



# Pedal to the Metal

**Author:** *Stephanie Nichole*

**Category:** Romance, New Adult

**Description:** Five years ago a tragic accident changed Jagger's life forever. He ran from L.A. to Las Vegas, leaving his father, four brothers, and former life behind. Now, after his father's death he's returning to help his brothers with the family business and his former street racing reputation. On his first night back in town his path crosses with Londynn at the races. She awakens something in him that he hasn't felt since that fateful night years ago.

Londynn Parrish may look like your typical rich girl but she's far from it. Her entire life has been prepared and handed to her, but all she craves is freedom. Freedom to make her own choices and build her own life. Even if that means leaving behind the life she knows and moving forward with one of the James brothers. Jagger is your typical bad boy with a tortured past and grew up on the wrong side of town. He's been gone for five years, but he's back now and neither Londynn or Jagger can deny the pull they feel for one another.

Can Jagger let go of his past and create a future with Londynn? Can Londynn let go of the life prepared for her? Londynn has secrets of her own she's trying to hide, but will Jagger be the one to bring the wall down?

**Total Pages (Source):** 57

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:55 am*

## Prologue

5 years ago

It was getting late, and I knew I needed to get home. Harlyn would be worried if she didn't at least hear from me soon. Plus, I figured she was dying for one of those Dairy Queen blizzards. Her cravings had become constant at this point. Only two more months left until we got to meet our little girl. Sometimes, I still found it hard to believe that I was going to be a father, but at least I'd had a hell of a role model growing up.

Sliding out from underneath the car I thought back to the first day I saw Harlyn Bexton in seventh grade. She was a new student and even though she was trying not to draw attention to herself, she was hard to miss with that medium brown hair, pale skin, rosy cheeks, gray eyes and full lips. I felt every nerve in my body stand on end when she looked at me. It had taken me a whole month just to speak to her. Axell and Bowie still give me hell over that.

That memory seems like yesterday, yet it was seven years ago. We survived middle school, high school, and Harlyn has managed two years of college. We're happily engaged and expecting, living in a small two-bedroom apartment, but its home. I could live anywhere, and it would be home as long as I had Harlyn. Sure, it had been hard since we found out she was pregnant. I was working at my family's body shop and bar while trying to save everything I could since Harlyn had to quit working, but we were making it. We were going to be okay because we always were, as long as we had each other we'd be okay.

No one plans on being a parent at 20 but I didn't worry because Harlyn was going to be a natural. Bowie popped his head inside the door, "Jagger!" he called out.

I sat up and looked at him, "Yeah?"

"It's getting pretty late. You might want to call it a night," he said before turning to head back over to the bar which was directly behind the body shop. I heard the door open again before Bowie's head reappeared, "Oh, and your phone has been going off like crazy. I keep hearing 'I'll Be There for You' by Bon Jovi every few minutes," he said tossing my phone to me.

Shoot! It was almost midnight, no wonder Harlyn was blowing my phone up. I bet she was worried sick. We didn't exactly live in the safest neighborhood, but most people knew not to mess with any of the James boys. I dashed to the sink to wash my hands, then grabbed my keys. Once I was in my car, I dialed Harlyn back to let her know I was on my way home.

"Jagger, I was so worried," I heard Harlyn sigh into the phone. My girl had a voice of an angel.

"Sorry angel, I got busy working on this 1967 Ford Eleanor GT and lost track of time. I'm heading to get your blizzard now then I'll be home."

"Don't worry about the blizzard I'm almost to the DQ now. I just couldn't wait any longer," she said, sounding apologetic but she had nothing to apologize for. I however, owed her an apology; she shouldn't be out this time of night, alone and pregnant in the neighborhood. I had to start paying better attention. "Jagger, wherever your mind is reel it back in. I'm fine, Harper is fine, we both just need our ice cream. We'll meet you back at home."

"Are you sure Harlyn?" I asked but I never got a response. Instead, I heard a scream,

tires screeching, metal bowing and glass shattering before the phone went dead. My heart was in my throat as I sped up to get to where I thought Harlyn might be and sure enough there was her car, or what was left of it. A jacked-up Ford truck was lying on its side, but I didn't bother to even stop as I ran towards Harlyn but as I approached, I noticed she wasn't in the car.

I screamed her name over and over as I ran along the darkened side of the road. This curve had always been deadly, but I never feared it, not until tonight, not until I saw Harlyn lying about five feet away from the car, not moving, her body lying in an impossible position. Blood was everywhere, as I collapsed next to her, I felt her tiny neck for a pulse but got nothing. In that moment my entire world stopped spinning, that Jagger stopped existing. My heart shattered like that windshield, my mind bent like that metal and suddenly my voice was screeching like those tires. My whole life had just been taken in an instant. By the time the paramedics and cops arrived I was numb. As they zipped Harlyn and Harper up in that black body bag I felt the last part of me die. I went with them, my brothers had showed up by that time, but I wanted nothing from them, I wanted no one. The only one I wanted was gone.

That night had changed everything. I had fled from Los Angeles after the funeral and I hadn't returned, that was five years ago but my family needed me now. I was 25 now and it was time for me to grow up and be a man. That night, the loss of the two who meant the most to me, in this world the last five years, had changed me. I was no longer the I man that believed that love would make everything better. I no longer believed that one person could make everything okay.

## Chapter 1

### Londynn

I stare up at the large cream-colored mansion and suddenly my anxiety kicks back in full force. I take some deep breaths slowly and count to ten like I've been told to do

over the past three months. I make my way up the steps from the taxi I had to take to return home. You would think one of my parents could have made time in their busy schedules to pick me up but nope, once again I was left to fend for myself. I guess I could have called Farrah but it's still relatively early for her. I'm pretty sure she doesn't see the sunlight until at least one in the afternoon. Then of course you'd think Ryce could have shown up considering he was my boyfriend, or at least he used to be, before. I didn't even bother to tell Creed or Alivia that I was coming home today or otherwise they would have been there and made a big deal about it. I just couldn't handle all that right now.

Closing the door behind me I stand in the foyer of the white sterile mansion I'm supposed to call home, but it's never really been a home. Not in any real sense of the word anyways. Sure, I grew up here, I had a mom, dad, brother and sister but we had always lived our lives apart from one another. I spent most of my time with nannies until I was old enough to take care of myself which in my parent's eyes was about ten. Thankfully, my parents had hired an older lady name Vivienne as the cook and main housekeeper. She had made it well known that she thought my parents were crazy for letting me and my siblings run around with no supervision or structure. She always made sure to stop and give us all a kiss or hug or kind word of encouragement. She had dried my tears more than once in my lifetime.

Vivienne was in her early 60's when she started working for us but for me, she was like the mother I didn't have. She was a short, round lady with cheeks that always stayed a shade of pink. Her medium length gray hair was always worn up in a tight bun and kind blue eyes were always hidden behind her reading glasses. She never wore any jewelry except for her wedding band even though she was widowed, that had forced her to come out of retirement. She had been a teacher in her younger years, and she loved children that was a given. She even loved Duke, my brother, and he wasn't the easiest to love. Vivienne had spent all the time she could here with us, teaching us, raising us but she was gone now. Just another thing to add to the list of what my life was before.

As I looked around at the tiled floor that was too shiny to be walked on, the overly white walls that could blind you when the sun from the sky lights above hit them just right, the exquisite chandelier that hung in the middle of the sky lights, the expensive paintings on the walls that were only there to showcase how much money my parents wanted people to believe they had. I dropped my luggage on the floor and listened to the echo in the silence of this house. Without Vivienne there was never a chance of this house ever becoming a home. Picking back up my luggage I passed the living room that was never lived in and the formal dining room that was only used to keep up appearances.

I go up the grand staircase and took the right side where they broke into two. The right side of the house was the, "Children's wing" as my parents referred to it as. Every door is closed up tight Duke and Farrah haven't been here in years, just me. I'm the youngest, the last hope to make the Parrish family name look good since Duke and Farrah didn't follow the plan, didn't conform to the expectations that had been held for them. Now I was the last hope, and I was faced with the fact that my life had been planned out for me since before I could speak. I didn't do well with the disappointed looks I received from my parents even though they had never showed signs of love to me, I still yearned for it. For the first time in three months, I wished I was Farrah.

As I opened the door to the room, I called mine I wasn't shocked to see it hadn't changed. It still looked like no one ever used it. A bedroom in a magazine looked more inviting than mine did. I hadn't even been given a choice in my bedding or decor. Everything was pale pink with a princess feel, which I guess is what my parents thought of us as since the Parrish family was one of the richest families in Los Angeles aside from celebrities. I dropped my luggage onto the floor by the door as I make my way to the French doors on either side of my bed that lead out to the balcony.

I refuse to look at all the wall of shelves that had been added to the room once my

parents realized I would be a champion in dance. All those trophies, medals and pictures would just cause that hole in my heart to open back up and swallow me whole. My anxiety attacks would set in again if I did. In the life I had been handed I never had to hurt for anything except for the freedom to make my own decisions.

My phone goes off and I see Alivia's name and picture bouncing around on the screen. I slide my finger across to answer it. Justin Bieber is blaring in the background, and I can hear Creed begging her to turn it down. Finally, Alivia's chipper voice comes over the phone. "Londynn? Are you there?"

"Yeah, I was just listening to you two bickering like an old married couple," I reply.

"We do not!" She says with her normal dramatic flair, but I guess that's to be expected from an aspiring actress.

"You do to but that's beside the point," I say sitting on my bed, careful not to wrinkle it. I shake my head at how idiotic of an idea that is.

Creed's deep voice comes over the line next. "Anyways, me and the wifey," I hear him laugh and Alivia gives an eww, "wanted to know what time you were being released so we could pick you up then we're all going to lunch and the beach to celebrate."

I sigh, preparing for the backlash I'm about to get. "I'm already at home but we can still go to lunch and the beach."

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:55 am*

"Wait! You're already out and at home, but you didn't tell us," Alivia says sounding hurt and I don't think it's her acting ability this time.

"Why didn't you call us Londynn?" Creed asks me.

"I don't know. I told my parents but neither showed so I just took a taxi. Listen, it's no big deal just head over here, and we'll head to lunch. I'm starved," I say trying to lighten the mood and it seems to work since the subject is dropped for now. They said their about thirty minutes away, so I have time to change and touch up my makeup.

As I stand in the fully stocked, extravagant walk-in closet I shake my head. This is an obscene amount of clothes for anyone to own. I used to pride myself on all the materialistic things I had been given. However, after that night three months ago it all just seems so shallow. I actually think it started the beginning of my senior year in high school when I realized that my life wasn't really mine. My parents expected me to do as they pleased. My mom had married my dad because it was good for her father's business, and he came from the wealthiest family at the time. He had been guaranteed to succeed.

I don't think my parents ever really loved each other. Their marriage was just an arrangement that would both help them personally. They were all about the appearances, it didn't matter that my father was a functioning alcoholic nymphomaniac that has slept with every office manager who had ever worked for him. Curtis Parrish was one of the most sought-after plastic surgeons in California. Women and Men came to him from all over and paid him a ridiculous price to keep looking like their child's sibling instead of their parent. My dad was handsome and could be incredibly charming, but he wasn't going to win any daddy of the year



awards, but I guess young pretty office managers don't care about that. No, all they care about is that Curtis Parrish is tall, standing at 6'3", broad shoulders, lean physique since he's an avid runner. He keeps his salt and pepper hair slicked back where it curls just at his collar. However, it totally works for him because he has that total George Clooney thing going on that all the ladies seem to go for. His square jaw, perfect nose and teeth and deep hazel eyes seal the package. Never mind, the fact that he's extremely wealthy, I'm sure that has nothing to do with it.

However, I'm sure many look at my parents and see the appearance they try so hard to convey. I'm sure many know the truth and blame my father but it's not just him. My mother is walking cliché. She's a self-medicated whore who has had an affair with every pool boy, personal trainer and gardener we've ever had working at this house. I get what the guys see because my mom is gorgeous. She's 5'9" without her heels, slender, with medium length hair that is currently a sandy blonde. Her blue eyes are striking as well as her face that she has bought over the years. Patricia Parrish was no mother, she was like this house. This house was not home just a place that five people had rested their heads. Three children had been carried by Patricia Parrish, but none had been loved.

I had been so lost in my thoughts that I had forgotten about Alivia and Creed until I heard them coming down the hallway. As they entered my room, I ran to them and pulled Alivia into my arms first. Her tiny stature was not showing today thanks to her five-inch wedges. Alivia Gomez was all of five feet one inch with every Latin curve. Her long black hair was thick and curled perfectly. She smiled at me, exposing her dimples in her baby face cheeks. Her brown eyes were full of love, and it made me happy to know that I at least had friends I could call family.

I didn't have time to turn around before Creed Eisenhower pulled me into his strong arms. Creed wasn't much taller than me at five feet ten inches, but he was practically a genius. He attended the same private high school as Alivia and me, but he attended on a scholarship which was strictly given due to his brain. His floppy brown hair was

pushed to one side and his glasses almost hid those caramel-colored eyes that made all the girls stare. It didn't help that they were framed with some amazing lashes. Since his braces had been removed last year, he smiled constantly causing lines to form around his mouth but it suited him.

"We've missed you, Londynn! Now, let's go eat because I'm starving," Alivia said grabbing my hand and pulling me out into the hallway. I may not have the family I dreamed of or the freedom to do what I want with my life, but I did have these two amazing people to call my family.

\*\*\*\*

Jagger

Pulling back into Los Angeles after five years was the last thing I wanted to do, but my brothers needed me now. With my father's death and Jovi still in school they were going to need the extra pair of hands at the shop and bar. As much as I'd like to keep running from my past, it was time I faced it. I drove through L.A. until I reached the neighborhood I had called home. North Hills, Los Angeles is not a desired place to live. Its home to the lower middle class with small houses built in the 70s and 80s. A lot of the homes had become run down over the years, but it was still home. As I made my way through the neighborhood, I came upon the curve in the road that had changed everything for me. Pulling over to the side of the road I parked and stared out the windshield. My heart rate picked up as that night came back to me in flashes. Every time I closed my eyes that night came back to me, I didn't want to start living that daily hell while awake too.

I got out of the car gathering the red and pink carnations I picked up at the store and made my way out to the cross that had been placed in the memory of the lives lost. My brothers had told me about this, but I had never seen it with my own eyes. Somehow Ace had managed to make it from hubcaps left at the shop. It was beautiful

shiny silver, but it was a simple cross that read, "Harlyn Bexton & Harper James" with two pairs of wings dangling from each side. My eyes stung but I couldn't move. I was rooted in this spot just like I had been that night. I leaned forward and placed the bunch of carnations next to the fresh daisies laying there. "Hi, my angels, sorry I've been gone so long. I'll be around now or at least I'm going to try. It's hard without you two. I love you both."

As I got up, I made my way back to my car without looking back. Once I was behind the wheel again, I felt that hole in my heart. Pounding on my steering wheel made it seem better, but it was just an illusion. Why did I think I could come back here? I pulled back on to the road and headed towards my childhood home. Pulling into the driveway I stare at the house that I was raised in; it hasn't changed a bit. The single story with white siding and two steps leading up to the teal door my mama had insisted on. I remember painting that door as part of my punishment for my first speeding ticket. It wasn't really punishment though since it made my mama so happy. The big tree in the front yard shaded most of the house. The brick planter boxes that lined both sides of the front of the house, a punishment for Bowie at one point, were full of every color of daisy. No doubt in my mind that these flowers planted here, and the ones laid by the cross were because of Sadie, Axell's fiancée.

I got out of the car, grabbing my luggage from the trunk and made my way to the door. According to the driveway only Bowie was home. When I got to the door I paused, I didn't know if I should just go in or knock first. Twisting the door handle I felt it was unlocked so I went inside. As I stood inside, I took in the small three bedrooms, two-bath house. To my left was the living room where my brothers and I use to fight over the remote. My brothers had laid new carpet and the furniture was now a leather sectional. I could see from here that the kitchen had been painted through the bar that overlooked the living room. It was white and pale yellow now. Down the hallway was the three-bedroom doors, Axell and Sadie, Mine and my youngest brother Jovi.

I took in the house and the smells. This was the house that had taught me everything. I had grown up in this house with two parents who loved fiercely. They had always taught us that as long you loved fully and tried to do what you thought was right then nothing else mattered. As long as you had a roof over your head and food to eat then you should not complain. There was always someone else out there who had less than you, so you should be thankful for what you had regardless. I had once believed all of that, I have believed that if I worked hard and loved harder that my life would be complete, and it was until Harlyn was taken from me. Now, I don't believe in any of that. Maybe, it worked for my parents but not for me.

My parents had been high school sweethearts and married two days after graduation at the courthouse. No big ceremony, no big dress and no big ring but there had always been an abundance of love. Shortly after they were married, they found out they were pregnant with Axell, the first of five boys they would have and raise in this house. My dad had worked at Carl's which was a car repair and body shop. It was the only job he ever had he started working in high school and worked there until Carl gave it to my father because of his age. Dad had then added the bar on the other side of the building a couple years later.

This house had been all my parents could afford when they first married but they kept it. My parents had twenty-one full years of love before my mom lost her battle with cancer that was twelve years ago. Jovi was just three at the time. My dad had always been a strong man, he had that don't mess with me look but the day my mom took her last breath I saw him cry for the first time. My parents were complete opposites. Ronald James was that rough and tough kind of guy who loved 80s rock and American muscle cars. For as long as I could remember he had long hair that was always in a ponytail, a full beard, multiple tattoos on his arms and chest. He cursed like a sailor and never backed down in a fight and smoked at least a pack a day. He was tall at almost 6'4" and all muscle. My mom Annie had been 5'3" with a lean and curvy build. Her shoulder length chocolate brown hair was always straight. Her blue green eyes were always kind, and her smile could light up a room. To most people

my parents made no sense, but it worked.

Four months ago, my dad had left to be with my mom. They all said it was a heart attack, but I think it was a twelve-year broken heart. After losing Harlyn I understood how my dad felt all those years. It had only been five years for me, and I still had a tough time finding the strength to keep going sometimes. Maybe having five mouths to feed at home was what he needed to keep pushing. I felt for Ace and Jovi the most. They had the least amount of time with our mom and now Jovi was losing time with dad too. I took a deep breath before heading towards my old room. As I opened the door, I found my room had been changed a lot. Probably, because Ace had moved into my room when I had moved out into my own place with Harlyn after high school graduation. The room was clean and showed no signs of anyone living in it before. It looked like a guest room that I was sure was done by the hands of Sadie. I couldn't even begin to imagine what she had found left behind from me and Ace. Although at this point, I am sure it wouldn't faze her she knew the five of us were hell on wheels.

I unpacked my belongings, while I was hanging my clothes in the closet, I heard the back door open. Bowie's body was in my doorway before I turned around. "Well hell! Looks like my baby brother is finally back and planning on staying?" he asked.

Bowie was the next to oldest and had a lot of my mom's physical traits with his blue eyes, chocolate brown hair and tan skin. He was at least 6'2" and all muscle like our father. Tattoos covered his biceps now, no doubt thanks to the tattoo shop that he and Ace owned together. His hair was messy like he just got out of bed, and he was clean shaven. "Figured you guys might be able to use some help around here now. Figured it was time to stop hiding."

"Well, it's good to have you back Jagger," he said crossing the room and pulling me into a hug. I might be younger, but I had at least two inches on him and about 20 more pounds of muscle. "Does Axell know?" He asked.

"Yeah, I told him I was considering it but not to tell anyone until I was sure." I replied.

"Well, damn I guess that explains why Sadie has been cleaning on this room all week," he said rubbing his chin.

I finished hanging up my clothes, "She didn't have to do that. I could have cleaned it myself."

He chuckled, "You didn't see the mess Ace left it in."

I laughed, "Yeah I guess I didn't. After I'm done here, I'm heading over to the shop to see Axell, you want to come?"

"Hell yeah! I'll go change." And with that he was gone from my room leaving the back-screen door to slam shut with a bang. Bowie lived in the little one room shed outside. My dad had added it while we were in high school and called it his man cave. According to Axell, Bowie now lived there. He came back in the house with all the swag of his ladies' man reputation. "Let's go see our big brother!" He said as we left the house and made our way to my '68 Camaro SS. Bowie let out a low whistle while assessing the car. "Now, this is nice, not as nice as my Fastback but still nice. Vegas must have treated you well."

I just shrugged as we got in the car and backed out of the driveway. Bowie turned up the radio and started singing and playing air guitar to ACDC. I couldn't help but laugh, I think it was the first real laugh I'd had in five years. Maybe, returning wouldn't be so bad after all. I might not be that naive boy who believed that love could conquer everything but that didn't mean I couldn't find some purpose or strength by being surrounded by my brothers again.

## Chapter 2

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

Londynn

Its late afternoon by the time Alivia and Creed drop me back off at my house. As I enter, I notice the house is still silent which isn't too shocking since its Friday night. My parents will be lucky to make it home in the early morning hours, if at all. I'm slowly making my way up the stairs when Farrah's ringer goes off. As soon as I answer Farrah is talking. "Okay, I'll be there in about forty-five minutes then we are going out for the night. Dress hot! Love ya doll!" After that the line disconnects but this isn't shocking either.

Farrah has always marched to the beat of her own drum, much to our parent's dismay. She wasn't one to be told what to do, she was carefree and fun loving. Farrah didn't care if she disappointed anyone as long as she made herself happy. As soon as she graduated high school and turned eighteen, she cashed in her trust fund, moving it to another bank so my parents couldn't control it. She packed up her room, rented a studio apartment and started working at a boutique. She had peeled out of the driveway in her black Range Rover with her middle finger in the air and platinum blonde hair in the wind and never looked back.

My parents had basically disowned her except for social events and holidays. Even though I was sure my parent's nonchalance had hurt Farrah, she didn't show it. She had carried on like the trooper she is. I'd always admired how tenacious she was. As I enter my room I decide to shower quickly before she arrives. After showering and dressing I step out of my bathroom to find Farrah lying across my bed on her back, reading a fashion magazine. Her deep blue eyes take in my appearance and frowns.

"What?" I ask sounding more defensive than I meant to.

My tone doesn't go unnoticed because her frown only deepens as she rolls over onto her stomach. "I said to dress hot, not like we're going to the country club."

Looking down I take in my outfit, yellow and black floral skirt that hits above the knee with a black silk top and black heels. I had pulled my hair into a low side ponytail. "What's wrong with what I have on?"

"You look like you're going off to prep school," she says as she rises from the bed. I look her over. She has on a pair of skintight jeans and black leather halter top with a pair of black stilettos. Her long platinum blonde hair hangs in long curls with half of it pulled back. Her makeup is heavy with fake eyelashes and a ton of eyeliner but that's her normal. Once she's standing in front of me, she holds out a bag for me to take.

"What's this?" I ask as I take the bag from her hand.

"This doll is an outfit that won't make you stick out like a sore thumb. Where were going you can't go dressed like that," she says motioning her red tipped nails in my direction. She ushers me into the bathroom before she starts helping me strip off the clothes.

"Where are we going Farrah?" I ask while she starts pulling the contents from the bag out.

"We" she says motioning between us, "Are going out," she starts handing me the clothes and I put them on without protest. After I'm dressed, she sits me down while she teases my straight hair before placing a black ribbon headband in it. Moving on to my makeup she adds dark eye shadow and tons of mascara and eyeliner. "Man, I'd kill for your lashes. If I had yours, I wouldn't have to glue these on every day," she says motioning to her own eyelashes. She stands back and pushes me towards my full-length mirror. "Now, we can go out."



Standing in the mirror I'm a little speechless. Farrah dressed me in something I loved but would never have been allowed to wear. Skinny light wash jeans that were ripped up, a simple black tee that was maybe a little too tight in my opinion and a pair of black wedges. I wasn't sure what to make of this outfit, but I liked it, a lot. Farrah claps when she notices the smile on my face then she grabs my hand and pulls me down the stairs to her Range Rover.

Farrah is dancing and singing along as we make our way through L.A. It dawns on me that I don't even know where we're going and I'm about to ask when Farrah turns down the music and glances at me. "You okay Londynn?" I give her a smile and nod, but she doesn't seem appeased. "Londynn you've been home all of one afternoon and you already seem miserable again."

"I'm not miserable."

She huffs, "Really Londynn? I don't buy that, you are miserable. Living your life based on someone else's expectations will make you miserable. You have got to learn to live for yourself."

I take a deep breath and count to five like I've learned to keep my emotions in check. "Farrah, not everyone is you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" She asks, and I can hear the hurt laced through her voice.

I shrug, "It means not everyone is as brave as you are. Not everyone just gives up the life that's been given to them."

"Given to you? Londynn, your life has been prepared for you. It wasn't given to you. From the time each of us were born our so-called parents planned out our lives, where we'd go to school, what activities we'd be involved in, what we'd wear, who'd we date

and marry, what college and profession, all of it Londynn. All of it, not a single decision about our lives, was actually ours. I didn't want my life to be controlled by them," she says, and I can see that her neck has a flush to it. Whenever her neck has a flush, it means she's really worked up. I wish I could be as strong as Farrah but I'm not.

"I know what you're saying is true but I'm not you. I'm like Duke," I say feeling defeated while the gnawing in the pit of my stomach returns.

"You are not like Duke. Duke is a walking, talking clone of our father. You are not mom or dad; I can see it in you but you're too scared to let go. You're too scared to disappoint them, you can't be afraid of that."

"I don't know Farrah."

"Okay, obviously I've made my point but I'm just going to keep pushing you, or maybe I'll get lucky, and you'll find something or someone to light a fire under your ass and you'll do it on your own," she says nudging me on my shoulder before making a kissy face at me.

Laughing and shaking my head I ask, "So, what are we doing tonight?"

"It's a Friday night in L.A. we're going to do what everyone else is doing besides going to the club." She says avoiding my question, but I already know the answer. In L.A. on a Friday night there's really only two things most people our age does, either go out clubbing or to a party and the other is go to the street races. If we're not going clubbing, then we're going to the street races and I don't know how I feel about that. Ryce is for sure going to be there, he races every week, has since he's gotten his license. He also loses every week to one of the James brothers.

"Farrah" I say in a warning tone.

"What?" she asks in her most innocent voice, batting her eyelashes at me.

I let out a heavy sigh, "I can't go to the races. What if is Ryce there?"

"What if he is?" she asks, shrugging her shoulders.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

"You know that I don't know what we are right now." Three months ago, on the night that changed everything for me I had walked in to find Ryce having sex with another girl. I'd had my suspicions in the past but never any confirmation. It shattered my heart in ways I didn't know possible, the things he had said to me afterwards were just extra daggers. I had honestly believed he had loved me, but I had been wrong. It hadn't been me he loved. It was my name and the money that came along with it.

"What do you want the two of you to be?" Farrah asked. As if our relationship could be so easily defined. I was expected to marry Ryce at some point, it had been that way since I was fifteen and we started dating. Ryce had been my first everything and our families expected marriage. "Londynn, I can see those wheels spinning but your relationship with Ryce is yours. You can decide what you want it to be. He's the one who cheated and then blamed you for not being able to keep his pants on. He's the one that's the cold-hearted bastard."

"But our parents expect us to be together"

"To hell with what our parents want or what Ryce's parents want or even what Ryce wants. What do you want?" I stay silent because no one has ever asked me what I wanted. I don't actually know how to answer that. "Londynn, look at our parents and their relationship. Do you want that for your future? Do you want a husband that drinks too much and sleeps around? Do you want to be self-medicated like mom? I don't think you do."

I turn and look out the window as we pass the beach. The setting sun glistens on the ocean. When I was little, I would dream that someday I'd become a mermaid and I'd swim in that immense body of water. I could just escape it all, but I was never going

to be a mermaid. I had two choices either continue to let the expectations of my family dictate my life or pull a Farrah and figure things out on my own. Resting my head against the seat I feel more confusion growing.

\*\*\*\*

Jagger

As Bowie and I pulled into the parking lot of the body shop I cut the engine and stare at the long building in front of us. It was no longer the peeling gray color it was when I left. Now, it was vintage red with black trim and silver metal door. "Damn, did everything change while I was gone?" I turn to ask Bowie.

"Man, you've been gone five years, things were bound to change. When Axell took over he gave the shop and the bar a face lift." He goes quiet while I study the building again. "You got to admit it looks better."

It did look better. It looked better than better. It looked like the kind of shop we had always wanted. Axell had taken the time and money to make everything look more presentable, it had to help the business. "Yeah, looks a ton better I just wasn't expecting it. C'mon let's go see our brother," I say punching him in the arm.

As we get out of the car and make our way up to the shop, I see he upgraded the inside as well. Once we're inside the door the smell of oil, tire rubber and metal hits my nose. This is home and suddenly it's like I'm seventeen again, working in this shop learning everything I could about cars. Bowie leads the way to the office, while saying hi to a few of the workers. He knocks on the door then enters. I follow behind. Axell is standing, talking on the phone.

Axell hadn't changed much his skin is still unable to tan even in the California sun he's still pale. His almost black hair is not long like it used to be. Now, it's just long

enough to slick it back and he's traded his baby face for a little stubble. He's still the tallest at 6'5" and like all of us he's all muscle. His eyes widen at the surprise of seeing me with Bowie. Axell's eyes are now wide enough that you can tell they are two different colors one is solid blue, and the other is part brown and part blue. It's a disease or condition of something that I can't even begin to pronounce.

After he hangs up the phone he walks around the desk and pulls me into a rough hug. "Jagger. It's been too long. It's good to see you again little brother."

"You too" I tell him while hugging him back.

He pulls back and holds me at arm's length distance, "Vegas has been good to you. Why didn't you tell me you'd be here today?"

I rub my hand over my face, "Didn't know to be honest. I just got off work and packed up what I wanted to bring."

"Well, either way it's good to have you back," Axell says with his goofy smile on his face. "Sadie will be happy that she took care of the room yesterday."

"Yeah, about that. She didn't have to do that. I could have taken care of it myself."

He waves his hand as if swatting the thought away. "You know Sadie." Sadie was a permanent fixture in our family, had been since Axell and she met in high school and started dating. Sadie had become like a mother to all of us and I was sure she still was to Jovi. She had managed to put herself through college and graduate and was now a full-time nurse. She was the best thing that had ever happened to Axell.

"Okay, as much as I hate to break up the brother bonding but I'm starving," Bowie interrupts and Axell laughs then suggest we head over to JamesTown, our families bar on the back side of the building. We make our way over and take a seat at the bar,

Bowie goes behind the bar and grabs us all a beer then pops his head inside the back door and asks for three burgers and fries.

We mostly eat in silence with exception of a curious question from one of my brothers. My thoughts keep drifting to the last time I was in this bar. It had been after Harlyn and even though I wasn't old enough to drink I was hammered. I had started a barfight and I would have gotten arrested if Bowie hadn't taken the fall for me and while Ace drove me home. Two days after I had packed up and left. Las Vegas was close enough and big enough that I could forget my past and hide out. Being back here though reminds me of how much I have missed this place I called home.

We continued to hang around the bar. My brothers filled me in on the things I had missed out on. Apparently, the James brothers still ruled the racing world, Ryce Whitten and the rich brats from Santa Monica tried every week but never beat us, Farrah Parrish now worked as a bartender at JamesTown and had a thing going on with Connor Hart, who was from our side of town. Farrah had always been different from the rest of the Santa Monica brats. She had paved her own path and that wasn't allowed apparently.

Bowie told me that Duke Parrish had lived up to his expectation. He sometimes still came to the races with his nose in the air like he was superior to the rest of us. He was going to be a lawyer once he finished college and he had already placed a ring on Kasha Kendrick's hand. I really wasn't that surprised or interested in Duke however, I was curious about Londynn, Farrah's younger sister. She was the most intriguing to me, when I had left, she had only been fourteen, but she had already been gorgeous. With her honey-colored hair and dark hazel eyes that looked like stars were dancing in them, she had still believed in the magic of the world.

"So, you told me about the rest of the Parrish family, what about Londynn?" I asked trying to seem as uninterested as possible.

Bowie chuckled and gave Axell a knowing look. "That's right you had always been the most curious about the baby of the family," Bowie says laughing way too hard.

"It's not like that, I was just curious." Bowie could be exhausting at time. I look over at Axell I get a sense of sadness in his eyes but I'm not sure why.

Axell clears his throat, "Well she kind of did what you'd expect. As soon as she was old enough to date, she became Ryce's girlfriend."

"Not that his punk ass deserves her," Bowie chimes in.

"She's been away for three months according to Farrah and the relationship with Ryce is questionable," Axell says before falling silent. After a few minutes of silence Axell checks his watch and says, "We should get going we got to get to the races and close the shop." Bowie is already in the shop helping cleanup for the day when Axell places his hand on my shoulder to stop me, "Jagger, Londynn is vulnerable right now so it's best to stay clear."

I feel my brows knit together in confusion. I didn't know why he was telling me to stay clear. I had no intention of going after her. Even at fourteen Londynn deserved a one-woman type of a guy and I wasn't him. I would never be that guy again, not after Harlyn. Everything for me now when it came to women was no strings attached sex, just about the release. Something told me that Londynn wasn't that type of girl. "I wasn't planning on getting near her. Unless the woman is Harlyn, I don't give a damn," I said walking away from Axell and heading to my car. I didn't want any more brotherly advice today.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

\*\*\*\*

As I pull up to the street that we'd be using to race tonight I spot my brothers cars, Axell's black 1970 Chevy Chevelle, Ace's royal blue Dodge Challenger Hellcat and Bowie's black 1968 Ford Mustang Fastback. I pull in next to Bowie, as I get out, I spot Ace and Jovi leaning next to the wall smoking a cigarette. I walk up yanking the cigarette from Jovi's mouth, "I don't think so."

Jovi looks up at me with his wide innocent eyes, he's tall now at least 6'1" with messy chocolate brown hair that's a little too long on the top, he's far too skinny though, I'd have to fix that, start hitting the weights with him. "Jagger?" his voice no longer held that pre-puberty squeak to it, now it's deep and husky that seems to be a family trait. I pull him into a hug, when I pull back, I tell him, "I never want to see you smoke anything ever again, am I clear?"

"Yeah, I just figured since Ace does." he trails off with a shrug.

Looking over at my next to youngest brother, Ace, he's grown up too. He's eye level with me at 6'3". His body resembles the rest of ours, all muscle. The top of his chocolate brown hair is also a little too long, but I guess it's, so he can pull it up and style it the way he does, the sides are short to the head. His ears have big black gauges. A piercing on the left side of his lip and neck full of tattoos are the first things I notice. Looking down his arms I see those are also covered in colorful ink, now it all makes sense as to why he owns a tattoo shop. "Yeah, well Ace was always a rebel without a cause," I say pulling Ace into a hug while yanking the cigarette from his mouth too.

"Never without a Cause, all for the ladies. Ladies love a rebel," he says winking his baby blue eyes that are lined with a ridiculous amount eyeliner and eyelashes that are so dark and thick, that most girls have to buy. I chuckle at his comment and he whispers into my ear, "Good to see you. Welcome home."

"Thanks man," I tell him just as a gorgeous, petite brunette saunters up to Ace. She's just his type in her tiny black dress and over the knee the black leather boots with at least six-inch heels and a rather large set of breasts that couldn't be real. She must be short without those because she barely comes to the middle of Ace's chest. Her dark grey eyes are lined with just as much eyeliner as his and her long dark hair hangs down to the small of her back. Her nose is pierced, and I wonder if Ace is the one who did it.

Ace kisses her on the cheek and motions towards me, "Kynlee this is my older brother Jagger. Jagger this is my friend Kynlee."

I extended my hand out to shake hers. "Nice to meet you Kynlee, although I'm not sure what you see in this brother of mine. Clearly, you can do better." I love Ace but if he's referring to a girl as hot as Kynlee as just a friend then he doesn't deserve her.

She laughs tossing her hair over her shoulder, "I like you already." When she smiles her cold exterior automatically warms up. She should definitely be smiling more like that, but I have the feeling Ace doesn't give her a whole lot of reason for these smiles. All of our thoughts and conversations come to a halt as Ryce Whitten pulls up in his canary yellow Porsche 911 but it's not because of the car or him, it's because of the volume of his music. It's ridiculous. I can barely hear myself think so I'm not quite sure how he managed to drive all the way down here.

As he gets out he smirks in my direction, cocky little son of a bitch that he is. He loses every time he races but still acts like he's the best because of the amount of money he has in his trust fund. I see Ace ball his hand into a fist and I know that if I

make one move he's got my back, but I didn't come back to fight so I turn around in the other direction. I'm not going to let that rich brat cause me any trouble. He's still just pissed that Harlyn never even looked his direction. He had tried on multiple attempts, but she had never even batted an eyelash, it was just another reason why I loved her. I hear a girl squeal in delight and glance back over my shoulder to see Ryce with his face buried in Jessica Mann's neck. She's barely clothed and by the way his hands are all over her I wonder if he's going to take her right there on top of the hood of his car. I see movement out of the corner of my eye and notice the head of honey colored hair and long legs moving away from the scene with Ryce. I haven't seen her face, but I know it's Londynn.

## Chapter 3

### Londynn

When we first arrived at the races I scanned the area for Ryce, but I didn't see him anywhere, but I was bound to run into him. I still didn't know what to do about our situation. I knew regardless of who he was hooking up with he'd end up doing what his parents wanted. Ryce always only cared about money first, if he didn't do as they wished he'd be cut off. As I was walking, searching for Farrah who was probably somewhere with Connor I saw some of the James brothers, Ace who I knew better than most since we were almost the same age. We'd kissed once, mostly because he was helping me prove a point to Ryce which lasted all of two hours. Then there was the youngest James boy, Jovi, he was like fifteen now, but you could already see the resemblance between them all. Of course, Kynlee, who scared me a little to be honest, was next to Ace as always. They would never call themselves official, but they were definitely something. Kynlee was gorgeous, but she had this attitude that made all the girls a little scared. However, none of them were what really caught my attention. No, the one that caught my attention was the one standing in all black. That had to be Jagger, I hadn't seen him since I was fourteen but even back then he was too good looking for his own good, obviously that hadn't changed. He was at least 6'4"

and all muscle. You could actually see the muscles that defined his back through the simple black tee he had on. His hair was chocolate brown and cut similar to Ace's but instead of pulling it up and towards the side, Jagger's was just pulled up. It was thick. It made me want to run my fingers through it. When he moved his arms, I could see a tattoo on the inside of his right bicep and another tattoo on inside of his left forearm. His tanned skin made me wonder if he had moved to a place that had a beach and if he spent a lot of time there.

Music. Music that was so loud that everyone else fell and quiet took over my thoughts. Looking over my shoulder I noticed Ryce's canary yellow Porsche heading this way. I fell behind some other people in the crowd. As he parked I noticed movement from across the street again, looking up I noticed Jagger had turned towards Ryce with a look of disdain on his face. His bronze colored eyes were narrowed in a glare in Ryce's direction. I also noticed that even though Jagger and Ryce were close to the same age that Ryce had a baby face compared to Jagger. Maybe, it was Jagger's trimmed beard or the way his amber eyes held pain no one could understand. Ryce smirked at Jagger and I held my breath as I waited to see if anything would happen between them, but Jagger just turned back around shaking his head. I was studying Jagger again when I heard a loud squeal come from the direction of Ryce.

Ryce had grabbed Jessica Mann, a fake busty blonde that had a reputation. Ryce currently had her sitting on the hood of the car with her legs wrapped around his waist, his face was buried in her neck and his hands were...well everywhere. It was a disgusting sight to witness but something I needed to see. Farrah had asked me what I wanted with Ryce and at the time I didn't know but after this I had an answer. I wanted nothing, absolutely nothing from or to do with Ryce. I would never be able to look at him like the boy I had fell in love with once upon a time. The trust we had once shared was shattered for me. He clearly hadn't spent any time missing me the past three months but then again, I hadn't expected him to. The last time I had seen him flashed back into my mind.

We were at the street races just like every other Friday night. Ryce was being distant every time I searched those brown eyes I had come to love for answers I only ended up with more questions. Once we parked he got out throwing his arm around me and pulling me close. To the audience in front of us we were the perfect couple, but it was just the appearance. I was depressed, and I was pretty sure Ryce was cheating. I had just turned nineteen and Ryce was twenty-three. When our parents first introduced us, I had been fifteen and the fact that Ryce Whitten wanted to date me made me feel like I was on cloud nine.

Ryce was the typical California rich boy. Six feet with six pack abs and sun bleached blonde hair with chocolate brown eyes and one of those smiles that made girls weak in the knees. Any girl my age would have felt special being with him because he had that way of making you feel that way. As if you were the only girl in the room but I had been young and naive and missed the looks he gave other girls. He said he loved me and I believed him. Ryce would buy me expensive things and take me to fancy restaurants and I had always believed that was a show of love but not anymore. I knew better now. It was just for appearance.

I had once been captivated by Ryce Whitten, I had given him everything I had and all I got in return was a front seat to him having sex with some random girl. When he finally realized I was standing there, frozen like an idiot he had followed me outside and he told me it was my fault that he cheated. I was a prude and cold and he had to cheat because I didn't put out enough. That was three months ago and here I am now frozen watching this scene with Jessica unfold until I realize that I can walk away. There's no one to stop me so that's what I do. I turn around and start to walk away when Creed calls my name from across the street. My eyes must give something away because Creed looks around until he spots Ryce who is already moving towards me. I try to cross the street discreetly, but I hear Ryce's voice call my name.

I consider trying to walk faster but I know that will do no good. I've been spotted, Creed gives me an apologetic look but it's not really his fault. I was the one who

thought I could get away with avoiding him all night. I'm not too far away from Ace, Jovi and Jagger who Creed is standing with since they close to each other. They've practically grown up together. Before I turn around to face Ryce I notice that Jagger has fully turned around along with everyone else to see what's going on. Instantly, I feel my anxiety kick in.

\*\*\*\*

Jagger

I had no reason to feel protective over Londynn Parrish, but I didn't trust guys like Ryce Whitten. They were used to getting what they wanted and if they didn't then usually their angry side came out. Sometimes their angry side required someone else to step in. As I turned around my eyes instantly locked on Londynn's hazel eyes. They no longer held those stars, the world had stolen those dancing stars, the girl in front of me didn't look like the girl who believed in magic anymore. This girl looked broken. I should know, I carried that same look a lot of the time but just before she turned around to face Ryce I saw her walls come back up. She might be hurt but I doubted few people knew about it.

Ryce spoke first, "Londynn I didn't know you were back."

Londynn crosses her arms over her chest and raises her nose in the air while she meets his eyes. "Well, I don't suppose you would since we haven't spoken in three months. You've clearly been...busy."

Ryce takes a step towards her but she matches it by taking a step back. "Come on sweetie it's not like that."

Londynn throws her hand up to stop him. "Save it Ryce. I used to believe you but not anymore."

"Londynn, we need to talk," Ryce says but his tone is condescending, like he's trying to talk to a toddler.

Londynn shakes her head, "I think your tongue needs some rest," she says before turning around towards us where Farrah, Connor, Bowie, Axell and Sadie now stand as well.

Ryce quickly closes the distance between them and yanks her arm, pulling her back towards him. "Don't walk away from me Londynn!" He yells at her and I see her flinch and instantly I'm moving.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

I hear footsteps behind me and I don't even have to look back to know Ace is right behind me, probably Bowie too. They both love to get in someone's face. I stop not too far from Londynn and Ryce. Ryce glares at me over Londynn's head and I can hear her whispering she's sorry and to please let her go. Hearing Londynn's voice sound so broken did it for me, I cleared my throat and said, "Let her go."

"Keep your ass out of it Jagger or I'll hand it to you," he says trying to sound threatening.

I chuckle, "That's funny Ryce because I can't remember you ever handing me my ass but if you think you can then come on." I motion for him to come at me. "Let her go and show me what you got."

