, and more than once, he'd wondered what Kerry's full lips tasted like.

But there was not a damned thing he could do about any of the thoughts that raced through his head.

On top of terrible timing, Kerry was all turned around, and Brian knew that pursuing someone who had just lost their sister and found themselves as a new parent was the worst idea ever.

Still, none of that mattered to his mind and his heart.

Brian had just pulled his mind out of its hamster wheel when his phone rang. He snatched it off the desk. "Yeah."

"Brian..."

He would recognize that voice in the middle of a hurricane. "Kerry. What's wrong?"

"He's trying to sue for custody of Phillip." Kerry sounded breathless and panicked. "Charles Westerly served me with papers saying that Phillip is his son and that he wants custody of him." He sounded as though he was about to completely lose it.

"Okay. Hold on. I'll be over as soon as I can. Just be calm and let me look into this." He grabbed the file and pulled it open. "In the meantime, you should look into a lawyer."

“I think that asshole came to the funeral home so he could make sure Caroline was dead and then try to take Phillip. This whole thing is a mess, and I can’t let Phillip go with him. He just lost his mom, and now some stranger is going to try to take him away.”

“It’s okay. Just breathe, and let’s take things one step at a time.

Paperwork would have to be filed in family court, and I can make sure that they are aware that Charles is a person of interest that we have been trying to contact.

That will buy us some time, because they are going to want a resolution before they let anything move ahead.

I’ll be there just as soon as I can.” He ended the call and made another.

“Family Court Services, this is Linda.”

“Hey,” he said with a smile. “How are you?”

“Well....” She chuckled. “If it isn’t the man who used to pull my hair and call me names.” She laughed.

“As I recall, you gave it right back.” He and Linda grew up next door to one another.

“I need a favor. There’s a new case for custody of Phillip Sutherland.

Would have been filed in the last few days.

” He waited as she typed. “I know you can’t tell me much, and I don’t need you to.

Just wanted the court to know that the man pursuing the case is a person of interest in

the murder of Phillip's mother.

We're waiting on DNA as well as other evidence. ”

She paused. “I see.”

“We've been trying to contact the father so we can speak with him, but he hasn't seen fit to make himself available.”

“I'll make a note in the case file so the legal staff is aware of the situation. You'll need to contact us with a resolution.” She typed in the background.

“Thanks, Linda. I figured you all would want to know.”

Linda hummed a second while she continued working. “How did you know about this so quickly? Besides this being your case?” She seemed to be able to do two things at once.

“I got a call from the guardian of the children involved,” Brian answered her, cutting himself off from telling her anything further.

He and Linda went way back, but they were not drinking or even coffee buddies any longer.

Linda was good at her job, but outside of work, she tended to forget that she shouldn't talk about things, and the last thing he wanted was anyone telling tales out of school.

It would be bad form and could get him into trouble if anyone suspected that his professional objectivity had gotten a little stretched. “Thank you for everything.”

“Be sure to keep us updated,” Linda told him, and Brian promised that he would and ended the call. He had done what he could and hurried out of the station.

Kerry was nearly frantic when he arrived.

Brian stepped inside, and Kerry wrapped him in a hug, pulling him close.

Without thinking, Brian closed his eyes and inhaled deep, taking in Kerry’s rich scent—tinged with soap and a touch of worry.

He returned the hug, knowing that Kerry needed comfort and reassurance.

But the hold quickly went beyond that, and Brian didn’t mind for a second.

His emotions were quickly getting pulled closer to Kerry and the boys.

He knew he should step away, but he couldn’t bring himself to do that.

“It’s going to be all right.” His professional judgment and feelings quickly jumbled into a kind of soup that he hoped to hell he was going to be able to sort out somehow...

maybe.... God, he was so screwed, because all he wanted to do was hold Kerry forever and keep all the bad things at bay.

The boys were outside playing, and when Kerry released him, he returned to watching through one of the windows. “How can they allow this to happen?” Kerry asked.

“I’m no expert on these sorts of things. I’m a cop. I solve crimes. Have you been in contact with a lawyer?”



“Not yet. The papers just arrived this morning.” He went to the coffee table and handed Brian the white envelope they came in. “I’m really not sure what I should do. The thought of Phillip going with someone he has never met, regardless of whether this guy is involved in Caroline’s death...”

“Do you have Caroline’s will where she names you as the children’s guardian?

” Brian asked, and Kerry nodded. “Then that’s your main weapon.

If Charlie hasn’t been in his kid’s life, and you can prove that you have, and that you as guardian was the mother’s wish, then I’d say you had a chance since Caroline had sole custody.

But I’m no expert, and you’ll need to get a lawyer. ”

“I will.”

“And I need to get this case resolved. If he is the one who killed Caroline, then that nullifies his claim, not least of all because he’ll be in prison, but you can’t benefit from murder. We need to find out what Henry saw... if anything.”

Kerry nodded. “I’ve been giving that some thought.

It’s best if things like this are done in a safe space, so I thought Henry and I could speak in his room.

I’ll contact Karen to see if she can watch Phillip for a few hours.

Then we’ll gently sit Henry down and ask him.

You can’t be in the room, but I’ll record the session, and you can listen from the

hallway.

I know it isn't ideal, but I don't think we can wait. ”

Brian knew it would be best if it was done with cameras and stuff, but this latest development added an extra time crunch, and it wasn't like they were going to put Henry on the stand. He just needed to know what he saw.

“Okay. Set up what you can. I need to make a few calls to the station.” He stepped out of the house to give Kerry a chance to set things up the way he wanted them. Brian reported to the captain about what he'd planned and checked in with Janine to see if anything had come in.

“No test results yet,” she told him. “When I called, they said that we should have results in a few days. What happened? You bugged out of here like a bat out of hell.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:23 am*

“One of the suspects is trying to sue for custody of one of the kids. We need to get to the bottom of this fast or else a possible murderer is going to put this family through even more hell.”

“Let me check. I can add pressure because this involves family court, and those cases always have tight timelines.” Brian was grateful for her quick thinking. Janine was a smart one, and he was pleased he got to work with her.

“Great. Look. I’m going to need you here.

We are going to see if we can learn anything from the oldest boy.

Can you come? Don’t use sirens and make as little noise or fuss as you can.

Any hope we have of getting information from him relies on Henry feeling unpressured and as safe as possible.

” He wanted more than just himself to witness anything that happened here.

“Okay. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Brian explained to Kerry that his partner was coming as well and that she would wait outside the room with him. “How do you see this working?”

“Well, Henry and I are going to have a talk in his room. I’m hoping that I can get a conversation going between us and that he’ll open up.

I don't know if he will, but if he does, we may get something.

If not, we can keep the appointment we already have and maybe the therapist at the children's psychological center can help.

I know this is going to be hard on him, so no matter what he says, you and Janine must stay out of the room.

I will record the session because you'll need it, but that's all.

No cameras or cell phones," Kerry cautioned, speaking softly.

"And Phillip?" He wanted to make sure that all of them were safe.

"He's going next door. Karen will watch him. He likes going over there because Karen is a baker and she makes lots of cookies. She's aware of what is happening and told me that she will keep Phillip inside with all the doors and windows locked." Kerry was still nervous.

"Go ahead and take Phillip over to Karen's and get him settled.

Once Janine arrives, she and I will wait for you.

Then you can relax and get yourself prepared.

" He placed his hands on Kerry's shoulders, looking into his incredible eyes.

"I know you can do this better than some stranger in an office. He knows you and trusts you. And you have done this before?" He phrased it as a question, but he already knew the answer.

“Many times. I just need to get my head in the game.” He stayed where he was, and Brian held his gaze, trying to give him all the confidence he could. “Let me get Phillip settled and then we’ll do this.”

“What about Pebbles?” Brian asked as the dog rolled onto his back, looking for belly rubs. Brian knelt and gave the happy guy what he wanted.

“He’s going to be part of the session.” Kerry got Phillip from his room, while Henry was in the bathroom, and spoke to him quietly. Then he came out holding Phillip’s hand, a stuffed rabbit under his arm. “Miss Karen will have cookies for you.”

He seemed happy enough as the two of them left the house.

Brian sat quietly on the sofa. Henry came out and sat on the floor in front of the television, totally engrossed in what he was watching. Once the show ended, Henry turned to look at him and went over to sit on the sofa, with Pebbles taking a place on the other side of Henry.

“Did you know my mommy?” Henry asked.

“No. I didn’t,” he answered. “But everyone says that she was really nice and a great mom.”

