



A
BROKEN
REALITY

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Danny Madsen had been missing for four days, and hope was fading faster than the weak sunlight giving in to the cold night ahead. Worse, there'd been intermittent periods of snow and sleet throughout the day, creating slick surfaces on unlit county roads and leaving behind asphalt without traction or boundaries.

Like every other evening since the boy's disappearance, the approaching dusk put a damper on the search effort. Each was another day past the critical "48-hour window," another night for Jesse Carlton to fight back tears of frustration as he crawled the icy streets of Hingham, Massachusetts in his silver BMW, looking for the ten-year-old boy the Amber Alert described over and over as white with blond hair and blue eyes, weighing fifty-six pounds and standing about four feet six inches. When last seen, they'd always add, he was wearing a bright blue North Face coat, blue corduroy pants, Nike sneakers and a backpack with the name "Danny" stitched into the left shoulder strap.

Danny's description echoed in Jesse's head as he made the right off of Main Avenue onto Forest, which passed the hundred or so square acres of conservation land. He didn't need the Amber Alert to picture Danny. He'd recognize him the instant he saw him since he'd known the boy from the day he was born. Jesse had long been best friends with his parents, Becky and Don, and Danny had become the son Jesse and Melissa tried and tried for but could never have. They'd become so close to the Madsens, in fact, that they'd purchased a home up the block from them, sight unseen, when Becky and Don told them it had come on the market. It was apparent to all of them that the less distance between the families, the more fulfilled their lives would be.

It was this honorary parenting of Becky and Don's only child that had Jesse driving the streets and highways in and outside of every neighboring town for the past four nights—pursuing

leads he'd overheard cops discussing at the Madsen home, following up on hunches he'd get after scouring the Internet for clues from past abductions. Each evening as he began his search, Jesse prayed he'd be the one to bring Danny home safe, sound and emotionally intact.

Jesse knew his nightly searches were pointless, but he could no longer bear pacing the floor at home or sitting in the Madsen's cop-filled living room waiting for another bullshit tip, another clue that led nowhere but deeper into heartache. Melissa spent her nights comforting Becky while Don worked with the police to pursue every potential lead. Jesse's need to do something, anything, forced him into his car each night with dissipating hopes and, by the way things had been going recently, unrealistic dreams.

The last person to see Danny was the school bus driver who watched him jump down the vehicle's steps four days earlier, just three blocks from Don and Becky's. And that clue was as solid—and as clear—as mud.

Jesse turned off the radio and clicked on the high beams. The pavement was pure white from the newly fallen snow and there wasn't another car anywhere to be seen. In front of him was blackness; behind him was blackness; on each side, nothing but blackness. How did he expect to see anything out here, let alone find a scared and freezing kid? He didn't know, but it didn't matter. This was the only action he could take that made him feel like he was actually doing *something* to help.

The yellow light poles every 300 feet or so did nothing but offer a blurry glow that barely reached the road. And now that a smattering of snow had started again, the soft crunch of flakes beneath the tires filled the silence with an eeriness that sent a strange tingle sliding up Jesse's neck.

On either side of Forest Avenue lay the Terrence Ford Conservation Land, acres and acres of brush, swamp and trees with a few neighborhoods dotting the outskirts. Since the homes were hidden behind the dense thicket and prodigious pines, they were usually invisible to Forest Avenue drivers. Tonight though, even in the deep blackness of this night, he could see their pinpricks of homey yellow light, which, like the rickety poles lining the road, was nothing he could see by.

As he passed the two-mile marker, his phone rang, jolting him from his concentration. The display on the dash showed Melissa's cell. He took a calming breath and pressed the button on the steering wheel. "Hey, babe."

"Where are you?" Melissa sounded almost panicked, her voice trembling.

"What's wrong? What happened? Where are *you*?"

"I'm at Becky and Don's. They just got a call from Agent Rivera...hold on."

He tried to be patient, but after a few more seconds of muffled voices he couldn't hold back. "Missy!" he yelled and banged his fists on the steering wheel. "For Christ's sake, what did Rivera say?"