"Screw this!" He says pushing Londynn back with enough force to send her tall, lean body falling into my chest. Luckily, I catch her just as Bowie steps around me and punches Ryce square in the jaw knocking Ryce a few steps back. Instantly, Ryce's friends gather around him ready to try to take us on but I hear footsteps behind us and I see Axell and Connor have also joined us. This could get bloody really quickly so I lean down to whisper in Londynn's ear but suddenly the sweet smell coming off her skin hits me. Daisies feel my nose but it's not overpowering it's subtle, it's nice. I swallow trying to get my thoughts back on track. "Are you okay?" I ask her, and I notice how the tickle of my breath causes goosebumps to cover her arms. She simply nods her head yes. Knowing that she's okay I place my hand on her waist and guide her behind my back where she must see Farrah because I hear her retreating to where the rest of the girls are at.

Bowie and Ace are ready for a fight, but I have a better idea, so I step forward in



front of Bowie. It's like an animal that has rabies whenever he gets worked up he's hard to get down. "I have a better idea. Instead of busting up that face of yours and your buddies, how about we settle this on the road. Pedal to the metal?"

Ryce spits out a mouthful of blood and glares back at us. "Pedal to the metal." He confirms then turns to head back to his car.

\*\*\*\*

The races had been set and the \$1,500 buy in was paid. I was going against Ryce which didn't bother me in the least. Actually, I couldn't wait until he was choking on my dust. I had spent my free night's street racing in Vegas, but the Vegas street racing scene was nothing like the one in here. Of course, there were tons of different areas that race in L.A. this was just ours. Ace, Bowie and Connor were all racing as well. They would be going against Ryce's richie-rich friends, but I didn't worry about them either. These were our streets, they may have over priced cars but that didn't matter. What mattered was how the driver drove their cars.

As I'm sitting behind the wheel of my car I feel my adrenaline kick in. The pulse in my neck beats to the sound of my rock music. I can almost visualize winning this race. Ryce sits in the car beside me and from the corner of my eye I can see him looking my way, but I don't have any reason to give him the time of day. The only thing he'll be seeing in a minute are my taillights. I take a deep breath and move my neck side to side, trying to pop it. On the street beside my driver's side stands the people from my side of town with the exception of Farrah and Londynn.

Londynn is standing there gnawing on her bottom lip. I can tell she's nervous, but she has nothing to worry about. Ace and Bowie have already won both of their races and now it's just Connor and me. Connor takes off and gets a good lead, but I lose sight of his taillights as he rounds the corner. I pull my car up to the starting line and rev the engine for good measure. I can tell by the cheers from my side of the street that

Connor won. Now it's my turn, Jessica walks out to stand between our two cars, when she drops the scarf we go. I hold my steering wheel in a death grip and just before she drops the scarf she winks. Apparently that wink meant go because Ryce takes off getting a three second lead on me. Pissed I slam my pedal down and feel the salty California air rush into my car.

My mind clears and all I concentrate on is this car, this road, these few seconds. The vibration from the car's speed runs up my body and flows through my body. The people and the buildings I pass are just a blur at this speed. I can hear cheers from the crowd, but it's muffled because of the wind rushing through the car at this speed. It's like I'm flying, like I'm free. I'm switching gears like a maniac but I'm catching up to Ryce and that awful yellow Cracker Jack toy he calls a car. His car would actually have a good chance of beating mine if it wasn't for him driving it. He lets off his gas thinking he's already won in the last few seconds which gives me all I need. In that instant I shift my Camaro up another gear and fly past him for the win. I continue to drive decreasing my speed until I come back to where we started when I get out I scan the crowd until I find her face. Londynn's very relieved looking face and I give her wink just to watch that blush fill her cheeks.

\*\*\*\*

Londynn

I felt a little flattered that Jagger and his brothers were willing to stand up for me but if they didn't win these races there would just be more issues. I didn't want to drag them into my problems. So far though the James boys had lived up to their reputation of owning these streets. Now, Connor is up and Farrah has my hand in a death grip. She's worried but according to the group were standing with he shouldn't be. Although I know telling her that will do no good until this race is over. Looking over I see Axell with his arms around Sadie's shoulders. Seeing her had sent my anxiety up at first. I was afraid she'd mention the past three months and I didn't want everyone to

know. Actually, I didn't want anyone to know and neither did my family. Their reasons for not letting anyone know were different from mine though. They didn't want another wrinkle in the perfect appearance. I, on the other hand, didn't want people to look or treat me differently. I didn't want to be seen as weak or crazy.

Luckily, Sadie hadn't brought it up. In fact, when Jovi had introduced us she had acted as if she didn't know me aside from being at the races previously. I let out a sigh of relief and I hoped my eyes had showed how thankful I was. Sadie had been the best friend I'd had for the past three months but I couldn't let people know that. The next time I could talk to her without all of these people around I'd explain and hopefully, she'd understand. I remember the first time I'd met Sadie. I remember how scared I was when I was checking in to Spirit but they had Sadie come out and introduce herself as my nurse and her electric blue eyes that held a kind of kindness that I had never experienced before. We were the same height, but her skin was pale, and she had always worn her reddish-brown hair up in a ponytail. Her heart shaped face and sweet smile made you at ease instantly. Seeing her with Axell, away from her nursing scrubs and ponytail, I notice that her hair falls around her shoulders and her eyes stand out even more thanks to her eye makeup. She's dressed simple in a pair of denim shorts and tank top but she's still that kind Sadie who had been my nurse the past three months.

Connor had won and when he had reappeared by our group Farrah and ran up to him, flinging herself in his arms. I don't know if I could trust someone enough to throw myself at them like that. What if they didn't catch you? Then again, I guess with arms like Connor's you didn't have to worry about that. I could see what my sister saw in him. His dark red hair was short and clean cut and he had a dark red beard that was trimmed close to his face. He was at least 6'1" and one of his arms was covered in tattoos as well as the muscles, you could even see the outline of his veins thanks to his muscles. His forest green eyes held a hint of mystery which I'm sure drove Farrah crazy and he had an easy smile. He made Farrah seem so tiny next to him another thing I'm sure she loved.

As soon as Jessica walked out to let Jagger and Ryce know when they could start I lost track of Connor and Farrah. This was the race I was most worried about, but I was also a little excited. I had always had a small crush on Jagger. He carried this dangerous mystery around him and years ago I had wanted to understand it. I had been drawn towards him, but I was too young, and he had Harlyn but now things were different. Ryce took off before he was supposed to giving him a few seconds lead which made me nervous. I had seen enough races to know that those few seconds could make or break a race. My anxiety was starting to build when I felt someone slip their hand in mine. Looking over I saw Sadie, she was giving me reassurance and reminding to take deep breaths. Sadie to my rescue once again.

Before Jagger had time to come back around to where we all were the crowd on our side was buzzing with the news of his win. I let out a sigh of relief and Sadie squeezed my hand. I looked over at her, "Thanks Sadie."

She shrugged, and her sweet smile appeared on her face. "No biggie, it just looked like you needed me." She was walking back to Axell when she turned around and said, "You did good Londynn."

As soon as Jagger was out of the car he was swarmed by people. I hung back from the crowd, next to the wall of the building. Farrah had disappeared with Connor and I kept trying to call her, but she wasn't answering. Axell, presented the winners with their money and Ryce and his friends left quickly but not before Ryce winked at me then grabbed Jessica, ushering her into his car. I shook my head in disgust. How had I been so blind to him before? I felt his body heat before he even spoke, "You deserve better."

Without turning around, I reply, "I'm learning that."

"Good," he replies, and the tone of his voice send shivers down my spine and warmth takes over my body.

I turn around and look into Jagger's bronze eyes, you could get lost in those eyes. His lips form one of those smiles that makes girls turn into puddles and he knows it. He's turning on the charm but I'm not sure why. "Congratulations on the win."

He shrugs while placing his hands in his pocket and leaning against the wall. He's lethal when he puts the charm on. "That was easy. Where's Farrah?"

I shrug, crossing my arms over my chest, "I don't know, after Connor pulled around she ran to him then I lost her. My guess is that she's probably a little busy with him right now."

He chuckled, and I noticed his perfectly straight teeth and the little crinkle that formed around his eyes. "I bet. Well, would you like a ride home or to JamesTown? I'm sure she'll either call or go there soon enough."

I wasn't sure what to do. For some reason I didn't want Jagger to see the place I called home and Farrah wasn't answering. I could go to JamesTown but technically I was underage and I didn't have my fake ID, but I also couldn't just stand out here all night. "I'm only 19." He raised his eyebrows in question. "I can't get into JamesTown, technically."

He chuckled while he placed his hand on the small of my back, leading me to his car. "It'll be our little secret plus I'm pretty sure the owners will look the other way." He opened the passenger side door and let me slide in before shutting the door and getting behind the wheel. While he folded his long legs into the car, the small area is suddenly filled with his scent. Gucci Guilty, I'd recognize it anywhere. I had always loved the smell of it, but Ryce would never wear it. The butterflies in my stomach multiplied as we headed to JamesTown while some 80s rock music played.

## Chapter 4

Jagger

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

Her scent is intoxicating, and the traffic is moving at a painstakingly slow pace. Mostly, because it's Friday night and also because most of the traffic in front of us is heading to the same place we are, JamesTown. Def Leppard comes on the radio and on instinct I turn it up, they've always been one of my favorites. I hear a small giggle and see Londynn's honey colored hair dancing back and forth and she bounces to the music. At least she has rhythm unlike me. She giggles again and it's a sweet sound that I have feeling she doesn't do often enough. I can't resist the urge to ask, "What's so funny?"

She looks over at me and shrugs but a small smile tugs at her perfect lips. In an instant my mind is day dreaming on what it would be like to kiss those lips. What the hell has gotten into me?, "I was just wondering if you listened to anything from this decade." I raise my eyebrows in question and she studies my face a moment before continuing but not before the blush creeps up to her cheeks. "I mean you guys are all named after 80s musicians and you all drive vintage cars, well except for Ace."

"Yeah, Ace was always the one that tends to keep up with the times. He just walks down his own path. And to answer your question, yes, I do listen to music from this decade. Actually, I'd think you'd be surprised to find the vast decades of music on my iPod."

A smirk crosses her face and I swear my heart rate picks up, but I don't know why. Yes, Londynn is gorgeous but it's not like I'm the relationship type guy anymore and she is definitely that girl. I need to keep reminding myself of that. "Is that so?"

"Yes. So, do you have a favorite musical artist?" I ask.

"Doesn't everyone?" She counters and I'm not sure if it's because she doesn't want to tell me or what?

I shrug while inching the car forward with the flow of traffic. "I guess they do. What's yours?"

"Depends really but if I could only pick one, Kings of Leon."

"They're good. I saw them when they played in Vegas last year," I tell her, and she instantly looks at me with that pretty mouth of hers wide open.

"You're kidding me!" She exclaims, and I shake my head no. "It's official I'm beyond jealous of you right now. Were they great?"

We continue to talk about Kings of Leon for at least ten minutes then a hushed silence falls over the car. Londynn is staring at the beach as we drive by and I could almost see her wheels spinning but I didn't know what she's thinking about. Once we pass the beach she turns back to face me. "So, who's your favorite and why?"

"Whitesnake."

Her eyebrows knit together as if she's trying to figure out if I'm serious and if it wasn't so adorable it might get on my nerves. "Whitesnake?" I just nod. "First of all, I don't think I know them and second of all, why?"

"There's this song by Whitesnake called Is It Love? it was my parents' song. I remember so many nights I'd sneak out of my room when I was supposed to be asleep and sit on the floor where I could look around the wall and see my parents dancing to that song. It was their song and the way they looked at each other and held each other..." I shrug.



"It made you believe in it all," Londynn says in almost a whisper.

"Yeah, I guess they did," I say as we pull into a parking place in front of JamesTown.

I get out and walk around so I can open the door for her. I take her small hand as I help her out. Its silky soft next to mine. For a moment she stares up into my eyes and I swear she can see what an ass I've been the past five years and for the first time I care that I've been that guy but its short lived because Farrah walks out of the door. Well, more like stumbles hollering Londynn's name. Londynn releases a deep sigh, one that's deep enough to make her shoulders come close to her ears then fall back down. A small smile falls over her face, "I better go take care of that but thank you for the ride and for sticking up for me."

"The pleasure was all mine," I reply giving her a wink and a smile that has always sealed the deal for me. I watch as she walks away, and I wonder what in the hell has gotten into me? It's not like Londynn Parrish, queen of the rich and perfect, would ever even consider anything with me unless it was to make Ryce jealous. So, why does my heart feel like some of the ice has been chipped away?

\*\*\*\*

Londynn

I was kind of glad for the distraction of a tipsy Farrah. Jagger was causing me all kinds of butterflies and he knew it. He kept giving me that smile that had probably gotten him in more beds than the 80s stars he was named after. I couldn't let myself fall for someone like him. He had a reputation, they all did. Yes, he was ridiculously good looking and smelled amazing and his eyes had those little crinkles that appeared when he smiled. Yes, his deep, husky voice sent shivers down my spine and made everything tingle but that didn't make it a good idea. Actually, it made all of this a bad idea.

With guys like Ryce I now knew what to expect. To be wanted but only because of the money and ego boost that comes along with me. It wasn't that they wanted, it was the image. I couldn't ever remember Ryce telling me his favorite song or asking me mine because we didn't really talk. I hadn't realized that though until tonight. But with guys like Jagger they were charming, and they knew it. They had the looks and knew how to use them. In the end I knew I'd get my heart broken and yes, Ryce had broken it too but I didn't see it coming from the beginning. Allowing myself to hold any kind of fantasy about Jagger would definitely lead to heartbreak and I'd known it from the get go.

Farrah was sitting in Connor's lap and Kynlee had basically been all over Ace since we sat down. He wasn't complaining but I doubt any guy would. She was the type of gorgeous that was intimidating, and her ice-cold attitude didn't help. The only saving grace at this table was Sadie. She had sat down beside me while Axell, Bowie and Jagger tended to something in the back. We had been sitting in silence, well, not total silence since we had to hear the make outs going on at the table and the music that filled the bar. Sadie cleared her throat and looked at me. "So, how's the first day?"

I shrug, "Getting by. Thanks for asking," I add with a small smile.

"You look good. I'm really proud of you for sticking up to Ryce the way you did. You really needed to do that for yourself," Sadie says patting my hand on the table.

I give her half a laugh, "Well, I don't know how much I did considering your brother-in-law had to step in."

"Fixing to be brother in law and also he didn't have to but the James' boys can't stand guys like Ryce and they were raised where you didn't talk or treat any female that way. It's just in their blood but even if he hadn't stepped in you would have been fine," she says with a reassuring smile.

"I don't know," I say quietly but she manages to hear it.

She shakes her head, "No, Londynn remember what you've learned. You deserve better now make sure you get it. Stop doubting yourself."

"Okay," I say giving her a smile that will get her off my back. "I'm going to see what's on the jukebox," I tell the table as I make my way across the room. As I'm looking at the jukebox I feel the heat coming off his body as he stands behind me. He leans forward and places a hand on the glass next to mine. I can smell cinnamon coming off his breath before he whispers, "Find anything good?" I shrug in response, "Just browsing."

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

He chuckles, and I look over my shoulder at him, his eyes study my face but instead of making me uncomfortable it makes me feel something else, something unknown, but I like it. A thought occurs to me and I turn back to the jukebox and continue browsing until I see the band I was looking for. Of course, the juke box is full of all the classics and since the James boys owned JamesTown it made sense that Whitesnake would be in the jukebox. I scroll through the songs and make my selection. Before the music starts playing I turn around and lean against the jukebox and lay my head to one side and smile.

“Now what’s that smile about?” he asks as his eyes study me again, trying to figure it out. The music starts, and he throws his head back in a laugh. “Really? You’re playing my favorite song?”

I shrug with my arms crossed over my chest. “I’d never heard the song and you know what they say curiosity killed the cat.” He bites his bottom lip for just a minute like he wants to say something but won’t. “Dance with me?” I ask holding out my hand.

He looks at my hand like I’m crazy but then shakes his head. “I can’t dance Londynn. I have no rhythm.”

“Well, lucky for you I’m an excellent teacher. Sixteen years of classes so just follow my lead,” I tell him as I take his hand and pull him towards the dance floor. Once we reach the floor I take one of his hands and place it on my waist and take the other in my hand. “Now, just shuffle your feet to the beat of the music. It doesn’t have to be anything fancy.” He barely moves at first but as the music continues he becomes more comfortable and before I know it he’s pulled me closer to his body. His eyes have never left mine and I feel slightly lightheaded. I can feel the rise and fall of his

chest as he breathes, and I can see the little beads of sweat forming on his neck from the heat inside the building. We dance until the song finishes and then we stop but he doesn't release me, and I make no move to step away. It's like it's just us in this bar, on this dance floor. The sound of a glass dropping, and shattering knocks me back into reality. "See, you can dance," I say patting his chest in what is supposed to be a playful manner, but my voice is shaky and a little breathless.

## Chapter 5

### Jagger

After the song and dance had ended Londynn had practically ran away from me. It had been four days and it was still bothering me. I didn't know what made that girl so hot and cold, but I was over it. It'd been four days since I had arrived back at my childhood home and I found myself falling into a routine. I'd wake up to the smell of breakfast being cooked, thanks to Sadie, my brothers, Sadie and I would all sit for breakfast. Sadie would then take off to work and drop Jovi off on her way. After breakfast I would shower then head over to the body shop to start work. We had actually been really busy which was great for us. Around lunch I'd stop and have lunch with Axell in JamesTown usually compliments of Farrah. Once we finished lunch we'd go back to work until it was time to pick up Jovi. At that time, I'd leave to pick up my little brother and we'd head for the gym. My baby brother needed to gain some muscle. I'd managed to become a pretty decent cook since living on my own, so I'd start dinner after another quick shower. The first day I had cooked dinner was last night and even though it went well, Sadie had been so surprised she'd cried. I just figured after spending eight plus hours in a rehab being a personal nurse for four patients every day the girl needed a break when she got home.

So, here I am once again cooking for my brothers, Sadie and Kynlee, yet I'm distracted because even though I keep telling myself I don't care about Londynn she keeps invading my mind. That smile, that giggle, that smell, the softness of her skin

against mine, those eyes. Those eyes that had lost their sparkle since I'd last seen her. It shouldn't matter that the sparkle was gone but for whatever reason I wanted to know why it was gone. I wanted to fix it for her. Ace and Kynlee come into the kitchen interrupting my train of thought but maybe I should thank them since they distracted me.

"Hey Jagger, need any help?" Kynlee offers.

"Nope, I'm all good. You just grab yourself a drink and have a seat, darling," I add a wink to really mess with my brother. I noticed his jaw clench which lets me know I've hit a nerve, but I doubt Kynlee caught it.

"Okay but if you need any help just holler, Ace is useless in a kitchen," she says in a joking manner, patting him on the chest.

"Among other things," I add, taking another dig at my brother. Kynlee saunters away and I catch Ace as he follows her. Ace likes her, more than he's willing to admit and more than she realizes. "Can I give you some brotherly advice?" I ask.

He lets out a huff of air. "Please don't."

"Well, tough shit cause I'm going to anyway. Take it from me don't let her get away. She clearly cares about you and I'm pretty sure you care about her however, I doubt she knows that."

"Take it from you? The brother who got totally whipped then lost his mind and ran off when things took a turn? You don't know anything about me or Kynlee," Ace says giving me a hard glare that would intimidate most people but not me.

Before I can reply Bowie steps into the doorway, leaning against it. "No, don't take it from him but you can take it from me." Bowie meets Ace's glare with one of his own

and I see the pain that Bowie tries to hide in his eyes. He's trying to tell our little brother that he doesn't want that pain every day. Ace shakes his head and stalks off outside, pushing past Bowie mumbling something about needing a smoke.

After Ace is outside I turn back to the fajitas I'm making but Bowie makes no move to leave. "You doing okay, Bo?"

"Yeah, great as always," he tells me before grabbing a beer from the fridge and heading to the living room with Kynlee. Bowie is far from fine, he'll never admit it, but he knows just as much or maybe even more about heartbreak than me. He had fallen in love with a girl from a few streets over. They had attended the same school since first grade, but it was one of those things, puberty hit, and everything changed. Unfortunately, she came from a pretty messed up family. Her dad was a notorious drug dealer and a bad deal had left her parents and brother dead. The only reason she had been spared was because she had been with Bowie. She had no living relatives that were willing to take her, so she was supposed to be placed in foster care, but she had packed up and ran away before that could happen. It had been ten years and Bowie had never loved another girl, had never had another serious relationship. He carried that broken heart everywhere. Maybe, he does know more about heartbreak than me because Harlyn didn't choose to leave me and never come back but Hollis had.

After dinner I find myself outside, sitting under the tree in our yard. It's already dark outside but I like the fresh air. Creed Eisenhower has lived next door to us for years, he comes walking out with a short Spanish girl. Her dark hair is pulled up into a ponytail and she's dressed simple enough, but no one would ever forget Alivia Gomez. They're talking as Creed walks Alivia to her car. "Alivia, do you really think Londynn is going to be okay?"

I see Alivia shrug, "I don't know. It's hard to tell, she's the world's best at keeping an image. I never knew she had it so bad before. I hope she's okay but Ryce needs to

leave her alone and her parents need to let her live her life and stop giving her their playbook.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t imagine my parents telling me what to major in, who to marry and when. I mean literally nothing is her decision,” Creed says while opening Alivia’s car door.

“We’ll just keep an eye on her,” Alivia says.

So maybe this was some of the reason Londynn’s eyes have lost that sparkle. I couldn’t imagine the type of life they were describing either. It would be horrible. To not ever get to anything for yourself. However, that’s not Londynn’s entire secret, there’s more to it. I shouldn’t care but I do. I shake my head and head back into the house. Maybe, I need to go visit Harlyn tomorrow to try and get some perspective.

\*\*\*\*

Londynn

Sunshine pouring through my room wakes me up. It’s early but I can’t go back to sleep, so I get up and head down for some breakfast. It’s been almost a week since I got home but I had yet to cross paths with my parents. Today I was not so lucky, sitting at the small kitchen table are my parents. As I enter my mom looks up from her tablet, “You really should make yourself look presentable before coming down, don’t you think?”

I guess it didn’t dawn on me that I needed to dress up to have breakfast with my parents. I shake my head because it seems like a ridiculous idea to me. This is the first time they’ve seen me since I got back and my mother’s first words to me are about my appearance and my father hasn’t even looked over or around his newspaper. I look down at my shorts and t-shirt, they aren’t that bad. It’s what I slept in so I



guess it's a little wrinkled but who do I need to impress. I grab a granola bar and bottle of water and head back to my room.

I watch my parents leave from the window in my room. The hollow, gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach is back. I feel just as lost and confused and unhappy as I did before. The only time since I got back that I've felt good or at least something close to it was the night of the races. Being with Jagger in his car and on the dancefloor had made me feel the happiest I had felt in a long time.

Ugh! I had to stop thinking about him. It was a waste of time. He'd never be accepted by my parents even if I did want to give it a shot. Besides, I was sure Jagger saw me as nothing other than a one-night stand. I had never had one of those, but I didn't exactly care to try it out either. It just wasn't who I was. I didn't have anything to do today until one, so my morning was clear. One thing was for sure I wasn't staying in this house until then.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

Slipping on a pair of khaki shorts, white tank top and navy-blue cardigan to keep the crisp, approaching autumn breeze at bay and a pair of brown sandals. I slip a white headband in my hair and head out to my car. I turn up my radio and start to drive. I have no destination in mind, I'm just trying to escape from that feeling. Before I know it I'm in North Hills and turning into the cemetery. I guess I needed to see Vivienne.

I park and walk around until I finally find her headstone. Seeing it makes it official. I didn't get to attend her funeral since I was already gone by that time so seeing this makes it sink in. After a while of staring blankly at the headstone I sit down on the ground. Oh, what my mother would say now if she saw me sitting on the grass in my khaki shorts.

Clearing my throat, I start talking to Vivienne like she's really here, "You know I'm kind of mad at you for leaving me like this. You and Farrah have always been all I've had family wise. You knew that. The house is so cold and sterile without you. It makes me sick just walking into it. You always got that I didn't belong there, but they don't. It's just me against them without you. And Ryce, don't even get me started on him. You were right, he's just not who I believed he was." A few tears slip down my cheeks, but I make no move to wipe them away. "I wish you were here. I could really use some of those homemade chocolate chip cookies and one of those Vivienne hugs. Oh, and advice! I could really use some of that Vivienne wisdom."

When I finally get up from the ground I turn around and to my surprise I see Jagger. He's standing in front of a headstone, with a bunch of daisies in his hands. His red t-shirt makes all the muscles in his chest and arms seem even bigger. My mind instantly thinks back to when I was standing in his arms while we danced. I can't help but feel

like this is some kind of sign from Vivienne, but Jagger seems lost in thought, so I turn around and head back to my car.

\*\*\*\*

Jagger

I haven't seen Harlyn's grave since the day she was buried something about seeing the headstone with her name on it just made things surreal. Sometimes I find myself just acting as if she went out to grab something and she'll come back but after a while it sets back in that she's gone. I make my way to her and squat down with a bunch of daisies in my hands. "Hey angel, I'm sorry I haven't been here in so long. I just didn't know how, you know? You were always the smart one, not me, you were always the one who knew the right thing to do. I haven't known the right thing to do in five years now, so I could really use some sign from you. My dad and Axell kept telling me I was running and lost. Of course, I denied it but their right. I'm so damn lost without you, without that life we planned. Sometimes I miss you so much that I literally can't breathe so right now I need you to give me some sign, some since of direction because you're the only one who can angel. You're it." I stay there for a little while longer, fighting back the tears that burn my eyes.

As I'm getting ready to leave the sun catches the shine of honey colored hair. I watch as she walks away towards her red Audi, what in the world is Londynn Parrish doing in the North Hill cemetery? I start heading in her direction and holler out her name, she turns around a little stunned. I jog over to her and as I do I take a moment to appreciate those long, lean legs of hers. In that pair of shorts, they look like they go on for days. "Fancy running into you here," I say smiling at her.

"Yeah, I guess it is. I was just...visiting?" I know she was just telling me, but it comes out like a question.

“Me too but I figured you’d have your own private cemetery.”

She shakes her head and crosses her arms over her chest. “Even if we did have that, who I’m visiting wouldn’t be there.”

“Why not?” I ask but I notice the change in her demeanor as she walks past me. I follow her, she stops in front of a headstone that reads ‘Vivienne Marie Green’. I look over at Londynn but she’s just staring ahead.

“Vivienne was a cook and housekeeper that my parents hired when I was like ten. She was really the only parent I’d ever had. She was like a grandmother that everyone loved. She made these chocolate chips cookies that just melted in your mouth and when you had a bad day she’d just pull you in for a hug. That hug could make everything in the world right again. It was warm and kind and full of love and she always smelled like brown sugar. But you never made her mad enough to say your middle name, if she did you were in big trouble. Vivienne and Farrah were all I had growing up and when Farrah left Vivienne protected me to no extent.”

A silent tear slips down her cheek and before I know it I reach out my finger to stop its trail. Her skin is warm and just as soft as I remember. She sets those big hazel eyes on mine and I can’t help but want to protect her too. At times she seems so broken then in an instant you can see that wall build back up and she’s so strong there’s no way to get it down. I get why Vivienne wanted to protect her, but I want to know what from. “Protect you from what?” I whisper.

She shakes her head and pulls her bottom lip between her teeth. “I should go” she says before stepping around me and heading back towards her car. A part of me wants to follow her but the other part of me gets the sense that she needs to be alone. I can’t help but feel like this is the start of something if our paths keep crossing like it’s meant to be.

## Chapter 6

### Londynn

As I park in the visitor section I take a deep breath while I stare up at the two-story white building that sits just off the water I feel myself start to calm. There is no act here, I don't have to be perfect or keep my image. I can just be Londynn in there and that's enough. As I'm getting out of the car Sadie comes strolling up to me with one of her patients, Lori. She's a middle age lady who suffers from Body Dysmorphic Disorder. Poor Lori is probably only about 115 pounds, but she insists that she weighs a ton. She actually ended up here because she exercised so much she gave herself a heart attack. I give her a hug, "You look beautiful today Lori." She blushes then waves her hand in a dismissive manner. "Hey Sadie."

"Hey Londynn. You look very nice today. How are you feeling?" She asks. I don't know how she does it, but she can read me so well.

I shrug as we start walking back towards the entrance, "Honestly, I don't know. Being back in that house with my parents..." I trail off and roll my eyes because I just don't know how to explain it all.

Sadie reaches out and touches my upper arm, "It's okay Londynn. You don't need to have all the answers right now. Just keep working through it all. You'll find the answers soon enough."

She gives me an encouraging smile and I try to return it, but it doesn't seem genuine. I mumble a thank you. As I make my way to Dr. Thorton's office I find myself breathing in the ocean scent mixed with the smell of the lemon cleaner they use. It's sad that this place which was meant to be sterile and cold was actually more like home to me than my own house was. I take a seat outside the office and wait for him to finish with his current patient. I check my phone and see a text from Alivia asking

if I want to grab so frozen yogurt, I quickly tell her yes and set the time for two hours from now. I should be done and free by then.

A teenage boy steps out of the office followed by Dr. Thorton. He's an older, round man with cheeks that stay rosy all the time. His big framed glasses don't hide his kind blue eyes. His gray hair is thin and stays slicked back on his head. Dr. Thorton smiles when he sees me, "Londynn, it's so good to see you, please come in and have a seat" he says while motioning for me to enter the room. Once I'm seated in one of the two leather chairs, he sits behind his desk. "So, how are you feeling since you left treatment?"

He wastes no time getting to the point. That use to be one of the things I loved about Dr. Thorton, he never beat around the bush, he just dove straight in, head first. However, right now I wish he would have taken a little time and worked into his question. I'm not really sure how to answer that question and that's the part I don't want to admit. I don't want to admit that I'm still confused. I don't want to admit that I still crave my parents love and attention. I don't want to admit that I still feel like I'm drowning sometimes. I don't want to admit any of it, I could just paste on that smile I've used for years and I might even fool him but what good would that do?

An hour later and quite a bit of awkward silence later I'm in my car blaring Kings of Leon with my sun roof open heading towards the frozen yogurt shop. I'm trying to drown out my own thoughts with my favorite band but it's not working very well. As I pull into the parking lot I know I'm early, so I call Farrah, maybe she can make me feel more connected than I do currently. However, she doesn't answer so I decide that just waiting in my car is my best option. I'm scrolling through my phone when a knock on my window makes me scream, turning around I see Sadie. As I'm getting out of the car Sadie says, "Dr. Thorton mentioned he was worried about you and I told him I'd check on you."

"How did you know where to find me?" I ask.

She shrugs then laughs, "I followed you. I probably could have gotten like five speeding tickets trying to catch up to you, but it was worth it."

"You could have called me I would have told you where to meet me."

"It's okay besides Axell and the boys would have loved for me to get a speeding ticket. Ruin my perfect record plus it would really make me one of them," she says with a laugh. "So, want to tell me why Dr. Thorton is worried about you?"

"I'm sure he has his reasons but I'm fine," I tell her but the look she gives me lets me know she doesn't believe a word I'm saying. Hell, I don't even believe a word I'm saying but if I start talking I'm afraid I'll break, and I can't do that.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

“Londynn, I wish I could believe that, but I can’t. You don’t either but it’s okay you’re not ready to talk but when you are I’ll be here. And trust me you’re going to need to talk to someone at some point. There’s no way you can live in that house and keep company with people like Ryce and not need it. Promise me that when you do you’ll call me.” Tears threaten to escape, but somehow, I manage to hold them back. I just nod in agreement as Sadie steps forward and pulls me into her arms.

As I watch her walk away and drive off I can’t help but feel like she might be right. I’m going to need her someday.

\*\*\*\*

Alivia pulled up a little while later, once we got our frozen yogurt and took a seat that looked out onto the street. “So, what’s new with you?” Alivia asked.

I shrug and slowly let the frozen yogurt melt in my mouth while I decipher what her question means. I can tell but the look on her face that she knows something, probably from Creed. “Not much and you?”

She matches my shrug and stares before saying, “Not much.”

I shake my head and roll my eyes, “What do you know Alivia?”

She laughs, “Okay, so Creed told me all about your bad boy in shining armor coming to your rescue at the races! Jagger James on top of that! I mean I’d take any of those ridiculously hot James boys coming to my defense but Jagger, he’s got that mysterious thing going for him but doesn’t seem like an ass like Ace.”



“It was nothing. You know Sadie was my nurse while I was in treatment and she is engaged to Axell and according to her that’s just how they were raised. They may be bad boys, but they stand up for women,” I say staring down at my frozen yogurt because if I meet Alivia’s eyes she’ll know I’m lying and then she’ll never let this go. Of course, it was a big deal to me. No one besides Farrah and Vivienne has ever come to my defense before. The fact that a guy who is basically a stranger did for me is confusing enough. Add on the fact that he is Jagger James, who is gorgeous with his perfectly messy hair, tattoos and muscled up body that I seem to have some weird vibe going on with just makes it impossible to figure out. How am I supposed to explain this to my best friend if I can’t even make sense of it?

“Girl, that was not nothing! I wish I could have been there to see the look on Ryce’s face. I bet it was priceless. I heard he even cheated to get a head start and still lost the damn race,” she says laughing loudly. I just nod my head in agreement, but I stay quiet, once her laughing dies down she gets a serious look on her face. “So, if Jagger was nothing then what’s going on with you and Ryce?”

I shake my head and whine, “I don’t know! I know that Ryce and I make sense and our families expect us to get married and what not, but I don’t feel that excitement with him anymore. I used to get so excited at the thought of a date or kissing him and now I just cringe.”

“You cringe?” Alivia asks clearly shocked. I just shake my head in agreement with her. “I knew you weren’t happy, but I didn’t know you cringed. Why?”

“Because of all the pressure to be the Londynn he wants me to be. The Londynn my parents want me to be. I’m not free to just be me and I know that makes no sense to you because your family isn’t like that but I just dread playing the part anymore,” I say sighing heavily and feeling defeated.

“I have a crush on Creed!” Alivia just blurts out of nowhere then quickly clamps her

hand over her mouth while her brown eyes go huge.

I laugh because I knew this a year ago even if they hadn't figured it out yet. "Alivia, I knew that so stop being so dramatic."

"You knew that?"

"Yes, and I'm pretty sure Creed has a crush on you," I tell her.

"How did you know?" She asks.

I giggle, "The way you two act, it's been obvious to everyone but the two of you."

She runs her fingers through her hair and sighs loudly, "What do I do Londynn?"

I shake my head at the irony of the situation. My love life is in shambles yet she's asking me for love advice. I may or may not have a boyfriend that I don't want to be with and that has already proven I'm nothing more than a trophy to keep his place in the society pages. Then there's this thing with Jagger. I feel different when I'm with him, like I don't have to pretend to be something I'm not. For those few fleeting moments I feel alive, I feel free. So, I tell Alivia the only advice I can give her, and I should probably take for myself as well, "Tell him, life's short you know?"

\*\*\*\*

Jagger

My emotions are a little all over the place after leaving the cemetery, between seeing Harlyn's grave for the first time and that odd encounter with Londynn, I'm not sure what to think. Londynn makes me feel something I haven't felt since that night I lost Harlyn. Londynn makes me feel hopeful but hope is a dangerous emotion especially

for a guy like me. I learned a long time ago that since I grew up on the tough side of town then I needed to be tough in order to survive. I had never understood why my brothers got in so many fights until I finally figured out it was their way of protection. If they could show everyone else just how tough they were then no one would mess with them. So, that's what I had done, followed in my brother's footsteps and Ace had followed me. It's how we got the reputation we have, that and the fact that were lethal behind the wheel of a car.

There's nothing like getting behind the wheel of a car and pushing the pedal all the way down to the floorboard. Pedal to the metal was the biggest adrenaline rush you could ever get. Nothing comes close to that feeling of doing a 100+ mph and the wind whipping your face, the objects you pass just becoming blurs. Nothing could beat that feeling except one thing, love. Love was that same adrenaline rush because you're giving someone the most breakable piece of yourself and trusting them with it. Giving them that is like pushing that pedal to the metal and the adrenaline rush comes from wondering if they will protect it, kind of how you wonder if you're going to survive your race.

For a guy like me though, hope is a fairy tale, something you'll never actually get. Wrong side of town, wrong amount of money, wrong car, wrong house, the wrongs just continue to pile up. I'm no fairy tale prince and girls like Londynn have been raised inside a fairy tale. They dream of it and their prince charming. I could never give Londynn the life she's expecting or has been raised in, not even close. Londynn is a fairy tale that could potentially send me running from L.A. again. I can't afford to do that again and my brothers can't afford that, they need me.

By the time I pull into the body shop my mood has plummeted and it must show because when I enter no one says anything to me and they all move to get out of my way. A pissed off James brother is the last thing you want to be on the bad side of and apparently the crew here knows that.

A few hours later Axell pulls me out from under a car. “You feeling any better?”

“Depends on your definition,” I tell him.

He chuckles, “What is with you, Bowie and Ace? You guys all have this sarcastic ass attitude, drives me insane.”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“Hey, I’ve never said I was disappointed. I’m damn proud of all of you but you guys need to let the attitude go. Look, Ace has Kynlee who is great, but he’s acts like a jerk to her all the time and what for? Bowie and you both got your hearts broken but you know what the world is still turning. Y’all need to grow a pair and grow up, the world is tough but acting like this isn’t going to get you anywhere,” he says giving me a hard glare.

“You done now?” I ask, and I know it’s rude, but truth be told Axell hit a nerve. I should tell him thank you or at least give him a smile but instead I just roll back under the car.

“You know seeing you with Londynn this past weekend gave Sadie and I hope for you. You’ve been alone for too long and she’s a great girl. I know I said to stay away but you protected her without hesitation. I guess I was just hoping that maybe I’d get my old brother back.” He says, and I can hear the hint of sadness in his tone.

“Well, don’t hope, it just causes you to dream up fantasies that will never happen,” I say while getting back to work.

\*\*\*\*

By the time I leave work it’s late, but I don’t want to go home so I decide to go for a drive. Once I’m in my car I turn up the radio and roll down the windows. I’m driving without paying attention before I finally realize where I’m heading. Lookout point as we always called it. In high school we all used to come up here and hang out rather it

was after the races or just to make out with our girlfriends. It was like our little escape from the world. I continue the drive up but to my surprise it's not empty. It's pretty late on a Thursday night so I expected it to be empty but to my surprise I see a red Audi R8 parked up ahead. As my headlights light up the area a head full of honey colored hair shines back at me. Londynn.

To say I'm shocked to see Londynn here is an understatement. The rich girl from the rich part of town has no business being up here at lookout point late at night by herself in an overpriced car. I park next to Londynn and get out of my car, slowly I walk towards her. I stop beside her car. The Audi is in perfect shape I'm afraid to touch it let alone sit on it but Londynn scoots over. When I don't move she tells me in a whisper, "sit...please." I don't say anything because she looks like something is on her mind. I study her profile her mouth is in a straight line not even a hint of smile playing on her lips. Her eyes stay focused on the city lights in front of us, but I was right about that light being gone from them. Something about her seems so sad and lost.

We sit in silence until I can't take it anymore. , "I didn't know you rich kids knew about lookout point."

"We know about it but not too many will come to it. I've always been intrigued by it," she says still not looking at me.

I shake my head because I'm not sure who would be intrigued by this place, but I'll admit that the view is killer. "You know it could be dangerous for you out here all by yourself."

"It could be, but I've been out here every night this week and you're the first person I've seen, and I don't think you're a threat."

I chuckle because a lot of people would have a different opinion. "You know a lot of

people would disagree with you on that.”

She shakes her head and finally turns those dark hazel eyes on me, “They’d be wrong. You have a reputation and an image just like the rest of us, but those things don’t make you who you are.”

Something about how she says those words makes me feel like she knows a lot more about reputations and images than she’d like. “Now what would you know about a reputation and image princess.”

“More than you know,” she says coldly before turning to face the city again.

We sit in an awkward silence for some time before I finally apologize which causes her to laugh but it’s still a little forced. “So why do you come up here?” I ask her.

“I’ve always liked the city lights. I think they remind me that were not alone even in those moments that we feel so hopeless and alone if you come up here and see all those lights, from homes and cars and businesses it reminds you that this world is a big place, full of people. No matter what I’m going through someone else is probably going through something worse and someone might feel exactly like me. Alone and lost and pressured. Each one of those lights represents a person who might just feel like I do.” She falls quiet after that while her words sink into my brain. Londynn Parrish feels alone and lost and pressured. Who would have thought that the girl, who seemed perfect, wasn’t? After a while Londynn slides from the hood of her car and tells me it’s getting late and she should be getting home.

I open her car door for her but before she climbs inside she turns back to me, those eyes are searching my face and I know she’s worried I’ll tell everyone about what she said up here tonight but I’d never do that. “Don’t worry it’ll be our little secret,” I tell her. I see the relief flood her face then she tip-toes and kisses my cheek. The fresh scent of daisies engulfs me for a moment before she slides into her driver seat. I’m so

stunned by the kiss that I barely remember shutting her door. I lay back on the hood of my car while the day replays in my mind.

## Chapter 7

Londynn

It's been two days since I've seen Jagger at lookout point and I'd let a part of my guard down. Now looking back on it I'm not sure why I even told him everything I did that night. I wish I could understand what came over me. And the kiss! Why had I kissed his cheek? Tonight is Friday night, and of course there are street races but I'm refusing to go. Instead, I'm staying in with a bowl of popcorn and a soda while I watch 80s teen movies.

I had just got comfortable on my bed with *The Breakfast Club* playing when it occurred to me that the rebel from the film reminded me a little of Jagger and it was an 80s movie, kind of like Jagger's choice of music and his given name. Shaking my head, I pause the movie, maybe I should grab a book instead. I'm about to get up when Farrah, Connor, Creed, Alivia and Jagger walk into my bedroom. I want to bury my head in the pillows and scream at this unannounced visit.

"Okay doll face! You are going to get up and get dressed because we are going to the races!" Farrah exclaims while Alivia is already in my closet pulling things for me to wear.

I sigh and roll my eyes, "I told you earlier when you asked I wasn't feeling up to it tonight, so why are all of you here?"

"Because you need to get out of the house" Creed says while stuffing his hands in the pockets of his jeans.



I shake my head but take in the group in my room. Jagger James is standing in my pale pink, princess like room. It must look so predictable to him, little does he know that my favorite color is red and that I want a black, white and red bedroom but I'll have one someday. Then another thought occurs to me my hair is a mess, I have no makeup on and I'm wearing Hello Kitty pj's. Now I really want to scream, this is not how I ever wanted Jagger to see me. Especially when he's leaning against my door frame looking like some kind of sex God. It should seriously be illegal for anyone to be as good looking as he is.

He has on dark denim jeans that hang off his hips in just the right way with a simple white t-shirt. I can see the chain and outline of a necklace that is under his shirt and it makes me curious what it is. His eyes never leave mine and I'm feeling flushed and breathless for no reason what so ever. Finally, I shake my head in an attempt to clear it and turn my head back to Farrah, "I don't want to go. I don't want to fight with Ryce again. It's useless and stressful."

"Technically you didn't fight with him, Jagger almost did but then he just beat Ryce which is why I'm going to the races tonight. So, come on! Let's go!" Alivia says.

I shake my head but before I can say anything Farrah sits next to me on my bed. "Don't! Don't go there in that head of yours. You need to go out, you need to take time away from this life and figure things out for yourself. As far as Ryce is concerned he's just another douchebag dumbass that didn't realize what he had when he had it. Any guy who could cheat on you doesn't deserve you! So, let's make you look super-hot, well hotter than your normal and you can prance those long legs past him and make him realize what he lost."

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

I laugh and let her pull me from the bed. As she's ushering me into the bathroom she tells the boys to have a seat on the bed and watch the movie while we get ready. Once the door is shut and I'm looking at the outfit I ask Farrah and Alivia, "What is Jagger doing here with you guys?"

, "Well, he was hanging out at JamesTown and I had just tried calling you for like the thousandth time when Connor came in followed shortly after by Creed and Alivia. I told them I was coming here to check on you and they all just followed," Farrah says with a shrug making her blonde curls bounce.

