



Need for Speed (The James Brothers #4)

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Category: Romance

Description: Axell James is the backbone of the James family. He's had one constant in his ever-changing life, Sadie. The two seem to have a rock-solid relationship. From the moment Sadie landed in Los Angeles during their senior year of high school she caught Axell's attention.

Now, years later they are married and living their happily ever after until Sadie's past comes back to haunt them. Axell has always had Sadie on a pedestal, believing she is perfect but when the lies from her past catch up to them he'll realize she is far from perfect and the fall from the pedestal could be deadly for their relationship.

Will Axell and Sadie be able to survive his need for speed and her need to outrun the lies of her past?

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Axell

Guns n' Roses was blaring through the speakers.

The smell of oil and metal filled the air.

A light breeze from the opened garage doors makes its way underneath the car where I'm currently at.

The shop closed an hour ago but I'm still here working on this car.

It's not race night, so I have nowhere to be but at home and I avoid that now days.

Not because I have a bad home life like some of my friends.

Actually, it's the opposite. I grew up in a great home with parents that showed us what true love looked like.

Sure, we could have had more money, but I couldn't complain either.

The problem was that my perfect home life was crumbling.

My mom had been diagnosed with cancer a couple of years ago, and at first, we were all hopeful, even the doctors, but as time passed so did that feeling of being hopeful.

Each day she slipped from us a little more and so did my dad.

My mom and dad had been high school sweethearts and I get that the idea of life without her was impossible for him.

I didn't say much because what could I say?

I didn't understand that kind of love. I had never even been in love.

Sure, I had a girl I took to school functions and that I hooked up with after the races, Jemma, but that's all it was.

We both understood and agreed so it worked.

So, I couldn't tell my dad I understood how he felt because I didn't.

I knew what it felt like to be losing my mom, but I didn't understand losing your other half.

The biggest problem was that by losing mom we were losing our dad too.

Everything he did was for her but otherwise he had checked out.

I guess it was his way of dealing with it.

With both of our parents going, that left me to raise my brothers.

Bowie and Jagger were old enough that they didn't need me, but Ace and Jovi still had a ways to go.

I had to stand tall and be strong for them.

I was going to have to step up as the father figure since I was the oldest even though I

wasn't ready.

I heard laughter coming my way, so I roll out from under the car. I see my younger brother Bowie and our friend Roscoe. It's not race night so I'm not sure what they're doing here. Bowie looks at me and rolls his eyes. "You aren't going like that are you?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" I ask as I wipe my hands clean of grease.

Bowie laughs. "The bonfire party."

Joke's on them the bonfire was next weekend.

"It's tonight," Roscoe adds.

Damn, he's right. I forgot tonight was the party. I shrug. "You guys go on ahead. I'll skip it."

"The hell you will!" Bowie says, as he grabs my shoulder and shoves me toward the bathroom. "You need a break so you're coming. Besides, Harlyn's cousin just moved back and I bet she's hot. Probably a good distraction."

I roll my eyes as I rinse off and change. "For you or for me?"

Bowie huffs. "Not for me dumbass. Remember I have a girlfriend named Hollis."

Bowie having a girlfriend is very new to me.

He's always been the ladies' man, so I keep waiting for him to return to his old ways but surprisingly enough he's been all about Hollis since he met her.

“I don’t need a distraction. I have Jemma for that crap and it’s a drama free zone.

If you add someone new, then you have to worry how to handle all of it and I don’t need that. ”

After I was cleaned up Bowie and Roscoe headed off to pick up Hollis and I headed for the beach.

By the time we pulled in I was surprised to see the party in full swing already.

I spot Jagger and Harlyn easily enough and make my way over to them.

I grab a beer and try to relax. I hear squeals and screams coming from the ocean’s direction.

As I turn to see what is going on, I see a guy from school with a girl I’ve never seen.

He picks her up and throws her over his shoulder as he runs for the water.

She screams the whole way until he drops her in the water.

As she stands up, she turns around and kicks her leg out, sending water flying toward the guy. I watch as they splash, wrestle, and laugh with each other. She’s so carefree and it draws me in. “Who is she?”

“My cousin Sadie Rogers,” I hear Harlyn say, but I didn’t realize I had asked that question out loud.

She jogs out of the water and I watch as the moonlight dances off her wet, fair skin.

She has on denim cutoffs and a navy-blue v-neck t-shirt.

She approaches the group and I find myself holding my breath.

Her cheeks are rosy from being a little out of breath.

Her baby blue eyes are such a contrast to the almost black hair on her head.

Once she joins us, Harlyn introduces us and when Sadie smiles at me it's like everything else fades away.

All the crap at home is gone. That smile could light up a pitch-black room.

Maybe, that's what was wrong with my heart, it was pitch black then Sadie smiled, and everything changed.

I didn't need a distraction but maybe I did need Sadie.

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Axell

Jovi gives me his puppy dog eyes. “Another night on the couch?”

I shrug like it’s not a big deal. “Yeah, that damn bed is just so uncomfortable.” He shakes his head because he knows better, and I know that.

Why is it that we always try to lie to our kids when things are bad?

It’s really an insult when you think about it.

We try to sugar coat everything for them when really, they have already figured out the thing, we are trying to keep from them.

Jovi may not be my kid, but he is my responsibility, mine and Sadie’s.

At the thought of her I feel a pain shoot through my heart.

I wish I could say I’m shocked when I open the bedroom door and don’t see my wife, Sadie, in our bed, but I’m not.

It’s become the state of our relationship.

I sleep on the couch, Sadie sleeps in our bed then gets up early enough to sneak out of the house without me knowing.

We avoid each other, we walk on eggshells when we are around one another. It’s

ridiculous.

We've been together almost fifteen years and the minute we got married a few months ago everything changed.

Everything became a mess that I don't know how to fix and that's an issue for me.

I'm a fixer, when something is wrong, I try to fix it.

I feel a need to fix everything for everyone.

I have to fix it but I don't know how to fix this.

Sadie changed and now she wants different things than what we had agreed on.

I haven't changed, I still want the same things.

Well, really, I only want one thing...Sadie.

I toss my pillow and blanket on the end of our king size bed that is already made for the day.

It's like she was never there at all. As I enter the bathroom I can smell her.

The scent of honeysuckle fills my nose. She hasn't been gone too long.

I can still feel the humidity from the shower in the tiny mint green bathroom.

I rest my hands on the sink and look at my reflection.

I'll be thirty-two in a few months and this is not how I saw my life.

Noise from the hallway reminds me that I still have Jovi that I need to look out for, so I hop in the shower, not even giving it time to heat up.

After a quick shower and dressing for work, I head to the kitchen to make breakfast for the two of us. Jovi joins me and sets the table while I finish up cooking. We sit in silence until both of us are done. “Do you need money for gas?”

“No, I filled up last night,” Jovi replies.

I nod. “Good, how about your homework?”

A laugh escapes from him but it’s not a happy laugh, it’s a harsh laugh. “All done. You know mom already asked me all this last night. Maybe you two should try talking sometime. Just an idea,” he says, before turning around, grabbing his backpack, and heading for the door.

I know this situation is hard on him and I hate that.

Growing up we hardly ever saw our parents fight and to Jovi that’s what we are...

his parents. He was almost four when our mother passed away so his memories of her are vague at best. After she passed away our dad was just lost, drowning in the grief and unfortunately, that’s the only way Jovi knew him.

Sadie is the only mom Jovi really knows.

Our mom passed away just two months before my high school graduation.

Sadie and I had been together almost six months, but the way she stepped up was shocking.

She would come over before school to help with breakfast and make sure Ace got off to school okay.

Then as soon as school was out, she'd come back to our house until Ace and Jovi were in bed for the night.

I doubt it shocked anyone when I asked her to move in after graduation.

We'd been in this house ever since. My dad was gone now, and my brothers have all started their own lives.

It was just us and Jovi, but soon he'd be gone too, and I didn't know what would become of Sadie and I then.

Sadie

The alarm on my phone started to go off. I don't know why I even bother setting the damn thing. I'm awake hours before it goes off, hell I'm awake most of the night. I roll over and look at the empty side of the bed, his side of the bed, and I let the emptiness consume me. How did we get here?

Finally, I get out of bed and shower. Before I realize it the shower starts to turn cold, I hadn't meant to stay in here so long.

On autopilot I get ready for work, slipping on a pair of purple scrubs, French braiding my strawberry blonde hair, applying a little mascara, and spraying on some of my honeysuckle body spray.

Grabbing my purse, I check to make sure my protein bar is tucked inside along with

my cell phone and keys.

Quietly, I make my way to the kitchen and grab a bottle of water.

I stop with my hand on the front door, from the small hallway I can see Axell stretched out on the couch.

His feet hanging over the edge and his head in what has to be an uncomfortable position.

A pang of regret shoots through me. God, I miss him.

I allow myself to stand in the small hallway and drink him in.

His square jaw is covered in a dark five o'clock shadow which only makes his chiseled cheekbones stand out more.

He's gotten a haircut recently because the sides are extremely close to his head and the top longer and slicked back.

He's shirtless and even though I've seen his defined chest multiple times.

I'd be lying if I said it didn't have some effect on me.

His half sleeve tattoo is on full display.

The black and gray waves that swirl from his collarbone down to his elbow with skulls added into the design.

Axell starts to mumble and I know him well enough to know that he is about to wake up.

I quickly slip out the door and make my way to my car.

My beautiful 1968 Pontiac GTO. It was black with a red racing stripe.

My tires matched with red rims. The beautiful car was a wedding present a few months ago.

It had always been my dream car, but I had refused to pay the money out for it.

When Axell had first given me the keys I tried to get him to take it back, but he refused.

With the way things are between us now I feel incredibly guilty that he pays the payment on it.

When I get into my car Guns n' Roses come blaring over the speakers.

I groan and quickly scan for a different station.

Not only is Axell named after the band but it also happens to be his favorite band.

I can't listen to them without wanting to cry.

Finally, I find a station playing one of my favorite artists, James Bay, I turn up the station and back out of the driveway.

As I make my way to Spirit Rehab where I'm a nurse, I roll my windows down.

The air is fresh with the smell of salt water coming from the ocean and early morning dew from the spring season fastly approaching.

The sky painted with baby pinks, purples, and blue as the sun works to rise up.

It's beautiful. Sunrises were always my favorite time of the day. It was mine and Axell's time.

As the traffic becomes thicker, I slow down to a snail's pace and let my mind wander back to the first time I saw Axell.

I had just gotten back this afternoon and already Harlyn and her boyfriend, Jagger James, had convinced me to go to some bonfire beach party.

I was reluctant because I didn't know anyone else here except for these two.

Technically, I didn't even know Jagger until a few minutes ago but Harlyn convinced me.

So, here I am standing in my tiny bathroom as I work on some makeup.

I had decided to go casual in my denim cutoffs and simple v-neck t-shirt.

I left my dark hair down. I had dyed it before leaving South Carolina this week.

It had come out a lot darker than I had expected but oddly enough I liked it.

The darkness of it actually made my fair skin look like it had a glow and my baby blue eyes popped more.

I applied some mascara, blush, and lip gloss before deciding I was ready for this so-called party. As I stepped out of the bathroom Harlyn whistled at me and I blushed. "The guys are going to love you."

I rolled my eyes because guys were the last thing I was supposed to be thinking about.

I had to uproot my whole life in South Carolina in my senior year of high school because of a guy.

My mom shipped me to live with my dad and brother Seth.

Guys weren't even on my radar. "Guys are the last thing I'm worried about. "

"Fair enough," Harlyn replies as we make our way out to Jagger's car.

That was always the great thing about Harlyn, she never pushed or pressured you about anything.

As we made our way to the beach I took in my surroundings.

It was a different kind of beautiful from South Carolina, but it was beautiful in its own way.

As we park, I'm shocked to see just how many people are already gathered on the otherwise deserted beach.

We settle in and it isn't long before the one thing I promised myself to stay away from finds its way into my line of sight.

A tall surfer looking guy catches me staring at him and smiles while adding a wink in my direction.

I can feel myself blush which leads me to mentally cursing myself because the last thing I should be concerned about is a damn guy.

The guy finally makes his way over to me and introduces himself, Aaron.

He's cute but I don't feel anything beyond that, but Harlyn is busy with Jagger and his friends so I decide it couldn't hurt to talk to Aaron.

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Soon after I find myself with a beer in hand and swaying to some song.

Then Aaron picks me up and swings me over his shoulder and jogs to the ocean before dropping me in.

The cold water sobers my buzz up instantly.

Hell bent on revenge I stand up and kick my leg out sending the water flying out in his direction.

Aaron and I start a splash war which quickly leads to wrestling.

I give up when it becomes clear that I won't be able to win.

As I leave the ocean, I spot Harlyn and decide to check in with her, but as I approach, I have a misstep as the most gorgeous human being I've ever seen catches my eye.

He is standing next to Jagger and I can see some similarities.

The same square jaw and chiseled cheekbones, dark hair, and tall.

This guy has to be at least 6'4" compared to my 5'1" frame. I'm a sucker for a tall guy.

I manage to get my mind straight and make my way to the group, but I swear I can feel the mystery guy's eyes on me.

Once I join the group Harlyn introduces me to the new people.

The mystery guy is Axell James, Jagger's older brother.

He's even more gorgeous up close. He reminds of the Greek Gods you read about in the mythology books.

All night I hung around the group hoping to talk to Axell but shortly after I had joined the group a beautiful blonde walked up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. My heart fell, but of course someone as good looking as he is, has a girlfriend.

That makes sense. My jet lag starts to kick in a little while later and I'm barely able to keep my eyes open.

"Do you want a ride home?" I hear a deep voice ask.

The voice dances over my body like music and makes every nerve stand on end.

I look up and see Axell towering over me.

"You look like you're about to fall asleep."

I laugh but it comes out airy and barely there. "A little jet lagged, that's all."

He smiles and even his smile is more perfect up close. "Well, I'm fixing to leave if you'd like a ride home. I promise I don't bite, but if I do, I've had all my shots."

I laugh, and it sounds normal this time. He's handsome and funny, I'm a goner. "Well, I'm not against biting but I'm more worried about your girlfriend's claws." A look of confusion crosses his face. "Pretty blonde named Jemma."

“Oh,” he says shaking his head. “She’s not my girlfriend so you’re good.”

Part of me is screaming for me to go with him and the other is screaming this a horrible idea.

Of course, that little devil in me wins and I stand up and follow him to a car.

He opens the passenger side door and as I pass by, I catch a whiff of his scent, oil and musk, who would have known that those two scents would smell like heaven?

It’s masculine and natural. When he gets in the car, he tells me I can pick the radio station, but Lynyrd Skynyrd come over the speakers and I instantly start to sing along.

The song ends while we are sitting at a red light and my stomach picks now to roar like a lion. Axell laughs then takes a right, the opposite direction of my house. Before I get to ask, he pulls into a fast food drive-in that looks like it just came out of the 50s. “What is this place?”

“It’s Burt’s, best food in town.” He pulls in and a car hop appears. Axell orders two cheeseburgers with bacon, two large fries, and two chocolate milkshakes.

“What if I didn’t like chocolate?”

He turns to me and eyes me. “You love chocolate.”

“Do I now?” I ask.

He nods slowly. “You like the things that are deemed bad for you and you are not one to deny yourself the simple pleasures in life.”

His words shock me because they are so true.

Even with the warm breeze I have goosebumps covering my body.

I try to smile but I'm sure it looks forced.

Soon enough the food arrives. We eat in silence, nothing but the music from the drive-in speakers playing.

Axell is right, this is the best food. Afterward, he pulls out and heads to my house.

When he parks, he opens his door and walks around before I can tell him he doesn't need to.

He opens my door and extends his hand to me.

The minute our skin meets it's like my arm is on fire.

Butterflies attack my stomach. I get out on wobbly legs.

As I go to step up on the curb, I trip but Axell catches me, pulling me into his chest. Speechless, I look up into his eyes but up close they look like two different colors.

I move to my tiptoes to get a better look and sure enough his left eye is solid blue and the right eye is half blue and half hazel.

They are mysterious but hold sadness in them.

A look I recognize. Before I even realize he leans down and presses his lips to mine, moving one of his hands from my waist to my hair.

I've kissed my fair share of guys before, hell I've even thought I was in love before, but I've never had a kiss feel like this.

This kiss has my body on fire and my nerves standing at attention.

The world around me has ceased to exist. I've never had that feeling of becoming one with another person, but with Axell I swear that's what we just did.

Axell pulls away from my lips but he's only a breath away.

I'm breathless and by the look on his face I think he's just as affected.

"Come with me," he demands as his husky voice soothes my raging nerves. I simply nod not caring where we go.

We get back in the car then drive to a tiny playground in a pretty questionable area. He takes my hand as we walk to the swings. I sit down, and he starts to push me. "Why don't you swing too?"

He comes around and sits beside me. "This used to be my favorite place in the world. My mom used to bring me and my brothers here every day. I grew up here. I played cops and robbers, superheroes, cowboys and Indians, my whole childhood was here. I remember my mom sitting under that tree with a picnic basket on long summer days. She'd be reading while we played for hours. "

I smile, imaging Axell as a child, running and playing in this playground. "That sounds like a great memory to have."

"My mom is dying so memories will be all I have soon enough," he whispers.

My heart cries for him. This explains the sadness in his eyes.

I reach out and take his hand in mine as the sun starts to rise in the sky.

If I thought I knew anything before I was wrong, so wrong.

I didn't know anything until Axell James gave me a ride home and changed my life.

The traffic starts to move again, and I let the memory slip from my mind. What happened to those two who loved each other so much?

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Axell

Racing gave me a sense of power that I no longer had in my life.

It also didn't hurt that I was the best. I wasn't being cocky just honest. No one wanted to race me and whoever did always lost. I could drive a car better than anything else in my life.

I talked in the language of speed and cars better than I could talk to any human I knew.

My dad instilled two things into me; cars and music and both had always been my saving grace until I had found Sadie. Giving up racing when she voiced her fears was a no brainer for me. As much as I loved racing and craved it, I needed Sadie more than anything else in this world.

Racing had also led my life down a dangerous path.

Because I was so good with an undefeated record at the street races and I seemed to have no concern for myself, I was approached by some guys.

The type of guys that you know you should avoid, not look in the eyes, turn around and run in the opposite direction, type of guys.

However, I was numb on the inside at the time.

I choose to be numb because it was my only option.

I had to remain strong for my family and the only way to do that was to remove my feelings, to numb myself, so I did.

Roberto and Manuel approached me one night after I had won yet another race.

My winnings for that night was close to five hundred dollars.

Of course, when you're a teenager that seems like a ton of money.

I was celebrating with my brothers, Bowie and Jagger and some of our friends when the two men appeared.

I noticed them standing along the street attempting to fit in but sticking out like a sore thumb.

For starters they were in their late twenties while the rest of us were in high school or college.

The oldest being twenty-three. The other thing that made them stick out was the fact that they were trying to dress down but even in their jeans and t-shirt they looked far too expensive for this part of town.

After celebrating for a bit everyone started to disperse with the decision to head to the beach.

As I made my way to my car the guys approached me.

One spoke very broken English while the other spoke none at all, but they still managed to compliment me on my driving while offering me a job.

I remember feeling like I was in some movie or waiting for someone to jump out and

holler “gotcha” but no one did.

Before they left, they handed me a card with a phone number on it.

If I decided to take the job, then I needed to call that number.

I didn’t even know what the job was just that they promised me over a thousand dollars to race plus half of my winnings.

I had no idea the kind of mess I was getting myself into by even considering the offer.

I guess at the time though I didn’t care.

Sadie didn’t know about that arrangement for years. As I pull into the shop my phone starts to ring. I look down and see my younger brother’s name flashing across the screen. “Hey Ace, what’s up?”

“It’s been a hell of a morning. I got no sleep last night.

We got a call that Kynlee’s little sister, Brooke had a pretty bad fall from a horse, back in Texas.

She wasn’t going to go since the wedding was this weekend, but I told her I’d get it all rescheduled, then helped her book her flights and what not,” Ace explains sounding a little winded.

“Damn, I hope Brooke is okay.”

“Yeah, me too. I actually called for another reason,” Ace comments.

I chuckle. “I figured you did.”

“Here’s the thing. I told Kynlee I’d get the wedding rescheduled which as far as guests isn’t too hard since it’s mostly just our friends and family, but I don’t know how to reschedule the rest of this crap,” he says in a huff.

Laughing at him I say, “Okay, let me check in at the shop since I just pulled in then I’ll meet you. Where are you?”

“Inkredible.” Ace replies, the tattoo shop he owns.

“Okay, do you have a list or something of who we need to get a hold of?” I ask.

A loud laugh comes through the phone. “A list? I’ve got a damn book over here!”

“Okay, okay, I’ll be there in a few. Just chill for a bit,” I tell him.

I hang up with Ace and run into check on the shop.

I can hear the sounds of Starset from out here.

I don’t like to be too strict on my crew because they are great and for the most part, they have pretty good taste in music.

As I enter a few of my employees holler out and wave.

I stop by the main office where I see the secretary, Elsa, sitting on the phone.

I step inside and she waves. “Good morning, Elsa. How’s everything?” I ask her.

“Pretty good. Got a full roster but have almost everything in stock. Here’s a list of what we are using and then some of the things that have become flagged because were out,” she tells me.

Elsa somehow created a system for us to keep track of parts.

A lot of customers are returning customers, so I like to try and keep the most basic parts on hand, so they don't have to wait as long to get their vehicles back.

Elsa keeps count of the things we use and lets me know once we are getting low or out of an item.

The system works great and gives our shop a good reputation despite the part of town it's located in.

Customers know that more than likely they'll get their car back quickly if it's something minor.

"Great job. I'll get this stuff ordered. Anything else? If not, I need to go help my brother with some stuff."

She shakes her head. "Nope, that's it. Jagger and Bowie are both on the floor so if we need any signatures, I'll just grab them."

"Sounds great. Have a good day," I tell her as I leave and head to my office. I sit down and get everything ordered. Before I leave, I go in search of my brothers. Spotting them I head over. "Hey, I'm heading out."

"Already?" Bowie asks.

I nod. "Yeah, did you hear about Kynlee's sister?"

"Yeah, bad news right before the wedding," Jagger comments.

Bowie and I both nod in agreement. "Yeah, it is but they are rescheduling the

wedding which is why I'm leaving. I'm heading over to Inkredible to help him get things rescheduled. I'm sure he's losing his shit by now."

Bowie laughs. "Probably but if anyone can help him...it's you. Call us if you need anything."

"Will do," I tell them before leaving the shop and heading back to my car.

I made a quick stop to grab some subs from the local deli then head over to meet Ace.

As I enter the shop the music goes off letting the artists know they have people up front.

I quickly call out and let them know it's just me, so they don't have to stop what they're doing.

Ace appears looking stressed, his hair is in disarray from him pulling on it. "Well it's about damn time. Where the hell have you been?"

I hold up the sack and drink holder. "Getting food so we can figure out what you're doing.

" We head back to the room that he uses to tattoo in.

After getting situated we go through Kynlee's book and get just about everything moved a month up.

Everything except for the band which is already booked for the night.

"Damn it! What do I do?" Ace says, pulling on his hair again.

“Breathe. Call Kenndrix and see who else Kynlee would like? We’ll figure it out.

” I tell him. It’s odd to see my brother stressing over a wedding.

I was certain that he’d never get married.

Losing our mom had affected him the most, but then Kynlee came along, and he changed.

She brought a different side out of him just like Sadie did for me.

Sadie

I get to work early so I grab a cup of coffee from the employee lounge and a protein bar and head outside to sit in the sand.

While sitting there I watch the waves coming back and forth, constantly in a tug of war.

That’s how I feel right now. I’m in a tug of a war but Axell doesn’t even know about it.

I know he’d rise to occasion and become my knight in shining armor but there’s a part of me he doesn’t know.

The part of me that I left in South Carolina when my mom shipped me off to L.A.

It’s been almost fifteen years and I’m afraid the truth can’t come out now.

I don't want Axell to see me differently and I'm afraid he would if he knew about the girl I used to be.

He knows I had a wild streak, but he thinks that's where the story ends but it doesn't.

Is anything ever that simple? I've been living a lie for so long that I had started to believe it myself, but history has a way of resurfacing when we least expect it and biting us in the ass.

"Hey you!" I hear Lyndsay, my co-worker and best friend, call out to me as she makes her way out to sit beside me.

She looks over at my measly breakfast and shakes her head.

She hands me something warm wrapped in foil.

"Here, I figured you'd have one of those again and I didn't think I could bear to watch you choke it down. "

"I don't choke it down," I reply which is pretty much true because I barely taste anything anymore. I only eat because my body requires it.

"Okay, then I choke while trying to watch you eat that. Those things are nasty, and no one should have to eat them unless they just have to," she says with a laugh. "I made breakfast burritos so humor me and just eat the damn thing."

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I smile and take the burrito. Lyndsay has always been like this, I would call her bossy but she's really not.

She's just honest and opinionated. She's determined to make sure that everyone has everything they need and that's what makes her such a great nurse and mother.

After Harlyn was killed I could have fallen back into old habits and if it hadn't been for her and the fact that Axell and I were raising Jovi, I probably would have.

When I had first moved here all I knew was my cousin Harlyn and my brother Seth.

Seth worked graveyards down at the docks and after work he'd go surfing for a few hours in the morning.

I'd only get to see him a couple of hours after school.

I became really close to Harlyn and her best friend at the time, Lyndsay, we became the female version of the three musketeers. The Charlie's Angels if you will.

Then Harlyn got killed and life took a tailspin.

I did the one thing you aren't supposed to do when that happens.

I kept trying to correct it and every time I did it got harder and messier.

Finally, I realized that I couldn't fix it for everyone.

I couldn't tell them how to grieve. I couldn't tell them how to feel.

I had to sit down and watch everyone handle it in their own way, and I had to figure my way out.

Harlyn and Seth were the only two that knew me, like truly knew me.

When she died so did that part of me because I knew there was no way in hell that Seth would ever say anything about that girl to anyone?

He'd take her to the grave. Without Harlyn reminding me of the girl from South Carolina I fell deeper and deeper into the lie of who I was.

"Eat!" Lyndsay demands, using her mom voice. I laugh then take a bite of the burrito to appease her. Lyndsay hasn't changed much since I first met her. Her medium length brown hair is pulled back into a ponytail. She is a queen when it comes to makeup and I hardly ever see her without it.

We finish the rest of our breakfast in silence then make our way back up to the rehab center where we work.

I love my job. Spirit rehab facility deals with a range of patients, all separated by floors.

We have patients that are dealing with substance abuse, mental illness and eating disorders.

It's really fulfilling when you get to see your patients getting well and then move on.

I've seen a handful of my former patients around town and it's always heartwarming to see them healthy and still living life.

It makes my job worthwhile. Of course, not all of them stay healthy and for those ones that we lose, it's hard to take but at the end of the day, I wouldn't trade it for anything.

The other great thing about my job is that it demands all my attention.

Whenever I'm at work I'm fully here. I have no down time to think about myself or my life.

No outside situation is more important than my patients and what they are going through.

Work is my distraction and it's the best one I've found.

It was such a long day at work. All I really want is to soak in a hot bath, eat some pasta and watch some horrible TV.