Henry nodded. “She’s an angel mommy now.” He leaned against him as the show changed, and the two of them watched quietly together.

Kerry returned and stopped when he saw them. “There’s someone outside waiting for you,” Kerry told him before taking Henry by the hand and leading him down to his room. Pebbles followed them, so Brian took the chance to meet Janine outside.

“He’s getting Henry ready.”

“How is he going to get the kid to talk? It’s been apparent that he doesn’t want to.” Janine had thought to dress in casual clothes like Brian.

“I don’t know. He’s the child psychologist, so he should know what he’s doing.

We’re here to listen and keep quiet. No matter what we hear or what Henry says, we can’t react or say anything.

That would kill any chance we have of getting something useful.

” He hoped to hell they got something to go on.

Otherwise, they would be putting a kid through hell for no reason.

“I get it.”

Brian’s phone vibrated in his pocket, and he reminded Janine to set hers on silent as well. He answered Kerry’s text, and they quietly entered the house, went down the hall, and paused outside the bedroom.

“She’s an angel mommy now, and I don’t want her to be mad. Making angels mad is really bad,” Henry was saying.

“You aren’t going to get in trouble from me or your angel mommy. I promise you that,” Kerry said, and Brian met Janine’s gaze, wondering what prompted this.

Henry began to cry. “But I was bad.” He cried some more. “I did what Mommy said not to, and now she’s an angel, and I was bad, and she’ll hate me forever in heaven.” The tears came more strongly, and Brian didn’t dare peek into the room, but he could imagine Kerry hugging him.

“What did you do that Mommy said not to?” Kerry asked. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. You can tell Pebbles. He’s really good at keeping secrets.”

Damn, the guy was fucking smart as hell. Get the kid to talk to the dog. That was darned brilliant and about as non-threatening as possible.”

“I wanted a cookie,” Henry said in a child’s whisper. “And I climbed on the counter to get one. I gave you one too.” He must have been talking to the dog. It was working. “Mommy always said I was supposed to stay in bed except to go potty, but I was hungry.”

Brian snuck a peek into the room in time to see Henry holding Pebbles.

“Did you get the cookie?” Kerry asked, but Henry was silent. “It’s okay. Sometimes, we all wake up hungry. I do, and I want a cookie too.”

Brian backed away and continued listening.

“Pebbles heard something, then I heard it too. In the garage,” Henry said. “It was Mommy, and she was yelling. I was scared, but you were with me, and I knew you would bite anyone who tried to hurt Mama.” Damn, it had been Henry who let Pebbles into the garage. What a smart kid.

Henry cried harder, and Kerry was so patient, talking quietly.

Brian closed his eyes, trying to push away the pain he could feel battering the walls of his professionalism.

He glanced a look at Janine, who seemed almost as affected as he was.

“Pebbles is okay, and I’m sure he was happy to try to defend your mom. Can you tell

Pebbles what happened?”

“But he was there. He saw it too,” Henry whispered.

“Yes. But he was busy,” Kerry said softly and with such care.

Kerry was met with silence that went on for quite a while. Brian found himself fidgeting, which was something he didn’t normally do at all. He had to force himself to stay still and quiet.

“You ran out after the bad man, and you tried to stop him. I know you did.” Henry seemed to be talking to the dog. “You were a good boy. But he was hitting Mommy, and he wouldn’t stop. I wanted to help her, but I was scared. You barked and bit him. I saw you.”

Jesus. Brian had to put his hand over his mouth to stifle a gasp. The six-year-old had seen what happened to his mother. His heart ached for both him and Kerry. He dared a peek into the room. Henry sat on the floor with his back to Brian, holding Pebbles in his arms. He seemed surprisingly calm.

“Can you tell Pebbles what he looked like?” Kerry asked. Henry nodded, and Brian was too fascinated to look away as he hung on every word.

“He was mean,” Henry said. “And he had bad eyes, and I was scared. He was hurting Mommy like this.” He put his hands around Pebbles’ neck.

Holy shit, the kid had seen it all. Part of him had hoped that he’d been wrong and that the kids would have been spared this kind of thing.

“I ran back into my room and pulled the covers over my head. I waited for Mommy to come, but she never did.” Henry was crying again. “I want my mommy to come



home.”

“Damn,” Brian whispered after making sure he was out of sight.

Then he motioned to Janine, and they quietly left the hallway, went outside, and closed the door while Kerry and Henry continued talking.

He was fairly sure they weren’t going to get anything more from Henry.

What the fuck had he been expecting? Henry to give a detailed description of the attacker?

“That didn’t get us very far,” Janine said.

“Actually, it did help. It confirmed that the genetic material on the dog is from the attacker, and we got a number of samples. So, if we can get good results, we will have something definite.” But other than that, there wasn’t a lot that they could use.

“Okay. But the kid didn’t give us anything to help confirm or rule anyone out.” She seemed as frustrated as Brian felt. But that was how things went sometimes. This job was rarely easy.

“It’s okay. We’ll get the recordings from Kerry and go over them again in case there was something we missed. Every little bit helps.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’m going to head back to the station unless you need me here.”

“Go on. I’ll be back just as soon as I finish up here and make sure that Henry is okay.

” He went back inside, a little surprised to find Kerry and Henry still talking.

He returned to his place, but Kerry was reassuring Henry that he wasn't in trouble and neither was Pebbles.

They were both safe and that he wasn't going to let the bad man hurt him.

When Brian peeked into the room, Kerry met his gaze, his eyes filled with rage for a few seconds.

"Can I have a cookie?" Henry asked. "Pebbles wants one too." Henry sniffled.

"How about we give Pebbles a dog biscuit and you a cookie?" he asked.

"I'll go get both." Kerry left the bedroom, and Brian joined him in the kitchen.

Kerry set an iPad on the counter, sweat beading on his forehead.

"I'm sorry there wasn't more I could get you.

I know Henry got a good look at him, but everything is all wrapped up in his fear and worry.

So the descriptions are all emotional. It makes sense. "

"It was good. It confirmed that what we got from the dog was from the attacker. Once the DNA comes back from the lab, we'll know one way or another."

"That's true." Kerry reached for the counter and began to shake.

"I hate this part of my job. Working directly with the kids who have been hurt like this is why I got into this field, but it always makes me feel like my legs have been knocked out from under me." He stared out the window for a while.

“You did really well, and so did Henry. It would have been a shock if he’d have had a full description.”

“True. But he did pick out who attacked his mother.” Kerry slowly turned around.

“I heard you and your fellow officer leave, and I thought you were going to come back. I went through a number of Caroline’s photo albums, as well as her iPad.

The pictures are shared with her phone. Anyway.

” His hands shook, and when he turned, Brian found himself pulled closer, and Kerry clutched onto him tightly.

Brian knew it was most likely just the stress of the moment, but damn, he liked the fact that Kerry wanted his comfort.

“Uncle Kerry?” Henry called, and Kerry backed away.

“I need to get his cookie.” He rummaged in one of the cupboards to find the Oreos and Greenies. Kerry left and then returned.

“I take it I missed something important?” Brian said.

“It’s all on the tape. But I went through Caroline’s pictures from the past few years to see if there were pictures of her with anyone she might have dated.

And I showed those to Henry and Pebbles.

” Kerry picked up the iPad and opened it.

“This is the image he recognized.” He turned the picture to Brian.

He blinked and sighed. It was an image of a man leaning over a picnic table, probably taken in a park. The man's face was turned toward Caroline. "Henry was right—he does have bad-looking eyes."

"Yeah. And that is the man who showed up at the viewing the other day. This is Phillip's father. The one who just filed for custody... and the man who cannot have him under any circumstances." He paled, and Brian caught him before he could hit the floor.

"Hey, it's okay," Brian said as he helped Kerry up and then got him out of the kitchen and over to the sofa. He helped him down and then hurried back to the kitchen to get Kerry a glass of water. He handed it to Kerry, and he drank some.

"Wow. That's never happened before."

Brian hadn't realized how worried he was until Kerry began talking again.

His heart raced, and he closed his eyes, trying to slow it.

Jesus, what the hell was wrong with him?

He was supposed to be professional, a little distant.

But he was finding that harder and harder to do.

"It's okay. That's to be expected when you come face to face with the person who killed your sister.

And it's worse when it's through Henry."

Kerry nodded and drank some more water before setting the glass on the coffee table.

“What do we do?” Kerry took his hands, and Brian looked at where they touched, knowing he should pull away, but not wanting to.