"And Jagger just came?" I ask hearing the shock in my voice.

"Jagger just came," she clarifies. While I absentmindedly put on the clothes they've brought I try to figure out why he came with them. Maybe when I leaned in to kiss his cheek he thought it meant more than it did. I've been over that decision multiple times and every time I try to tell myself it was just because he had been nice and listened to me but in reality, there was more to it. There was some odd connection I had with that bad boy racer sitting on my fluffy pink bed on the other side of the door. While Farrah and Alivia went to work on my hair and makeup I tried to make sense of everything else.

\*\*\*\*

Jagger

In the car on the way to Londynn's house I try to figure out why I had come. I really had no reason to be here other than I was curious. I was curious about where

Londynn came from and what she was used to. As we pull up to the obscenely large white mansion I get a sickening feeling. The place is huge, way bigger than I had imagined. There was no way Londynn's family had needed a house this big. Once we stepped into the foyer I realized that the outside seemed small compared to the inside. Seeing the inside only confirmed my idea that there was no way Londynn's family needed a house this size. Hell, my family didn't even need a house this size.

Farrah leads us up the grand stair case to what I assume is Londynn's room but along the way it dawns on me that I haven't seen one personal thing in the house so far. No family photos or any reference to the people that live here. It's so clean and white that it almost reminds me of a hospital. It's so sterile feeling that it almost seems cold. I search for family photos as we continue down the hall but there is nothing besides art that I'm sure was overpriced and some mirrors. Seeing this place almost makes me feel sad for Londynn having to grow up here.

When Farrah stops in front of a door I'm not sure what I was expecting but I was not expecting Londynn's bedroom to be the size of the entire house I grew up in. With every step I've taken through this house tonight it's made clearer and clearer that we come from two completely different worlds. Of course, I already knew that, but I don't think I realized just how different until now. Londynn's room is all pale pink and white, it's something that I'd expect for a child that loved to play princess but not the nineteen-year-old girl she is now.

Once the girls disappear into the bathroom I look around the room. This is the first place I've seen actual photos in the house. Londynn's bookcase is crammed with books, a stereo and photos. As I scan the photos I notice they all contain just four people Farrah, Alivia, Creed and an older, gray haired lady who I'm assuming is Vivienne. No mom, no dad, no Duke and no Ryce are in the photos and again I feel sad for her. I can't imagine not displaying a picture of my parents somewhere in my room but then again, I have a feeling our parents are about as different as our homes.

The wall next to me is full of shelves and all of them are stuffed with awards, trophies, ribbons and pictures from dancing competitions and what not. From the looks of things Londynn was one hell of a dancer. Londynn being a dancer explained her gracefulness and it made me wonder what it would be like to see her dance. Creed must have noticed me staring because he leans over and whispers, "It's a shame she doesn't dance anymore because she was something to see."

"She doesn't do it anymore?" I ask trying to figure out why she would quit something she was clearly great at and seemed to like.

Creed shakes his head and sighs heavily, "No she doesn't. Her family had other plans for her but Londynn loved it so much. It was her passion and it showed." The bathroom door opens, and Creed sits back up. While Farrah and Alivia are beautiful, Londynn is drop dead gorgeous. She is literally breathtaking with her honey colored hair, tan skin and deep hazel eyes. The white lace dress she has on makes it look like her skin is showing but if you really look at it there's just a nude colored material under it. The neckline though is very low cut with just two strings that tie around her neck. Her long lean legs, dancer legs now that I know that, look even longer in the short dress and the white wedges. Her hair is down and loose with just a few curls. Her hazel eyes meet mine and I have to remind myself to breathe. Thank goodness Connor keeps his wits about him because he reminds us that we need to get to the races. As we head downstairs it becomes clear that Londynn is riding in the car with me. My mind is already racing from seeing the way her body moves as she walks in that little dress being in an enclosed car for any period of time could prove to be impossible.

\*\*\*\*

Londynn

Being in such an enclosed space with Jagger was making me feel like I was sixteen

again. I don't know why since nothing has ever happened with a Jagger and nothing can ever happen with him. We would never work besides he always has this love them and leave them vibe coming off him but for whatever reason the car is full of tension or maybe I'm just imagining things. Maybe, it's the smell of his cologne and the way he switches gears that has me imagining things I shouldn't.

As we pull up to the races I notice how close were cutting it, the races will start in less than three minutes. Jagger is already out of the car and the crowd that has been paying attention to the people buying into the race is now facing us. I'm about to open my door when Jagger pulls it open and extends his hand to me. I place my hand in his and let his warmth surge through me, the butterflies in my stomach grow. Once I'm out of the car he turns to me and whispers in my ear, "Damn I'm luckiest the man here." When he pulls back he has that smile on his face, you know the one that makes all the girls swoon, to top it off he winks at me. I shake my head as he walks over to meet the other drivers.

I scan the crowd as Farrah, Alivia, Sadie and Kynlee make their way over to me. Ryce is glaring so hard that I swear he'll burn holes through my skull if he doesn't stop. Farrah asks me what's wrong and I mention Ryce to her. Of course, Farrah's first bit of action is to flip him off. Axell calls who will race who and as the crowd disperses Ryce says, "No! I want Jagger."

Jagger who was in mid step heading back towards us stops and turns around. "What didn't get enough last time?"

Ryce stalks towards Jagger and before I know it I'm moving to get closer in case Ryce decides to swing. I don't want Jagger getting hit because I rode here with him but before I get halfway there a hand clamps around my wrist. "You don't want to do that babe." I turn around and see its Ace who has my wrist. "Turn back around and go back to the girls, we got this. Even if Jagger couldn't handle this on his own I'd have his back, but Jagger can. However, if I let you get in the middle of that" he says

motioning towards Jagger and Ryce who are now nose to nose with one another, “Jagger wouldn’t let me forget that. So, do me a favor and go back to the girls.” After contemplating what Ace says I turn around and walk back to where the girls are. As soon as I’m close enough Farrah grabs me and doesn’t let go.

“You want to do something besides bitch and moan?” Jagger asks Ryce in an eerily clam voice.

“Yeah I want to race you and I want to know why you always go after my seconds?” Ryce asks.

Jagger throws his head back and laughs out loud. “I don’t go looking for your seconds they come looking for me. What bothers you more that you lose or that you lose tome? The boy from the wrong social crowd.” Ryce stands completely silent and still for what seems like forever. Axell, Bowie, Ace and Connor have all moved in behind Jagger just to be safe. The rest of us hold our breath while we wait to see what will happen next. To my surprise Ryce turns around and starts to walk away but suddenly he turns back and throws a punch at Jagger. It catches him off guard and sends him a few steps back. Thankfully, Jagger is quick because before Ryce can get in another punch Jagger has landed two to his jaw. Axell grabs Ryce and Connor grabs Jagger, Bowie and Ace are standing between the two now.

Bowie looks between both, “No cage matches here. You have a problem you settle it on the black top. Pedal to the metal?”

Jagger smirks at Ryce, “Pedal to the Metal.”

Ryce works his jaw back and forth a few times then spits out some blood, “Pedal to the metal.” Jagger and Ryce are released and while Jagger is heading this way I notice Ace stepping up to Ryce. His mouth is moving, and I see Kynlee moving pretty quickly for a girl in six-inch heels towards him. Before either of us can say a

thing Ace lands one hell of a punch on Ryce, one that lands Ryce on the ground. When Ace turns around Kynlee is there, he drapes his arm around her shoulders and they walk off.

I must look spooked because Jagger asks me if I'm okay I shake my head and he runs his hands up and down my arms. "You must be cold, you have goosebumps," he says stepping around me and pulling a black leather jacket from his trunk. He holds it out to me and as I step into it I'm surrounded by the smell of his cologne and whiskey. I love the smell of his cologne the whiskey not so much. "Sorry, the last time I had it on was at work in Vegas."

"What'd you do there?" I ask my curiosity getting the best of me.

He chuckles, "I was a bouncer at a strip joint."

After that admission we both fall quiet, but my mind should have guessed he'd worked in some place like that. I can't help but feel so young and naïve next to him now. Not to mention every stripper I've ever seen has an amazing body. Their all curves and sexy, not slim with barely any boobs and the girl next door clothes. As if I didn't already have my doubts before. He stands right beside me until it's time for him to get in line to race. "What about a good luck kiss?" He asks in a teasing voice.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

I grab his chin and lean forward but right before I meet his lips I turn his head and kiss his cheek, “Good luck” I say sweetly, sauntering off towards the rest of the girls.

### Chapter 8

#### Jagger

When Londynn had kissed my cheek and said good luck in that voice I had wanted to grab and pull her back to me, pinning her against the car and devouring that smart mouth of hers. Sadly, I didn’t have time for that because I had to go race her loser ex-boyfriend. Watching Ryce choke on my car fumes did give me some satisfaction but not enough. I was still having thoughts about Londynn and I really shouldn’t. After seeing the way she viewed the world, and not being that type of guy for her I really shouldn’t think about kissing her. But here I stand at JamesTown nursing a beer and thinking just that while she dances on the floor with Kynlee and Alivia.

Watching the way she moves makes me want things I know I can’t have. I turn around and ask the other bartender Aaron for a shot, after downing it I stalk off to the body shop through the short cut by the rest rooms. Anytime I feel frustrated or need to think getting under the hood of a car is always like therapy to me. I slide under one of the cars and instantly my mind seems to clear, all the jumble suddenly makes sense. I think about Londynn and what is going on between us which is basically nothing. We flirt and there is this odd chemistry, but she is not the girl I’m use to now days. Maybe, if I’d stuck around after Harlyn, maybe I’d still be that guy. You know the one that could stay faithful to one girl, that could love with all of his heart, that could still believe that loved conquered all but I’m not that guy. Besides, even if I did still believe in any of that I’d had my perfect match, my soulmate, my one true love,



you didn't get those twice.

Even if none of that was an issue I knew I could never be with anyone like that again. It wouldn't be fair to Harlyn or her memory. Plus, I didn't deserve it I had been the reason she was in the car that night. It was my fault she wasn't here now. She didn't get a chance at happily ever after so I sure as hell didn't deserve it. My mood was going south pretty quickly when I heard the door open and the sound of heels on the concrete floor. From my spot under the car I could see Londynn's white wedges as she makes her way over to me.

"Shouldn't you be celebrating instead of working?" she asks in a teasing voice.

Sliding out from under the car I see her standing there with a flush on her cheeks from the heat of the dance floor. Damn, she looks good. "What should I be celebrating? Beating your boyfriend? Because that was so easy I see no sense in celebrating that."

She cocks an eyebrow at me, "Ex-boyfriend." She goes quiet and I can tell she's thinking because her brows are furrowed and she's chewing on her bottom lip. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you."

I'm watching her walk towards the door when I ask, "Why don't you dance anymore?" She turns around and gives me a questioning look. "In your room there is entire wall of medals and ribbons for you."

She sighs heavily before walking towards me. "What did you want to be when you were a kid?"

I chuckle and wash my hands in the sink. "A NASCAR driver or a mechanic. Why?"

"When I was young my mom put me in dance, jazz and ballet. I hated ballet mostly

because my teacher was so strict and when you're four you don't love people like that. Anyways, one Christmas when I was six my parents took us to see The Nutcracker and the way the ballerinas moved I knew what I wanted to be. I wanted to be a ballerina and then some day when I was too old to dance anymore I wanted to open my own dance studio."

She's now standing in front of me, leaning against the car. "Then why did you quit? I mean you clearly have the talent to become a professional ballerina and the money to open the dance studio later on. Obviously, you have all kinds of opportunities."

Her eyes look a little sad when she looks up to meet mine. "You see money as a way to give you a better life. As if it'll open doors and give you opportunities and maybe it does, if it's your money. But if it's not your money it comes with expectations. The money is my parents which means I have to play by their rules, Jagger. Being a ballerina is not an acceptable career choice. I can go to college to become a doctor or lawyer, but they'd really just like to marry me off to Ryce."

I'm standing in the body shop that has always been my second home and I think of my life. I had parents who pushed us to become our own person and follow whatever made us happy. They loved and supported us unconditionally, even at our worst. When Axell, Bowie and I wanted to start a band years ago our parents had cleared out the garage and had been our biggest fans. My home might have been small, but it always felt warm and happy. I'd never been told that what I wanted to do wasn't acceptable. Thinking of how Londynn had been raised made a piece of my cold heart chip away. She had mentioned all she'd had was Farrah and Vivienne and now I'm starting to see Londynn in a different light. No wonder Londynn felt so alone and sad sometimes. Who could tell their child that what they dream of becoming isn't acceptable?

I shake my head I disgust of how much Londynn has probably been hurt and before I know it I'm standing right in front of her. Her dark hazel eyes look up and meet mine

and before I decide against it I slip my hands into her hair and pull her mouth towards mine. The taste of coconut instantly hits my mouth. It must be that lip gloss she's always putting on. I feel her hands run up my back and her nails dig into my shoulders. I push her against the car as I deepen the kiss. My heart is about to beat out of my chest and my brain is running a thousand miles a minute. She fits perfectly against my body, like she was made to be in my arms. A small moan escapes Londynn's mouth and it's my undoing. I break away to look into her eyes and as I'm looking into them I see her defenses go back up.

She pulls away and heads for the door apologizing the whole way. Once she's out of my view I take a deep breath, but I can still taste her lip gloss, feel her lips against mine and her nails on my shoulders. No other girl had felt that perfect to me since...Harlyn.

\*\*\*\*

Londynn

While being wrapped up in Jagger's arms and how those arms made me feel safe made me forget about all the reasons why this was a bad idea. Why had I followed Jagger in here? Because for whatever reason I couldn't seem to stay away from him. I couldn't deny whatever this was going on between us. I took a deep breath trying to slow my slamming heart, but it had the opposite effect. His cologne was now mixed with the smell of oil and leather and it was intoxicating. Who would have thought that mixture of things would smell so good? Jagger pressed me further into the car which only made our bodies get closer, man could Jagger James kiss, I didn't want to think about how he got so good at this but seriously I could feel this kiss from every strand of hair down to my toes.

When Jagger took a step back I had a minute to gather my wits and in that brief period of time my brain reminded me of all the reasons why this was a bad idea.

However, I discovered a new reason now. Jagger made me feel safe, but it was my place to create my own safety, my own life, my own freedom now. I couldn't let myself rely on Jagger for anything. I couldn't let myself rely on anyone for anything. I had to do it myself, Dr. Thorton had made it perfectly clear that one of my main problems was that I pushed people away, but it wasn't for the reasons he believed. It was because I just wasn't good enough, I wasn't perfect enough and I didn't want anyone to know that.

Rushing away from Jagger and the body shop and the car and the kiss that left me light headed and weak in the knees seemed like my only option. Once I got back to JamesTown I search for Farrah, but I don't see her anywhere. I spot Kynlee, but she's now occupied with Ace. Someone places a hand on my shoulder and I jump, as I spin around I see Sadie looking at me with concern. "Are you okay?" she asks.

I nod then tell her, "I'm trying to find Farrah. I just want to go home."

"Farrah disappeared with Connor shortly after you followed Jagger, but I can give you a ride?" Sadie offers. After a few moments of contemplating I decide to take her offer. We ride in silence besides the radio. Sadie always seems to know what I need and right now I need time to figure out what the hell happened with me and Jagger. I'd only kissed two guys in my life Ryce for the obvious reason of him being my boyfriend and Ace one night when he tried to help me make Ryce jealous. None of my other kisses had felt like the one I'd just experienced with Jagger. None of them had left me weak in the knees and light headed and wanting more. Whatever had happened with Jagger was totally different.

As we pull into my driveway Sadie puts the car in park, "Are you sure you're okay? Did Jagger do something?" She asks.

"No, he didn't do anything. I'm just...I'm fine really," I say instead of telling Sadie how confused and lost I am. I don't want to tell her that I'm starting to feel like I did

before I started treatment. I just want to feel normal and happy again and it's scary to think that the only times I've felt that way since coming back has been when I was with Jagger. "I'll see you Monday," I tell Sadie before I climb out of the car. The house is empty as always, I climb the stairs slowly as I make my way up to my room. Tossing my shoes in the corner I lie back on the bed and sigh. If I had known how tonight would have went, would I have gone?

The answer is yes because even though I know Jagger James is not the type of guy I should want but he's the only one that makes me feel alive right now. He touches a part of my soul that no one has before. When he looks into my eyes I feel like he can see past the perfect image I've mastered for everyone else. I feel like he sees the real me, the real Londynn and what's more is he accepts that version of me. The girl who is desperate to be free and live her life without all the expectations from her parents. The girl who dreamed about being a ballerina. The girl who thought anything was possible. The girl who even though she's scared as hell still believes in love.

I bite my lip and it makes me think of the kiss. That kiss had left me totally breathless. I was so certain that Jagger would be like Ace or Bowie, just some bad boy with a hot car but instead he's genuine. He listens when I talk and asks questions that no one has ever asked me before. No one had ever asked why I had quit dance, but he did. It's like he knows a part of me is missing without it. I can still smell his scent on my dress from where he was molded into me. I had never felt so protected in my life. I had never had anything feel more right.

I shake my head as if it will shake the thoughts away because there is no way that kissing or being with Jagger is right. We come from two different worlds and he'll get bored with me quickly. I'll end up with my heart broken just like it was with Ryce. If I couldn't keep Ryce happy then how could I possibly think I'd keep Jagger happy? It was clear he had way more experience than me.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

Laying on my bed staring at this ridiculous room I feel that dread wash over me. Before I can even take a breath, it's growing, drowning me, suffocating me, and wrapping me up tightly in a blanket. A thought occurs to me, maybe I can go stay with Farrah for a few days. On her first visit she told me I was more than welcome to stay at her place anytime. Well, were about to find out just how much she meant that. I get up quickly and grab an overnight bag. I dump all my necessities in the bottom and toss some clothes on top. Getting into my car I tell myself that I just need to escape for a few days.

When I pull into Farrah's little driveway I see Connor's car is still here. I grab my bag and march up to her front door before I can back out. I ring the doorbell and wait for Farrah. When she answers I can tell she's been asleep her eyes are puffy, her hairs a mess and I bet her robe is the only thing she has on. She looks alarmed to see me standing at her front door in the middle of the night with a bag in my hand. "On your first visit you told me I could stay with you anytime; did you mean that?"

"Of course, I did!" She exclaims and steps back, so I can come in. "But is everything okay?"

The minute she asks I feel something in me break and the tears fall freely I shake my head, "No, I don't think so." Farrah pulls me into her arms and rubs my back. She tells me we'll figure it out and she's right we will, but I don't know how.

## Chapter 9

Jagger

It's been four days since I kissed Londynn and I still don't know what the hell I was thinking. Kissing Londynn hadn't been my best decision, I knew better, tasting her was like taking an exotic trip but knowing it's going to end you're going to come back home to your small house and your normal life. Right now, I needed something to distract my mind from Londynn. I've worked at the body shop all day but decide to hit the gym with Ace anyways.

I spot Ace the minute I pull into the parking lot. Were half way through our workout when these two girls who have been checking us out finally make their way over. Both are your typical blonde California girl. Nothing that I'm interested in, but they could distract me from Londynn. I'm not sure what is going on between Ace and Kynlee but I'm pretty sure she wouldn't be okay with the way he's flirting right now. Ace eventually tells the girls to meet us at JamesTown in an hour.

An hour later I'm parking in front of the body shop before using the shortcut through the buildings. I spot my brother, "Ace!"

Ace turns around and flashes me his cocky grin, "So you decided to show up after all."

"Yeah, I had nothing else to do," I reply with a shrug.

He laughs, "Really? No Londynn Parrish to make out with?" He asks taunting me with his tone and knowing eye.

I sneer at him, "What the hell do you know about it?"

He leans against the door blocking my way. "I know enough. I know that Londynn and you have some kind of thing going on and I know the girl can kiss." Then he winks before opening the door and disappearing through it.

How the hell did he know she could kiss? Had Ace kissed Londynn? Or was he just trying to get under my skin? Whatever, the reason it was working. I catch up and grab his shoulder. “How would you know Londynn can kiss?”

Ace raises his eyebrow before that cocky grin returns. “Well, let’s think about that, shall we?” He gets quiet and rubs his chin, “Oh! That’s right, I kissed her that’s how I know.”

“Why?”

“Because her boyfriend was a douche and she needed some attention and I’m never one to abandon a damsel in distress,” Ace answers with a shrug.

I shake my head because I can’t picture Londynn as a damsel in distress the girl had too many damn walls built around herself to be in distress. Besides Ace is nothing but a womanizer for whatever reason. He knows he’s gotten under my skin, but he forgot I can play that game too. “So, what’s going on with you and Kynlee? Trouble in paradise?”

“Mind your own damn business,” Ace says before shoving past me.

I follow right on his heels, “What I’d say man? I’m just asking where Kynlee is, that girl sure is a looker.”

“Will you shut the hell up already?” Ace bellows in the empty hallway.

I chuckle, “Touchy, touchy. Looks like I hit a nerve but a word of advice little brother. Go home to Kynlee. Those two fake blondes waiting on us in there don’t even hold a candle. If you keep pushing Kynlee away eventually she’ll leave and not come back. Girls like her don’t come around all the time, especially for guys like us. So, go home Ace.”



He shakes his head and stands there thinking over my words. Eventually he turns around and heads back the way we came but before he reaches the door he turns back to me, "Girls like Londynn don't either. Go home Jagger."

I stand there letting Ace's words sink in. He's right girls like Londynn don't come around all the time either and especially for a guy like me but things between us can never be. Londynn is like champagne and I'm beer. You can't drink champagne on beer money. All I have is beer money. I could never give Londynn the life she's used to or deserves. That kiss has really messed with me, mainly because I hadn't had a kiss feel like that since Harlyn. I thought I'd never feel like that again and even if I could I won't let myself. I don't deserve to move on and even if Harlyn's death wasn't my fault I couldn't handle any more pain like that. I barely survived the pain from losing her and Harper.

I shake my head trying to knock the images of Harlyn and Londynn from my head as I head for the bar. Once I step inside I see Farrah fixing two fruity looking drinks for our two fake blondes. I walk over to them, "Hello ladies," I say as I drape my arms around their shoulders while Farrah glares at me. She doesn't even ask if I want a drink she just walks off.

\*\*\*\*

A few hours later and one of the blondes who I can't remember her name is in my car. I should be into this but instead I keep thinking about all the differences between her and Londynn. This girl with her fake hair and fake boobs with her barely there clothing is nothing like Londynn. This girl's scent burns my nose because of her fake designer perfume and it's like she's bathed in it. Her body doesn't mold into mine the way Londynn's does. I don't feel like it's just us in the world and she tastes of alcohol and lipstick. I miss that coconut taste that Londynn had.

The blonde is trying really hard but eventually I have to stop her. I face my steering

wheel, “Listen I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought you out here. I can’t do this.”

“Seriously?” The girl snaps back at me and who can blame her. I’ve been a total ass to her basically. I’ve led her on and I don’t even know her name. I reach over and grab her shirt lying in the floor board and apologize again. Before I know it she’s out of the car and I’m sitting alone with my mind back on Londynn. I slam my hand against the steering wheel before rolling down the windows to get rid of her smell that now consumes my car.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

I start the car and peel out of the lot, my tires screeching as I pull out onto the street. It's late so there's hardly any traffic thankfully. Before I know it I'm close to 90 mph and moving along without a care in the world.

\*\*\*\*

Londynn

I've been staying with Farrah almost an entire week and have yet to hear from my parents. Clearly, they aren't concerned with my wellbeing. I have my doubts that they've even noticed that I was gone. In my last therapy session, Dr. Thorton encouraged me to consider dancing again. A part of me still yearns for the feeling I got every time a song would start up and my body began to move with it. Maybe, that's why I called around until I found a place to dance today. This little gym on Jagger's side of town has an empty room that is usually used for Zumba but it's free today and it's all mine.

When I first arrived this morning, I had seen Jagger and Ace's cars parked in the lot. They would be hard to miss I braced myself for possibly seeing Jagger, but nothing could have prepared me for seeing him. I had been trying to make decisions where he was concerned. Dr. Thorton had also encouraged that I tell Jagger the truth about myself and how I had spent those three months. He believed that if he handled it well then, I should give him a chance. I wonder what he'd say right now if he saw Jagger shamelessly flirting with some fake blonde.

Luckily, I managed to sneak past them and get to the little room at the end of the hall. Once inside I shut the door and plug my iPod into the stereo system that's already

hooked up in the room. I stretch out and try to get rid of the mental image of Jagger with that blonde girl but I'm not really having any luck. I look down at my new dance practice outfit I ran out and bought this morning once I had found a place to practice. Black legging shorts with red sparkles and a sports bra that matches. Once I'm stretched out and feel limber I walk over and switch the song and before I know it I'm moving like I've never missed a day of dance.

I get that same feeling of freedom I use to get. I breathe deeply as I move through song after song. I've lost track of time, but I know I've been here almost all day. I notice someone in the mirror that lines the wall. Turning around I see, Jayson the guy that worked in the gym. He told me that technically the gym was closed but he was going to get a work out in so I was welcome to stay until he finishes up. I tell him thank you and return back to dancing.

Eight songs later I get the sense of being watched. When I stop and look at the mirrors I see Jagger leaning against the door frame. His eyes lock on mine and I can't make out the emotion in them. He looks so good that I'm pretty sure if I wasn't already out of breath from all the dancing that I'd be short on breath. His hair is perfectly fixed, and he has on one of his signature t-shirts, this one is olive green with a pair of light wash denim jeans and pair of white sneakers. The green makes his skin look tanner and his eyes really pop.

He pushes off from the doorframe stopping to bend over and grab my water bottle as he makes his way to me in the middle of the room. "You're beautiful when you dance," he says to me as he holds out my bottle to me. I take it and give him a questioning look because I'm not sure about his statement. He clears his throat like he's nervous. "I mean you're always beautiful but when you're dancing there's something unguarded and freeing about you. I've never seen that side of you."

"Well, thanks," I say a little breathlessly.

We stand in the room with the music playing around us in an awkward silence. "I saw your car it's why I stopped. I was a little shocked to see you on my side of town when there's no race."

I shrug, "I've been staying with Farrah. So, I guess your side is now my side. Besides, this was the only place that had an empty room today for me to dance in."

"Well that's good," he says like he's unsure what to say.

Answerby Phantogram comes on my iPod and before I know what he's doing he grabs my hands, tossing the water bottle aside and pulls me into him. We start dancing around the room, and it just feels right. I look into his eyes, and I know if I let my guard down that I'll fall but I don't know if I can do that. Instead, I decide to just get lost in this moment and enjoy it. The song ends too soon. I step back out of his arms. "You dance pretty well for someone who insisted he couldn't."

"That's all you Londynn. I don't move like that with anyone else," he admits. "Can I walk you to your car? This isn't the safest part of town."

"Sure. Let me get myself together and let Jayson know I'm done," I tell him because I can't help but feel special that he wants to walk me to my car.

He nods then tells me, "I'll go tell Jayson. I'll meet you out there," he says motioning towards the gym.

Once Jagger is out of the room, I take a minute to catch my breath before collecting my things. Jagger is leaning against the wall in the hall when I step out of the practice room. His head snaps up in my direction when he hears the door shut, he leads me through the gym with his hand on the small of my back. Even though I slipped on a light jacket I can feel the heat coming from his hand. When we reach my car, he takes my bag and tosses it into my trunk then opens my car door. "I'm going to follow you

home just to make sure you make it safely. Drive carefully Londynn.”

My heart is beating wildly for some reason. I don’t know if it’s because he’s willing to go out of his way to make sure I make it home okay or because of that look in his eyes that I can’t decipher. “Thank you, Jagger. Drive carefully too.”

“Pedal to the metal remember?” He says with a smile crossing his face.

I laugh, “Oh yeah, I forgot. But still be safe.”

He nods and leans down and kisses my cheek, “Good night, Londynn.” Before I can reply he’s shut my door and is heading to his car. I watch as he walks away and let the blush take over my face. Once he’s in his car I back out from my parking spot.

## Chapter 10

### Londynn

I haven’t seen Jagger since the night he showed up at the gym while I was dancing. Then again, I guess you could say I’m still avoiding him to some extent. I’m just not sure what to do with him or myself or us. I want to do what Dr. Thorton tells me and open up to Jagger but then what if he looks at me like I’m crazy? Or worse what if he starts treating me differently? I don’t think I could handle any more sympathy and I don’t want anyone thinking that I’m not...all there. I’m terrified to get too close to him because I couldn’t handle his rejection.

I also worry that I’m just not good enough for Jagger. I mean I’m nothing like the girls he’s use to. I’m not even close so really why would he even be interested? I mean sure he’s flirted with me, but I think that’s just Jagger’s personality by nature. So, I figured until I decided what I’m going to do with the situation that it was probably best to avoid him. I have decided to tell Dr. Thorton about my fears of

telling Jagger. Maybe he can come up some reasonable explanation as to why I feel all these things. Maybe he can make me feel better.

As I pull into the parking lot for my therapy session my phone starts to ring. Looking at the screen I see it's my mom. I haven't been home in a week and she's just now calling to check on me. Yeah, she's not winning any mother of the year awards. I almost don't answer but then I do right before it sends her to voicemail.

"Hello," I say into the phone.

"Londynn. I just spoke with your sister. You are both expected to be at dinner tonight. Your brother will be arriving back in town this afternoon for a short visit. We're doing familydinner with the Whitten's and Lawson's. Make sure you dress appropriately," she tells me.

"Mom we had plans tonight." I tell her sighing into her phone.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

My mother huffs on the other end, “Really Londynn Faith? You hardly ever see your brother. You will both be here besides Ryce will be here. Your sister insisted on bringing some criminal so I’m expecting you and Duke to keep all the eyes of them. See you at eight.”

Before I can say anything else my mom has ended the call. I shake my head while I stare at the phone in my hand. We didn’t even get asked, we had been told we’d be there. She hadn’t asked if I was okay or where I had been for the past week. Hell, I doubt she’d even noticed I hadn’t been home all week. Tonight was all about appearances for them, and I would be expected to play the perfect daughter for them and the perfect girlfriend to Ryce who I wasn’t even dating anymore. However, I didn’t even get to tell my mother that because she had cut me off so quickly. I couldn’t figure out why Farrah would even want to subject Connor to our family and this dinner tonight.

\*\*\*\*

By the end of the session, I could tell that Dr. Thorton was worried about me and my wellbeing, he had made that much clear more than once. Sadie had insisted on walking me out to my car but by the time we had reached it I could tell she was concerned too. Sadie could read people well especially since she didn’t know anything I had just confessed to Dr. Thorton.

When I got back to Farrah’s she was stomping around and throwing clothes around her room. “Wow did a tornado hit while I was at therapy?” I ask, joking with her might lighten her mood.



“No! Our mother called and is insisting on us being at dinner tonight for our brother,” she whines.

“I know, she called me too.”

She snorts, “Seriously? She doesn’t call all week when you don’t come home but Duke returns and suddenly, you’re worth calling. I swear our family is the definition of dysfunctional.”

I just shrug. “So, you’re really going to take Connor there?”

“Yes, he was with me when she called, and he offered, and I don’t know I thought maybe it would make them avoid trying to talk to me.”

“Maybe.” Connor is either brave, stupid or just really into my sister because no one is willing to sit through a dinner with my family unless it’s one of those three. I’m sure it will turn into a nightmare and that my parents will treat Farrah and Connor like they are below them. It makes me sick how they think but I can’t change their minds. “So, what are you wearing? Mom said to dress appropriate.”

Farrah gets this evil looking grin on her face and walks over to her closet. She pulls out a super short, super tight black dress that has a crisscross design down the entire arm as well as cut outs on either side of her abdomen that showcase the same crisscross design. All that is enough to make my mom cringe, but the neckline is cut down into a V that stops right above her belly button and again the crisscross design will be the only thing holding my sister in the dress. She holds up a finger to tell me to hold on and bends down to pull out a pair of black heels with at least a five-inch sparkly heel and matching sparkly ankle strap. Hooker heels comes to mind, that’s what my mom is going to think when she sees them.

“Farrah, you can’t be serious. You’re not seriously going to wear that are you?” I ask

sounding shocked.

"Of course, I am. She's insisting I come but she forgot I don't play by their rules anymore. I'm not going in there playing the perfect daughter tonight and neither should you," she says before she disappears into the bathroom. I get up from the bed and walk out to the living room. I know she's right I shouldn't conform to what they want tonight but I'm just not as strong as Farrah.

\*\*\*\*

A few hours later we pull up to the house we grew up in, parking Farrah's Range Rover in the driveway. As we all slowly get out, I take the time to notice that Connor isn't in his normal muscle or t-shirt instead he has on a pair of khaki dress slacks, dress shoes and a black button up shirt. He cleans up really nice and for a moment I let myself imagine what Jagger would look like dressed up like that. Farrah walks around from the driver's side. She looks great, but my parents are going to die of embarrassment. Her outfit is definitely not my mother's idea of appropriate.

As we make our way to the door Connor tells me I look nice. I look down at my white and gold checkerboard dress which hits at my mid-thigh and the sleeves fall right under my elbows. I added a pair of three-inch heels that have a white strap over my toes and a gold strap around the ankle. My hair is curled but I pulled half of it back, Farrah's on the other hand I curled and teased as much as it could be.

We haven't even made it to the door, and I already feel the anxiety of the night setting in, I don't have a good feeling about this. We step into the house and follow the sound of voices to the formal dining room. As soon as we enter there is a hushed silence that falls over the room and I see my mother's eyes bug out when she takes in Farrah's outfit. One of the servers comes up with a tray of champagne which Connor and I both wave away but Farrah grabs a flute and throws her head back to drown it in one swallow like it's a shot.

My mother is now standing in front of us. "You look lovely Londynn," she says while kissing me on each cheek. "Farrah," she whispers sourly before kissing both of her cheeks as well. She extends her hand out to Connor and tells him how nice it is to meet him and how much she's heard about him. She's playing the act of perfect mother and wife to the hilt tonight. I'm sure my mother has never even heard Connor's name before tonight because that would require her to talk to Farrah, which she doesn't.

As we all take our seats to eat my mother insists that Ryce will sit beside me. I mentally cringe but plaster my fake smile on my face. Ryce keeps placing his hand on my thigh and trying to move it up, but I keep slapping it away under the table. By the time the main meal is served my nerves are frazzled, I'm irritated, and I feel like I'm about to lose it. I try to take deep breaths like I was taught but right now it's no use.

Mrs. Lawson starts speaking to me, "Londynn, how was studying abroad over summer? I bet it was amazing."

"What?" I ask, unsure what she's talking about.

My father clears his throat and my mother chimes right in, "Oh, Londynn loved it, Joyce. I'm sure she hated to even come back home. Sadly, though it made her miss registration for the fall semester of college."

Mrs. Lawson waves her hand, "Oh, there's always next semester besides how much college could she need. She and Ryce will be married soon enough. What are you doing until next semester or the wedding, whichever comes first," she says laughing.

I feel my lungs contracting and my throat closing up and I feel myself start to sweat. I can't answer her I can barely talk. My mother takes over once again. "Oh! She's volunteering down at the rehab facility on the beach called Spirit Rehab facility."

“Oh, that’s fantastic! Ryce you really have yourself a keeper here,” Mrs. Lawson tells him.

That’s my undoing, my mother starts talking again but I cut her off. “Just stop! Mrs. Lawson I wasn’t studying abroad and I’m not volunteering at Spirit Rehab facility. I was a patient there for three months. Oh! And Ryce and I aren’t together because he can’t keep his pants on around other girls. There I think that covers everything,” I say then go back to trying to clear my throat. I thought if I was honest the anxiety would subside but instead my breathing is becoming more labored and difficult.

Farrah’s eyes go wide, and she shouts, “Were there any nuts in the food?” I’ve been allergic to nuts all my life but surely my parents know this. They wouldn’t have served me food knowing I’m allergic to it and even if they didn’t know surely Ryce did, and he would have warned me. I’m starting to get lightheaded and dizzy from lack of oxygen. My tongue feels triple its normal size. I hear one of the servers tell Farrah that the dressing had almonds in it. Farrah runs to my side and tells Connor to go grab my purse. My parents are complaining about me acting out for attention.

Connor returns with my purse and Farrah grabs my emergency injection for an allergic reaction in case I ever ate the wrong thing, like tonight. She slams it into my upper thigh. Connor scoops me up in his arms and heads for the door but not before Farrah tells my parents off. “You seriously don’t even know your own daughter is allergic to nuts. She has been her entire life! Maybe you two need to lay off the bottles of pills and alcohol! And Ryce you call yourself a boyfriend! You dated my sister for how long? You know what’s sad, had I not come tonight, your pathetic asses would have let her die.”

“Why would we know she was allergic?” I hear my father ask.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

“Because she’s your daughter. Vivienne knew,” she says lastly before turning on her heels and rushing towards the door where Connor is waiting patiently still holding me in his arms. “We need to get to the ER now!” Farrah tells Connor.

### Chapter 11

#### Jagger

Even though there were races planned for tonight I knew I wouldn’t see Londynn. Connor had called to ask me what he should wear to some family dinner with Farrah and Londynn’s parents. I had never really seen Connor be into a girl enough to be willing to go to a family dinner, but he seemed happy, so I didn’t give him hell over it. After helping him I made my way to the shop until the races.

Londynn had been on my mind a lot since the other night at the gym. I felt my guard coming down when I was around her and I was beginning to look forward to seeing her at the races. Tonight, would be a change for me but I’d go because if I didn’t Bowie and Ace would give me hell.

The races were busy, but the usual hype and tension were missing. No Ryce meant that it would be a pretty calm night. My brothers and I beat all of Ryce’s douchebag friends. After the races I went with Bowie, Ace and Kynlee to JamesTown. Bowie was being unusually quiet, but I didn’t want to press the matter because he had a short fuse most days. Things with Ace and Kynlee seemed off as well. This whole night felt weird to me. I left JamesTown within an hour and went home. As I walked through the door, I heard Axell and Sadie talking in the kitchen. Just before I rounded the corner, I heard Sadie tell Axell, “I’m really worried about Londynn. She seemed

so shaken up this afternoon when I saw her. Being forced to have dinner with her parents and Ryce isn't good for her."

Axell sighed, "I know you worry about her because you care about her, but all of this is up to Londynn. You can't fix her life for her; she has to stand up to them herself."

"I know" Sadie said sounding defeated.

I had been having my suspicions that Sadie knew Londynn from more than just the races, I had even asked a couple of times, but Sadie had denied it. Sadie was friendly with everyone, but you could always tell when she really knew someone. Hearing her and my brother talk about Londynn just confirmed those suspicions. I walk into the living room and clear my throat. Sadie turned around with a wide-eyed startled look and Axell looked like he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "So, how do you know Londynn?"

Sadie looks back at Axell before he shrugs and tells her, "He's bound to find out." He lays the dish towel on the counter before leaving us alone. Sadie puts the last plate in the cabinet then walks over to me and holds out her hand. "Keys please?"

I hand over my keys and follow her out the door to my car. She slides in the driver seat, and I walk to the window, "What are you doing Sadie?"

"I'm answering you question, now get in."

I chuckle, "How is you driving my car going to answer my question?"

She shrugs, "You'll see. Now get in because I've been dying to drive this car since the first day you got back, and I will leave without you."

I jog around and slide into the passenger seat. It's not that I'm worried about Sadie

driving my car because Axell was the one that helped her learn to drive. Sadie can drive just as well as any of us James boys. No, I'm worried about what I might find out about Londynn. We drive in silence until Sadie pulls into a parking lot for a building called Spirit Rehab facility. , "I don't need rehab Sadie."

She gets out of the car, and I follow. "I know that Jagger. This is where I work," she tells me as she motions to the large white building that looks more like an office building than a rehab. Although they must get a killer view because they are allby themselves at the end of a road right on the beach. "I'm a private nurse here. I'm a nurse to 4-6 patients a day. I deal with just those patients. Spirit thinks that it helps when the staff is familiar with the patients. If I only deal with a few patients, then I can learn them better. This is where I met Londynn almost four and a half months ago."

I knew Sadie was a nurse, but I didn't understand what Londynn had been doing in a place like this. "So, was Londynn working here?" I ask her and the only response I get is a shake of her head for no. "Volunteering?" Again, nothing but a shake of her head. "Okay Sadie I'm going to need you to speak now."

Sadie turns to face me. "Londynn was a patient here. Actually, she was my patient here."

Londynn had been in rehab but what for. None of this made sense. Maybe she had just been like Farrah, a party girl that had gotten out of control. Then again, I wasn't even sure what Spirit treated here. "What do you guys treat here?"

Sadie shrugs, "A little bit of everything. Drugs, alcohol, eating disorders mental disorders, anxiety, depression and suicidal."

Wow! That didn't narrow my list down at all really. They literally did treat a little bit of everything. I needed more information than this. "Sadie, that's not a lot of help,

I'm going to need some more info here."

Sadie shakes her head no. "Jagger, this is my job and with that comes confidentiality but even if it didn't, I still wouldn't tell you. That's Londynn's to story tell, not mine. She gets to decide who and when she tells it. But know this it wasn't for anything really bad. However, she is vulnerable, and I just want you to be careful with her."

I couldn't believe Sadie had driven me all the way across town to basically tell me nothing. I could tell Londynn was vulnerable it was obvious by the way she kept those walls up around her. No one keeps walls up that high unless they're vulnerable. A thought occurred to me then, "You think I'll hurt her or be bad for her," I tell Sadie.

"Actually, I think just the opposite. I think that someone like you could be great for Londynn."

"Someone like me or me?" I question Sadie.

"You in specific but if not you then someone like you."

I shake my head and listen to the waves crashing onto the shore for a bit before asking Sadie, "Why?"

"Because underneath that badass exterior you're a good guy. You fight for the people you love, and you push them to be the best versions of themselves. You also don't smother a girl. I think someone with your strength, intelligence and heart is exactly what Londynn needs." Sadie turns around and heads back to the car. By the time I reach it she's already behind the wheel with it running.

When we get home, I tell Sadie thank you but I'm not sure for what since I didn't really learn anything. I tell her good night then head home to take a really long, really



hot shower. I stand under the steady stream of water until it turns cold then climb into bed. A couple hours later I'm still awake with all the possible scenarios running through my head. I sigh and shut my eyes, trying to force myself to sleep.

\*\*\*\*

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

I felt like I had just fallen asleep when I heard my phone start singing, “Welcome to the Jungle” by Guns n’ Roses. I roll over and blindly feel around for my phone. Once I found it, I saw Connor’s name on the screen, Connor had grown up with us and besides my brothers, he was the one person I was closest to, if he was calling at this time then he probably really needed something. Finally, I slide my finger across the screen and say, “Hello.”

“Hey Jagger man, I’m sorry to call at this time but I kind of need a huge favor,” Connor says sounding apologetic already.

“What’s up?”

“I need a ride,” he says simply.

I chuckle, “Why? Are you still at Farrah’s parents’ house?”

I hear him let out a long breath, “No, I’m at the hospital over by Santa Monica.”

I sit straight up in my bed while trying to figure out why he would be at the hospital. If Ryce laid a hand on him, I’ll break his. “What are you doing there?”

“Londynn apparently as a food allergy to nuts and the dressing that was served on the salad had almonds in it. After her outing all their dirty little secrets she got where she couldn’t breathe. We had to give her an emergency injection then bring her here, but we all came in Farrah’s car. She offered for me to take it since I have to work in the morning, but I don’t want to leave the girls without a car.”

I was already moving around my room slipping on clothes. "No, don't leave them without a car. I'll be there in a few," I say before I hang up. I grab my black zipper hoodie before heading out to my car. I wondered why no one had warned Londynn about the dressing. Traffic was light and even though the hospital near Santa Monica was a good way away I made it in record time. When I pulled up, I saw Connor leaning against Farrah's Range Rover. I park next to him and get out. "Hey man."

