

CLAUDIA HAUER

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## Take What You Get

Reuben called in late February, he had a client in Omaha and could stay over one night. Jax got him a base pass and keyed him in.  
“Fucking prison.”

They went out. After dinner, Jax told him about Ashley. “There’s this girl. She’s having a baby in April.”

“Your baby, dude? You’re fucking kidding me! You’re going to be a father?” Reuben was excited.

“I’m not going to get that involved.”

“What the hell? Haven’t you learned anything?”

Reuben hadn’t talked to Mom and Dad in years. Once in high school a kid had taunted Jax and Reuben, said if it weren’t for them, he might wonder if their parents had ever had sex. Reuben had exploded. Jax had just stood there, thinking, trying to figure it out. Reuben had got Dad’s aggressiveness, and Jax had got the passiveness. They had split it between them.

“You’re too young to be like that, to be dead before you lived. Give yourself permission to have a real life.” Reuben always had to be moving forward.

“I’m alive,” Jax said. Everything that lived craved life. Life, life, life. Where did this urge for life come from? Everything clung to life. Fish went crazy when you caught them. And people, they would get all these machines to try to save them when they were gone already. Animals knew how to take what they got. People did not.

He had a kid coming. He should stay stateside, get a job, spend time with his family. Ashley had gotten the test and it was going to be a girl. Good. A guy was allowed to spoil his daughter. He could take her to the playground, buy her treats,

and he wouldn't have to dish out the discipline like with a boy. But could he deal with Ashley? She hadn't even had the kid yet and already she had an endless stream of things Jax had to do just so. He could see it - the kid would be screaming, but he would have to get the coat on her if it was cold. If Ashley thought it was cold. He had seen guys badgered like that. Pathetic.

He would have to move off base. Being in the army, living in the barracks, that worked for him. Someone told him what he had to do, and he did it. That was all. You got through one thing at a time. And they went easy on him because of his injury. It was on the record, the sergeants all knew. Jax could do the stuff they gave him to do, and people accepted him. Life was empty, but that's how life was.

The night he met Ashley there was a storm in the air. Thunder in the distance. He had longed to be outside, somewhere wild, with trees, plants with wet leaves, just him alone. He liked the rain, it made things feel closed in. It never rained in Iraq. He wished there were hills around. Kansas was so flat. His unit had done some training in Georgia, he had liked that you couldn't see very far for the trees. Jax didn't like being able to see so much in every direction. He already knew things were empty, he didn't need to have it reinforced. Iraq had been awful like that.

As a kid, he used to walk out at night in the open spaces behind his house. He would stand and look up at the windows of his and Reuben's bedroom, at that regimented little room with its identical twin beds. Everything had always had to be a certain way, disciplined and orderly, or Mom and Dad flapped around like fish out of water. Desperate, with no strategy, no plan. For Jax's part, he would have liked to make it work for them, but Reuben always turned it inside out, tore it apart. The army was regimented too, but they knew how to handle it if things got chaotic. You didn't have to worry that they wouldn't be able to handle something.

Jax would look up at that window and pretend to be a stranger. Who lived there? Such a cozy house. A close family? A happy family tucked into their lives for the night?

Ashley had been impressed when Jax told her his father was a preacher. She thought it meant he would be nice, some kind man you would want to confess to. Jax had felt a little sad that she wouldn't get what she wanted. Must be nice for all those people who get the unconditional kind of love. But Ashley was used to it at least, what with her parents so busy saying Goddamn and For Christ's sake at each other, and the kid wouldn't know family could be any different until it grew up a little.

He had gone to a 4<sup>th</sup> of July party at someone's house with a big porch. Ashley had been there with some friends, all wearing KSU sweatshirts. Pony tails and mascara. Churchy girls. Not his type.

The guys had started passing around their pistols, comparing them. Jax knew they wouldn't use them, they just liked to hold them in their hands. Made sense to him. He liked guys who understood that if you got pushed, you push back. People talked about morals, well, morals were simple: you fought back when you got bullied. Jax didn't have a lot of that, although he wished he did. He'd had more before his head injury changed him, but he'd never had much. But he fit in, especially after he got hurt, and he knew he was okay because the guys accepted him. That's what made America great, guys like that. They knew how to defend themselves, and what we had here. Not like those Iraqis who would shoot at anything. No discipline, no sense of how much energy it took to protect your own. You wanted morality? Morality was staying vigilant all the time. But the poor bastards didn't have anything to protect, in that wasteland.

Why had he signed up? It was hard to remember. To get away from Dad was the most likely explanation. But he had also wanted to see something more of the world. Fight if he had to. As it worked out, he hadn't done much fighting. Mostly worked in the back of things, in supply. Looking at the war that way, from the supply truck, he had seen how much of it was chance. Dumb luck, whether your convoy or the next one hit the IED. Whether you were on the right side of the vehicle or the left. Sometimes it was even a matter of minutes, seconds. Like when his Humvee had got hit. He had known it was bad because when he came to, he was seeing the world through a tunnel, and it didn't go away like when you wake up from a deep sleep. But he was grateful to the guys – they had stayed with him until he was medevac-ed.