As I pull into the driveway, I see Jovi's car but not Axell's yet.

I make my way inside and the house is quiet except for the music coming from Jovi's room.

I stop by and see him sitting over an open book. "Hey buddy."

"Hey mom," he says with a smile on his face. Jovi started referring to me as mom shortly after his biological mother passed away. It shocked me at first, but over the years it has become normal. "How was work?"

"Long, speaking of work, why aren't you at work?" I ask him.

“I have a big test tomorrow, so dad sent me home to study for it,” Jovi says while studying his book.

His hair keeps falling over his eyes and I have to resist the urge to reach out and move it.

If I had it my way, he’d get a haircut, but he’s at that age now where he wants to make his own decisions. “Are you and dad okay?”

I hear the concern in his voice and it breaks my heart that he’s even worrying about this.

“Yeah, we’re fine. Just some silly argument, nothing big,” I tell him.

I still remember when Jovi asked if he could call us mom and dad.

It was bittersweet. I was so happy that he could see me as his mother but also incredibly sad that he never got to know the amazing woman that was his actual mother.

“I’m going to soak in the bath for a bit then I’ll fix dinner. ” He nods, and I leave him to study.

I start to run some hot water and drop in a lavender bath bomb, it claims it helps achy muscles and it’s supposed to be relaxing. I turn on the iPod and scroll until I find Lewis Capaldi on my playlist. The hot water makes my skin tingle, but it feels so good. I lay my head back and close my eyes.

A few years ago, Axell had surprised me with a weekend getaway for our anniversary. When we returned, I was surprised to find that the getaway was only part of the present. Axell had an extra-large soaking tub added into our master bathroom

since it was number one on my wish list.

I'm so relaxed that I don't hear him, but I smell the food.

I open my eyes and see Axell standing there in all his glory.

Even from here I can see the longing in his eyes and I hate that I've pushed him away.

Axell is a strong man, probably the strongest I know, but even if he won't admit it, he also has a need to be needed.

I'm not giving him that. His deep red t-shirt hugs his biceps and chest. His tattoo peeks out from under the sleeve.

His dark denim jeans hang low on his hips, hugging him in all the right places.

I feel my heart rate start to pick up and I let out a shuddering breath.

"I come with a peace offering. I got your favorite, fettuccini alfredo with cheesy breadsticks." A small smile comes over his face.

I smile back at him as my heart beats wildly in my chest. "I'm sorry about the other night."

Axell shakes his head while placing the plate on the bathroom counter.

He approaches me and kneels down. "No, you don't owe me an apology.

" If he only knew how wrong, he was. I owe him more than an apology.

“I know how you feel about racing. It is dangerous I was just trying to think of a way to get the money back for Jovi’s college fund quickly.

You know when dad got sick, we had to dip into it and I hated doing that, but we had no other choice.

He’s got plenty for the first two years of college, so we’ll just figure something out by that time. ”

I reach out and stroke his cheek. “He’s smart, he’ll get some scholarships and we’ll figure it out, we always do.”

He turns his head and kisses my palm. “I know we will. I love you Sade.”

“I love you, too,” I say while he leans down and kisses me. “Why don’t you join me?” I tell him with a wink. He smiles against my lips.

“My pleasure, Mrs. James,” he replies with a wicked grin crossing his face. That grin has always sent shivers down my spine and I don’t think that’ll ever change.

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Axell

It's funny when I was younger; I always swore there was no way I could ever share my bed with anyone.

I'm a big guy and I like my room. Then Sadie came along, and I'll admit at first it was awkward.

You worry about snoring or talking in your sleep.

Always afraid of embarrassing yourself so you don't really get comfortable but after a few weeks having someone beside you just becomes your normal.

I quickly got used to the warmth that Sadie's body put off and the extra weight on my chest from where she rests her head.

I like that the bed always smelled like honeysuckle because it reminded me of her even when she wasn't around.

Sleeping on the couch the past few nights reminded me of all that.

I hated how the cool air from the air conditioning would sneak under my blanket and wrap around me.

It was a constant reminder of the distance that was between us at the moment and I always hate when Sadie and I seem off with one another.

I stare at her as she sleeps and remind myself how lucky I am.

I should have never brought racing up the other night.

I knew that was a huge no for her. I knew what the reaction would be and what it would cause.

Sadie will go to the races to watch but she never really watches.

She fears car wrecks and death so watching people that she cares about is too much for her.

She never asked me to quit racing, but she made it clear that she couldn't be with me if I decided to still race after I almost had a wreck. I still remember it all like it was yesterday instead of years ago.

It was race night, and my blood was pumping in overtime.

I couldn't wait to get behind that wheel.

I could feel the nerves coming off Sadie, so I place my arm around her shoulders and pull her into me, trying to reassure her.

I had this. I was the king of the streets. I had no fear when it came to this.

Racing was the one thing I had always had control over in my life. And now with my mom dying, I felt that need for control even more. I had to be the strong one for my dad and brothers, but it wasn't always easy. I was losing her too, but I couldn't break down like that.

Sadie looks up at me. "Something feels off about tonight."

I shake my head and chuckle. “Baby, nothing is going to go wrong. I got this. I could race this road blindfolded.”

I can see the unease written all over her face, but I just shake it off.

Finally, it’s time for us to place our buy in and get lined up.

I’m always the last to race since I’m known as the king.

Jagger will start off the races, then Bowie, Jones, and Tillman.

As I slide into my car a boom of thunder fills the air.

An eerie quiet, falls over the crowd on the sidelines. The brewing storm begins to pick up more momentum in the middle of Jagger’s race. Lightning has now joined the party along with gusting winds. I roll my shoulders in an attempt to release the pent-up tension that has built there.

I scan the sidelines and see Hollis, Harlyn, Lyndsay, and Sadie standing together. The look on Sadie’s face breaks my heart. She is a nervous wreck. I try to push the thought and image of her from my mind as I move to the front of the line.

Sprinkles start to come down just as Jemma steps up to flag us.

I turn my music up louder and roll my windows up to drown out the noise of the storm.

I take my palms and wipe them over my jeans trying to dry the sweat that is forming there.

I don’t know what has gotten into me. I’ve raced in worse weather than this before.

I move my head from side to side to stretch it, then try to focus just on the race.

Just as Jemma flags us to go, a strike of lightning lights up the sky above us.

It's like the sky just opens up as the rain comes pouring down.

We've already left the start line and I'll be damned if I stop now because of some rain.

We move around the designated route for the race but on the last curve coming up to the finish line Patrick, the guy I'm racing, loses control of his car on wet asphalt and clips my bumper.

With the wet road I'm unable to get the traction I need to keep the car on the road.

The car begins to fishtail. My heart is slamming against my chest, sweat burns my eyes, and my breathing is heavier than ever before.

Is this it? Is this where I die? Is all that keeps playing through my mind. I send a quick prayer out because I really hope it's not. I haven't even told Sadie I love her yet, but I do. Who will take care of my brothers?

Luckily, neither cars flip, but Patrick slides off the road and grazes a street light and a bench. I come to a stop as my car jumps the sidewalk and scrapes along a brick building. My seat belt won't come undone. Bowie yanks the passenger side door open. "You scared the shit out of us bro!"

"The seat belt is jammed," I tell him as I pull with all of my muscle.

"Hold on let Tillman grab a tool," Bowie says as he disappears.

Roscoe climbs in through the passenger side door with a crowbar. “That was some stupid ass shit, dumbass! What the hell were you thinking racing in a damn rainstorm?”

I sigh heavily. “Shut the hell up and just get me out of here.”

The buckle clicks and it releases me. I climb over to the passenger seat.

Once I step outside Sadie slams into my body.

Her tiny arms wrap around my waist and she pulls me as close as she can.

She’s shaking like a leaf from being wet and cold or scared, I don’t know.

I rub circles on her back. I lean down and press a kiss to the top of her head.

“I’m okay. No big deal,” I say trying to calm her.

She pulls back and glares at me and before I can react, she slaps my face with all her strength. “You selfish son of a bitch,” is all she says to me before she turns on her heels and storms away. The rain is still coming down and her image quickly fades.

I hear my car scraping against the building as someone tries to move it back to the street, but I could care less. All I care about right now is Sadie and the fact that I might have just lost her.

I knew I had scared Sadie, but I figured she’d come around in a few days, but four days later and there was still no Sadie.

She hadn’t called, she hadn’t come by, and when I saw her at school, she’d go the opposite direction.

I didn't know what to do. My heart ached for me to go to her, but my pride said screw it and move on.

There were a ton of other girls who would be more than happy to be on my arm. I didn't need Sadie.

The problem was I wanted Sadie. If I'm being honest with myself, I do need her.

Sadie is the only one who stands up to me when I'm being ridiculous.

She is the only one that tells me how it is instead of just going with whatever I say.

She makes me go home and face the music and be present in the moment.

When I'm with her I don't have to chase the adrenaline rush or look for control because she calms me somehow.

In just a few short months Sadie has done the one thing no one else ever has.

She has climbed over every wall I had. Walls that I built to keep the reputation I had.

Walls that protected me from the cruelty of the world.

She scaled them and won then she wove herself into my heart. There was no shaking Sadie.

I was sitting at lunch with my group of friends when it dawned on me, I was going to have to forget my pride and go to her if I wanted her back. It was either that or learn to live with this ache in my heart that only Sadie could fix.

After school I headed to the shop with my brothers to get to work.

The shop was my home away from home and I loved it here.

Everything about this shop was comfort to me, but today I didn't want to be here.

I knew I had to talk to Sadie. I had to fix this because at the end of the day, I needed her in my life.

At seven o'clock we called it quits. I washed up and jogged to my car.

Bowie asked me where I was off to in a hurry.

I replied for him not to wait up. I sped through the streets, eager to get Sadie back but as I pulled up to her house it was dark, no cars in the driveway, nothing.

I got out and rang the doorbell anyway, but of course, there was no answer.

I refused to leave until I could talk to Sadie, so I went back to my car, getting comfortable while waiting for her.

I must have dozed off because oncoming headlights woke me.

A small white car pulled into the driveway and to my surprise I saw a guy from school hop out and go to the passenger side.

Sadie appears from the other side of the car.

Emotions flood me. All I can think is this can't be happening.

I have a death grip on my steering wheel causing my knuckles to turn white.

I have to keep talking myself out of beating his ass.

I have no right to take my anger out on him. Technically, he has done nothing wrong.

Sadie quickly hugs him then turns to head for her house when her eyes fall on my car.

The other car backs out without a second glance and leaves Sadie standing in her front yard.

Neither of us blink, neither of us move.

Finally, I manage to get myself out of the car.

Slowly, I move toward her. I don't know how I'm moving or why, but I'm drawn to Sadie.

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Sadie remains perfectly still. I'm not even sure she's breathing but she's watching my every move.

Once I'm close enough, I reach out grabbing her hips and pull her toward me before crushing my lips onto hers.

Her little yelp of shock sends shudders through my body.

I kiss her with everything I have. She wraps her arms around my neck.

I pull back an inch, her mouth just a breath away from mine.

"I love you Sadie. I'll do anything you want me to all you have to do is ask. I love you."

Sadie's reaction is not what I thought it would be.

I didn't even think about telling her that I love her it just fell out of my mouth, but I don't regret it.

Admitting that I'm in love with her feels right but she's shaking her head.

She places her hands on my chest and I know she can feel my heart pounding in my chest. "Axell, I love you, I do but I'll never ask you to not be who you are.

Racing is part of you, and it's a big part.

No matter how scary it is for me it's something that you love and that matters. ”

“I know it scares you, but I promise I got this Sadie. I can race in my sleep,” I tell her the feeling of adrenaline coursing through my veins, but I didn't get it from racing this time. This time it's caused by Sadie and the fact that I'm in love with this girl.

A sad look fills Sadie's eyes. “Axell, you don't understand.

I may be in love with you and I understand where racing stands in your life.

I understand why you feel like you have to race but I can't be scared every time you get in a car.

I can't get that pit in my stomach every time you drive up to that line and rev that engine.

I don't want to worry that I'll never see you again.

I'll never ask you to stop racing, but I also can't be with you and live like this.

” A few stray tears slip from her eyes. I watch as they make a trail down her cheek until they slip from her face and land on my arm.

“I'm sorry,” she adds in a whisper, then turns around and leaves me standing in the dark.

I don't know how long I stand there, but I can feel my adrenaline fading and reality setting in. I thought it was bad when I had thought I lost her, but this is worse. This is so much worse.

Sadie stirs in her sleep knocking me from my memory. I watch as her eyes flutter

open and she raises her head from my chest. Resting her chin there I watch as a shy smile and blush transform her face. “Good morning.”

I run my fingers back and forth on her bare shoulder. “Good morning gorgeous.”

“So last night was good.”

I chuckle. “Yeah it was.”

She leans forward and presses a kiss to my chest. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too,” I tell her, as I grip her upper arms and drag her body up mine, so I can claim her mouth.

Sadie

Last night was amazing but waking up in Axell’s arms was the best part.

For a moment, I was able to just soak in that look in his eyes.

Axell gets this look sometimes like I’m the only perfection he’s ever known.

That feeling has been my guilty pleasure since I met him, but that feeling is fleeting.

I soak it up while I can because it never takes too long before my mind circles back to the one thing, he doesn’t know about me.

It also happens to be the biggest thing about me and I’ve kept it from him all these years.

I have no excuse except that I was too selfish to tell him.

I feared of losing that look he gives me or even worse, losing him but in reality, I don't deserve him. I never have.

Finally, pulling ourselves from the bed we get ready for the day.

I head to the kitchen to make some breakfast while Axell showers.

I decide to make a breakfast bake since it always goes over well with the guys.

I just slide it in the oven when Axell appears behind me in the kitchen. "I'll get it from here. You go shower."

I smile as he places a kiss to my neck. "Okay, I'll be quick."

Standing under the hot water of the shower my mind circles back.

When my mom called me a few weeks ago I knew things had taken a turn for the worse.

Right after Jagger moved back to L.A. from Vegas, I had found out that my mom had been diagnosed with congestive heart failure.

She has been lucky to live as long as she has, but the last time I saw her name come across my screen I knew that this was it.

They say you get intuition and that's all I can say about that feeling I got that day.

She told me that the medicine was no longer working, and they didn't expect her to make it over a few months.

I needed to come clean and tell Axell, but I still didn't know how.

Telling him my mom was sick was the easy part.

It was going back home that was the problem and what if he wanted to come with me?

There was no way he could come with me. He couldn't know about everything in South Carolina. Seth! Maybe I can get my brother to go out and visit with her. Maybe, he can see what he can get settled.

After work, I head over to Seth's place, but he isn't there.

I knew I should have texted him earlier.

There's no telling where he is. I'm just about to call him when Axell's picture appears on my screen.

Answering the phone, I'm greeted by a cheery voice.

"So, Bowie and Hollis decided to have a cookout for everyone. I'm already over here, but if you let me know when you get home, I'll come pick you up. "

I hear Axell doing baby talk and it melts my heart.

He's going to make a great father but then I think about the fact that I may not be the mother.

I shake my head in an attempt to clear it.

“Okay, I’m actually at Seth’s. I was going to check on him, but he doesn’t seem to be here. I’ll head home now.”

“Is everything okay or were you just checking in on him?” Axell asks with concern in his voice.

Seth is older than me, but I’ve always looked out for him.

He’s always been a bit of a hippie child which only makes him more loveable.

Seth and I don’t look alike. He’s tan from all the time he spends surfing with wavy sandy blonde hair that hangs to his ears.

His six-foot-one-inch frame is all muscle.

I got my dad’s sky-blue eyes while he got a mixture of our parent’s eyes, seafoam green.

He has a bad tendency of scowling, but when he smiles it lights up the room.

When you first meet him, you’d think he’s going to be air headed like the stereotypical surfer but he’s the complete opposite.

He can be pretty philosophical. “Just checking in. I’ll just try to catch him tomorrow.”

“Okay I’ll see you in a few. Be safe, love you.”

“Love you too,” I tell him as I hang up the phone.

When I pull back up to the house I head in and slip on my peach colored sundress and

some brown wedges.

I let my hair out of my French braid and run my fingers through it.

It's falling in loose waves. I decide to leave it down.

I'm heading down the hallway when the front door opens.

Axell lets out a low whistle of appreciation.

"Damn, you look gorgeous." I blush and take his extended hand.

"You ready to eat, play some board games, and a whole lot of baby talk?"

I laugh. "I'm ready to see you speaking a whole lot of baby talk," I tell him with a wink.

Jagger and his wife Londynn welcomed a little boy, Westin, a few months ago and Bowie and his wife Hollis welcomed a little girl, Annalynn, almost three weeks ago.

The babies are getting spoiled because we've all been so excited to have babies around.

A phantom pain runs through my heart, but I push it down.

I spot Kynlee almost as soon as we walk through the door. I make my way over to her. "Hey, I didn't realize you were back. How's your sister?"

"She's doing better. The doctors expect her to make a full recovery and the swelling on her brain has gone down. As long as she keeps getting better then she should be here for the wedding," Kynlee says with a big smile.

“Oh, that’s great. I didn’t realize your family was coming.” Kynlee has a strained relationship with her family from what she’s said, so I’m surprised by this news but really happy for her. I know it means a lot to her.

She shakes her head. “Just my mom and sister. I’ve never been very close with my dad or brother and they refuse to come. They more or less disowned me when I moved out here.”

“I’m sorry, Kynlee.”

She shrugs. “It’s okay. I’m afraid if they did come it would just be drama. I know Ace wouldn’t like the way they talked about me and you know Ace, he’d tell them exactly how he felt. I’d rather not have that at my wedding, but I am glad my mom and Brooke will be here.”

“I get what you’re saying about drama. I haven’t seen my mom since I moved here in high school.

She kind of has the same view of me as your father does of you.

Your wedding is meant to be a happy moment and you deserve for it to be that.

Having people around that don’t really want to be there isn’t worth it.

You have all of these people who really want to be there so that’s a win in my book,” I tell her.

Kynlee smiles and wraps her arms around me.

“Thanks, Sadie.”

“So, are you ready for your bachelorette party?” I ask her just as Ace joins us.

She nods her head enthusiastically. “Yes!” She replies as Ace says, “No!”

I laugh unable to hold it in. Kynlee turns and lightly slaps Ace on the chest. They begin to talk to one another, everyone else forgotten about.

I turn around in search of Axell and see him holding Westin.

He’s bouncing him on his knees while making funny faces at him and it melts my heart.

To see Axell in the role of a father never gets old. It just makes him that much sexier.

Later that night while we are lying in bed, I feel the bed shift as Axell moves. A few seconds later I hear him whisper, “You awake?”

I roll over and smile. “Yes.”

“I was thinking. Playing with Westin and Annalynn then seeing you with them. I want one of my own. I want us to have a family. I was never sure until I held Westin but now, I know,” he tells me quietly.

A few stray tears slip from my eyes. One of the things that made it easier with Axell was that he never cared if we had kids of our own.

My mind is screaming for me to tell him that now is the best timing I’m going to get, but instead, I lean up and place my lips over his, willing myself to forget everything else for now.

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Axell

Last night was the races, and of course my brothers all held up the family name.

They won each of their races by a landslide.

I was so damn proud of them. However, I know Jagger and Bowie missed their wives, but I was sure the extra income from their winnings helped with the new additions to their families.

I hate to admit it, but I actually felt a rush of jealousy while they were racing.

I miss it but as soon as I looked over and saw Sadie standing with her group of friends the jealousy subsided.

If I didn't have her that would be worse than never racing again.

Besides it had been my decision to not race anymore.

She had stood by her word and never asked me to give it up.

I know that my brothers all say she did but in reality, she never did.

She just simply made the only decision she felt she could, which led me to make the only decision that I could.

Months, two months to be exact, that's how long it had been since I last held Sadie in

my arms, since I last got to kiss her, two months and it wasn't getting any easier. I'd see her around school and at the bonfire beach parties but never at the races.

After she had told me should couldn't be with me, I called the number on the card the two men gave me after one of my races. Turns out they wanted me to race for them. These were some big races and they brought in big money, but they needed someone worth putting money on.

The first night I pulled in I was shocked to see all of the high-end cars, Corvettes, Ferrari's, Audi's, and so many more.

Cars that you dream about. I saw the two and parked by them.

When I got out, they introduced me to a bunch of other guys then another racer, Tillman.

He was from San Diego and came across as very chill.

I liked him already. We talked and got to know each other before it was his time to race.

I quickly learned from him and by observing the races going on that these were very different from what I was used to.

I watched as thousands of dollars were bet on the races.

The amount of money being laid down was staggering to me.

I would get forty percent of whatever was won according to Roberto and Manuel.

I couldn't even begin to wrap my head around that.

Hell, even ten percent of this kind of money was insane to me.

Before I knew it, I had to get ready for my race.

I slipped behind the wheel, blasted Disturbed, staring straight ahead I psyched myself out as the vibration from the bass of the music shot through my chest.

The girl standing between the cars dropped the green flag and instantly I flew from the start line. I didn't know these roads well, but I didn't need to. My body knew what to do. This is what I did best. I easily kept my lead and crossed the finish line a full car length ahead of the other racers.

Needless to say, Roberto and Manuel were more than impressed with my race.

I continued to race for them for a few weeks, racking in the money and basking in the glory of the attention I received.

Tillman and I quickly became good friends.

Everything in my life looked great from the outside but really it was all going to shit.

My mother's health was declining daily and the ache for Sadie had yet to ease.

One night after our race, Tillman and I drove to one of the beaches and sat on the hood of our cars, drinking a beer. "So, you got a girl?" he asked me.

I shook my head and looked down while picking at the label on my beer. "Nope, no girl," I reply taking a long pull from my beer.

Tillman chuckles. "But there was one."

“What makes you say that?” I ask.

He shrugs. “The sound of your voice. So, what’s the story?”

I sigh heavily. “I didn’t know her very long, but she was different.”

“They always are,” Tillman replies.

“I almost got in a wreck while racing and it scared her. She was never a fan of me racing. She always said it was too dangerous then that happened and we kind of went off the rails. I tried to get her back, told her how I felt, and she felt the same, but said she couldn’t be with me because she couldn’t handle my racing.

” As I tell him I feel the anger start to simmer in my veins.

“That’s a tough one. Did she ask you to quit?”

I shake my head. “Never, she said she wouldn’t, said she understood that it was a part of me and she’d never ask me to give it up, but she couldn’t be a part of my life.”

“Damn, that sucks,” he says. We sit in silence for a bit.

Tillman clears his throat. “You know I had someone like that. She didn’t mind if I raced but she didn’t want me tied up in this kind of racing.

Said money like this comes with expectations and what not.

She gave me an ultimatum either her or this. Obviously, you know what I picked.”

I study his profile for a moment. I see the look of sadness that seems to come over his features and the way he talked about her must have been how I sounded when he

asked about Sadie. “Did she come back?”

He hangs his head for a moment. “No, she’s in Seattle going to college, has a new boyfriend, and new life.

I picked the racing to spite her. I was pissed that she was giving me the ultimatum, so I picked racing.

Don’t get me wrong I love what I do and who knows maybe, we wouldn’t have lasted but I never got to know.

Now, I just get to wonder the what if of it all. ”

“Are you subtly trying to tell me something?” I ask him because I feel like he is.

He chuckles. “All I’m saying is that this life and money will suck you in, just make sure it’s your first pick. Don’t let something else go because of ego or pride.” Tillman slides from the hood of the car and stands. “I’m going to head home.”

The rest of the week Tillman’s words stayed with me. Every time I saw Sadie I’d wonder if I was making the right decision. I only had a few more days until the next race and I wasn’t sure I’d be there right now.

Ace comes into my office and I let the memory slip away. “You wanna do something tonight?” I raise my eyebrows at that question. “What? Kynlee will be out until late and I have no clue what she’s doing so in order to keep from going insane, I thought I’d see you if you wanted to do something.”

I nod. “That makes sense just figured you’d ask Jaxx and Pierce.”

“Jaxx is out of town for work and Pierce has a new boyfriend. Besides, I thought it’d

be good if we could all figure out something to do.”

“In general, that’s a good idea but since Londynn and Hollis will be out with Kynlee, I doubt Jagger and Bowie can join us or have you forgotten two little things named Westin and Annalynn?” I ask.

He smirks. “No smartass I haven’t I just figured we could all get together at one of our houses and play Guitar Hero and sing bad karaoke. Maybe, have some good food and a few beers, nothing major.”

I never thought I’d see Ace this grown up and I have to admit it make my heart swell with pride. He’s grown leaps and bounds from the boy he used to be. “I’ll get everyone together and text you the details.”

Ace smiles. “Sounds good.” He checks his watch “I actually got to go. I have a tattoo scheduled in about half an hour.” Ace leaves and I quickly text Jagger and Bowie to see what I can figure out.

I’m sitting on our bed as I watch Sadie get ready to go out for the Kynlee’s bachelorette party.

She pulls a charcoal gray dress up her body.

I watch her wiggle as the tight material inches over her skin.

The strip of black glittered material on the side of the dress glistens as it hits the light.

Sadie turns around. “Will you zip me?” she asks, as she slips the one strap over her shoulder.

I stand up and make my way over to her. As I reach for the zipper, I let my fingers brush lightly over her spine.

I watch as she shivers then shakes her head.

“Axell, we don’t have time for this right now.

” Even though I know she’s right, I lean forward and press a kiss to the back of her neck. “Axell! Zip now!”

I chuckle and pull the zipper up her body. “There but you better hurry home,” I tell her, before pressing one last kiss to the side of her neck.

After Sadie is picked up by the limo that has been rented for Kynlee’s bachelorette party, I grab Jovi and we head over to Bowie’s house. With Jagger and Bowie both having babies we figured it would be easiest to all meet at one of their places.

Jovi seems lost in thought on the way to Bowie’s house.

I don’t ask questions because I have learned that with Jovi it is better to let him open up at his own pace.

A Bon Jovi song comes on the radio and I turn it up.

Before I know it both Jovi and I are singing along to the song at the top of our lungs.

We come to a stop at the red light just as the song ends.

I can feel Jovi studying me from the corner of my eye. “Dad?”

Hearing Jovi call me dad is always a little odd.

Most of the time he keeps with my name unless it's something serious or he's talking with Sadie.

It's not that I mind him calling me dad, but when our dad was alive, I knew it hurt him when Jovi referred to me as that.

Even though my dad's absence is what led to it. "Yeah, what's up?"

Jovi takes a deep breath "Well, the other day at school they had a bunch of college representatives and what not there since we're seniors and getting ready to graduate."

"Yeah, I remember getting the e-mail about that. Did you find a school that you liked?" I ask. Jovi is smart and can probably get in just about anywhere and get help with it but just in case my brothers and I have put aside money in a fund for him.

"Well, yeah, I found something."

I chuckle at his nervousness. "Well, that's good. Where is it?"

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“Kind of all over,” he says quietly.

I glance at him to see unease written all over his face. “What the hell does that mean?”

“I want to join the Marines,” he replies.

I’m shocked, so shocked that I’m speechless.

Being a Marine takes a lot of dedication as well as the danger aspect of the job.

It’s honorable, that’s for damn sure, I just didn’t expect that answer.