"Hey. I'm really sorry about having to call at this time but I can't afford to miss work, you know?" Connor says. He runs a hand through his hair, "I feel like a dick for leaving Farrah, you can tell she's worried about Londynn, but she knows I just can't afford to miss a day."

Connor had very little money to his name. He had a tiny apartment and his car. Whenever I won at the races, I'd sneak his portion of the money back to him because I knew he couldn't afford to lose it but he craved the adrenaline rush the races gave him. I clasp my hand on Connor's shoulder, "I'm sure Farrah understands but here," I say extending my car keys out to him. "Take my car, go home, get some sleep then go to work, when you get off come by the shop and pick me up. I'll stay here with the girls and drive them home."

"Jagger, you have to work too," Connor says.

I shrug, "Well, I do own the place, plus I won tonight so I'm set. Don't worry about me. When I get ready to go to work, I'll call one of my brothers."

"You sure?" he asks.

"Of course. Now, what room are the girls in?" I ask him.

"Room 244," he says then turns around to head for my car but stops and turns back to me just before he opens the door. "You know I use to think they had it all with all that

money and big houses but it's just a mirage. Their family life is horrible, I saw it firsthand tonight. Their parents didn't even know Londynn was allergic to nuts. Not even Ryce knew. I guess just Farrah and some lady named Vivienne did. It was sad sight to witness. Our parents didn't have money or big houses, but we knew they cared about us." He turned around and got into my car and I watched as he drove away.

While I made my way through the hospital towards room 244, I thought about what Connor had said. He was right growing up we all been slightly jealous of the life the rich kids got to live. It was one of the reasons why he had all started racing, to take their money but I knew damn good and well my parents knew what we were allergic to. I knew they cared enough to make sure we were okay. Maybe in some ways we had more than Farrah and Londynn.

Just before I reached the door, I heard the girls talking. Londynn was apologizing to Farrah. Farrah told Londynn notto worry about it. "I should have asked if anything had nuts," Londynn said quietly.

"No! They should have known, last time I checked they were our parents even if they don't act like it," Farrah said furiously.

I heard Londynn sigh, "I bet they're so angry at me for telling everyone at the table the truth about Spirit. Mom's going to kill me herself next time I see her."

"I was actually wondering about that. You've always been so determined to be the perfect daughter for them that I was a little shocked that you admitted the truth to all their friends. Don't get me wrong I couldn't be prouder, but why did you do it?" Farrah asked.

I don't think Londynn is going to answer and just as I'm about to enter the room I hear her tell Farrah, "I felt like I was going to go into an anxiety attack. I felt like I

did before going to Spirit. I'm tired Farrah. I'm tired of putting on this perfect image. I'm tired of doing everything they expect me to do."

"I know you are," Farrah says her voice thick with emotion.

Londynn sounded so defeated that I wanted to rush in and wrap my arms around her and protect her from everything but then that would mean letting her past my own walls. The walls I built to keep from getting hurt again. I couldn't handle it but here I was considering that very thing. Londynn made me want things I shouldn't.

By the time I entered the room Londynn was asleep, Farrah looked up at me as I stood in the doorway watching her sleep. "Jagger?" she whispered.

"Yeah, Connor felt horrible for leaving you guys, so I gave him my car and told him I'd stay with y'all. How is she?" I ask as nod towards Londynn.

"She'll be okay. Keeping her was just to be safe."

"Good. You hungry or thirsty?" I offer Farrah.

She shakes her head, but I notice her studying me in the darkened room. "You care about her." I look at her and she giggles. "It's true and you know it. You're both trying to fight it but it's there. You two just need quit worrying about it and let it happen." I just shrug in response. "Face it, Jagger James that heart of yours has thawed."

Had my heart thawed to the idea of being with someone again? Had I managed to care about Londynn without realizing?, "I'm going to grab coffee," I tell Farrah and go to head out of the room."

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

“Jagger?” I turn around at the sound of Farrah’s voice. “Be careful with her.” I just nod and head out of the room.

### Chapter 12

#### Londynn

I awoke the next morning with the sunlight bouncing off the overly white walls of the hospital room. I felt the warmth of a hand resting on my wrist. I shake my head because I had told Farrah to sleep in the extra bed. There was no reason for her to sleep in the chair next to my bed, there was no way that was comfortable. The hand on my wrist moves slightly and I realize it’s not Farrah’s, this hand is too big, and the skin has that roughness of someone who has used their hands during their life. My eyes fly open and to my surprise Jagger is slumped forward in the chair, his head resting on the bed and his hand on my wrist.

The sun illuminates his hair and I notice a few strands that are almost the same odd color as mine. His sleeping face looks much younger than I’ve ever seen before. I take a moment to appreciate his face, it’s always a face that most painters dream of but seeing it like this, totally unguarded is breathtaking. My eyes land on his lips and I remember that kiss and how good it felt. My lips tingle at just the memory of it. I want Jagger James, more than I’ve ever wanted anyone before and that scares the hell out of me.

Jagger stirs, and his eyelids open slowly as he takes in his surroundings. As he searches the room his face finally lands on mine. “Hey pretty girl,” he says, his voice all husky and full of sleep. Why is it a guy always sounds sexiest when he’s just

woken up? The minute my ears hear is voice my stomach does little flip flops.

“Hey” I whisper back as I feel the blush creep up my face. “What are you doing here?”

He sits up and stretches, I watch as his shirt rises, and I get just a glimpse of his six pack and tan stomach. “Connor had to go to work this morning and he didn’t want to leave you guys.”

“So, you just stayed?”

He shrugs like it’s no big deal. “Yeah, I don’t have to be at work today like he does. How are you feeling Londynn?”

“I’m okay, my throats a little sore but other than that I’m good. Ready to go home.” The minute I say home I realize I don’t really have a home. “Well back to Farrah’s.”

“Well, I’m sure the doctor will stop by in a bit. Y’all want some breakfast?” He offers.

“Yeah, that sounds good. I’m sure Farrah is starving too but beware when you wake her. She’s not a morning person,” I warn him as I sit up in the bed and feel his eyes on me. I look up and see him studying me, “What?”

He shakes his head, and that smirk comes across his face. “Nothing really. I was just thinking only you could make a hospital gown look that good.” A chuckle escapes his mouth, and he heads over to Farrah.

Farrah jumps up at the touch of Jagger’s hand. “What? Is Londynn okay?”

“Yeah, she’s fine. I was going to get us all breakfast, but I don’t know what y’all eat,”

Jagger tells her.

Farrah gets out of the bed trying to adjust her dress while she does. "You okay Londynn?"

"I'm fine," I tell her, but I can tell she doesn't believe me, so I add, "I promise but I am hungry so will you please go with Jagger and get some food and something to drink?"

"You sure you want me to leave?" She asks.

"Yes! Go please," I tell her pushing her off the bed.

"Okay, we'll be right back," Farrah tells me as they head for the door.

Just before they reach it, I holler out, "But nothing with nuts!" I hear them both laugh at that. Once I'm alone in the room I take the first deep breath I've had since before our family dinner. A part of me wants to cry for my parents not really being parents. Another part of me wants to be angry because of the whole situation. Then there's another part of me that feels guilty and embarrassed that now people know about my time at Spirit and it's only a matter of time before the rest of them find out.

I shake my head as I get out of bed and head for the bathroom. As I stare at myself in the mirror it's like I recognize myself, but I don't really know myself. I'm so different from the girl I use to be. I used to daydream about marrying Ryce and starting our life together and now I daydream about Jagger and his lips. It's ridiculous because we have no chance, he probably just sees me as some young, stupid, rich girl. Wanting Jagger is dangerous because the more you want something the more it hurts when it doesn't work out.

As I climb back on the bed a thought occurs to me, what will Jagger say or think



when he finds out I was in Spirit? Will he think I'm crazy? Or will he just give me that same sympathetic look Creed and Alivia do? Even Connor gave me that look last night when I had my melt down. Or maybe he'll just feel so uncomfortable that he'll avoid me altogether?

Considering that Sadie is engaged to his brother there is a chance he already knows but I don't see Sadie doing something like that. The last thing I want is for Jagger to treat me differently because of this but how could he not? Just like that those fleeting thoughts of happiness and freedom fly right out the window.

\*\*\*\*

Later that morning I was released, I sat in the back seat while I watched the town pass by as Jagger drove us back to Farrah's. Even though I was fine they both continued to hover over me. Finally, Farrah went to take a shower, leaving Jagger and I in the living room watching reruns of Sons of Anarchy. I can feel Jagger's eyes on me before he even speaks. "So, I was wondering if you'd like to go out some time."

Was Jagger James asking me out on a date?, "Like on a date?"

"Well, yeah. On a date," he answers.

I sit there and contemplate everything. I wanted to go, I had never wanted to go anywhere so bad before, but I wasn't sure it was the best idea. However, instead of going with my better idea I just blurted out, "Yes!" It came out sounding as overly excited as it did in my head. I heard him chuckle and felt my cheeks flush with embarrassment.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

The doorbell rang, and Jagger jumped up to get it, “That should be Bowie.” Once Jagger was gone, I took a moment to let the idea of going on a date with Jagger bounce around in my head. Jagger and Bowie said goodbye before they turned and headed for the door. I had no doubt that this was outside his comfort zone and even though I was pretty sure it was a bad idea I couldn’t help but be excited. The doorbell rang again, and I got up to answer it but to my surprise on the other side stood Ryce and my brother Duke.

Ryce looks just like every other rich guy from Santa Monica. A yellow polo shirt with the collar popped up, khaki shorts and flip flops. I have to resist the urge to roll my eyes at how ridiculous he looks. Duke on the other hand has on a pair of jeans, loafers and mint green button up shirt. His honey-colored hair is perfectly spiked, and his hazel eyes are boring into me. We look so similar, yet we are so different.

“What do you two want?” I say crossing my arms over my chest.

They push past me and stand in Farrah’s messy living room. With me sleeping on her couch it’s become a mess of clothes from my suitcase and blankets and pillows on the couch. “We need to talk babe.”

I wave my hand to stop Ryce. “Don’t start calling me babe.”

Duke steps forward, “Were worried about you Londynn. After seeing all of that last night we and our parents think you need to seek further treatment.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Now I needed further treatment because I didn’t want to play the perfect daughter anymore and because I had told the truth.

This was ridiculous. Before I can say anything Ryce steps towards me and I step back, “See babe you act like I’m going to hurt you.”

“You did hurt me Ryce!” I yell out unable to control my emotions any longer.

Farrah comes busting out of the bedroom door with her robe on, “What the hell are you two doing here?”

Duke sneers at Farrah, “Trying to fix Londynn.”

“Fix me?” I ask.

“Londynn, do you really want this life? Look around you,” he says motioning towards Farrah’s apartment. “This isn’t you; we just want you to get better. Maybe you need some kind of medication.”

“I have medication,” I tell him quietly, hating to admit that I even need it. The medication makes me feel weak.

He stuffs his hands in his pockets and shrugs, “Well, maybe you need something different.”

“No, what I need is for all of you to try and understand where I’m coming from!” I say more furiously than I had intended.

“Okay babe calm down” Ryce says holding his hands up in a surrendering motion.

Farrah huffs then yells at them to get the hell out of her apartment. Duke turns on her and they start to go at each other’s throat. Tears sting my eyes, but I refuse to cry in front of these two. I can’t make out what Duke, Ryce and Farrah are yelling about because all I can hear is my heartbeat. I have to concentrate on my breathing.

Suddenly, everything feels like it's closing in. I do the only thing I know I can. I grab my keys and run for my car.

\*\*\*\*

Jagger

I've only been at work about an hour when my cell phone starts to ring. Looking down I see Farrah's name on the screen. Immediately I think it must be Londynn using Farrah's phone but as soon as I hear the voice on the other end, I know I'm wrong. Farrah is panicked and worried. Apparently, Ryce and Duke tried to do some kind of intervention because they believed that Londynn was acting out with the allergic reaction. Londynn had grabbed her keys and fled. Farrah had thought maybe she had come to me, but I had yet to see her.

By lunchtime there was still no sign of Londynn. I went into Axell's office, "Can I borrow your car?" I ask him.

He looks up from the paperwork in front of him. "Yeah, everything okay?"

I sigh, "I hope so. It's Londynn."

"What do you mean?" Axell asks standing up from behind his desk.

I shrug while running a hand through my hair. "I'm not sure but Farrah just called worried. I told you about their disastrous family dinner?" Axell nods his head. "Okay well apparently Duke and Ryce showed up trying to tell her that she needed help because it's not normal to act like that. I mean for crying out loud she had an allergic reaction and their all too preoccupied to pull their heads from their asses and see it wasn't an act."

Axell approaches me and hands his keys out to me, "Okay, here but please calm down and be careful. Do you think you know where she'd go?"

"No not necessarily but I have a few ideas and if those don't work out then I'll check the whole damn city."

"Okay well, keep me up to date," Axell tells me before I turn and head for his car. Once I'm in his car my first idea is to go to the gym. Maybe, dancing for her is like getting under the hood of a car for me, some sort of therapy. I pull in but don't see her Audi in the parking lot, but I go in and ask Jayson if she's made any calls, but she hasn't.

I check the beach next but see no sign of her and as I'm driving around it dawns on me that I don't really know her as well as I would like to. I don't know any of her favorites and I make a mental note to ask next time. I drive past Creed's house but see no sign of any one home there. My last thought was to check the cemetery thinking maybe she went to visit with the Vivienne lady but that turns out to be a dead end as well.

As I pass Harlyn's grave I stop, I can't come here and not speak to her, it just feels wrong to me. "Hey angel, sorry I didn't bring you any daisies. This wasn't a planned visit. I could actually use some of that guardian angel help and yes, I know I keep you super busy up there, but this is for Londynn. If you could just give me some kind of idea where she might be I'd appreciate it." I stand up and take a deep breath, I smell the autumn in the air. There's that crisp feeling to the breeze. "Come on Londynn, where are you?" I whisper to myself. I extend my hand to rest on Harlyn's headstone. "I'll see you in a bit angel. I love you."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

The sun is starting to set while I drive through familiar neighborhoods while wracking my brain for some idea of where Londynn could be. Suddenly a thought occurs to me, maybe she wanted to be reminded that she's not alone. I take the next rightturn that will lead me up to lookout point. As I go up the winding road, I see the red of her car come into view, her honey colored hair is dancing in the breeze and I let out a sigh of relief.

### Chapter 13

#### Jagger

I didn't realize how worried I had been about Londynn until I saw that little red car and that head full of honey colored hair. It was ridiculous that I could be so worried about a girl I barely knew but there was something about her that made me feel the need to protect her. I didn't know what her big secret was even though I did know it had to do with Spirit Rehab, but I didn't know what for. Although, after today I had every intent of finding out. I knew whatever it was made her defensive for whatever reason. I wanted her to know that she didn't need those defenses with me.

There was also something else in her eyes I had noticed after the night we kissed but I was not able to name the look, trust. She didn't trust either but if her family dinner had been even a glimpse of what her life had been like with her parents, it made total sense that she wouldn't trust. Not to mention that Ryce had always slept around even when I would call to check in Ace or Bowie would tell me about Ryce's antics. Even though I couldn't fathom why anyone would need another girl when they had Londynn. As much as I didn't want to admit it, I cared about her, more than I ever thought would be possible after losing Harlyn.

I park next to Londynn's car and get out as I approach, she glances my way. "How did you know I was here?" she asks in a whisper.

I take in her appearance and even though her eyes are puffy and red I've never seen her look more beautiful. Her hair is down and flowing, mixed with her distressed jeans, t-shirt and Chuck Taylor's, she's like my idea of a dream girl. "I figured you might want to be reminded you're not alone."

She turns to face me while I stuff my hands in the pockets of my jeans. "You remembered that?"

"Yeah, of course I do." The shock in her voice makes me wonder how many little things people have actually remembered. My guess is not a lot.

She lets out a big sigh and I realize the music I hear is coming from an iPod lying beside her. "Who's singing?" I ask her, trying to get her out of her own head.

"Erick Baker," she says and after a minute I realize she isn't going to say anything else, so I extend my hand out to her. She looks up at my eyes like I'm crazy.

"Come show me how to dance again?" I give her the smile that most girls can't resist but she seems to be trying. Finally, she slides off the hood of her car and puts her hands in mine. I pull her up against me while we start to move to the music. I feel the muscles in her shoulders and back loosen up. A few songs later I pull her away from me just enough to see her eyes. "Londynn..." I'm not sure how to approach this subject.

A look comes over her features and I'm not sure what it means but she pulls away and walks towards the edge of the hillside and stares ahead at the setting sun. "How much do you know?"

I get a feeling that she's referring to this big secret, so I tell her, "Not much."

She glances at me from the corner of her eye, "Sadie didn't tell you?"

I chuckle while shaking my head, "No, she said it wasn't her story to tell."

I see her take a deep breath and I can see the wheels in her eyes turning but I don't know if she'll tell me anything. I stand there quietly staring at her while she stares at the sun that is now quickly disappearing. "Londynn, you can trust me. I want you to. I want you to open up to me. I know there's something haunting you, I know because I've been there myself. I see that same look in your eyes that I have. I want to help." I reach out for her hand, pulling her into me. I slip a finger under her chin and will her to look up into my eyes, "Open up to me...please."

\*\*\*\*

Londynn

I was standing there staring into Jagger's eyes trying my best to decide what to do. Could I tell him the truth? I knew I had felt better when I had told my parents friends, but could I tell Jagger? Could I handle his reaction? A part of me wanted to run to my car and climb in and speed away and never return but the other part me, a bigger part of me wanted to open up to him. There was something about Jagger that I couldn't resist even though I knew it was a bad idea and would leave me brokenhearted I just couldn't stay away from him.

I took a deep breath and thought what the hell?, "Jagger, it's a long story but if you really want to know I'll tell you."

I see the shock register on his face, clearly, he thought this was going to be a bigger fight. He walks over and takes a seat on the hood of my car. "I've got all night pretty



girl," he says with a wink.

A part of me wants to roll my eyes at him because I know he's flirting but the other part of me is grateful he is trying to lighten the mood. Before starting I say a silent pray for him to understand after hearing all this. "My entire life I have been taught to keep this certain image up. After Farrah left home and made it clear that she wasn't going to live up to the expectations of my parents it got worse. I was expected to always have on the right outfit, say the right things, go to the right events and keep the right friends. I was expected to seem like I loved and adored Ryce and a part of me did...at first. I always knew they expected a lot from me, and I was fine with it until I got older and started to want things of my own. I wanted to be friends with Creed but he's not from our side of town. He's a scholarship kid and my parents saw that as below me and their family name. I went against them anyways and became his friend. Although they weren't crazy over Alivia either, so they were kind of use to me going against them where my friends were concerned. After being friends with Alivia and Creed for a while I started to see why my parents only wanted me to be friends with people who had their stamp of approval. Those kids were controlled much like I was by their parents and the money being around people like Alivia and Creed made me jealous. They had a say in their lives, and I so desperately wanted that."

"Farrah started reaching out to me again a few months after she left and as soon as I got my license and a car, I went to see her. However, seeing her didn't prepare me for how envious I would be of her. Being around her, I saw how happy and full of life she was. How free, I wanted that freedom so bad. It was at that point that my parents started to make it clear that dance was just a hobby and not something to consider as a profession. That's when I started to get really upset and resentful. Vivienne though would always try to make my days better. She was the only one in that house that asked how my day was and she and Farrah made it a point to be at every single dance performance I had. Hell, Vivienne even showed up at most of my practices. She encouraged me to be my own person. She pushed me to leave Ryce and the expectations, but I was always afraid of the backlash. I had seen how my parents had

treated Farrah after she left, and I was scared of that.”

I take a deep breath before continuing, “Vivienne had never been a fan of Ryce and the fact that we had started to think he was cheating only made her dislike for him grow. I began to pull away from him and the world I had been raised in. I started to spend more time with Farrah and her friends and at Vivienne’s after she left work at my parents. On the weekends I’d go to the races with Farrah and sleep on her couch. Then Vivienne was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer. I knew she wouldn’t make it, but she fought hard. I started to try and get back into my old life because I was afraid of being left alone. Which is actually funny considering that most of the time my parents are absent anyways. At the end of May Vivienne lost her fight which sent me running from the hospital with Farrah standing in the hallway begging me to stay. I couldn’t stay, I couldn’t handle any of it, so I ran and went to the one person I hoped would be there for me. When I got to Alivia’s house her parents told me she was out, so I went to the next person I thought of at that moment. I remember pulling up to his house and there was a party going on. I remember searching for him until I found him in his bedroom with a topless girl straddling his lap. All my suspicions had just been confirmed and I felt like the last little bit of air in my lungs left my body.”

I let out a harsh laugh. “The worst part was the girl was Alivia. She was supposed to be one of my best friends but there she was hooking up with my boyfriend when I needed someone. To this day neither of them knows that I was there, I had just turned around and quietly left. I drove home in a haze, my phone kept ringing, but I kept ignoring it. When I got home, I went straight to my dad’s liquor cabinet and grabbed the first full bottle I found. Then I went upstairs and stood in my bathroom. When I was looking at my reflection it was like I didn’t even know who I was. I was just some stranger standing there. There was so much pain in my heart, and I just wanted to be numb, so I pulled an old prescription I had from when I had surgery on my ankle. I climbed into a scolding hot tub of water and took a couple pain killers then drank some of the bottle.”

Looking at Jagger I see his jaw is super tense and his eyes are searching mine. “I don’t remember much else other than waking up in the hospital with Farrah sitting in the chair beside my bed crying. Apparently, I had passed out from the mixture of pills and alcohol and slipped beneath the water. Luckily when she found me, I hadn’t been under long and they were able to save me but if she hadn’t come looking for me I’d be dead right now. My parents never came to visit me or even called to check on me. Farrah asked me to see a therapist, but I felt I needed more. So, I decided to check into Spirit, that’s where I met Sadie. If it hadn’t been for her, Farrah and Creed I don’t know if I would have survived those three months. I still see a therapist twice a week just to make sure I’m okay. Dr. Thorton diagnosed me with anxiety and depression which he thinks started from all the pressure my parents put on me to be perfect,” I sigh as I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

Jagger is quiet, but he clears his throat, “And now you’re trying to figure out what you want?”

“Basically,” I say with a shrug. , “So, there that’s my big dirty secret.”

As I stare at Jagger, I see some unknown emotion in his eyes. I’m not sure what it is but whatever it is I think it’ll be what ends this thing between us. A part of me wants to cry over that but then again, I knew I was taking a chance telling him about all of this. At least he’s not looking at me like I’m crazy but he’s not looking at me like he wants me anymore either. He rises slowly and walks towards me. I notice his hands never leave his pockets.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

“That’s not something bad Londynn. Life can do that to you, it kicks you and tosses you around and sometimes beats the hell out of you. You kept fighting and there’s nothing dirty about that. Anyone who makes you feel that way is not the type of person you need in your life,” he sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “You should get home; Farrah has been worried sick.” With that being said he turns to leave, once his car is out of sight, I let my tears fall freely.

### Chapter 14

#### Jagger

As I sat there listening to Londynn’s confession, I felt those walls around my heart start to go back up. Londynn needed someone that was for sure, but I couldn’t be that someone. I never would be. I wasn’t the kind of guy who could be there the way she needed and even if I could be that guy, would I want to be? Londynn had just proved herself to be too risky. She had almost indirectly killed herself. Was she expecting him to just be okay with that? I had already been in love with a girl and lost her. Hell, I was still suffering from the grief and guilt from Harlyn and Harper. There was no way I could even try to let my guard down with her now.

As I drive down the highway with no real destination my mind goes back to all the times I’ve spent with Londynn. I had been so certain that she was just the spoiled rich girl but instead she was lonely and looking for freedom. She had been raised to be perfect all of her life. What I had believed to be true about her wasn’t even close.

Before I know it, I’m on the highway heading towards Vegas. I’m running...again but maybe that’s what I’m meant to do. Maybe, I’m meant to always run from pain.

Everyone knows I'm damn good at it. I consider turning back around and going home but instead I push the gas pedal down farther and feel my car's speed climb with it.

I see the city lights of Vegas before I realize it and they instantly make me think of Londynn. After spending hours on the road, I feel like a total ass for just leaving her like this. I hadn't even thanked her for opening up to me. No, instead I got in the car and drove away. What the hell had I been thinking? I roll the windows down as I pull into Vegas. I guess I think the fresh air will make me feel better, but it doesn't. As I drive the crowded streets that had been home up until two months ago, I can't help but wonder if Londynn is okay.

I pull into the parking lot of the club I use to work at as a bouncer. As I climb out, I stretch my stiff muscles before I head for the door. As I walk up, I see the guy who was the closest thing I had to a friend here, Brian. "Well I'll be...Jagger James! Didn't think I'd see the likes of you around here again!" He hollered as he pulled me in for a hug. "What brings you back to Vegas?"

I shrug, "You know I just missed you too much to stay away."

Brian throws his head back laughing, a deep rumbling that comes from his chest. "I wouldn't believe that no more than I believe pigs fly but I'll take it." He removes the rope and lets me inside. "Oh, there was a pretty little thing I let in there about ten minutes ago you should go charm her with that smile of yours."

I just roll my eyes at him as I make my way through the crowded area to the bar. I order a beer and sit there as I take in the scene around me. When I had first got to Vegas, I thought this was some sort of heaven, but I learned pretty quickly this place is more like hell. It's full of fakes and snakes, everyone is out for themselves. If you can help them in some way, they don't mind you but otherwise, you'll get bit.

I'm staring at the beer in my hand thinking about Londynn again when Hannah walks

up and throws an arm over my shoulders. I didn't even have to look to know it was her, she always smelled too sweet, like cotton candy but she was the one girl I had spent time with here. Mostly because she wasn't into commitment, with Hannah there was no strings attached. She definitely wasn't fake, and I had always been careful not to get bitten because I was pretty sure she was a snake. "Well, well what do we have here?" She said smiling sweetly at me. "I must admit I've missed you JJ."

Hannah had always insisted on calling me JJ, I never knew why I guess it satisfied her, so I let her. Her fake black hair has chunks of hot pink, her barely-there dress is hot pink faux leather, and she has a pair of 6-inch heels that are nothing but glitter. As she saunters around to me, I notice the dress barely covers any part of her. She bats her over the top fake lashes at me, "Oh come on JJ you know you missed me too."

"Haven't had a whole lot of time for that Hannah," I tell her while taking a drink.

She moves in closer to me and all I can smell is that sickening sweet smell, nothing like the fresh daisy smell that comes off Londynn. Ugh! Why can't I get that damn girl out of my head? Before I think I grab Hannah's neck and pull her into me. Maybe if I kiss Hannah long enough, I'll forget about those deep hazel eyes and the head full of honey hair. That hair that's always so soft you can run your fingers through it, nothing like this head full of hair product. If I could just forget how she tasted like coconut and the way she molded into my body, but I can't. Maybe if I just keep running, I'll forget.

\*\*\*\*

I wake to the sunlight streaming through hot pink sheer curtains. My head feels like it's been run over by a semi, my nostrils burn with the smell of cotton candy and stale cigarette smoke, my back is burning. I manage to sit up and realize I'm in Hannah's room. Everything is hot pink and zebra. I growl in frustration at myself. What did I do? I'm such an idiot. I manage to make it to the bathroom and see I look about like I

feel. I splash cold water on my face then examine my back in the mirror. I look like a stray cat got a hold of me. As I walk back to the bedroom, I pick up pieces of my clothing. Sitting on the bed with my head in my hands I try to figure out what is wrong with me. Why do I always do this?

“So, who’s Londynn?” Hannah asks standing in the bedroom doorway.

I look up at her, “What?”

She laughs, “You called me Londynn last night, so I was curious who she was.” She walks over and hands me a cup of coffee. “You know I’ve been called a lot of different names but never by you.”

I take a sip of coffee before answering, “She’s this girl back in L.A. I ran because I found out some stuff.”

She laughs again before sitting next to me. “You always run JJ, but did you ever think maybe it’s time to stop. What you found out about her, was it so bad you had to run?”

“No, I guess not. I just don’t want to go through it again.”

She raises her eyebrows at me, “Go through what?”

I shake my head and run a hand through my hair, “Losing someone again. You know everyone talks about how great love is, but it really sucks.”

“Oh, please you know that’s not true. Love is great. Nothing is better than that, but you can’t find it again if you keep running. You know when the last time I saw you this messed up was?” she asks but I just shrug. “The night we first met and few months after that but then I stumbled across that picture of the pretty brunette and you blew up at me, Remember?”

“Yeah, I remember,” I say staring at the floor.

“You were so mad! You didn’t talk to me for weeks but when you finally did you apologized and told me what happened. Then you told me you’d never let anyone in again and I believed you. That’s why I know right now that this Londynn girl is different.”

“Oh really? How do you know that?” I ask sarcastically.

“Because she’s already gotten in. You wouldn’t have ran if she hadn’t. You wouldn’t have tried to drink her away if she wasn’t. Hell, you wouldn’t be here if she wasn’t and somewhere in that head of yours, you know that,” she says then gets up from the bed.



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

Before she leaves she looks back at me when I ask her, “And what about you Hannah? You’re fine with all your relationships being like this?” I motion towards the bed.

She shrugs, “We all have our demons and secrets. Mine make me okay with my relationships just being about sex,” she says pointing at the bed. “Go home Jagger.”

The one-time Hannah uses my real name and it’s to tell me to go home, but can I?

\*\*\*\*

It’s been a month since I’ve been back in Vegas. I haven’t seen Hannah again but I’m staying in my old apartment again with my old roommate, Brian but no matter what I do I can’t get Londynn off my mind for too long. It doesn’t matter what I drink or how much. It doesn’t matter who I try to use as a distraction, she’s always just right there in the back of my mind. My phone starts ringing again, and I roll over to see Axell’s name on the screen. I haven’t actually spoken to any of my brothers. I’ve texted to let them know I’m okay and when they’ve asked if I’m coming back, I’ve just laid the phone down. Truth be told I don’t have an answer for them. I don’t know if I’m ever going back to L.A.

The phone finally stopped ringing only to start back up again. Clearly, he’s not going to give up today like he’s been for the past week. I chunk the phone against the wall because if I answer I know that Axell will talk me into my car and down the highway. When I think of the highway Londynn is always the first image that comes to mind. Her and that kiss we shared in the body shop. How could I have been so stupid as to think that we had a chance? As if we didn’t already have more than enough going

against us, her secret had to be the one thing that would send me running.

My phone starts back up again, and I grunt and leave my bedroom. The light in the kitchen instantly gives me a headache. I've been living with a perpetual hangover since getting back here. I should know better, but I keep thinking that at some point that some drink will remove the image of her from my brain. The way her legs looked while she walked towards me. The way she moved when she danced. The way she tasted like coconut when I kissed her. The way she always smells like daisies. The way she fit perfectly against me when she was in my arms. The way her hair would always fall over her left shoulder.

Ugh! What the hell has happened to me? I'm not this guy that obsesses over one girl. I haven't been this guy since Harlyn, and I can't go back to being that guy. Especially not with one who almost just died! What if she got to feeling like that again but this time no one got to her in time? What did she expect me to do if I let her in and then lost her? I was certain that if I loved and lost again, I'd go crazy. Whoever said that quote, "It's better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all" had clearly never suffered the loss of love because if you have you know that quote is total bullshit.

I head back into my room as I hear my phone ringing still, marching over to it I yank it from the floor but instead of Axell's name I see Sadie's. Using Sadie was not fair, I slid my finger across the screen. Before I can even say hello, Sadie's voice comes over the phone, "I don't what your issue is right now but if you ever cared about Londynn you need to get back here now."

My phone goes dead and before I know I'm moving through my room grabbing the closest clean clothes and my keys as I head out the door for my car. Once I'm inside though I hesitate. If I go back, then I'm making a final decision. I'm telling all of them that I care about her and her wellbeing. I'm letting her past these walls I've worked so hard to build, can I do that?

I guess my answer is yes. I don't know how, why or when but I've started my car, put it in drive and I'm already on the road before I think about my answer. In a few hours I'll be back in L.A. and next to Londynn...I hope.

## Chapter 15

### Londynn

The first few days that Jagger was missing I had held onto hope that he'd return but after the fourth day I knew he wasn't, little did I know at the time that it'd be a month before I saw him again. Farrah had come home and brought me something she had printed online. ABA, American Ballet Association was holding open auditions in New York the following week. Of course, she thought I should go but I just wasn't sure what I should do. Two days later I was running around trying to pack and make all the necessary arrangements that I'd need for New York.

I had to go to my parents' because most of my dance stuff was there but as I pulled up, I was a little shocked to see my mom's BMW sitting in the driveway. I braced myself for a conversation with her. By the time I made it out of the house I felt even better about going to New York, I just knew it would turn out great. This was my chance at my dream, my chance at freedom. Dr. Thorton and Sadie also thought it was a great idea. By the time Farrah dropped me off at the airport on Saturday I could barely contain my excitement.

Staring at my reflection in the mirror I shake my head at how naïve I had been a few weeks ago. I had made a deal with the devil and now I was paying my price. I looked down at my black evening gown for some charity event at the country club. The country club where I would be expected to act like the perfect daughter and girlfriend. I had chosen a black lace high lo gown that had a deep-v neckline and off the shoulder's long sleeves. I had found a pair of shoes that reminded me of The Wizard of Oz. They were red glitter Mary Janes with a bow to lock the strap in place.

I had added a red satin headband to my curled hair.

I keep staring at my reflection because I know it's me but I'm not me. I know that makes no sense, but I look like myself but nothing about my life right now is what I want. What I wanted was to go to the races but instead I'm going to the charity event. I've fallen right back into this role without a blink of an eye. I shake my head in disgust and head downstairs. As I make my way down Ryce enters my house and I inwardly cringe. I mean Ryce looks handsome in his tux but he's the last person I want to spend the night with.

, "Here's this necklace to go with that outfit," Ryce says extending a velvet jewelry box at me. Clearly, he doesn't want to spend time with me anymore that I want to spend with him. I sigh and open the box it's a beautiful ruby and diamond necklace that ends in a ruby teardrop shape. Any girl would be ecstatic to wear such a beautiful piece of jewelry, but I could care less. Ryce steps forward and yanks the necklace out of the box and I want to scream at him to be gentle with it, but I don't. He's looking at me like I'm supposed to read his mind when he tells me, "Well, don't just stand there. Turn around so I can put this damn thing on we can get this night over with".

I turn around while he messes with the necklace then cusses because he can't get it to fasten. I smell a hint of tequila on his breath. Luckily my mom appears, and she can get the necklace fastened.

I smile, shake hands and make pleasantries with everyone I'm expected to. I've been on Ryce's arm all night as we made our rounds in the ballroom. Finally, it's time to sit, eat and listen to speeches about whatever charity this is for. My feet are killing me, and I feel like I'm drowning again, only this time I know I won't be coming back up for air. Looking around at all the fake happy couples I realize this is my life now. Alivia is sitting next to me and despite her efforts I just don't feel like being around her. Ever since I told Jagger about seeing Alivia and Ryce together I can't get the image from my mind. It's really starting to put a strain on our friendship.

After the speeches a band takes the stage, and the dance floor is now open. Ryce asks me to dance because we are expected to but after three dances one of the older ladies snags him away from me. She laughs and apologizes but really, I should be thanking her. I'm going crazy and I need some fresh air. When I return to the ballroom, I can't find Ryce anywhere. I search until I find him and Bethany Law in some darkened corner in the hallway. I turn back around before they can spot me but when I reach the part of the hallway that leads back to the ballroom, I notice the exit doors.

I take off running and the sound of my heels slapping the tiles alerting Ryce that he was spotted. I hear him call after me. I'm almost out of the parking lot when his yellow Porsche catches up to me. "What the hell Londynn?"

I sigh and roll my eyes. "You can go back Ryce. I'm going home."

"What home? You don't have a home if you don't keep up your appearance with me and if you don't get in this car then you're not keeping it up. Guess what happens then...mommy and daddy cut you off and kick you out," he says with a harsh laugh coming from him.

I stop and spin around to glare at him. "I don't care! Let them! Let them cut me off and kick me out! No amount of money is worth being subjected to spending the night with you. I can't even pretend to like you Ryce. If I have to give one more fake smile or tell one more person how lucky I am to have you I'm going to throw up!" I yell at him.

He puts the car in park and before I can really register what he's doing he gets out of the car and comes around to face me. "You know you were just supposed to be a hot piece of ass and pretty face. A trophy wife! Why the hell is that so hard for you?" He grabs my arm and yanks me towards the car. I tell him no but before I know it, I'm forced into the passenger seat of his car.

Great now I'm stuck in a car with a drunk driver. For a minute I think to call Farrah, but we haven't really talked since I got back from New York. Even so I know she'd probably answer for me, but she had texted me to tell me that her and Connor were going away for the weekend. I fastened my seat belt and prayed I'd make it home in one piece.

As we moved down the streets the speed of the car accelerated. My heart was pounding so hard in my chest I was sure it was about to come flying out at any moment. We're in Farrah's side of town which also meant that we were in Jagger's side too. It was race night which meant somewhere on one of these streets would be the races. Ryce must have pushed the accelerator more because we were moving even faster. Everything around me was a blur. I caught a glimpse of a sign and suddenly my heart fell into my stomach. The curve, the same one that Jagger's girlfriend and unborn baby had been killed on. We were coming up on it and fast. There was no way Ryce could make that curve without wrecking.

"Slow down! You're going to get us killed!" I screamed at Ryce, my panic rising. He just glares ahead. "Ryce! Please! Slow down!"

"No one is going to make a fool of me! You think you can just choose some other guy. Jagger James, the white trash bad boy! Like hell you will!" Ryce hollered back but I noticed the car slowing. Maybe if he kept talking the car would keep slowing. "Don't you know who I am Londynn? Our families had this planned for us before we were born!"

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

Suddenly, the car slowed dramatically, and he pulled over on the side of the curb. Tears were streaming down my face, but I didn't know where they had come from. Ryce had never been violent, he had a temper and there were a few times he'd grabbed my arm too hard, but he'd never hit me before. I was scared of him though in this moment. There was an unfamiliar look in his eye. I could almost feel his anger coming off him. He got out of the car, slamming the door with so much force the window rattled.

He appeared, yanking my door open. He reached down and yanked my arm which caused me to yelp in pain. I was still fastened into the seat by the seatbelt. "Shut up you spoiled bitch!" He yelled in my face as he reached in and unbuckled the seatbelt.

Once we were outside the car, he pushed me backwards from him which caused me to stumble in my heels. "Ryce please calm down. I didn't mean to upset you," I pleaded with him.

"Oh, sure you didn't! You're always just so perfect! Girls would kill to be with me but not you! You have to go around and be seen with Jagger. Leaving me to look like a fool in front of all my friends. Make me look like an idiot in front of my parents with that whole allergic reaction bit! Then once you realized your pathetic dreams wouldn't be coming true you ran back to me. Where's Jagger now Londynn? Where is he to rescue you? What did I ever do to you to make you embarrass me the way you do?" Ryce asked stalking towards me.

I knew I shouldn't say anything, but I couldn't stop myself. "What did you do? You want the list? How about all those times you ignored me for weeks? How about the three months I was in rehab, and you never bothered to write, call or visit?" I ask him

while pushing his chest. “How about the night I came looking for you after Vivienne died and you were too busy hooking up with Alivia to even notice? How about any of those times? I can’t stand you Ryce. You are everything I hate about that part of the world. You think everyone is beneath you and that everyone wants you. But in reality, they tolerate you because you can bank roll every adventure and party. I’m pathetic, what the hell do you think you are?” I ask pointing at him, “At least I wanted to try and make something of my life unlike you. You’re just one of their mindless robots, playing their game.”

I turned around to leave. I wasn’t too far from Farrah’s maybe I could just walk there then call a cab or something, but I didn’t get too far. I felt Ryce’s hand clamp around my wrist and yank me back to him. My wrist was throbbing from his grip by the time he spun me around to face him. He did say a word, but I could tell by the look in his eyes that whatever was about to happen was the worst. He had managed to pin both my hands behind my back, even with me struggling against him I couldn’t get his grip to loosen. His free hand stroked my cheek and he whispered, “You were supposed to be my trophy...just mine.” Then before I knew it, he had backhanded me across my cheek so hard I fell to the ground. My eye felt like it was going to pop out of its socket and there was a pounding in my ear. Tears roll down my face. He didn’t stop there though. He pulled me back up to my feet only to hit me again.

By the time he got in his car and drove away I could barely see out of my left eye, my lip was bleeding, and my legs and arms were stinging from where the dirt and gravel had scrapped them. I finally managed to sit up only to realize that my purse with my cellphone was in Ryce’s car. I doubt I could even walk to Farrah’s now. I was stranded on the side of the road in a fancy dress and heels with my face swollen and bruised in the not-so-great part of town. All I could do now was pray. I saw a gleam of silver and when I looked over, I saw the cross with Harlyn’s name on it. This was the same spot Jagger had lost her. I get why he left, I’m too scary for him. He’s afraid I’m not stable enough and who could blame him. I lay my head on my knees and cry.



\*\*\*\*

I don't know how long I sat there before a pair of headlights washed over me. I didn't look but I heard the gravel crunch as the car came to a stop on the side of the road. I heard the car door open and shut and someone walking towards me. "Miss, do you need some help?"

That voice. I know that voice. I look up and see Ace's electric blue eyes rimmed with thick black eyeliner staring back at me. Ace James, who would have thought he'd be my knight in shining armor tonight?

"Londynn? What the hell happened to you?" He asks, and he runs to the spot that I seemed to be rooted in. He gently takes my head in his hands and examines my face. "We need to get you to a hospital." I shake my head no. "Londynn come on. I don't know what happened, but I have a pretty good idea. You need to see a doctor." I just shake my head no, again. I can't seem to find my voice. "Londynn, I think you may be in shock."

I swallow, and my throat feels like sandpaper. "I probably am but no hospital."

I notice some relief floods into his eyes when he hears my voice, "At least you can talk. Do you want me to take you to Farrah's?"

I shake my head no, "She's out of town."

"Shit! I forgot her, and Connor took a mini vacation. Where do you want me to take you?" He asks.

I go through everyone I know in my mind. I don't want to see Alivia. Creed wouldn't know what to do with any of this and if I go home my parents won't care anyways. Then a name comes to mind. "Sadie."

“You want me to call Sadie?” I just nod my head yes to answer his question. “Okay let me help you up and get you in the car. I’ll take you to my apartment because it’s closer. Kynlee’s there and we can at least start getting you cleaned up. I’ll call Sadie and have her meet us over there.” When we get to the car, he opens my door and reaches in to grab something. He holds out an electric blue zipper hoodie for me to step into. I let him help me get it on, I’m not sure I’m cold but the hoodie looked welcoming.

On our way to his apartment, he calls Sadie. I hear him explain how he found me and that I asked for her. When he hangs up, he tells me she’ll be there then dials another number. It must be Kynlee because he tells her the same story. Once we’re at his complex he helps me out of the car and wraps an arm around my waist. “I live upstairs, think you can make it?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry about it,” he says with an apologetic smile.

I shrug or at least I try to. “It’s okay.”

When we reach his door, Kynlee is standing there in a pair of really short denim shorts and black tank top. All of her hair is pulled up into a ponytail and she has on a pair of glasses. Her hand moves to cover her mouth. “Oh my gosh! Londynn,” she says as she steps forward and extends her hand out to me. It’s such a simple gesture but at the moment it makes tears form in my eyes. I take her hand and she pulls me into the apartment. “Ace, why don’t you grab the first aid kit?”

“I have one of those?” he asks.

Kynlee laughs, “Never mind I’ll go get it. Why don’t you fix her something to drink?” She turns to face me, “I’ll find you something to change into as well.”

Ace shows me to the couch and sits me down then disappears into his kitchen while Kynlee went off down the hallway. I take the time to take in his living room. It's everything I'd imagine for Ace. There's one red wall with a bare black tree painted on it as well as some lonely ravens. He also has a black sectional with a mixture of red throw pillows and black throw pillows that have skulls on them. A black gothic looking coffee table sits in front of me. At the end of the sectional is black bookcase full of horror DVD's. He comes back and hands me a cup of hot tea. "This is some shit that Kynlee likes, it's supposed to help calm you."

