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Liam Strickland – 24 Years Old – Senior Business Analyst (Looks a little like Steve Sandvoss, with honey blond hair that is a little long on top and around the ears, his eyes are hazel.)

Rick Romano – 28 Years Old – Fireman (Rick looks a lot like Sagi Kalev in the face. He's taller than Sagi, and not quite as muscular, but very broad in the shoulders)

Cassandra (Cassie) Niece – 2 Years Old

Christopher (Chris) or (Crissie as Cassie calls him) – 7 Years Old

Jack – Liam's Boyfriend/Partner – 27 Years Old (Looks like Brian Kinney, has the same confident demeanor, knows what he wants and goes for it. This is what Liam found so attractive about Jack. His take charge attitude and his confidence.)

Julie – Liam's Sister – 30 Years Old – deceased in fire

Adam – Liam's Brother-in-Law – 32 Years Old – also deceased in fire

Rebecca – Liam and Julie's mother

Frank – Liam and Julie's father

Detective Mitch Seavers – Detective working the arson case and Stacey's boyfriend, although sometimes he doesn't want to admit it.

Stacey Peters – Fire Station Administrative Secretary, Rick's sister and Mitch's girlfriend.

Story Summary:

Liam, an openly gay man, has his life turned upside down when his sister and brother-in-law die in a fire at their home, leaving him to take care of his niece and nephew. Follow Liam as he tries to keep his life together.

Chapter 1

Rick and a few other firemen were combing through the rubble, searching for hot spots. Although there wasn't much left, they needed to make sure it was safe for the fire inspectors. Rick, being the fire captain, was responsible for making sure everything was secure before the inspectors took over.

It was pretty evident that the fire was arson. The fire had burned too hot and too fast for it not to be arson. It was obvious that some sort of accelerant was used. This fire took a lot with it, by the time they arrived on the scene, the fire had already taken over most of the house. They lost two men to this fire and two more were in the hospital. There were also two other occupants in the house that were found on the stairs, already deceased. It was obvious that they were trying to

escape. Neighbors informed the police that the couple had two young children. This was how we lost our two comrades. As it turned out, there were no other occupants in the home at the time.

The police had already started working to locate the next of kin, since they also needed to determine the whereabouts of the two young children, seven year old Christopher and two year old Cassandra. The neighbors had already identified the deceased as Mr. and Mrs. Adam Rockford. They were a fairly influential family and well known in the community. Adam was a very successful criminal lawyer. In fact, there was talk about him running for District Attorney. His wife Julie, was also a lawyer, however she worked in legal aid/poverty law. Both were well respected and the loss would really hurt the community.

As it turned out, the missing children were located when the police arrived at the home of Julie's parents. Today had been the Rockford's ten year wedding anniversary, so Julie's parents had taken the children for the night. The police asked Julie's parents to come down to the morgue to make a positive identification on the bodies. Although the neighbors had already identified the bodies, they wanted a relative to actually make the final identification. Julie's mom, Rebecca asked the officers if she could contact her son, Liam, to go down and make the identification. She was concerned about her husband. Frank has a weak heart and she was worried that it would be too hard on him, plus, Rebecca didn't want to leave the children.

Liam had just finished working on some figures provided by one of his clients and was settling down to relax in front of the TV. Tomorrow being Saturday, he was looking forward to relaxing and taking it easy over the weekend. Jack, his partner, was out of town on business and wasn't due back for another week. Jack was the CEO of a large software development firm and traveled a lot, but Liam could count on him to call every evening. Jack and Liam have been together now for almost ten years. They had met when Jack had hired Liam to conduct a financial feasibility study and prepare a proposal for new business markets. Liam had just sat down with the remote in hand when the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Liam, it's mom." Liam knew instantly that something was wrong. He could tell from the sound of his mother's voice, but before he could ask, she continued.

"There's been a fire at your sister's. Liam, they are both dead." She sobbed, not being able to hold herself together any more. "Liam, Julie and Rick are gone." She said again, almost as if she couldn't believe it and was trying to convince herself as well as Liam.

Liam was speechless, he didn't know what to say, but managed, "I'll be right there, mom."