“Send me the exact picture that Henry identified. At least we have confirmation that we’re on the right track.

Now, I just have to tie everything to him without involving Henry.

” There was no way in hell anyone was going to put a six-year-old on the stand in a murder trial.

It just wouldn’t work, and he didn’t want to involve him anyway. Not like this.

“He’s been through so much.”

“I know, and this has to be the end of it for him. His mother is an angel mommy now. He knows that. The rest of this has to be something that we try to keep away from the kids if at all possible.”

Kerry put his face in his hands. “I know.” His shoulders bounced, and Brian gathered Kerry in his arms before he could give it too much thought about what a bad idea this was. “I hated putting him through that.”

“But it’s over, and we got everything we could need. Now, we just have to catch this guy.”

“And nail his ass so hard that he never sees the light of day again,” Kerry added, and Brian found himself smiling as he rocked Kerry slowly.

Chapter Seven

Kerry felt like a fool and yet cared for in a way that seemed foreign.

The kind of guys he attracted tended to be the strong, silent, asshole type, and they didn't believe in anything as tender as comforting.

They were into other, more active aspects of relationships. "Is it really going to be okay?"

"Yes, it is. Henry was able to confirm our prime suspect, and now he is going to move from a person of interest to someone I get an arrest warrant for. All we need is the DNA, which is going to prove he's the...

." Brian stopped because he did not want to go there.

They both knew what Chuck had done, and he didn't need to repeat it.

"And this case was solved all because of the actions of a six-year-old."

"Excuse me?" Kerry said.

"Yeah. Think about it. Henry was scared, and he let Pebbles out. Pebbles bit Caroline's attacker and got his blood on his coat. Because of that, we have DNA... and Henry identified him. Your nephew is a hero. I think the police department ought to... I don't know...."

“You can’t give him what he truly wants,” Kerry said, knowing that all the boys would want for a long time was their mother back.

“I know.” Brian said softly. “But I can make sure that they have their Uncle Kerry to look after them and love them. Chuck is not going to get his criminal hands on Phillip, and those boys will grow up learning what love is from you. And they’ll hear stories about their mom.

” Brian swallowed hard, and Kerry placed his hands on either side of Brian’s head, his palms against his scratchy cheeks as he drew him closer.

Kerry wasn’t sure if this was the right thing to do, but he drew him in and kissed him.

He had intended to be gentle, but Brian closed his arms around him, holding him tight, and the kiss deepened within seconds to a red-hot sizzle that stopped all of Kerry’s thoughts in an instant.

Somewhere deep down, he knew he shouldn’t be doing this, but fuck it all.

Brian was hot as hell, and this dance they’d been doing needed to come to some sort of conclusion.

His entire body quivered with heat and excitement. Kerry pressed Brian back against the cushions, determined to take advantage of this moment.

“Uncle Kerry...,” Henry called. Kerry backed away and rubbed his mouth, kickstarting his brain as Henry barreled into the room, Pebbles right behind him. “Can I have another cookie?”

“Not right now. But later.”

He climbed onto the sofa and then sat on Kerry's lap.

"What is it?"

"Where's Phillip? Pebbles misses him."

Kerry nodded. "He's next door at Miss Karen's."

"He'll be back home really soon." Kerry hugged him tight.

"What do you want to have for dinner?" The juxtaposition of what he and Henry had talked about earlier seemed out of place with those kinds of questions, and yet they all needed as much normalcy as possible right now.

"Pizza." Henry's favorite.

"What do you want on it?" Kerry asked, already pretty sure he knew the answer.

"Cheesy with pepperonis." He grinned. "Phillip wants cheese."

"Okay." He turned to Brian. "Do you want to stay?"

Brian was already standing. "I can't. I have a number of things that I have to do, but can I come by later?"

"Certainly," Kerry told him with a smile. "Let me know if there is anything that you need from us."

"Just keep the doors and windows locked and your phone close by." Brian seemed as though he had more to say, but probably didn't want to say what he needed to in front of Henry.



Brian said goodbye, and almost as soon as he left, Kerry's phone dinged with a message.

Charlie may make a play for Phillip. He's desperate, and soon, he's going to find out that we are on to him.

By then he isn't going to have much to lose.

So, call right away if anything happens.

Get Phillip from the neighbor and hunker down until we get him in custody.

Okay , Kerry sent in response before taking Henry's hand. "Let's go get Phillip."

They left the house, locking up before going next door. Kerry knocked, and Karen answered the door. "Phillip," she called back into the house. "Your uncle is here."

Phillip raced over and hugged Henry. "She has lots of Legos," Phillip reported.

"Thank you for watching him. Everything went really well." He kept his tone light, not wanting to upset the boys.

"Good. Do they have everything they need?" It was like they were speaking in a kind of code.

"Yes." He thanked her again and took both boys home.

Pebbles was waiting for them, full of energy, greeting the boys like they had been gone for days.

They all hurried off to play, and Kerry tried not to pace the house nervously as he

waited for Brian to call.

He hoped like hell that they were able to get Charlie in custody soon, but Brian was right.

They weren't going to be able to arrest the guy just based on what Henry had told him.

They needed enough that Henry didn't need to be involved at all.

Still, they were moving forward and getting closer to answers. It was up to the crime lab to provide them with the ammunition they needed.

"Let's order pizza for dinner." That got him smiles and even an excited bark from Pebbles.

"Uncle Kerry," Phillip cried as he hurried up to him. "Why is someone outside?"

The pizza had arrived for dinner not half an hour ago. Kerry had checked when answering the door, and there had been no one there. Shit, when was all this going to be over? He was getting tired of feeling like he was on the edge all the time.

Kerry hurried to the front window. The man he'd seen out from before was across the street. Kerry knew who it was now and called Brian. "Charlie is across the street, watching the house. I half expect him to come over at any time and demand to see Phillip."

"I have a call with the crime lab, trying to get the results we need. I'm going to ask Janine to stop over.

I'll tell her to use her lights. That should scare him off.

If he comes to the house, do not let him in.

Don't let him see the kids, and you can tell him that the police have been called and are on their way. ”

“What if he tries to break in?”

“Get the kids to a safe place and call the neighbors. Get them to come out and make themselves known if you can. Janine is already on her way. She left the station while we've been on the phone. She'll be there in less than ten minutes.” He sounded calm, but worried.

“I need to hang up and call Karen.”

“Fine, but text me as soon as you're off the phone with her.” Brian hung up, and Kerry called Karen, explaining who the man was out front.

“I'll turn on my lights and call the other neighbors.

” Karen got off the phone and turned on every light she had outside.

Kerry did the same, and it wasn't long before others on the street followed suit.

Kerry got the kids into Henry's bedroom, pulled the curtains, and asked if they wanted to play camping.

He got them on the floor and used the bed to anchor a blanket over them all as a tent with the boys easily slipping under the bed so they could keep away from the bears.

Grrrrr. Apparently, for this game, Kerry was the bear.

A firm knock sounded on the front door. Kerry tensed, but refused to let the kids see any reaction. "I'm going to see who that is. But the bear is going to come back." He growled again to squeals of laughter before leaving the room.

He checked though the window beside the door. "What do you want?" Kerry asked without unlocking or opening the door.

"I have a right to see my kid. I know you got the papers." Charlie pounded on the door.

"The police have been called, and they're on their way.

Go away. We want nothing to do with you, and you're not welcome," Kerry said as forcefully as possible without yelling so he didn't disturb the kids.

He told himself that this was the man who killed his sister, and there was no way in hell that he was getting anywhere near them.

"Good. They will make you let me see him." This guy really was delusional.

"Go away. You've been told to leave."

"I have a right." He pounded again, and Phillip and Henry raced out to Kerry, grabbing hold of his legs.

"Is that the mean man?" Henry asked, clinging to him.

Shit, he had hoped to avoid them having any contact with this all together.

"Go back in the bedroom and pretend the bear is coming. Can you do that for me? I'll be right in. I promise." Both boys looked at each other and then hurried away,

hopefully to do as he asked.

A siren sounded, and soon lights flashed out front as first a single car and then multiples pulled up out front. “Charles Westerly,” a female voice said firmly.

“Yes. So what?” he snapped.

“You are wanted for questioning in the death of Caroline Sutherland,” Janine said loudly enough that her voice carried well into the house.

“I had nothing to do with that. All I want is to see my son.” He pounded on the door again. “This isn’t over. I know you got the papers from my lawyer. You can’t keep him away from me.” He sounded more and more desperate with each phrase.

“Put your hands where I can see them.”