Kynlee reappears just as there is a knock on the door. "That should be Sadie," he says going to get the door. Kynlee comes over and tells me, "Why don't we go to the bathroom? Sadie and I will help you change." I take her extended hand but as soon as I see Sadie come through the door, I feel the flood of emotions come back and I nearly collapse from it. Ace grabs me before I hit the floor. He helps the girls get me to the restroom which is decorated in black and white skulls. Kynlee starts a shower, once I'm showered and dressed in a pair of shorts and a tank top, similar to Kynlee's, her and Sadie go to work cleaning me up. I'm sure the cuts and scrap burn but I'm so numb I don't feel anything.

When they're done, they help me back to the living room where Ace hands me another cup of tea and Axell tries to give me a granola bar. Sadie sits in front of me on the coffee table. "What happened Londynn?" She asks but I shake my head no. I notice Kynlee standing next to Ace and the way he's pulled her close to him, as if he can protect her from the world. Sometimes Ace James seems like your typical jackass bad boy, but Kynlee brings something else out in him. She looks up and whispers something, he drops a kiss on top her head and she comes to sit beside me. She takes my hand in hers. "Londynn, you need to talk to us," Sadie tells me.

"I had this stupid charity benefit to go to at my parent's country club. I caught Ryce hooking up with some girl in the hallway and he chased me down. He forced me in the car and then drove like a maniac I was sure we'd wreck, and it'd all be over but

finally he slowed down. He pulled over on the curve and he was yelling about me making a fool of him or choosing Jagger and some other stuff. He yanked me out of the car, and he kept yelling at me about stuff. I tried to keep my mouth shut but eventually I started yelling back and it made him angrier and then...well you can guess the rest," I tell them gesturing at my face.

Axell steps forward, "Has he done this before?"

I shake my head, "No, he's grabbed me a little too roughly before when he's upset or drinking but he's never hit me before."

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

“I’m going to kill that asshole!” Ace says angrily.

Sadie turns to him. “That won’t help anything.” She turns back to me, “Why don’t you come stay with us until Farrah gets back.”

“No, I can go home. I don’t want to intrude. When Ace found me, I just wasn’t thinking right. I should have had him take me home then,” I tell them.

I’m up and trying to get to the door when Ace steps in front of me. “You’re not going back there. They don’t protect you, Londynn! They don’t care, you can stay here with Kynlee and I or go home with Sadie and Axell. We will make sure you’re safe and that Ryce never does this to you again.” I think about arguing with him, but I can see something in his eyes that tells me I won’t win.

Reluctantly I agreed to take the couch at Sadie and Axell’s. Kynlee told me she’d swing by tomorrow and bring me some more clothes until I feel up to go shopping. I tell her thank you. Ace walks us out and I tell him thank you. He just smirks at me, “I’m just glad it was me that found you.” I don’t tell him but I’m glad it was him too.

When we get back to Sadie and Axell’s he disappears and comes back with blankets. He makes out the couch for me while Sadie gives me some Tylenol and water. They tell me good night before disappearing into their room. As soon as I lay my head on the pillow I’m out, the events of tonight leave me while I sleep.

## Chapter 16

Jagger

By the time I pull into the driveway of my childhood home back in L.A. it's almost four o'clock in the morning. The house is dark and quiet, I feel nervous about what Sadie might tell me. I've tried to figure out what her words meant the whole way here. If I ever cared about Londynn I needed to get back here. During the trip I had come up with a thousand different scenarios, none of which were good. I pause at the front door and take deep a breath before quietly unlocking it and stepping inside.

It seems everyone is asleep because the house is completely dark. I hear the leather of the couch moving and look that way. Immediately I assume Axell is in the doghouse with Sadie but as I step into the living room I notice the moonlight catching the honey colored hair laid across the pillow. Londynn. What is Londynn doing asleep on the couch? Looking down at her I realize that out of all the scenarios I thought up this one never came to mind. There is a bag of unfrozen peas lying in her hand. The side of her face I can see is black and blue and slightly swollen, there's a cut on her lip. The rage that takes over me at the sight of her makes me want to go beat whoever did this to her but instead I quietly go to my room and slip on a pair of sweats and muscle tank.

On my way back to the living room I stop in the kitchen and grab another bag of frozen veggies. I slowly lower it on her face then I sit down on the floor beside the couch. As I listen to her even breathing, I let my mind wonder. I should have been here. I shouldn't have left her the way I did. Who could have done this to her?

At some point I must have fallen asleep because I wake up to the sound of Jovi in the kitchen getting breakfast. The moonlight has been replaced with the sun. I get up and go into the kitchen but not before checking on Londynn. She's still asleep so I collect the now thawed bags of veggies. When I enter Jovi is at the table eating a big bowl of Lucky Charms. "Jagger?" he asks with his mouth full.

I ruffle his hair, "Don't talk with your mouth full it's not a good quality,"

He laughs and swallows his cereal before continuing. "When did you get back?"

I'm trying to keep the noise down, but Jovi doesn't seem to get that. "Damn, keep it down dude," I say chuckling.

"Why?" he asks with a confused look on his face.

I nod towards the living room, "Londynn Parrish is asleep on our couch."

"Ohhh...I wonder if that's why Axell and Sadie left out last night?"

I shrug, "I don't know but I would guess so. Now, to answer your other question I got back this morning.

He continues eating and I go to make a pot of coffee. "Are you back for good?"

I don't answer right away but then just as I'm about to I hear Londynn say, "That's the million-dollar question Jovi."

I turn to see her leaning against the wall of the kitchen watching me. I try not to stare at the damage on her face but it's hard not to. Her cheek and eye are both bruised but most of the swelling has gone down. Her lip is cut and there are scrapes and bruises all over her arms and legs. Despite all that though I've never been so happy to see someone, the other part of me is furious and wants to beat on the one responsible for this. I give her my signature smirk, "For better or for worse."

She shrugs as she sits down across from Jovi, "We'll see."

"What the hell happened to you?" Jovi blurts out.

I'm standing behind him at the fridge grabbing the milk, so I turn around and slap

him in the back of the head. "Jovi Martin James," I scold him.

He looks down at his cereal and mumbles sorry. Londynn reaches over and takes his hand. "It's okay. I got into a fight with Ryce, and it didn't end so well."

"I thought you guys were back together," Jovi says. This is just another reason for me to not like Ryce Whitten. I can't wait to beat his ass down then my mind goes back to what Jovi just said, like it's just now registering. When did Ryce and Londynn get back together?

I see her shrug, "Not anymore."

"You want some of my Lucky Charms?" Jovi asks her.

Londynn giggles, "You know I don't think I've ever had Lucky Charms."



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

“What?” Jovi and I both ask at the same time.

She looks between us. “When I was younger, I always ate Raisin Bran because it was healthy and since I was a dancer I couldn’t afford to not be healthy, so I don’t think I’ve ever eaten Lucky Charms.”

“Okay no offense Raisin Bran tastes horrible,” I say grabbing two bowls from the cabinet and taking a seat next to Jovi at the table. I slide a bowl over to Londynn.

“Well, if you don’t know anything different,” she says with a shrug. I fill her bowl and watch as she stares at the cereal like it’s some sort of unfamiliar species. I would laugh at how cute it was if the situation wasn’t so damn sad. What person has only eaten Raisin Bran? Finally, she raises a spoonful to her mouth, and she makes a sound of satisfaction. “Okay you’re right Raisin Bran does taste horrible.”

I watch Londynn while she eats. Jovi is talking away about some girl in his class that he obviously has a crush on named Monrowe Fields. I had to laugh because it seemed like just yesterday, we were all watching him learn how to walk. “Hey Jovi, you got that learners permit yet?”

“Yeah!” He responds.

“Well then how about I let you drive us to school?” I offer.

“Are you for reals?” He asks but I recognize that same gleam in his eyes that I had at that age. He’s unable to hide his excitement about getting behind the wheel of a car.

“Yeah,” I answer and motion towards his room. “Why don’t you go get ready?”

He’s up and out of the kitchen in record time. Now, it’s just Londynn and I, this is harder than I thought it would be. I clear my throat, “Londynn, I owe you an apology. You opened up to me and after that I’ve handled everything all wrong. It’s just your confession scared me.”

“It’s okay. At first, I was sad then I was mad but now I understand. While I was sitting on the side of the curve staring at that cross for Harlyn I realized that my confession probably scared the hell out of you. After losing her I can’t imagine you’d want to be with someone who almost accidentally drowned because she made a stupid decision,” she says quietly.

I sigh and let silence fill the space between us. “Londynn, it did scare me. That’s why I ran. Ever since I lost Harlyn and Harper, I run when anything gets too tough or scary. It’s what I do because I try to avoid all of it. I’ve spent the last month in a mostly drunken haze trying to forget about you, but I can’t. When Sadie called me, I realized that I wanted to be here...with you.”

I study her, but a look of defeat is in her eyes. “Things have changed Jagger.”

Nodding I tell her, “I can imagine so. Nothing stays the same and it’s been a month, but I’d like to actually give this a chance. You want to go to lunch today, and you can fill me in on what I’ve missed?”

She looks up at me and she seems shocked but I’m not sure why. “Jagger, I’d love to go to lunch but I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she says drawing a circle around her face.

I shrug, “It’ll be okay. I promise I’ll take you somewhere that you can wear a pair of those huge sunglasses.”

She laughs, “Thanks but I don’t have any of my stuff.”

“I’ll call Kynlee. You have on her clothes now, right?”

She looks down then gives me a smirk, “Yeah I do but how did you know that.”

I bite my lip to keep from laughing, “Because your dance practice outfit covered more than that. It just screams Kynlee.” Silence is upon us again, but Sadie enters the kitchen. I get up and tell Londynn, “I have some stuff I need to take care of this morning, but I’ll be back by lunch time for you.” As I’m heading out of the kitchen I stop behind Sadie and place a kiss on top of her head and whisper thank you.

\*\*\*\*

I pulled up to Inkcredible, Ace’s tattoo shop, once inside I holler out for Ace. Before I had left the house Axell had told me Ace was the one who had found Londynn. I needed to thank him. Ace appears out of a doorway from the back. “Well, the missing James has returned.”

“Yeah and apparently, I owe you some gratitude. Thank you for helping Londynn last night,” I tell him and extend my hand towards him.

He smirks and takes my hand, “You know I may act like an ass most of the time, but I’d still help when needed. I just have rep to uphold.”

I laugh, “Of course you do.”

“So, what are you going to do about Ryce?” Ace asks me.

I shrug, “Who says I’m going to do anything?”

“Please! Even if you didn’t have a thing for Londynn, you wouldn’t let something like this slide. I figured that’s where you’re headed now.”

“No, I kind of have a lunch date with Londynn," I tell him.

I turn back around to face my younger brother and see him smirking at me. “Seriously? How’d you manage that? I assumed that Londynn would stay in hiding until the damage healed.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

"I'm just charming like that," I tell him returning his smirk.

He laughs, "Yeah, I don't buy that one."

"Okay so maybe I promised to take her somewhere that she could wear a big pair of sunglasses to hide it. Problem is I have no clue what to do now. It's not like I've spent a lot of time in the last five years planning dates," I say sighing, feeling a little defeated. I'm not sure why I came to Ace with this issue. I would have been better to have went to Axell or even Bowie.

Ace clears his throat, "Why don't you get takeout and then make a picnic out of it?"

I'm sure I'm staring at my brother like he has another head because that was actually a good idea and Ace doesn't get a lot of those. "That's kind of perfect."

He acts like he's brushing dust from his shoulders. "I know. I am kind of a genius. So back to this Ryce issue."

"I'm going to hand his ass to him at the races then I'm going to make his face match Londynn's," I tell him as I head for the door of his shop.

"Jagger."

"Yeah?" I turn back around to look at him. A look of complete confidence takes over his face.

"I've got your back."

I nod my head at him because I figured if anyone did, it'd be him. He seemed to like Londynn. "See you later" I tell him as I head back for my car.

\*\*\*\*

When I pull back up to the house it looks empty. It makes me wonder if Londynn left however, as soon as I open the door, I see her sitting on the couch watching TV. "Hey pretty girl, you ready?"

She stands up and stretches. It gives me a minute to appreciate the view. Her honey-colored hair hangs in long waves. Kynlee must have helped her with her makeup because you can't see most of the bruising. An oversized pair of sunglasses sit on top of her head. She's wearing a long white sheer skirt and olive-green sleeveless top. When she walks towards me, I notice the slit that runs up the skirt, almost exposing her whole leg. I have to remind myself to breathe. I turn and open the door before leading her to my car.

"So where are we going?" she asks while we're driving.

I glance over at her and watch as the wind from the open window makes her hair dance around. "It's a surprise." I pull up to a small Mexican restaurant. I run in and grab our order then head back to lookout point. When I pull up and park, I hear Londynn giggle. I look over at her and ask, "What?"

"I wasn't sure how you were going to keep the promise that I could keep my sunglasses on, but you did it," she says shaking her head and getting out of the car.

I get out, grabbing the food and blankets I brought. Once I've laid the blankets out, I go back and grab the cooler full of drinks from my trunk. "Well, I can't take all the credit, but I hope this is okay with you."

She looks up from her spot on the blanket, a small smile lights up her face. , “It’s perfect. So, what’d you get us to eat?”

“Burritos and nachos.”

“Nachos?” she asks like she’s curious. Surely, she’s had nachos before.

I study her for a minute before asking, “Have you had nachos before?” She looks away and if I hadn’t been watching her, I would have missed the small shake of her head. “Seriously?”

She shrugs her shoulders and turns back to look at me. “Wasn’t part of the diet.”

“Well, you don’t need a diet in my opinion,” I tell her honestly.

She lets out a small laugh, “I don’t need a diet at all anymore since I’m not dancing.”

“What do you mean?” I ask her.

“It’s part of the stuff you missed while you were gone...” she trails off and the comment hangs in the air. I get out the food and we start eating. I wait to see if she’ll say more but after a while it becomes obvious, she’s not going to. I don’t mind just sitting here in silence and enjoying the view of her sitting here with me. I love seeing the small smile that brightens her face when she takes a bite of food. The whole time in Vegas I had missed this. I had missed Londynn.

Once we finish eating, I finally ask her. “What did I miss while I was gone?”

Chapter 17

Londynn

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

We were out of food, so I really couldn't avoid Jagger's question anymore. Since we were alone I moved the shades to the top of my head. I stare out over the city that I use to love and let my mind think back over the past month's events. The last time I was here with Jagger I had two dreams, to be with him and to dance again but now I have none. I know he's here right now, but it won't last. He'll get scared and run. I can't blame him for that. If I were in his shoes, I would probably do the same thing.

Finally, I take a deep breath and turn to face him. I basically have nothing else left to lose at this point. "Shortly, after you left Farrah found out that ABA, the American Ballet Association was holding open auditions. I was reluctant at first mostly because I was holding on to the hope that you'd show back up here. Anyways I finally decided to go. I was packing when I realized that I didn't have my lucky ballet shoes and practice outfit. It was midafternoon, so I figured I could go to my parents' house undetected, run in and grab the stuff. When I pulled up the driveway was empty. I was in my room grabbing the items I came after when my mom appeared in my doorway."

"She asked me what I was doing, and I told her about the audition and going to New York. She told me she was happy for me and that she'd let me go to the audition without another word if we could make a deal. My mom said that if I auditioned and made it that her and dad would help me pay for a place in New York until I could get established and they wouldn't fight me on it. In her eyes me going to New York to dance was better than what Farrah is doing, even though Farrah is happy in her life. I knew that the offer sounded too good to be true, so I didn't jump at the opportunity right away. I asked what happened if I didn't make it. She told me that if I didn't make it, I would return to L.A. and move back home. I would go to the events they wanted, and I would appear happy and in love with Ryce. I wouldn't argue or fight



them over these events and during Christmas I would ecstatically accept Ryce's proposal at the country clubs annual Christmas ball. "

I looked back over to the setting sun when it dawned on me that I'm always confessing something when I'm around Jagger. Aside from Farrah he was the only one I could open up to. Jagger was quiet until he cleared his throat, "So, what happened in New York?"

A harsh laugh escaped my mouth, "I clearly overestimated my talent for dance." I shake my head in disgust with myself. "I had taken too much time off from it. My lines and technique weren't what they used to be. Dance is fickle, it takes daily hard work and dedication to stay in the shape that's necessary to dance professionally. I just didn't have it anymore. The ABA put me on a waiting list because they said they could see my potential but there were too many others that were already prepared. I had to come home. Once I gathered my things from Farrah's I moved back into my parent's house, holding up my end of the bargain. It's been far from easy but last night at that charity event I realized I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't live in their world, going to all these lavish social events, plastering on fake smiles and pretending to be in love with a guy that cheats on me in darkened hallways."

Jagger reaches over and takes one of my hands in his. "You shouldn't have to settle for that life Londynn. You deserve to be treated like a queen because you should be in the eyes of the guy who loves you."

I give him a small smile before I continue with the story. "I tried to leave the event. I was just going to walk until I could call Sadie, but I didn't get away. Ryce heard me leaving. He chased me down and forced me into his car. I knew Ryce had a temper, but it had never gotten to this point before. Nothing I said or did got him to stop. It wasn't until I gave up that he did. When he pulled away, I knew I had to do what Farrah did. I had to get away from it all. I had noticed Harlyn's cross then and prayed for help and strength, then Ace pulled up and it was like a sign." Jagger had

gone very still and quiet since I mentioned Harlyn. "I'm sorry I didn't mean to open a wound."

"You didn't. I just always called her my angel and it looks like she still is. She watched out for the only other girl I could see myself being with. The girl I could actually settle down with and share a life with. Londynn," he said, taking my face in his hands and gently turning me to look at him. "I know I have a lot to make up for and to prove to you, but I will. I want to be the guy who saves you when you need it. I want to be the guy that you come to when you're happy or sad. I want to be the one who treats you like the queen you are. If you'll give me the chance, I'll prove I can be that guy for you."

I don't know when, but tears had formed in my eyes and silently escaped. I just nodded my head yes. Jagger pulled me into his arms and kissed the top of my head. He was careful not to touch the side of my face that was beaten. "You should stay at our place for the time being. I'll start looking for a place tomorrow."

I pulled back and shook my head. "I'll stay with y'all until Farrah gets back but I don't think we should move in together. That's too quick."

"Okay, maybe you're right but I'm still looking for my own place, so we'll have more privacy, and you can stay whenever you want."

I laughed, "Okay. Deal."

\*\*\*\*

Jagger

After Londynn had finished filling me in on what I had missed, and I had basically confessed I wanted her as my girlfriend. I'd pulled her into my arms, and we had sat

on the blanket and watched as the sun set and the city lights started to appear. It was starting to get late when we decided to head home. “So, is there anything else I should know that you haven’t tried, food wise?”

She giggled, and I couldn’t stop my heart rate from speeding up. That sound was one of my favorites in the world, “There’s a lot I wasn’t allowed to eat.”

“Good to know.” We were in the car, almost to the house when I noticed Londynn had been uncharacteristically quiet. “Is something wrong?”

She sighs, “Well, I don’t have any of my stuff. I don’t have pj’s or clothes or personal products. Kynlee is supposed to bring me some more stuff tomorrow.”

“Well, we can go to Wal-Mart on the way home if you want.” I mentally cringed at myself after offering because I had my doubts about Londynn even knowing what a Wal-Mart was let alone been in one. She shook her head no and just stared at the window. We drove in an uncomfortable silence for a while before it dawned on me that I hadn’t seen her purse, her cell phone or anything else. “Londynn?” She turned to look at me while we were stopped at a red light. “Do you not want to go because you don’t have money on you?”

“I never got my purse out of Ryce’s car, and I don’t want to go to my parents right now because their probably home. I’m going to try and get Creed to take me tomorrow while their out.”

I turn the car at the next intersection and head towards the store. “We’ll go and get enough stuff for tonight and tomorrow you can take my car, or I can go with you if you want and get your stuff from your parent’s.”

“You’d do that with me?” She asked sounding shocked.

“Of course. I wouldn’t want you to go by yourself in case Ryce was there. Besides you’ll need someone, so you can drive your car back if you’re bringing it.”

“I can pay you back tomorrow for whatever you spend tonight," she says quietly.

I laugh, “Absolutely not. I like to take care of my girl so I’m going to take care of you. It’s not a problem and you will not pay me back.” She started to argue but then decided against it.

\*\*\*\*

When we finally got back to the house it was full of people. It looked like everyone was here then I remembered it was Sunday evening which meant it was family game/movie night. Family night was something we had done every Sunday for as long as I could remember. I wish I had thought of it before, so I could have given Londynn a warning, she may not be up for everyone considering everything she’s been through in the last twenty-four hours. “Sorry I forgot about Sunday evenings being family night," I tell her with an apologetic smile.

“Family night?" she asks but when I look at her, I notice the smile she has now is the kind that says she’s in awe of the thought.

“Yeah, every Sunday for as long as I can remember we all get together and have dinner and then play board games or watch a movie. You have a family night?" I ask her.

She shakes her head no then stops. “Well, when Vivienne came to work for us, she started doing this kind of thing with Farrah and I on Wednesday. She’d order us pizza and make popcorn; you know that kind that is covered in greasy butter? Then we’d pile into her small living room and watch one of those old movies. She had this thing about all the classics like Audrey Hepburn and Vivienne Leigh. Those were our

family nights, but we never had one with our parents.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

“Well, who needs your parents when you had someone like Vivienne?” I tell her as I drape my arm around her shoulders and lead her into the house. As we enter, I can smell the pizza and spaghetti coming from the kitchen as well as laughter. We drop Londynn’s stuff off in my room then go to the kitchen to join in. Axell, Sadie, Bowie, Ace, Kynlee, Jovi and Creed are all crowded around the table playing Clue.

“He made it!” Bowie says looking up from the board.

I grab Londynn’s hand and head over to grab some food. I hand her a plate and tell her to help herself. She hesitates for a moment then decides to get a portion of spaghetti and a piece of pizza. I can’t help but smile, at least she’s comfortable here in this house, with my family, with me. It makes me happier than I thought it would.

After the game of Clue was finished, we made Root Beer floats. Londynn and I drug up two more chairs as we all sat down to play a game of Monopoly. By the time we were was finished it was getting late. Axell told Jovi to head to bed as Ace, Kynlee and Creed all left. I had noticed Creed talking to Londynn before leaving and it made me glad to know she still had some other good people in her life. Creed was definitely one of the good ones. Bowie stayed to help pick up the kitchen with Axell and I, while Sadie headed to take a shower since she had work tomorrow. Londynn came in and offered help, but our small kitchen was already crowded.

I found Londynn in my room sitting on the bed after we had finished cleaning the kitchen up. “You could have hopped in the shower,” I tell her as I take a seat next to her.

“I figured you guys all have school or work tomorrow so I’d let y’all go first,” she

tells me with a small smile.

Before I can stop myself, I lean forward and place a light kiss on her lips. I'm careful not to let myself get caught up because of her busted lip but even a light kiss with her leaves me a little breathless. "You're too good to be true."

"Not even," she says playfully pushing me away. "Now go take a shower."

Londynn returns to the room after her shower and I'm already comfortable in bed. She hesitates in the doorway, "I can sleep on the couch Jagger."

Propping myself up on my elbows I study her face to see what she's thinking. "Nonsense, there's plenty of room in this queen size bed but if you're not comfortable with us sleeping in the same bed then I can take the couch. It doesn't bother me."

She's shaking her head before I can even finish the sentence. "I don't mind sharing the bed with you I just...didn't want you to think it meant..."

She didn't want me to think it meant sex. I knew what she was thinking but I also knew that if you moved something too fast you could run the risk of ruining it and I had no intention of ruining this. "I didn't think that. Just sleep." I patted the empty side of the bed. "Come on Londynn."

Slowly she moves towards the bed and climbs in next to me. Her hair is still wet, and the sweet flowery smell fills my room. We lay there for a while and I'm sure she's asleep, but I hear her whisper in the dark. "Thank you, Jagger."

"Anything for you pretty girl," she lays her hand on my arm and I think about how right this all feels.

## Chapter 18

Londynn

Sounds from the kitchen woke me the next morning. I guess everyone else was getting ready to start their day. When I finally opened my eyes, I see Jagger still sleeping. He's lying on his back and my hand was resting on his bare chest. I could feel his even breathing. He looked much younger when he was asleep, but I missed seeing that smirk and his eyes. His hair was disarray and I had to resist the urge to run my fingers through it. It looks so thick and soft I was just about to give into the temptation when I felt his hand move. I hadn't realized that one of his hands was resting on my thigh. It felt nice.

Before I could move my hand, his eyes fluttered, and he looked at me. I was nervous about how I might look. Was my hair a mess? Did I have indentions from the pillow? Did I have morning breath? A smile broke across his face, "Good morning pretty girl." The sound of his sleepy voice was the best sound I'd ever heard. It was husky and thick with sleep. It was all kinds of sexy. He slightly shakes his head and releases a little laugh.

"What?" I ask, not sure what he thought was funny.

"I just didn't expect you to look this good in the morning too. I was completely unprepared." He thought I looked good in the morning then I remembered my bruised-up face and tried to hide it in the pillow, but he reached out and caught my cheek with his hand. "No don't do that."

I shake my head, "Don't do what?"

"You know what, don't hide from me. I'm here and I'm glad I am." He leans forward and gently kisses my lips. He lays back and stretches before turning back to me. "So,



I was thinking I'd run Jovi to school again then I can swing by and pick you up, so we can grab your stuff if that works for you."

I checked the time, but I knew it would still be too early to go to my house when he got done with Jovi. I wanted to avoid both my parents and in order to do that I had to wait until after ten. "It'll still be too early. It needs to be after ten."

"Okay, well I'll go to the shop and get some work in before then. I'll pick you up at ten sharp," he told me before sitting up on the side of the bed. I sit up as well as I watch the muscles in his back move while he stretches some more. He has a small cross tattoo in between his shoulder blades. Before I can think twice about it, I crawl to his side and trace the tattoo. I feel and hear his sharp intake of breath. "I got that one shortly after the...accident."

The cross was very intricate, and I knew he had gotten it for Harlyn and Harper. I thought it was a great way to remember them. "It's beautiful."

He clears his throat. "Thanks." He turns around to look at me for a moment before asking, "Do you have any tattoos?" I shake my head no. "You ever want one?"

I think about that for a moment. "Yeah, I'd like one, but I think I'd see the needle and run," I say laughing.

"I love hearing that laugh," he says before pulling me towards him and kissing me again only this time I run my fingers up into his hair. It's just as thick and soft as it looks. Jagger breaks away and lets out a breath. "Okay, now I have to go get ready or Jovi will be late."

\*\*\*\*

At ten o'clock exactly I see the steel blue Camaro pull back into the driveway. He

gets out and I take a moment to appreciate him as he walks up to the door. I notice that he always walks like he's in no hurry but there still some underlying purpose to his strides. His hair is fixed as normal and his aviator shades hide his amber eyes, but the shades suit him. His simple white t-shirt hugs all the muscles in his chest and biceps. The medium wash denim jeans are ripped on one knee and his Chuck Taylor's round out his outfit and it looks so good.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

He steps inside the house, and he slips his shades off when his eyes meet mine. I'm sure I'm blushing from where my thoughts were heading. Not to mention I'm sure he knows I was watching him. He smirks at me, "Are you ready to go?" I just nod in agreement and head towards him. Right before we step outside, he places his palms on the door in front of me. I'm caged in by his body and I can feel the body heat coming off him, the smell of his cologne engulfs me. Finally, I turn around to see his eyes staring intently at me. "I'm trying Londynn. I'm trying to be good. I'm trying to be the better guy, the one you think I am. I want to let you heal but when I know you're watching me..." He trails off, lets out a long breath and shakes his head. "You're making it really hard to behave, pretty girl." He places a kiss on the top of my head then reaches for the doorknob.

I step back so he can open the door but end up pressed against his chest. My heart is about to beat out of my chest, and I can barely breath. Before I even realize what I'm doing, I turn back to face him and give him the sexiest smile I can. "I never said anything about behaving, Jagger." Then I turn around and head for the car. I need the fresh air to clear my head. I'm pretty sure I hear Jagger chuckle behind me as I walk away.

Traffic is moving at a snail's pace, of course some band from the 80s was playing. The radio screen says it's Warrant, not a band I'm familiar with but the song isn't bad. I notice Jagger touch the screen and the music changes to Justin Bieber, I'm not sure why so I ask, "What's with the change?"

He shrugs, "I figured you were probably tired of listening to the 80s, so I thought I'd switch it to something you'd like."

I can't help but laugh, "That's sweet but I don't like Beiber."

"You don't?"

I shake my head, "No, Alivia does but not me. I mean I've listened to him and seen him in concert, but it was for her not me."

"Are you ever going to confront her about hooking up with Ryce?" He asks while changing the station back.

I let out a heavy sigh. "I don't know, her and Creed kind of have a thing right now. He's always liked her. He kind of has her on a pedestal and I don't want to hurt him. I think if he knew she'd hooked up with Ryce he'd think differently about her because he's not a fan of him and because she was supposed to be my best friend. I care about Creed, and I don't want to hurt him like that, you know?"

"I get that but doesn't not telling him also hold risks for him to get hurt?" Jagger asks. I give him a questioning look and he takes a minute before continuing. I think he's trying to decide if he should say anything or not. "Well, I mean you said he holds Alivia on a pedestal but he's not really holding her up there, he's just holding the image of what he thinks she's like. In reality though she's not that girl, so I would think that it would hurt worse for him to keep falling for her then find out it's all been a lie. Why not let him know the truth then if he still wants to pursue her at least he knows what he's going after? But that's just a thought," he says.

We continue through town in silence while I let his words sink in. He's right I do need to tell Creed. By not telling him I'm allowing him to get more tied up with someone who might not be right for him. I know Alivia for the most part has always been a great friend to me, but that night did happen. I've been trying to keep it under the rug but I'm not sure from whom now that I think about it. Was I hiding it to allow Alivia to keep her image? Was I really trying to protect Creed? Or could I just not

handle the truth about my, “best friend” and boyfriend? Whatever the reason I know I have to tell Creed now. He deserves to know then he can make his own decision on what to do with her from there. I’m so lost in thought that I barely notice the radio screen flashing a favorite artist alert. Jagger hits play and suddenly the car is filled with the sounds of Kings of Leon. I look over at him and he shrugs, “You said they were your favorite.”

I study him for a moment while my heart does that little fluttery thing it does sometimes when I’m around him. He remembered my favorite band, a band that I only mentioned once. I can’t think of anyone who has remembered that about me with the exception of Farrah, Alivia and Creed and that’s only because I listen to them all the time. I finally find my voice but even when I talk it comes out in a whisper of shock, “You remembered that?”

He lets out a small chuckle, “Well, yeah.”

Between deciding what to do with Creed and Jagger remembering my favorite band I hadn’t even noticed we were almost to my house until Jagger slowed and pulled into my driveway. I stare up at the house and it’s like I can already feel the unease coursing through my body. Jagger gets out and walks around the car, he holds his hand out for me. I notice the small shake in my hand from the anxiety building within me, Jagger must notice it to because he gives me a small smile. “If you want me to go in with you I will but it’s up to you. I don’t want to overstep my bounds.”

“You don’t mind coming in?”

He shakes his head, “No, not at all. I’d be happy to actually.” With that he shuts the car door and takes my hand in his and leads me to my front door. The only people that are here is the staff which is how I had planned. Once we’re in my room I give Jagger my smaller suitcase and ask him to pack all the stuff from the bathroom into it. I work on getting all my favorite clothes into the other suitcases. I’m packing up

pieces of my life but why? Where do I plan on living? I mean I planned on getting a place with Farrah but what if she doesn't want that? I feel my anxiety climbing even higher. By the time Jagger is finished in the bathroom I'm sitting on my floor by the bed with knees pulled up to my chest, rocking back and forth. I'm trying to calm down, but I can't seem to get there.

Jagger crosses the room and kneels in front of me. "Londynn...Londynn...hey look at me, okay? Londynn...you need to talk to me."

Finally, I look up at him and whisper, "I can't do this."

He nods his head, "Okay. Can you tell me why?"

I start to shake my head and feel the tears forming behind my eyelids, "Because what if I have no place to go when I leave?"

"Oh, pretty girl! You'll always have a place, if not with Farrah, then with me. Trust me though Farrah will be happy to have you." He pulls me into his arms and after a few minutes I feel myself start to calm. After a few more minutes I manage to get up from the floor and we continue packing. Once I've gotten everything I've come after, Jagger gathers my bags in his arms, and we head downstairs.

We're almost to the door when I hear, "Londynn Faith Parrish, what in the world do you think you're doing?" my father bellows from behind me.

I cringe before turning around to face him. "Father."

"You want to tell me why you thought you could sneak in here and take your things and sneak back out without me knowing?"

I level him with a stare. I will not let this man intimidate me. "Honestly, I figured

you'd be at work, you know with your secretary."

"I don't like that insinuation, Londynn."

I shrug. "Who said it was an insinuation?"

"See, this is why I didn't want you to start hanging out with all those criminals that your sister calls friends. Look what it's done to you," he said, motioning toward my appearance. It dawned on me that from where he stood, he couldn't see the side of my face Ryce had done the most damage to.

"Those criminals are more like family to me than you are!" My anger was boiling, and I was about one more insult away from losing it.

He let out a harsh laugh while he crossed his arms over his chest. "You're so young and naïve. Just like your mother!"

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

I shake my head vigorously in disagreement. “No! I’m not like either of you, and I never will be.”

“So, you’re going to pull a Farrah? You’re going to run all over town and disgrace our family name? Keep company with the James boys?” he says the last part like he’s disgusted and that’s what send me over the edge.

I glance back at Jagger, “Will you please take those to the car? I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Londynn, we had an agreement. If you didn’t make it into ABA, then you would come back here and live by our rules. In a few months you are expected to announce your engagement to Ryce, and you will do so,” my father says with a note finality in his voice.

\*\*\*\*

Jagger

I was going to leave like Londynn had asked until I heard her father telling her she would marry Ryce. Either her father didn’t know what kind of man Ryce really was, or he just didn’t care about his daughter’s wellbeing. Because any father who knew a man had hit his daughter would not want her to marry him. I step up beside Londynn and I see her look at me out of the corner of her eyes.

“I’m not marrying Ryce. I don’t know what to tell you and mom but that’s not happening. I’m moving in with Farrah and I’m going to live by my rules from now



on,” she says before turning to leave, she grabs my shirt and as she does, her father grabs her arm and spins her around to face him.

I know the moment he notices her face because he freezes then slowly releases his grasp on her. “What happened to your face?”

“You know I’d tell you, but you wouldn’t believe me anyways so what’s the point?” I see her glaring at him.

He turns on me before either of us have time to move. “You!” He yells pointing at me. “You did this to her!”

“No sir. I didn’t. I would never do this to anyone.”

Her father comes at me but Londynn jumps in front of him then she pushes him back. “He didn’t do this to me!” she yells back while motioning towards me. “Ryce did this to me on the side of a road after the charity ball! Ace, James Jagger’s brother found me, and they helped clean me up and what not.” Her dad’s face falls and Londynn steps towards him, “You want me to be with him so badly that you are blind to who he really is. He cheats and lies. He has anger issues...” she says motioning towards her face. “Obviously, but you and mom still insist on me being with him. He doesn’t love me, and I want that in life.”

She turns and leaves out the door. I go to follow her but then turn back to him. “Londynn is amazing and she deserves to be loved and taken care of. I may not be able to give her a house like this or an overly priced car, but I can love her. I can protect her, and I can give her what she deserves in life. I’ll give her everything I possibly can,” I tell him then turn to follow the girl that I just realized that I’m falling in love with.

Chapter 19

Jagger

After collecting Londynn's belongings, I dropped them off at the house while she went to get a cell phone. I watched as she drove off in her little red Audi. On my way back to work I couldn't help but keep thinking about what I said to her father. Then the realization that I was falling in love with her hit me all over again. I hadn't been in love in so long I didn't know how to be sure that I was this time. Was I just fascinated by her?

I don't know how long I had been under the car when Axell came and told me it was time to close up shop. I slid out from under the car and washed up. On my way home, I kept trying to figure out my feelings for her, but I wasn't getting anywhere. When I pulled into the driveway, I noticed Londynn's car parked on the side of the street. When I opened the door the smell of food hit me, and I remembered I had worked through lunch. Jovi was sitting at the coffee table working on homework which seemed odd because usually we had to fight with him to do his homework. He went to a private academy on a scholarship because he was so smart, but he just didn't care about it. "You're doing your homework already?" I asked stunned.

"Yeah! Londynn helped me and she has an idea for me to get Monrowe's attention, but she said I had to finish the homework before she'd take me to the store."

I hear her laugh and turn towards the kitchen doorway. I'm knocked speechless. She is standing there with her hair piled on top of her head in a pair of shorts and a Led Zeppelin t-shirt. "He even helped me cook."

"Londynn! Come on I have a reputation to keep."

I laugh this time. "Is that so?" Jovi just shrugs and goes back to working. I cross the room and pull Londynn towards me. "Something smells amazing," I say breathing her in.

“Oh! I’m making lasagna,” she says clueless.

I chuckle, “Yeah that smells good to, but I was actually referring to you,” I tell her while she looks up at me, I can see the blush creeping up her neck and filling her cheeks. She tip-toes and kisses me quickly on the lips.

“You need to go shower and then dinner should be ready.” She looks back at me over her shoulder and winks. Yeah, I’m screwed. This girl is going to own me, all of me. All day I had dwelled over the fact if I was in love with her or if I could even be but here was my answer. I was and I could. I hated the idea of not seeing her. I hated the idea of her with another guy. I just wanted to be enough to keep her, that was my biggest fear.

After dinner Londynn and Jovi left to go to the store to work on Operation Monrowe according to Jovi. I had to laugh. Sadie came out on the back porch and sat beside me., “It’s good to see you like this,” she tells me.

“Like what?” I ask.

She smiles when she turns to look at me, “Happy.”

I smirk, “I’ve been happy.

Sadie is shaking her head, “No, not like this. It’s been a while since I’ve seen that look in your eyes.”

“What look?”

She laughs, “Oh Jagger, don’t forget how well I know you.”

We sit in silence for a while, just watching the sun dip lower into the sky until it disappears completely. Something about it disappearing reminds me of Harlyn and before I know it, I turn to Sadie. “Is it wrong?”

She looks at me confused, “Is what wrong?”

I run a hand through my hair then down my face while releasing a heavy sigh. I haven’t openly talked about this...with anyone...ever. “To feel this way. I mean why should I get to feel this way when Harlyn is...dead?”

Sadie reaches for my hand, “Oh Jagger. It’s fine to feel this way. You’re allowed to move on. You’re allowed to be happy. You’re allowed to live. Besides, that was five years ago, and a lot can happen five years ago.” I give her a questioning look. “You two were so young when you met, and you guys were thrown a curve ball when the two of you got pregnant. I mean it was a blessing, but it wasn’t expected. Who knows where you two would be today if the accident hadn’t happened.”

I think about it for a minute, but it sounds like Sadie is saying that what Harlyn and I had wasn’t real and a part of me feels really angry about that. “Are you saying we were too young for it to be real?”

“Oh goodness! No! I’m just saying that a lot can change in a year let alone five years. Hell, Axell and I aren’t even the same couple we were five years ago. We have gone

throughso much, stuff that none of you know about. As individuals we are constantly growing, constantly changing. But sometimes while we grow as individuals we don't grow as a couple. As a couple we grow apart, I'm not saying that would have happened, I'm just saying it's possible. You act as if you aren't allowed to have a life Jagger and it's just not true. It's not bad, it's not hurting her memory to live your life. I'm pretty sure that she would have wanted it."

"You know for the past five years the memories have been so clear, so vivid that it feels just like yesterday. At least until I met Londynn, when I'm with her I feel a sort of freedom that I haven't felt in so long. I mean I can't forget Harlyn or Harper but it's like I can take a deep breath," I tell Sadie and realize I probably sound like a crazy person.

She gives me a smile. "You have loved and lost so much. Much more than most people your age. It has made you wisebeyond your years. I think losing your mom hit you and Ace the hardest. I mean Axell and Bowie were both older and kind of have had their time with her. I'm sure no amount of time was enough, but they had more time with her than the two of you. And Jovi well he was still a baby in so many ways. You and Ace though, you were both still at that age where you could use her wisdom. Then you found Harlyn and it's like it eased your pain, but I think the loss of both have created this heaviness in your heart and soul that is unnecessary. I hope someday you can let go," she sighs, "Now if I could only get Ace to listen to me."

As her words sink in, I can't help but think that maybe she is right. I mean Ace and I were still really close to our mom when she passed away. I met Harlyn shortly after that and maybe I used her and our relationship as a distraction from the real pain I was feeling. Then when I lost Harlyn I had run because I was so full of grief that it felt like the only way to breathe. It was like that part of me was healing when I was with Londynn.

Sadie was right about Ace though; he had always been the closest to our mom. I

remember when she first started chemo and she got too weak to get out of bed. Ace would run from the bus stop to our house, pour a glass of lemonade because it was her favorite then grab one of her favorite books and climb into bed and read to her. He'd be in there reading to her for hours. Dad would finally get home from work and make Ace leave the room and go do his homework. He did this same thing every day until one day we had come home from school and when he ran into the bedroom, the bed was empty. Mom had passed away, but dad hadn't had time to notify us before we got home from school. Instead of our mom we had found dad sitting on the bed crying like a baby. Ace had never been the same after that day and it made me wonder if that was why he kept Kynlee at an arm's length.

I heard the car doors shut and Sadie excused herself right before Jovi came barreling through the back door to show me his new haircut, outfit and the rest of Operation Monrowe. When he went inside Londynn stepped outside onto the small porch. "Hey there pretty girl."

She smiles at me, and my heart rate picks up. "Hey there handsome."

I reach for her hand, "Oh I like the sound of that." I pull her into my lap and kiss her lips lightly, careful not to hurt the portion that's still healing. "How did Jovi afford all that stuff for Operation Monrowe?"

"You mean the butterscotch candy?" she asks.

"No, I mean all of it. The clothes, the hair and that little set up to impress her."

She shrugs, "I paid for it. It's not a big deal."

"But it is. I don't want you here for your money and I don't want you to feel like that. I want you here because I don't want you anywhere else," I tell her while staring into those hazel eyes, the ones I could get lost in forever.

“Jagger Ray James you are so much more than I ever could have hoped for,” she says, placing a kiss on my forehead. “I wouldn’t want to be any other place either, but Farrah called while we were shopping, she’ll be back tomorrow.”

I tighten my arms around her, “So you’re leaving me?”

“Well, we are going to get a two-bedroom place together but I’m not actually leaving you,” she says laughing.

“Fair enough. So, what exactly is Operation Monrowe?”

“Well, you know Jovi has a major crush on her, so I asked him if he knew something she liked, and he said she loved butterscotch candy. So, we bought those and were going to place a candy with a note in her locker. The note will have one thing he likes about her. Then when he’s ready he can tell her he’s thesecret admirer and she’ll be super impressed.” She says with a dreamy look in her eyes.

I chuckle, “You sure about that?”

“Yes! I would have loved something like that when I was their age.”

I notice her shiver as the breeze picks up. “Come on let’s go inside.” I take her hand and lead her inside.

\*\*\*\*

Londynn

It’s late but I can feel the restlessness coming off Jagger in waves. I’ve been trying to sleep but it’s hard when I know he can’t. I feel like maybe it’s something I’ve done so I give up and roll over to face him. “Jagger?” It’s dark in the room but there is a little

moonlight breaking through the blinds. I feel Jagger switch from his back to his side.  
“What’s wrong?”



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

“What makes you think something’s wrong?” he asks.

A small breathy laugh escapes before I can stop it. “Oh, I don’t know maybe because I can sense how restless you are. You know you can talk to me, right?”

“Yeah, I know that. There’s just a few things bothering me.”