No, wait Liam, the police... The police want a family member to go over to the morgue to identify the bodies. I don't think your father should go, I don't think his heart could handle it." *'No, his heart couldn't,'* thought Liam. "Anyway," she continued, "I need to stay here with the kids. God, the kids, I'll have to tell them. How am I supposed to tell the kids?" And, she was sobbing again.

“Mom, I’ll head over to the morgue, and then I’ll head over there, Okay? Don’t worry; I’ll take care of everything. You and dad just stay there. We’ll figure out how to tell Chris and Cassie as soon as I get there, Okay?”

“Okay Liam, we’ll wait for you.” With that, Liam hung up the phone.

As soon as Liam hung up, he picked it up again to call Jack. Jack answered his cell phone immediately. Liam rarely called him, usually waiting for Jack’s call. So, Jack knew something had to be wrong.

Jack offered to come home immediately, but Liam didn’t think that was necessary. Instead, he told Jack he would call him once he knew more. Jack didn’t like the idea, but they finally compromised with Jack coming home Monday evening, rather than a week from today. This would give Jack some time to adjust his schedule, but also get him home early to be with Liam. After hanging up with Jack, Liam headed out the door.

An hour and a half later, Liam was on his way over to his sister’s house after identifying the bodies. It was hard. It hadn’t seemed real until he actually saw the bodies. It was at that point he broke down. It was real. His sister was gone. He sobbed quietly for some time before a police detective came in to talk to him. They had some papers that Liam needed to sign and then proceeded to ask him a number of questions concerning his sister and brother-in-law. They were hoping that they could get some sort of lead to start the investigation. Apparently, the police suspected that the fire was intentional.

After leaving the police station, he had decided he needed to see the house. He wasn’t sure why, but he just had to.

When he arrived at the house, he was shocked. He honestly didn’t know what to expect, but this definitely wasn’t what he expected. The house was gone. There was nothing left, except for the foundation. Wow! His car slowed to a complete stop in the middle of the road, his eyes locked on the house, his breathing stopped. Wow! He finally took a deep breath and blinked as tears again stung his eyes. Everything was gone. He started the car forward again and realized there were still several emergency vehicles parked in front of the house.

Liam pulled up behind one of the vehicles, exited the car and stood in front of the house, or what was left of it. Frozen in place, staring at the spot where the house used to be, Liam was again blinking back tears, while trying to figure out why he’d come here.

Rick was talking to one of the fire inspectors when he noticed the man standing in front of the house. It was obvious the man didn’t belong here. He wasn’t uniformed, but instead was dressed in faded jeans and a green v-neck t-shirt. He was tall, with honey blond hair. He was actually a very good looking man, probably about 25 years old. However, good looking or not, he obviously didn’t belong here. So, Rick decided to question the man.

“Hello, I’m Captain Romano. Can I help you?” Rick asked, as he arrived next to the blond.

Liam was startled out of his thoughts, to see a large man wearing a firefighter's uniform, standing in front of him. Liam hadn't even realized there were other people here. It only stood to reason, since there were still several emergency vehicles here, but he was so caught up in the sight before him, that he didn't even notice the people. He looked up at the man, not quite sure what to say. He was sure the man said something to him, but didn't hear it over his thoughts.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" He asked.

"I said, I'm Captain Romano. I'm the fire captain in charge. Can I help you with anything?" Rick repeated.

"Oh, no...Yes...Wait, I'm Liam Strickland, this is...was...is my sister's house." Liam shook his head, trying to clear it, trying to figure out what to say. Continuing, he said "I just left the morgue after identifying their bodies. I don't know why I'm here, I... I just wanted to see what was left. I..." He trailed off again, not sure what else to say.

Rick reached out and put a hand on Liam's shoulder, hoping to offer some comfort. "This must be really hard for you. I'm sorry for your loss and I'm sorry that you have to go through this. You are welcome to have a look around, but you'll have to stay on this side of the crime scene tape until the inspectors are done." With that, Rick walked off, leaving Liam alone. Liam watched him walk off. It was evident that the Captain had been working the fire. He was covered in soot and looked exhausted. He was an extremely large man with broad shoulders and amazingly blue eyes. Liam only noticed them because they stood out in stark contrast to the sooty face. They were beautiful eyes though.