"Sorry, Jesse. I'm just getting more details." The muffled voices he'd first heard faded away as though she was moving into another room. "Someone just called the hotline from somewhere out in Hingham. It was an older woman who lives—"

Jesse felt like his heart skipped a beat. "I'm in Hingham! Where in Hingham, Missy? Where?"

"Oh my God, Jesse. Wait, I wrote it down." His pulse pounded against the side of his neck as he waited for the crumpling of paper to stop and her words to start again. "Okay, the woman lives on Tower Road off Route 228, on the east side of that conservation area."

He brought up the GPS and frantically searched for 228. “I’m like five minutes from 228—five minutes. I’m literally on the other side of the woods.” His voice was shaky. “I’ll put Tower Road in the GPS.”

“She says she saw a boy fitting Danny’s description running past her house a couple of hours ago. She didn’t call right away because she wasn’t sure.”

Jesse let out a shout of frustration. His shallow breaths quivered in his throat. “Shit, it’s starting to sleet,” he said. “I’m on Forest right now. It runs parallel to Route 228. I’ll turn around and work my way toward Tower to see if I can meet up with one of the units.”

“Jesse, please be careful. I don’t want you getting stuck in the middle of nowhere.”

“This isn’t nowhere, Missy—it’s Hingham,” he said with a sigh, knowing there was nothing he could say to help quell her anxiety. She was a worrier, plain and simple. It was something he’d become accustomed to and had learned to be patient with, but tonight his nerves were too raw, his patience too thin.

“Jesse, sleet means ice. Ice means slippery. Slippery means...”

“*Missy*,” he snapped. He bit his lip and took another breath. “I’m going to turn around and head back toward 228.” He gazed into the darkness to his right, wishing there was a road that cut through the conservation area. “Once I get there, I’ll give you a call. Until then, sit tight. This could be the break we’ve been hoping for.”

“Oh God, Jesse. I hope so. Please be careful. I’ll wait for your call. I love you.”

“I love you, Babe,” he replied, making sure to sound as composed as possible as he disconnected.

Jesse was once again alone, the soft muffle of the car engine filling the otherwise empty silence. Keeping safety in mind despite his own anxiety to find the boy safe, he made a careful K-

turn in the middle of Forest Avenue. The tires slipped a bit on the icy road, so he let up on the pedal allowing the car to straighten itself out. When he faced south, he stepped on the gas again and drove as fast as he could without completely losing traction.

Jesse could see the lights of Hanover Mall through the melting snow on the windshield. The liquid dripping down the glass made it look as though the lights were dancing, shimmying back and forth to the steady beat of the tires crunching the ice beneath him. He glanced at the speedometer: 25 mph. If he could keep up this speed, he'd be back at the intersection of Forest and Main within four minutes.

A faint smile crossed his lips as he remembered finding Danny's favorite Spider-Man action figure in the back seat earlier that week; Danny must've dropped it the day Jesse helped out Don and Becky by picking him up from rehearsal for his school's play. The toy had been right in the middle of the seat, and he wondered if he could reach it—maybe it would change his luck, somehow attract Danny to him.

Jesse reached back, fumbling around, trying to reach Spidey. Nothing. He leaned further and slid his open palm along the seat. Still nothing. Angling backward as far as he could, he patted the floor mat behind him in hopes that the figure had slid during a turn.

No luck.

A quick glance showed the tiny superhero jammed into the corner of the back seat. Spider-Man was tonight's lucky charm; the idea felt right, and it would help him find Danny. It was a superstitious and even desperate move, but doing things by the book had so far turned up nothing.

"Gotcha!" he cheered when he snagged the action figure's foot. He turned back toward the road to see a black figure stumbling out from the brush in front of him. In less than a second, the headlights shown on the figure's face—it was Danny.

Horror seized Jesse by the throat and he gasped as he slammed on the brakes. The car went into an immediate spin, flying directly at Danny whose eyes went wide in the headlights. Jesse felt a thud against the back panel of the car. He screamed, the view from every window only blurred streaks of light. He tried to focus, to spot Danny somewhere in the whirl of his surroundings. But the boy was gone. He screamed again, his cry now muffled by the airbag exploding against his face. He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling the BMW skid off the side of the road and nose-dive into a shallow ditch filled with snow.