Kerry peered through the window as two additional officers stood nearby. Janine got the cuffs on him.

“What are you arresting me for?”

Janine paused for a second. “Right now, disturbing the peace. But who knows.” She read him his rights and then led Charlie away, voices growing quieter.

Kerry went to the bedroom and found the two boys in their tent.

“It’s okay. Everything is quiet now,” he said.

“The bear is all gone.” Both boys came out, and Kerry hugged them tightly.

“You were really good. Let’s go get ourselves a snack.

” He led them into the kitchen and got the boys seated at the table with their treats, giving Pebbles a Greenies.

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:23 am*

Kerry figured someone from the police would stop in before they left, but the knock on the door still made him jump. He checked outside before unlocking the door and pulling it open. “Janine?”

She nodded. “We have him in custody, and I’m going to book him on suspicion. We can hold him for three days, and hopefully by then, the tests will have come back.”

“Will you search his house?” Kerry asked.

Janine smiled and nodded. “Yeah, we will. I’m going to write up the warrant once I get to the station, and then we’ll get a judge to sign it. Brian messaged me to say that he’ll see you as soon as he has anything.”

“Great. Thank you for coming so quickly.” He looked to the car where Charlie sat in the back. While Kerry watched, one of the other officers got into the cruiser and pulled away.

“How are the boys?” Brian asked when he arrived two hours later.

“They’re okay. Right now, they’re having cookies and milk.

I’ll be glad when this is all over.” Maybe then, he would have a chance to figure out what a future might look like for all of them.

The kids needed stability, and Kerry wanted a chance to see what his life could be like with the boys and maybe a certain officer in blue.

Though he knew that was jumping the gun just a bit.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get here sooner. I had to make more calls to put pressure on the lab.

I have been assured that the tests will be run tomorrow morning and that we will have results sometime during the day.

I can hold our suspect on trespassing and suspicion charges for a few days, but not much longer, especially if he gets a lawyer who really presses the issue. ”

“Come on in. I did my best to make this a game, but the boys saw and heard more than I wanted them to.” Kerry went inside, and Brian followed. In the doorway, Kerry turned around, smiling. “Are you looking at my backside?”

Brian blushed, and Kerry knew he’d caught him. Kerry turned back around and made an extra effort to swing his backside as he went into the kitchen.

“Why are you walking that way?” Henry asked.

“Excuse me?” Kerry said, with mock indignation.

“You look like a hurt chicken,” Henry pressed, and then burst into a fit of giggles that took Phillip along with him, though what the boys knew of chickens was a mystery to him. It didn’t seem to matter. Maybe it was something only little boys could understand.

“I think you looked....” Brian was right behind him, his voice soft, barely reaching his ear. “Sexy.”

Kerry shivered and tried to stop it but failed.



He wanted so much to be able to turn around, pull Brian into a kiss, and see where the hell that would lead him.

That was the old Kerry, the one who could throw caution to the wind because it was just him.

It was also the one who had a terrible dating record because he never stopped to think.

Now, he had his nephews to look after, and that meant being the gatekeeper of not only his life, but theirs too.

Still, the urge was there, especially with how Brian stayed right where he was, heat rolling off him, raising Kerry's temperature.

"Finish up your cookies. It's almost time for both of you to go to bed." Tonight, that could not come fast enough. Even Pebbles was sprawled out in the kitchen floor, his eyes blinky, clearly ready for sleep.

"Can I have a cookie?" Brian asked. Kerry reached for the package. "Not that kind of cookie."

Kerry turned, looking deeply into Brian's eyes, startled at the level of heat and his own reaction to it.

He had always considered Brian handsome, with the way his strength showed in his manner and the way he filled out his suits.

He was definitely someone who kept himself in shape.

"Maybe later." He swallowed hard, because that had not been his intention at all.

“Good,” Brian said, just an inch from his ear, his breath tickling Kerry’s skin. He stepped back a few seconds later before going into the living room.

The boys finally finished their cookies, milk, and giggle session.

Then Kerry hustled them into the bathroom to brush their teeth and wash their faces and hands.

Once they were done, he got them into pajamas and finally in bed.

Pebbles joined Phillip and made himself comfortable, which started a squabble with Henry, because he wanted Pebbles.

“The dog can choose for himself, and I’m sure he’ll be in your room soon enough,” Kerry told him, and Henry returned to his own room. Phillip settled down, cuddling his stuffie, and rolled right over. Kerry kissed him good night and then tucked in Henry.

“Is the bad man going to come back?” Henry asked.

“No. He’s in jail, and I hope he’s going to stay there.

” The thought of that asshole getting his hands on Phillip was enough to make Kerry’s blood boil.

But that wasn’t going to happen. “You don’t have anything to worry about.

The bad man isn’t going to come back, and if he does, I’ll be here to keep you and Phillip safe. ”

“And Mr. Brian too?” Henry asked.

Kerry found himself nodding. “Yes. Mr. Brian too.” He kissed him good night and said a silent prayer for both the boys that this would be over soon.

Then Kerry would need to figure out what they were going to do from there.

“Night.” He left the room and found Brian in the living room, the lights down and everything quiet.

He sat on the sofa and felt Brian’s gaze on him. “Are they okay?”

“Yes. They’re both tired. Henry asked if the bad man was coming back. I’m not sure if that was a more general question or if he might have recognized Charlie somehow. I’m hoping it’s the former.”

“Me too. Though I really think we have him.”

Kerry could only nod. “What will you be doing tomorrow?”

“Questioning our suspect,” Brian told him. “But I don’t want to talk about that, at least not right now.” For the first time, Kerry saw doubt and hesitation in Brian’s eyes. He was always so sure of himself, so seeing him this was way a surprise. “I like you, Kerry. I think you know that.”

“I know. But I keep wondering if....” He sighed. “I keep wondering if this is kind of weird. You’re the guy who is investigating Caroline’s death, and....”

Brian leaned forward. “I get that, but it doesn’t change the way I feel about you.

I didn’t expect to begin this investigation and find someone I was interested in.

Hell, I was beginning to believe that I was never going to find someone.

I'd basically given up, and then there you were, with your bright eyes and determination.

You kind of swept me off my feet a little. ”

Kerry swallowed hard. “I don't know what the future is going to bring.

I do know that I can't live here. I can't expect the boys to stay in a place where their mother died.

They are going to need somewhere fresh. I also know that can't be my place in Seattle—it's too small.

So, I don't know where we're going to live, but I do know that I need to get the boys settled somewhere.

They said I could transition to Olympia, but my clients are in Seattle, though, and...  
.”

Brian leaned closer. “You do know that Seattle is just up the freeway. That it isn't on the other side of the country. And that they make these things with four wheels and an engine, called cars.” He cocked his eyebrows, and Kerry snarled in response.

“Yes, I do.... But traffic is a nightmare—you know that. And if I have someone in my life, that means they're in the boys' lives too. We don't need to spend all our time in the car. I want to spend time with you....” Kerry groaned as he realized what he'd said. “You know what I mean.”

“I do. You're a successful and highly qualified child psychologist who has worked with families as well as the police departments in the area.

Don't think I didn't check you out—I'm a cop.

And I saw how you helped Henry. That took a lot of skill and talent.

I also know that the practice you work with has offices in Olympia and Spokane.

So, you have options. More than most people. ”

“I have the worst luck with relationships.” He leaned back on the sofa cushions, trying to relax, but he was wound as tight as a drum, and no matter what he did, the tension refused to leave.

“Then have better luck in the future.” He quirked his eyebrows. Kerry knew exactly what he meant, and damn, he wanted to take the chance. Brian drew closer, his fingers sliding along Kerry's neck. Warmth spread through him, and he leaned into the touch.

Kerry glanced down the hall for just a moment and then back at Brian before closing the distance between them.

Brian's kiss lit a fire in him that Kerry had no idea existed.

Within moments, embers he'd long thought had gone out forever, never to be relit, burst into a conflagration that threatened to consume him.

God, Brian was an amazing kisser—his lips firm, not too wet, and oh hell, he pressed against Kerry, his fingers sliding upward, carding into his hair and making his scalp tingle.

“Oh,” Kerry said as he blinked when Brian pulled away. “I have to ask. Can't you get in trouble for kissing a client... or victim... or whatever I am?”

“Maybe. I don’t really know, because this sort of thing has never happened to me before. And it’s not like you’re a suspect or even a witness. You’re someone who is trying to pick up the pieces. I guess the most important thing is if this... is what you want.”