Shaking himself again, trying to again regain focus, he decided he needed to head over to his parents. He was certain that they were probably wondering what was taking him so long.

When he arrived at his parent's house, his mom immediately consumed him in a hug. Holding him, squeezing him, sobbing uncontrollably. Liam pulled her away, grasped her face between his palms and wiped her tears with his thumbs, then leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead.

"Don't worry mom, we'll get through this. Everything will be alright. How are the kids doing?" He asked, hoping to keep his mom busy, help keep her focused.

"They are fine. They've been sleeping through the whole thing." Liam hadn't even given any thought to the time. He looked at his watch and realized it was close to 2am. His mom continued. "I still don't know what I should tell them, but I figured I would just let them sleep. No sense in waking them up now."

Liam nodded his head in agreement. "Mom, they say it was arson."

"I know Liam. The police would like your dad and I to come down to the police station tomorrow. They want to ask us some questions." She told him.

Speaking of his father, “How is dad doing? Is he handling this okay?” Liam asked.

With that, his dad walked into the entryway and hugged him tightly. “I’m doing fine Liam, considering. Mom’s been hovering over me, driving me crazy, but otherwise I’m doing fine. How are you doing? Best come in. The kids are asleep in their mom’s room, so your old room is ready for you. Why don’t we all try to get some sleep? We’re going to have one hell of a day tomorrow.”

“Yeah, okay dad. I don’t know that I’ll really be able to sleep, but you’re right about tomorrow.”

Chapter 2

With very little sleep, Liam dragged himself into the kitchen, intent on having a large cup of very black coffee. When he walked into the kitchen, he was surprised to see his dad already sitting at the table, nursing a cup of coffee.

Grabbing a cup for himself, he joined his father at the table. “Rough night for you too?” Liam asked.

“Yeah, I’m worried about your mother. Liam…” His dad started. Liam looked from his cup of coffee, up into his father’s eyes. His dad looked tired. *‘I guess none of us really got any sleep last night,’* he thought to himself.

His father continued, “You know, you’ll need to take the kids.” He said, while obviously trying to hold it together. “We would love to have them, but your mother already has so much to deal with. She already worries over me so much. We’ll help out as much as we can, but Chris and Cassie, they don’t need to be living with us, if something should happen to me. Don’t get me wrong,” he stopped, holding up his hand to stop what his son was obviously going to say, “I don’t plan on going anywhere soon, but I also didn’t plan to have a heart attack. But, if something did happen to me, I don’t want the kids to be here, so close to it. I just think it’s best for your mother and for the kids. Do you understand Liam?”

Yes, he did understand, but what would he do with two young kids? He and Jack had never even thought about kids, but now, what choice did he have. There was no way he would turn his back on Chris and Cassie. Oh, he knew his parents would take the kids if he refused, but he knew his dad was right. It would be best for everyone if the kids went with him.

“Okay dad, I’ll take the kids. Jack and I have plenty of room at the apartment. We can do this.” He said, working to convince himself more so than his dad.

“Thank you, Liam. That’s one less worry. Just, don’t tell your mom about our conversation. I know she has every intention of taking the kids, but we’ll explain to her that it’s best for them to stay with you.”

“Yeah dad, that’s fine.” After that, they sat in silence, finishing their coffee.

Liam's mother joined them shortly after and started breakfast, knowing the kids would be awake soon.

After they all ate breakfast and the kids were settled in front of the television watching Saturday morning cartoons, Liam and his parents sat at the table, quietly talking about what would happen to the kids and how best to tell them.

After some argument back and forth, Liam's mother finally agreed that it would be best if he took the kids. They decided that Liam would head out and work on getting their apartment ready and that Liam's mom and dad would tell the kids what happened.

On the drive back to his apartment, all Liam could think about, was how glad he was, that he didn't have to be there when they told the kids. Then, he felt guilty for not being there. This conflict went over and over in his head for the entire drive home.