Jovi has never mentioned or showed interest in the military before.

I make the last turn and see Bowie’s house up ahead.

“Well...that’s good Jovi. Listen, why don’t we talk more about this later. ’

Jovi nods and hops out of the car as soon as it comes to a stop. I sit for a moment staring at the street trying to wrap my head around the bomb that Jovi just dropped on me. How will Sadie react to this? Eventually, I get out of the car and head inside.

We’re just about to eat when Ace starts to make a speech, “So, originally you guys know that Kynlee and I weren’t doing the whole bachelor and bachelorette party, but after everything with Brooke, I thought she deserved a break. So, I’m declaring tonight my bachelor party.”

We all toast to that and then carry on with the evening.

After eating way too much junk food and playing games late into the night, we all return to our homes.

I climb into bed with no sign of Sadie, but maybe that's a good thing because I'm not sure how to break the news to her that Jovi wants to join the Marines.

Sadie

It had been another long and tedious day at work, but luckily, I did hear back from Seth.

I was heading over to his place after work.

Lyndsay appeared at my side as I'm walking down the hallway to administer the meds to my patients.

"Hey, so I was going to see if you wanted to catch a movie this weekend? It's been such a long time since we saw each other outside of work. "

"It has been a while and a movie sounds great," I reply. "Do you have a babysitter, or do you want me to see if Axell or Jovi are free?" Lyndsay was a single mom of two, but she made it seem so easy.

"Oh no, I have a babysitter. I actually started seeing someone."

I stop and spin around to stare at her. Lyndsay has never been one to keep things from me, especially when it comes to her love life. "What are you talking about? Is it

new?”

She shrugs. “Kind of but not really.”

“Then why am I just now hearing about this?” I demand.

Lyndsay laughs. “Because I didn’t want to jinx it. Don’t worry you’ll approve.”

“You sure about that? Nine times out of ten I don’t. You have the worst taste in men. I swear you have a douchebag magnet in your body.”

She holds her hands up in surrender. “Okay, I get it and I’m not saying you’re wrong, but I know you’ll approve of this one, trust me.”

I give her a questioning look “That’s easier said than done when it comes to your love life, but I’ll try.”

The rest of the day had been chaotic. I have never been so glad to see my shift end.

I say goodbye to Lyndsay then head for Seth’s house to catch up with him before Kynlee’s bachelorette party.

I pull into the parking lot of his beach side apartment.

Before I can knock the door swings open and Seth gathers me in his arms. “Nice to see you too,” I tell him.

He puts me down and ushers me inside. “How have you been? I’m sorry I haven’t been around; work and surfing have been crazy.”

“What’s so crazy about it?” I ask him, while taking the bottle of water he extends

toward me.

“Well, you know how I go surfing just about every morning after I get off from work?” he asks, and I nod in response. “Well, there was a talent guy there the other morning watching us all surf. He asked me if I’d be interested in trying to go pro.” Seth’s face is beaming in pride.

“Wow, that’s great but don’t most people try to become pro before they’re thirty?” I ask, then realize I sound unsupportive. “I’m sorry I didn’t mean that to come out the way it did.”

Seth waves it off in his normal Seth fashion. Never taking anything to the heart. “I know what you mean and to answer your question, yes, but this could be a real shot.”

I smile at him because I couldn’t be happier for him but that does put a damper on what I had to ask of him. “Well, I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks, so on the phone you said you had something you wanted to discuss.”

I had told him that, but I knew it would be a long shot even before the surfing opportunity, now there’s no way he’ll say yes. “It doesn’t matter now.”

“Like hell it doesn’t. Tell me,” he demands.

I sigh heavily. “Mom called me and told me she was diagnosed with congestive heart failure a while back. Now, they’ve only given her a few weeks to a couple of months to live.

Given everything that is in South Carolina, I was going to ask you if you would go down and kind of take care of things but now... ”

Seth's demeanor completely changes when it has to do with our mom. I get it but it's not easy to see. "Sadie, even if I didn't have the surfing I wouldn't go, and you know it."

"But Seth, she's your mom," I try to reason with him.

He shakes his head. "No, she's your mom.

She left me and never looked back. She hasn't tried to contact me since she took you and hauled ass when you were four.

Dad and I were left to fend for ourselves, while Dad did everything he could to find you and her.

It wasn't until she wanted to ship you off to dad that she appeared out of thin air.

The only reason she surfaced was because she wanted something.

So, I'm sorry Sadie, I know that she's your mom and you love her.

I'm sorry she's sick and I'm sorry that your history is about to catch up to you, but I can't and won't go. "

I figured this would be his answer, but I had to try. I'm terrified of losing the life I have now because of a lie I let go on too long. "I understand. I just didn't know what else to do."

Seth gives me a sad smile. "Yes, you do. You tell Axell, face the consequences, go back to South Carolina and do what needs to be done and hopefully while you're gone that will be enough time for Axell to forgive you."

“What if he doesn’t forgive me?”

Seth reaches across the kitchen island and pats my hand. “He will. It might take a bit, but he will. Axell loves you too much.” That’s the thing; Axell loves the part of the girl he knows but he doesn’t know all of me. What if the rest of me is too messed up to love?

“I’m going to run to the restroom,” I tell Seth as I head down the hallway.

As I enter the bathroom, I can’t help smell the lavender smell lingering in the tiny room.

That’s not Seth’s normal scent, he must have had some “friend” as he likes to refer to them over.

It isn’t until I’m washing my hands that I see the black travel makeup bag that looks all too familiar.

The silver etched eyelashes standing out against the black.

I reach for it and open it up to find what I already suspected.

All of Lyndsay’s go-to makeup items. It all starts to make sense.

Why Lyndsay didn’t tell me she was seeing someone, but insisting that I’d approve, why Seth’s bathroom smells like lavender and he’s been harder to reach than normal?

The bag was something I bought for her a couple of birthdays’ ago.

I grab the bag and make my way to the kitchen.

I toss the makeup bag on the kitchen island, startling Seth, but I see the shock on his face as he looks down at the bag. “What the hell?”

“It’s not what you think,” he says while standing up.

Seth is my brother and I love him. I’d do anything for him but he’s a horrible boyfriend.

He hasn’t even been in a relationship since high school.

He knows how much Lyndsay means to me, he knows she’s like a sister to me.

Why would he do this to her? Hell, she knows what Seth’s like so why is she putting herself in this position?

Lyndsay needs someone dependable and good. Not my fly by the night brother.

“I think it’s exactly what I think. The only thing I don’t understand is why her, Seth?

Out of all the girls, why do you have to screw with my best friend?

She deserves better than this!” I tell him, as I grab my purse and make a beeline for the door.

I sit in my car for a moment trying to gather my emotions, but the stress hits me all at once.

Everything in my life is blowing up and I can’t stop it. All I can do is sit back and watch.

As I'm getting ready for Kynlee's bachelorette party Axell gets home from work.

He has a great way of distracting me from all the crap going on and it brightens my mood.

Now, I'm sitting in the limo with some of my favorite girls, but I can't help but let my mind wander back to everything else going on.

Seth and Lyndsay, going back to South Carolina after all this time, how to tell Axell; I feel like the hits just keep coming.

"You okay?" Hollis leans over and whispers in my ear.

Hollis and I always have had a good friendship.

I always rooted for her and Bowie to beat the odds.

Hollis is just one of those people that deserved more than what life had given her.

I was so happy when she finally got it. Hollis knows me better than the rest of the girls in the limo, so of course she would pick up on my mood.

I see the concern in her gray eyes. "Yeah, just got a lot on my mind."

"Well, when we get to the show, we can talk if you want," she offers, and I give her a smile. Maybe, I should talk to her. Maybe not about everything, but at least Seth and Lyndsay.

Ace set this whole night up, so it comes as no shock that we are on our way to a burlesque show in downtown L.A.

Kynlee loves all things burlesque. Ace threw her a burlesque themed birthday party a couple of years ago.

I'm not sure where we'll go from there, but neither does she.

The only people that know are Ace and the driver of the limo.

It's really pretty romantic and sweet when you think about it.

Once we arrive at the burlesque club, we are ushered to a VIP area.

It's upstairs in a balcony that overlooks the entire floor.

The red deep purple satin couches look so inviting.

Red velvet throw pillows are scattered across the couches as well.

A black shag like carpet with flecks of gold line the floors.

Drapes hang around in various places being held back with gold ribbon.

Gold chandeliers are the only light in the place with the exception of the spotlight on the stage. It's very vintage and pretty.

Hollis and I take our seats and she leans over toward me. "Okay, so what's going on?" I sigh, and tell her about Seth and Lyndsay and why it worries me.

"I get where you're coming from. I would have felt the same way if I was in your situation, but at the same time, they are both consenting adults."

"I know, but I don't want him to hurt her," I reply.

She nods her head. "I get where you're coming from but maybe she will be the one to change him."

I shake my head. "I don't think anything or anyone will change Seth."

"I'm sure a lot of people have made the same comment about our husbands," she says with a smile. Hollis has a point. Maybe, I'm being too quick to judge the situation. "What else is on your mind?"

I sigh. "My mom was diagnosed with congestive heart failure and just recently found out she only has a couple of months to live at best."

Hollis squeezes my hand. "I'm sorry to hear about that. Has your relationship with her gotten better?"

"Not a lot but we are slightly better than before. Dale, my stepdad, passed away a few years ago, so someone needs to go out to South Carolina and take care of everything. Seth won't go which I understand, so it's up to me, but I haven't been back there since I graduated college. I'm not a fan of going back there."

Hollis nods. "I'm sorry that's a tough one. I'm sure that Axell will go with you if you asked him."

The chandeliers begin to dim as the music becomes louder, ending the conversation between Hollis and me. She's right, Axell would go with me, but I can't ask him that, at least not until I come clean with him about everything.

By the time we make it home, it's the early morning hours.

Jovi and Axell are both sound asleep. I shower quickly before slipping into bed next to Axell.

My body is exhausted, but my mind won't shut up.

I end up tossing and turning until Axell rolls over and wraps an arm around my waist, pulling my back into his chest. He presses a kiss to my shoulder and hums in appreciation. "You're home."

"Yeah, I'm sorry I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's okay. What's bothering you baby?" Axell asks.

Sometimes, I hate that he can read me so well. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Know that something is wrong with me when you aren't even looking at me?"

I feel him smile against the back of my head. "Because I know you Sadie. I've had a lot of time to get to know you. I know you don't sleep well when something is on your mind."

I sigh. "It's my mom," I whisper into the darkened room. Axell moves slightly then pushes me onto my back so he can read my reaction.

"What's wrong with her?"

"Remember when I told you she was diagnosed with congestive heart failure?" Axell nods, waiting for me to say more. "Well, she told me a few weeks ago that she only has a few months to live, at best."

Axell leans forward and presses a kiss to my forehead. "Baby, I'm sorry."

“Someone has to go back and take care of everything. I went and talked to Seth today and he won’t go.”

“You can’t blame him considering that she left him and never returned or tried to get in touch with him,” Axell says.

I nod. “I knew it was a long shot to ask him, but I figured it was worth a try.”

“Listen if you need to go then let’s get you out there. I’ll hold down the place until you return. If you want me to come with you, I can do that too. My brothers can take care of the businesses and Jovi.”

His offer warms my heart while breaking it at the same time.

Now Sadie! Tell him now! Instead, I’m choosing to be a coward.

“No, you stay here for now. If I need you to come once I get there, I’ll let you know.

I’m going to try and wait to leave until after the wedding.

” I stretch up and kiss his lips. “Thank you.”

“Always, I love you,” Axell replies, before rolling onto his back and pulling me next to him. As he drifts off to sleep, I lie awake and worry about the future of my marriage.

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Axell

Sadie has been pre-occupied the past few days.

I can tell that the news of her mom is weighing on her.

Sadie can say it doesn't bother her, but I know it does.

I know that having a strained relationship with her mother has always bothered her.

I hate to see her like this, so I planned a surprise date day for us.

We're going to go to the Santa Monica Pier.

It's one of her favorite things to do. It was actually the place I took her to on our first anniversary.

I sneak out of bed, careful not to wake Sadie. In the kitchen I start to make her favorite breakfast; chocolate chip and banana pancakes. Jovi walks in shortly after I begin cooking. "Damn, something smells good," he says rubbing his stomach.

My baby brother is standing in the doorway in nothing but basketball shorts, his hair in disarray, and stress etched on his face. "You look like you had a rough night."

He shakes his head and walks over to help me cook. "Monrowe and I had an argument."

“You want to talk about it?”

He shrugs. “Not sure there is anything to talk about. I told her I wanted to join the Marines and let’s just say she didn’t like that.”

I chuckle. “I didn’t figure she would.”

Jovi sighs heavily. “I love her Ax. I really do. I want her in my future, but at the same time, I have to make something of myself.”

I stop cooking as I place a pancake on the plate.

Studying Jovi as his words sink in. “Jovi, that’s not the only reason you want to join the Marines is it?

To make something of yourself.” Jovi shrugs and I reach out gripping his shoulder.

“Jovi, regardless of your decision to join the Marines or not you will make a future for yourself. You don’t need to prove yourself to anyone and no one expect you can make something of yourself.

Sadie and I are so damn proud of you regardless of what you decide to do going forward. ”

Jovi nods and clears his throat. “Thank you. So, are you planning something special today?” he asks, while eyeing the food.

“Yeah, Sadie will be leaving after the wedding to take care of some stuff with her mom and she’s got a lot on her mind, so I wanted to give her a day that would give her a break from it all,” I explain to Jovi.

He nods in approval and I fix Sadie's breakfast then head to the bedroom.

I lean over and kiss her cheek, "Good morning beautiful." Sleepily, she rolls over and squints at me.

"I made us breakfast then we're going on a small trip. "

Sadie joins us in the kitchen a few minutes later looking more awake.

We eat while talking about Ace's upcoming wedding, work, and school.

I notice that Jovi doesn't bring up the possibility of him joining the Marines right now and for that I'm thankful.

I know that Sadie will support his decision, but she sees Jovi as her own and I can imagine how worried she'll be over the danger aspect of the job.

When I enter the bedroom, I see Sadie slipping on my favorite blue sundress.

It makes her eyes really pop while hugging her body in all the right places.

She turns around and looks at me. "Are you really not going to tell me where we are going or what we are doing today?" I smirk and shake my head. A growl of frustration escapes her.

I step toward her and pull her into me. "Trust me, you'll love it."

Sadie pretends to pout. "I don't know. I hate surprises."

It is true that Sadie hates surprises, but she'll love this one. I lean forward and press a kiss to the top of her head, "You'll love this one. Trust me."

About an hour later, we are dressed and ready for the small drive.

The Santa Monica Pier is about an hour drive from here, but it'll be worth it to see Sadie taking a break.

“Are we going to Santa Monica?” she asks with surprise in her voice.

My smile grows wider and I nod. Sadie squeals and does a little dance in the passenger seat to show her excitement.

It takes a bit before I can find a place to park but eventually, we do.

We decide to check out some of the booths first. Sadie loves handmade things, so this has always been one of her favorite stops.

Aimlessly we walk around while Sadie picks up things here and there.

I carry the bags of the items she has bought so far.

I snagged a piece of jewelry that I saw her eyeing at the booth before but wouldn't buy for herself.

After we finish at the booths, I run the bags back to the car then meet Sadie back where I left her.

A stressed look covering her face while looking down at her cell phone.

Once I'm close enough I ask her, “Is everything okay?”

She nods her head. “Yeah, just my mom but nothing that has to be taken care of now. I'll call her once we get back home.” She reaches out and wraps her hand around my

waist. “So, are you going to feed me or what?”

My head throws back in laughter. “Yeah, let’s go grab some food then we can go on some rides.

” The rides have always been one of my favorites on the pier.

We decide to grab some seafood. After lunch we stop to watch some break dancers and live music before heading over to the rides.

Sadie grabs my hand and pulls me toward the carousel.

This always was her favorite. I relent and let her pull me the rest of the way.

I help Sadie hop onto the horse she picks out then take a seat on the one next to hers.

I watch her as we go round and round. The smile lighting up her face right now is exactly what I was hoping to see while planning this day.

We head to the rollercoaster however, Sadie is reluctant.

A rollercoaster is the closest thing to racing I have found.

The way the roller coaster drops and turns making your stomach drop to your feet.

Feeling the wind whipping around your face.

I listen as Sadie screams at every sharp turn and heart plunging drop.

“Let’s get cotton candy,” Sadie says as we step away from the rollercoaster.

I link my hand with hers and walk to the closest vendor stand.

We walk around eating the cotton candy and sharing a soda.

Stopping every now and then at the game booths while I attempt to win a prize for Sadie.

I do manage to win her a little stuffed pig that she instantly names Piglet.

The sun is starting to set over the ocean as we make our way to our last stop, the Ferris wheel.

As cheesy as it sounds, I hope that we get to stop at the top.

While we stand in line, I sway with Sadie in my arms to the music coming from the live band.

We take our seat while the guy locks us in.

Sadie grabs my hand as we begin to move.

She won't admit it, but she has a fear of heights.

Just like I had hoped, we come to a stop at the top.

I grab my cell phone and open the camera to take a picture of us before I press a kiss to her lips.

On the way back to L.A. we listen to the rock station that Bowie does shows on. We sing along to all the songs. Her voice and laughter fills the car. I turn the radio down and grab her hand. "I love you, Sadie."

She smiles, but I notice that it doesn't reach her eyes. "I love you too."

Sadie

Today had been perfect. Axell is constantly reminding me of why I'm so lucky to have him in my life and why I love him so much.

When you see Axell James the last thing you think is romantic, but he is with me.

Even in the midst of the perfect day date with Axell, I can't escape my past. My mom texted me telling me that Drake would pick me up from the airport once I landed in South Carolina.

Reading that text not only twisted a knife in my gut and heart, but also reminded me of why I didn't deserve a day like today.

I sit up in bed trying to read a book that I'm not at all paying attention to. All I'm paying attention to right now is Axell. I'm memorizing every last detail about him as if it's the last time I'll lay eyes on him. Although, in this situation it just might very well be.

When we arrived back home, I was surprised when Jovi asked me if I could go to lunch with him tomorrow.

Of course, I quickly agreed, I could see that he needed to talk.

First thing in the morning though I have to try and make amends with Seth.

I can't leave L.A. not knowing if or when I'm coming back without fixing things with

him first. I'm preparing for the worst as if that could soften the blow of the consequences.

I watch as the moonlight casts a glow over Axell's chest, darkening the hair on his chest. His eyelashes shadowing his face.

He looks much younger while asleep. I can almost see the teenage version I fell in love with without the stress of the world on his face.

I can't help but wonder what his face will look like the day after tomorrow?

What will it look like after Ace's wedding and I drop a bomb on us?

I can't sleep so quietly I get up and make my way to the kitchen.

I stop at Jovi's bedroom door like I always have.

I open it just enough to check on him. It's been a habit of mine since I first moved in here.

However, his absence is evident and my heart jumps to my throat.

I run to the front door noticing that the deadbolt is unlocked.

It only takes a second to realize that his car is not in the driveway.

I run back to the bedroom, to Axell's side of the bed and shake him "Axell!"

He sits up while rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Jovi is gone!"

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Axell throws the covers off his body and charges down the hallway to confirm what I just said.

He re-enters our bedroom mumbling a string of curse words while grabbing his phone off the charger from the nightstand.

Between the two of us we quickly rule out him being at any of the brother's houses or at Monrowe's, but we did discover she too is missing.

Minutes later Bowie, Jagger, and Ace enter the house, joining Axell as they go in search of their youngest James brother. Axell presses a kiss to the top of my head. "We'll be back. Try not to worry."

I watch as they all leave. He can tell me not to worry, but I will. An hour later but what feels like an eternity, they return helping a very drunk Jovi through the front door. "He's going to regret this tomorrow," Jagger says, as he and Axell walk him to the bathroom.

Bowie stops in the hallway and shakes his head.

"Damn kid, Apparently, he and Monrowe had been on the phone and they got into an argument, so he went over to her place. She didn't want to wake her parents, so she snuck out and they ended up at the beach.

She claimed she didn't know where he got the beer since he already had it when he picked her up.

She took the keys from him afraid that he'd try to drive. ”

I nod, trying to absorb that Jovi is drunk. I never thought I'd see that day or at least not for a while. “Where's Ace?” I ask, just realizing that he's not with them

“He went to get Kynlee, so she could drive Jovi's car back. Monrowe's parents came and picked her up,” Bowie explains.

I hear the shower start to run and Jovi cursing like a madman once he's pushed under the stream of water, no doubt that it's still cold.

Bowie walks down the hallway to join his brothers in the bathroom while I go to the kitchen to find some Tylenol and water.

As I'm heading to Jovi's room, I hear the distinct sound of vomiting.

Ace and Kynlee walk in. “Where's his dumbass?” Ace asks, as he passes by the bedroom.

“The bathroom, but why don't you wait until tomorrow to get on to him?

I'm sure you all want to because I also want to, but he won't remember it tomorrow.

It's better to wait and do it while he's sober.

Also, we might want to try and figure out what brought this on.

This isn't like him,” I tell Ace and Kynlee.

Ace shakes his head, “No, it's not. I think that's why I'm so angry. He's the smart one. He's not supposed to make the same mistakes we all did.”

I laugh. “He’s a boy and on top of that he’s a James boy, he’ll make a lot of the same mistakes you guys did, but he’ll learn quicker.”

“God, I hope so,” Ace says, while running a hand through his hair. Kynlee squeezes his bicep and it warms my heart to see how supportive she is to Ace. I worried he’d never find anyone.

The guys get Jovi into bed while I give him the Tylenol and make him drink some water.

Axell and I thank the rest for coming to help before saying good night to everyone.

Axell and I make our way back to our bedroom.

“Well, I never thought I’d have to go through that until we had a kid of our own.

Jovi just always seemed so together, I think it shocked all of us for a minute.

I mean, I don’t think the damn kid has ever broken a rule. ”

We must have fallen asleep at some point last night, because I wake up on Axell’s side of the bed without him. Rolling over, I see him up and pacing the floor with coffee in his hand. “You okay?”

He stops and turns to look at me, “Yeah, I’m okay.

Just trying to think of how we are going to handle this.

” I get up from the bed and walk over to Axell wrapping my arms around him.

After a few moments he presses a kiss to the top of my head and leaves the bedroom.

Grabbing my robe, I quickly follow. Axell barges into Jovi's room and yanks the shades open.

"Rise and shine!" his voice booms as he claps his hands loudly.

Jovi rolls over and groans. "Really? You have to be kidding me!"

Axell chuckles. "I kid you not baby brother. Get your ass out of bed. You are going to shower, take your mom to lunch like you planned, then you are coming home and working around the house the rest of this week."

Jovi is sitting up. "What work around the house?"

"I'll make you a damn list and after you're done here you will work extra at the shop."

"Don't you think you're overreacting?" Jovi asks.

"No!" Axell's voice booms so loudly that even I cringe away from it. "You scared the hell out of us last night. You are grounded until further notice. Now, get up and get ready."

Jovi stands, but he doesn't look happy about it. "Will you get off my case?"

A harsh laugh escapes from Axell "Are you going to tell that to your drill sergeant, because I'm pretty sure if you do, you won't last longer than a week in the Marines. Maybe you should consider a different path if you don't like someone on your case.

"Marines?" I ask, as if that could change the words I just heard. Jovi wants to join the Marines? That's why he wanted to go to lunch. He mentioned he wanted to tell me something.

Jovi throws his hands up in the air. “Great, thanks a lot!” Jovi storms out of the bedroom, past me, and straight to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

“He wants to join the Marines?” I ask Axell.

Axell rubs his hands over his face. “Yes, I’m sorry I shouldn’t have done that. He didn’t want to tell you like that and I had no right to do that.”

“Are you okay with him enlisting?”

“Yeah, I am. If that’s what he really wants then yes,” Axell replies.

I shake my head. “But it’s dangerous.”

“Sadie, it’s just as dangerous here. If he’s here he’ll start racing, it’s in his blood.

He’s been itching to race for years now.

I’m surprised we’ve managed to hold him off this long.

At least in the Marines he’s being paid, getting an education, and creating a future for himself in the midst of that danger. ”

I don’t know if I can handle the thought of Jovi enlisting. “I have to go see Seth and try to fix things with him. Tell Jovi I’ll come by and pick him up for lunch.”

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Sadie

I wasn't sure what I was going to say to Seth, but I knew I had to say something.

Hollis had been right in reminding me that Lyndsay and Seth are both consenting adults and maybe, she will be the one to change him.

Seth wasn't always the guy he is now. He went to college right after high school.

Seth had gotten into UCLA and our dad had convinced him to go.

He even lived in the dorms. It was there that he met Laurel.

She was a cheerleader and used to the finer things in life.

She also wasn't very good at staying faithful.

Laurel and Seth were two wrongs and as the old saying goes, two wrongs don't make a right.

I think they both really cared about each other but neither knew or wanted to change their old ways.

They were so independent that neither would let the other help.

They also had an issue with opening up. Neither understood why the other would ask what they had been up to.

Seth and Laurel were just too young and not ready to be in a real relationship and ultimately it tore them apart.

Seth has dated since then but nothing serious. I think he worries about making the same mistakes. Although, I think he's old enough now that he should be able to see those mistakes ahead of time and not make them, at least, I hope.

I pull into the parking lot and make my way to his door.

I knock, but no one answers. His vehicles were here so unless he got a ride with someone else, he's avoiding me, not that I blame him.

I did overreact the other day, but I can't apologize for that if he keeps avoiding me.

After knocking again, I grab my phone and dial his number.

I hear the ringer from the other side of the door before he manages to silence it.

I bang on the door. "Seth, I know you're in there.

Open the door so we can talk." I hear the lock being turned and as the door opens, I see my brother standing there looking more hurt than I expected. He doesn't move aside to let me in.

"What do you want?" he asks.

I sigh heavily, "Well, for starters I wanted to apologize. I overreacted the other day when I found out about you and Lyndsay. It threw me for a loop and I was worried about you guys."

"No," Seth says while shaking his head. "You weren't worried about me.

You were worried about me hurting Lyndsay and you know what sucked the most was that you honestly believed I'd hurt her.

I've known Lynsday for how long? I know what she's been through and who she really is and it hurt that my own sister thought I'd be that much of an ass to someone like her. ”

“I'm sorry. I had no right to question you.

I do know that you'd never hurt her, and I was wrong to think you would.

I had no right to get involved with things between the two of you since you are both adults.

I think I'm partly angry and disappointed with myself and I wanted to take it on you to make myself feel better. ”

Seth cocks his head to one side while studying me. “Did it work?”

I shake my head, “Nope, still miserable only more.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better Lyndsay ended things with me.”

My head whips up. “What? Why?”

“I told her what happened with us and she said she didn't want to come between us.”

“Oh no,” I say while dropping my head into my hands. “I never wanted for that to happen.” Seth gives me a questioning look. “I really didn't.”

“You look like hell,” Seth comments while opening the door all the way and moving

aside, inviting me in. He grabs us some drinks and we take a seat on his patio overlooking the beach. “So, what’s wrong?”

“What’s not wrong?” I say with a shrug. “My life has become a mess and I’m not sure I can fix it.”