As the car lay on its side, ruined engine still ticking, Jesse could barely hang on to consciousness. Images and sounds swirled through his head: the screech of metal dragging along the pavement, Danny's face hitting the window, the sickening thump as the car smashed sideways into the little boy's body.

"It didn't happen," Jesse whispered. "This is a dream," he panted. "Just a dream." He repeated the words again and again until the weight of his eyelids became unbearable and he closed his eyes, allowing the sound of his sobbing to lead him gently into his own personal darkness.

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As Jesse's mind struggled for something good to latch on to, memories of fifteen years earlier floated to the surface.

"Her name's Melissa and she's beautiful," Don announced from three bar stools down.

Jesse took a sip of the martini he'd been fantasizing about all day. It was colder and tastier than he'd imagined. The speakers behind the bar blared something dubstep, forcing Jesse to take a breath so he'd be able to yell above the din. "You'd better watch it," Jesse joked, gesturing

toward Becky sitting on the stool beside Don. “You don’t want your wife thinking you’re looking at other women.”

Becky smiled and shook her head. “I’m not worried,” she said, gently poking Don’s chest. “This man knows he already has the best woman around.”

Don kissed her cheek and saluted like a five-star general. “Absolutely. She’s correct. I have the best woman around.”

Becky’s poke turned into a slight punch. “Don’t be a smartass, *honey*.” She turned to Jesse. “By the way, *I* was the one who thought of you as soon as I was introduced to Melissa at the library. She seemed so smart and beautiful and you’ve been going from woman to woman for so long that...”

“Okay, then,” Don interrupted. “Let’s not go there right now. Why don’t we get a table where it’s quieter and we can tell you more about Melissa? Then you can decide if you want to meet her.”

Jesse grabbed his martini. “Lead the way, Matchmaker Madsen!”

The maître d’ led them to a small, circular table close to the center of the restaurant. On the linen tablecloth sat four place settings of elegant bone china, as white as the covering beneath them and as refined as the lustrous flatware surrounding each dish. In the middle was a crystal vase filled with roses that appeared freshly cut, with tendrils of clematis winding through the blooms.

Jesse smirked as their maître d’ pulled a padded chair out from the table for him. “Hmmm...this is kind of fancy for just the three of us. I’m more used to barbeque, plastic forks and paper plates.”

“Nothing but the best for you, my old friend,” Don replied, ignoring Jesse’s typical sarcasm.

Jesse sat down, slid his chair toward the table and cocked his head. “Something’s not right here. What’s up with you?” He glanced over to Becky, who immediately started reading the menu. “Why this place? What’s going on?”

Before Don had a chance to respond, their waiter approached, introduced himself and began to remove the extra place setting.

“Not so fast there, *garçon*,” Don said, tapping the table. “We might have a fourth.”

Jesse choked on his drink. “No! What? You’re kidding me. She’s not joining us for dinner.” He looked at Becky, who glanced up for only a second before returning to fiddle with her menu.

“I don’t see the problem,” Don said nonchalantly.

“Don, look at me!” Jesse gestured toward his wrinkled suit jacket and not-so-fresh shirt. “I’ve been working all day. I’m not prepared to meet anyone, especially not someone as much of a knockout as you say this woman is.”

Don waved him off. “*Please*, Jesse. Like you *ever* look bad. You look like an underwear model, but with better hair.” He patted the top of his own thinning crew cut, shaking his head in defeat. “You have nothing to worry about...at least with your appearance.”

Don and Becky shared a laugh, but Jesse wasn’t listening anymore. He was too busy straightening his tie and sliding his palms along the front of his shirt to press out the lines. It didn’t matter how many people told him how handsome he was or how lucky he’d been to have been blessed with his beautiful mother’s genes; when he looked in the mirror he simply couldn’t see what others saw.

Jesse glanced at Becky, who was watching his every move from behind her menu.