Once he arrived home, he decided he needed to focus on getting things ready for the kids. Jack and Liam had a really nice 4-bedroom loft style apartment in the upscale district of the small city where they lived. It would be easy to accommodate the kids. They, for obvious reasons, had the master bedroom, and the room directly across the hall was their office. The first of the two bedrooms down the hall was set up as a guest bedroom and it wouldn't take much effort to get it ready. The last bedroom however, was used primarily for storage, which means he would need to start going through everything and clearing it out.

Three hours later, he had everything sorted and cleared out. A few of the boxes would go to Goodwill and what was left he would store under the stairwell. He made a call to Goodwill and then hauled all the other boxes to the stairwell closet. Deciding that the kids should have normal kid's furniture, all of the furniture in the guest bedroom would be going to Goodwill as well. He wanted them to feel at home, to feel welcome.

Just as he was preparing to head out to get some lunch and do some furniture shopping, his doorbell rang. Opening the door, he saw a man that looked vaguely familiar. The man had an armload of boxes in his arms and several bags surrounding him. Perplexed, Liam asked, "Can I help you?"

"Uhh... Yeah, you can relieve me of a few of these boxes," the man said.

As soon as Liam heard the voice, he knew who was at his door. "Captain Romano," he said, the surprise evident in his voice.

"Rick," Rick replied.

"What?" Liam asked.

"Rick, you can call me Rick"

“Oh, okay. Sorry, I’m just surprised to see you here. Here, let me help you with some of those.” Liam said, finally coming out of his stupor and taking some of the packages from Rick’s hands. “So, why are you here? Have you found out something more about the fire?”

“No, not yet, but the guys and I at the firehouse, got a few things for the kids. Since they lost everything, we all pooled together and got them some clothing and toys and stuff. I hope that’s okay.” Rick said, somewhat nervous. God, but Liam sure was a good looking man.

“Oh yes, definitely. I was just getting the extra rooms in our apartment ready for them. I hadn’t even thought about clothes and toys. I was actually just heading out to get some lunch and then do some furniture shopping for their rooms. I can’t even begin to imagine everything that they are going to need. This is just all so surreal.” Liam replied.

“Well, I’d be happy to help. I’ve got 12 nieces and nephews ranging in ages between 3 months and 12 years, I can help you get everything you’ll need. Plus, I’ve got a truck.” Rick offered with a grin.

“Rick, that would be great, are you sure? Can I buy you lunch first? I haven’t eaten much today and don’t think I could manage much more before passing out.” Liam asked.

“Sure, lunch sounds good. Let’s just get the rest of these bags and boxes from the hall and we can be on our way.”

During lunch, Liam learned that Rick came from a very large Italian family and had six siblings, three brothers and three sisters. He was the youngest by several years. All of his siblings are married and have two kids each and one of his sisters is currently pregnant with niece or nephew number thirteen.

Listening to Rick talk, Liam couldn’t help but admire how strikingly handsome Rick was. He was a very large man, with very broad shoulders. His Italian background gave him a beautifully olive colored skin tone. His hair was dark brown, cut short in the back, with longer wisps in the front that hung down his forehead a little. It looked like he pretty much had a permanent five o’clock shadow that was as sexy as hell. His eyes though, were what really stood out. They were a gorgeous grey, green, and blue, with a darker blue rim around the edges. Wow, you could really get lost in those eyes. In fact, he was lost in them, brought back to reality by Rick waving a hand in front of his face.

“Liam, are you still with me?” Rick chuckled, knowing full well that Liam was eyeing him as though he were tonight’s dessert.

Liam started and then stumbled with something to say, while surreptitiously wiping the drool from his mouth. Jeesh, he had really zoned out there. “Sorry, I was lost in thought, I guess I’ve got a lot going on right now.” Liam said.

“Don’t worry about it. Under the circumstances, I completely understand. Besides, I tend to talk too much. Should we go ahead and check out the furniture store?”

“Oh, yeah, sure; the place where we bought most of the furniture for the apartment is pretty close by. We can head over there.” Liam stated as he left money on the table to cover lunch.

They spent the next two hours deciding on the furniture. After the truck was loaded up with two twin beds, two dressers and two desks, they headed back to the apartment. They worked quietly while they set up the furniture, only discussing how to arrange things. After the furniture was situated, they started going through the bags and boxes that Rick had brought with him.

