

Just Two Men Talking

By Scribblesinink

Three days was enough time to teach you a man's ways. Jake watched how Horst Cali walked into the bank, hands held out in appeasement. As soon as he cleared the doors, the captain's gaze traveled over the hostages: Bernard, Abe, Ashley, the woman from the closet whose name Jake never learned.

Jake chuckled inside. It was what he'd expected: Cali was trying to turn his visit into an intelligence gathering mission. Well, that was why he'd made those three men kneel in a line, an unmistakable warning: *I'm not playing games*. Judging by the way Cali's jaw set at the sight, the message was being received loud and clear.

Even so, while the good captain was mentally marking everyone's positions, Jake knew he wasn't aware how high the stakes *really* were. Not yet. He soon would be, though; it was the sole reason Jake had asked him inside. What he had to tell Cali wasn't something that could be explained over the phone. Not only because others would be listening—and that would wreck the entire plan before it was even set in motion—but because it was also one of the most monstrous things he'd ever done, and he felt he owed it to the man to tell him face to face.

It wasn't something he relished doing.

Steeling himself, he pointed down the hall with his HK. "In there."

"Why?" Cali looked as if he was about to cross his arms over his chest in a display of mulishness. "I'm here. So talk."

Jake sighed and scrubbed at his eyes. They were gritty with lack of sleep and gun smoke, and he was tired, really tired, of these never-ending contests: who was the toughest, or smartest, or most pigheaded.

"Just humor me, Cap'n." He headed off in the direction he'd indicated, knowing he wasn't leaving Cali much of a choice. Sure enough, after a moment, he heard footsteps following him on the smooth stone floor.

Jake waited for Cali to join him in the conference room. It was full of gleaming mahogany furniture and padded chairs and crystal vases, made for civil discourse, for men and women in business suits discussing investments and loans and mortgages.

For what he was about to tell Cali, a dingy backroom or a trash-filled alleyway would've

fit better.

Jake gestured for the captain to take a seat at the far end of the table, but chose to remain standing himself, with the door at his back. His left hand was giving him trouble again, and he balled it into a fist, shoving it deep into his pocket, not wanting the other man to notice it shaking.

Silence hung heavily in the room, broken only by the whisper of air from the fixed A/C.

Cali was waiting patiently for Jake's next move, gaze fixed steadily on him. Jake suspected he was itching to begin further negotiations and try and talk him into letting the rest of the hostages leave the bank. None of it showed, however: neither on his face nor in his posture. Cali was good at his job, Jake had to give him that.

Too bad they'd ended up on opposite sides.

Jake cleared his throat. As if it was the sign he'd been waiting for, Cali spoke first.

"So... *Jake*.... Want to tell me how we can end this?"

The use of his first name was deliberate. The past days had taught Jake that not a word left Cali's mouth until it had been weighed and measured for potential effect.

He shifted the HK hanging from his shoulder and offered Cali a small smile. "How? Simple: you're gonna help us walk out of here."

Cali raised an eyebrow, the answer clearly not what he'd been expecting. "What do you think I've been doing these past three days?"

Jake gave a quick, humorless grin. "I'm sorry, I wasn't clear. I meant, you're gonna help us walk out of here *unnoticed*."

Cali leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table and stapling his hands into a triangle in front of him. "You know I can't do that," he pointed out mildly.

"Yeah." Jake looked at him for a long moment. "I know you can't. Just like you know I can't give up. I owe it to those guys out there," he indicated the rest of the bank with a nod of his head, "to do whatever it takes." He paused. There was no easy way to say this, so he went right ahead. "We have your wife."

Cali blinked. "What?"

"Your wife," Jake repeated patiently. "My guy picked her up about thirty minutes ago."

It took Cali another minute for the message to sink in. Jake could see the exact instant realization struck, and the experienced hostage negotiator made way for a distraught husband. It wasn't a pleasant sight.

Cali shot to his feet, eyes dark with fury and not-quite hidden fear. Jake would've had to physically fend him off if not for the sturdy table between them.

There had been a reason he'd told Cali to sit on the far side.

"You're a sick bastard, you know that?" Cali snarled, no longer carefully picking his words. "I expected more from you."

Jake looked away, almost physically ill with dislike at himself. If it had been Anna.... He turned back, setting his face in hard lines. "Hey, man. You crossed the line first. I'm just takin' it to the next level."

"What the fuck are you talkin' about?"

"You brought in my son." Jake straightened, pulling what scraps of justification he could find around him like it was armor. "That was a low blow. You shouldn't have done that."

Cali stared at him, bewildered, as if he had no idea what Jake was referring to. And perhaps at first he didn't. In any case, it took him a visible effort to dredge up the memories. Once he remembered, he fell back into his seat.

"She's pregnant," Cali murmured, more to himself than to Jake.

It was Jake's turn to stare. *Crap*. He hadn't known that. If he had, maybe—no, it wouldn't have changed a thing. It was as he'd told Cali over the phone: all or nothing. He owed that to his men. He owed them more than he owed Captain Cali, or the captain's wife.

"Look," he said, attempting to ease the blow a little, "nothin' bad will happen to her, as long as you do what I tell you. Soon's we get out of here, you get your wife back. Alright?"

Cali lifted his head and slowly focused on Jake. "I can't just let you walk out of here," he objected. He sounded defeated. "There's over fifty SWAT guys out there. They're pissed, tired, and eager for blood."

"I know." With two dead cops on the roster, Jake knew it would be that way.

For a long minute, deep silence weighed heavily on the conference room. "We need a distraction," Cali said at last, his voice almost a whisper.

Jake suppressed a relieved sigh: looked like the captain was going to cooperate after all. He hadn't been entirely sure about that, wife or no wife.

"I can arrange that." Not giving Cali a chance to think about it, Jake briskly told the captain what he had in mind. "You have to take care of transportation. And make sure nobody looks too closely as we come out. Can you do that?"

"Yes." A glimmer of hope had sparked in Cali's face. "But I swear, if something happens to —."

Jake cut him off. "Nothing will happen to her, man. Just you do your thing, and me and mine'll do ours. And we'll all get to go home unhurt."

Cali heaved a breath and got to his feet. He moved slowly, as if he'd aged ten years in the last ten minutes, and Jake felt guilt squirm unpleasantly in his belly. He forced it away. "C'mon, let's go." He opened the conference room door and gestured Cali out. "Ten minutes," he said. "Then you come back. And we end this."

"We end this." Cali's voice was hoarse and he looked decidedly green around the gills. Once out of the conference room, he made for the front door, past the kneeling hostages, and outside a little faster than was wise if he didn't want to raise suspicion. Jake watched him go, feeling nearly as sick as the other man looked.

At least it was almost over. He turned away, waving Marshall and Albert close, out of earshot of the hostages. "Listen up. This is what we gonna do...."

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