“You can fix it but you have to start by telling Axell everything, and I mean everything.”

“I know,” I whisper. Seth remains quiet letting me come to terms with it all. “I just don’t want to lose him, but if that happens then I can’t blame him after all these years of my lying.”

Seth leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

“I know you lied but at the same time I think it was your coping mechanism. Your life got really messed up thanks to Josh and everything he put you through. I think that by the time you were able to talk about it, you felt it had been too long, so you let the lie continue.”

“What if Axell doesn’t see it that way?”

“Then we deal with it. I’ve got your back regardless,” he pauses before looking over at me, “but I think once Axell has some time to come to terms with it and realize why you lied, he’ll come around.”

“Well, he’ll have plenty of time once I leave for South Carolina. Who knows how long I’ll be stuck down there.”

Seth sighs. “Look, I’ll go with you if you want me to.”

My head whips in his direction, “What?”

“I’m not saying I really want to, but I will because you need me. It’s not for her, it’s for you,” Seth says quietly.

Tears prickle my eyes to think of how much he’s sacrificing for me by offering to go.

He has no idea how much that means to me.

I reach over and squeeze his hand. “Thank you but I think this is something I need to do on my own. Plus, I don’t want you to go see her unless it’s for you.

” We sit in a comfortable silence for a while.

“So, what are we going to do about Lyndsay?”

“What about Lyndsay?”

I sit up straighter, a plan already formulating in my mind. “For us to get her back for you.”

“No.”

“Yes, you care about her. I can see that, and I was wrong for thinking otherwise. So, now I need to fix this for you guys before I leave,” I explain to him.

“You and plans are never a good thing.”

Once I felt certain that my plan would work for Seth and Lyndsay, I left him to finish it up.

I had a lunch date with a hungover Jovi.

I had no doubt that Axell was making him pay for his night of sneaking out and drinking but at the moment that was the least of my worries.

I'm more concerned about the fact that he wants to enlist in the Marines.

The Marines? Really? How the hell did this even happen? Jovi has never mentioned anything about the army, let alone the Marines. It's not a family thing for him either. I don't know what brought on this change of heart. For as long as I can remember he wanted to go into computer science.

As I pull into the driveway, I have to take a moment to remind myself to go easy on him at lunch.

For some reason he has decided he wants to do this, and I need to hear him out.

I may not agree, but I do need to try and understand where he is coming from.

I'm just about to call his phone when he steps out of the house.

He's grown up so much over the last few months.

He shot up in height overnight it feels like.

He's at least 6'2" now, but his eyes are hid behind his aviator style type sunglasses.

He dresses similar to his brothers. Today, he's sporting a Pop Evil concert t-shirt, khaki shorts, and a pair of flip flops.

His messy brown hair moves with every step he takes.

He slides into the passenger seat. “How has your morning been?” I ask.

I see him shrug out of the corner of my eye. “It’s been fine.”

“Look, I know something is bothering you. Last night was nothing like you and I plan to get to the bottom of it today at lunch. I won’t push you right this moment but I’m also not going to let this go. We apparently have a lot to talk about,” I tell him while giving him a pointed look.

We pull into the parking lot of the restaurant.

Jovi is silent but just like the gentleman he is, he makes sure to open the door for me.

Once we’re seated and have ordered, Jovi clears his throat.

“I know you heard dad this morning about the Marines, but you haven’t said anything about it yet, why? ”

“Well, I’m not happy about that decision, but I do realize that it is your life and your decision to make. I would like to hear why this choice has surfaced now.”

I watch as Jovi pulls his sunglasses from his eyes and slips them into the collar of his shirt.

“Multiple reasons really. I never gave it much thought until they showed up at our school. I like the idea of being able to help people and learning my limits both physically and mentally. I’d get to see some parts of the world that I would probably never get the chance to otherwise.

It could also turn out to be a great stepping stone for a career.

There's also the fact that they will pay for my college education. ”

“If you're worried about the money for college, you don't need to. Axell and I have that covered.”

He shakes his head, “It's not that. I just honestly feel like this is the best decision for me.”

“What does Monrowe think?” I ask

Jovi is too much like his brothers, too good at hiding his emotions, but luckily, I've had enough experience with the James boys to catch the sad look that flashes through his eyes. “She hates the idea. She's made that very clear,” he says with a shrug.

“Can you blame her?”

“A little. She's supposed to love me and support me.

I'd support her if the roles were reversed but she's just being...

impossible. It's like she wants to throw our relationship away.

I mean, I factored her into my decision.

The Marines is also good for our future.

Why do I feel like dad is the only one supporting me right now? ”

I reach across and take his hand in mine. “He's not but this coming out of the blue so you have to give the rest of us some time to get used to this. Now, why did last night happen?”

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“Can we do this once we are back in the car, please?” Jovi asks, and I hear the plead in his voice, so I just nod.

Once we’re back in the car Jovi leans forward and turns down the radio.

“I’m sorry about last night. I was on the phone with Monrowe and she was telling me that she didn’t think I really loved her and that maybe it was best if we ended things now.

I kept trying to explain things to her, but she wouldn’t listen.

Eventually, she hung up on me, but I knew she was crying so I felt like I had to go to her.

I got dressed and snuck out of the house but when I got there, she wouldn’t talk to me, but I guess I started to raise my voice, so she came outside and we went to the beach. ”

What he says makes sense, but he didn’t explain one thing, “And the beer?”

“A really dumb decision. I got it before I picked up Monrowe. I just feel like my life should be sorting out and moving on, it’s just getting messier and I’m moving backwards,” he explains.

“How did you get the beer, Jovi?”

He sighs while scrubbing his hands over his face. “Brendon had a fake ID made for

me as a gag gift for my last birthday. I've never used it before and never planned on it. It was a rash decision."

I don't know what I feel right now. I'm relieved that he's never bought any before but angry that he even has a fake ID. "Well, as soon as we get home you are giving me that fake ID."

"Yes ma'am." We drive home in a comfortable quiet.

Jovi gives me the ID as soon as we get home.

I cut it up and toss it in the trash. Jovi gets back to his chores around the house and Axell is at work, so I decide to start packing.

Tomorrow is Ace and Kynlee's wedding, and I'll be leaving the following morning.

Between now and then I have to find a way to tell Axell everything and hope he still loves me.

Axell

When Jovi left to go have lunch with Sadie, I decided to go check on things at the shop and JamesTown.

After his stunt last night, I needed a break.

It wasn't even the stunt it was his attitude about the stunt, like we were supposed to just be okay with it.

I know he is probably going through a hard time right now with trying to figure out what he wants to do with his life.

Ace and Jovi were the only two that really had a choice to make when graduating high school.

The moment our mother passed away I knew my fate was sealed.

I knew I was going to have to step up and finish raising my brothers.

We all had college funds at one time but when mom came down sick and the insurance wouldn't cover treatments, Bowie, Jagger, and I quickly decided college wasn't something we needed.

I also figured that if we all put a portion of our race winnings into an account we could have enough for Ace and Jovi to go to college.

Luckily, we were able to get their accounts set up and enough money for their schooling if they decided they wanted to go.

I can't pretend to understand having to make a life changing decision.

The closest decision I've made that was life changing was picking Sadie over racing.

At the time it seemed like a no brainer for me.

I gave up something I loved for something I loved more.

It didn't seem so life changing when I made the decision, but now that I look back, I guess it was life changing.

I picked a path, one that I wouldn't change for anything.

Tomorrow Ace is getting married, his second life changing decision he's making.

Sadie will leave for South Carolina the following morning.

That's going to be a huge adjustment. We've never been apart for long periods since graduating high school.

Not having her around to come home to is going to be the oddest part.

I know she needs to go. She needs to make amends with her mother and she needs this time for closure.

Also, I don't doubt her mother needs the help and having a nurse like Sadie around definitely couldn't hurt.

It's funny, things seemed so calm and in order of just a few months ago and now it seems like everything is spinning at super speed.

Jovi graduating and his antics, Sadie leaving for who knows how long, Ace getting married.

Maybe, things will simmer back down once everything is taken care of.

I just hope that Jovi doesn't act up too much while Sadie is away.

I've never been very good with certain parts of parenting.

Sadie always wants to get to the bottom of everything.

She always asks the questions of why they are acting the way they are.

Not me, nope, my initial reaction is to go hard ass drill sergeant on them.

That was our dad's way and I guess it's mine too.

It's even more difficult when it's Jovi.

He's always been the one to walk the line and make good decisions.

He's never been like the rest of us, so it has allowed me to expect more from him.

That's the problem with expectations; when the person falls short the disappointment is suffocating.

I've learned to expect disappointment but not when it comes to Jovi or Sadie.

I'm so lost in thoughts that I don't hear Ralph, one of the mechanics, holler for me.

When I look up it's like seeing a ghost from my past. He's slightly taller and a lot broader with tattoos peeking out from under his sleeves but his smile still has the boyish charm to it. "James!" he calls out to me.

"Tillman?"

He nods, "I heard this was your place a few months ago and I had to check it out."

"Well, I'll be damned," I tell him. "If you weren't the last person I expected to see walk into my shop. You want to grab a drink next door and catch up?"

"Hell yeah!"

We make our way through the hallway that connects both buildings. We grab a couple of stools and order from Farrah. “So, how’d you end up in L.A.?”

“Well, I was racing a few nights ago and my girl knew a guy there said he was from here. I mentioned you and come to find out he’s best friends with your brother and she’s an ex of yours,” he explains.

“I’m guessing Jaxx as the guy but I’m not sure what girl you’re talking about. I’ve never actually had a girlfriend aside from Sadie.”

“Jemma and she didn’t really say ex. She said you guys used to date,” Tillman comments.

I chuckle. “Yeah, we dated when we needed a date for something but nothing serious.” Tillman shakes his head. “What?”

“Man, I thought you were dead when you disappeared on us.”

“Dead?” I say with a laugh. “Really, you thought I was dead?”

“Well, you just disappeared, no comment, never to be seen again, what the hell was I supposed to think?” he asks.

I shrug, “I’m sorry. It was just after we talked, and you told me about you and that girl, I kept thinking about Sadie. I knew I had to make a choice and honestly, hearing you talk made it an easy choice for me.”

Tillman smiles. “So, you got her back?”

I hold up my hand to show him my wedding ring. “Yep, I got her back and I’m never letting her go again.”

“Damn, you’re married?”

“Yeah, just recently actually, but we’ve been together since I talked to you. That night actually,” I tell him.

“Okay, this I gotta hear,” Tillman says while rubbing his hands together.

I let my mind drift back to that memory.

By the time I got back to L.A. it was drizzling.

It’s the middle of the night and I should be exhausted, but I’m so full of energy that I couldn’t sleep even if I wanted to.

Talking to Tillman put my mind in perspective.

As much as I love racing, I’ve found something I love more.

Something that feels more vital. Something that feels real.

Sadie. I love Sadie more than I could ever love racing.

Not having Sadie around anymore has made me realize that even in our short amount of time, she had become vital to me.

I actually feel like there is a piece of me missing without her in my life.

Sadie is real. When I’m racing, I’m chasing a high that only lasts for the length of the race.

As soon as the car starts to slow down the reality sets in and the high disappears.

With Sadie around I don't need any of that.

The only thing I need to remind me of who I am is Sadie. She keeps me level headed.

I've made my decision and I find myself taking the route to her place instead of mine.

As I pull in front of her house, I see that it is dark.

My plan is to wait until morning but the longer I set there the more desperate I become to see her, feel her, hold her.

Before I can think twice about it, I'm out of my car and moving to her window. I know a couple of times.

A lamp light appears from behind the curtain and I hold my breath until I see her face peek around the curtain.

I watch as relief floods her features. She motions that she will meet me at the front door.

Sadie appears a few seconds later slipping one of my hoodie's over her head. "Axell, what are you doing here?"

I step forward, "I had to see you."

"At this time of night?" she asks.

"It couldn't wait, Sadie," I tell her as I finish closing the distance between us.

I pull her toward me, but she resists. We're getting soaked, but it doesn't matter.

I'll stand out here all night until she comes to me with ease, like she used to.

"Sadie, I just got done racing. I've been doing a lot of that since you left me.

I thought it helped. I thought it filled a void, but it doesn't.

I race, and I win, but it doesn't mean anything without you there by me. "

"Axell...", Sadie says while trying to move away from me.

I shake my head. "Please, don't. Let me finish.

" She looks up at me. Raindrops causing her hair to cling to her face.

"Sadie, before you, racing was the only thing I knew, the only thing I wanted. You showed up and changed it all in such a short amount of time. You showed me so much more. I love you Sadie. I choose you."

Based on the shuddering breath she pulls in I think she's crying, but the rain makes it impossible to tell. "Axell, you can't choose me over racing. You'll end up resenting and hating me in the end."

I take her face between my hands and make her look me in the eye. "There was no choice once you entered my life. I love you Sadie. I love you more than racing. I'll always choose you above all else. Tell me you don't want to give this a try.

Sadie closes her eyes. "Axell, you say all of this now but what about later?"

"I know what happens later. I've spent my time without you and I don't want to ever do that again. I don't have to worry about later because what I'm saying now will still be true no matter the length of time. I love you Sadie, I choose you, tell me you don't

love me.”

“I...” she hesitates, and I hold my breath while she takes her time finishing that sentence. “love you. I choose you.” Before she even fully finishes that sentence, I bring my mouth crashing down on hers. Her honeysuckle scent invades my senses and I’ve never felt more at home in my life.

“Damn, you sure know how to get the girl,” Tillman comments.

I smile because I didn’t know if I’d get the girl, but I know I’m lucky as hell that I did. “I’m lucky. So, do you still race?”

Tillman nods. “Yeah, that’s another reason I’m here. I just bought a car, Corvette C7, I want to use it to race but it needs a lot of work to be street ready. Word on the street is that this shop is the best place in town for what I’m looking for.”

“Word on the street?” I ask.

“Yeah, they even say you fixed up Enzo Jones’ car, you know the lead singer of Royal Eternity?”

I nod “We did. I’m sure we can get your car street ready.”

Tillman pats my shoulder. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Tillman and I continue to catch up. He fills me in on how the racing with Roberto and Manuel is going.

Seems not much has changed except the money is even larger than before.

Eventually, we make our way back outside to see his car.

I make notes of all the changes he wants to make, then we exchanged numbers and I promise to send him a quote tomorrow.

As I head back into the shop, I can't help but think this day has been far more interesting than I expected.

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Axell

I wake up to the smell of bacon and eggs, my stomach roars in appreciation.

I feel the empty bed beside me and know that Sadie has already started the day off.

I don't know how she has so much energy after last night.

I had planned on sleeping in. Ace's wedding isn't until sunset, so we have most of the day.

As soon as I step outside our bedroom I run straight into Jovi.

He mumbles he's sorry, but he looks distracted.

I wrap my arms around Sadie's waist from behind and lean forward to press a kiss to the top of her head. "Good morning beautiful."

"Good morning husband," she replies.

I breathe her in while I still can. The ache in my heart intensifies with the idea of her being gone tomorrow morning with no real way of knowing for sure when she'll be back.

We came to the decision to have Sadie quit her job then re-apply once she gets back to L.A.

I didn't want her to have to feel as if she was on a time crunch or needs to get in a hurry to return.

I wanted her to be able to take her time even if that meant I had to be without her for a while.

It's probably the only selfless thing I've done for her because when it comes to Sadie, I love her too much to care that I'm selfish with her.

"So, you know what's going on with Jovi? "

She sighs heavily, "Monrowe's parents grounded her so she's not coming to the wedding. They're having a really hard time right now."

I rest my chin on top of her head. "Damn, I hate to see him like this. I miss my happy go-lucky kid brother. I mean, I know not everyone gets forever with their first love, but I don't want him hurting like this."

"Well, changing his plans for the future last minute caused her to rethink their future. They'll figure it out eventually, it's all a part of life," Sadie comments quietly.

She seems different, like something is bothering her.

Something aside from her mother. She's been distracted a lot lately, but this is something more.

I place my hands on her hip and turn her around to face me.

"Sadie, what's wrong?"

Her eyes widen for a moment, but it happens so quick that if I didn't know her so

well, I might not have caught it. “Why do you ask that?”

“Because you’ve seemed distracted more and more lately. I know everything with your mom has to be weighing on you, but I can’t help but feel like there’s something more to it. Something else aside from your mother,” I explain to her.

Sadie takes a deep breath, “You’re right, there is something else. I— “

“Are we ready for breakfast? I’m starving,” Jovi says as he enters the kitchen. As curious as I am to continue this conversation with Sadie and to know what’s bothering her, I can tell by her stiff posture this isn’t something she wants to discuss in front of an audience.

I lean down and press a kiss to her forehead and whisper, “Later.”

After breakfast we get ready for the day.

Jovi and I are both groomsmen for Ace and Sadie is a bridesmaid for Kynlee.

Actually, we’re honorary because the wedding is so small, they aren’t actually having a wedding party to stand with them at the altar.

We will however be in the first row and in matching outfits.

I promised Ace we’d meet him at his shop.

I wasn’t sure what all the girls had planned, but I knew Ace wanted to get a haircut before the ceremony.

Jovi and I make our way outside. He starts to head for my car when I stop him. “Where are you going?”

“To the car,” he replies, with a confused look on his face.

“Wrong car, buddy. You’re driving us.”

A smile lights up his face, and he responds with a, “Hell yeah,” before jogging over to his car.

I turn around and see Sadie standing in the doorway.

I wave, and she returns it but I can see the worry on her face from here.

A part of me wants to go back inside and make her talk to me right now but today is about Ace.

I’ll make sure that Sadie and I talk about whatever this is before she leaves.

Once I’m settled into the car and Jovi picks a radio station we head for Ace’s shop, Inkredible.

Unfortunately, there is a lot of traffic on the roads but then again summer is fast approaching, and it is Saturday.

People are crawling forward, so I figure now is the best time to try and talk to Jovi. “So, you decide about the Marines?”

Jovi sighs. “I know it’s what I want to do but at what cost? Do I want mom to worry the whole time I’m gone? Do I want to lose Monrowe because of it? Do I want to leave you guys hanging?”

“First of all, how would you leave us hanging?” I ask.

“Well, if I enlist and something happens here, or you guys need help at the shop, I can’t just drop everything and be here,” he says.

I chuckle. “Jovi, it isn’t your place to drop everything here.

The shop is all of ours. It always will be.

I’m glad to have the shop and JamesTown to share with you guys.

It’s my future but that doesn’t mean it’s yours.

If you need to go out and find yourself or just do something for yourself, that’s fine.

This will always be here for you to come back to. ”

Jovi hangs his head and blows a long breath before looking back up.

“Thanks dad.” I used to hate when he called me dad.

I wasn’t his dad, we had a dad. Then I realized he never really knew our dad.

He didn’t know how amazing he had been before losing our mom.

So, I let him start calling me dad. “I’m sorry about the other night. ”

“I know you are.” I look out the window trying to decide if I should apologize for being so hard on him. Eventually, I decide against it. “So, what’s going on with you and Monrowe?”

“Hell, if I know! She’s become so hot and cold. One minute she says we’ll be able to work through anything including me joining the Marines. The next she’s crying and

saying she can't do it. She doesn't want this anymore."

"As in your relationship?" Jovi nods. "As in, no waiting until graduation and seeing what happens before calling it quits?"

"Yeah, it's crap, right?" Jovi runs his hands through his hair. "I don't know what she does or doesn't want anymore. I'm so confused. Hell, sometimes I don't think I even know what I want." He pulls on his hair again causing me to chuckle. "What?" he asks.

"You know if you join the Marines, you're going to have to cut this mop you call hair," I say as I reach over and ruffle his hair.

He pushes my arm away. "Yeah, yeah, I know. What about mom?"

"What about her?"

"I don't want to worry her if I join," he says.

I sigh. "Jovi, Sadie will worry regardless. It doesn't matter if you're in the Marines or at college.

She took on the role of a mother and that means she will worry no matter what.

You have to do what you want, what you truly want.

Stop factoring in Sadie and Monrowe." Jovi's head whips in my direction.

"I know you love Monrowe but that doesn't mean you will always be with her.

You are still young. You have a lot to learn about life and yourself.

Who knows maybe you two will go your separate ways then find a way back to one another?

Maybe, she isn't meant to be your forever no matter how unfathomable it may seem right now. "

I don't even realize we are at the shop until Jovi makes the turn. "But you met mom in high school."

I nod my head. "Yes, I did but I was different than you have been. I was wild and had learned so much before I graduated. Plus, my plan after graduation was much different. At the end of the day, you have to decide which do you love more; Monrowe or the opportunity of the Marines?"

We get out of the car and make our way inside.

I hear my brothers in one of the rooms in the back.

Once we find them, I see Ace sitting in the tattoo chair with Roscoe, one of Bowie's best friends and Ace's co-worker, tattooing something onto Ace's ring finger.

"What the hell?" Jovi asks as he moves around me to get a better look.

"I'm getting Kynlee's name tattooed on my ring finger. That way even when I don't have my ring on, it's like it's still there," Ace explains.

"Well, I guess that makes sense," I tell him. "So, are you ready for today?"

"Yes, hell yes. I've been ready for a while now," Ace tells us. I can tell by the look in his eyes that he means it too.

“So, what’s the plan for today?”

Ace smiles. “Well, after this we are going to the arcade. You know the one we used to all go to when we were younger. Then I figured we can grab lunch and I want to get my haircut before the wedding.”

“That sounds great,” I tell him.

Jagger adds, “I could use a shape up on my hair as well.

Jovi makes his way back to me. “Can I get my haircut?” he asks, leaning down so the others won’t hear.

I give him a questioning look. “You sure?” I ask.

“Yeah, I’m sure. It’s time to make a decision.”

Well, I guess it was.

After spending hours in the arcade playing every game imaginable, multiple times, we all head to lunch.

Ace’s best friends, Jaxx and Pierce, joined us while at the arcade.

We are all sitting around eating pizza, which is Ace’s favorite, and catching up.

I take a look around the table and just try to stop time for a moment.

A few years ago, I never thought I’d see this.

Jagger back in L.A., Bowie actually happy, Ace getting married, and Jovi making the biggest decision of his life.

I feel so proud of all of them. I'm proud for them.

Life has thrown us some major curveballs but somehow, we managed to survive.

We managed to stay together and find happiness again.

I smile to myself as my brothers and friends joke around with one another. Jagger leans toward me, "What's with the creepy ass grin?"

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I laugh. “Just taking it all in. Trying to appreciate it all.”

“Okay, that’s not creepy at all,” Jagger replies with a laugh.

I nudge his shoulder. “Shut the hell up and look around.” Jagger takes a moment and observes the table.

“Did you ever think we’d see a day when we are happy at the same time?”

I mean come on Bowie is married to Hollis and has a little girl.

Ace is actually getting married. Jovi is graduating high school and you,” I say while squeezing his shoulder, “Are married and have a baby boy. I never thought this would all happen.”

Jagger nods his head slowly, allowing my words to sink in. “You know what? You’re right, I never really thought it would either.”

After lunch we all head to the old-fashioned barber shop.

Our dad came here for as long as I can remember, and we’ve followed in his footsteps.

We each got our first haircuts in this place by Billy.

When we enter, he turns around to greet us then he realizes who we are.

“The James brothers! Well, it’s been a while since I’ve seen some of you.

What can I do for you guys once I finish up here? ”

“Well, I’m getting married in a few hours and I want to look my best, so I need you to fix me up,” Ace tells him.

Billy stops and pulls Ace in for a quick hug. “Well, congratulations my boy! I’ll get you all set in a few. What about the rest of you?”

Jagger and Bowie both tell him they need to be cleaned up. Jovi tells Billy he’ll go after them and I figure I might as well since I’m here. We all leave with fresh haircuts and Ace riding high on cloud ten. We head over to Jagger’s to get ready for the wedding.

Once I’m dressed in my black slacks and red button down shirt, I decide to text Sadie.

Axell : I can’t wait to see you.

Sadie : Haha oh really now?

Axell : Yes ;) I know how good you look in red.

Sadie : So, you say.

Sadie : By the way I changed my hair today.

Axell : What? You too?

Sadie : Yes. It’s golden brown now. Did you change your hair?

Axell : No but Jovi got rid of all of his.

Sadie : No way! I never thought I'd see the day.

Axell : Right. He actually looks a lot like Jagger under the mop.

Sadie : Lol! Who knew?

Sadie : I have to finish getting ready. See you at the wedding.

Axell : See you there beautiful ;)

I put my phone in my pocket while we wait to head to the beach. Ace and Kynlee insisted on a beach wedding. I guess it holds something special for them. Ace comes out and hands me a white rose to pin to the pocket of my shirt. I look at him.

“Kynlee’s request.”

I laugh and take the rose. He’s so whipped.

Sadie

As I’m driving to the spa where I’m meeting up with Kynlee and the rest of the bridesmaids, I can’t shake the feeling of overwhelming guilt.

In less than twenty-four hours my entire life can change and as a result so can Axell’s.

I should have told him years ago, but I didn’t.

Now, every time that I try, I stop because I'm a coward.

I never thought of myself as a coward. I actually thought I was strong and independent. In a lot of situations, I am that girl, but when it comes to telling Axell the truth about my past and the girl I used to be...well, I chicken out making me a coward.

Truth be told I've loved Axell so much for so long that the thought of losing him, of losing his love is downright terrifying.

He's been such a huge part of my life and soul that I don't know what I'll do if he can't get past it all.

In all honesty, I never deserved Axell James' love.

I was never worthy of the way he looked at me or the pedestal he placed me on.

I wanted to be, but I wasn't. I couldn't be.

My past was too tarnished. My soul had smudges of mud that would never come off just like the permanent grease stains on Axell's clothes.

When I came to L.A. I had sworn off boys and the idea of love was completely foreign to me.

I was in a depression of sorts. Axell saved me.

He always says I saved him but he's wrong.

He came into my life and brought the light back to me.

I was in the dark before him. From that moment on I wanted to be the girl he deserved, the girl who deserved that look of all-consuming love and trust. I've tried hard but I'm about to drop a nuclear bomb on everything we've built, and I can't help but be pulled down from the soul eating guilt and regret.

Without Axell I'll never be the same Sadie. This Sadie will cease to exist.

I pull into the parking lot of the spa and try to take a few deep breaths to calm my war of emotions. Eventually, the tears threatening the back of my eyes, calm down and I move towards the door. Today is for Ace and Kynlee, I remind myself.

As I walk into the spa, I spot our group.

We're all meeting here for manicures, pedicures and massages before having lunch then get ready for the wedding.

Hollis spots me and waves me over, I join them.

I plaster on my smile and try to absorb some of Kynlee's excitement.

A lady appears from behind a door to escort us to the area where we will start with massages.

As we're walking down the hallway Hollis leans over, "Are you okay?" Hollis was always the most observant and I had considered her one of my closest friends back in the day.

It's clear she still knows me pretty well.

"Yeah, just a little tired," I comment.

Hollis smiles and raises her eyebrows. “Long night?”

I laugh at her suggestion but decide to go along with it. “Yeah, you know I leave first thing tomorrow, so I had to make up for all the time we’ll lose. “

“Girl, I don’t blame you,” she says with a laugh.

If only Hollis really knew what was bothering me.