Liam was surprised by the large numbers of items that were brought over. He couldn't believe that everyone at the station could be so thoughtful. There were several outfits each, including undergarments. There were stuffed animals, dolls, Playdoh, paints, Hot Wheels cars, movies, even a bright red fire engine. Just the thought of so many caring people coming together to help them out, brought new tears to his eyes.

Rick, watching Liam's reaction, said “Hey, we lost a couple of our men in that fire. Keith had been with the fire department for eleven years and Roger had been with us for about six years. They were part of our family. We all figured this would be a good way to pay tribute to their lives, to their sacrifice. Everyone pitched in, even some of the guys from the police station.”

Liam was speechless. “I don't know what to say. Thank you just doesn't seem like it's enough.”

“Liam, those two kids are now part of our family. No thanks are necessary. Now, let's get all this stuff put away.” And with that said, they both started distributing all the items between the rooms.

When the rooms were ready, Liam called his parents and asked them to bring the kids over. Then he called and ordered pizza for everyone.

When his parents arrived, Cassie threw herself into Liam's arms.

“Unca Leem, Unca Leem,” Cassie exclaimed excitedly, as she was enveloped in Liam's arms.

“Hey kiddo,” he said as he gave her a big smack on the cheek, causing her to giggle. “How ya doin?” He asked.

“Hmmm,” was her only reply as she eyed Rick suspiciously over Liam's shoulder.

Christopher was standing with Rebecca and Frank. He didn't look too good. It was obvious that he understood what was going on better than Cassie did. Setting Cassie down, but taking her hand, Liam headed over to where Chris stood.

“Hey Chris, how are you doing?” Liam asked.

“Fine,” was the only reply he got, so Liam continued. “I ordered pizza for dinner. Hope you're hungry. I also set up rooms for you and Cassie upstairs at the end of the hall. Why don't you guys go take a look, then wash up for dinner.”

Chris took Cassie's hand from Liam and they both headed silently upstairs.

Liam finally turned to Rick and introduced him to his parents. While his parents and Rick were discussing the details of the fire, the doorbell rang. Liam excused himself to pay for the pizza, and then put the pizza and some plates in the dining room.

"Hey, Mom, Dad, Rick, everything's set up in the dining room. Help yourselves. I'm just gonna head upstairs and get the kids."

Once upstairs, Liam found Chris laying down on his bed and Cassie sitting there with him.

"Hey guys, the pizza's here, are you hungry?"

Cassie immediately started hopping up and down and repeating "pizza, pizza, pizza." Chris however, didn't show any enthusiasm at all.

"Chris, aren't you hungry?"

"No, Uncle Liam, I'm just really tired. Can I go to sleep?"

"Sure buddy, no problem. If you wake up and are hungry, just come on downstairs and help yourself. Okay?"

"Okay, thanks Uncle Liam."

With that, Liam picked up Cassie and headed downstairs.

When he got to the living room, Rick was just setting up a couple of phone books on one of the chairs for Cassie. Looking up at Liam, he said, "You'll need to add a booster seat to your list of things for the kids."

Before Liam could respond, Rebecca asked where Chris was.

"He said he was tired, that he just wanted to sleep." Cassie added to that statement with "Crissie sad."

"Yes, sweetie, Crissie sad, but don't worry, he'll be ok." Liam reassured her.

While they ate, they discussed the funeral arrangements. Rebecca had decided that she would go ahead and take care of everything on that end, since Liam was going to have his hands full with the kids.

After dinner, while Cassie was watching one of her new movies, they discussed the issue of school and daycare for the kids. Liam had already decided that he would keep the kids in the

same school for as long as possible. Since he was, in effect, a consultant and self-employed, he could adjust his schedule as necessary.

Frank brought up the fact that Julie and Adam had a will in place with the law firm where Adam was a lawyer. It was decided that Frank would contact the law firm and make an appointment to go over the will. Julie's parents had been named as Chris and Cassie's legal guardians if something should happen to them, but if they were not in a position to care for the kids, then guardianship fell to Liam.

Julie and Adam had a pretty sizeable estate, so the kids wouldn't need anything financially.

Finally, around 8 o'clock, they had decided to call it a night. Liam said goodbye to his parents and then turned to Rick.