Was he kidding? Brian was sex on a stick, and maybe that was the problem.

In the past, he had always gone for guys like that and jumped into things without much thought.

Maybe he and Caroline had that in common.

He wasn’t sure. But he did know that his usual pattern wasn’t what he wanted this time.

Kerry wanted something different with Brian, but what that looked like, he had no idea. “Yeah... I want this.”

### Chapter Eight

Brian couldn't help smiling at Kerry's response.

His instinct was to take hold, kiss the hell out of him, and propel both of them down the hall to the bedroom so he could make Kerry forget everything that had happened these past few weeks.

Hell, maybe he could make Kerry forget his name.

That would be awesome. But instead, he gently kissed him and backed away.

"I should be going. I need to be prepared for tomorrow."

Kerry slid closer to him, his heat and scent sending Brian's mind reeling.

He kissed him, and within seconds, he was lost. Kerry tasted like warmth, musk, and a dose of heaven, which was exactly what he hadn't known he'd been missing...

forever. He pressed Kerry back, deepening the kiss.

He startled slightly when Kerry slipped his hand under his shirt, but then he sighed into the kiss as his warm hand slid along his belly and then up to his chest.

He got lost in the sensation as all the questions about whether this was a good idea flew from his head.

All he wanted was more of those touches, and he hissed softly when Kerry tweaked a nipple.

Oh holy hell, his pants were way too tight, and his mind centered on Kerry and nothing else.

So, it came as a surprise when Kerry pulled away and stood.

Brian looked up at him, wondering what the hell just happened.

Kerry held out his hand, and he stared at it for a second before taking it and letting Kerry lead him down the hall, past the boys' rooms. Pebbles raised his head as they passed, but he didn't move or make a sound.

The bedroom was very different than what he expected and was quite bare.

"I got tired of sleeping on the sofa, so I packed up the things of Caroline's that were out.

" A neat stack of boxes sat in the corner.

Brian suspected he hadn't even opened the closet or the dresser drawers, but those were fleeting thoughts as Kerry closed the door and pressed the lock.

Brian drew Kerry into his arms as they came together in a frenzy of heated kisses and energy.

Hell, they practically bounced off one another in their haste.

But Brian held him tightly, their bodies pressed together.



He caught the hem of Kerry's polo shirt and pulled it over his head.

Then he undid the buttons of his own shirt, their kisses growing more urgent until they were skin to skin.

God that felt good, the heat, the firm muscle.

It sent Brian's desire soaring, and it seemed to have done the same to Kerry.

Their shoes thunk ed on the floor as they each did that awkward dance to get them off.

Fucking hell, the movies always got it wrong, because unless they had Velcro, there was no elegant way to get out of your pants.

But they managed, and Brian pressed Kerry down on the bed, which bounced to receive them.

"I've wanted this for days, but I didn't think I should because of everything."

Brian smoothed the hair off Kerry's forehead. "Why?"

"Because maybe I didn't feel like it was the right time for me to be happy... about anything." He knew that was quite an admission.

"Hey," Brian whispered as he lightly sucked at the base of Kerry's neck, receiving a groan and a stretch in response.

"We should all be happy. That doesn't mean you don't miss someone.

It's just the start of the other side." He didn't want to mention any details, and Kerry

seemed to understand what he meant.

“This isn’t some kind of getting me over the grief kind of thing, is it?” Kerry asked.

Brian answered Kerry’s question by sucking on one of his pert nipples.

“Does it feel like that?” Kerry whimpered and shook his head.

“Good, because it’s not. Any more than this isn’t some kind of running away from your hurt.

I know it isn’t.” Brian lifted his head.

“Because you face things head-on. It’s part of what draws me to you.

You handle and deal with your issues, the same as I do. No games or subterfuge.”

“Yeah, I doooooo....,” Kerry moaned as Brian scraped his teeth lightly over the other nipple. Damn, he loved that they were sensitive and how Kerry shivered as Brian ran his hands down his sides.

Brian raised his head, meeting Kerry’s gaze.

“Then it’s just you and me. Right here and now.

” He loved those eyes. They were damn expressive when he wanted, and they told Brian so much.

A window to the soul, and in this case, it was so true.

He could see Kerry’s kindness and helpfulness, how wonderful he was down to the

core.

This was someone he could fall in love with.

And even that, and all the baggage that could come with it, didn't deter him for a second.

Kerry was worth the leap. Now it was his task to make sure Kerry realized that he was too.

"Oh God," Kerry whispered into the room lit with just the outside light that spilled past the edges of the shade as Brian slid downward, taking his long, thick cock between his lips, sinking lower and lower as Kerry whimpered.

"Jesus...." Brian pulled back and took Kerry deeply, again and again.

The time for words had passed, and he loved that he could reduce someone as smart and verbal as Kerry to soft sounds that filled the room with erotic energy.

Passion was most definitely in the air, filling the small room, and Brian was determined to give as much of it as possible.

"How... damn....," Kerry whimpered when Brian pulled back. "Do that again?" Kerry asked.

"Sweetheart, I intend to drive you out of your mind," he whispered, and Kerry's breath hitched as Brian took him hard once more.

Kerry was almost too big, but otherwise perfect.

He loved the way he could control Kerry's passion and how he reacted to everything.

Brian didn't even need to see him; he could tell just from his breathing the effect he was having on him, and that was sexy as all hell and something he didn't want to end. "You are so beautiful."

Kerry giggled. "No, I'm not. I'm ordinary in most every way. I was always skinny and thin."

Brian kissed him. "You are beautiful. There is a light in your eyes and a vibrancy about you that makes you stunning."

Kerry pulled him closer. "You're the stunning one. And don't tell me you don't know how sexy you are. You have all these muscles, and you're tall and strong."

"There are many forms of strength." He ran his hands down Kerry's chest. "Just like there are many kinds of heart." He pulled Kerry to him, their heat mixing.

Bodies slowly sliding against each other, quivering with excitement.

This was amazing, and the longer he held Kerry in his arms, the more he realized that he didn't want to let him go.

"I can't argue with you."

"It would be pointless anyway, because you know I'm right. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." He grinned and carded his fingers through Kerry's hair, loving the feel of him against his skin.

Kerry quivered beneath him, and Brian groaned as they rocked slowly, heat and passion building to the point where Brian could no longer contain it.

Only his control to wait for Kerry held him off until Kerry gasped and wet heat

spilled between them, and then Brian tumbled into his own release, holding Kerry tight.

Brian woke a few hours later. He and Kerry were slightly stuck together, but he didn't care. Slowly, he pulled away, and Kerry shivered next to him.

"Are you okay?" Kerry whispered.

"Yes. I guess I kind of lost things a bit." He snuggled closer to Kerry. "Have you been awake?"

"Yeah, I've been thinking. I want to see what this guy is up to, and I'd like to be there when you question him." Kerry said. "I am a highly trained psychologist, so maybe I can give you some insight."

"But the boys?"

"Karen has invited them over. According to the boys, she has the best toys, and she and Caroline were close friends. I don't want to tear the boys away from her.

She was part of their lives before, and I feel it's good for them to have things that are as normal as possible. I can come down in the morning."

"Okay. I'll wait until you get there. But you'll need to observe only, and I don't want him to see you at all. Remember that he is trying to get custody of Phillip. This guy is a real asshole, and he thinks he's the kind of person that the police aren't going to get anything out of."

"So you'll need to play hardball." Kerry shrugged, and Brian couldn't help wondering just how much steel was in that backbone of his.

“Fine. I’ll bring the damned baseball bat.

” Kerry drew closer, the heat building between them once more.

“Okay, I’ll stay out of sight no matter how much I want to wring the fucker’s neck. ”

“There you go. That’s the spirit.” Brian hugged Kerry tightly and then reluctantly got out of the bed.

He didn’t want questions from the boys if they found him here in the morning.

He dressed and then leaned over the bed, kissing Kerry gently.

“I’ll see you tomorrow. And remember the rules when you get there. ”

“I will.”

Brian quietly made his way to the front door, stepped out into the night, and went right to his car, wishing he could stay with Kerry.

It shocked him just how much he wanted him and to be part of their little family.

Brian wished he had known Caroline. She was probably quite a person, judging by her brother and by what Kerry had shared with him.

Once in the car, he drove away, but found himself taking a swing around the block, just to make sure that everything was quiet.

Then he headed home. Once he arrived, he sent a message to Kerry just to make sure that everything was okay before going back to bed, alone.

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:23 am*

The following morning, he met Kerry and escorted him to the viewing room.