I know I could tell her, but it just seems wrong to tell her before I tell Axell.

The massage therapist complains the whole time about how tight my muscles are.

With each complaint I grind my teeth. I’m beyond irritable at this point and I’m well aware that my body is wound up.

Eventually, the massage ends, and we move to our manicures and pedicures.

They bring us glasses of champagne and magazines to look at.

Kynlee has picked a red glittery color for our fingernails and toenails that will match the wedding.

Normally, I don’t do red but for her I will. It’s actually a pretty color too.

After finishing up at the spa we all head over to Ace and Kynlee’s place to get ready for the wedding.

The hair stylist will be there. When we pull up, I spot Kynlee’s hair stylist, Christy, easy enough with her soft pink hair and arms colorfully decorated with tattoos.

Beside Christy are two people I don't know but I'm assuming they are Kynlee's mom and sister, Brooke.

I know it means a lot to Kynlee to have them here, but I know her relationship with her mom is rocky at best and I hope that having her here doesn't turn out to be an issue.

As we park and get out of the cars, I realize that Brooke looks a lot like Kynlee except taller.

Once we are close enough Kynlee introduces all of us to them.

Both girls definitely look like their mom.

They all share the same chocolate brown hair and brown eyes.

There is a little awkward tension between Kynlee and her mother, but Brooke seems to be trying to simmer it down with her constant chatter.

It's hard to believe that just a few weeks ago she was in the hospital with a head injury.

I'm glad she's feeling better and seems to know how to handle the tension filled air.

Londynn and I are chatting while waiting for our turn to get ready. Suddenly, she turns to me. "I think I want to cut my hair."

"You do?" I ask. Her hair has gotten so long.

She nods. "There so much of it and it takes so much time to care for. It just got super long during my pregnancy thanks to all those vitamins. I liked it a little shorter."

“Then cut it,” I encourage her. “I was actually thinking of dying mine,” I add.

“You should!” she exclaims. “What color?”

I shrug. “I’ve always changed my hair color, but I think I’d like to try a golden brown. It’s been one of my favorite colors I’ve had.”

“That’d be really pretty.” Christy appears and calls Londynn’s name. “Do you want Sadie first she’s thinking of changing hair color if you can?”

Christy pops the bubble gum in her mouth. “I brought color with me just in case. Come on Sadie.”

Christy gets as close to the color as I wanted that she could manage.

I’m sitting on the couch flipping through a magazine when my phone alerts me of a text.

I look at it and see it’s from Axell. Just seeing his name on my screen still gives me butterflies in my stomach.

Londynn comes out of the bathroom looking more like herself and a big smile on her face.

Christy motions back to me so I promise to meet Axell at the wedding, as if I’d be anywhere else.

Christy gives my hair a beautiful curled updo with a few strands framing my face.

I slip on the bohemian maxi style dress with the red heels Kynlee picked.

I'm not sure how we are going to walk in the sand in these, but I put them on anyways.

We're all waiting for Kynlee when she appears looking like a Greek goddess.

Kynlee's hair is all pulled up and cascading down her back in long curls.

There are red tiny jewels woven in throughout her hair.

She has a white lace crop top paired with a high waist flowing skirt.

The skirt hangs to the floor with a slit on one side going up to her mid-thigh.

It looks perfect for both Kynlee and this beach wedding.

She has on simple jewelry that add pops of red throughout.

"You guys all look so beautiful!" she exclaims as tears start to form in her eyes.

Christy swats her arm. "Don't you dare mess up my masterpiece by crying."

We all laugh at that then Kenndrix, Kylee's best friend, steps forward. "We look like a whole bunch of nothing compared to you. Ace is going to go crazy!"

We disperse to head to the wedding and nervous jitters settle in my stomach not because of the wedding, but because the time to tell Axell is getting closer and closer.

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Axell

I'm standing with my brothers in a circle waiting for the girls to arrive.

Ace is the only one missing since he's waiting at the altar for Kynlee.

The limo pulls up and the girls start to file out.

You would think that after all this time I'd be used to Sadie's beauty but I'm not.

Her beauty still pulls me and takes my breath away.

I don't know who I would have been or where I would be if it hadn't been for her coming into my life, but I'm glad I didn't have to find out.

I take in her lean legs in the high-low dress Kynlee picked out.

The heels remind me of those shoes from Wizard of Oz .

I love Sadie in red, I always have. Her hair is swept up and away from her neck and face with the exception of a few loose strands.

She smiles when she sees me, and it almost feels like our wedding all over again.

Seeing the bouquet of red and white roses brings the memory back.

Sadie and I were finally doing it. We were getting married and it was about damn

time.

We had been saying for years that when the time was right, we would get married.

Then we realized that if we kept saying that there'd never be a right time, so we picked a date a month ago and planned the damn thing.

Sadie wanted small and, in the park, where I first brought her to.

It had a tiny worn gazebo and that's where we would stand and say our long overdue vows.

Only our closest friends and family were here.

I hadn't been sure what to wear so Sadie had picked out my outfit.

It was simple just like me, but I was worried that I would be underdressed compared to her.

The simple navy slacks and baby blue button up shirt seemed dressed up for me on most days.

However, today is far from most days. Today, Sadie will walk down an aisle in a white dress and take my name.

She will no longer be Sadie Rogers, she'll be Sadie James.

Just like she should have been so long ago.

Lyndsay, Londynn, and Kynlee had decorated the gazebo for us and made sure the aisle was created.

Seth would be walking Sadie down the makeshift aisle.

Sadie's dad was out of town on work, but he already considered us married so he told us not to postpone it until he could be here.

There were white and blue hydrangeas bordering the entire railing of the gazebo.

They were also tied to each chair at the end of the row and linked together with ribbon.

I knew Sadie would love it. They were her favorite flowers.

I sent Lyndsay with the necklace I bought for Sadie to celebrate this day. It was a white gold, three drop diamond necklace to symbolize our past, present, and future. I was hoping she'd like it.

My palms were sweating not because I wasn't sure about marrying Sadie, but because I was worried about her realizing she deserved better than me.

Way before I was ready it was time for me to take my place.

I stood there and waited until I saw Sadie.

She was breathtaking. She looked like an angel in her white dress.

It was lace and fell off her shoulders. I could see the necklace around her neck from here.

Her hair was left down and simple with a blue and white flower crown.

As she approached me the world fell away.

My palms dried, and I let the air I had been holding out.

She was perfection, my perfection. She saved me before I ever knew I needed saving.

She loved me when I was convinced, I'd never need anyone.

She showed me light out of the darkness.

She showed me it was okay to be weak because she'd be my strength in those moments.

She taught me everything I know about love.

I want to make her smile like this every day for the rest of her life.

When she took my hand and stepped in front of me nothing ever felt more right in this messed up world.

We said our vows, we exchanged our rings, and we kissed to seal the deal but in the end none of that mattered.

That piece of paper that came with marriage didn't change us.

Sadie had been it for me from the moment I met her.

Sadie had been my wife since the moment she moved into our house and took on a role she never had to.

The only thing that piece of paper gave us was Sadie legally having my last name.

After the ceremony we had a small reception at JamesTown. We ate, drank, sang, and

danced and I fell more in love with Sadie in every moment of it.

Sadie approaches me with a smile. “Hey hot stuff,” she says with a laugh. Once she’s close enough she reaches over and pulls me toward her. “I love this on you.”

I chuckle. “I love you,” I tell her before pressing a quick kiss to her lips. “By the way I like the hair.”

She beams at me. “Good, I was worried you wouldn’t.”

I caress her cheek. “You shouldn’t worry. I always love everything about you.” She tilts her head into my hand and I notice the flash of sadness in her eyes and the heavy sigh, but before I can ask about it we are being ushered to take our spots.

Sadie wobbles and I reach out to catch her. These heels that she has on and this sand do not go together. “These damn shoes,” she whispers.

I nod then turn around toward Kynlee. “These shoes are not going to work very well in this sand.”

“I’m noticing that. What if the girls take them off and the guys carry them?”

We all nod in agreement. The girl’s hurriedly slip their shoes off and hand them over.

I often find myself forgetting how short Sadie really is next to me.

She’s always been one of those girls that loved heels and wedges and at 5’1” she liked the extra height.

The only time she wears flats is when she’s heading to work.

The song that Ace and Kynlee love by In This Moment starts to play and we begin to walk down the aisle.

I smile at Ace as we approach him, but he surprises me as he steps forward and hugs both Sadie and I.

He whispers, “Thanks” before taking his spot back.

I see unshed tears shining in Sadie’s eyes.

Once we are in front of our designated chairs Kynlee begins to walk down.

I see the love shining in her eyes as she takes in Ace.

Quickly, I look over to my little brother and see the same look in his.

It fills me with so much pride to see him in this moment, to be able to be a part of this moment.

I’m so glad that Ace was able to see Kynlee for the amazing girl she was and really give her a chance. He deserves this.

Once Kynlee reaches Ace, I see them both wiping escaped tears from their eyes.

We all take our seats. I hear Sadie sniffing and when I look over, I see her crying as well.

I fish out the travel pack of Kleenex I stashed in my pocket because I knew Sadie would get emotional.

I find them and hand one to her. She smiles gratefully at me and I reach over and take

her hand in mine.

The music fades away and Kynlee passes her bouquet to Kenndrix.

Jaxx, one of Ace's best friends, is actually officiating the wedding.

He became ordained online, apparently. He begins the ceremony and, in this moment, a perfect calm washes over the beach.

Lazy waves slowly crash into the shore but other than that the weather is beautiful.

The sun is setting behind Ace and Kynlee and I can't help but feel at peace with everything.

I truly feel like our parents are here watching this somehow.

Kynlee starts with her vows first. "Ace, we have been through so much that I wasn't sure where to begin.

You were the cool boy in school. The one that acted like he didn't have a care in the world, that had the cool car and swagger," we all laugh at that, "I was instantly drawn to you. I remember having such a crush on you. I'd walk through the school parking lot just to see you.

Which was totally out of my way since I rode the bus.

Then I moved but no matter the distance I always wondered about the elusive Ace James.

When I first got back to L.A. I knew I had to go to the races, to see you if nothing else.

There you were all rebel without a cause, tattoos and cool car.

The only difference was that I saw the broken in you.

You're broken called out to my broken. Somewhere along the way our broken pieces came together to complete the puzzle.

We broke every limit we had. We crossed every boundary we set.

We broke all the rules and it was so worth it.

I'd go through it all again if it meant I got to be here with you right now, in this moment.

I won't lie there was a time I never thought I'd get this future with you but then you surprised me, like you always do, you went and broke every single limit, boundary, rule, and expectation and made me the happiest and luckiest girl in the world.

I couldn't have a happily ever after if it wasn't with you. I love you Ace."

By the time Kynlee is done with her vows there's not a dry eye in the house. Even I have tears prickling at the back of my eyes. Sadie's hold on my hand has tightened. When I look over at her I see her tearstained face. Instantly, I grab her another Kleenex.

Kynlee slips Ace's ring on his finger but not before she stops, looking at his finger as confusion washes over her face. "What?" Ace smiles and shrugs. Kynlee beams at him, finishes slipping the ring on, then jumps into his arms to kiss him.

Jaxx clears his throat. "Whoa! Not yet!"

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Ace and Kynlee both roll their eyes before we all start laughing.

This is typical Ace fashion. Ace clears his throat before starting his vows and I find myself leaning toward them.

I know my brother is a very passionate person even if he seems like the most unlikely person to be.

I know he has a way with words but I'm curious as to how far he will go.

How far will my little brother put himself out there?

“Kynlee, my angel first of all I love you. I know to most those seem like simple words, but you know just how much those simple words mean. You know me better than anyone in the world and there was a time when that scared the hell out of me, to let someone in, to let someone see the real me. The version of me that was behind the reputation. Then you came along and turned my entire world upside down. You were different from everyone else in my life. I needed that different even if I didn't want to admit it.

I swore I'd never fall in love. I swore I'd never get married, I never wanted a relationship, but I could never let you go.

Once I finally had a little piece of you, I just couldn't do it.

I was selfish, and I didn't care. You pushed me to my limits faster than I race cars.

You made me realize that the life I had been living was empty.

You pulled me from my darkened room and shared your light with me.

You showed me a different way. Thank you for breaking the limits with me.

Thank you for charging through the boundaries.

Thank you for breaking the rules with me.

Most of all, thank you for seeing something in me that I never saw in myself.

Thank you for loving me when I didn't love myself.

Thank you for this moment. I promise to remind you that I love you every day.

I promise to be by your side forever because angel, there's nowhere else I'd rather be.
I love you."

Damn, my brother just made me so damn proud.

Ace just laid it all out there for us to see.

After our mom died, I never thought I'd see the day when Ace would open up.

He shut down after her death. He acted like an asshole because it was the easiest way to keep people away.

To keep everyone from seeing the real him.

To mask the pain, he was feeling. He's right about Kynlee saving him from the

darkness and I can never thank her enough for that.

Ace and Kynlee are finally allowed to kiss each other. We all clap and dry our eyes before heading to our cars to head over to the reception which is at a rental property on the beach. As we make our way to the car, I notice Sadie is still gripping my hand for dear life. “Hey you okay baby?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Because you’ve had a death grip on my hand this whole time.”

She loosens her grip. “Sorry, I didn’t even realize.”

I pull her hand up and kiss the back of it.

“It’s okay. Just wanted to make sure you were okay.

” We stop so Sadie can slip her shoes back on before getting into the car.

Sadie is quiet on our ride to the reception, but I don’t push her because I know she’s got a lot on her mind. We pull up and make our way inside.

The inside is decorated in red and white.

Pierce, Ace’s other best friend, is apparently the DJ for the night.

Ace and Kynlee arrive shortly after and take to the dance floor for their first dance.

The same song that Kynlee walked down the aisle to is playing.

I wrap my arms around Sadie’s waist and sway to the music.

The cake is cut, the bouquet has been tossed, and now we are all just talking or dancing.

I excuse myself to find the restroom. On the way back, I stop and request a song.

I approach the table just as it starts to play.

I extend my hand out to Sadie. She stares at me for a moment before placing her hand in mine.

We make our way to the dance floor to dance to our song.

I'll Be There For You by Bon Jovi is playing loud and clear.

I pull Sadie close and we dance to our song.

I love having her in my arms. I love being engulfed in her scent. I just love her.

Our song ends, and Perfect by Ed Sheeran starts up. I keep Sadie in my arms as we continue to dance. The lyrics have me feeling sentimental and romantic. I lean down to whisper in Sadie's ear, "You are perfect. God, I love you. I'm going to miss you so much while you're gone."

I thought those would be good things to say, but the next thing I know I feel Sadie shuddering. I pull her back and realize she is crying. "Baby, what's wrong?" I ask.

She just shakes her head and pulls away from me. "I'm sorry. I can't. I just...can't." With that she turns and power walks out the back sliding-glass doors. I'm so stunned by her reaction that she's already in the sand by the time I reach her.

"Sadie, what the hell is going on? You're scaring me."

She turns around to face me and I see the heartbreak in her eyes.

Whatever has been bugging her is about to come out and I have a feeling it's going to be like a hurricane hitting me.

Sadie shakes her head and a sob escapes her.

I want to go to her, pull her into my arms, comfort her, but I don't.

I'm frozen only I'm standing on a beach in sand.

"I'm not perfect at all Axell. I'm not the girl you think I am.

" Yeah, I'm not frozen. I'm in quicksand and I'm sinking fast.

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Sadie

One moment everything was fine and the next everything came crashing down on me.

I had managed to hold myself together all day until I was in Axell's arms dancing.

I was able to keep the war of emotions going inside my head from cascading outside until that damn Ed Sheeran song came on and Axell told me how perfect I was.

I couldn't fight it anymore. The war broke through and I lost it.

I couldn't fight the tears off as they came flooding through.

I tried to keep Axell from seeing me like this, but I couldn't.

Rushing away from him sobbing didn't help anything.

I suddenly couldn't run away from it all fast enough.

I needed a moment to myself, I needed distance from it all.

The weight of everything was pulling me under.

My limbs were heavy with guilt and regret.

I hadn't even reached the sand I already felt like I was sinking into it.

The cool breeze stung my overheated body, but I welcomed it.

I know Axell and I know he's not far behind me.

I have to get myself together. This isn't the time or place to have this discussion, but then again that's been my excuse all these years.

Maybe, it's time to stop making the excuses and own up to my decisions, but to do it during Ace's wedding just seems wrong.

I feel Axell's presence behind me. My soul knows him. I don't have to see him to know he's there. Our souls seek each other out. I never believed in the idea of soulmates until I met Axell. I hear him clear his throat before he asks, "Sadie, what the hell is going on? You're scaring me."

My plan is to lie to him again, but when I turn around and see the man I love, my husband, the person I have been through so much with I can't do it.

I can't continue to lie to him. It doesn't matter that it's Ace's wedding.

It doesn't matter that this isn't the right time or place.

My mouth throws the words out before I can reconsider them further.

"I'm not perfect at all Axell. I'm not the girl you think I am. "

A look of confusion crosses his face. "Baby, what are you talking about?" he asks as he pulls me into his arms. "I know you, Sadie."

I shake my head and try to pull away from him, but he won't let me go.

“No, you don’t. You just think you do. I’ve been living this lie for so long,” I tell him.

The worst part is that I know Axell. He would have accepted me and my past. He would have accepted everything if I had just had the courage to tell him.

“Sadie, I don’t know what’s going on?”

It’s time to accept my fate. “I know you don’t and that’s my fault and I can’t begin to tell you how sorry I am. I’ll tell you everything.”

Axell releases me and walks over to sit on the steps then pats the spot next to him.

I follow his lead and take a seat. The warmth from his body warms my cold soul.

My soul knows what’s coming and it’s shut itself off in order to protect the pain that will follow.

I’m trying to find the courage when Axell reaches over and takes my hands in his.

“Sadie, you can tell me anything. You know that. Nothing you tell me can make me not love you.”

As much as I love those words, I wish he hadn’t said them. What I’m about to tell him will change everything. There’s a very good possibility he won’t love me after this. “I love you for saying that but don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

“I’ll always keep that one,” he replies with a matter of fact tone.

I sigh and let the memories of my past come crashing back on me, just like the waves crashing into the shore.

“You know I wasn’t actually from South Carolina.

I only lived there about a year before I moved here.

Before that we lived in Tennessee. My mom and I had always been really close so when she met Dale, I hated him.

I didn’t want him around. I started acting out.

I thought it would scare Dale off, but it didn’t.

One night I went with my friends to the local bowling alley.

We were standing outside trying to act like we were a lot cooler than we were at the time when he pulled up.

I remember feeling the vibration coming from the ground and the roar of the engine as the motorcycle approached.

He pulled up and parked not even ten feet away from us.

He put his cigarette out while checking us out.

The look he gave me sent chills all over my spine.

He had tattoos and an eyebrow piercing. He was your typical biker.

I knew he would be a good way to piss my mom off and maybe make Dale leave.

He smirked as he passed us. We quickly decided to follow him inside.

We were bowling when he came up and offered to give me tips on how to bowl.

I took his offer. I ended up climbing onto the back of the bike that night as he gave me a ride home, much to my mother's dismay.

He told me his name was Josh and we exchanged numbers.

I didn't really plan on seeing him again but then he called me, and I figured why not?
”

“Josh was your typical bad boy; alcohol, drugs, in and out of jail for fights, girls throwing themselves at him willingly, and of course he took it. I quickly felt myself giving into the pressure of what he wanted. Before I knew it, I was in over my head. Looking back, I see the small signs leading up to all the issues, but you know when you're that young you don't really even think about them.

Anyways, my mother and Dale announced their engagement which only pushed me closer to Josh.

They both didn't like or trust him and for good reason.

He had a well-earned reputation but at that point I wouldn't listen to them.

I was angry at my mom for wanting to add Dale to the family.

I was angry at Dale for taking my mom away from me.

I was just angry, and I felt like I had no one except Josh.

He was technically always there when I needed him, but our relationship was far from great.

My family, my friends, even some teachers tried to tell me to get away from him, but I was hell bent on proving them all wrong.

When Josh told me he loved me, I believed him like the na?ve girl I was. ”

Axell’s face is pale and his lips are drawn in forming a hard line.

I take a deep breath before continuing. “He went in and out of rehab, but it never stuck. The last time he came out things were different. It was like something clicked and he realized he needed to change. He told me it was because he loved me, and I believed him again. Hearing him say that put me on cloud nine. Everything was perfect for a few months then he went missing one weekend. I was worried sick, literally. I was throwing up and dizzy. I was a mess. There was a rumor that he was seen on his motorcycle with some of his old buddies, but I didn’t want to believe them.

I wanted to believe that he really had changed.

He called me after three days and said he needed to see me, so I went to meet up with him.

I was just about to leave when he finally showed up.

I knew the minute he staggered off the bike that we were back to step one.

I knew he had left with those friends and fallen off the wagon...

again. In that moment I was so angry. Those three days had been hell for me.

Not just because I was worried about him, but because I found out my sickness was much more than that.

I was pregnant. I was pregnant by this drunken drug addict that couldn't stay sober over a couple of months at a time. I was so angry at him and myself."

I can't look at Axell not now. I just told him my biggest secret but there's still so much to say.

"With every step he took toward me my anger grew. He tried to tell me he was sorry when he saw the look on my face, but I cut him off. I didn't want to hear it.

I couldn't let my heart make this decision for me because it wasn't just about me anymore.

I was going to have a baby and it didn't need this crap in its life.

Josh's anger had always been at its worst when he had been on a binger.

I should have waited but I just couldn't.

I told him I was done and that he had to make a decision.

It was either this lifestyle and his friends or me and our baby.

Needless, to say he didn't want a baby at the moment.

Our anger got the best of us. Remember those signs that I mentioned I overlooked? "

I raise my head to look at him and he just nods.

"Well, Josh had been abusive in the past but nothing that seemed serious. He'd get jealous and grab my arm too hard or something like that.

This night was different though. He grabbed my arm and got in my face about giving him an ultimatum.

Things escalated from there. I just remember crying and begging but he wouldn't stop.

Finally, his sister and her boyfriend showed up and got him off of me.

They rushed me to the hospital. They didn't expect the baby to make it.

Hell, I was lucky to make it." I don't even realize I'm crying until Axell reaches up and wipes the tears away.

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“My mom and Dale were livid. They worried something like this would happen. My mom and Dale sat in my room the next morning while they thought I was asleep and discussed moving to get me away from Josh. At that point I wanted nothing else to do with him, but we lived in a small town and he’d be impossible to escape.

When I really woke up, we made a decision to move.

Dale had lived in South Carolina before, so it seemed like the perfect place.

The day I was released from the hospital was the day we left.

Everything was already packed up and, in the vehicles, when the nurse wheeled me out of the hospital.

Josh was still in jail, but I wasn’t pressing charges, so he’d be released soon.

I just wanted to move past this part of my life,” I tell Axell.

Axell clears his throat. “Can I ask something?” I nod in response, terrified of his question. “Why didn’t you press charges?”

“I thought about it. My mom, Dale, and I discussed it but if I pressed charges then there’d be a court date and I’d have to go back. I just wanted to move on, so I didn’t press charges. I left town before he was released and never looked back.”

“And the baby?”

I sigh. “The doctor told me every chance he got just how lucky I was to be alive. We told Josh’s parents that I lost the baby.

That’s why I couldn’t go back. I couldn’t let him be around the baby.

It was my job to protect it now. The baby had fought to live, and I had to give it a chance.

Josh never wanted the baby anyways. I had the baby and luckily, he was healthy.

Problem was...I wasn’t. I was already depressed and having him sent me into postpartum.

I tried to be a mom for a couple of months, but it became pretty clear that I couldn’t do it.

My mental state just wasn’t there. So, I signed my rights over to my mom and I went into a rehab facility to help me with my depression.

That’s where I figured out, I wanted to be a nurse.

When I was released my mom already had my stuff packed up and a plane ticket ready.

She sent me here to live with my dad. At first, I argued, but she had already made up her mind. ”

“Then I got here and got to be around Seth and that made things seem easier. I had planned on going back after graduation, but I met you and I fell in love. It was all so different from what I’d went through with Josh.

What we had was real and for the first time in a couple of years I was happy, but it was a lie.

Time kept passing and before long I started to believe the lie.

My dad and Seth were the only ones who knew.

They weren't going to say anything, so the lie became my life and the truth got buried but now Dale is gone, and my mom is dying, and Drake is just there.

I have to go but I had to tell you first. It's been eating at me since I first found out about my mom. ”

Axell rubs his hands over his face before standing and walking a little way away from me.

The distance hurts but I know him well enough to know he needs time to process all of this.

He begins to pace back and forth. Finally, after what seems like an eternity he stops and turns around to face me.

The look of betrayal is like a dagger to my heart.

The hurt is clear as day and I'm the one that caused it.

I put that look on his face. “Why didn't you just tell me? ”

I squeeze my eyes shut and look away. All of my answers seem useless at this point because none of them were good enough reasons to not tell him. “I don't know,” I whisper.

“You’re kidding right?” he asks, his voice harsher than before.

I stand up, but I don’t move toward him.

“What do you want me to say? That I’m sorry?”

I’m sorry Axell. I really am, and I know you probably don’t believe me, but I never meant to hurt you.

I never meant to lie to you. I was trying to protect Drake in the beginning.

Then I wanted to be able to give him the life he deserved and by the time I could my mom wouldn’t sign the rights back over to me.

I was stuck Axell. I was a dumb girl who fell for the wrong guy and ended up in a situation I never thought I would.

I didn’t know how to fix it and I was terrified of this,” I tell him motioning between us, “I was terrified of losing you and everything we have.”

“Everything we have is a lie!” he yells into the night.

I flinch at his words. “No! What we have is real. I just made a mistake, but I never lied when I said I loved you.”

I watch as his head falls back, his hands in his pockets.

I want to reach out and touch him. I want to fix the hurt I just caused.

I want to go back in time and tell him the truth from the moment he told me about his mom, but I can’t.

I can't go back. I can't fix this. I can only hope he forgives me at some point. "I wish it was that easy."

"Why can't it be?" I ask him.

He stares at me for a moment and I see the war waging within him.

The way he's looking at me is killing me.

It's like he's trying to figure out who I am while saying goodbye.

My heart slams around in my chest. "You were supposed to be able to trust me. I was supposed to protect you and that meant Drake too, but I didn't get to because I didn't know.

I didn't know because somewhere in you there was doubt.

You doubted that you could trust me and without trust we have nothing.

Love is not enough. Love and trust go hand in hand," Axell says it so quietly that I strain to hear his words against the crashing of the waves.

He approaches me and holds out the keys to his car.

"I'll stay with Bowie tonight." Axell turns around and walks back toward the house while I sink onto the steps, keys in hand and cry out every last tear I have at the moment.

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Axell

Walking away from Sadie right now is one of the hardest things I've ever done.

A part of me is staying with her, it always will.

She owns the best parts of me. At the end of the day I'm hers.

Right now, though, I feel like I don't know anything.

I feel like I don't know what is going on.

Everything I thought I knew, I don't. The one person I thought would never lie to me, never hurt me, just did and in the worse way.