"Rick, thanks so much for your help today. I don't know that I could have made it through the day without your help."

"I'm glad to have been some help. Let me give you my number, feel free to call me if you need anything. Also, everyone at the station would love to have the kids come by for a tour. I think that Chris would probably love to see the station and maybe go for a ride on one of the trucks. Maybe it would help distract him, even for just a short time." Rick replied.

"Thanks Rick, I don't know what to say, except that we'll definitely take you up on that offer." Liam said, as Rick handed him his business card.

After saying goodbye to Rick, Liam went back into the living room to find that Cassie had fallen asleep on the floor, her movie still playing.

"Guess you've had a pretty tiring day too, little one." He said, turning off the TV and gently picking Cassie up and carrying her to bed.

Later that night, Liam was relaxing on the couch, consumed with grief, tears streaming down his face while he was going through old photo albums of his family. He had lots of pictures of his sister. It was hard to believe that he would never see her again. They had so many memories. Julie had always been so protective of him. He remembered her wedding, remembered when both the kids were born. He was so excited to be an uncle. God, how was he going to manage to raise these kids? He had no idea how to be a father.

He was brought out of his thoughts by the phone ringing. Looking at his watch, he knew it would be Jack.

"Hello?"

"Hey, babe, how are you doing?"

“Jack, oh, it’s nice to hear your voice. I’m doing okay. I’m pretty beat though. Listen, we need to talk about something.”

“Oh? What’s up?” Jack questioned.

“Well, I’m taking the kids. Mom and dad can’t really take care of them, so that leaves me. I don’t know what else to do, I’m the only one. I went ahead and cleaned up the two extra bedrooms and furnished them today. I really hope this is all okay with you. I really didn’t have any other choice.” Liam said quickly.

There was a long silence on the other end of the phone and that had Liam really worried.

Finally, Jack answered with, “Liam, I don’t know what to say to that. Kids weren’t really part of my plan. I like the fact that we’re not tied down with anything, that we have the freedom to come and go as we please. I like it being just us. I guess I just need to think about it a little bit.”

“That’s okay, I understand. This is really sudden and definitely a drastic change. We’ll still be able to do things together, just you and I, my parents will be here to help out, so we won’t be doing this alone.” Liam responded.

“I know, I’ll be home on Monday night and we can talk more then. I love you.”

“I love you too.” Liam said before he hung up the phone.

‘Well, I’m not exactly sure if that went well or not,’ Liam thought to himself as he proceeded to put away the photo albums and head to bed.

He woke with a start, not sure what woke him, but only that he was certain he heard something. Glancing at the clock, and collapsing back on the bed with a huge sigh. “God, its 4 o’clock in the morning, what now,” he grumbled while heading out of the room to check on the kids.

He heard the crying before he even made it out of his room. The crying was followed by someone calling, “Mommy”, over and over again. Not frantic, just calling. Obviously, Cassie wanted mommy. She’s really too young to comprehend what’s happened and that mommy won’t be coming back.

Hurrying into Cassie’s room, he sat down next to her, hoping to console her.

“Shhhh, sweetie, Uncle Liam is here.” He said, while enveloping her in his arms.

She clung to him, while saying, “Want mommy, I want my mommy.”

“I know sweetie, but remember that Gammy told you that mommy can’t be here?”

This didn't help, she just kept sobbing and asking for her mommy. Liam's heart was broken and he didn't know what to do. "Hey, sweetie, you want to come and sleep with Uncle Liam tonight?" He asked, hoping that would help.

He got a nod of the head, a snuffle, and then an "uh huh" in reply.

Picking her up, he carried her to his bed, where she proceeded to curl up with him and go back to sleep.

Sleep however, eluded Liam. His thoughts swimming with everything that needed to be done, while also wondering how he was going to deal with all of this, wondering what changes his life was going to be forced to take.

Author's Note: Thank you for taking the time to read my story and I hope you've enjoyed it so far. If you are interested in commenting, good or bad, you can e-mail me at myoregon12@yahoo.com

Also, I would like to thank Miguel Sanchez, author of "You Can Run But You Can't Hide" for reviewing and editing these first two chapters. His story can be found on the Nifty Archive under the beginnings section.