He wanted to kiss him but refrained. “Okay. You can make yourself comfortable in here. Of course, you can see into the room, but Charlie is not going to be able to see you. We will bring him in once we’re ready, and I’ll talk to him.

Janine is going to be in here with you, and she will be able to communicate to me directly if it’s absolutely required.

” It was best if he were able to concentrate as closely as possible during this type of questioning.

“Okay. I won’t interrupt unless it’s absolutely necessary, and I’ll do it through Janine if it’s required.”

Brian hoped that it wouldn’t be necessary.

“Thanks. I’ll see you later. It will take a few minutes, so get comfortable and relax as much as you can.

” He left Kerry and returned to his desk while one of the uniformed officers got Charlie and took him to the interrogation room.

Once Brian knew he was in there, he waited, letting Charlie stew. Then he went down and opened the door.

“I know my rights, and I want my lawyer,” Charlie said as soon as he entered the

room.

“Very well. We’ll get him.” He sat down and stared across the table at Charlie, not saying anything, but not looking away either.

He had a right to an attorney, but that didn’t mean that Brian was just going to leave him alone.

This was the psychological part of the interview: make Charlie as uncomfortable as possible.

“Stop looking at me,” Charlie said, but Brian shrugged and didn’t turn away.

Charlie looked at the side walls, which were gray and blank.

Then he tried looking over Brian’s shoulder and finally down at the table.

“What are you hoping for? I don’t have to talk to you.

” Again, Brian remained quiet as Charlie got more and more agitated.

“I don’t know anything anyway. I don’t know why I’m here. ”

“So, you want to talk?” Brian asked. He didn’t press about an attorney; he simply watched the other man.

“I don’t know anything.” He was becoming more and more fidgety, and then without a word, Brian opened the folder in front of him and slid out a form, turning it toward Charlie without pushing it across the table, but knowing he could read the large print at the top.



Attorney Waiver. Charlie grabbed the form, and Brian tossed him a pen.

Once Charlie signed it, Brian took it back, put it in the folder, and took out the picture of Caroline as she had been found.

“Do you know her?” he asked, and Charlie shrugged. “Verbal answers.”

“Yeah. So, she’s the mother of my kid, and she kept him from me. I know she’s dead because I checked at the funeral home, and now I want my kid.”

“Is that why you strangled her?” Brian asked as coolly as he could. “You figured you could get your son if his mother was dead, so you strangled her and then hung her body to try to make it look like a suicide.” He smiled. “We know it was you.”

“I didn’t do any of that,” Charlie burst out too loudly to be really convincing.

“See, we know you did.” Brian pushed his chair back.

“Stand up and lift your pant legs.” He had on baggy jail pants.

“Go ahead. Lift your pant legs.” Charlie got to his feet and pulled up his right pant leg.

Then his left, which was covered with nasty scrapes and lurid bite marks.

They were infected and going to get pretty bad.

Brian swallowed hard because the guy’s leg looked kind of gross, but other than that, he gave no indication of what that injury proved.

Brian also knew that at that moment, Janine was directing one of the cameras in the

room to get a close up of the injury. This wasn't television, and they didn't have the equipment to match the injury back to Pebbles, but Charlie didn't necessarily know that.

"I got this riding a friend's motorcycle," Charlie supplied as though he had all the answers.

"No. You got that when the victim's dog, Pebbles, attacked you. He tore into your leg, and unfortunately for you, we were able to get DNA off the dog. So, we can match that injury to the victim's dog, the same victim that you deny harming."

Charlie turned to him, his eyes dark, and Brian figured he was about to jump at him at any time. "That damned bitch had my kid, and she was trying to get money out of me for him." The look in his eyes was feral. "I had to do something."

Brian stood and leaned over the table, pressing his advantage.

"So, you lured her into the garage with threats of trying to take Phillip away from her and then strangled her. You had a plan, but you didn't count on the dog attacking the hell out of you.

And once you were done, you strung up her body to try to make it look like she hung herself. "

"That damned bitch was going to ruin my life...," Charlie said, and that sounded close enough to a confession that Brian only stood there waiting to see what else he said.

Charlie's hands began to twitch as the realization of what he'd said must have sunk in.

“Sit down!” Brian snapped just as a knock on the door followed by a man in an ill-fitting suit with a battered briefcase entered. The guy looked about twelve, with the harrowed look of a man much older. Brian almost felt sorry for him.

“I’m Joshua Parker, Mr. Westerly’s attorney,” he said with little energy. “The questioning of my client stops now. And unless you are arresting him, we’re out of here.”

“See, that’s just the thing. He waived his right to an attorney.

But he can assert it now, since you’re here.

” Brian was more than happy for that at the moment.

“And as for arresting your client, we’re going to do that now.

Charles Westerly, you are formally under arrest for the premeditated murder of Caroline Sutherland.

” An officer came into the room, put handcuffs on Charles, and then plopped him back down into his chair.

Then he retreated to the corner as additional muscle if needed.

“On what grounds?” Mr. Parker asked.

“Well, we can start with the confession he gave just before you walked in. Then there’s the DNA evidence.

See, your client was attacked by the victim’s dog.

” An officer handed him a set of papers, and he passed them over to the attorney.

“This is a warrant giving us the right to take samples of Mr. Westerly’s injuries, as well as a DNA sample.

A nurse will be in shortly to take care of that.

” He kept his expression neutral, though he wanted to grin.

“You can’t use any of that since it was garnered without him having been read his rights.” Mr. Parker said.

“Please. He was read his rights last night at the victim’s home when he was first arrested for disturbing the peace. Besides, he confirmed he knew his rights when he first asked for you.” Brian was pleased. “And once the DNA comes back....”

Mr. Parker chuckled. “What is taking samples from my client’s wounds going to do? Match them to himself?”

Brian grinned. “No. We’re going to match DNA from his wound back to the dog that bit him. The victim’s dog.” The tests hadn’t come back yet from the lab. He thought of bluffing, but there was no need.

“That’s a stretch,” the attorney said. “It sounds to me as though you’re getting desperate.”

Brian shrugged and waited a few more minutes for the nurse to come in.

She had Charlie open his mouth, and she swabbed his cheek.

Then she carefully swabbed down the wounds on his leg, using multiple swabs before

closing the samples.

She turned to the attorney. “You might want to get your client some medical care. Those wounds are infected. Dog bites are particularly prone to infection.” Then she left the room, closing the door behind her.

“I’d say we’re done here. We have everything we need.” Brian packed up his folder. “A second officer will be in to help escort you back to your cell.” He left the room and closed the door, then went to the observation room. “Are the microphones off?”

“Yes. He’s with his attorney,” Janine told him.

“Good.”

“Can you really get Pebbles’s DNA from his wound?” Kerry asked him.

Brian shrugged. “I’m not sure. But we’re going to try. That will only help solidify the case. We don’t have a signed confession, but we do have a confession of sorts.”

“Of sorts,” Janine echoed as the phone rang.

She answered it and grinned, listening before hanging up.

“That was the lab. They were able to get blood off Pebbles and material from Pebbles’ teeth to match our suspect.

Pebbles attacked him and we can prove it.

His confession also gives us the basis for first-degree murder, which means he gets life in prison. ”

Kerry slumped slightly, his shoulders dropping. “So, it’s over?”

“I’d say so. Yes. There may be court, but I suspect that they are going to try to plea bargain.

But either way, he’s going away from a very long time, and as soon as we alert family court that he’s been arrested and what the charges are, his custody claims for Phillip aren’t going to go anywhere.

Chuck the Fuck is going to go away for a very long time.”

Janine brought a chair, and Kerry sat down, his face in his hands. Janine excused herself quietly and left the room.

“God,” Kerry said. “I don’t know how I expected this moment to feel, but it’s nothing like I thought. I mean....”

“I know. There’s a sense of justice, but that doesn’t bring Caroline back. There is nothing that will do that. But this part of the ordeal is over. We have caught the person who took their mother away from Henry and Phillip. That is all that we can do.”

“I know. It just doesn’t feel the way I thought it would.”

“How did you think it would feel?” Brian asked, trying to help Kerry put words to what seemed to be bubbling up.

He lifted his head, his eyes watery, opened his mouth, and nothing came out. “I don’t know. I’m a psychologist. I should have words for this. I should know.” Frustration joined the hurt in his voice.

“No. You shouldn’t. This isn’t my first case like this, and I can tell you that everyone feels this way.

I think it’s because there are no words for a time like this.