“Then talk to me Jagger.” I encourage him while silently hoping he’ll open up to me. We both seem to have this bad habit of keeping things bottled up inside. I want that to become an old habit. I want us to be open with one another, I want us to know we can rely on one another.

He sighs, “Well, for starters I would feel better if you’d let me pay you back for the money you spent on Jovi.”

I shake my head because the idea seems silly to me. I have more money in my trust fund than every single person currently in this house. I spent very little on Jovi in comparison. I don’t really know what the big deal is. “Why?”

, “Because your whole life is changing right now. The last thing you need to worry about is spending money on my little brother and his crush,” he says, and I can see him shaking his head in the shadows of the room.

I prop myself up on my elbows, “Jagger I did it in the name of love,” I tell him with a laugh. “Besides money has never really been an issue for me, you know that.”

He sighs, and he brings a hand up to cup my non-damaged cheek. “I know it hasn’t in

the past but who knows now since you've moved out of your parents' house."

"You know, you never asked me what I did today while you were at work," I tell him knowing that in some ways it will create a curiosity in him.

"What did you do today?" He asks, and I can hear the curiosity in his voice already.

I laugh again because his voice sounds so young and innocent when it's full of curiosity. "I called Farrah and asked her what I should do next? She told me to move my trust fund to a different account or bank that only I'd have access to. So, I did. I still have my money now it's just deciding what to do with my life since I won't become a professional ballerina any time soon. So, is that what's been bothering you?"

I feel him shrug then sigh. "That's some of it."

"What else?"

"I don't know I guess I'm just stressed about finding my own place and everything," he tells me but I'm not sure I really believe him. There seems to be something more bothering him. It seems like something much more emotional and darker than just stressing over finding a place of his own. I want to push it, but I guess for the time being I just have to hope he'll open up later. We still have a lot to learn about each other and I guess the trust will grow as time goes on. I hope sometime soon he feels comfortable enough to tell me things but for now I'll let it go.

"You know you don't have to get a place of your own, right?" I ask him because I don't want him to feel like he has to do something to impress me.

"I know but I want to. I miss having my privacy and I'm sure at some point were going to want some privacy," he says with a laugh.

I give him the most questioning look I can manage even though I know what he's referring to and it immediately sent my body into a wave a heat. Finally, I ask, "Privacy? For what?" but before I know it, he's flipped me over onto my back and is on top of me.

I let out a startled squeal from the sudden change. I'm laughing while he starts to trail kisses up and down my neck. "See that squealing is why we need privacy."

He kisses me lightly on the lips, but I bury my hands in his hair and deepen the kiss. I pull back, "The squeal was from the surprise attack, but I can be quiet," I tell him a little breathless.

"Oh, can you?" he says in a teasing tone before bringing his lips back to mine. I'm lost in his kiss before I can reply. The butterflies in my stomach are going crazy and I feel lightheaded. I can feel his kiss in every part of my body. I could stay here like this all night.

He moves his lips down my neck and across my collarbone, the heat from his breath setting my already heated skin on fire. His feather soft kisses leave a trail of goosebumps across my skin and a desire growing in the pit of my stomach. He moves up to my ear lobe and pulls it lightly between his teeth causing me to arch my back so that I'm pressing against his bare chest. "Good girl. You can be quiet," Jagger whispers in my ear, his voice is raspy like he's fighting for control of his body just as much as I am. His lips trail back down my neck to my chest. His amber colored eyes lock with mine.

When I finally come back down from the high, he's right beside me. He presses a soft kiss to my mouth, "You're amazing" He whispers before rolling over to his side of the bed, but he pulls me with him. My head coming to rest on his chest which is slick with sweat, I can still hear his heartbeat as it returns to normal. I've never experienced anything like that before. I'm completely ruined because nothing will

ever compare to Jagger James.

## Chapter 20

Jagger

Londynn's stirring wakes me up, looking down I see her curled up next to my side, her head lying on my chest. I run my hand over my face, I hadn't meant to let things get carried so far last night but once I had started kissing her, I found myself unable to stop. I can still feel her everywhere. Being with Londynn was like nothing I had felt since Harlyn. I haven't been celibate over the last five years, hell I had been far from that, but nothing had ever felt like last night.

I run a hand through her honey-colored hair. I can feel her breath on my skin, but I watch the rise and fall of her back anyways. If I was worried about my feelings for her before last night, then I knew I was screwed now. There was no denying that I loved her which would be fine, but I couldn't help but feel like eventually it'd all end. She wouldn't be satisfied with the mediocre life. No matter what I did I wouldn't be able to provide for her like she was used to and that made me think that eventually she'd get tired. When she got tired, she'd leave and it'd hurt like hell. I already knew what it was like to love and lose, I wasn't sure I could survive that again.

Londynn stirs again and I hear a small sigh escape her mouth. Her dark hazel eyes look around before coming to rest on mine. A small smile comes across her face. "Good morning boyfriend." She says quietly. The minute she says it I know I've gone too far. I can't go back, and I don't want to. I love this girl and it might kill me when she leaves but for the time being I'm going to enjoy this.

"Good morning pretty girl," I tell her while brushing a piece of stray hair from her face. A blush creeps across her cheeks before leaning down to kiss me. "I could get use to this," I tell her.

She giggles, “Me too.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

A knock on the door reminds us that we're not alone. I drop my head back on pillow and let out a frustrated growl. "I swear I'm getting my own place," I whisper to her. Another knock comes from the door, "What?" I holler.

"Are you taking me to school?" I hear Jovi ask through the door.

I look at Londynn and the way the stray rays of sunlight coming through the blinds makes her hair shine and catches the smoothness of her tan skin. I want to tell Jovi no, but I know I can't. Besides I need some space to get control of myself and my emotions. "I should take him," I tell her while smiling apologetically. She smiles and nods. I lean up and kiss her again before telling Jovi yes. , "You have plans for today?" I ask her.

"Yeah, I have to go see Farrah since she's getting back today, and I have a therapy session." I notice she glances away when she mentions therapy, but I don't want it to be something she's ashamed of.

I cross the room while pulling my t-shirt over my head. "You want me to go with you?" I offer her. She shakes her head no which I expected. "I'm proud of you."

"For what?"

"For sticking with something that isn't the easiest thing. I'm sure going to therapy and talking about all of your feelings and emotions isn't the easiest thing, but you do it. It makes me so proud for you and of you," I explain to her.

She sits up and wraps her arms around my neck. "As if last night didn't seal the deal

you had to go and say all the right things. I can't wait until later," she tells me before she starts kissing me. All too soon Jovi is knocking on my door again. She pulls away and I want to protest but she tries to push me from the bed. "Go boyfriend."

I chuckle and before I make it to the door, I glance back at her. She's lying back on the bed, and I've never seen a more beautiful vision. "I like that pet name."

A huge smile breaks across her face. "Good! I do too!" she exclaims with a wink in my direction.

"I'll see you after work pretty girl. If you get bored stop by later." I open the door because I know if I don't then I'll never get out of this bedroom.

\*\*\*\*

On the way to school Jovi couldn't sit still and then I remembered that he was going to be starting his Operation Monrowe. "You okay man?"

He wipes his palms on his jeans. "Yeah, I'm just nervous."

As I pull into a parking spot, I rest a hand on Jovi's shoulder and give him a little squeeze. "Don't be nervous Jovi. You're a great guy, one of the best I know. You're smart and you're a James boy so don't you worry about anything."

"There she is," he whispers in awe. I follow his eye line and see a petite auburn-haired beauty. Her hair lay's in long soft curls and her blue eyes shine from across the parking lot. I can see what Jovi sees in her.

I look over at my little brother and see the fascination on his face and I can't help but laugh. "You're in trouble little brother."

He whips his head back towards me, "What? Why?"

"Because I know that look all too well." I see a look of worry come across his face. "It's okay. You're a James boy so being in trouble is inevitable. Now, get out and go to school and start this Operation Monrowe."

He's already out of the car when he leans back in, "Thanks Jagger."

I just nod as I watch my little brother cross the parking lot and disappear into the building. When I pull into the shop's parking lot, I can't help but wonder what Londynn is up to right now. "Good morning little brother!" I hear Bowie holler from across the shop as I enter. I just shake my head and wave. I go into Axell's office, "I should be done with Mr. McAvoy's car today."

"Good. I'm sure he'll be happy to get it back," he tells me without looking up from the paperwork.

I stand there for a little longer, but I might as well be invisible. "Everything okay Ax?"

He takes a deep breath before looking up. "Yeah, just had a little argument with Sadie this morning. Fighting with her always throws my day off."

"Well don't sweat it. I'm sure it'll all be okay. If anyone is meant to be together it's you and Sadie," I tell him and offer a smile before turning around to leave. I work all morning on finishing up the car I was working on. The feeling of being watched is what caught my attention. I roll out from under the car to see Londynn leaning against the tool cabinet. "Enjoying the view?"

"More than you know," she says while biting on her bottom lip. She holds up a bag of fast food. "I brought lunch."



“Let me wash up and then we can go eat somewhere,” I tell her but just as I’m about to walk away I turn back and lean down kissing her coconut glossed lips. “Sorry I couldn’t resist.” I hear her giggle as I walk away.

\*\*\*\*

Londynn

Shortly after everyone had left to start their days, I get up to start mine. I wondered around the room trying to figure out what was Jagger’s or what belonged to one of his brothers. My phone starts ringing, and I see Farrah’s picture bouncing around. “Hello.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

“Londynn! I’m back!” Farrah exclaimed into the phone. “Meet me at my place ASAP! I have an idea for us.”

“Okay let me get dressed and I’ll be there,” I tell her while heading to my suitcases. I pull out a pair of medium wash distressed jeans and baby pink crocheted baby doll top. I have to search for my white tank to go under but eventually I find it. I slip on a pair of white sandals to go with it. Grabbing my purse and sunglasses I head out to meet Farrah.

As I pull up to Farrah’s condo, I hear the music coming from inside. She must be in a good mood. Before I could even ring the doorbell, she has flung the door open and pulled me into a hug. “Londynn! I’ve missed you!”

I laugh, “I’ve missed you too.”

She pulls me inside and looks at me. I instantly see the change in her face. The happiness is gone. Now, she’s angry. “I’m going to kick Ryce’s ass! You just wait.”

“You might have to get in line.”

She shakes her head, “I’m sorry you shouldn’t have had to go through this.”

“It’s okay. I mean not really but it did get Jagger back here and we did kind of get together,” I say with a small smile.

She laughs, “I knew it! I knew you and Jagger were going to become more.”

“How did you know?” I ask her as she pulls me into the bedroom where she’s still unpacking.

“Are you kidding? I’ve only seen him look at one other girl the way he looks at you. Harlyn. And we all know what she meant to him. I knew it was only a matter of time before he lost that battle,” she says, as she flies around the room putting things away.

I have a feeling that Farrah is right but at the same time there is still something that bothers Jagger. I can feel it but until he decides to tell me I won’t know what that is. “Well, I guess we’ll see how it goes.”

“Yes, I’m sure it will. So how was it?” she asks.

I give her a questioning look. “How was what?”

“Oh please! You know exactly what I mean. I know that being with Jagger has to be better than being with Ryce in every single way.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Well, you are right about that. Anyways, you said you had an idea about where we could live when you called.”

“I did, and I do. I think I should put this place up for rent. There’s a two bedroom that’s opened up on the other side. We could split the down payment if you want,” she says coming to a stop in front of me.”

I jump up and hug her, “Yes! I’d love that!”

“Good. I got the number. I’ll go call then see what we need to do. Did you move your money like I told you to?” She asks while waiting for someone to answer the phone.

I nod, “Yes. I did.” She nods her head then walks to turn down the music. While she

talks about our new place, I try to keep from thinking about Jagger and how all my dreams seem to be coming true.

Farrah returns, and her look is quizzical, "What are you thinking about?" I shake my head, but she keeps teasing me until finally I break down.

"Fine! I was just thinking about how all my dreams are coming true."

"What about being a ballerina and the ABA and what not?" she asks.

I shrug. "I think maybe that was a childish dream. Kind of how I use to dream about being a mermaid but Jagger...Jagger's real. He's the dream that can come true, for someone to love me for me, someone who supports me regardless of everything. Remember when we use to sit around and dream about being an adult and in love. Starting a family and just being happy. Well, that's a dream I could actually achieve...with Jagger."

Farrah smiles at me but I can see the tears shining in her eyes. "I was so worried you were going to keep trying to be little miss perfect that you'd end up like mom. I didn't want you to end up medicated or unhappy. I love seeing you so happy Londynn."

"Good I love being this happy. I never knew Jagger James would be my dream come true, but he is," I tell her, and I swear my heart has grown in size and I didn't even know that it was possible. I get up from her bed, "Let me know about the place when you find out. I'm going to go get myboyfriendsome lunch then head over to therapy."

Farrah laughs, "I bet you make Dr. Thorton's job a lot easier now. I'll see you later and fill you in on my vacay with Connor," she says wagging her eyebrows at me.

I laugh while shaking my head, "I'm sure that will be TMI but okay. I'll see you

later.” I was sitting in traffic when I realized I didn’t actually know what Jagger’s favorite food was or what he liked on his burger or if he had food allergies. I was frustrated with myself that I didn’t know these things. However, when I pulled into the drive-thru I reminded myself that we were still new. I shouldn’t know everything yet, just because he emotionally made me feel like I had known him forever, I hadn’t.

I felt better by the time I pulled into the shop. I quickly found Jagger under a car. He must have sensed me watching him because he slid out pretty soon. Damn, he looked good. I couldn’t help but feel that flutter in my stomach every time I sees him. Flashes of last night ran back into my head and I felt the blush starting to form. When he turned back and kissed me briefly, I had to control myself to keep from burying my hands in his head of hair and begging for more.

Now were sitting outside on this worn picnic table. “Thank you so much for lunch. I didn’t realize how late it had gotten.”

## Page 36

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

“You’re welcome,” I tell him with a smile. “So, I was thinking today when I went to get this food that I didn’t know if you had any food allergies or even your favorite food...”

He chuckles, “No food allergies and my favorite food is a bacon cheeseburger, but I do like tater tots better than fries.”

“Good to know,” I tell him, and he looks up at me and I can see him studying me before he speaks.

“You know I think we should go on a date,” he announces.

“A date?” I ask, and he just nods. “Aren’t we a little past the dating phase.”

He reaches over and traces my cheek bone with his thumb. “No were never past that pretty girl.”

“Okay. When is this date going to happen?” I ask him.

“How about tomorrow?” I must make a face because he asks, “What’s wrong with tomorrow?”

“Remember when I told you that Farrah had an idea about our living situation. Well, she found us a two bedroom and she was going to see if we could move in tomorrow, so I was actually hoping I could use these muscles of yours,” I tell him while attempting to wrap a hand around his bicep.

“You guys already found a place?” He asks sounding a little disappointed.

I nod but I can tell something is bothering him. “That’s good right? I mean I’ll be out of your hair soon.”

He takes my face in his hands. “You are never in my hair and if you are I want you there but yes you can borrow my muscles. We’ll do the date later this week.” Then before I can speak, he’s kissing me but there seems to be something desperate and passionate about it. I feel my body start to tingle all over and before we get carried away, I pull back and stand up.

“I have a therapy session. I’ll see you at home boyfriend,” I tell him before walking away.

“Wait! So, you just eat, take advantage of me then leave?” He hollers at me.

I turn back and see that trouble making smile on his face and I shake my head. “Take advantage of you, why Mr. James you should be so lucky,” I tell him before blowing him a kiss and heading to my car.

## Chapter 21

### Londynn

When I pulled into Spirit, I was unsure of how the session would go. However, it was clear that by the end of it that Dr. Thorton was very happy with me. He said I had grown more in the last month than ever before. It made me feel like I could take my first deep breath. I knew a lot of the changes had to do with Jagger, he made me happy and free. As I was heading back to the car Farrah called to let me know that we were all set to move into the new place tomorrow. It was bittersweet. I loved being in Jagger’s arms at night, his arms keeping me warm and inhaling his smell but at the

same time I knew I couldn't stay there forever. It was too soon for us to more or less live with one another. Not to mention he already had to share the house with other people, but I would miss him at night.

As I pulled up to Jagger's family's house, I knew I now faced a new dilemma. How to get the rest of my things from my parent's place to the one I would now be sharing with Farrah. I didn't want a run in with my parents. I mean I loved them, I always would but being around them set my anxiety into fits and I just couldn't deal with that right now. I did the last thing I knew to do. Reluctantly I scrolled through my contacts until I saw his name. He answered on the fifth ring, and he sounded like he was out of air.

"This better be good..." He said.

"I need a favor and hoping you won't be an ass about it," I told him then held my breath while waiting for his answer.

After what seemed like forever he finally spoke, "I don't do favors."

I released the air I had been holding. "You know you use to be a good person. You used to do anything for me, for Farrah too. What happened to that guy?"

I hear what sounds like sheets rustling and a sliding glass door opening then closing. "You sound happy."

"I am. Farrah and I are getting are own place and I'm seeing Jagger now."

A hard, sarcastic laugh comes through the phone. "I knew that James brother was into you. I think I can guess your favor since you're getting your own place with Farrah. You need your things collected."



“Yes, I do. Please,” I plead with him.

I hear him sigh then finally he said, “Fine. I’ll go first thing in the morning. Text me the address of where they should be delivered.”

“Thank you!” I exclaim. “I’ll send you the information now.”

“And Londynn?” He pauses to make sure I’m paying attention. “I’m only doing this because you sound happy, and I think it’s good for you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

The phone goes dead, and I instantly text him the information before I can forget. As I'm heading inside, I see Creed appear in the backyard next door. I pass the front door and go to the side gate. When he sees me, he smiles then heads my direction, but I'm reminded of what Jagger said about telling Creed the truth about Alivia. Suddenly, I don't feel like talking. I mean how exactly are you supposed to break into one of your best friends that the girl he's basically in love with isn't who he thinks she is?

"Londynn! I wondered when I would see you," Creed says jumping over the fence and into the James' back yard. He pulls me in for a hug.

I hug him back. "I know, you're right next door but things have been crazy."

He examines my face. "Yeah, I bet. That's healing pretty well."

"Did you know about this?" I ask him motioning toward my face.

Creed stuffs his hands in his pockets and shrugs. "I heard but when I ran into Axell the other day and he confirmed it. I texted you, but you never replied so I just figured you needed time."

"Oh no! I totally forgot to send out my new number. That night I left my phone in Ryce's car and I didn't want to deal with him to get it back, so I just got a new one. I'm so sorry Creed. I would have answered you if I'd had my phone," I explain.

"That's good to know. Are you going to the races this week?"

That was a good question. I wasn't sure if I was going. I mean I hadn't planned on

going until my face was fully healed but if Jagger wanted to go and he wanted me there then yes, I'd go. I guess I'd just have to play it by ear. "I don't know yet. Maybe, if Jagger wants me there."

"So, you and Jagger, huh?" he asks wagging his eyebrows up and down.

I slap him on his arm. "I swear you're horrible."

Creed checks his watch then looks up to give me an apologetic smile. "Sorry I have to run. I need to meet Alivia we kind of have a lunch date but let's hang out soon."

"Yes lets. You have fun," I tell him as he hugs me goodbye. I watch as he leaves and wonder if I'm letting him make a huge mistake.

\*\*\*\*

Jagger

The next morning, I wake to the smell of pancakes and coffee. As I slowly make my way to the kitchen, I see Londynn standing at the stove making breakfast. She was dancing around to some song on the oldies station. Her hair is down and loose and almost all of her legs are visible in her white shorts. I can see the small muscles in her arms working thanks to the navy blue and white chevron stripped tank top she's wearing. I close the distance between us and wrap my arms around her waist. As I pull her back towards me, I take a deep breath. She always smells of flowers. "Good morning pretty girl. It smells delicious in here."

"Morning boyfriend. I figured I'd make you breakfast since I'll be taking advantage of you today." She says with a giggle. "I'm making chocolate chip pancakes. They always smell the best."

“Yeah, that too but I was thinking I liked the smell of flowers,” I say with a wink running my nose over her shoulder. “And you can take advantage of me anytime.”

Londynn turns around in my arms to face me, looping her arms around my neck. “Is that so?” I just nod before she reaches up to kiss me. We get lost in one another instantly. It isn’t until we smell the pancake burning that we pull away from one another. “Thank you for helping me today but I’m sorry you have to miss work.”

I shrug while pouring us coffee. “It’s okay. Besides I don’t really need to work when I race every week.”

“Do you ever lose?” she asks, placing the plates in front of our chairs.

I laugh out loud at that question. I remember a time when I lost every damn race I entered. “I lost a lot in the beginning, but I learned pretty quickly. I haven’t lost since except for when I was new in Vegas. I didn’t really know the streets or anything when I first started there. It was a disadvantage.”

“I never thought about any of that, but I guess it’s kind of like knowing your stage when you’re dancing,” she tells me, and I notice the look of sadness in her eyes before she covers it up with that trained smile of hers.

“Yeah, I guess it is,” I tell her. We eat in silence then head over to the new condo that Londynn and Farrah will be sharing. It dawns on me when we’re about a block away that Londynn only has a few of her clothes and personal items. She has no furniture or anything to put in her room. , “Londynn, do we need to go get your furniture and stuff from your parents?” I ask her.

She shakes her head. “No, I’m just going to buy my own furniture and I have someone getting the rest of my clothes, pictures, books and stuff like that.”

She points to an empty parking space, and I pull into it. As I put the car in park Londynn jumps out and heads over to a small, rented U-Haul. I see her hugging someone and when I get out, I realize it's Duke Parrish. Duke is taller than Londynn but not by much, but his hair is the same color as hers. However, he has Farrah's blue eyes. I've never been a fan of Duke, mostly because he's always been friends with Ryce. I notice Duke studying Londynn as I walk towards them. Farrah meets me halfway when we stop in front of them, I notice Duke's busted lip.

"So, I guess the rumors are true, you and my little sister," he says in a voice that I think is meant to intimidate me but it doesn't work.

"Yeah. You have a problem with that?"

We stare each other down for a minute. No one says anything or even moves but finally he tells me, "As long as you never do anything like this to her, I don't have a problem." He says while motioning to her face.

"I would never do anything like that to her," I reply.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

Duke nods then Farrah asks, “What the hell happened to your lip?” He reaches up and rubs his lip almost like he’s forgotten it was busted. However, his knuckles look worse than his lip. They are busted and bruised. Farrah being Farrah doesn’t miss a beat, “Duke seriously what the hell?” she exclaims as she grabs his hand to examine it.

“It’s not a big deal,” he says.

“Not a big deal, you’re kidding right?” Londynn asks him.

He sighs heavily. “I’ve been seeing this woman who turned out to be married, her husband found out. Trust me it’s not that bad. You should see him.”

Londynn pulls him in for a hug. “Oh Duke. When are you going to learn? You’re so much better than this.”

He laughs but I can see that her words hit a nerve. “Well, let’s get you unpacked.”

After a few hours and with the help of Creed, Ace, Bowie, Axell, Kynlee, Farrah, Londynn and I, the girls are officially moved into their new place. Everyone heads out to do whatever they had planned on doing to begin with while I go looking for Londynn. I find her lying in the floor looking up at the ceiling. I walk over and lay down beside her. Her slim hand slips into mine. “Thank you again Jagger. I was thinking, it’s late and I’m tired so would it be okay if I stay with you tonight? I can go shopping for furniture tomorrow.”

“That’s fine,” I tell her. Even though something is really bothering me. She asked

Duke to collect her stuff from her parents instead of just asking me to go with her. For some reason that kind of hurt even if I don't want to admit it. It's like she's ashamed of me, almost like she doesn't want to be seen with me in that part of her world. I'm in love with this girl but I have to wonder if I'll ever be enough. I mean she asked her brother who she's never seemed to close to over me.

## Chapter 22

### Londynn

Jagger and I had grabbed dinner before going back to his place. He had been pretty quiet, and I could tell something was really bothering him. He got this little line between his eyebrows whenever that happened. I wanted to ask him about it, but he didn't seem too talkative, so I didn't. It wasn't until after our showers and we were lying in the bed in an uncomfortable silence that I decided to try and get him to talk to me. "Jagger?"

"Yeah."

I take a deep breath and decide to jump head first. "I know something is bothering you, but I wish you would talk to me."

He wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me into his chest. I don't stop him because in all honesty it's where I want to be, but I also know it's his way of avoiding the question. "I'm fine. I'm sorry if I made you feel like that." It's a lie. I know it's a lie, but I let myself believe it for now. The minute I close my eyes I'm asleep.

\*\*\*\*

I didn't see Jagger at all yesterday. I had went shopping for the furniture, got it delivered then applied for a couple of jobs. Nothing major but until I could figure out

how to start my own dance studio, I needed something to fill my time. They were just a couple small fashion boutiques, but I was kind of excited about the idea of getting my own job. My furniture had arrived late in the day, Farrah and Connor had helped me set everything up. Once everything was finished, I messaged Jagger, but he said he had to work late.

I was on my way to see Jagger this morning when I got a call from an unsaved number. Turns out I got one of the jobs. I was ecstatic. When I pulled into the parking lot of the body shop, I jumped out and jogged inside. I said hi to Bowie and Axell as I passed them. Finally, I found Jagger working on a custom paint job, I waited until he was done. Jagger noticed me as soon as he stepped out of the room. "Hey pretty girl."

"Hey! I've got news!" I exclaim. He raises his eyebrows in question. "I got a job!"

"Really?" He asks but the shock in his voice hurts.

I scoff, "Is that so shocking?"

He shakes his head. "No, I just didn't know you were looking."

I roll my eyes out of bad habit. "Well, if we had talked yesterday, I would have told you but you seemed to be avoiding me."

"I'm not avoiding you, Londynn. I had to work late, I told you that," he replies sounding exasperated.

"Yeah, I remember that excuse." I mumble.

He runs a hand through his hair while sighing. "Please don't start being difficult."

"Well, I'm sorry if my wanting to be with you and share my news is being difficult.



I'll just go," I tell him as I turn around and head for my car.

Jagger's hand grabs my arm before I make it two steps. "I never said you had to go."

I watch as some internal battle wages behind those amber eyes of his. Whatever is happening right now is linked to whatever was bothering him the other night. I stand in silence for a minute to see if he'll start talking but he doesn't. Instantly my defenses go up. "No, you didn't but to avoid the difficulty I figure it's for the best," I tell him then yank my arm from his grip. As I walk back to my car, I refuse to look over my shoulder to see what he's doing.

Once I'm in my car I find myself driving without really paying attention. Before I know it, I'm pulling into the cemetery. I park by Vivienne's row and head over to her grave. Sometimes you just need to talk. I take a seat beside her. "I'm sorry I didn't bring you any flowers," I tell her about New York and ABA, giving the life my parents wanted a chance, how Ryce and I had finally ended and how Jagger and I had become. I explained about moving out and getting a place with Farrah and how I had gotten a job. This was not how I saw today going. I had been so happy this morning and it changed so quickly.

"I don't know what to do now. I want to be with him. Actually, I've never wanted anything more, but he won't open up to me. I mean once in a blue moon I see a glimpse of him, he'll let that guard down and let me in but then it's like he realizes what he's done, and hits reverse. You know, you used to tell me real love is confusing and complicated. I never got it when I was with Ryce, but I get it now. The races are tonight, and I know he's going but if things are going to be like this then I don't want to go, even for him. Is that horrible?" I ask Vivienne's headstone. After a few more confessions I get up and dust myself off.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

As I'm heading back to my car, I notice the fresh daises on a grave. I make my way over and notice its Harlyn and Harper's. I stand there a moment, unsure of what to do. Finally, I decide it couldn't hurt so I squat down. "Hey Harlyn, hey Harper. I know you guys didn't know me, but I feel like I'm in a competition with you guys right now. I don't mind because I think in some way, I can understand it but I can't understand him especially when he refuses to let me in. It makes me wonder if it's just who he is or is it something to do with me? You know, I love him, I really do but I'd trade that if you guys could be here with him because I think then maybe that'd erase that look of pain in his eyes. I think maybe he would be a different Jagger if you were still here."

"I know the James' brothers have these reputations and images and maybe they suit them to an extent but under those bad ass exteriors they are really decent guys. I don't think people really get to see that side of them but it's there. I've noticed it with Axell and Ace. Jagger too, in brief moments but I feel like I'm the only one trying right now. Maybe, I'm just naïve. Maybe this is just how relationships are and I don't have enough experience to understand it. I don't want to walk away but I don't want to fight all the time either," I sigh and stand up.

"Thanks for listening. I could really use some kind of sign from you guys or Vivienne right now. Should I hold on to him?" No sign appears so I head over to my car but when I get inside and turn the key nothing happens. My car is dead, no sound whatsoever. I have to laugh because it seems like this could be that sign. I grab my phone and scroll to Jagger's number.

\*\*\*\*

Jagger

I felt like an ass watching Londynn leave upset. I was causing this friction between us but the idea that she was embarrassed by me or where I came from really bothered me. Maybe, I didn't have a right to feel that way and maybe she wasn't embarrassed. I mean it wasn't exactly in Londynn's personality to care about that type of stuff. Maybe, I was just being insecure. I was about to slide back under a car while the paint dried on the other when my phone started singing, "Bed of Roses" by Bon Jovi, Londynn's personalized ringer. I'd seen her a little over an hour ago, but Londynn hardly ever called while I was working so I slide my finger across the screen. "Londynn?"

"Jagger, I'm sorry I hate to bother you, but my car won't start," she says sounding stressed.

"It is making any sounds?" I ask trying to determine what could be causing it without actually looking at it.

I hear her sigh on the other end of the line, "No, nothing. It's just dead."

"Okay let me get the tow truck and I'll come and get you. Where are you?"

"I'm at the cemetery," she mumbles. It makes me feel even worse that she felt like she needed to go talk to Vivienne. I really was an ass. I tell her okay and that I'll be there soon. I stop by and tell Bowie I'm going to tow Londynn's car in since Axell is still at lunch. On my way to the cemetery, I rehearse what I need to say. I need to tell her I'm sorry for the past couple of days and I probably need to tell her what's been bothering me.

As I pull up, I notice how beautiful she looks today, not that she doesn't look beautiful every day but there's something classy about her outfit today without being

overdone. She has on another pair of white shorts, a black blouse and yellow blazer over it. Her gold wedges make her tan legs seem even longer and I instantly think about them being tangled in mine at night. I pull up and park, when I get out, I'm prepared to apologize but Londynn will barely even look at me. "Let me get this hooked up then I drop you off wherever you need."

"I don't need a ride. I called Creed to pick me up he should be here any minute," she tells me while staring off at the sky. Her shades hide her eyes which I hate because she's great at keeping her body language neutral, but her eyes tell it all.

"Londynn, you didn't need to call someone for a ride. I could have dropped you off or even given you the keys to my car if you had stuff to do," I tell her, feeling defensive again. She has once again pushed me aside when she needed help.

She runs a hand through her hair. "I didn't want to make things more difficult for you than they already are."

Damn, she wasn't letting this go. I know I hurt her when I said that she was being difficult because Londynn was actually far from it. It had been a stupid thing to say. "Londynn, listen I'm sorry about earlier and the past couple of days. I haven't been myself."

She shrugs, and I hear a car approaching. "I don't know maybe that is who you are. I'm not sure anymore. I want to be with you, but you have to want to talk to me in order for this to work. You have to talk to me, but you don't. Thank you for coming and getting the car. Let me know what you find out."

Londynn turns on her heels, grabs her purse and walks away. She's at Creed's passenger side door before I turn around to stop her. "Londynn! Are you coming to the races tonight?"

“That depends...”

“On what?” I ask.

She sighs, “On you Jagger.” With that she gets into the car. Creed waves at me through the window before taking off out of the cemetery. I stand there in the empty cemetery trying to figure out what the hell she meant by that. On the drive back to the shop my confusion just grew into frustration. I couldn’t believe she was putting this all on me. I had gotten out of this tow truck with every intention of making things right. I had apologized and what had I gotten? Her acting unaffected then putting everything on me. Now, I remembered why I didn’t do the girlfriend thing anymore.

\*\*\*\*

By the time I pull into the shop I’m seething with anger. The way Londynn is reacting to everything is stupid, childish even. I hand her car keys over at the desk and tell them the issue. I go over to one of the workers and ask for something I haven’t done in years. I ask him for a cigarette, I use to smoke but I quit when I found out Harlyn was pregnant. I haven’t smoked since except for when I’m really stressed. Well, today is one of those days.

I head outside to the picnic tables on the side. There’s some nice shade from the tree. I sit on the table with my feet on the bench as I stare out into the distance at nothing in particular. Bowie comes up just as I’m about to put the cigarette out. “Smoking? That bad of a day?” He asks taking a seat next to me, pulling out his own pack. I just nod my head. “You want to talk about it?” He offers.

“Why are women so damn frustrating?” I basically growl.

He laughs and shakes his head. “Oh man! I knew it was Londynn who had you all worked up. You know I don’t know a damn thing about women. I gave that up when

Hollis left.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry about that, didn’t mean to bring it up.”

He doesn’t answer for minute but then he finally says, “No big deal, man. It’s been a long time.”

It has been a long time but it’s still clearly a big deal. When Hollis left, she took Bowie’s heart with her. The Bowie he is now is not who he was then. Now, he parties too much, drinks too much, smokes too much, fights too much and spends his nights with a different girl in his bed. It’s his way of acting like he doesn’t care, like he’s such a badass that it doesn’t matter that his heart was broken. He can say he’s over it, but the truth is if Hollis were to walk back into his life right now, he’d take her back in an instant. “I don’t know what to do.”

Bowie squeezes my shoulder. “I’m going to tell you this once and then I’ll deny it if it ever leaves this table because I can’t have women thinking I want all the hearts, flowers and romance but if you care about Londynn, if you love her then set your pride aside and go get her. She’s clearly crazy about you but she deserves someone who is just as crazy about her. I think that’s you but if it’s not just let her go.”

## Page 40

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

We sit in silence until Axell shows up to join us. I scoot down as well as Bowie to make room for him. "I remember when dad added this ol' thing out here. Never thought it get much use," Axell says.

We hear the engine of Ace's car and soon enough Ace and Jovi have joined us. Jovi asks me where Londynn is because he has to tell her about Operation Monrowe. "She's not here right now. Maybe she'll be at the races later."

"Oh, I saw her car and just figured," he says looking a little disheartened.

I glance back over towards her car. "Yeah, her car died. I had to go tow it in." I look back at the car again and realize that I don't want to be without Londynn. That girl in that red car stole my heart the first time I saw her. I love her, but I need to tell her that. It's getting late, races will start in a few hours. I get up from the table and face my brothers. "I love her."

"No shit Sherlock," Ace tells me.

As I make my way to my car, I hear my brothers hollering and whistling from behind me. I can't help but smile.

\*\*\*\*

When I pull up to Londynn's new condo, I notice they now have a welcome sign and doormat. I'm slightly surprised to see Farrah's car still here. I figured she'd be out with Connor. When I ring the doorbell Farrah answers and clearly, she's getting ready for the races. She dressed in her normal overly sexy attire and her hair is in

rollers. "Jagger? I didn't know you were coming," she says after the initial shock wears off.

"Yeah, I didn't plan on it either. Is Londynn here?"

She steps back and lets me inside. I look around and notice that it's almost all unpacked and decorated. "She's been in her room watching *Gone with the Wind*." I raise my eyebrows in question. "It's kind of like her go to movie. She watches it whenever she's emotional so be careful and good luck."

"Thanks" I tell her as she turns and heads back upstairs to her room. I walk past the kitchen and living room, down the small hallway to Londynn's room. I knock on the door and go in. To my surprise she's dressed in a pair of sleep shorts and worn-out t-shirt. Her hair is piled on top of her head, and she has a carton of ice cream sitting in her lap. "Hey pretty girl." She just looks at me but doesn't say anything. "Londynn, I owe you an apology."

She sighs and rolls her eyes. "I don't want an apology Jagger." She lifts the remote and pauses the movie.

"Then what do you want?"

"Oh my God! Do you really have to ask that?" She asks.

I run a hand through my hair. This wasn't going how I had planned. I had this all going very differently in my head. I don't know how I keep messing this all up. "What is it with you here lately? You always want more from me on your terms but then you're embarrassed to be seen with me in your part of the world."

"What?" she basically yells, her voice rising with her emotions.



“You don’t have to act like you’re not. I get it. I’m not Ryce Whitten. I don’t drive a Porsche and I don’t have a trust fund. I know I don’t fit into your world. I don’t need you only wanting me or using me on your terms,” I tell her, my own emotions rising.

She gives me a shocked and hurt look. “Is that what you think? That I’m embarrassed by you because of what kind of car you drive or where you’re from because if you do then you don’t know me at all! And I’m so freakin’ glad that you’re nothing like Ryce Whitten. Ryce is a horrible excuse for a man but you, you are without a doubt one of the best. I don’t want you just on my terms and I don’t know how you can accuse me of that.”

I let out a hard laugh. “It’s not that hard to piece together Londynn. You keep me as far from your parents and their mansion as possible. When we first went and got some of your things you tried so damn hard to make sure they wouldn’t be there. Then when you needed the rest of your stuff you called Duke, the brother that you barely speak to. And now you’re not even coming to the races tonight. You know those races are important to me, but I guess that doesn’t matter.”

“You think because I didn’t ask you to go get my stuff that I’m embarrassed by you or because I didn’t want to go to the races tonight that I don’t care. You’re wrong Jagger. I didn’t ask you to go get my stuff for you. If you had showed up at that house without me, then my parents would have called the cops and had you arrested for trespassing. I was protecting you because I can’t be around them right now. I couldn’t send you to face them without me. I would never put you through something like that. And as far as the races I wasn’t going because you’ve been distant, and I didn’t really want to see Ryce. It was never because of you or that I didn’t care,” she says, and I notice the unshed tears in her eyes forming. I’m such an ass. Why do I keep doing this? I cross the room and try to pull her into my arms, but she holds up her hands to stop me, “No Jagger. Don’t. You need to go.” She tells me.

“Londynn...I...I’m sorry. I don’t know why I keep doing this.”

She shakes her head so hard her some of hair falls lose. "Leave Jagger." Then she turns her back to me. I stand there for a few second before crossing her room and shutting her door behind me. As I walk down the hallway, I run a hand over my face and let out a frustrated grunt. When the kitchen comes into view, I see Farrah standing there drinking some water.

I shrug. "I guess I'll see you at the races. I'm sure you heard that and know that Londynn isn't coming. I'm sorry I never meant to hurt her in any way." I turn to leave. As I'm sitting behind the wheel of my car, I notice the screen of my radio flash with a favorite artist alertKings of Leon. I bang my hands on the steering wheel. I haven't been this insecure since I first started dating Harlyn. Harlyn. Maybe that's my whole issue. Ikeep pushing Londynn because what I feel for her is in some ways stronger than what I felt for Harlyn, and it just feels like I'm doing something wrong.

I start the car and pull out of the parking space. I glance once more back at the door. Leaving Londynn upset and hurt in her room just seems wrong, but my damn pride is just too bruised to go back in there. So, I put my car in drive and peel out of the parking lot.

## Chapter 23

### Londynn

I'm staring blankly at the wall in front of me while trying to keep myself in check when a knock on the door brings me back to reality. Farrah is standing in my doorway dressed in her normal Farrah fashion. She has a red long-sleeved shirt that comes off her shoulders. The sleeves start in the middle of her upper arm causing the top of the shirt to expose more of her chest than necessary. Her light wash jeans are tight and low rise leaving her belly button exposed. Her metallic wedges top off her outfit. She looks beautiful and sexy, not something I could never pull off. This is the type of girl Jagger needs, not me.

Farrah crosses the room and sits down next to me on the bed. She reaches for my hand, “Londynn, you need to go to the races tonight.”

I shake my head. “No, I don’t. Besides you heard Jagger, he doesn’t even think I care.”

“Londynn, Jagger James is not like the boys you’re use to dating. Guys like Ryce have money to fix their wounded prides and to buy their girlfriends back if they upset them. Jagger doesn’t have any of that. He’s just a genuine guy that is falling in love with you.” I whip my head in her direction. I don’t know what would make her think that he’s falling in love with me. Farrah lets out a small laugh at my reaction. “I’ve only seen Jagger look at one other girl that way and it was Harlyn and actually I don’t think he even looked at her as strongly as he does you. Not to say he didn’t love and care about her because we all knew he did but with you it’s different. I think that’s scared him too.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

“Love is supposed to be this great thing. I get that he’s scaring, I am too,” I tell her, finally admitting it out loud.

She sighs, “Maybe you need to tell him that. You have to put yourself in his shoes for a minute. He’s in a relationship for the first time since his fiancée and unborn child were killed unexpectedly and with a girl that he probably feels like is out of his league. He’s never dated outside of his side of town. This is a lot of firsts for him in a short amount of time. He may just need to hear you have the same fears.”

Farrah makes sense and I want to believe her, but I can’t help but notice the difference between the girls he’s use to and me. “I’m not like the girls he’s use to. I’m not sexy and curvy. I can’t dress like you and pull it off.”

“Oh Londynn. You have a lot to learn about Jagger. Have you ever seen a picture of Harlyn?” She asks, and I shake my head. She stands up and holds her hand out to me.

I place my hand in hers and she pulls me off the bed. “Where are we going?” I ask.

“To show you that you are exactly the type of girl that Jagger James will fall in love with.” She pulls me through the condo and up the stairs to her bedroom. She pushes me on the bed and goes into the closet. She comes out a few minutes later with a box in her hands. When she removes the lid, I see tons of pictures, she rummages through them until she finds what she’s looking for. She hands me the picture and I recognize Farrah, Bowie, Axell, Sadie and Jagger. However, I don’t recognize the girl that Jagger has his arm around. She has medium length brown hair and kind looking eyes. Her smile lights up the whole picture and she’s wearing a modest black and white polka dot sundress. “Do you know the girl in the sundress?” I shake my head no.

“That’s Harlyn. She was the good girl who always dressed modest and was the kindest, most soft-spoken person you’d ever meet.”

I study the picture a while longer. “I guess I just figured she dressed and acted like...”

Farrah completes my sentence when I trail off. “Like me and Kynlee and all the girls who throw themselves at Bowie. Jagger loves racing for his own reasons, but it has never been about the girls for him. He never noticed them with Harlyn, and I’ve noticed that he doesn’t pay attention to them since you’ve been around.” We sit in silence while her words sink in, and I continue to study the picture. “Do you want my advice?”

“Yes, please,” I reply.

She takes a deep breath. “Go get dressed and come with me to the races. When you get there find Jagger and talk to him.”

“What if he doesn’t want to talk? I mean he wasn’t exactly happy when he left here.”

“Then you grab his face and kiss the hell out of him until he forgets about the fight,” Farrah tells me. She takes the picture from my hand, pulls me from the bed and pushes me towards the door. “Now go get ready.”

When I get back to my room, I rummage through my closet for a couple of items I had purchased months ago on a splurge. At the time I never thought I’d use them but right now I need them. In the back of the closet, I find the boxes I have yet to unpack but luckily the first box I open has the black ripped jeans and leather jacket I bought on that whim. I pull them out. I find a blush-colored flowy tank top to go with it. Once I’m dressed, I add a small necklace and pin my hair back on one side. I find a pair of blush heels then head to the living room to meet Farrah. When I enter she

releases a whistle. "Girl he's going to forget everything when he sees you."

"I hope you're right but just in case I remembered your advice, kiss him until he forgets," I tell her, she laughs which causes me to laugh as well.

Farrah grabs my hand and pulls me towards the door. "Come on were going to be late!" We hurry to her SUV and through the streets to get to the races. When we pull up its crowded, so Farrah parks a few blocks back and we walk up to the races.

Once we make it through the crowd, I spot Jagger easily. My heart rate picks up and my stomach is packed with butterflies. He's talking with Ace, Bowie and...Duke. Instantly I wonder why? I love Duke, but I don't trust him, I can think of no good that will come from Duke associating with any of the James brothers.