“Becky, you should know better. I might expect this sort of surprise from my oldest and not-so-dearest friend Don, but not from you. You’re more level-headed than this.” He used his fingers to comb back the sides of his hair.

Becky raised her head and stared directly into his eyes. “Have I ever done this to you before, Jesse?” she asked, letting her menu fall to the table.

“No, but...”

“And if it doesn’t work out, I’ll never do it again. I promise.” Becky looked around the room as though there might be hidden microphones surveilling their conversation. “What I *will* do is tell you that she told me she’s finally gotten over a bad breakup. So the last thing I want is for her to get hurt.”

Jesse shrugged his shoulders and sighed. “Okay.” He took another sip of his martini.

“No, *really*, Jesse. Please be kind to her. I really think she’s perfect for you and might actually be the one who—”

“I get it, Becky. I do.” Jesse glanced over at Don and was about to ask for backup when he noticed his friend’s attention focused on the dining room entrance. He followed Don’s gaze to catch sight of one of the most impressively beautiful women he’d ever seen. Jesse couldn’t help but stare as she approached the table.

She had a modest swing to her walk, like the shy version of a runway model, with a black sateen pencil skirt carefully hugging the outline of her hips with each perfect step. Her white, sleeveless silk blouse swayed with the pulse of her gait and a pleat-neck keyhole introduced just a touch of her cream-colored skin. *Aphrodite*, a voice whispered from somewhere inside his head.

When Becky stood to greet her, Jesse awoke from what felt like a trance. He turned to Don, whose crooked smile raised a rush of anxiety inside him.

“She’s a beauty, huh?” Don whispered, now also standing to greet Melissa. “Remember what Becky said, Jesse. Don’t hurt this one.”

Jesse didn’t have time to respond before Don was hugging Melissa and turning her toward him.

“Melissa, this is Jesse. Jesse, Melissa.”

“Hi,” Jesse stuttered, reaching out his hand. “I’m Jesse.”

She took his hand in hers and smiled wickedly. “Oh! Is that what Don meant by ‘This is Jesse’?” Her hands were cool to the touch, and soft, like a light brush of nighttime ocean air. He looked to the floor and shook his head.

“I’m sorry,” he said, searching for a reason behind his sudden inability to think or speak clearly. “I’m just a little bit...”

“Of a loser?” Don chimed in.

“Don, stop,” Becky interrupted. “Please ignore my husband, Melissa. He and Jesse are very old friends and they often revert back to childhood.” She gave Don a look of reproach. “Now let’s sit down and get you something to drink.”

For Jesse, the rest of the evening was surreal. As the hours passed and Melissa kept choosing to talk to him—to *him*—it became obvious that beauty was just one of her magnetic features. She gave off an almost palpable allure, not only while she talked, but also while she listened, an invisible frequency arousing in Jesse the feeling that they were always meant to meet, a mutual yearning to discover one another from the inside out.

When dinner was over, Jesse slapped Don’s hand away from the leather check holder, then grabbed it and slid his credit card inside. “This one’s on me,” he said. “As a thank you for introducing us.” He threw a timid gaze toward Melissa.

“Ahem,” Becky cut in. “None of this would’ve happened without my most beneficent influence.”

Jesse turned to her. “Don’t worry, Becky. Santa Jesse has you on his permanent ‘good’ list.”

Melissa stood and kissed both Becky and Don. “I have an early morning. Thank you very much for a wonderful evening.” She turned to Jesse, touched his hand and gently kissed his cheek. “And goodnight to you, Jesse. It was such a pleasure.”

Jesse smiled and watched her walk away. After a while, he noticed that Becky and Don still existed.

“You’re in trouble,” Don said, tapping the top of Jesse’s hand with his index finger. “I can see it in your face. You’re smitten.”

“‘Smitten’?” Jesse swiped at Don’s finger. “Who uses that word anymore?”

Becky folded her napkin and placed it purposefully on the table. “Seriously, Jesse, please be kind. She’s becoming a good friend and she’s such a wonderful person. She’s been through a lot and deserves only good things.” She placed her hand over Jesse’s. “No joke—promise me.”

