

# Frozen Keys

For five years Mr. Moore has taught Caleb how to play piano. Ever since their first practice together Caleb has always been filled with a burning passion for playing. He quickly learned notes, symbols, scales, and was quite talented with his fingers as he gracefully moved them across the keys. "If only that passion was still inside of him," Mr. Moore mumbles to himself.

Caleb admitted to having not played at all over the two weeks of Christmas break, but it still didn't explain his lackluster performances. Once a week, he attends Mr. Moore's piano room after school to practice. It's his third lesson since the new school semester started. Surprisingly, Caleb's notes are dull and lifeless. His fingers drag slowly across to the keys as he tediously plays. At this point, Mr. Moore would rather look out the window at the falling snow than focus on this racket.

He hopes that during this lesson, Caleb would return to his lively playing, for it wasn't uncommon for his students to need a little warm up after avoiding the piano over the break. It seems, however, as though Caleb's fingers and spirit are stuck. No, they are as frozen over as the lake outside of the school. He prays that during their next lesson, Caleb's playing will begin to thaw and bring life as it usually did.

"C sharp, E, G sharp." Mr. Moore corrects Caleb's right hand, which is nowhere near the required notes.

"Right," Caleb nods as he struggles to find his placement only to still hit the wrong notes. He's only on measure 4 and their session is almost over.

"Is it fine with you if we end things early today?" Mr. Moore asks for his own benefit. He would rather have an early start to dinner with his wife. It was clear Caleb did not want to be here, so why not put his ears out of the musical agony. Caleb responds by grabbing his books, sliding off the bench, and inserting them in his bag. All actions lacked effort as he prepared to leave. "Have you been practicing lately? Your father is a pianist so I'm sure he can help if you're struggling." Mr. Moore suggests.

"He left for a trip," Caleb grudgingly responds. "He's playing with an orchestra up in New England right now."

"Well, what about your mom? She's a musician too."

"She's with him. They both were selected to perform." His pace quickens towards the door.

"Well, I'm always here if you need the extra help. I want you to do well for the recital coming up in two weeks. Not much time left to memorize a piece."

Caleb nods and begins to make his way out the door.

"Hold up!" Mr. Moore yells. "I have a Christmas card for your parents that I forgot to give you before the break." He rummages through a drawer and pulls out a red envelope.

Caleb turns around without making eye contact, snatches the envelope, and runs out the piano room towards the snowy landscape beyond the doors leading outside.

Quite frankly, Mr. Moore isn't shocked. Caleb's been out of character ever since coming back from break. His once passionate playing has turned into aimless stares at the keys. The joyful "Hello!" he occasionally received throughout the days in the halls have also stopped. Nothing

was quite the same. He didn't, however, have time to reflect over the situation. He wanted to make it on time for his dinner reservation with his wife.

He throws on his coat and then his bag before making strides for his silver Honda. As he drives off, a torn, red envelope is spotted laying in the snow. Mr. Moore immediately knows that it's the one he gave to Caleb, but can only ponder about why it lies beneath the falling snow.

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Steak, good music, and his beautiful wife. What else could Mr. Moore possibly need to enjoy the evening? No matter where he looks, everyone seems to be happily enjoying the night. Yes, it is expensive. Yes, he had to reserve two months in advance. However, the restaurant seems to have truly earned their five star rating.

A live jazz performance plays on stage with the best soul-filling music Mr. Moore ever heard. The waiters are entertaining with their humor and the flavorful cuisine explodes in your mouth. Everything is perfect. Everyone has smiles on their faces. Everyone except Caleb seems to be enjoying things. Across the room Mr. Moore spies Caleb. He's slouched against the velvet cushion of a chair with his head down. He appears to be fidgeting with something under the table. At one point Caleb accidentally makes eye contact with Mr. Moore while forking his untouched meal. He quickly turns away. Mr. Moore hopes he feels ashamed for throwing his Christmas card in the snow. Sitting at the table with him are an older couple laughing and conversing with one another; both have similar features to Caleb. Grandparents. Mr. Moore has seen them at recitals over the years but never actually had the chance to talk to them. Is now the chance to do so? Mr. Moore thinks to himself. He wants a few answers. Not to be rude of course, he just cares deeply for his student and is curious about the sudden change of attitude. Mr. Moore

politely excuses himself from his wife and makes his way toward Caleb's table. "Mind if I sit here?" Mr. Moore smiles at Caleb's grandfather. "I'm Caleb's piano teacher."