\*\*\*\*

Jagger

By the time I manage to get to the races I'm not even in the mood but at the same time I crave that adrenaline rush of getting behind the wheel of my car and getting so lost in the race that everything around you becomes a blur. Once I'm out of the car I notice Duke standing a few cars down from me. He's on our side which is odd since technically he should be across the street with the other rich kids. I walk down to him just as Ryce's yellow Porsche pulls up and parks. When he gets out, he tries to keep his head down but it's easy to see his face has taken one hell of a beating. Most of his skin is bruised or busted up. Ryce glances in our direction and I notice him quickly avert his gaze to the ground once again. Looking up I notice the smirk on Duke's face and a thought occurs to me. "You're knuckles are busted up because you beat the hell out of Ryce." Duke merely shrugs like it's no big deal. "Why'd you lie to your sisters?"

He clears his throat. “Londynn has always been fiercely independent. She’s always been one to take care of things on her own however I didn’t see a reason to let Ryce off the hook and besides it’s not like she could have done near enough damage to him to make him feel remorse.”

“So, you lied because Londynn is independent and wouldn’t have wanted you to defend her?” I ask him in disbelief. Nomatter what he said I didn’t think that was the only reason. There was more to why he lied to Farrah and Londynn.

He runs a hand over his chin. “That’s part of the reason. The other is that I didn’t lie. I was seeing a woman whom I didn’t know was married. When her husband found out...well needless to say he wasn’t very happy. He did manage to get one good hit on me, and it busted my lip.”

Now, it all makes sense. The lip was from the angry husband, but the knuckles were from the beating he handed to Ryce. “You know you could have just told them it was from Ryce. I mean I already thought it was once I saw his face tonight.”

He laughs, “You think I’d let that pathetic ass get a hit on me. Hell no! Besides my sisters already expect the worse of me, no reason to let them down now.”

“Why do you say that?”

He shakes his head. “They love me, but in their eyes, I am our father made over.”

I have to ask him, “Are you?”

“Not exactly. We are similar, but I would never do what he has done to our mother. I actually care about a handful of things in life unlike him.”

I study him for a moment and notice his eyes hold an almost haunted look as well.

“What handful of things?”

“Well, aren’t you the curious one tonight? However, I’m feeling talkative, so I’ll play. My mother, my sisters, women, money and power," he says holding up his hand and counting them off on his fingers.



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

“No offense but that sounds like your father.” I tell him offering an apologetic smile.

He holds up his hands in surrender, “No offense taken, and it does sound like him aside from him caring about my mother and sisters. He doesn’t care about those things. Now that Londynn has finally gotten out from under them, I’m free to do as I wish.” I give him a questioning look and he continues. “When Farrah left, my parents felt like they lost control, so they took it out on Londynn and me. I knew that if I left like Farrah had done then it would be unbearable for Londynn, so I stayed and played by their rules because I knew eventually my baby sister would realize what she wanted out of life, and she’d break free.”

“That makes sense,” I tell him while nodding my head in agreement. It’s nice to know that just because it seemed like he didn’t care that he had actually stayed around to help protect Londynn. At the same time, it’s sad that she’s lived her life believing that she only had Farrah and Vivienne when her brother was also there in a different way. It’s a shame that Duke Parrish might actually be a decent human being, yet his sisters believe the worse in him. Instead of encouraging him to tell them the truth I ask him what he wants to do with his life.

“I don’t have any desire to continue in law school, so I will drop out immediately. Then I will take my money and become the international entrepreneur that I’ve always dreamed about,” he says, and I notice the faraway look that comes into his eyes.

“What about a family?”

He shakes his head. “No, it’s not for me. I won’t marry, and I won’t have kids. You

know there's something you have to understand about Londynn if you're going to be with her. We've never actually seen a loving, functional relationship before. All we were surrounded by were couples that had been placed together because of what each family could gain. There was no love in any of them. There were lies, cheating and some form of self-medicating. Londynn yearns for that relationship that will be filled with love and romance. As well as someone who will love her for her. I know she acts older than what she is a lot of the time, but she's bound to be inexperienced with relationships."

As I mull over his words, I realize that he's right. Londynn probably hasn't seen a real relationship. I've watched one my entire childhood, my parents were madly in love until the day my mom passed away. Then I had went on and found one myself with Harlyn, but Londynn had only seen the worse of relationships. The only love she really understood was the kind that could be bought. I needed to remember that and have better patience, if she even still wanted me after tonight.

"So, do you know what's going on between Alivia and Ryce and/or Creed?" Duke asks pulling me back into the present.

"What do you mean?"

He's studying something behind me. "Well, I've been friends with Ryce a long time and I know when he's hooking up with someone. I see that look when he looks at Alivia but then I've also spotted her all over the place with Creed, so I was curious if you knew what was going on."

I sigh before deciding to tell him the truth. Besides from the sound of it he's already figured it out. "The night Vivienne died, and Londynn had her break down she found Alivia, topless in Ryce's lap."

"What? Why would you say that Jagger?" I heard a very angry and hurt voice come

from behind me. Ace and Bowie were by my side in no time but all I could think was, “Shit, Creed.”

## Chapter 24

Jagger

I knew the minute I recognized the voice that I had made a huge mistake. Not only was this information going to upset Creed it could very well end any chance I had with Londynn. I know she wanted to be the one to tell him and this wasn't my secret to tell, even to Duke. I turn around and face him, “Creed.”

“Why the hell are you lying on Alivia like that?” He says. The anger is evident in his voice.

I shake my head, “I'm not lying.” I notice Alivia standing off to the side looking shocked. “Ask her yourself,” I tell Creed motioning towards Alivia.

He looks in Alivia's direction and notices her shake her head. Wow! That girl is something and not in a good way. Creed takes a step towards me, “What Jagger? Do you think you're the only one who can date someone above you? Do you think that gives you the right to lie about Alivia? To tarnish her name?” From the corner of my eye, I see Bowie move to defend me, but I place a hand on his arm to stop him.

“It's not like that Creed. You need to calm down and listen to me.” I try to sound convincing because Creed has always been like another little brother to me and I really don't want to fight him, but I will if I have to.

Creed is shaking his head vigorously. “Why? To listen to more of your lies? You're a liar!”

“No! He’s not but Alivia is.” I don’t know where she is, but I hear her. Then the crowd that has built around us parts and Londynn walks through. She stops a few steps away from us. Alivia has also joined us on the other side of Creed. Londynn gives Creed an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry Creed but Jagger isn’t lying. Alivia did sleep with Ryce. The night Vivienne passed away I went looking for her, but she wasn’t home. Her mom told me she had went out. So, I went to Ryce’s thinking that maybe this would be the moment that he’d become a decent boyfriend but of course I was wrong. No, going to Ryce’s just confirmed my suspicions that Ryce was a lying cheating bastard, but it also showed me a whole new side to Alivia. She was topless and straddling Ryce’s lap. I’m sorry Creed but she isn’t who you think she is.”

Creed turns around and stares at Alivia as if he’s seeing some sort of alien for the first time. “Is it true?”

Alivia looks down at the ground and slightly nods her head yes. Creed removes his glasses and rubs eyes harder than necessary. “How could you? How could you do that to Londynn? How could you do that with Ryce?” He asks saying Ryce’s name in disgust.

“I don’t know it just happened. I didn’t know that Londynn had seen us that night. I’m s---“

Creed cuts her off, “Are you still seeing him?”

Alivia looks up and there are tears streaming down her face. “Yes.” Ryce steps up and throws his arm around Alivia’s shoulders. She makes no move to shake it off which gives Creed all the answers he needs to know.

Creed slips his glasses back on then glares at both Alivia and Ryce. “We’re done. Don’t come crying to me when he screws you over because he will Alivia. But don’t you dare come to me because I won’t be there for you.” With that he turns and heads

towards the crowd. Londynn reaches out for his arm, but he quickly yanks it away and tells her, “Don’t.”

When Londynn turns around, I see the hurt in her eyes. She looks at both me and Alivia and I’m not sure which of us hurt her worse. Her supposed to be best friend who slept with her boyfriend behind her back or the boyfriend that she trusted enough to confide in and just told one of her biggest secrets. I don’t say anything because I have no right to speak. Whatever Londynn decides I’ll have to take because I’ve royally messed up here. Londynn looks back at Alivia. “He deserved so much better than that.”

“You knew all that time and didn’t say anything to him or me?” Alivia asks.

Londynn shakes her head. “Yes, I knew all that time, but I didn’t say anything because I thought you might grow a moral code or remorse and tell him yourself. Instead, you went on like nothing happened. You visited me every weekend for three months and played like nothing had happened. Like we were still just best friends, but you knew this big secret. I’m with Creed, we’re done.”

## Page 43

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

“You’re just going to throw away our friendship over some guy?” Alivia yells at Londynn’s retreating back.

Londynn swings back around. “No, you did.” She turns back around and the crowd parts to let her pass. I should go after her, but I can’t make my feet move.

Ryce is still standing with all of us. “Damn she’s freakin’ crazy as shit.”

That comment sends me overboard. When I glance back, I notice Duke wiping something from his car. “Duke looks like you missed a spot man,” I tell him right before my fist connects on the one part of Ryce’s face that isn’t bruised or busted. He stumbles back as I shake out my hand. Ace, Bowie, Axell and Connor are all at my side in case any of his friends try anything but of course they don’t. “Don’t you ever talk about my girlfriend like that again because if you do, they’ll have to wire your jaw back together.” I turn around and leave through the crowd the same way Londynn did.

As I near my car I see her head of honey colored hair leaning against it. I walk over to her and meet her dark hazel eyes. I memorize them because there’s a very good chance this will be the last time I ever see them this close. “Why the hell were you even discussing that?” She asks.

I run a hand through my hair. “Your brother asked, and it just slipped out. I didn’t even know Creed was here, I swear. I’m sorry Londynn.”

“It’s great that you’re sorry Jagger but sorry doesn’t fix the broken heart Creed suffered tonight or our broken trust. How am I supposed to trust you now? How am I

supposed to know that whatever I tell you in the future won't be aired in front of the entire racing community?" The hurt in her eyes breaks my heart in a whole new way. I can't believe I just blurted out information she had trusted me with.

"You don't know but all I can do is promise that I won't do it again and that I am really sorry. I'm sorry that Creed got hurt. I'm sorry the whole crowd found out. But most of all I'm sorry I hurt you. I'll do whatever I can to make it up to you," I tell her, and I mean it. It's not just some line to get what I want. It's the truth. I would do anything to make it up to her. , "Please Londynn." Inwardly I cringe because I'm standing here begging a girl. I haven't done that since I was a teenager but if I have to do it again at least I know Londynn's worth it.

She's biting her lip and I know she's trying to keep from crying. She shakes her head. "I don't know right now Jagger. I have to go find Creed. I'll call you." And with that she turns on her heels and walks away from me. Now all I can do is wait and see what she decides.

\*\*\*\*

Londynn

As I walk away from Jagger, I let the tears fall. I can't believe he was just discussing my personal life at the races and with my brother. I really thought I could trust Jagger. I thought he was going to be different but maybe I was wrong. Ugh! And Creed, I can't even begin to think about how he feels. I wanted to tell him, and I didn't know how but this was definitely not what I had in mind. I'm walking down the sidewalk when a Jeep pulls up beside me. I see Kynlee inside, "Londynn," she hollers at me. She walks over to me. "Come on you're going to need some sort of transportation to go after Creed. Take my Jeep but just drop me back off at the races first, okay?"

“Kynlee, thank you for the offer but I can’t just take your Jeep.” I tell her.

She laughs while pulling me towards the open driver’s door. “Of course, you can. Besides it’ll speed everything up. You find Creed and fix things with him then you call Jagger and y’all meet up and fix things and I get to ride home with Ace.”

“I don’t know if I can fix things with Jagger.” Admitting it only makes me want to cry again.

Kynlee leans forward and opens the passenger side compartment box and takes out a package of Kleenex. She takes one out and hands it to me. “Of course, you can. He didn’t mean for all that to break out back there. Jagger isn’t a bad guy. Actually, none of the James’ are. Just hard to love but it’s worth it.”

I think about her words as we slowly make our way back to the races. “Do you love Ace?”

A sad smile appears on her face. “So much but it’s far from easy.”

“Out of all of them he seems like he’d be the most difficult.”

She sighs then turns to face me while I park to let her out. “He is but the more difficult something is the higher the reward. Ace Daniel James is so much more than he seems. He’s terrified of love, and he refuses to admit that he loves anything but I know he does. I know he loves his brothers and his car and his shop. And I know he loves me and someday he’s going to tell me and when he does that’ll be the best day of my life and it’ll make all of this bullshit we go through worth it. Besides like my mom said once you choose who you love you can’t turn back, you just have to ride the scariest rollercoaster of all. Go find Creed and make sure he’s okay then fix things with Jagger. I think you both deserve a little love and happiness.”



I grab and hug her before she can resist or get out of the Jeep. "So, do you," I whisper in her ear. When she pulls back that sad smile is back, and I can't help but hope that sometime soon it will be replaced with a happy one. She gets out and as soon as I lose sight of her in the crowd, I back out of the parking spot and head towards the one place I know Creed will be.

\*\*\*\*

Once I leave the races, I head for the small public playground on this side of town that is actually next door to the public library, attached to the playground is a small baseball field. Creed had dreams of becoming professional baseball player before he took a scholarship to the private school. We had no sports in our school, all academics which meant he had to give up his dream of baseball, but he was like me. Whenever we needed to think we went to the place that held our dreams, for me a dance studio and for him a baseball field.

As I turn the corner Kynlee's headlights wash over Creed's family car. I sigh in relief. I pull in next to the Camry and hop out. While I approach the field, I try to figure out how to fix these things. How do I fix things with Creed? How do I fix things with Jagger? Who knew that the freedom that I craved so badly would be so complicated? As soon as I step through the gate, I see Creed sitting on the small, worn, wood bleachers. Creed looks up as I approach. "Londynn, I don't want to see you right now."

I stop in front of him and cross my arms over my chest as if that stance could protect from any hurtful words he might say. "I figured that, and I understand but at least let me explain."

He eyes glare into mine. "Fine, explain." I stand there for some time moving my weight between my feet. I'm unsure of how to explain this. "Are you going to explain?" Creed finally asks.

“Yes, I’m just unsure where to start.”

“The truth. How about you start with the truth," Creed tells me like it makes all the sense in the world, and it probably should.

I take a deep breath and release it slowly. “Okay, I wanted to tell you the truth about Alivia and Ryce, but I didn’t want to hurt you.”

He lets out a hard laugh. “As opposed to tonight?”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

“I know, I didn’t plan on you finding out like this Creed. You’re one of my best friends and I love you. I know how long you’ve had feelings for Alivia. You held her on some kind of pedestal. I knew if you found out the truth, you’d probably change your mind about her considering how you felt about Ryce. I didn’t want to shatter your dreams of her. I didn’t want to be the one that told you because honestly, I didn’t have the guts to tell you. It’s like if I talked about the whole situation...that night...it made it real.”

Creed is very quiet for a while and looks up at the sky, but you can’t see the stars tonight. Finally, Creed says, “I can understand that. You had gone through so much in such a short amount of time, so I can understand not wanting to talk about it. I get that you wanted to keep it to yourself, so it wouldn’t seem real, but you should have told me.”

I nod my head in agreement, “You’re right I should have. Jagger told me to, but I just didn’t know how and then the day I finally decided to you were heading out to meet with Alivia, so I chickened out.”

Creed takes his glasses off and rubs his eyes with the palms of his hands. “I was so blinded by her that I’d just ignore anything she did that was questionable.”

“I’m sorry Creed,” I tell him.

He looks up at me slowly. “I know you are, and I forgive you but promise me that you will talk to me next time.”

“I promise.”

Creed opens his arms and closes the distance between us, making me wrap my arms around his neck. As I lay my cheek on his red and black flannel shirt, I feel the warmth of it. He smells like Creed, a mixture of aftershave and books. Creed asks. "How did Jagger know?"

I pull back and take a seat next to Creed. "I told him the night he left town. I had decided that I wanted more with him, but I knew I couldn't have that if I wasn't completely honest with him. He needed to know about Spirit and what had led up to that point, so I told him everything."

"Wow, I bet that was scary."

I laugh, "Terrifying! It didn't help that he hauled ass and disappeared for a month afterwards, but I understood his reasons for leaving. You should know that he encouraged me to tell you a while ago, but I was a coward."

"A coward? Londynn Parrish you are not a coward. You are one of the bravest people I know. Everything that has been thrown at you in life you have met head on. They knock you down and you get back up. You're so brave but you don't see it," he tells me. He wraps an arm around my shoulders and pulls me into him. After a while he tells me, "Come on let's go home. It's getting late."

"Okay. Would you mind following me to drop off Kynlee's Jeep then dropping me off at my place?" I ask him.

"Of course not." He extends his hand and I take it. As we cross the field, I can't help but feel like even though I've known Alivia all my life that Creed is actually the best friend I've ever had. I never would have thought that my best friend and boyfriend would come from such a different world.

When Creed and I pull into the parking lot in front of the condo I now live in I notice

Jagger's Camaro parked in my assigned spot. As Creed pulls up behind it, I see Jagger get out of the car. I watch as he makes his way towards us, when he reaches the trunk, he leans back against it and waits for me. "Thanks Creed. I'll see you later."

"Yeah, have a good night," Creed tells me as I get out of his car. I stand a few feet from Jagger and cross my arms over my chest again. I had been so upset at the races I hadn't noticed how good he looked. His dark denim jeans and vintage Guns N' Roses t-shirt with his black leather jacket over it makes him look like some kind of male model. I want to close the space between us and wrapped up in him, but I can't do that right now. Instead, I tell him, "I didn't call you."

"I know but I needed to know that you got home okay."

I look off into the distance and shake my head. "Well, since you're here you might as well come inside so we can talk." I walk past him while rummaging through my purse for my keys. I notice that Farrah's Range Rover isn't here which means she's with Connor and probably knew Jagger was coming here. I don't know how this talk is going to go and a part of me is scared to open the door.

## Chapter 25

### Londynn

Once we step inside, I search for the light switch but suddenly the recess lights that frame the small dining room and living room come on. I turn around and see that Jagger found the switch. "Do you want something to drink?"

"Sure," he answers.

I walk into the kitchen and look in the fridge all Farrah has stocked it with so far is

wine, beer and water. I take a water out for me and a beer for Jagger. When I turn around Jagger is standing in the doorway of the small kitchen. I have to fight the urge to go to him again I extend my hand to him, and he takes the beer. "Thanks."

"Yeah."

We stand in the kitchen as the tension builds, an uncomfortable silent place. Finally, Jagger clears his throat. "Listen Londynn, I'm sorry. I know I've said that a lot these last few days, but I really mean it. I didn't mean to hurt you and I didn't even now Creed was there when I was talking to your brother."

I know he didn't mean to hurt me or Creed, but I have a feeling Duke did know and caused the whole thing. "I know that Jagger. Besides I think Duke was behind this scene tonight. I'm sure he knew that Creed was there and considering how close he and Ryce have always been I'm sure he already knew about Alivia. I think he meant to cause a fight between us thinking I'd run back home. So, actually I owe you an apology for my brother."

Jagger shakes his head. "You don't owe me anything and I know your brother is probably a lot of things and that you know him better than I do but I don't think he's as bad as you think."

"Trust me Jagger, Duke is my father made over and that's not a good thing. He loves that world we were raised in. He'd do anything to stay in it even if it meant breaking us up," I tell him, but I can see the disbelief in his eyes.

He nods his head while rubbing his chin. "Okay."

I study his amber eyes and I know that I could never stay mad at him. "I also owe you a thank you."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

“A thank you. For what?” Jagger asks.

“For inadvertently telling Creed. You did something that I wasn’t ready to deal with and didn’t have the courage to do. If he hadn’t overheard, you talking to Duke who knows when I would have told him. And the longer I took the harder it would have been on him.”

“Well, then I guess you’re welcome,” he tells me and before I know it, I’ve sat my bottle of water on the counter and closed the distance between us. I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss his lips. I hear him sit his beer down as both his hands warp around my waist, pulling me closer to him. One of his hands slowly moves up my back until it’s buried in my hair, he deepens our kiss.

At some point his hands move to the back of my thighs, picking me up as he sits me on top of the counter. I wrap my legs around his waist while his tongue teases my neck. A hand slips under my shirt and runs up my bare back. His tongue travels lower and I hear myself moan. He mumbles my name, and the warmth of his breath tickles my neck causing me to let out a small giggle. He pulls back and rests his forehead against mine and looks into my eyes but the way he’s looking it’s like he can see down into my soul.

“You know the best thing about this condo?” I ask him while smiling at him. He raises his eyebrows and I slide off the counter. Taking his hand, I lead him to my bedroom. I pull him inside the room then walk around and shut the door. I lean back against the door and slip off my jacket. “Farrah’s bedroom is all the way across from mine and upstairs, it’s like we have privacy.”

He chuckles as he approaches me, the look in his eyes sets a fire through my body. “You are so much trouble.” He takes the hem of my tank and pulls over my head then he pushes me back against the door. His kisses are heated and urgent. I grip his shirt and tip toe to pull it over his head. We make our way back towards the bed and fall on top in a heap of tangled limbs and the night drags on just like that.

\*\*\*\*

I don’t know what time it is when I wake up, but I know it’s in the middle of the night. My sheet is wrapped around me tightly and I’m using Jagger’s chest as my pillow. His hand is stroking my hair and I wonder how long he’s been awake. I roll over onto my stomach, so I can see his face. “What’s wrong?”

His hand reaches out and strokes my cheek. “When I came tonight, I wasn’t sure what would happen, and I definitely didn’t see this happening.”

“Honestly neither did I but I’m glad it did,” I admit to him. I take his hand in between mine and trace the lines of his palm.

“I came here to tell you something tonight.” I look back into his eyes and I feel my anxiety sky rocket. “I admitted that I thought you were embarrassed by me, and I think on some level I really thought that, but I think it’s more than that. I think I’m trying to ruin this because what I feel for you...scares the hell out of me Londynn.” He takes his free hand and rubs it over his face a few times. “What I felt Harlyn was real, I don’t doubt that but lately I wonder if Sadie wasn’t right. She said that even if Harlyn had lived that we might not be together because people grow and change. I was so convinced that after I lost her that I’d never feel like this again. That I’d never love again and then you walked into my life, and I don’t know it’s like every emotion is so much stronger now.”

I kiss the palm of his hand then close my hands around his. “I get what you’re saying



but you have to know that everything happens for a reason even if we don't understand it. I can't begin to imagine the pain you felt from losing her, but it has shaped the man you are today." I reach out and run my hand over his chest and through his small patch of chest hair to his heart. "And this man is a man that I could love."

He lets out a breath I hadn't realized he'd been holding. "Good because I love you, Londynn."

I stare into his amber eyes then I lean forward and press a kiss to his lips. To a lot of people this would seem too soon but to me it feels like I finally found my home. I finally found my freedom it just happens to be in the shape of Jagger James. When I pull away from our kiss, I rest my forehead on his and look into his eyes. "I love you too."

\*\*\*\*

Jagger

It's been a week since Londynn and I had told each other that we were in love and honestly it had been one of the best weeks of my life. With the exception of those few moments when the silence set in, and I felt guilty. I still didn't know if I had a right to feel like this. Did I have a right to move on? In those moments I would always feel like I was doing something wrong to Harlyn's memory and the memory of the couple we had been. Luckily, I had managed to keep busy between the shop, finding my own place, going to Vegas and picking up the rest of my stuff and spending my night tangled up in Londynn's bed I'd had very few of those silent moments.

Most of those moments would happen after Londynn had drifted off to sleep. I'd watch her sleeping on my chest, her hairsprayed out across my arm and pillow, the scent of flowers filling my every breath. She seemed so at peace when she slept but it

was in those moments that I worried I was doing wrong by Harlyn. I'd try to go to sleep to silence my mind completely, but sleep wouldn't find me. It wouldn't be until Londynn woke up and saw me still awake then insist on some hot tea that I'd finally find total silence.

Today was moving day for me. I had found a small loft in the same area as Connor's. Londynn had wanted to help me move but she had to work at the clothing boutique. I was surprised by how much she loved her job and how dedicated she was to it. To be honest, I figured after her first day she'd quit saying it wasn't for her since she'd never worked before, but it seemed she liked the idea of making her own money. So, while she was at work I was moving with the help of my brothers.

My goal was to be all moved in by tonight because I planned on Londynn and I having our first official date here. A homemade dinner and movie but at the rate we were getting everything moved in it might not turn out that way. "Man, you own a lot of crap," Bowie said making his way through the door with the box springs. Ace was on the other end, but he had been uncharacteristically quiet today. I need to touch base with him and make sure everything was okay.

A few hours later and we had finally managed to get everything moved in and arranged. I started up my grill and laid some fish out for it, while I was making a salad that Creed had told me Londynn loved I saw Ace coming from the restroom. My other brothers had left already which I was thankful for since I needed to check on Ace. "Hey man, you doing okay?" He just shrugs in response. "Come on, come talk to me."

"It's Kynlee."

"What about her?" I ask him.

"She told me she loved me the other night," he tells me, but I know there's more to

the story than that.

“And?”

“And I started an argument with her which caused her to storm out and we haven’t spoken since.” He tells me looking as guilty as ever.

“How long ago?”

“Three days," he replies.

“Three days! Three days and you haven’t talked to your girlfriend after she told you she loved you?” I exclaim.

Ace runs a hand over the back of his hair. “She isn’t my girlfriend!”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

“The hell she’s not! Kynlee is your girlfriend rather you admit or not but if you ask me, you’re lucky that a girl like that even puts up with a guy like you.” I tell him pointing the knife I’m using to cut up vegetables at him.

Ace glares at me. “Well, I didn’t ask you and what the hell do you mean a guy like me?”

I sigh, lay the knife down and level Ace with my own glare. “I mean you’re a good guy and she obviously sees that but you’re an ass Ace. You don’t put her first in your decision, you don’t consider her feelings and you flirt with every girl you see. I’m surprised she’s stayed around this long.”

“So basically, I’m you pre-Londynn.”

I think about the guy I was between Harlyn and Londynn and he’s right. I was totally the guy I just described with one exception I didn’t have a girlfriend. “You’re right I was that guy, but I didn’t have a girlfriend to be concerned about...you do. We were raised better than this Ace. Come on mom and dad would hate the way you’re acting and the way you treat her.”

“Don’t! Don’t you dare bring them into this, especially mom!” Ace bellows at me.

I stand there for a minute studying my younger brother and I notice the pain he usually hides so well. He’s terrified right now, and I think I know why. “Ace, what happened to our parents was horrible. Dad having to lose mom was probably the hardest thing he ever did but you know what? I’m pretty sure they would have done it all the same if they’d had the chance. And just because you run the risk of getting

hurt or losing someone doesn't mean you can't fall in love. Besides who's to say that Kynlee isn't your long term?"

"Are you kidding me? Were the James brothers, it's in our DNA for relationship to suck or end or hurt like hell. Look at Dad and mom, Bowie and Hollis, you and Harlyn! Even Axell and Sadie aren't so good anymore. We are doomed to lose when it comes to love. You'll lose Londynn in some way too, mark my words Jagger. Guys like us don't get to keep love. We just get it long enough to give us a slow death." With that Ace grabbed his keys and marched out of my loft without a glance back at me.

His words hung in the air, making it seem like it was hard to breathe. I didn't want to believe him, but in a way, he seemed right. What if it was just a matter of time before I lost Londynn? How would I survive that again? My phone goes off and I look at the screen and see it's from Londynn, "See you in a few."

I lay my phone down and quickly head upstairs to shower. While in the shower I decide that Ace is wrong, and that Londynn and I will prove him wrong. Then I start to worry about his comment concerning Axell and Sadie. I had noticed that things seemed different between them, but I didn't think it was that bad. I mean they had been together for so long now it just didn't seem right if they weren't together. As I'm getting dressed, I hear the doorbell. I quickly button up my shirt while taking the stairs two at a time.

## Chapter 26

### Londynn

I had found the cutest dress while working at the boutique the day before my actual date with Jagger. I tried to resist the urge to buy it but at the end of the shift I had purchased it. Now, I stood in front of my full-length mirror and admired the cobalt

blue and cranberry pinstripe dress. I slipped on a pair of my nude heels and a cranberry cardigan. After work I had rushed home just to curl my hair and touch up my makeup. I don't know why but I felt nervous, I mean we had technically been together for a little over a month now.

I had to shake my head at how silly I was acting. On my way out of my bedroom door I grabbed my perfume for a quick spray then head to my car. When I pull in front of Jagger's place my butterflies turn to bats. I stand staring at his door, taking deep breaths to calm crazy nerves and finally I press the doorbell. A minute later Jagger appears looking as gorgeous as ever. His hair is perfect messy, his beard neatly trimmed, his gray jeans hung off his hips just right and his white button up shirt hugged all of his muscles. He had a few of the buttons undone which showed just enough of his tan skin that I felt a blush creep up into my cheeks.

"Wow!" Is his only response as his eyes travel up and down my body.

My blush only deepens, and I release a small, nervous giggle. "I could say the same thing."

Shaking his head, he says, "Not possible. There's no way I look as good as you do." He reaches out and pulls me into his arms and tilts my head back with his thumb and kisses me quickly on the lips. He reaches behind me and shuts the door.

I notice the place looks and smells amazing. All of his furniture is brown leather with gray accents. The lighting is dim but romantic and whatever he's cooking as filled the area making my stomach growl. "The place looks so great Jagger. I wish I could have helped you move in today."

He brushes a lose strand of hair from my face, "I know but you had to work. Speaking of how was work today?"

“It went great! I really like it there,” I explain as he leads me to the small fenced in patio where he’s grilling some salmon. “Are you grilling salmon?”

“Yes, I am,” he says, and I see that smirk I love come across his face.

I study him while he turns them over. “That’s my favorite.”

“I know.” I must have given him a shocked look because his look of seriousness fell, and he laughed. “I remember from our first date.”

“Oh!” I say laughing. “That makes sense.”

“However, in my defense this is my first time making any of this so if it sucks, please lie to me. I don’t think my ego could take any less.”

I throw my head back in laughter. “I’m sure your ego will be just fine.” After we eat were lying on the couch, well more like cuddling when I ask him. “What are your favorites?”

“What do you mean?” He asks, and I hear the confusion in his voice.

“Your favorites. You know, favorite color, favorite food, favorite drink, favorite movie, I already know your favorite song but stuff like that.” I sit up so I can see him.

He bites his bottom lip for a minute then clears his throat. “My favorite color is blue, my favorite food is fajitas, favorite drink is cherry Pepsi, favorite movie is Rebel without a Cause, does that answer all of them?”

I shake my head, “Not even close but it’s a start.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

He sits up and runs his thumb over my jaw line, "You know I have a lot of new favorites."

"Do you?" I ask trying to sound like I'm teasing instead of a breathless mess. Just the simple touch of his thumb has my stomach doing flips and my heart about to beat out of my chest.

He leans closer to me, and his voice drops into a husky whisper, "Yes, like I love the smell of flowers, daisies in particular. Coconut has become my favorite flavor. I really like little red fancy cars. Seeing the blush creep across your cheeks. Those long legs that go on for days. I even love Kings of Leon," I start laughing because I can't actually picture Jagger listening to them. He's so 80's hair bands but I love that he loves them. He kisses each of my cheeks then my nose and finally my lips. When he pulls away, he tells me, "But my new favorite thing in the world is the sound of your laughter." His hands fly to my sides and him tickling me mercilessly. My laughter is filling the small apartment. I fall back on the couch with the idea that I might be able to escape but instead he follows. I'm now pinned with no hope of escaping. Tears form in my eyes; my sides are achy and I can't breathe from laughing so hard. Suddenly Jagger stops and looks me dead in the eyes, "That is my favorite."

I look up at him while trying to catch my breath. "I love you Jagger James."

"Lucky me. I love you too Londynn Parrish," he says before I reach up, wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him like crazy just like Farrah suggested.

\*\*\*\*



Later that night I wake up next to Jagger. He's actually asleep which must be a first. Normally I wake up and find him awake, unable to go to sleep. It's a nice change I think as I study his face. He's so unguarded and relaxed when he's asleep. I trace the muscles of his chest and abdomen with my finger, careful not to wake him. I lay my head back on his chest. I'm almost asleep when the doorbell rings sending us both bolting straight up in bed. Jagger looks over at me, "What the hell?" I shrug. He's out of bed and slipping on a pair of sleep pants before I even move. "Stay here."

I wait until he's out of the room then I scamper out of the bed and grab one of his t-shirts. I stand at the top of the stairs where I see Connor standing at his door. Connor looks worried and I'm guessing that Jagger senses it too because the muscles of his back are tense. "Jagger, I'm sorry we all tried to call but I think your phone's dead."

"It probably is. What's wrong?"

I've almost reached Jagger when Connor lets out a long breath. "It's Ace. There was a fight and he's...he's in the hospital." Connor shakes his head. "It doesn't look good."

I can see the walls instantly fly up around Jagger. This is hurting him, but he'll never admit it. Just when things seem to get on a good track something else happens. I know Jagger is going to push me away but I'm going to be there for him every step of the way. I don't care what he says because when he looks back, he'll remember that I was there.

\*\*\*\*

Jagger

Tonight, had been so perfect until Connor had showed up to tell me about Ace. The instant he had said it my heart had fallen to my stomach. I love my brother. I knew he

was difficult, and he caused a lot of shit, but he was still my brother. And even though there was no excuse for his ass like behavior I understood why he felt the need to behave that way. Most people didn't even know the real Ace, they only knew his reputation. The real Ace was just the little nine-year-old boy who came home from school to read to his mom, only to find she had passed away and he never got to say goodbye. Our mom had been his best friend and losing her had hurt him more than the rest of us. He was terrified of loving someone because he knew he ran the risk of losing them. He loved Kynlee, but he had refused to recognize or admit it and now he might never get the chance to.

After Connor left Londynn had pulled me back up to the room and helped get dressed then she quickly did the same. She ushered me back down the stairs to her car. She never said anything and neither did I, it was like the night that I had lost Harlyn and Harper, I was on autopilot. I was moving but I didn't really know how. Now, I'm sitting in the passenger seat of Londynn's car while she weaves in and out of traffic. I should tell her to be careful or slow down, but I don't. Instead, I keep replaying what Ace had told me about how we were doomed in the love department and maybe he's right.

Maybe, I'm fooling myself by thinking of a future with Londynn. Maybe, the James' are meant to be alone or just always lose what they love. I glance at Londynn from the corner of my eye, and I know I can't let what happened to Harlyn happen to her. If I am doomed, then I refuse to take her with me. She tells her car to call Sadie., "Hey, were about to pull up. I'm going to drop Jagger off up front the go park. Where does he need to go?" she asks.

"I'll meet him outside," Sadie replies then hangs up.

Londynn pulls up in front of the doors and lets out a ragged breath. "Okay, I'm going to go park, then I'll be in there."

It's now or never. "No."

"What?" she asks.

I shake my head and stare blankly ahead because if I look at her and I see that hurt in her eyes I'll cave. "I said no. I don't want you here. I want you to go home. Now."

"But Jagger..."

"No this is a family matter and you're not family." With that I open the door and walk off to meet Sadie. I don't look back to see what Londynn does because I know if I see those taillights what's left of my heart will break. When I reach Sadie, she pulls me into her arms. "How is he?"

She shakes her head, "Not good but he's in surgery."

I start heading for the door and Sadie stops, "Aren't we waiting for Londynn?"

Shaking my head, "No, she's leaving. Why is he in surgery?"

Sadie looks like she wants to say something, but she keeps her mouth shut and I'm thankful because if I had to tell her why Londynn is leaving, she'll probably slap me then give me her motherly like wisdom which will send me running in search of Londynn. "He got beat pretty badly and he was stabbed a few times. Once in the abdomen and twice in the lower back area. He lost a lot of blood before anyone found him."

The anger that rolls through me is as bad or worse than when I first saw Londynn after Ryce had beaten her. I turn around in the silent hallway and punch the wall. Sadie quickly grabs my arm and examines my hand. "Did anyone see who did this?"

She shakes her head, “No but it had to be more than one because there’s no way just one guy could cause this much damage to Ace. You know him, he’s one hell of a fighter. You all are so I know it was more than one.”

“You’re right.” We continue down the hallways to the surgery waiting room where my brothers and Kynlee are waiting. When I walk in my brothers are on their feet hugging me. I walk over to Kynlee and sit next to her; she glances up at me. The beautiful girl I had first met is gone. Instead of her warm brown eyes they look hollow. The redness and puffiness surrounding them is enough to break anyone’s heart. She really does love my brother and it kills me to know that he loves her, but she may never get to hear him say that.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

I reach out and wrap an arm around her shoulder. "It'll be okay Kynlee."

"What if it's not?" I hear her mumble through her tears.

I try to lighten the mood with a small laugh, "He's a James, we don't go down without a fight."

She looks up at me. "I know Ace is difficult and not the nicest guy but who would want to do something like this? I mean how do you just jump someone, stab them then leave them for dead? It's crazy!"

"It is. I'm sorry Kynlee."

"Why are you telling me you're sorry? You didn't do this and he's your brother, I should be telling you I'm sorry. I'm just so mad at myself right now," she says fiercely.

"Why are you mad?" I ask her.

She shakes her head and I notice her eyes fill with tears again. You'd think as humans we'd eventually run out of tears, but I know firsthand that never happens. "Because he was only at Red Hott because I wanted to get a job there which caused a fight between us. I stormed out and I think he assumed I went there. None of this would have happened if it wasn't for me."

"Kynlee you're allowed to have a job if you want. Ace needs to chill with his protectiveness. I love him but it's true. Besides how bad could the job be?"

“It’s a cocktail waitress but he thinks the uniform is too short and I don’t even get it! I mean he makes it clear all the time that we’re just friends or just sex so why is he so protective of me? It’s not like he really cares.”

I shake my head, “That’s not true. He may not show it, but I know that my brother loves you. He may never say it because he’s actually terrified of getting hurt, but he does love you, that’s why he’s protective.”

A small smile flashes across her face then she scans the room. “Where’s Londynn?”

“She went home,” I reply.

I watch as the confused look on Kynlee’s face changes to knowledge. “Londynn loves you; you know?”

I shake my head at her then rest my head against the wall staring at the ceiling. I know she loves me but that’s why I have to let her go. Ace is right, we’re doomed.

## Chapter 27

### Jagger

At some point while waiting for news on Ace we had fallen asleep all over the waiting room. In the middle of the night the doctor came out and announced the surgery had been successful and he was now in recovery. He warned us that Ace would be kept in ICU for observation over the next few days and might even require another blood transfusion, but he was optimistic he would make a full recovery.

Axell turns to face our circle of family. “Okay Sadie and I want to stay here. Bowie, will you take Jovi home and make sure he gets to school. Jagger, can you go into the shop this morning and make sure everything is on schedule?”

“Yeah, but I need a ride. Londynn had to leave, and she drove me over here,” I tell them.

Bowie squeezes my shoulder, “I gotcha.”

Axell turns to face Kynlee who is standing next to Sadie. “Are you staying?” She nods, and Sadie wraps an arm around her shoulder.

“Okay, let’s go,” Bowie says. “See you guys around lunch,” he tells Axell, Sadie and Kynlee as we turn to leave.

As we make our way down the hallways to the parking lot Jovi asks, “Where’s Londynn? I figured she’d be with you.”

I sigh, “We kind of had some words. Well, no actually, I kind of took my stress out on her and I told her to leave because she wasn’t family.”

“Damn Jagger! What the hell were you thinking?” Bowie whispers fiercely at me.

I shake my head in disappointment at myself.

“Well, it doesn’t matter now she left.”

As we walk through the last set of doors, I hear Bowie let out a low whistle and Jovi asks, “What if she didn’t?”

“What?” I ask him and turn around to face the sterile looking waiting room. In the corner of the empty waiting room, I see Londynn curled up in one of the hard-plastic chairs, asleep. I run a hand over my face. “I’m such an ass. Y’all go on ahead. I need to talk to Londynn.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

"See you at work," Bowie tells me as him and Jovi turn and disappear into the parking lot.

I walk over to where Londynn is asleep. For a minute I'm overcome with emotion, I had been horrible to her last night, yet she had stayed. She had slept in a chair that I'm sure wasn't the most comfortable thing in the world. She could have easily driven off and back to her place, to her comfortable bed. Instead, she stayed in an empty waiting room by herself after the way I had talked to her. I couldn't dislike myself more than I did right now. I rested a hand on the side of her cheek, and I saw her eyelids flutter, then those dark hazel eyes met mine. "Morning pretty girl."

"Morning. How's Ace?" She asks.

"He'll be okay. He's out of surgery and they expect him to make a full recovery. He'll be in ICU for some time for observation and he may need another blood transfusion but he's going to make it." As she sits up her hair falls forward and I move it out of her face. "I'm sorry about last night Londynn. I took everything out on you, and you didn't deserve that."

"It's okay Jagger," she reassures me.

I shake my head, "No, it's not."

She stands up and extends her hand down to me. "Come on let's go get some breakfast."

I take her hand and we walk hand and hand out to her car. When we get there, she



hands me her keys and I open her passenger side door but before she gets in I pulled her backtowards me. I slip my thumb under her chin and tilt her head back to look into her eyes. "Why'd you stay?"

She locks her arms around my neck and her fingers start running through the back of my hair. "Because I love you Jagger. I knew you were stressed so I didn't take it to heart. I mean yes, my feelings got hurt at first, but I knew you didn't mean it. Besides when you look back on this time, I want you to remember that I was here for you because I love you and I don't want you to face things alone. I'll always be here for you." She tip-toes and her lips meet mine. Before I know it were both so caught up in the kiss that we forgot all about the surrounding world and troubles. When we finally broke away, we were both breathless.

"I love you, Londynn," I tell her before helping her in the car.

As I walk around the car I have to wipe at my eyes. I'm not sure why I've gotten so emotional but hearing Londynn tell me why she stayed had caused this reaction. When I start the car Kings of Leon comes over the speakers and I feel a smile cross my face. I drive until we reach this little beach shack that serves the best omelets I've ever tasted. Once were out and heading towards the doors Londynn says, "I've never been here before. Actually, I didn't even know this place existed."

"A lot of people don't." The waitress that passes us as we enter tells us to take a seat anywhere. I lead Londynn out to the balcony that overlooks the ocean. You can feel fall in the air, there's a cool and crispness to it. "Is this okay?" I ask Londynn once were seated. I wasn't sure, but I thought maybe it was too chilly out here for her.

"Yes. This is beautiful," she says, staring off at the ocean and rising sun.

I follow her gaze and look out over the ocean. I might have been born and raised in California, but I was not a fan of the beach or ocean. Yes, it was beautiful especially

this time in the morning, but the ocean held a certain fear to me. It was so large, so immense that it was kind of terrifying. Not being able to see the end in sight was more than a little overwhelming. Bowie and Jovi were both surfers, but I had never even set a single foot in the ocean. “It is beautiful but a little scary too.”

“Scary?” She asks turning back to study me.

I shrug, “Yeah I don’t know there was something scary about the immensity of the ocean, something so large and deep that you can’t see the end in sight.”

“There are a lot of things in life that hold immensity within them, that doesn’t mean they should be scary.”

“I know but they are to me,” I admit to her.

The waitress appears and takes our orders once she’s gone again Londynn turns back to me. “So do they have suspects on who did this to Ace?”

I shake my head, “No, no one at Red Hott saw it but I’m sure they’ll want to talk to Ace once he’s awake.”

“Red Hott, isn’t that a strip club?” She asks looking more than a little disgusted and confused. I just nod my head yes then she asks, “What was he doing there?”

I take a deep breath before explaining. “Apparently, Kynlee wanted a job there an—,  
“

“Kynlee wants to be a stripper?”

I laugh at her reaction. “No, she wants to be a cocktail waitress because she thinks it will help her with her career in the long run. You know she wants to be a lingerie and

swimsuit model and eventually a playmate, right?"

Londynn scoffs, "No I didn't."