Jesse squinted, trying to get one last glimpse of Melissa as she walked out of the restaurant. When the door closed behind her, he turned to Becky. “I solemnly swear that I will never, ever hurt that woman.”

Jesse shuddered from his own words, not only because he’d never before made such a commitment, but because he wasn’t sure he’d be strong enough to keep it.

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As he slowly regained consciousness, Jesse found it difficult to open his eyes, like duct tape had been stretched over his eyelids. He turned his focus to the commotion beside him: the scraping of boots along pavement, the groan of steel and road machinery, a man somewhere above him repeating his name.

“Jesse...Jesse,” the man pronounced sharply, but without shouting. The voice sounded familiar but Jesse couldn’t connect it with a face. “Jesse...can you hear me?” A slight tap on his cheek. “Mr. Carlton? Jesse?”

Jesse tried to speak but his mouth dribbled only mumbles. He tried with all his might to open his eyes, and when the lids finally lifted he had to immediately close them. The red and blue police car flashers were overpowering, and even with his eyes shut he could still see them against his eyelids. He turned his head to the other side, away from the lights, the noise and the voice. When he reopened his eyes, he blinked to clear his vision and found himself gazing into darkness punctuated by the unnatural strobing of color.

Now he could feel that he had been placed on a stretcher with a thermal blanket wrapped around him. Still cautious of the bright lights, he slowly turned to the voice that continued to repeat his name.

“Jesse, are you okay?”

Although the hood from the man’s parka covered most of his face, Jesse could finally make out his profile. “Agent Rivera,” he said, then remembered Melissa’s phone call telling him about a woman who had seen Danny and then — after that — it was a blur. He tried to jump up but the safety straps across his chest held him down. He felt a sharp twinge on the right side of his rib cage. “Danny! Did you find Danny?”

Rivera swept the hair from his eyes and placed his gloved hand on Jesse's chest. "Not yet. But we're still looking for him. Right now, you have to take it easy and rest. We're going to get you to the ER. One of my guys just picked up your wife and they're on their way to meet you at the hospital." He pointed to Jesse's car. "In the meantime, they're getting your car out of the ditch so they can tow it to Jeb's service station. Not sure you'll be able to drive it again. It's close to totaled."

"Melissa said you had a lead. Some woman on Tower Road who said she saw him."

Rivera shook his head. "Hasn't panned out yet. But we're working on it." He leaned over so their faces were only inches apart. "How'd this happen, Jesse? Was there another car? Something in the road? Did you see someone?"

Jesse winced. An almost intolerable pain from within the center of his head spread into his eyes. He closed them and tried to think back to the moments before the accident. His mind was like an empty barrel—bare, hollow, nothing but echoes. He remembered hanging up with Melissa, turning the car around, the snow turning to sleet and then...nothing. *Shit.*

"I can't remember. It's a blank. I think I skidded on an ice patch or something. I'm just not..."

Rivera patted Jesse's chest. "Don't worry. It'll come back. Could be a concussion or something." He nodded to the paramedic standing behind Jesse. "First we get you some head scans, make sure you're healthy, and then we pick your brain some more. Right now you go to the hospital and I go back to the search. I'll circle back with you later today."

As they wheeled Jesse along the wet road toward the ambulance, he peered into the sky at the bright, blinking stars mired in an ocean of black. How did he end up in a ditch? Why was he in an accident? He could remember everything about driving, looking for Danny...

I must've fallen asleep, he thought. It's dark. I've been up for days looking for Danny. Yeah, I must have passed out at the wheel from exhaustion.

But deep down he knew that wasn't true. Maybe he had a concussion like Agent Rivera had said, but he remembered the call with Melissa, seeing the mall and observing the neighborhoods through the conservation land. Only a few moments were missing. That didn't sound like a concussion to him. It also didn't sound like falling asleep at the wheel, something he had never done before in his life.

Maybe it was nothing and the shock of the accident just kept a memory from forming. *It happens*, he thought before slipping back into unconsciousness, *but I don't think that's what happened to me.*