A part of me is angry, a part of me is devastated, and the other part of me understands why she did it. The human emotion process is confusing as hell. No one should be able to feel so many conflicting emotions at one time. My mind is racing faster than I ever have behind the wheel of a car.

That's an idea. Getting behind the wheel of a car might help me figure this shit out.

When I'm behind the wheel of a car I'm in control, me, no one else.

Right now, I need some sense of control because my entire world was just been thrown upside down.

At this point I don't even know what I'm doing.

I'm just walking on auto pilot. Once I'm back inside I stop at the bar and steal a bottle of whiskey.

I slip out the front door undetected and walk down the road until I reach an empty part of the beach.

I take a seat in the sand and open the bottle.

I take a swig from the bottle and let the oak and mint taste wash over my senses. The burn in the back of my throat brings back the moment with Sadie. I'm numb except for the warmth in the pit of my stomach caused by the whiskey.

A growl of frustration escapes from me and I hang my head.

How did my life get to this point? Just a few hours earlier I was so full of joy and pride for how far we had all come and now...

now I'm sitting on an empty beach with a bottle of whiskey in an attempt to drown my sorrows, to drown the truth from my mind.

I can't help but wonder what else has been a lie when it comes to Sadie.

Some part of me knows that she loves me and that's not a lie, but that part is being silenced by the other part of me.

The part of me that is questioning everything.

I'm sitting here thinking back on my life with Sadie.

Every important moment, every memorable conversation, I'm trying to decipher it now.

Trying to figure out how in the hell I missed this?

How was I so blind? What did I do to make her think or feel like she couldn't tell me?

Then my anger moves to Seth, why the hell didn't he tell me?

He never even hinted about Sadie's past. What about Lyndsay, does she know?

Was I the last one to find out the truth about my own wife?

That hurts, I won't lie. My mind goes back to what else hasn't she told me about?

Not telling me she had a son is kind of a big deal, so I can't help wonder what else she hid from me.

I take another swig from the bottle. I know this won't help me or the situation or even Sadie, but I feel the need for this bottle right now.

I feel like I failed. I failed Sadie in some way.

This whole time she has been taking care of my family.

Raising Jovi like he was her own when she actually had her own son.

I don't know what to do with this information.

To make matters worse, she leaves tomorrow for God knows how long. How are we

supposed to figure things out when she'll be on the other side of the country? How do I learn to forgive her for keeping this from me all these years? I don't know how long I've been sitting here but my body is stiff.

I need to drive, and I've only had two swigs from this bottle, but I have no car.

I gave my keys to Sadie. Grabbing my cell phone, I almost dial Bowie but at the last minute I don't.

If I call one of my brother's, I'll have to explain and then listen to their advice.

I know they'll mean well but I can't even think straight right now, so the last thing I need is them being involved.

I scroll through my contacts until I see Tillman.

He's just the guy I need. I press dial and listen to the line ring. Finally, he picks up. "Hey Axell, what's up?"

"Are you busy?"

"Not really, why?" Tillman asks.

I sigh. "Because I need to drive but I don't have my car right now."

"That doesn't sound good," Tillman pauses, "Where are you?" I give him the directions then hang up. About half an hour later he pulls up. I climb into the passenger seat. "Not to be an ass but you look like hell."

I scoff. "Rough night."

“So, you want to drive?” I just nod in return. “Well, then I’m guessing that means something bad went down between you and your girl.” Tillman stops, waiting for an answer but I don’t give him one. “Well, you can drive when we get there.”

“Get where?” I ask.

He looks over at me and smirks. “To the races. I was there when you called me, but I still had a while before it was my turn. We have plenty of time.”

I start to shake my head. “I’m not racing.”

Tillman holds his hands up in surrender. “I never said you had to. I have an extra car there. You can take it out for a drive. I have to be back there, so you have to come with me to get the car, that’s all.”

As much as I hate to admit it a part of me got excited over the idea of racing when Tillman mentioned it. I know that would hurt Sadie and in my current mindset maybe that’s not the best thing to do. I can’t decide right now if racing would be for me or to hurt Sadie the way I’m hurting.

As we pull up to the races, I notice that these races have changed.

The races that my brothers take part in seem to never change except for location from time to time but these are so different from what I remember.

There are double the cars parked along both sides of the street from what I remember.

However, most of these cars are just as expensive as they were all those years ago.

Tillman parks and we get out of his car.

I spot Roberto easily enough. I nod to him as Tillman tosses me a set of keys while pointing to the red Ferrari 488 sitting next to me.

“Have at it but promise me one thing.” I raise my eyebrows in question.

“Be careful and call me if you need anything.”

I turn and open the driver’s side door but look back and tell Tillman, “Thank you.” He nods in response.

I slide behind the seat and already I feel more in control.

I scan the radio stations until I land on the new age rock station.

Turning it up loud enough that it drowns out my thoughts, I back out of the parking space.

I drive aimlessly. My mind moving with the car.

Just like the car moves in and out of traffic and around curves, my mind does too.

It moves from one memory to the next still trying to find any clue that I missed.

I pull up to a red light feeling more frustrated than before.

Driving used to be a calm for my soul at times like these, but not now, I guess.

I look over and spot some kid sitting behind the wheel of his flashy Mustang.

The car has had a lot of work done to it, but I bet he’s been done it the cheapest way possible which means it’ll never last. Hell, I bet Mr. Hollister model can barely shift

the gears.

As if he can read my mind, he revs his engine and smirks at me, almost as if he's calling me out.

It's late and the streets are mostly vacant.

I know I shouldn't, but I push down on the gas pedal and rev my engine in return.

This punk doesn't have anything on me. I own these damn streets and I'm about to show him.

The light changes to green and in an instant, I find myself falling back into my old habits.

The speed courses through me, urging me forward.

I glance in the rearview mirror and see his headlights directly behind me.

The wind is whipping through the windows and the vibration shakes every muscle I have.

The city around me becomes a blur as I move along the streets, maneuvering in and out of traffic as I go.

We are moving into a part of town that actually has traffic.

The kid has yet to gain on me. I push down harder on the pedal and shift up another gear.

Eventually, I glance back at the rearview mirror and realize that the kid in the

Mustang has disappeared.

I won, not that it's surprising. I ruled these streets for years, still could if I wanted to.

As I ease off the accelerator my energy slowly returns to normal and with that the reality sets back in.

The anger and hurt from Sadie now mixed with the guilt of racing is weighing heavy on me.

I should go home but I can't, not yet anyways.

I drive around most of the night. Tillman texts to check in on me, I answer him back.

My brothers and Sadie call and text, I ignore those.

I'm not ready to figure things out. Eventually, I meet Tillman at a twenty-four-hour café.

We carb load with pancakes that are loaded with everything.

Mine are covered in syrup, cinnamon, cream cheese frosting, and pecans.

I didn't even realize I was hungry until the food was set in front of me.

Once the waitress leaves us Tillman clears his throat. "So, you want to talk about it?"

I shrug while shoveling a mouth full of pancake into my mouth. "Nothing to tell," I reply after chewing.

"Bullshit! You didn't call me for nothing, Axell."

I shake my head and stare at the window taking in the peaceful view. “What do you want me to say?”

“How about the truth man?”

I finish eating before I break down everything for him.

I relay most of the story that Sadie told me.

Tillman never interrupts. He only asks two questions, how I feel about Sadie’s confession.

I replied with, “I’m pissed.” Which is the truth.

Tillman runs his hands over his face. He looks exhausted.

“Look, I don’t know much about relationships and I get why you’d be pissed but is it worth throwing your entire relationship away for? Is it worth getting a divorce?”

His words start to wrap around my brain and the only answer I can come up with is no.

Yes, I’m pissed and for good reason. Yes, I’m hurt that Sadie didn’t tell me the truth.

I’ll always wish she had, but I guess in some way I understand that she was trying to protect Drake.

In some way whether it was wrong or right she thought she was doing the right thing and that I can respect.

However, as pissed as I am, I still can’t imagine my life without Sadie in it.

I don't even want to try. I know that I can move on from this, but I don't know how quickly.

That's the problem. I don't want to be one of those people who punish someone else for the mistake she made in her past, but how do you just forgive and forget? How do you just move on?

Tillman pulls me from my thoughts. "I didn't mean to make your brain work that hard with those questions."

"You didn't," I tell him while shaking my head.

"Look, I think the most important question to ask yourself is do you love her? Love and I mean real love, is hard to come by now days. Real love lasts but most of this stuff now days is fleeting, just something to pass the time or make you forget you're lonely.

From what little I know about the two of you I'd say it's real.

You made a selfless decision at a time when you were meant to be selfish based on the love you have for her. Do you regret that?" Tillman asks.

"No, not for a single second, but I raced tonight."

Tillman's eyes go wide. "Wow, I wasn't expecting that."

"It just happened. Some punk kid came up beside me at a red light and revved his engine and the next thing I knew I did the same," I explain.

Tillman shakes his head. "Please, tell me you weren't so rusty that you let the punk win?"

I chuckle. “Nope, you forget I own these streets.”

“You used to own these streets, but it’s been a while. I’m happy you won though.” I raise my eyebrows in question. “That’s my car you were driving. I can’t have people thinking I let some punk beat me.”

I laugh. “Oh, we can’t have that.”

Tillman shakes his head. “No, we can’t.” After a few moments of silence Tillman speaks again. “Go home Axell and talk to Sadie.”

A heavy sigh escapes me. “I still don’t know what to say.”

“The truth. You said she’s leaving for a bit.

That gives you both time to think and clear your head, but don’t let her leave like this.

She’ll leave thinking you hate her and that there’s no hope.

That’s how things end up becoming messy and ending badly.

So, go home, tell her the truth about what you’re feeling so you can both move forward.

The time apart probably won’t be a bad idea but at least let her know there’s still a chance for the two of you to move forward,” Tillman says.

He’s always shocking me. You don’t think he’d be so insightful, but then he goes and gives a speech like that and you can’t help but be impressed. “Damn, I didn’t see that coming from you but thanks. Meet me at the shop later?”

“Yeah, I got to get my car back at some point,” Tillman tells me. I’m almost out the door when he calls out to me “Good luck.”

I have a feeling I’m going to need it.

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Sadie

You always think you know exactly what you'd do in certain situations.

For example, my current one, I always knew I'd fight for Axell no matter what.

I always knew I'd never let him walk away from me without fighting first, without saying the words to keep him.

He's the love of my life so it made sense to me.

Yet, here I am, standing perfectly still and silent.

My head is screaming, my heart is on a rampage trying to beat out of my body to follow him as he walks away.

My eyes betray me as the tears fall down my face.

I didn't say anything. I didn't fight for him.

I just stood here and accepted this fate.

You may think you know what you'd do in a certain situation, but truth is you don't.

You never know what you'll do, what you'll say, or how you'll react until you are in the situation.

No matter how many times you play it out in your head, no matter how many times you practice the words, nothing truly prepares you for the moment.

The weight of the words being spoken, released out into the air so that everyone can see your flaws.

I don't care about anyone else seeing my flaws.

I stopped caring about that a long time ago.

From the time I moved to Aynor, South Carolina.

It was small enough that the only thing they had to pass the time was gossip.

A new pregnant teenage girl with bruises and cuts covering her body was more than enough to start the whispers and stares.

Even after the bruises faded and the cuts healed, they still whispered about me.

I'd walk into a place and it'd all be completely silent.

It was a little too obvious if you asked me.

People avoided me like I was the plague.

I understood that part. I knew how I looked in their eyes.

Maybe, that's why I kept the truth from Axell for so long.

He never looked at me the way they did. When he looked at me it set off a flutter of butterflies. He saw something more in me.

I can't help but wonder if I've lost that too.

I stand in the sand staring at Axell's back until I can no longer see him.

I stand there until my legs begin to cramp from not moving.

Eventually, I see Hollis at the back doors.

She spots me and moves to open the door, but I shake my head.

She stops, confusion written on her face.

I move then, I don't know how but I make myself move away from the house.

I move toward the car, Axell's car. As I slide behind the wheel I'm engulfed in his scent and it rips at my already tattered heart.

The smell of his aftershave and musky cologne wraps around me.

Laying my head against the steering wheel I sob until there's nothing left.

His scent used to bring me comfort, but now it breaks me.

I don't know what to do or where to go. All I know is that Axell is gone and I can't go home, not right now anyways.

I start the car and Axell's music fills the car just another reminder of his absence.

He's everywhere and nowhere all at the same time.

I move the station until I find some acoustic station.

The lyrics call to my tired soul, they pull me in and I let them.

The soulful voices of the singers are like a calm to me.

I drive and drive until my eyes feel heavy and I have to stop.

I end up at the one place I know I can always go.

The one person who has never judged me. The one person I can always count on, Seth.

Tears prick the back of my eyes again as I move blindly for his front door.

I ring the tiny doorbell and wait. Time has no meaning right now.

I could have stood on his doorstep for just a second or maybe an hour.

I don't know, and it really makes no difference.

For the first time in over a decade, I have nowhere to be, no one waiting for me to come home, no one that cares if I do.

Seth opens the door looking as if he just rolled out of bed.

It dawns on me then that maybe he has just rolled out of bed.

I don't even know what time it is. Seth takes one look at me while whispering, "What the hell?" before he pulls me into his arms and slamming the door.

He walks me to the couch with an arm wrapped around my shoulders.

He sits in front of me on the coffee table.

“Sadie, what happened?” I give him what I would guess to be a pointed look and he runs his hands through his untamed hair. “Shit.”

“I told him everything,” I whisper into the darkened room.

Seth reaches for my hands. His hands are large and warm.

They are worn and rough from years of surfing.

Oddly enough, they remind me of Axell’s which causes a sob to burst through.

“I told him everything and he didn’t even seem mad really.

Just hurt. Oh my god, I hurt him Seth. I never wanted to hurt him. ”

Seth moves to sit next to me and pulls me into his side. “I know you didn’t and deep down Axell knows that too. Right now, it’s all fresh and what not. He just needs time Sadie.”

“What if time doesn’t fix this? I leave tomorrow, and I don’t even know for sure when I’ll be back.

What if we don’t talk the whole time I’m gone?

Do I come back here if we don’t, or do I stay in South Carolina and try to make a life for Drake and I?

That’s if Drake even wants anything to do with me, I can’t blame him if he didn’t,” I say through sobs.

I'm not even sure how Seth understands anything I say, but in true Seth fashion he hears everything and gives me exactly what I need to hear.

He sighs. "Sade, I don't know what the future holds.

I don't how long it will take Axell to get over this.

I'm not sure anyone could give you a time frame for this situation.

I mean, you just told your husband since you've basically been with since you were seventeen that you have a son that he never knew about.

That's big, like Titanic big but I know Axell.

I've seen the way he looks at you. He loves you too much Sadie to hold this against you forever.

As for Drake, I'm sure he's going to be pissed, confused, and hurt.

That's to be expected, but you are all he will have shortly so I'm sure he will try to move past it.

Just remember he's a teenage boy whose entire world is being ripped away from him.

You have plenty of experience in that field sadly," Seth tells me.

Seth is right if there's one thing I know, it's how to handle a teenage boy with his world exploding. I just wish I wasn't part of the reason why his world was changing. "Thank you, Seth."

"Anytime Sade, anytime," Seth whispers to the top of my head.

Hearing him use my nickname always makes me smile.

When I first moved in with him and my dad, I asked him why he always called me Sade.

He told me it was because he wanted a baby brother when our parents first told him he was going to be a big brother.

When they brought home a baby sister, he just decided to shorten my name, so it sounded less girly.

Over time the nickname has grown on me and I've even caught Axell using it from time to time.

At the thought of Axell, a sharp pain shoots through my heart.

Seth brings me some hot tea and Tylenol.

I lie back on his couch and even though I don't feel like I could sleep I do.

The next morning, I wake to the beaming sunlight cascading through Seth's wall of glass.

I check the time and see it's just barely past six.

I get up and make breakfast, it's the least I can do after waking him up and crying all over him last night.

He appears in the kitchen with a sleepy smile on his face.

"I didn't mean to wake you I just wanted to make you breakfast to say thank you for

being there last night. ”

“Sade, I’ll always be there, you know that,” he says, as he walks to the coffee pot to pour him a cup. “You still leaving today?”

I nod while biting my lip. “I have to. I put off going to South Carolina and taking care of things long enough. Mom isn’t getting any better and I need to try and mend or form some kind of relationship with Drake before she passes.

This transition is going to be hard enough as is.

Plus, I’m sure Axell could use the space.

I just hope it helps us heal instead of drifting farther apart. ”

“It’ll be okay.”

I shake my head. “You always say that.”

“Because it’s my motto. I have to believe that.

If I believed everything was going to come crashing down every day I woke up, well I’d have no reason to get out of bed.

I choose to believe that everything will be okay.

Things will work out however they are meant to anyways so what good does it do to worry yourself sick.

I love you Sade, but you worry too much.

Just breathe and have a little faith,” Seth says.

“Faith?”

He nods. “Yes, faith. Faith in Axell. Faith in your relationship. Faith in the love you two share. Faith in yourself.”

“You make it sound so easy,” I mumble.

Seth gives me that lopsided boyish smile. “Because it is. We, humans in general, tend to make things complicated. When you think about it nothing in this world is really that complicated. It’s our way of thinking that makes things seem complicated.”

Seth’s words sink in slowly and he has a point. I decide that I will have plenty of time later on to figure out if this is all that easy or if I’m making it complicated, so I decide to turn the tables on him. “Speaking of complicated, how’s Lyndsay?”

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“We’re good. We actually had an early date last night. Your plan worked, thank you by the way,” Seth says.

I smile and it’s the first real smile I’ve had on my face since yesterday morning. “Good, I’m glad,” and I am glad. I’m glad that things seem to be working out for at least one of us.

I leave Seth’s and head home. I need to shower and change so I can catch my flight.

I just don’t know what to expect when I get there.

What if all of my belongings are sitting outside?

What if Axell kicks me out the minute I walk in?

My mind goes through every worst-case scenario as I drive home.

To my relief, I don’t see any of my things as I pull into the driveway.

When I enter the house it’s quiet. I stop in the kitchen and start a pot of coffee.

I peek into Jovi’s room and see him fast asleep in his bed.

I brace myself outside our bedroom door for whatever Axell might say or do, but to my surprise when I open the door, I find the bedroom empty.

The bed hasn’t been touched since I made it up yesterday.

I check the closet and see all of his clothes are still there.

I check the bathroom and see all of his personal items are there too.

The room doesn't smell like he's been in it recently either.

The thought of Axell not coming home last night feels me with even more dread.

Who was he with? What was he doing? I may not have a right to ask those questions after everything I just put us through, but I can't stand the thought of him telling some other girl about all of this.

He told me he'd stay at Bowie's, but I guess a part of me had hoped he wouldn't.

A part of me had hoped that this would all be easy.

I'd come home, and he'd be waiting for me.

I'd apologize, and he'd tell me he still loved me, and we'd find a way to move on.

I knew it couldn't be that easy, but I wanted it to be.

Now, our bedroom seems cold and silent. The moments we shared here are just a memory.

I somehow manage to pull myself together and climb into the shower and get dressed.

I pull my hair back in a ponytail and forego any makeup.

I have no one I need to impress. I call for a cab, write a note to Axell, and roll my luggage into the hallway.

I stop in the kitchen to fix myself a to-go cup of coffee when Jovi staggers into the kitchen, rubbing sleep from his eyes. “Are you leaving mom?”

I turn and smile at him. “Yeah, my flight leaves in a bit. I don’t want to be rushed if I get stuck in traffic.”

“I’ll drive you,” he offers.

I shake off his offer. “No, I already called a cab. You go back to bed. I’m sure you had a late night.”

He nods his head. “Where did you and dad take off to anyways?” I give him a questioning look.

“Oh, come on, you two were dancing then you both rushed outside. He came back in and took a bottle of whiskey from the bar that he thought no one saw and left again. You never came back. It wasn’t all that hard to put together. ”

My heart sinks further but I put on a smile for Jovi. “You don’t really want details, do you?”

Jovi shivers. “Oh no!”

I laugh then step forward and hug him. “You behave while I’m gone. Listen to your dad and stay out of trouble. I love you.”

“I will behave. I love you too mom,” he tells me before he presses a kiss to my cheek. “Have a safe flight and let me know when you land.”

“I will. Get back to bed,” I tell him as I motion for him to leave the room.

Once his door shuts, I blow out an unsteady breath.

Where had Axell went? I don't have time to think about all of it right now.

I check my phone again and not surprising, I still have no missed calls or texts from Axell.

Sighing, I roll my luggage out of the house and onto the front porch to wait for the cab, but to my surprise the cab isn't there but Axell is.

Axell

As I pull up to the house, I'm shocked to see a cab in front.

I shouldn't be because I'm not sure how else I expected Sadie to get to the airport.

Jovi should have taken her instead of letting her take a cab, but if he was asleep there's no way Sadie would wake him up.

I walk over to the cab and lean in the passenger side window.

"You can go ahead and leave. I got stuck in traffic and we weren't sure I'd make it in time.

Thank you," I tell him as I hand him a twenty-dollar bill for his time.

He pulls away from the curb and I look down to check the time on my watch.

Sadie should be leaving any time now so instead of going inside I wait outside the

car.

The early morning air is fresh, and I breathe deeply while trying to decide what I'm going to say or do.

By the time I see the front door opening I still have no clue.

Sadie steps out onto the porch and I take a moment to memorize everything about her.

Her hair is pulled up into a messy ponytail.

She's dressed for a day of travel in jeans and a band t-shirt.

She slips her shades over her eyes before she realizes that I'm in here in place of the cab.

I can tell she is shocked by the sudden intake of breath.

I move toward her and reach around to take her luggage.

Once it's placed in the trunk of the car, I open the passenger side door for her, but she is still frozen in the same spot.

I motion for her to come and eventually she begins moving again.

As she passes by me her honeysuckle scent moves through the air and the ache it creates in my heart is almost unbearable.

Once she's safely inside, I shut the door and make my way around to the driver's side.

As I pull into the traffic an awkward silence fills the air.

That was always the thing about Sadie and I, we never suffered from awkward silence, until now.

Everything is different now. Sadie wrings her hands that lie in her lap; her sign that she is nervous.

I hate that she's nervous but how do I soothe her when I'm on edge myself?

By the time we reach the airport Sadie and I still haven't spoken a word to one another.

I know that we both have plenty to say, yet our throats are clogged when we need the words the most. My emotions rage on the inside but I seem as calm as can be on the outside.

As I park, I go to get out of the car, but Sadie stops me.

"I got it." I sit back even more uncertain what to do.

Sadie takes a deep breath. "I'm sorry Axell.

I never meant to hurt you and I never meant to intentionally lie to you.

The story was something my mom created, and I followed her.

By the time I knew I needed to tell you I just didn't know how and that's my mistake.

I own that and I'm sorry, but you have to know I love you.

I'll always love you," she tells me as she leans over and presses a kiss to my cheek.

She leaves the car in a rush with nothing but the warmth from her mouth lingering on my cheek and the scent of her perfume filling the car.

I don't know how long I sit in the parking lot staring at the people as they move around.

Finally, I pull out and head to the shop.

Throwing myself into work seems like the only thing I can do right now.

I always had two distractions when I was younger; work and racing.

Then I exchanged racing for Sadie and now I'm left with just work.

The memory of racing the punk kid at the red light comes flooding back as I pull into the shop.

The feeling of being behind the wheel at extreme speeds consumes me yet again.

I have an itch to race, but I know I won't.

That itch has been there for years. I've ignored it this long and I'll continue now.

Agitation fills my every movement. I unlock the doors and open the shop for the day.

It's a couple hours earlier than normal but it doesn't matter.

I get busy with paperwork before starting work on Tillman's cars.

Most of the parts we needed arrived yesterday.

I have the radio on filling the silence of the shop.

Bowie's voice comes through the speakers since he's hosting the show this morning.

I listen for a moment before getting back to work.

Before I know it the rest of the workers start to arrive.

They greet me good morning and I try not to be a jerk to them.

My foul mood is not their fault so I'm trying not to take it out on them.

Jagger shows up about ten minutes before noon.

He works at the shop most of time and at Londynn's dance studio, Tip Toes, cleaning the place up and what not.

Jagger approaches me. "Hey man, what happened to you and Sadie last night? You guys just disappeared."

I shrug without looking at him. "It was just time to go."

Jagger scoffs and I can feel him studying me. "That's all you're going to say because Londynn mentioned seeing Sadie leave in your car but never saw you."

I stand up and level Jagger with a glare. "Maybe, Londynn should mind her own damn business."

"She was minding her own damn business. She was just worried, that's all. What the

hell has gotten into you?” Jagger asks.

I growl in frustration. “You and your damn twenty questions. I didn’t realize I need to get permission from you every time I made a decision or went somewhere.” I move past him, nudging his shoulder as I go, but Jagger isn’t dumb. He knows something is wrong and he isn’t going to let it go.

I hear him following me. “Look, I don’t know what’s going on, but you’re pissed, and I know you. You’re worse than Bowie when you’re pissed, you only see red.”

I turn around and come toe-to-toe with my brother, barely an inch between us. “Back off Jagger.”

“Is this because Sadie left this morning?”

At the mention of her name I feel my facade fall.

I’ve been trying to keep it together, trying to keep the red at bay, but Jagger couldn’t just let it go.

Before I even realize it my fist flies toward Jagger’s jaw.

It’s almost as if the world is spinning in slow motion.

I watch as my fist connects with Jagger’s jaw.

I feel the ache in my knuckles as it radiates up my arm.

Jagger’s head pops back before he stumbles into the car behind him.

My breathing is labored, and Jagger’s eyes are wide in shock.

I attempt to take a deep breath but the weight of what I just did comes crashing down.

I shake my head and try to mumble an apology, but I can't make anything on my body work except my feet.

My body begins to move backwards until I turn around and jog to my car.

As I slide behind the wheel of the car, I take my first deep breath of air.

I rake my hands through my hair before pounding my fists on the steering wheel.

Throwing my car into drive I peel out of the lot and onto the street, barely missing the oncoming traffic.

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Axell

I speed away.

Away from the shop.

Away from Jagger.

Away from life.

Away from everything.

I push down on the accelerator and the car jolts forward and I feel some of the tension ease from my body.

Before I know it, I'm doing fifty miles per hour.

Seventy miles per hour. Ninety miles per hour.

I maneuver in and out of traffic. Horns blast around me, the air whips against my face.

The music can barely be heard over all the noise.

I drive until my muscles start to ache. Finally, they attempt to relax a little.

I pull over on the side of the road and try to replay the events in my mind.

I try to figure out how everything changed so quickly.

I thought that I was handling everything pretty well.

I didn't feel angry. I was trying to understand but then I slipped.

I lost control and I hit Jagger. No, I hit my brother.

I rest my head against the steering wheel as the shame fills me.

I was supposed to always protect my brothers, that was my promise to my mother.

A promise that was just broken. My life is spiraling out of control and I don't know how to stop it.

Normally, when I feel like this I go to Sadie.

I confide in her and she finds the right words to comfort me.

Not now, she's not here and even if she was, I don't know if I can trust her now.

How can you not trust someone but need them at the same time?

It's a contradiction. I've become a walking contradiction of emotions.

I'm lost and my only light to guide me back home is gone.