"Of course, I remember you!" the old man chuckles. "You've done a splendid job teaching Caleb over the years and I really appreciate it. Please, call me Greg." After a short introduction, Mr. Moore greets Greg's wife and gives a warm "Hello!" to Caleb who flips his hand up to gesture a wave.

From then on, they all briefly talk (except Caleb) before Mr. Moore readies himself to ask Greg the important question. Caleb grips his wrist before getting up to use the bathroom and Mr. Moore finally strikes.

"I'm a little concerned about Caleb's recent performance and behavior," Mr. Moore says to Greg. "His lack of practice shows during his lessons and he's been keeping to himself more. Would you perhaps know why?"

Greg lets out a short sigh. "Honestly, I'm afraid I don't know what to do with him. Ever since—" he stops himself. "I know this is our first real conversation but can I tell you something?"

Mr. Moore nods to give assurance.

"Unfortunately, while in New England for an orchestra performance, his parents died in an accident over the holidays."

Mr. Moore felt shock, then silence, and finally contemplation. He then realizes he accidentally threw salt in the wound during Caleb's piano lesson. Of course there was no way of him knowing

this, but it definitely helps everything line up. Mr. Moore brushes back his hair and doesn't push for further details, "I'm sorry to hear about this."

Greg nods before wiping a few tears from his face. "Sorry, I didn't mean to ruin your evening."

"No, of course you didn't." Mr. Moore quickly responds. "I must be going, however, my wife is waiting for me."

As Mr. Moore rises to leave, Greg does the same and shakes his hand. "Thanks for stopping by. We'll have Caleb practice more. See you at the upcoming recital."

"Of course, see you soon."

Mr. Moore begins to make his way towards his table but of course not before running into Caleb. He slips a "Hey Caleb, I...", but before he can get the words out, Caleb walks by without a response; not even a desolate glare.

However, Mr. Moore does notice something peculiar as he walks by. Caleb's still holding his wrist but with a folded, white paper towel that has a dark red stain where the pressure is being applied. Mr. Moore turns his head back to double check. He stares at Caleb's wrist pondering deeply. When he sits back down with his wife, Mr. Moore notices Caleb and his grandparents hurrying out the restaurant; blood can be seen dripping down his wrist as it stains his once white button-up.

"Surely everything is fine." Mr. Moore tries to assure himself. Ultimately though, he can't stop worrying about Caleb for the rest of the night.

A week later, and Caleb is still the only thing on Mr. Moore's mind. The death of his parents, the paper towel on his wrist, and a terrible outcome have been the only thoughts swirling around his mind. After a conversation with his wife the night before his weekly lessons with Caleb, Mr. Moore believes he knows what to do.

About an hour before Caleb's lesson, Mr. Moore pulls him out of math class and into his piano room. He gestures for Caleb to sit on the piano bench as Mr. Moore sits in a chair across from him. Even though Caleb refuses to make eye contact with him, Mr. Moore has something he needs to get across to him.

"So... how's school been?" Mr. Moore starts.

Caleb simply nods.

Mr. Moore takes a deep breath. "I've called you out of class so I can talk to you about...life."

Caleb looks up at him curiously.

"Listen, I know what you're going through but that doesn't mean I know exactly how you feel."

Caleb turns away again, looking down at the floor.

"I know things must be rough... And you're still grieving." Mr. Moore pauses to collect his thoughts before continuing. "But hurting yourself isn't going to change anything. The same goes for bottling up your feelings." Mr. Moore doesn't need to point as Caleb is already examining the cuts on his wrists. (Yes, plural now.) "I just want you to know that you can come here and talk to me whenever, even outside of lessons. If you don't feel like talking, I'm fine with you just sitting here with me as well."

Caleb stares up at Mr. Moore with tears rolling down his eyes.

"I know it's cold outside, but perhaps we can leave school early and get some ice cream... or anything for the matter. It's all up to you."

In a quick instance after saying those words, Mr. Moore finds Caleb bawling his eyes out onto his shoulder with a tight hug around him. A few minutes of silence and sniffing go by and it's as if Mr. Moore can feel the cloud of unease within his mind fading away. He honestly didn't expect his wife's advice to work so well on both parties. He doesn't need Caleb to explain himself or his actions, he's just happy to have him back. "Thanks." Caleb muffles through his tears. Mr. Moore can't help but begin to cry himself. "And ice cream sounds great by the way."

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