That was why Jax couldn't jock it around too much, that night at the party. Guys were angry. The Red White and Blue had taken a hit out of nowhere. Jax respected that, he just couldn't really go there. He'd always sort of envied people who could get angry. They seemed more real. Like Reuben. Reuben was so sharp, so alive. Jax felt a low level anger all the time, but he kept it on simmer, otherwise he felt sick and confused. He would walk around like a zombie trying to get back to equilibrium. So that night, he walked out into the backyard away from all the bravado to feel the rain, and thought about trying to get a ride back to base. Ashley walked out into the yard after him. She wanted to save him, the soldier boy. She had no idea how many defenses he had for that move.

Jax was sneering a little at her on the inside, but he didn't walk away. Ashley's face was shiny from the rain, which was light and cool. Jax played the part as they talked about her nursing job, her friends. She had brought her car and he left with her. They went to McDonald's for some fries, and she talked through it all. It had seemed fine at the time. It was a night when he felt normal.

They slept together by accident. Literally. Some guy turned too close in front of Jax's truck, and Jax clipped him. Jax's pickup had just spun around and had a cave-in on the front bumper, but the guy's car had flipped. The guy was okay. Jax helped him out while Ashley called the cops. Jax was jittery. Bad luck, the timing of it. A millisecond later and the accident wouldn't have happened. Or good luck. A millisecond earlier and someone might have died. He was still trembling when he and Ashley got in the tow truck, and when they got to Ashley's apartment, she took him inside.

When Ashley told him the pregnancy test was positive, Jax wasn't surprised. She had been so wet, and the sex had been easy, too easy. Things were bad between them for a month or two as it dawned on Ashley that he wasn't going to come around and marry her.

"You'll be better off doing it all your way," Jax told her. Of course he would give her money, whatever he had. He wouldn't feel right if he didn't. He knew what really bugged her was what people would think of her. Ashley wanted so much not to be like her folks, she wanted to be perfect. But in between the hormones and realizing it could be kind of cool to be a single mom, she got nice to him again. They went out to eat sometimes, and he would stop by to help her move things around in her apartment. She got big into her church, always talking about giving to others, but she got a big return on what she gave. She got to feel forgiven, she got her special feeling.

"Anyway," Jax said, "I might have to go back to Iraq."

Reuben threw himself back in his chair. "What the fuck? Just get out."

"Can't." Jax knew Reuben didn't know how it worked, and he was going to keep that to himself, let them all think he had to go. A matter of pride.

"Wow, dude. Why'd you get caught up in that? Stupid."

Jax had seen men die, men he had lived with, hung out with. Some died and some didn't. It didn't have anything to do with who they were, whether they believed in God the right way. Whether they had killed some kid or not. Pretty random, really. Maybe that was Mom's view too. One of her sons still came by for visits. One didn't. But it was nothing she could change.

He was a coward, Jax knew that. But he had done okay over there. Not the most aggressive maybe, but he had done his job. Yet he had watched his buddies get blown up, blown apart, and it hadn't broken his heart like it did with the brave ones. He couldn't feel the grief and rage the others felt. Oh, he felt angry, a sick kind of angry all the time, at having to be there. But he hadn't cared enough. He was friendly with everyone, but he never had a best buddy. Especially after the IED, he had trouble really thinking about death, even though it was all around him. It took too much energy. The guys that were brave, it was because they had lost someone. They had grieved. They had the energy for rage.

Reuben was not done. "Get out. Get a job. Get a life. Good God, you've served your country and didn't get shot or blown up. You're allowed to live, for Christ's sake."

Jax stared down at his hands on the table. Why in the hell was he seriously thinking he would stay in and go back? He wasn't suicidal, not really. He wanted to take his baby girl to the zoo on a sunny day and get ice cream. Live it out, one day at a time. What was that Reuben had said? For Christ's sake. Ashley's Dad always threw that around too. What in hell did that mean? Why did people say that?

Ashley had told him last week that she wanted to get a paternity test as soon as the baby was born. Bitch. Of course her parents had put her up to that, he could just hear her father yelling at her to get the goddamn test. Knowing Ashley, she would have thought of it eventually. But she wouldn't have needed it if she hadn't made a thing of it. When he had told her he would support the kid, he had meant it.

Jax suddenly had to fill the silence. He looked up. "Hey, Reub, you going to get back in touch with Mom and Dad?"

"They put you up to that?"

Jax stared at his brother. Outrage formed in the back of his mind, but there was no way to get it to his mouth. There never had been. Reuben was radiating suspicion and anger. Jax waited for his outrage to fade. It didn't take long. He knew it would be okay. There was space for him in the world, it was just a smaller kind of space than one might expect. He could get used to that.

"They still have our bedroom just like it was," he said.

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