I do the only thing I know to do right now.

I text Bowie and tell him to take care of Jovi and the shop.

I turn my phone off and pull back on to the road.

I'm no good for anyone at this point. I need to figure my shit out so leaving is the only option.

Maybe, I'll be back at some point. Maybe, Sadie and I will figure it all out.

Maybe, we won't. I don't know. So, I drive.

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Sadie

I try to read. I try to sleep. I try to figure out my life through the entire plane ride.

I get nowhere. I can't read because I can't concentrate, and my eyes will barely stay open.

I can't sleep because my mind won't shut up.

I can't figure out my life...well, because it's in too big of a mess for me right now.

I look out the window and I try to figure out what Axell would be doing right now.

If I know him, he's probably at the shop, under a car, working the day away.

I'm not sure what to expect when I land.

I know what Drake looks like, the male version of me in a lot of ways.

He got Josh's height and green eyes, but the rest is me.

My mom has been great about keeping me up to date with him.

She sends me pictures from all his games and school report cards.

He's a really great writer. She's sent me some of his book reports and I'm really impressed.

I know he just got his license a few months ago and that he works at a local grocery store.

I know he hasn't given my mom a day of trouble, unlike me.

I know all of this about him without really knowing him.

It hurts but it is what it is. I've missed out on his life, but he wouldn't have had this life if I had been there.

Everything would have been different. I wasn't in the right state of mind at the time to raise him.

By the time I got out of college my mother was attached and refused to let me have my rights back.

I could have taken her to court, but who wants to take their mother to court?

I didn't want to draw out this process and to be honest, I didn't know if uprooting his life was worth it.

I had come back and see his room. I saw his school and I watched him from a far with my mother at my side.

He loved his life and it seemed selfish and unfair to pull that from him at the time. Now, we have no choice.

Aynor, South Carolina had never been my home.

It was just a place I stopped at along the way.

Los Angeles was my home. No, strike that, home was wherever Axell was.

He was my home or at least he had been. My stomach is doing flip flops from the nerves coursing through me.

My palms are sweaty, and I feel like I might vomit.

Our landing isn't the softest which doesn't help my stomach.

As I exit the plane, I wipe my palms on the thighs of my jeans.

Drake is easy to spot in the crowd. He's tall and lean with spiky strawberry blonde hair.

I can see the green from his eyes from here.

He's holding a handful of flowers. As I approach, he gives me an unsure smile and extends the flowers.

"Thank you, Drake." He nods and takes my carry-on.

We make our way to baggage claim. When my bag comes into view, he grabs that too.

He's so fast I don't even get to move before he's heading for the door.

We make our way to his red Ford Focus. He loads my luggage and we get in the car. I forgot how different the humidity feels here. My clothes are already sticking to me. Mentally, I groan. As we pull onto the highway that will lead us back to Aynor, I ask Drake, "How is she today?"

He nods his head stiffly. “She’s okay. She’s having a better day today.,” his voice is so deep it catches me off guard at first. “How was your flight?”

“It was okay. I’ve never been a fan of flying but it was better than I expected,” I reply.

Silence falls between us again. Drake clears his voice. “Do you mind if I turn on some music?”

“Not at all,” I tell him. Admittedly, I’m curious about his choice in music.

I don’t figure he’ll love the 80s hair bands that I’m accustomed to.

Fall Out Boy comes blaring over the speakers and he moves quickly to turn it down.

He mumbles an apology, but I shake it off.

“I have to have music when I’m driving plus this is a good choice. ”

He gives me a questioning look before asking, “You know Fall Out Boy ?”

I laugh. “Yes, I do. I like most of their songs actually.”

“That’s cool. I usually listen to 80s rock or 90s grunge, but I like them and Panic! At the Disco ,” he comments.

Goosebumps form over my skin, not from the temperature, but what are the odds that Drake would like 80s rock?

Too soon we are driving through the small town of Aynor heading toward the house that my mom and Dale bought.

It's just outside the town itself and sits on about an acre.

It's beautiful, everything is just starting to bloom with the freshness of spring.

My mom's house has no fence, so the land is just marked off by the trees that line the property.

The house itself is a one-story ranch style.

The right side of the house is old fashioned red brick while the front and left side are white.

There is a wraparound porch also done in red brick.

Beautiful dark wood shutters frame every window and the dark wood and glass front door leave the house feeling classic.

There is a small white shed off to the side.

The tree in the front yard still has the tire swing hanging from it.

I remember spending hours on that swing when we first moved here.

It's where I went to contemplate my life and where it was going.

As we make our way up the circle drive, I notice the wooden rocking chairs, four total, sitting on the other side of the door.

As we get out of the car, I look up to see the sun beaming down.

It's quiet out here. When I first moved to L.A.

I never thought I'd get used to the noise.

Even in North Hills, which isn't in the heart of the city, can be noisy from time to time but out here it's different.

It's quiet for miles. I soak it in for a minute, but it won't be too long until that starts to drive me crazy.

I'll miss the noise of L.A. in no time. It's funny the things we get accustomed to that you never expected.

I try to take my carry on from Drake, but he refuses.

I follow behind him, taking the two steps up to the porch.

He opens the door and motions for me to enter.

I stop to observe my mother's garden on the side of the house.

Even if I didn't know she was sick already this would be a sign that she was.

The garden is dead. Drake follows my gaze.

"I water it, but I don't have a knack for keeping them alive.

I tried at first but now I just make sure to keep the weeds out.

" I pat his arm as I walk past him and into the house.

The house smells musty and stale. I can hear the oxygen machine from here as well as the sound of the daily soap operas my mother has always loved so much.

The house is impeccably clean which shocks me.

I know my mother can't clean anymore which means Drake must be keeping up with it.

Almost everything is the same. The house is decorated in cream and olive greens.

Drake moves around me then looks back over his shoulder.

"She's probably in the den," he tells me.

"I'll put your luggage in your room then I have to head to work. Will you need anything else?" he asks.

I shake my head. "No, I'm good, thank you and thank you for picking me up from the airport.

I appreciate it." He nods then disappears down the hallway.

I make my way to the den slowly, stopping to observe all of the photos hanging on the walls in the hallway.

For the most part I've seen them but there are some of Drake I've never seen, and I feel the need to stop and look at each and every one of them.

"Sadie?" I hear my mother call from down the hallway.

Her voice still has the same sing song tone as always.

I make my way to the den. The large open windows and French doors have filled the area with light.

My mother is sitting in a recliner with the TV blaring.

She smiles when she sees me. “Come give your mother a hug,” she tells me while motioning for her to come toward her.

I’m careful not to catch her oxygen cord as I make my way.

She stands up, wobbly at first before she manages and pulls me into her arms. She’s so frail and I hate that but it’s funny how some things never change. She still smells like apple cinnamon as I breathe her in deeply. She pats the chair next to hers. “Have a seat. How was your flight?” she asks.

“It’s was fine. I’m sorry I didn’t get here sooner, mama,” I tell her as regret fills me.

She waves my comment off. “Don’t be ridiculous Sadie. You have a life. You were busy with work and Axell. I understand. Besides Drake and I managed.”

“I can see that. The house and yard look amazing.”

She nods her head in approval. “They do, don’t they? Drake is a good boy.”

“Thanks to you,” I tell her.

She sighs. “If only my garden didn’t look like he sprayed weed killer on it.”

I laugh. “I’ll fix that for you. I have a garden of my own back home.

” We sit around and catch up. I make us a snack when my mother tells me she’s hungry and we continue watching soap operas.

The home health care nurse stops by later on and I talk with her.

My mother's condition is much like I expected, but actually seeing it and hearing it from a professional makes it sink in differently.

The nurse is scheduled to stay for a couple of hours.

She helps her do exercises to avoid blood clots in her legs and makes sure she gets her daily nap.

I decide to make a quick run to the store and pick up some groceries and stuff for the garden since the nurse is here.

Once I've found the keys to my mother's car I head outside.

I slide behind the wheel and take a minute to text Axell, Jovi, Seth, and Lyndsay to let them all know I made it.

Seth texts back almost immediately as well as Jovi.

Lyndsay is probably at work and I didn't really expect an answer back from Axell, but it stings all the same.

Later that evening I make dinner for us since Drake will be home soon.

My mom is on a special diet, so I fix some baked chicken breasts and steamed vegetables.

Drake comes in and takes a seat at the table.

Sweet tea is a staple in this part of the country so it's no surprise to me when he reaches out and grabs the glass, downing half of it before coming up for air.

We eat our dinner and I listen to my mom and Drake carry on a conversation. I like hearing about his day.

Later that night once everyone is asleep, I decide to email Axell about my day.

I know if we had left on better terms, I'd be calling him right now.

I'd explain how my day went and he'd ask me about this or that.

I'd listen to how his day went and what Jovi was up to.

I'd let his voice cover my body in security and my eyes would start to drift shut from sleep.

I miss the deep rasp of his voice. I miss the warmth of his arms. I miss him, and I hate that we are in this spot, but I made a decision this afternoon while watching soap operas.

I will fight for Axell. I will fight for our relationship.

I will fight for me. I will call, text, and e-mail him every day.

Even when he doesn't reply I will continue because that's what you do when you love someone.

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Axell

I wake to my head pounding and my stomach churning.

I definitely drank way too much last night.

I roll over and one of the springs from the couch pokes at my back.

Ugh! I need to get a move on today. I have no plans, but I feel the urge to move forward.

It's been four days since I left L.A. I haven't turned my cell phone back on, but I did call Bowie from the motel's landline to check in.

They're all worried and I get it. To be perfectly honest, I'm worried.

I don't know if Sadie staying would have made a difference for me but I kind of wish I could have found out.

I've been driving along the coast of California, heading toward Mexico.

I've raced every night. I feel slightly guilty about that but then I remember Sadie's years of lying and shake off the guilt.

Racing gives me a clear head, a new perspective.

That's the reason I haven't turned on my phone.

I have to figure this out on my own and for myself.

Up until this point almost every decision in my life has been made based on someone else.

This has to be for me, but I can't do it by myself if I have my brothers and Sadie reaching out to me all day.

Slowly, I get up but the world around me still spins.

I sit on the couch with my head between my knees for a few minutes.

Once I feel like I can walk I head into the tiny and unclean bathroom.

The motel room I ended up staying in last night was pretty disgusting.

The sheets looked like they hadn't been washed in a while, so I just crashed on the couch.

I rinse my face with some water before hopping in the shower.

I'm ready to head out when I stop and decide to call Bowie really quick. Elsa picks up the phone and I ask to speak to Bowie. "This is Bowie."

"Hey man, it's me. How is everything?" I ask him.

He sighs. "Ax, everything is fine except that everyone is worried sick about you. What the hell is going on?"

I run my hands through my hair. "I know and I'm sorry that you guys are worried. I never meant to worry anyone just a lot of shit going on right now."

“Ax, man, come on home. We’ll figure everything out together, we always do. It’s always us against the world and no matter what’s going on right now, it’ll be the same way. Just come home,” he pleads with me.

I sigh as I start to feel the urge to go back home coursing through my veins.

Bowie is right it always has been us against the world.

We fought for each other every time we had to.

Leaving them hanging like this was a crap move but I still feel like I need to sort things out when it comes to Sadie and I’m not ready to tell them about that.

“I’ll try and be home by the end of the week. ”

“Good. Have you heard from Sadie?” Bowie asks.

“Yeah,” I lie, “She’s good, why?” I ask

“Just checking. I was wondering what she was thinking about you up and leaving the same day she did. Jovi aced his math test yesterday by the way.”

“Damn, that’s awesome. Have you heard from Ace?” I ask.

Bowie chuckles. “Yeah, heard from him yesterday. He’s having the time of his life, but I had to hang up on him because he was trying to make out with Kynlee and that was something I didn’t want to hear,” Bowie says while making a gagging noise.

I laugh but my mood changes quickly. “And Jagger?”

“He’s good. He’s got a bruise, but it doesn’t hurt his pretty face to be a little roughed

up.

” Bowie stops to laugh but stops when he realizes that I’m not laughing with him.

“Ax, it’s okay. He’ll be fine, there was no real damage done.

I think you just shocked him more than anything but it’s all good.

Just come home, apologize, and hug it out. I’ll see you this weekend.”

“Yeah,” I tell him. We hang up and I head out to my car. Regardless of how I feel I need to head back home. I may have a lot to figure out, but I also have a job. Tillman’s car is just sitting around waiting to be finished up. If I hadn’t thrown a temper tantrum and ran off it’d be done by now.

As I get behind the wheel of my car, I feel the restless urge to be a speed demon.

I don’t know what’s gotten into me. Ever since the night of Ace’s wedding and racing the kid it’s been there, that incessant need for speed.

I guess maybe it’s always been there, but I’ve never scratched at it, so it stayed muted, like a mosquito bite you try to ignore but the minute you scratch at the bite it becomes a constant itch.

I start the car up and search my radio until I find Bullet for my Valentine playing.

As I get onto the road, I turn the volume up and press the gas pedal down.

Before I know it, I’m scratching that itch for speed.

It's been almost a week since I left L.A.

I wish I could say I was proud of the time I spent away but I'm not.

I ran away from my problems and that is not something I'm proud of.

That's not my style and that's not how I was raised.

I spent part of time away racing away from problems and the other part drinking them away.

I head straight to the house when I arrive back in L.A.

Jovi is out with his friend, Lance, but he's obviously been keeping up with the yard work.

Sadie's garden of flowers are starting to bloom and the soil is wet, so he's been keeping up with that as well.

By looking at the house you would never know Sadie and I had both jumped ship recently.

I sigh at the thought of Sadie. The whole point of leaving was to try and find some peace with our situation and I didn't.

If anything, I'm more confused now than I was before.

I love Sadie so much. The idea of letting her go or having a life without her just seems impossible to me.

I just don't want that, but at the same time how do you have a relationship without

trust?

Our trust is damaged now because of Sadie's lie.

Even if I can kind of understand why she lied, it doesn't fix the fact that she lied.

I'm supposed to be the one person she can trust with anything and for whatever reason she never felt she could trust me enough to tell me.

I have to figure out how to stop that from happening again before we can move forward.

I walk through the house without really looking at it.

I just want to shower in my own place before I head into work.

I run a hand over my full beard. I definitely need to trim it down too.

Once I'm showered and cleaned up, I throw on some clothes and head to the shop.

I still haven't turned my cell phone back on.

The thought of seeing Sadie's messages or listening to voicemails is still too much right now.

I'm actually surprised that Sadie didn't leave a note before she left.

It's not like her to leave things so unresolved.

I assumed I'd come home to a note of some sort since I hadn't been home when she got here from Ace's wedding.

I scan the room one last time just to be sure I didn't miss it, but there's nothing out of the ordinary.

Once I get to the shop I'm greeted by my employees.

It's lunch time so Jagger isn't at the shop right now and Bowie should be at the radio station since it's his day to host the show.

At least I don't have to face my brothers just yet.

I take a seat behind my desk to catch up on paperwork, but I find that it's already been done.

I grab my office phone and dial Tillman's number. He answers on the third ring. "Hello."

"Hey man, its Axell," I tell him since I doubt, he recognized the number.

"Oh, hey where did you disappear to?" he asks.

I shrug before realizing he can't see my reaction. "Nowhere and everywhere all at once," I reply

Tillman chuckles. "That's vague."

"Just a little. Anyways, I should get the car finished up over the weekend."

"You sure?" Tillman questions. "I know you've got a lot going on and I can wait for it."

I laugh. "Thanks for understanding but I need to get it done. Work is a good

distraction from everything else. Plus, the longer this car stays in the shop the more tempted I am to hop behind the wheel and race the hell out of it.”

“You know I’d let you.”

“I know,” I tell him quietly. Tillman would let me race the car.

That’s the one thing about him I’ve always admired, he is always willing to give without judgement.

We hang up and I head out to the car. I stand back to appreciate the beauty of it.

I’ve just slid under the car when I hear Bowie and Jagger enter the shop.

I hate to admit it, but my heart sinks a little.

The idea of facing Jagger after hitting him is a hard one for me.

I hear a low whistle. “Well, I’ll be damned. You finally found your way back home,” I hear Bowie say.

I take a deep breath before sliding out from underneath the car.

Standing up I take the time to wipe my hands clean even though they aren’t dirty before I turn around to face my brothers.

Bowie and Jagger are both standing with their arms crossed over their chests and smirks on their faces. “I told you I’d be back.”

Bowie nods. “You did and normally I would believe you, but you’ve been very unlike yourself lately, so I wasn’t sure if I should believe you this time.”

“I know,” I reply. Finally, I bring myself to meet Jagger’s eyes. “I’m sorry. I messed up, hitting you was a huge mistake. I was upset and taking it out on you didn’t make anything better.”

Jagger shrugs. “It’s okay. I knew something was bothering you even if you wanted to deny it. Besides, Londynn thought the bruise was sexy so maybe I owe you a thank you.” Before I realize it Jagger steps forward and pulls me in for a quick hug.

After that we disperse to get back to work.

I’m closing down the shop when I see all four of my brothers sitting off to the side of the shop on the picnic table our dad put there.

They wave me over. As I approach, I see an array of junk food spread out on the table.

I pat Jovi on the back as I sit down next to him.

We eat and catch up and for a moment. I feel at peace but then I’m reminded of my missing piece and the fact that I don’t know what to do about our situation.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:20 am

Sadie

It's been three weeks since I got back to Aynor and for the most part, I've found a routine.

My mother's health continues its slow decline.

She's sleeping more than when I first arrived.

Somehow, she manages to never miss her soap operas.

She sits outside on the porch as the sun is setting and admires the garden that I planted for her.

It's full of every kind and color of flower I could find at the store.

I purchased ones that were already in bloom instead of seeds, so my mother could enjoy them.

Drake gets up every morning and waters the garden before we start our daily chores.

I fix lunch then he heads to work. We still haven't found our footing, but I didn't expect us to.

I do fear that our relationship will always be this way.

I wish I could magically fix it. I wish I had been healthier mentally after his birth, so I

could have been the mother he deserved.

I wish a lot of things these days, but I can't bring myself to regret my decision though.

Drake has had a great life and it's one that I couldn't have given him until after college and I'm glad that he didn't have to suffer his early years that way.

My days are filled with cleaning out the years of stuff that my mother has accumulated.

After a few hours of that I move to cleaning up the house and making lunch.

I always make sure to sit down in the afternoon with my mother and watch the afternoon soap operas.

In the morning Drake sits with her and watches also.

I stay clear because I figure he needs his time with her too.

His life is about to change, and I think he'll need this closure in the long run.

Mom has a doctor's appointment today, so Drake helps me load her in the car.

He promises to DVR her morning soap operas before we leave.

My mother turns on the radio as we pull out of the driveway.

The Beatles come on and she starts to sing along.

My mother always did love The Beatles and she would sing along to their songs no

matter where she was or who was around.

I laugh at the memories of us road tripping back before Dale came into our lives.

We'd go away on a weekend or for a week during the summer and it was always filled with The Beatles .

They were the soundtracks of my youth. Every good memory I have from that time in my life has one of their songs attached to it.

Without a second thought I start to sing along with my mom.

My mother fell asleep about halfway to Myrtle Beach and the doctor's appointment didn't go so well.

It's not that we expected a miracle and for her to be healed or even allotted more time in her life, it's just that it never gets any easier to hear.

You can convince yourself that you are prepared but you never really are.

When we got back home Drake had already gone to work.

I struggle to get her into the house, but we manage.

Starting tomorrow Hospice will start coming in twice a day to check on her.

Even without a nursing degree I know what that means, we're close to the end.

Once mom is asleep, I go outside on the porch and sit in one of the rocking chairs.

I have a cup of mint tea and scroll my cell phone while I rock.

I've been nauseated off and, on all day, and they say mint helps that.

It starts to sprinkle as I sit there. I make it through my day's fine because I'm busy.

I have things to do and people to take care for, but the nights are a different story.

The nights are the worst. That's when the loneliness creeps up like an old, unwanted friend and climbs into your bed and reminds you that you're alone.

It pushes and prods at you until you have to let it in.

You can't keep it at bay forever. It wraps around you like a blanket; only it's cold and never ending.

Finally, I give up and call Seth and Lyndsay to check in.

After catching up with them I dial Axell.

I'm sure he won't answer but I call him anyway.

It rings five times and I'm just about hang up not wanting to leave another unanswered voicemail.

To my surprise the phone clicks on. "Hello," Axell says and my heart does a little happy dance.

His deep raspy voice wraps around every jagged nerve in my body and soothes every tense muscle.

It's like he's breathing life into me. It's funny how something so simple can give you such comfort.

Suddenly, my throat feels as if it has a lump the size of Aynor in it. I clear my throat. “Hey,” I manage to whisper out.

A silence hangs between us for a moment. I’ve been calling, texting, and e-mailing relentlessly so you would think that I would have plenty to say, but in this moment, I can’t find the words. Thankfully, Axell does. “How have you been?”

“I’m okay and you?” I ask.

“I’m okay too.”

I’m gnawing on my bottom lip for a moment. “How’s everything there?”

“Not too bad. The businesses are busier than ever, and Jovi has been behaving,” he tells me.

I giggle a little, mostly out of nerves. “That’s good. How’s Ace and Kynlee?” Axell makes a gagging noise which makes me laugh. “That bad?” I ask.

“Are you kidding me? They’re worse. I’ve never seen two people be so full of PDA in my life.” Axell exclaims.

I laugh. “Well, good! They deserve it.”

“Oh no, don’t encourage it,” Axell says sounding exasperating, but then he chuckles, and I know he’s just kidding. “How’s your mom?”

My mood quickly sombers. “More or less how I expected,” I whisper into the phone.

I hear Axell sigh. “Talk to me.”

“I knew coming here what her diagnosis was, but even with that I wasn’t prepared.

I think in some way I just kept telling myself she’d be okay but then I got here, and I couldn’t lie to myself anymore.

Seeing her made it all sink in. Just since I’ve been here her health has declined.

She had a homecare nurse that came in twice a day, but we had a doctor’s appointment today and now she’s been moved over to Hospice.

She sleeps most of the time. I know what’s coming, yet I’m still not prepared for it,” I confess to him.

I wouldn’t tell anyone else this but for some reason I always open up to him.

“I’m so sorry Sadie,” Axell tells me. “I know this isn’t easy on you despite the complicated relationship the two of you had. Unfortunately, nothing will prepare you for what’s coming.”

“Yeah,” I mumble into the phone as I reach up to wipe the tears that have silently escaped from my eyes. I didn’t even realize that I was crying.

“Baby, don’t cry.” I know that Axell calling me baby is just out of habit, but I can’t help but feel like there’s hope still. “How’s Drake?”

“Do you want to talk about this?” I ask.

Axell takes a moment before answering. “Drake is your son which makes him mine too. If we’re going to move forward, then we’re going to have to talk about this. It doesn’t matter how hard or awkward it is.”

His words make my heart melt. I always knew he'd accept Drake but hearing him say it just makes me love him so much more. "Is there a chance for us to move forward, Axell?"

"I'm trying to figure out how. I don't want to lose you, Sadie. I do love you."

I'm trying to keep from crying again. "I love you too. I really do. I've been trying to keep in touch."

"I know you have. I just wasn't ready. I just decided to answer tonight because...well, hell I don't know. I just needed to hear your voice," he confesses.

We'll get past this I think to myself. "I'm glad you did. I didn't realize how badly I needed to hear your voice until you answered."

"So, are you going to answer my question?" he asks with a chuckle.

"Drake is great. He's a great kid. A lot like Jovi but of course things between us are awkward. I knew they would be but it's harder than I thought it would be," I tell him.

"I can only imagine but he'll come around eventually. Are you coming back?" Axell asks and his tone catches me off guard. He almost sounds worried.

"Yes, of course, why would you ask that?"

He releases what sounds like a breath of relief. "Because you have a son and his life is there. I just thought maybe you'd want to stay there, I don't know."

"No, this isn't my home. I know this is all Drake knows but I think he'll be okay in L.A. He'll learn to adjust. My life is there, and I have to come back."

“Good, I was thinking we could take the extra room and make it his,” Axell tells me.

Tears do escape from hearing him say that. We’ve been at such a loss that I was wondering if we’d ever get here. “Thank you.”

“For what?” he asks.

“For being you. You always think about somebody else.”

“You know I’d do anything for you,” he says quietly.

I sigh. “I know. I need to talk to Drake soon.”

“That’s probably a good idea.”

“Yeah, I’ll do it tomorrow.” I yawn which Axell doesn’t miss.

“Go get some sleep. We can talk tomorrow,” Axell tells me.

I smile. “Okay, I will. Sleep well Ax.”

“You too. Good night.”

Before he hangs up, I stop him. “Ax?”

“Yeah?” he asks.

“I love you,” I tell him one more time for good measure.

“I know. I love you too.” And with that the line goes dead.

We still have a lot to figure out, but we've made progress today and that makes me feel better about our future.

Now, I just need to talk to Drake tomorrow and get things situated with him, but for now I'm going to bed.

My stomach still feels a little queasy. Hopefully, tomorrow I'll feel back to normal.

For the first time in months I climb into bed feeling relaxed.

No more lies hang between Axell and I and that is like a weight taken off me.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:20 am

Axell

I woke up early this morning feeling refreshed and well rested for the first time in weeks.

I think talking to Sadie was a good idea.

I hadn't been sure when I first saw her name and picture on my screen, but missing her was wearing me down.

I had yet to listen to her voicemails or read the emails and texts but in a last-minute decision I had answered the call.

Her voice poured over me like a warm blanket.

I knew in that moment that we'd figure out a way to work this out.

Sadie was a vital part to my life and I wasn't willing to let her go so I had to figure out a way to move on.

I had walked around the house for the past week trying to figure out what to do.

I always stopped in the extra bedroom. Then a couple of days ago it hit me.

That could be Drake's room. That epiphany was short lived because another thought followed.

What if Sadie didn't come back? I wasn't her first priority anymore and I shouldn't be.

Her son should come first, but did that mean she would stay in South Carolina?

Would she uproot Drake and come back here? There were so many questions.

I didn't get much sleep that night. My mind wondered between what Sadie would do now and what I should do?

Should I pack up after Jovi graduated and move to South Carolina to be with Sadie?

I mean, I could do that. Jovi was joining the Marines.

Bowie, Jagger, and Ace were all married now and could take care of themselves.

I also knew they'd take care of the businesses for me considering they did own part of them as well.

Once Jovi graduated, I didn't have to stay in L.A.

, so if Sadie didn't want to come back, we could still make it work.

It'd be a big change for me since I'd never lived anywhere but L.A.

Hell, I had never even considered living anywhere but L.A.

but this place couldn't be home without Sadie.

Actually, no place could be home without her which also meant that any place could be home with her.

As long as she was there, I could manage. I'd figure out the rest.

Maybe, that's why I answered the phone last night.

I had finally figured out our biggest hurdle.

However, hearing her voice reminded me of the pain I felt when she told me about her past. Suddenly, my solutions didn't seem so easy.

I knew we'd get through this, but it was obviously going to take some more time.

Then my question had slipped out and I could tell by the tone of her voice that she thought my question was ridiculous.

Oddly, enough I found that even more reassuring.