"Yeah apparently, it's why she moved to L.A. but anyways I guess when she told Ace about her new job, he wasn't too happy, and they had an argument, she left, and I guess he decided to go after her and figured she would be there only she wasn't. When he was leaving, he was jumped, we think."

"Oh my gosh, that's horrible. I mean I know that Red Hott isn't the safest place, and it isn't in the safest part of town but that's horrible and poor Kynlee I bet she's a mess," Londynn replies.

"Yeah, she was kind of a mess," I admit to Londynn. Afterwards we ate in silence and Londynn dropped me at home before heading back to her place to get ready for work. I felt like I needed to do something to make up for how horrible I had been to her last night, but I'd have to think of something or ask Axell for advice. I got dressed and headed to work.

\*\*\*\*

Londynn

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

Half way through my shift, I started to feel the effects of last night hit me. I was getting sleepy, and I couldn't seem to stop yawning. By the time my shift ended I was ready to just crawl into bed but as I left the store, I saw Jagger leaning against my car with a bouquet of red roses. When I got closer, he extended them out to me, "Hello there pretty girl."

"Oh Jagger, they're beautiful. Thank you," I tell him as I take the roses from him and bring them to my nose and inhale deeply.

"So, I wanted to make up for last night. Ace is awake, and the cops are going to talk to him. We've been asked to be present and since you are family, I was hoping you'd come with me," he tells me.

I hesitate for a moment because I'm not sure if he actually does want me there or if he just feels like he has to in order to make up for last night. I step closer to him and look up into his amber colored eyes. "Jagger, I'll be more than glad to go with you if that's what you really want but I don't want you to feel obligated to take me because of last night. It isn't necessary that I go."

"Londynn, I want you to come with me. You're a part of this family, my family. Please come with me," he says.

I nod my head and hand him my keys since I didn't see his car anywhere. He opens the door for me then walks around to the driver's side. When we arrive at the hospital I spot Jagger's brothers, Sadie and Kynlee all standing around waiting for us. As we get out and approach the group, they all welcome me which helps calm some of my nerves. I'm not sure why I'm nervous though. We all gather around Ace's bed with

two detectives whose names I've already forgotten because the sight of Ace makes me sick to my stomach. One side of his face is nothing but a swollen, bruised mess. He can't even open his eye on that side. He's got multiple cuts, stitches and bruises on his body from what I can see. An IV is in his hand distributing fluids and a medicine of some sort.

Everyone is standing around and gawking at Ace like he's an alien, myself included when Ace finally says, "Damn I knew I felt like shit, but I had no idea I looked like it too."

It makes us all laugh which is exactly what we needed right now. I notice that when Ace tries to laugh with us, he winces and grabs his side like he's in pain. As suddenly as the laughing had started it ends. One of the Detectives steps forward and speaks. "We need to ask some questions about last night while it's still fresh in your mind." Ace nods for him to continue and the detective gets out a small notebook and a pen. The detective asks a series of questions, most of which we already know the answers too thanks to Kynlee. About what time he believed he arrived and left Red Hott, what he was doing there, did he have any enemies but the one everyone wanted to know the answer to was finally asked. "Did you see who did this to you?"

Ace hesitates and looks around the room at all of us like he's trying to remember something from last night, but I can tell it's something more. His eyes or eye since only one can open at the moment, lands on me and while he shakes his head no, I know it means he's lying. He's trying to protect someone, and I can't help but feel like it was me. "No sir, I didn't see who they were. They hit me in the back of my head with something, I went down then tried to get back up but that's when they stabbed me. I know there was more than one person, but I never got to see their faces. I'm sorry."

"It's okay son. We'll continue to investigate and if you happen to remember anything at all don't hesitate to call us." The detective says as he hands Axell a card with his

name and number on it.

After the detectives left, we were ushered out as well so Ace could rest. I ended up with Jagger at his place and after making up I drifted off to sleep. However, I woke from a nightmare in the middle of the night. Trying to get back to sleep turned out to be harder than I imagined. I had been so tired when I climbed into this bed but now, I was staring at Jagger's ceiling, unable to sleep because I kept seeing Ace's eye on me. Why did he look at just me? And why had no one else seemed to notice this? I know if Jagger had noticed this he would have mentioned or asked about it by now.

By the time Jagger's alarm goes off I'm already showered, dressed and attempting to make breakfast. Jagger comes down the stairs and as much as I want to get caught up in the fluttering in my stomach, I can't allow myself to. I decided last night while lying awake that I would go see Ace and get to the bottom of his reaction. Maybe, I was just being paranoid, but I had to find out. Jagger walks up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist and kisses my cheek. "You're up early pretty girl, couldn't sleep?"

"No, I slept fine. I just got a text from Kristy, my boss, asking me if I could fill in half the day today. Apparently, someone called in sick," I tell him and feel a pang of guilt for lying to him.

"Oh okay, well since you're only working half a day do you want to meet back up here, and we can have lunch together?"

"Yeah, sounds great," I tell him.

"Good then I'll go into the shop while you're at work too," he says before kissing my cheek again and heading back upstairs. When I hear the shower start up, I quickly grab a piece of paper and leave him a note telling him I'd see him for lunch. As I slip out of Jagger's front door, I feel guiltier than I have in years.

\*\*\*\*

After stopping by my place to change clothes I head to the hospital and breathe a sigh of relief when I don't notice any of the James' or Kynlee's car in the lot. I have to keep my anxiety at bay while making my way up to Ace's room. When I reach ICU, I let the nurse at the desk know who I was going to see, she told me no longer than a fifteen-minute visit but I doubted I'd even need that long.

When I first enter Ace is asleep or at least he seems to be but without even opening his eyes he says, "I knew you'd come back but you shouldn't have Londynn."

"How'd you know it was me?" I ask him bewildered by how he knew it was me without opening his one good eye.

He rolls his head towards me, allowing his good eye to focus on me. "Because it smelt like flowers in here all of a sudden," I laugh, and Ace asks, "What are you doing here?"

"I think you know. You gave me a look yesterday when the detectives asked you if you saw your attacker. I want to know why?" I explain.

He shakes his head, "I didn't give you a look, hell I can barely see."

"Ace. You did, and you know it. If you saw who did this to you then you need to tell those detectives."

"Why?" he asks.

I sigh, "So they can arrest them."

"Londynn, you think the world is so black and white but it's not. If I tell them the

guys still won't get arrested. I'm sure they already have an alibi in place. It would be a waste of time and hurt more people than what it already has," he explains.

I study him for a moment. "Are you calling me naïve?"

"Maybe a little. You grew up in a world where the law worked for you, it was your friend. You could depend on it but not in my world Londynn. The James' word or description of someone isn't going to be good enough to make the detectives from this side of town do anything. What happened doesn't matter. I survived, yes maybe I'll have a few more badass scars now but I'm going to live."

"But Ace it does matter. Someone did this to you and they deserve to pay. You're letting them get away with this by not saying anything," I plead with him.



## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

He shakes his head then meets my gaze with his one good eye. “Trust me. I’m saving more people than anything else.”

“How? Who? This sounds ridiculous Ace!”

“I’m saving you, Londynn! And your relationship!” He almost shouts.

His words hit me like a bucket of ice cold water. I think I knew last night what that look had meant but I’d been too scared to admit it to myself. “What do you mean?” I whisper.

“I mean that if I tell who did this then Jagger will blame himself and you and your relationship. It’s how he’s wired, to take the blame. He’ll lose because he’ll push you away. You’ll lose because he won’t let you back in and you’ll both lose your relationship. Jagger is happy for the first time in years. I won’t be the one to take that from him.”

“It was Ryce, wasn’t it?” I ask him, but I already know the answer to my question. Ace merely turns his head away from me and I feel the tears burn my eyes. I turn and head for the door. I manage to get out to my car before the tears start to fall because Ace is right, I’m about to lose everything.

## Chapter 28

Londynn

Once I get my emotions back under control I start my car and head back towards

Santa Monica. The drive takes longer than normal with the morning traffic but when I look at the time I see it's still too early for Ryce to be up and moving around. He rarely gets up before noon. As I pull into his driveway I notice his car, so I know he's home. When I reach the door, I knock instead of ringing the doorbell. At least this way his housekeeper will answer it and I don't have to worry about him trying to sneak out to avoid me if he is awake by chance.

After his housekeeper lets me inside I head up the stairs to his bedroom. I knock and pause only for a second. It's not like I haven't seen him naked before. However, when I enter I'm slightly shocked to see Alivia pulling on one of Ryce's shirts. "Londynn?" she asks looking as shocked as she sounds.

"Alivia." As I scan the room I see Ryce coming out of his closet.

Alivia steps towards me. "This isn't what it looks like."

I hold up my hand up to stop her from talking. "I don't care Alivia." Which was the truth. I didn't care what either of them did. I had only come here to get the answers I needed, to help Ace. "I came here to talk to Ryce."

"Aww...baby you know I'll take you back but I'm keeping Alivia on the side," he says with a wink.

"Oh please! I didn't come here for that I came to find out why you and your band of assholes attacked Ace."

"Ace?" he asks playing innocent.

I shake my head at him but while I'm shaking my head I notice a dog tag laying on his desk. It's a silver ace of hearts card. I recognize it because it belongs to Ace, I know because Kynlee bought it for him. She was so proud she made him show it to

me the night I first kissed Jagger. "He was wearing that the night you nearly killed him," I tell him pointing at the dog tag lying on the desk.

His head falls back in laughter, he continues to laugh until he grabs his side from an ache and even then, he has a hard time controlling it. When he finally regains some composure, I have to wait for him to catch his breath. "I'm sorry, well not really but it's just trying not to take credit for Ace is hard."

"Why? Why Ace?" I ask him.

"You." He simply replies while taking a seat in one of his chairs.

I can't figure out what that means. I would get that if he had jumped Jagger but why Ace. "No, that doesn't make sense. If it was because of me, you would have jumped Jagger."

"Oh! I would have loved that! Unfortunately, he wasn't the one that walked into Red Hott."

"So, you just attacked Ace because he walked into a strip club at the same time as you?" I ask him while he reclines back in the chair like all of this is no big deal.

Ryce shakes his head. "No, I jumped Ace because he cost me you."

I roll my eyes at him, "How do you figure that?"

"Well, you see the night of the charity ball I came back for you but when I got there I saw the taillights of Ace's blue Hellcat leaving. If he hadn't picked you up then Jagger wouldn't have returned, and I'd still have you on my arm instead of Alivia," he says motioning towards Alivia who is sitting quietly on the bed. I can't believe his audacity, to talk about trying to get me back with Alivia in his room. Obviously, they

are more than just friends. "I came back that night to make it up to you."

A hard laugh escapes my mouth and it seems to shock Ryce. "Make it up to me? How the hell could you make it up to me Ryce? You cheated on me in the hallway of the charity ball, forced me into a car while you drove drunk and recklessly, verbally and physically abused me then you drove off leaving me stranded on the side of the road with no cell phone or purse, in a ball gown and heels in a not so safe part of town. How could you make up for that? Even if Ace hadn't shown up to help me there was no fixing that. It wasn't his fault that we ended, and I got with Jagger...it was yours. You and your actions ended us." Ryce studies me for a long time. "You know you're lucky that someone showed up for Ace."

"Doubtful," he grunts.

It sends my already high anger into a boiling state. "He could have died! And it would have been your fault! Yours, and let me guess who was with you...Justin, Marcus and probably Damon."

"Yeah and?" he asks like it's not a big deal that someone could have died, and it would have been their fault.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

I shake my head in disgust and walk to the door. “You’re disgusting.” Once I’m back in my car I pull out the tape recorder I had on me. Maybe Ace didn’t want me to do anything and maybe it would cost me my relationship, but I couldn’t let Ryce and his friends get away with this. They got away with so much all the time because of their name or money or connections but this was serious. Ace could have died. They had to pay for this. I didn’t want to lose Jagger, but I knew that Ace was right. I would lose him. He would lay all the blame on himself for what had happened.

Checking the time, I see I still have time before I’ll need to meet Jagger for lunch. I drive back to North Hills and straight to the police station. I ask for the detective, but he was out, so I left the recording with a police officer at the front. As I pull back up to my condo I feel exhausted. I walk in on Farrah doing some yoga in the living room, when I walk in she pauses the instructor on TV and turns to tell me, “That’s all your mail, there’s something from ABA.”

I gather the large stack of mail and make my way to my room. I couldn’t imagine why I’d have mail from ABA but I quickly search for that particular piece. Once I find it I rip it open to see that I have been offered a spot within the association. I’ve been removed from the waitlist. I can actually become a professional ballerina. It’s funny because for so long that’s all I dreamed about but so much has changed over the past year. I’ve changed, I’m not the same Londynn so I don’t have the same dreams.

My dreams now have to do with Jagger and I, as a couple but who knows I may not have that option anymore. I place the mail on my nightstand. I’ll talk to Jagger first and see what happens. If it turns out that Ace is right, then I’ll come back and call ABA. I quickly text Jagger and ask him to meet me at the beach near the same place

we had breakfast yesterday morning. I don't know why I choose there but I do.

\*\*\*\*

Jagger

“A couple of days ago I heard about this building going up for sale. “I explained to my oldest brother Axell. He’s looking around the crumbling building like I’ve lost my mind, but he doesn’t understand what the building could mean to Londynn. I mean yes right now it’s in bad shape. It’s been abandoned for years but after we fix it up it could be exactly what she dreamed of. “Look, I know this seems crazy and this building doesn’t look like much right now, but you have to admit it has potential. Londynn’s dream was to become a professional ballerina then open her own dance studio. I can’t make the first happen, but I can the second.”

Axell shakes his head, “How did you even afford this?”

“I’ve won a lot of races and I’ve saved most of the money over the years.”

Axell studies me for what seems like forever. “So, let me get this straight. You’ve been racing since you were sixteen and during that time you’ve won almost all of your races. Plus, you’ve always had a day job to pay your bills and what not. So, after your car was fixed, you saved most of your winnings which you decide to use on a crumbling building to convert into a dance studio for a girl who has more money that both of us combined, is that correct?”

I shrug, “Yeah. I know that Londynn could have done this herself, but I wanted to do something special for her. I want her to see that being with me doesn’t mean she has to give up everything or pay for everything. I love her, and I just want to show her that.”

“I can see that. On my days off I’d be happy to help you fix this place up.”

“Thanks man,” I tell my brother as we exit the building. I hadn’t planned on the sale to go through so quickly but now that the place is officially ours, I have an idea. I quickly text Londynn the address to the building so I can surprise her with lunch here and tell her about my plan. I know she’s going to be excited.

I hadn’t heard back from Londynn and I was just about to pick up the phone to call her when she finally texted me back and told me she’d be here within the hour. I quickly ran and got food. I was standing in the middle of the building when I heard a car pull into the gravel parking lot. I was standing in the middle of the building when Londynn opened the door. “Jagger?” She called out into the darkness.

“In here!” I hollered back.

She finally spots me and heads in my direction. “What are you doing here?”

When she’s close enough I grab her, pulling her into my arms, I pick her up and swing her around in a circle. I’m so excited that I can barely contain myself. Once she’s back on her feet I ask her, “What do you think?” while motioning towards the rest of the building.

She hesitates, “Is that a trick question?”

I laugh, “No, I know it doesn’t seem like much now, but you have to use your imagination. The studios can be set up in those rooms over there and over here we knock out these walls and create a performance area.”

“Are you talking about a dance studio?” Londynn asks in shock.

I nod, “Of course! I just signed the papers this morning. I wanted to surprise you.”

Tears spring into her eyes and she turns away from me. I reach out and grab her elbow forcing her to look back my way. "I'm sorry Londynn, I thought this would be good."

She shakes her head, "No, it's perfect but it makes what I have to tell you worse."

"What do you have to tell me?" I ask trying to run over every possible issue, but nothing comes to mind. We seem to have gotten to a better place.

"I didn't have to work today," she tells me first off and simply I answer okay very slowly. "I don't think you or anyone else noticed how Ace looked at me while the detectives were questioning him, but I did, and I knew it meant something. So, I came up with the work excuse, so I could go ask him about it. He remembers who attacked him, but he didn't want to say because he was afraid it would hurt us, but I finally got him to tell me. After he told me I went to confront one of the guys and I saw that dog tag that Kynlee got for Ace laying in his room. He admitted to doing it and named his friends. I had this recorder that I had bought for my college prep class in high school and I used it. I got everything he said on tape. I know Ace wanted to let it slide but this was too big to let him get away with. I mean Ace could have died so I turned in the tape."

I'm standing there trying to absorb everything she's telling me, but it seems so unreal. How had I missed Ace looking at Londynn? Why had he lied to us when we asked about the attackers? Why had Londynn lied about work instead of just telling me about this? What good did it do for Ace to keep this a secret? Then it dawned on me, he was trying to keep from hurting one of us. Londynn had mentioned that. I was scared to ask but I had to. "Who attacked Ace?"

Londynn closes her eyes like that will keep the tears from falling. "Ryce."

That one word, that one name turns my world upside down, Ace having been attacked



and almost killed. I was seeing red, but I had to know why. I understood that Ryce had an issue with me because Londynn had chosen me but what had Ace done. “Why Ace?” I ask through clenched teeth.

“Apparently the night of the charity ball when Ryce left me on the side of the road, he was coming back to pick me up and try to fix things between us, but when he pulled back up he saw Ace’s car pulling back onto the road. He blames him for us,” she whispers.

I start pacing back and forth. My brother being jumped and almost killed was all because I had fallen for a girl from Santa Monica. If he had died it would have been my fault. Ace was right we were doomed. Londynn and I didn’t belong with one another. She’d always belong in Santa Monica with guys like Ryce and I’d always be North Hills. Maybe she had chosen me but look at the price we were paying for that decision. If I had just stayed away from her to begin with then my brother wouldn’t be in ICU right now. As if the guilt of ruining the memory of Harlyn didn’t eat at me on a daily basis now I had to deal with the guilt of almost getting my brother killed because of the girl I chose to be with.

I was so disgusted with myself, so angry that I punched the wall as hard as I could. My hand went right through the wall, leaving a hole. I heard a yelp of shock come from Londynn. As I pull my hand from the wall I do the only thing I can now. “You need to go Londynn.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

“Jagger, please don’t do this...” I hear the pleading in her voice and it could easily break me, but I can’t let it. I can’t turn around and look at her because I know I’ll back out, but this has to be done. Our relationship is affecting other people now. It’s not just about us.

“Londynn. Go!” I holler, and it echoes around the empty building. The building that had held so much promise and hope this morning is now filled with heartbreak and defeat. When I don’t hear her leaving, I yell again, “Now!”

I hear her slowly make her way to the door and just before she leaves, I hear her whisper, “I’m sorry.” I stand there in the silent darkness and pray for the strength to make it through this heartbreak.

### Chapter 29

#### Jagger

After Londynn left, I had stood in the same spot for hours, or so it seemed. I stared at the hole I had punched in the wall. I let myself feel the pain that was suddenly taking over my body. I knew that I was taking a risk being with Londynn, but I had no idea it would be like this. The fact that Ace had been hurt because of my involvement with Londynn just proved yet again how wrong we were for each other. I kept hearing my phone ring, but I didn’t make a move to answer it. Why hadn’t Ace told us himself? Turning around I grabbed my phone without looking at it and headed to my car. Ace was the only one with answers and I intended to get them.

I took the first parking place I saw and made my way up to Ace’s room. When I got

there Kynlee was sitting by his side. She must have seen something on my face because she quickly excused herself, leaving Ace and I alone. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

Ace shakes his head. “Because I knew this would happen if you knew. I knew that if you knew it was Ryce that you would blame yourself and Londynn and ultimately ruin your relationship with her.”

“There’s nothing to ruin Ace! You could have been killed and it’s our fault. We thought we just had to be together and what for? To prove her family and friends wrong? To make all of you think that I can move on from Harlyn and Harper? What the hell was the reason?” I ask him feeling defeated.

“Jagger James, there is something to ruin, your happiness. You love Londynn and it’s something I never thought I’d see you do again, but you did it. The whole point was for that. I didn’t tell you because I knew what you’d do. You need to fix it Jagger. Go get Londynn.” He encourages me.

I stare at my little brother for a while but eventually I came to the same conclusion. My relationship with Londynn is not worth anyone getting hurt. “No, there’s nothing to go after. Londynn and I are done. I need to get to the shop, I’ll see you later.”

I don’t look back at Ace because I don’t want to see the disappointment that will be evident on his face. I know that letting Londynn go is not what he wants me to do but it’s not about wants. We don’t belong in each other worlds and as long as we keep trying the risk of getting our friends and family hurt is just too high. I’ll let her go because it’s the only choice we have right now.

\*\*\*\*

Londynn

1 week later

I hear Farrah sniffle as she squeezes me tighter during our hug. I'd probably cry too if I had anymore tears left in me, but I don't. The lady on the intercom calls for me to board the plane. "I got to go Farrah." She reluctantly lets me go and I turn around and head down the hallway to the plane.

Once I'm seated, I let the events of the past week hit me. I haven't seen or heard from Jagger since I told him about Ryce being the one that attacked Ace. The first couple of days after he'd asked me to leave, I had held onto the hope that he'd come around, that Ace was wrong, but he wasn't. It was now a week later, and I had no sign, text or call from Jagger. We were done. I finally called and accepted the offer with ABA on the fourth day. I spent the past few days packing up my life to move to New York. I knew that Farrah didn't approve but I couldn't live my life here now.

Staying in L.A. meant that I would always be surrounded by Jagger or the things that reminded me of him. Maybe, someday I could return here but not now. All L.A. held for me now was heartbreak after heartbreak. I needed to get away from it all. I knew Farrah was worried because I was leaving therapy, but I really felt I could handle this now. One of my biggest dreams was coming true so I'd make myself handle it.

As the plane takes off I look out the window and watch as L.A. disappears below me. The last piece of my heart shatters as I watch the dream I never knew I had disappear. The life I had foolishly let myself want with Jagger, that future that I knew we'd have to fight for. I just never imagined we'd have to fight so hard or that he'd give up so quickly. Right before L.A. disappears completely, I whisper, "Goodbye Jagger."

\*\*\*\*

Jagger

When I wake up the first thing I do every morning is torture myself by rolling over to the other side of the bed and inhaling the diminishing scent that Londynn left behind. That floral smell was so strong on the sheets the first night I told her to leave that I had went and slept on the couch. The next night I was so lonely I slept in the bed and her scent filled my aching heart and lonely soul but it's disappearing and before long it won't be here at all, just like her. Angry with myself I get up from the bed, I know my reasons for letting her go but it doesn't make it any easier. It also doesn't help that everyone in my life disagrees with my decision, but they don't feel the guilt I do every time I look at Ace. Then again, they also don't feel the ache inside my soul from missing Londynn either.

I stand under the shower head until the hot water runs out. Ace gets released today, he was lucky, he made a full recovery. It could have been worse. The only silver lining is that Ace and Kynlee seem closer than ever. I think he might finally let Kynlee in. After my shower I get dressed and head for my car. I want to be there when they officially release Ace. On my way to the hospital Kings of Leon comes on my radio and instantly Londynn's image pops into my mind, the way her honey hair would catch the sunlight, the way her dark hazel eyes lit up when she laughed, the way her nose scrunched up when I'd try to sing along, the way her foot kept beat with the song. Reaching over I change the station while letting out a string of curse words.

By the time I get to the hospital my mood as spiraled even further down than before. I can't shake the images of Londynn running through my mind. When I enter Ace's room Kynlee is helping him slip his t-shirt on. "Morning Jagger," Kynlee greets me.

"Morning Kynlee," I tell her kissing the top of her head as I pass by her. "Morning brother," I tell Ace while bumping fists with him.

Ace looks at Kynlee, "Will you go grab me some coffee?" He asks her, and she silently nods her head. After she's out of the room Ace turns to face me, "You look like hell man."

I shake my head, “You know I could say the same thing to you.”

He shrugs and winces, “Yeah you could but at least mine isn’t self-inflicted Come on Jagger! This happened to me, but you made the decision to let Londynn go. You caused your own pain for nothing.”

I motion around the room, “For nothing? I don’t call you being attacked and left for dead, nothing.”

“Oh, come on! That’s just your excuse to push Londynn away. Those Santa Monica kids and the North Hills kids have never gotten along. Ryce Whitten has had it in for all of us since day one. This would have happened with or without Londynn, so I don’t blame anyone for what happened, but I refuse to let this be your excuse to hide.” Ace stands up and walks around me but before he leaves out the door he looks over his shoulder and tells me. “Girls like Londynn don’t come around every day. Go get her.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

I stand there for a few moments, letting my brother's words sink in. Before I know what I'm doing, I'm jogging out of the hospital to my car. The only thing on my mind is Londynn.

As pull up to Londynn's place I'm surprised I feel nervous but then again, I'm actually facing my fear. I'm going to dive head first into all of these feelings. It's almost like jumping into the ocean for me. I don't know the depths of her feelings but I'm going to take this chance anyway. I see that both Londynn and Farrah are at home. I pause at the door for a minute, if I'm going to back out this is my last chance. Instead, I push the doorbell. After what seems like a lifetime Farrah finally answers the door. Her messy hair and red rimmed eyes catch me off guard, probably as much as I do standing on her doorstep if the tone of her voice is any indication. "Jagger?"

"Yeah," I say stuffing my hands in the pockets of my jacket. "Listen I know I'm probably the last person Londynn wants to see right now but I really need to see her and are you okay?"

Farrah's eyes had gone wide at the mention of Londynn. "Jagger...I'm not sure how to tell you this."

"Tell me what?"

I notice how it looks like Farrah is trying to look anywhere but where I'm standing. The air seems to thicken, and I can't draw a good breath. "Londynn's gone."

I shake my head and whisper, "No."

“I’m sorry Jagger. She got accepted off the waitlist to ABA and she wasn’t going to go but then when you didn’t show up she called an accepted. She stayed in bed for two solid days then she got up and started packing, kind of like a zombie but still.”

“She’s gone?” I ask her still trying to get over the shock of hearing that.

I notice the moisture in Farrah’s eyes. “She got on a plane about an hour ago.”

No, no, no, this wasn’t how this was supposed to be. I know I made mistakes and I told her to leave but she at least needed to know that I loved her before she left. I want to punch something because I’m so disgusted with myself. “She got into ABA?” Farrah nods in reply. “Well, that’s good.” I turn to leave but Farrah’s voice stops me.

“Do you want me to tell her you came by?” She asks.

I think about it for a minute. If Farrah does tell her I came here looking for her, then there’s a chance she’ll come back. God, I want her back, but if she comes back she’s giving up her dream come true. Can I be that selfish? No, I can’t so I tell Farrah. “No, don’t ever mention it.”

## Chapter 30

Jagger

It’s been two months since Londynn left for New York. I miss her more every day. I guess maybe that saying about, “Absence makes the heart grow fonder” is true. If it’s possible I love Londynn more now than before. I’m ashamed to admit that I stalk her social site pages, but she doesn’t post much of anything on there. My sheets finally lost her scent so in some desperate attempt I bought her perfume and sprayed them with it. It wasn’t the same. I’ve been avoiding everything and everyone aside from work.



It's Friday and Pedal to the Metal is tonight but I haven't went to one of those since I told Londynn to leave. I can't imagine going there, seeing all those faces and knowing that hers won't be amongst them. However, I know I need to go. People are already starting to talk, and I could use the money to add back into my savings since I dipped into that account to buy the building I had planned on making Londynn's dance studio. I force myself off my couch and head upstairs.

By the time I'm dressed and heading for my car it's almost time for the races to start. I punch in Bowie's number, "Hey man!"

"Hey, do me a favor, buy me into the race. I'll be there in ten minutes," I tell him.

He chuckles, "You got it little brother."

The phone goes dead, and I concentrate on making my way in and out of traffic in order to make my ten-minute promise. To my luck I do make it and Axell was nice enough to place me in the next to last race. To my surprise though I'm racing Ryce. Even though Ryce and his friends had admitted they were guilty they didn't see any jail time. Instead their families bought them a plea bargain that only required community service. I'd like nothing better than to beat him into a pulp but that would only land me in jail. Instead, I'll beat his ass on the street, like always.

I'm heading back towards my car when I notice the honey color hair. For a minute my heart skips a beat but then I realize that glimpse is Duke Parrish, not Londynn. As I approach my car Duke extends his hand. In an effort to get him to leave I ignore it. "Okay, I see how it is."

"Really?" I ask him.

He holds his hands up in defense. "Look, I may not have always been your biggest fan but all I ever wanted was for Londynn to be happy. Ironically, I think the happiest

I ever saw her was with you but then Ryce happened and everything blew up.” He holds out his hand again but this time with some paperwork in it, something that looks like a plane ticket. “This is your way to get her back, plane ticket, her address and schedule.”

I shake my head at him. “Man, you Santa Monica kids really have some nerve. First of all, if I wanted to go after her I’d buy my own damn ticket. Second, I’m the one that told her to leave and third, she got her dream come true. So why don’t you take all that paperwork and stick it up your ass Duke.”

I’m just about to get into my car when Duke says, “You’re making a mistake.” With that he turns and leaves. I pull into position for the race but for some reason my mind will not focus. Well, actually I know the reason, it’s Duke. Seeing him and hearing him talk about Londynn threw me off. I turn the music up in my car in an attempt to drown out my thoughts, but nothing happens. By the time it’s my turn to race I’m a complete mess. Ryce gets out first and I can’t seem to get caught up.

When I finally cross the finish line I realize that I just did something I hadn’t done since I was seventeen years old. I lost a race.

\*\*\*\*

Londynn

1 month later

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

It's been three months since I moved to New York. I wish I could say it had been everything I had ever dreamed of but to be perfectly honest it wasn't. Or maybe I just wasn't the same girl who dreamed this dream. Either way I was miserable. Halloween had just passed, and Thanksgiving was right around the corner. As silly as it sounds I missed L.A. and my friends, I missed Dr. Thorton and Sadie, I missed dressing up with Farrah on Halloween, and I even missed my family. But let's face it the thing I missed most was...Jagger.

Foolishly I thought that if I left L.A. that I'd magically forget about Jagger and the mess things had become. I knew that Ace had recovered because the only person I had allowed myself to text was Kynlee and even that was briefly. I hadn't answered calls or texts for anyone else, not even Farrah. Kynlee was my safest bet because she didn't know me well enough to know just how lonely I was plus, she was able to keep me up to date on what was happening around town. I pathetically wished for Jagger's name to come across my screen every time it went off, but it never appeared, and I knew it wouldn't. I knew the day I walked away from him that was it for us.

As I make my way out of the ABA rehearsal studios I let myself replay just how badly I had done today. My head wasn't in the game at all. My points were off, I missed steps, got off beat and shortened my spins. If I didn't get it together I'd end up losing my spot. My phone started ringing just as I was exiting the building, looking down I saw Duke's name on the screen. I silenced my phone and dropped it back in my bag.

"You do know it's rude to ignore calls if you're not busy, especially if they're from your favorite brother," I hear Duke say.

I whip my head up so quickly that I'm pretty sure I gave myself whiplash. "Well, you're my only brother."

"Maybe...you do know how parents are," he responds and I just shrug. "Well, it's good to see you too Londynn."

I sigh heavily, "What do you want Duke?"

His brows knit together, "Why do you think I want something?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe because we've never been close," I tell him.

He nods his head. "That's true but that doesn't mean I'm not curious how you are," he says while wrapping his arms around my shoulders. "Mom, dad and Farrah are all kind of freaking out that they haven't heard from you since you left. You know that neat little invention that you dropped in your bag does keep people from worrying."

I study the ground as we walk down the sidewalk, "I know. I'm sorry. I've just been so busy."

"Not that busy. You're just avoiding, which I get but you can't do that forever." We continue to walk in silence when suddenly Duke says, "Let's go get some lunch." We sit through a pretty awkward and mostly silent lunch. After we finish our food my brother clears his throat and I finally look up at him. "Londynn, I get that this is your life now and that you love it, you're living your dream, but you know mom still wants to know you're okay and Farrah deserves to know you're okay."

I shake my head because he really can't see it. Maybe, I should have gone into acting. "I can't talk to them. I can't talk to anyone from there."

"Why?" Duke asks.

I roll my eyes and decide to stare at the ceiling. Whenever I felt like crying when I was younger if I stared at the ceiling then sometimes it would stop the tears. “Because it’s a reminder of all that’s gone. I gave up that part of my life. I came here to live adream of a girl that no longer exists. You think I’mhappy,I’m miserable. I don’t like New York, I’m so far behind in dancing that my feet are raw and bleeding from all the hours I put in. I have no friends or family here. It’s just me, myself and I. Oh! And all those great thoughts and memories I have to keep me company.”

Duke surprises me then by doing something so out of the ordinary for him, he reaches across the table and takes my hand. “Londynn, if you’re miserable then go home. Go back to L.A. and back to Jagger.” I glare at him. “Don’t try and act like he isn’t a huge part of this.”

“He gave up on us,” I tell Duke as I grab my purse and head out the door of the restaurant. I haven’t gotten too far when I hear Duke catch up.

“Londynn, you both gave up on each other. He felt he was to blame for his brother’s attack and you can’t be upset with him for that. But you didn’t fight very hard either. Did you call or text or visit after he told you to leave?” I give him a puzzled look because I don’t know how he knows all this, “Don’t look so shocked, Farrah told me. Now, answer the question.”

I take a deep breath and mumble, “No, I didn’t.”

“Then it seems to me that you both gave up on each other, only you ran as well.”

I throw my hands up in defeat. “So maybe I did! I thought that this dream could replace the dream I had created with Jagger, that future I had hoped we’d have, so yes, I ran! But I’m sure Jagger is just fine without me and it’s not like he came fighting for me.”

I'm walking as fast as I can down the sidewalk with Duke on my heels when I hear him say, "Jagger James is a mess." I spin around to face him because I know this has to be some kind of trick. I can't imagine Jagger being a mess over me, especially since he was the one that told me to leave. "Jagger is a complete mess without you. Not only is he dealing with the guilt of what happened to Ace but now he's dealing with the guilt and grief of you."

I cross my arms over my chest because my heart is pounding in my chest. "And how do you know that Duke?"

"I was in L.A. last month and I went to pedal to the metal and I saw him. He lost that night. Jagger James lost the race."

I stand there stunned to my core because Jagger never loses. "But Jagger never loses."

Duke shrugs while stuffing his hands in his pockets. "Not since he was like seventeen. I have a meeting I need to get to but my advice to you.... go home Londynn and be happy." Duke leans forward and kisses the top of my head before turning around and hailing a cab.

I stand on the sidewalk for a long time just thinking about Duke's words. Jagger had lost his race and was a mess. Did he regret sending me away? But if he did then why didn't he just call me now? The alarm on my phone goes off reminding me I need to get back to the studio but as I enter through the doors I feel like even less of my heart is with me now.

## Chapter 31

Londynn

Christmas time in New York seems almost magical. It's without a doubt one of the most beautiful places during this time of year. Christmas had always been one of my favorite holidays but this year it just felt empty. Ever since Duke left I'd been even more confused than before. Every rehearsal went horribly, it's like I couldn't get out of my head, and today had been no different.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am*

I was standing on the balcony with a cup of hot tea in my hand when someone said my name, "Londynn?"

Turning around I see one of the girls from my rehearsal group, Savanna. She was one of the best dancers in our group and possibly within the whole company. "Yeah."

"I wasn't sure I had the right name," she says.

She's trying to be nice because there is no way she's been in our rehearsals and not heard my name. "It's not shocking that you know my name considering it gets called every other minute."

"It's a hard transition but can I give you a word of advice. Well, more like an observation." I think about this before agreeing. "It seems that your whole heart isn't in to dancing. To be a professional dancer is tiring and it requires your constant dedication and your whole heart."

I take a sip of my tea before turning to face her. "I thought this was what I wanted. When I was younger I dreamed of this day. I ate, slept and breathed dance. I fought my parents for years on becoming a professional dancer but then one night everything changed. When the dust finally settled after that night the girl I was...changed. Then I met someone, and my dreams changed even more, so you're right my whole heart isn't in this."

Savanna gave me a huge smile and squeezed my hand in a reassuring way. I didn't know why I had just told her all that but she felt safe. It felt like I had known her forever and I could tell her anything. Hell, I basically just had. I kind of hated the fact



that I hadn't gotten to know her better while I was here because she seemed like someone I could have been best friends with. She just had the calming air around her. It was comforting. Her brown eyes were warm and kind. "Well you have to follow your heart, life is too short for anything else."

"Thank you, Savanna."

She shrugs, "What are friends for." She turns around and heads back inside. I guess in some ways we had just become friends. Now the question remained, where did my heart lead me?

\*\*\*\*

Jagger

There was a permanent chill that had sat in the air that came along with the change of the season. Christmas was right around the corner, the local radio stations were constantly playing the seasonal music. It was currently filling the garage. Bowie and Ace had both just left after trying to convince me to go to the races tonight. They had finally given up because there was no way I was going to the races, especially after losing to Ryce last time. No, instead I'd just hide out in the garage and work on cars.

Santa Baby came on the radio, one of Londynn's favorite Christmas songs. I remember her telling me about it one night while we lay in bed. She told me all about how she spent her holidays. She had spent all her time listening and singing along to the seasonal songs while helping Vivienne cook and bake. She had told me it was one of her favorite holidays. I had been looking forward to sharing it with her this year, for us to get a tree and decorate it together but now...now there was nothing. She was in New York living her dream and I was stuck here in my own personal hell that I had created.

Sliding out from under the car I get up and changed the station to the local 80s rock station. That was better, I didn't need any more reminders of Londynn then I already had. Between my run in with Duke at the races and always seeing Farrah it was hard enough to keep Londynn off my mind. Although the past month had been the hardest, ever since Patricia had showed up here one night, it had been a month, but it still felt like yesterday.

It had been late and the only thing that had tipped me off that someone had joined me was the sound of heels. I can't lie, my heart sped up at that sound because I instantly had a hope that it would be Londynn. However, when I looked up I was beyond shocked to see an older version of Farrah. Patricia Parrish was standing in my garage, looking completely out of place. Her navy-blue pant suit and heels certainly didn't fit in here. "Can I help you?"

"I hope so. Jagger James, correct?" I had simply nodded. "I was hoping that maybe you have heard from my daughter."

I had contemplated giving her an answer before finally realizing that I should regardless of how I felt about her personally. Londynn was her daughter and she seemed genuinely concerned at the moment. "I haven't spoken to Londynn since before she left."

"Oh okay," she had replied, and she had sounded almost defeated.

"Are you alright?"

She shakes her head, "You were kind of my last hope. I haven't heard from her since she moved."

"Have you tried to call her?" I asked.

A sad smile appeared on her face. "Yes, but sadly our relationship wasn't on the best terms when she left. I just wanted to check on her, make sure she's happy."

"No offense but I don't recall you being very concerned about her happiness before." I pointed out.

"None taken. I was concerned about her happiness, but my own misery had taken over my life at that point. Now that I have filed for a legal separation from Curtis I can see just how wrong I have been. Londynn had always followed her heart and I think a very selfish part of me was jealous that my daughter had found you. She had found a love that was unconditional, and she was willing to give up everything to follow her heart. I wasn't that brave at her age. You made my daughter happy and even in my self-medicated state I could see that," she sighs before continuing. "I was actually very shocked to find out that my daughter had left for New York considering that she had you."

I toss my rag on the hood of the car with a little more force than I had intended. "She didn't. I'm sure you heard about the attack on my brother. I blamed myself and our relationship. I asked her to leave."

"Oh...well I guess that makes sense. Londynn wouldn't leave if she believed there was still a chance. Well, if you hear from her will you ask her to call me please?"

"Yes, I will," I reply to her.

Right before she exits she turns back to look at me. "My daughter loves you Jagger and I can't imagine that has changed. You're both very lucky to have found one another."

Her words had haunted me ever since that night. "Love Bites" by Def Leppard comes on the radio and I couldn't help but feel like it explained my life right now. I was

under the car when I heard the shop door shut. Sliding out from under the car I stood up while wiping my hands on my rag. Turning around I felt like all the air had been sucked out of the room. That honey colored hair and deep hazel eyes left me shocked and breathless. Londynn. Londynn was here.

\*\*\*\*

Londynn

I had called and asked Farrah to pick me up from the airport. She was more than happy to help. By time we had made it through traffic it was almost time for Pedal to the Metal to start. I didn't want to ambush Jagger, so Farrah had me drop her off while she went to look for Jagger. She called a few minutes later and told me that Jagger wasn't here but the last Bowie and Ace knew he was at the garage. I threw her Range Rover into drive and headed back towards the garage.

When I pulled up I wasn't shocked to see Jagger's Camaro out front. As I pulled in next to it I found my nerves going wild. What if he didn't want to see me? What if he was seeing someone else now? What if he hated me? So many questions. Finally, after I had given myself a pep talk I got out of the Range Rover and made my way to the door. As I got closer I heard a song that I had actually found myself listening to quite often over the past few months.

I took a deep breath before opening the door. I was trying to prepare myself for whatever might happen and coming face to face with Jagger again. Last time I had seen him he had been so angry that he hadn't even been able to look at me, so I wasn't sure what to expect now. The door shut with a loud bang which must have alerted him that someone was here. He slid out from under the car and as he turned around his amber eyes locked with mine. My heart felt like it was about to burst through my chest. "Hi." I managed to croak out.

He stood there just staring at me. Not moving, not breaking eye contact and not saying anything. I was beginning to think this was a bad idea when he finally said. "Londynn?"

I took a deep breath and a step towards him. "Look I know that when we last saw each other things were a mess and I just wanted to say I'm so--."

Jagger cut me off, "I'm sorry Londynn. I was a jerk. I should have never treated you like that. I've regretted it every day since that night." I closed the distance between us and grabbed his shirt and pulled him towards me. As soon as my lips met his I felt every nerve in my body calm. This was the dream I wanted now. Jagger was where I was meant to be now. Jagger pulled away for a moment. "I love you Londynn."

"I love you too Jagger," I tell him before he pulls my mouth back to his.

## Epilogue

### Jagger

It was New Year's Eve tonight and I had some big plans for Londynn and I. We had ended up spending Christmas together, first with my family and then with hers minus her father. It had turned out to be kind of perfect but then again anytime I got to spend with her was perfect to me. We had started working on her dance studio at the beginning of the week. Seeing the excitement in her eyes made everything we had been through worth it.

Looking back, I couldn't believe how prideful and foolish I had been. I had pushed her away and I could have very easily lost her. Thankfully, she was willing to set her pride aside for our relationship. I owed all my happiness to her. That's why I knew this night was the perfect time.

My loft had been covered in flower petals and candles thanks to the help of Kynlee and Farrah. I wanted everything to be perfect for Londynn tonight. I had Kings of Leon playing throughout the place. I heard the door lock turning with the key that I had given Londynn.

When she stepped inside, I saw the shock register on her face even in the muted light that the candles put off. “Jagger, what is all this?” She asked looking around the loft.

“It’s for you. I wanted tonight to be special,” I tell her.

She smiles and closes the distance between us. “Jagger, you know every night I get to spend with you is perfect. You didn’t have to do any of this but it’s beautiful.” She kisses me quickly.

“Well, I fixed your favorite meal and I figured since we had decided to stay in and just watch the ball drop on TV that this was the least I could do,” I explain to her. She turns around to look at the kitchen and it was the perfect time. I grabbed the box out of my pocket and dropped to my knee. When Londynn turned around, she gasped in surprise. I took her hand in mine. “Londynn Faith Parrish, I love you with everything I have. You would make me the luckiest man in the world if you’d agreed to marry me. So, will you marry me?”

Londynn drops down to her knees and throws her arms around my neck while whispering yes over and over. I finally get her to stop long enough for me to slip the ring on her finger. She smiles through her tears, tears that I know are happy this time. “I love you Jagger James.” I kiss her again and I can’t help but feel like the luckiest guy. I’d had love before and lost it and somehow, I got lucky enough to find it again. Londynn Parrish would become Londynn James someday in the future and I couldn’t wait to see what the future held.