You think you’ll have some kind of vindication or some sense of finality, but all that’s truly final is that Caroline is gone.

You are never going to feel better about that.

” He sat with Kerry. “It’s also okay to be angry, because that’s normal too. ”

“You should be the psychologist.”

Brian rolled his eyes. “I always figured I’d either be a police officer or a bartender. I guess the second part of my personality is coming out.”

Kerry chuckled as he wiped his eyes. “I should have anticipated this.”

“How could you? You’ve never experienced this before.”

Kerry nodded. “And I don’t think I could have gotten through this without you.” He rested his head on Brian’s shoulder, and they stayed like that, quiet and together for quite a while. “I know you have to go back to work.”

“Yeah, I do. There are going to be more reports and paperwork than you can imagine. But we got him, and the person who took your sister away is going to be behind bars for a very long time. Take as much comfort in that as you can. Then go on home to the boys and find something fun for all of you to do.”

“Yeah. I know it sounds like a cliché, but life goes on.”

Brian backed away. “It does, and you’ll always miss Caroline.

But the loss will lessen over time, and those two boys will always know that they’re loved and cared for.

As the boys keep saying... that’s what their angel mommy would want to see.

” Brian’s own eyes began to tear, and fuck it all, he couldn’t let the rest of the guys see it.

“That got to you too?” Kerry asked.

Brian sighed. “If I’m honest, this whole case has gotten to me. You and the boys have really gotten under my skin, and I don’t quite know what to do about it.”

Kerry actually smiled. “Then since it’s largely over, how about we go on an official date? You know, one where you don’t arrive in an unmarked police car or one of those work suits of yours. We can go out for a real dinner that doesn’t involve chicken fingers, mac and cheese, or pizza.”

“I like that idea.” Damn, that actually sounded amazing.

“Good. I need to get the boys, and you can call me to find out when I’m free. You know, my schedule is so very full right now, I’m not sure how I’m going to fit you in.” Kerry headed for the door, and Brian rolled his eyes as he smiled.



### Chapter Nine

“Is Mr. Brian coming to play with us?” Phillip asked as Kerry got ready for an evening out.

He smiled in the mirror in Caroline’s room.

He’d spent the last couple of days on the phone with the managing partners of the practice, and they had come to an agreement.

Kerry would work three days a week at the Olympia office, and two days a week at the Seattle office to ensure that he didn’t leave any of his current clients.

Over about six months, he would transition full-time to the Olympia office.

If everything went well, then once Kerry transitioned, he was going to head the Olympia office, which didn’t have a managing director at the moment.

Apparently, they had been wondering if Kerry would be interested in the position before all this happened.

So, it seemed everything was going to work out.

“No. Miss Karen is coming over to stay with you.”

Phillip seemed happy with that answer, and Kerry finished getting ready. There was still so much running through his head. He needed to find another place for all of

them to live. Caroline's lease was up in two months, and Kerry didn't want to renew it.

The doorbell rang, and he slipped on his shoes, hurried to the front, and opened it to Karen, who gave him the once-over. "Don't you clean up nice."

"Thanks." He closed the door and checked himself in the mirror one last time.

"The boys should be in bed by nine, and there's plenty of food in the house.

Help yourself to anything." He was so excited, he hadn't seen the plastic container she carried.

The boys, followed by Pebbles, all raced out to greet her and asked for cookies.

They all knew. She offered him one, but Kerry thanked her and declined.

The boys led her off to show her things as the doorbell rang again. This time, Kerry opened it to Brian, looking nearly edible in tan trousers and a light blue shirt, open at the collar. "Are you ready to go?"

Kerry swallowed hard, words escaping him. Damn, Brian looked good. Finally, he nodded, and Brian grinned.

"I like that I was able to make you speechless. That says a lot... so to speak. And you look really nice."

"Thanks," Kerry said after clearing his throat. "Where are we going?"

"Well, you made it pretty clear. No pizza, mac and cheese, or chicken fingers, so there isn't much left."

“Funny...,” Kerry quipped.

“There’s a really good steakhouse, and I made reservations. I’ve eaten there a few times for special occasions, and I thought this qualified. They do a nice job.”

“I’m glad.” He was really getting tired of eating what the boys wanted.

He liked pizza and things, but there were times when he really wanted grown-up food.

Kerry approached Brian’s deep-red Mustang.

Brian opened the door, and he slid into the passenger seat.

By the time he had his seatbelt on, Brian was in the driver’s seat, pressing a button and lowering the top.

“I never pictured you as a convertible kind of guy. Muscle car, yes, but....”

“I love this car. I got it a few years ago. Mostly, I drive what I’m assigned at work, and this sits in my garage. But it’s a wonderful night and warm enough that we won’t freeze with the top down.”

“Do you get to tool around like this very often?” Kerry asked as Brian pulled away from the curb, the breeze rustling his hair.

“Not as much as I like. But this time of year, when it isn’t raining, it’s so much fun.” He drove through the city, ambient lighting down by their feet and along the dash. It only added to the coolness of the experience. “But it is fun having this.”

Brian turned on some cruising music, and Kerry settled back to enjoy the ride. It was

fun being out like this. “You know the boys would love riding in here.” As soon as he said it, he almost put his hand over his mouth. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?” Brian asked. “The boys are the center of your life. They have to be.” He rested his hand on Kerry’s leg, and his attention immediately settled at that touch. “It’s how it should be. They’re kids.”

“Yeah, I know. But one night out and....”

“Don’t worry about it. You’ve been a parent for, what... two weeks now? It’s something that is going to be on your mind. Just relax. And yes, some afternoon, I’ll come over, and we can all take the ’Stang out for a ride. Maybe to get ice cream or something.”

“But no eating in the car,” they both said at the same time and then laughed.

“Yeah, you know you’re a parent when that’s the first thing that comes to mind,” Brian said, and Kerry had to agree. In such a short time, the entire focus of his life had shifted.

“Does it make me stupid if I said that I was worried?”

“No. But I’m sure the boys are fine. They know Karen and they obviously like her. If you want to send a message or call, go ahead.”

Kerry knew he was worrying for nothing, but he sent Karen a message and got a response almost right away that they were playing fort in the living room.

She even sent a picture of the blankets stretched over the furniture and the boys grinning.

He thanked her and slipped his phone in his pocket as Brian pulled into the parking lot of the steakhouse.

They went inside, and Brian was a perfect gentleman, waiting for him, even lightly touching his back as they walked to their table.

And the dinner was amazing. They ate and talked the entire time, and not about work or the boys, but about vacations, family outings, or embarrassing childhood moments that had them both laughing.

There was no pressure, no worry, just companionship, and Kerry didn't feel like he had to put on a front.

He could be just the person he was. It had been a long time since he didn't feel on edge on a date, especially a first date, which this definitely was.

And the food... it was grown-up and so good.

He loved his appetizer, steak tartare. It was a favorite of Kerry's.

Brian had never had it, so he shared a bite, and then they finished it off together.

That was followed by steak and veggies, then finally a dessert to share, because they were huge and chocolatey.

By the time they were done and the bill had been paid—Brian insisted on paying—they waddled back to the car, stuffed and happy. Then Brian drove him home.

Kerry had expected Brian to take him to his place and was a little confused. "I guess I thought...."

“You have two boys at home, so I thought that maybe this weekend, since I have a few days off, we could do something, the four of us... and then once the boys are in bed and we can lock the door, you and I could have a sleepover.” Brian leaned close. “An adult sleepover... very adult.”

Kerry shivered and nodded. “Okay.”

“Good.” He kissed him, and Kerry got out of the car, closing the door before half floating up the walk and inside the house.

“I saw you kiss Mr. Brian,” Henry said as a greeting. “Kissing is yucky.”

Kerry rolled his eyes. “You won’t think so when you’re older.” He looked over at the fort that had taken over the living room. “Did you and Miss Karen have fun?”

“Yes. Can we sleep in the tent?” Phillip asked. Kerry didn’t see any reason why not. He thanked Karen and saw her to the door.

“You’re a lifesaver.”

“Any time. I miss her, too, but I see Caroline in those boys.”

“The lease is up in a few months, and I’m looking for a house to rent.

My aunt has one that will become available, and I’m going to look at that one to start.

I’d very much like to stay in this area.

I’m planning to relocate here so the boys can stay near their friends and people who knew their mother.

They deserve as much continuity as possible. ”

Karen nodded. “If that one doesn’t work out for you, then I know of a few homes that might be available soon.”

“I’m going to sell my place, and I’d like to buy a house, put down roots, and really build a life for all of us.” He had done well and saved a good amount of money over the years. His needs had never been all that great.

“I’ll let you know if I hear of anything.” Karen patted his shoulder. “I’m glad you’ll be staying here. I’d very much like to see the boys grow up. I never had children of my own, and your nephews are as close as I’ve ever gotten.”

“They love you too,” Kerry told her, and then she headed home, and Kerry got the boys settled in their tent. He was about to turn out the lights when a soft knock sounded on the door. Kerry peered outside and opened the door slowly to let Brian in.

“I thought you were going home.” He was surprised he was back so soon. Pleased as well, but part of him wondered what was wrong, and he felt himself tense.

“I’m sorry for being stupid,” he whispered, and Kerry closed the door and led Brian down the hall, away from the boys, who were already mostly asleep.

He got Brian to the bedroom and closed the door.

“I thought I was doing the right thing by leaving you and going home. But I didn’t want to. I wanted to be here with you and them.”

“Then you should have just stayed.” That was what he had wanted, but Brian had seemed reluctant. Kerry had thought that maybe he had changed his mind or something.

“Uncle Kerry,” Phillip called from outside the door. He opened it, and Phillip rushed in and jumped on the bed. “I wanna sleep in here.”

Kerry groaned softly.

“Aren’t you sleeping in your living room tent?” Brian asked. “I used of have one of those when I was a boy, but my daddy never let me sleep in it, so I think you’re pretty lucky.”

“Go on and sleep in your tent. Tomorrow, we have to take it down, so you only get tonight.”

Phillip hurried away, and Kerry sighed in relief. “I need to make sure that he gets to sleep. But I’ll be back soon.” Kerry left the room and closed the door. Then he got Phillip settled, with Pebbles, in his blankets. He made sure he was falling to sleep before quietly leaving the room.

The light was out when he returned, but he could see Brian in bed, his golden skin catching the light through the window. “Damn....”

“Come on,” Brian told him, pushing down the bedding to give Kerry a glimpse of what he was missing.

He got undressed and slipped into the bed, with Brian tugging him into his arms. “I don’t want to be apart.

For some reason, it doesn’t feel right. My place seems empty and kind of cold.

I’m very much alone when I’m there, but here, with you... I’m happy.”

“Then stay. But you know that in the morning, there will be two boys who will be in



here to wake us up. Oh, and don't forget about Pebbles, who decides that the bed is his."

Brian pressed Kerry onto his back. "That sounds perfect to me. I always wanted to family of my own, and being gay, I figured it wouldn't happen. I might have met someone who could put up with my irregular hours, but having kids... that was something I didn't think would happen for me."

"So, you want us? All of us?" Kerry asked.

"Yes. I want to see where things go. I want to take all of you to the movies and to the park, maybe get another dog that will get along with Pebbles. Have a home of our own, maybe a house with a play structure in the backyard." He nestled closer.

"Somewhere the boys can have all the fun in the world... and somewhere with a big master bedroom so we can have just as much fun." The wonderful wickedness in his voice had Kerry grinning.

"I want to see this through too." He ran his hands over Brian's back before cupping that amazing ass. "As long as you're sure."

Brian took a deep breath, and Kerry waited for his answer. "Yeah, I am, sweetheart." He lowered himself until his lips touched Kerry's, and then it was all fiery passion that made Kerry hope it never ended.

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:23 am*

“Is tomorrow Christmas, Daddy?” Phillip asked as he had each night since Thanksgiving. The first time either of the boys had called him that, Kerry had cried. Now it warmed his heart, each and every time.

“Yes. Tomorrow is Christmas, and Santa Claus is going to bring your presents as long as you get to sleep.” Kerry yawned to show his nephew that he was tired and ready for bed. Henry was already in bed and had settled down for the night. But Phillip was still awake, even after Kerry had put him to bed an hour ago. “The tree is up, and you left cookies for Santa and carrots for the reindeer. So, settle in bed.” Pebbles took that opportunity to come in and jump on the bed, settling at the bottom. “Pebbles will keep watch.”

“Okay. But I want to see Santa. I want him to give a message to my angel mommy. Santa is magic, the teacher said so.” His daycare leader must have told him. They referred to Lila as “teacher” since Henry started first grade and came home with all kinds of stories about his teacher.

“I know. But Santa won’t come if you’re still awake. Your angel mommy is watching out for you, I promise.” He knew for sure that Caroline was looking out for all of them. The lease on Caroline’s place had had three weeks to go when Aunt Marilyn’s renters finally moved out. They were able to see it, and it was perfect. So, he and Marilyn settled on a price, and until everything went through, they agreed to rent it from her. It might have been called a Cape Cod style house, with a main floor where the boys’ rooms were and a large open second floor that was their suite with bedroom and a full bath. It even had a basement, kind of unusual for the area, that had been partially finished, which they were using as a family room and play area for the boys. As soon as he saw it, Kerry knew it was right, and just like the house he and Caroline

had lived in, back east where they were born. To top it off, the house was on Carolina Drive.

He got Phillip settled and left the room, closing the door most of the way, leaving it open just enough that Pebbles could get out.

“Are they asleep?” Brian whispered as he came up behind him, his arms going around his waist, pulling his back against Brian’s firm chest.

“Not quite yet,” Kerry told him. Brian tightened his hold, and Kerry knew what he was getting for Christmas, and he looked forward to the unwrapping. “We need to give them a few minutes. Where did you put everything?” They had set out a few gifts under the tree, but most of them had been hidden.

“I locked them in the closet upstairs. Don’t go up there.” Apparently, there were enough that if he opened the door, an avalanche was possible. “We’ll give it a few minutes.”

“Oh, and what will we do?” Kerry asked.

Brian snickered and guided him to the sofa, where they both sat down and began making out almost immediately. Brian moved in just before Halloween, and they found it hard to keep their hands off each other. Not that Kerry was complaining for a single second. With Brian’s sometimes unpredictable schedule, he’s learned to enjoy the time they had rather than lamenting when Brian had to work.

“God, I love you,” Brian whispered.

Kerry leaned closer, loving Brian’s scent. “I love you too.” It had taken some time before they had said those words the first time, but now they felt so right, easy, and special. It felt like they had wasted those weeks.

“Kerry,” Brian whispered as Kerry pushed Brian’s shirt upward, exposing that powerful chest and ripped belly. “The boys.”

“They’re asleep,” Kerry said softly.

“Then we need to get the presents, and then you and I can unwrap each other.” Brian pulled down his shirt, and Kerry fake grumped, grabbing Brian’s butt as they climbed the stairs.

Brian carefully opened the closet, and they loaded up on gifts, took them down, and placed them under the tree. They had put all of their gifts, as well as those they received in the mail, aside so that Christmas morning would have a huge impact. It took a number of trips, but eventually, all the gifts were under the tree.

Brian’s parents were coming from Portland and would arrive late morning. They planned to stay a few days and would spoil the boys rotten, Kerry was pretty sure. They treated the boys like their grandchildren, and Kerry was thrilled that the boys would have grandparents.

“Is that it?” Kerry asked, glancing at the pile of presents that spilled out from under the tree in the living room. “I sure hope so.”

“Actually...,” Brian said. “There’s one more, but it isn’t under the tree.” Brian stood in front of him and then went down on one knee. Kerry went speechless, and Brian pulled out a small box from his pocket. “I want you to marry me. I want to be Phillip and Henry’s papa and watch them grow up and be part of their lives. And I want us to grow old together and have grandchildren.” Kerry couldn’t say anything. “Will you?”

“Yes,” Kerry stammered, and Brian slipped a simple gold ring set with diamonds on his finger. Then he stood, and Brian kissed him. He took his hand, and after turning out the lights, they went upstairs to celebrate.

Kerry woke in the morning. It was just lightening outside, but he got up, dressed, and turned on the lights and made sure the house was festive for when the boys woke. Brian was still in bed as he started the coffee. Once it was ready, he took a mug and stepped outside in the crisp morning air. The sky was a bright blue as he turned to the east. Mount Rainier was out in all its snow-covered glory, glimmering like a huge jewel.

“What are you doing out here?” Brian asked as he closed the door, pulling his robe closer around him before slipping one of his arms around Kerry’s waist.

“Look,” he said, pointing and saying no more. In that moment, it felt as though all the clouds were gone from their lives, and the future was as bright and clear as the mountain. “That was Caroline’s favorite view.” They stood together, watching until the squeals of the boys pulled them back inside.