Although, I felt we were finally on the right path and moving forward again I felt horrible about Sadie having to be in South Carolina dealing with her mother's declining health by herself.

I knew she had Drake, but he was still a kid and she had mentioned that their relationship was still awkward.

I really felt like she could use someone there to help her through this.

Sadie was strong, I had always thought so but after hearing about her past she was even stronger than I gave her credit for.

I was more than willing to go down there for a week or two to be with her, but I didn't want to rush us and mess things up.

I made my way to the kitchen to fix breakfast for Jovi and I.

I had been slacking in Sadie's absence. Jovi wasn't going to know what to do when he got up and had something other than toaster waffles.

As I'm cooking it dawned on me, Seth. Seth could go out and help Sadie.

I know that he wasn't close to his mother, but he loved Sadie.

Jovi appeared in the kitchen doorway and the look of disbelief gave me a good laugh.

We ate breakfast then he left for school.

I decided to stop by the gym and squeeze in a work out.

My muscles were starting to get stiff from not being used as much but first I was going to make a stop at the beach to see Seth.

As I pull up to the beach, I spot Seth's truck easily enough.

I get out and make my way down to the sand to wait for him.

I watch as he takes on wave after wave. He really was good enough to go pro if he wanted to.

It's kind of a shame he isn't. I tried to surf a few times but it's a lot harder than I thought it would be.

I did okay but not well enough for me to keep trying.

Nope, I was a James boy through and through and we did better on dry land, under

the hood of a car.

Seth finally paddles into shore as he leaves the water, he notices me. He seems a little shocked to see me to be honest. He makes his way over to me. “Hey man, how are you?” he asks.

“I’m good and you? You did great out there,” I tell him motioning back towards the water.

“Thanks man. So, what brings you my way?” Seth asks.

I scratch at the stubble of my jaw. “Well, I talked to Sadie last night and she just seems super stressed. I was considering going out there, but we are just now figuring out how to move forward. I don’t want to rush us into something and make our situation worse,” I explain.

Seth dries his hair with a towel. “I’m glad you guys are talking and trying to figure out everything. I’m really glad that she finally told you. You don’t know how badly it was weighing on her.”

“That’s another story that we may not want to discuss.”

Seth raises his eyebrows in question. “Well, now we have to talk about this. Let’s go grab some breakfast.”

“I already ate but I’ll go with you. Maybe, you can give me a new perspective.” I hop in my car and follow Seth out of the parking lot towards his pick of places to eat.

“You’re missing out,” Seth tells me as he orders. Once we sit down at a table, he levels me with a stare. “Look, Sadie would have told you sooner if she would have figured out a way. The guilt and regret weighed down on her.”

I rub my hands over my face. “Seth, I’m not saying it didn’t bother her, but I don’t know how I’m supposed to feel about it.

She lied to me for years. I was supposed to be the one person that she could rely on, that she could tell me anything, but she obviously didn’t feel like she could, and I don’t know how I feel about that. ”

Seth shakes his head. “I don’t think you realize how bad off she was, Axell.”

“What do you mean?” I ask

“After everything that Josh put her through it messed her up. You figure she was still a kid basically. She was pregnant, beaten and uprooting her whole life to get away from him. On top of that Shelly, our mother, moved here to the smallest ass town that on the planet knowing she’d be ridiculed for her situation.

Moving to Aynor only worsened things for her.

After she had Drake it became evident that she was suffering from postpartum.

She didn’t want anything to do with Drake, she’d stay in bed in a dark room all day, barely eating or drinking anything.

Shelly decided it was best to try and check her into a facility.

Once she was in there, they diagnosed her with post-partum and a form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

While she was in the facility Shelly convinced her that it would be best to sign the right to Drake over to her.

Of course, in her mental state she agreed, and I don't disagree that it was best at the time, but Shelly used it against her.

Before she was released Shelly reached out to my dad after over a decade and told him that he needed to take Sadie.

Of course, our dad was more than glad to.

He had looked for them for the first couple of years then finally gave up hope.

Although, we didn't expect for her to be in the shape she was.

I was worried about her coming here to L.A.

, then she met you and that worried me more.

I knew your reputation and given her history, well you can't blame me for expecting the worst. You proved me wrong though.

You fixed the broken in her and you brought light back into her eyes. You were really good for her."

I let Seth's words sink in. "She mentioned the postpartum, but she didn't tell me the rest."

"Of course, she didn't, it wasn't her proudest time. She wasn't Sadie then. You know she tried to get him back," Seth comments quietly.

"Drake?" I ask.

Seth nods slowly. "Remember when she went back to Aynor after graduating from

nursing school?” Seth asks, and I nod in response.

“She went to talk so Shelly about getting her rights back. She was in a spot where she could take care of Drake now, both mentally and financially. Of course, Shelly wouldn’t let that happen and Sadie being the nice person she is, she left him there because Shelly convinced her it was unfair. ”

“I wish I would have known that years ago. I would have helped her fight.”

“I know you would have, and I think she knows that as well. At that point though she was so afraid that you would see her differently. She couldn’t bring herself to do it. I’m not saying what she did was right, but she felt it was the only way at the time,” Seth explains.

I nod, and we sit a few minutes in silence before Seth says he’s going to head home to get some sleep.

I need to get to the shop. Tillman’s car will be done today but Seth’s words weigh heavy on me, so heavy that I don’t even hear the music blaring in my car.

Each day it’s become easier and easier to understand and accept Sadie’s decision which means that each day we are moving forward.

I call Tillman right before we close down the shop. “Hey man, I see you’re back to your cell phone.”

“Yeah, couldn’t stay away forever. Anyways, the car is done,” I tell him.

Tillman let’s out a whistle. “I’ll be damned. You still at the shop.”

“Yeah, I’m closing up but if you want to come and check it out, I’ll head over to JamesTown and get some food until you get here,” I reply.

“Okay, sounds good. I’ll be there shortly.”

I finish closing the shop up then use the door that connects the two buildings to get to JamesTown. I’m just finishing up my food when Tillman takes a seat across from me. I push what’s left of my cheese fries over to him. “These damn things are addictive.”

“I know,” I tell him. “How have you been?”

He nods while he continues eating the fries. “Good, just been busy racing. Making a hell of a killing here lately. We’re down racers so I’m racing almost every night.”

“That’s good for you though,” I comment.

He nods his head again. “Yeah, so let’s go see this car?”

We get up from the table, I clear and clean the table before leading Tillman through the hallway that connects the buildings. I turn on the lights and his car comes into view. He lets out a low whistle of appreciation. “Damn, that looks good. I hope she purrs as good as she looks.”

I laugh while approaching the car. “Oh, she does.”

Tillman opens the door of the car and slides in.

I hand him the keys and he starts the engine.

It roars to life and the smile on his face makes it all worth it.

“Damn, this is perfect.” I smile then walk around to open the garage door.

He backs the car out, rolling down the window he hollers out, “Get in!” Once I’m in the car Tillman’s excitement is contagious.

He pulls out of the parking lot and takes off down the street.

Luckily, there’s not much traffic so we fly down the road.

Tillman drives with ease. He’s like me. Speed and racing come easily to us.

Flying down a road at heart stopping speeds is second nature.

“Do you like the car?” I ask.

“Hell yeah, I love the damn thing,” he tells me.

Eventually, we circle back around to the shop. We both get out of the car and Tillman hands me a check. “Thanks. I really had a fun time working on this car.”

“I’m glad we were able to catch back up. I know you don’t race anymore, and I respect that decision but it’s nice to know we can still be friends,” he tells me.

“Of course. Man, if it wasn’t for you, I probably never would have gotten Sadie back.”

Tillman shakes his head. “Yeah, but then you wouldn’t be in your current situation which hasn’t been the easiest on you.”

I shrug in response. “True but I love Sadie and I’m starting to understand her decisions back then. This situation hasn’t been the easiest, but I still don’t regret my

decision to choose her.”

Tillman smirks at me. “Good, I was hoping you’d say something like that. I’m glad to see where you’ve ended up in life. I’m proud of you.”

I laugh. “You’re sounding like an old man right now and you’re what just a couple of years older than me?”

He shrugs then laughs. “Go get your girl...again.” Tillman winks at me as he gets back in his car.

I watch as he leaves, and an idea starts to form.

I head back into the shop and power my computer back up.

Searching flights, I see that there is a flight in a couple of hours.

Eagerly I book the flight, close the shop back up and jog to my car.

I’ll have just enough time to get home throw some stuff in a bag and haul ass to the airport.

I might just make it in time for the flight but I’m going to have to let the speed demon loose.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:20 am

Sadie

I went to bed feeling okay. I mean my stomach was still a little weird, but I felt great other than that.

Then I woke up at four in the morning violently throwing up everything in my stomach.

This continued off and on for a couple of hours, up until the point that I had nothing left but even then, I dry heaved like a maniac.

Drake came in to check on me. I could see the worry on his face.

I told him it was just something I ate last night, and I hoped that was true.

At this point I was starting to worry for myself. I hardly ever get sick.

I fell back asleep just before seven. At around nine in the morning the smell of bacon sent me back to the restroom.

Drake apologized profusely but it wasn't his fault my stomach was messed up.

He offered to stay home from work, but I insisted on him leaving.

I didn't do well with people hovering over me.

I was used to being the one to take care of everyone, not the other way around.

I did better if I handle things on my own.

After Drake headed to work, I got up and made it to my mom's room.

We had moved the TV from the den area into her room, so she could watch the soap operas.

I took a seat in the chair next to her bed.

I didn't want to get her sick, so I tried to keep my distance.

We sat for hours watching the show before I finally decided to fix us a small salad for lunch.

My mother's nurse stopped in after that.

I was checking on the garden when Drake pulled back into the driveway. I didn't realize it had already been that long. "I must have lost track of time."

Drake shakes his head. "No, you really didn't. I worked a short shift today, only four hours. How are you feeling?"

I nod. "I'm okay. How was work?"

"It was good. Did you eat anything?" he asks.

"Yes, I ate a small salad earlier and it's managed to stay down so maybe the worst of it is gone," I tell him.

"Good. How is she?" he asks while stuffing his hand in his pockets.

I shrug. "About the same, she ate some of her salad and we watched soap operas."

He laughs. "Of course."

Drake turns to head into the house, but I stop him deciding that now is as good of time as any to have this discussion. "Drake?" He turns around and the sound of his name. "Can we talk?" I ask.

"Sure," he replies.

I walk up to the steps on the porch and take a seat.

Drake takes a seat next to me. I take a deep breath to calm my sudden nerves.

"Drake, I know you aren't naïve, and I know that you understand what is going on here.

Shelly has been your mom all of these years and I don't imagine this has been easy on you and I'm sorry for that.

I also don't want to make this harder on you than it already has been, but we have to talk about the future.

"I pause to see if Drake has anything to say but he only nods.

"I know that you and I don't really have a relationship and that's my fault.

I can never make you understand how sorry I am for that.

I often wish that my situation had been different, but it wasn't.

I hope you can understand that it was never because I didn't want you or didn't want to be a part of your life.

I just couldn't get myself in the right place.

The way things went down with your father messed with my mental state.

Shelly was the best answer for you and I don't regret that decision.

Your life would have been no good if I had tried to keep you and never got the help I needed at the time. ”

Drake clears his throat, so I stop again. “I understand that part, but I don't get why you didn't come back for me.”

“I did,” I reply.

Drake swings his head toward me with questions in his eyes. “You did?”

I nod. “Yes, I came back for you after I graduated nursing college. I could finally be the mother you deserved both mentally and financially.”

“Then what happened?” he asks.

“Well,” I tell him with a sigh, “I came back here, and I talked to my mother and I saw your room. We went to the school and sat outside in the car while you were at recess. I saw pictures that you had drawn and colored. I saw your report card and your teacher's notes about how great you were doing.

It felt selfish of me to take you from all of that.

I hated leaving you but at the time it seemed like the right decision.

I didn't think it was fair to uproot your entire life because I hadn't been able to get myself together from the beginning.

Also, my mother has a great way of talking me into things.

She made it clear she didn't think it was in your best interest at that time and that she would fight me for you.

I really didn't want to drag you through court and who really wants to take their mother to court?

” Drake nods. “I know I've missed everything but we're all we have left aside from your grandfather and uncle back in L.A.

and I can't stay here. I have a job and husband back there too.

I know it will be a big adjustment and I'm asking a lot of you but Axell and I would really love it if you would come live with us. ”

“Really?” Drake asks after a few minutes of silence.

I nod. “Of course. Regardless of the circumstances Drake, you are my son. We'd love to have you, but I know Aynor is all you've ever known, and this place is very small. L.A. is going to be culture shock for you, but I think you'll adjust and maybe, even like it once you got used to it.”

Drake stares out over the yard and I can't even begin to imagine what he's feeling right now.

My life took a change, but I had never had this kind of stability growing up.

I had never just had one place to call home until I met Axell.

My mother moved us around, a lot but I'm glad she didn't with Drake.

I'm glad he got this kind of home and stability.

A part of me hates to take that away from him.

Finally, Drake lifts his head to meet my eyes.

"I'll come with you. I'll give it a try. "

Tears prick at my eyes and before I realize it I reach out and hug Drake.

I tell him to go on in and spend some time with my mother and he does.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and check it, again.

I still haven't heard from Axell all day.

I really thought we'd start talking more after last night but maybe he needs some more time.

I'm sound asleep when the sound of my phone vibrating on the nightstand wakes me up.

Pulling toward my face I squint against the bright light.

I don't know who would be calling me at this time of night.

To my surprise Jagger's name is on my screen.

I slide my finger over the phone to answer it. "Hello."

"Sadie?" Jagger asks.

"Yeah, is everything okay?" I ask but I already know it's not. I feel it in the pit of my stomach, that old friend of mine called dread.

Jagger clears his throat. "Well, actually no. Axell's in the hospital in ICU."

"What?" I screech out probably waking the whole damn house.

I hear Jagger sigh. "I'm sorry I didn't want to tell you this way. There was a wreck."

"Why? Where was he going?" I manage to ask.

"I don't know for sure but from what we can piece together to you. He had booked a flight about a couple of hours before. He was speeding but I think it was just to make it on time for the flight," Jagger explains.

Tears stream down my face like a damn breaking that holds back the river.

My heart is dying slowly but surely and all I can think about in this moment is Axell.

Drake is standing in my doorway with a look of confusion.

Somewhere in my mind I know I should try to keep it together for him, but I just can't.

It's funny how I was just thinking about the changes in his life a few hours ago and now it's my life that has just been turned upside down.

The next morning, I wake up to the sound of the doorbell ringing.

I guess at some point I managed to cry myself to sleep.

Looking over my shoulder I see that all three of us, my mother, Drake, and I, are all in her bed.

The doorbell rings again and I get up to answer the door when the world tilts.

My head is pounding and my stomach begins to roll.

I rush toward the bathroom. Drake rushes past the bathroom door on his way to answer the front door.

With my head in the toilet the events of last night start to come back to me.

My heart beats erratically at the thought of Axell in ICU.

It just seems so unreal. I want to go to him but at the same time I can't leave my mother and Drake.

Just like some unanswered prayer I see a familiar face appear in the doorway of the bathroom out of the corner of my eye. As soon as he realizes how sick I am he rushes to my side. "Sade, are you okay?"

Seth's voice creates a calm in me. Once I'm finished, I flush the toilet and collapse against the wall behind me. "What are you doing here?" I ask him, my voice weak and hoarse from all the crying and vomiting.

Seth stands up and grabs the cup sitting on the bathroom counter. Filling it with water he hands it to me. Seth shrugs “I heard about Axell and I knew you would want to be there but wouldn’t want to leave Shelly and Drake here alone with everything. I knew you’d have to pick.”

“So?”

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Seth scoffs. “So, I didn’t want you to have to pick.

We all know that my relationship with Shelly is not good and that I don’t really want to be here but my relationship with you is a different story.

You’re my little sister and I love you. I want to be here for you and if that means I have to set my differences aside for the time being to help you then I will.

You need to go home and be with your husband.

I’ll stay here and keep an eye on things. I’ll help Drake out when he needs it.”

Tears form in my eyes, but I manage to keep them at bay. “Are you sure?”

He nods and gives me a sad smile. “Yes, I’m sure. Life is throwing everything at you at one time. It’s okay to let someone help you out here and there and even let them take care of you from time to time. Can you fly though?”

I nod. “Yes, I’m just sick from all the stress of everything I think.”

Seth nods then moves to help me off the floor. “Go pack up and I’ll start breakfast for everyone.”

I’m in my room packing when Drake knocks lightly on the door, clearly unsure of what to do. I try to smile at him, but it feels forced. “So, Seth’s my uncle?”

I nod. “Yeah, he’s great. You’ll love him once you get to know him. Shelly and him

have a very strained relationship, and for good reason, so there might be some tension at first but it has nothing to do with you I promise.”

Drake nods and walks farther into the room. “I’m sorry about your husband.”

“Thank you.”

He sighs. “You know when she first told me you were coming, I didn’t know what to think.

Then I got mad because I felt like we had been doing this on our own this long, so we didn’t need you now.

Then you got here, and you didn’t try to force a relationship on me and I started to appreciate that.

The next thing I knew it was normal to come home and see you here, comforting even.

It’s harder than I thought to see you leaving again. ”

His words hit me like a wrecking ball. I sit on the bed and pat the seat next to me. “It’s only temporary. A part of me wishes I didn’t have to go but Axell needs me too. It’s so hard to balance it all.”

“I get that. I’m not mad that you’re leaving. I understand why you are. I also know that if Seth hadn’t come here that you wouldn’t have left. You would have stayed here and worried constantly,” Drake tells me and he’s right. I would have.

“Axell and I didn’t leave things on a good note when I left L.A. My fault not his, but we were just starting to figure things out and planning for the future again. A future

that involved you. He was on his way here.”

“Here? As in Aynor?” Drake asks.

I nod. “Yeah, his brother Jagger said that from what they can gather he booked a flight to South Carolina a couple of hours before the accident. I’m guessing he rushed home to pack some stuff then was rushing to the airport when it happened.” My voice breaks and a few stray tears escape.

Drake wraps his arms around my shoulders and pulls me into him.

“It’ll be okay...mom.” His words threaten to make me cry more but we are interrupted by Seth hollering at us for breakfast. I never thought I’d see the day when I heard Drake call me mom.

My heart should be overjoyed but it’s weighted down, sinking like ship.

After breakfast Seth goes into Shelly’s room, I guess he figures if he’s going to have to be in here with her then he should get the tough conversation over.

I still can’t believe he came all this way for me.

He’s going to stay and help Drake with our mother, for me.

He’s the best brother ever. Drake grabs my bag and takes it to the car.

Seth had booked me a flight back to L.A.

when he booked his to come to South Carolina.

I was thankful he thought ahead like that.

Seth finally appears from our mother's room and walks toward me. His muscles look tense, but he wraps me in a hug as soon as he reaches me. "Keep me posted."

"Of course, I will," I tell him. "You too." Seth nods. "I can't thank you enough Seth. I don't know what I'd do right now without you, but I feel so torn. I hate leaving you knowing this isn't what you want."

Seth runs his hands through his hair. "Just now talking to Shelly I realize that it may not be what I want but it might be what I need. Don't worry about this. Everything will be okay."

I nod and head out the door and climb into the car with Drake.

He drives us to Myrtle Beach where I wait for my plane.

Drake sits in silence with me, my nerves worse than ever.

When they call my flight number to board I stand up and wrap my arms around Drake.

"If you need me, I'm a phone call away."

"I know," he tells me.

"I'll see you soon," I tell him with a pat to his cheek. I know that's a very uncool mom thing to do but I couldn't resist it. "I love you Drake and I'm very proud of you." I turn around and leave before he has to worry about saying anything.

On the plane I try my best to stay calm, but nothing works. I try to read but I can't stay focused. I've read the same page countless times before I give up. I need something to keep me busy though because if I'm just sitting still my mind will come

up with every possible worst-case scenario.

I know that as of this morning there had been no change in Axell's condition.

Last night I had been too upset and in shock to really understand anything Jagger told me.

I had called him this morning after Seth got to the house to apologize and find out what had happened.

He told me that Axell had been speeding when it started to sprinkle.

He went to switch lanes and lost traction causing his car to flip.

He had been rushed into surgery for his internal bleeding.

While in surgery they found he had a punctured lung, multiple broken ribs, a broken arm and collar bone and they had to remove his spleen.

They had managed to stop the internal bleeding, but he was in a drug induced coma until some of his other wounds started to heal.

At that point they would start to lessen the drug intake to pull him out of the coma but that was only if his body decided to release him from the self-induced coma.

I had never been big on praying but if I was going to start now seemed like the best time to start. So, for the rest of the plane ride I prayed to every higher power I could think of while I fought back tears.

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Sadie

It was cloudy and dreary when I landed in L.A.

an odd occurrence for this area but suiting for my current mood.

I see Lyndsay as soon as I enter the airport.

In an instant I'm in her arms and crying on her shoulder.

This is what best friends are for and she is definitely succeeds every time.

The guilt of not telling her the truth about my past years ago weighs on me, almost as much as the guilt from not telling Axell.

Eventually, Lyndsay leads me over to baggage claim and we make our way to her car.

She doesn't have to ask because she already knows where to go.

She pulls out of the parking lot and heads toward the hospital.

We drive in silence because there are no words.

I'm at a loss for words and she knows me well enough to know that.

Too soon we pull into the parking lot of the hospital.

Once we're parked, I hesitate. Going inside will make this whole situation real and that scares me.

Axell has always been the strong one. He's always been the one to take care of everyone around him.

The idea of him in a hospital and unconscious is overwhelming on so many levels.

Lyndsay reaches over and squeezes my hand. "He'll be okay, Sadie."

I nod. "I'm sorry Lyndsay."

She gets a look on her face, like she's questioning what I have to be sorry for.

"I'm sorry for not telling you about my past. I'm sorry for causing drama between you and Seth.

You're my best friend and I should have told you.

I should have supported you and my brother as long as you were both happy. "

"First of all, yes, I was pissed when Seth told me about Drake, but you know what I got over it because as a mom, I'd do anything for my kids.

In some way you felt like you were protecting him.

I just hate that you suffered alone. As with Seth, for whatever reason he makes me happy and he's good to me and the kids.

I don't know if it'll last but it's worth the risk.

He's different with me. I know how he's been in the past but when he's with me it's like a totally different version of Seth, so please don't worry about that.

You have enough on your plate right now.

So, come on let's go in there and see your husband.

I'll walk you up to the ICU. I'm sure one the guys are there already. " I nod, and we get out of the car.

The feeling of quicksand comes back to me.

I feel like I can barely move my feet forward.

The biggest part of me is wanting to avoid this moment.

It doesn't want to come face to face with the fact that Axell is not invincible.

For half of my life nothing was solid and stable.

Not a person or a place, but then Axell changed that.

He was solid and stable, and he stood strong no matter what.

Now, I have to face the fact that he isn't always that strong, that he too falls from time to time.

I know that sounds silly which is why I don't voice it.

No one is invincible, and I know that, but I held Axell to a different standard, much like he did with me.

That standard is crumbling now and I don't know if I can handle it.

Mentally, I'm breaking down. I'm trying to keep it together, but I just don't know if I can.

As we enter the hospital the smell of antiseptic and bleach fills my nose. I take off running for the bathroom once again. Lyndsay follows right behind me and holds my hair back. When I stand up, she looks worried. "I'm fine. It's just nerves and stress. Nothing to worry about."

"If you say so," she tells me.

I've never been a fan of elevators and if the ICU wasn't on the top floor, I probably would have insisted we take the stairs, but after vomiting so much I just didn't have the strength.

We ride up the elevator stopping here and there.

I watch as people get on and off the elevator, some happy and some sad.

I wonder if I'll ever get to leave in an elevator from here happy like that or will it be in tears?

Finally, we reach our destination and if it wasn't for Lyndsay grabbing my hand and pulling me behind her, I probably would have ridden that elevator all day long.

We pass through a set of swinging doors into the waiting room.

Hollis is easy to spot with her burgundy hair and platinum streaks.

When she looks up her eyes fall on me, she jumps up and makes her way to me.

She pulls me in for a hug. “I’m so glad you’re back,” she tells me.

Lyndsay rubs my arm. “I’ll come back later to check on you but I’m going to leave for now.” I nod and hug her, my way of silently thanking her for being here. “Love you,” Lyndsay says.

“Love you too,” I reply. Lyndsay leaves and when I turn back around Bowie pulls me into his body.

He wraps his arms around me, arms that remind of Axell’s.

His scent is almost the same too. My heart bleeds a little bit more at the idea that Axell may never hold me like this again.

Bowie pulls back and tries to smile at me.

“He’s going to be so happy you’re here.” Bowie leads us towards the door of Axell’s room.

The ICU is a circle with each patient having their own little space.

The walls facing the nursing station are glass and there is an automatic sliding door leading into each room.

From behind the glass I could see Axell lying stiffly in the bed, looking nothing like himself.

The tubes and machines surrounding him caused a lump to form in my throat.

Bowie moved us through the door. Axell had multiple stitches throughout his body.

His face was bruised and scratched, but there was one deep cut that required stitches.

It ran under his eye, along his cheekbone.

Bowie guided me to the chair beside his bed.

I decided then and there that the best thing I could do was to shut down emotionally.

I needed to be strong for Axell's brothers especially for Jovi.

Axell was like a father to him and he had already lost so much.

I sat beside Axell all day. The guys came in at different times since only two people at a time were allowed in the room.

When Jovi finally came in after school he came directly to my side.

He sat beside me quietly and held my hand.

I was supposed to be the one being strong for him, but it felt like he was giving me his strength instead.

The nurses came in and out of the room, checking on Axell's vitals, nothing changed but every time they came, I'd hope he'd wake up. Jovi left saying he'd be back.

I sat in a daze, only speaking when spoken to.

A steady flow of people rather nurses or his brothers came in to the room.

I tried to smile and greet them, but I couldn't.

I saw the look of sympathy in all of their eyes.

If I hadn't shut myself down, I'd probably cry every time one of them looked at me.

I knew Axell's vital were steady, but they weren't good which meant that anything could happen and that was a scary thought.

I wasn't allowed to stay the night in the room, so I moved to the waiting room.

Jovi had brought me food for both meals, but they had gone uneaten.

I was at a loss and I wasn't sure what to do.

I sat in the uncomfortable plastic chair and stared at the stark white wall.

You'd think hospitals would at least attempt to make things more comfortable, more inviting.

Instead, they are cold and sterile. Solid white with hard, uncomfortable chairs.

I don't know if you could actually make a hospital inviting considering no one wants to be here but you could try to at least make it a little comfortable.

At some point I must have dozed off. Hollis was standing above me when I woke the next morning.

Her head was tilted to the side. "Did you sleep here all night?" I nodded because I was afraid, I'd say something unkind if I spoke.

My appearance should have given me away.

A rat's nest for hair and wrinkled clothing.

I stretched my arms above my head, but they were stiff and achy.

Hollis extended her hand and I took it. "Come with me," she tells me.

"No," I reply pulling my hand from hers. "I need to see Axell."

Hollis takes a deep breath. "They won't unlock the doors for another half hour, but the cafeteria is open, so we'll go grab some breakfast."

"I'm not hungry Hol."

She nods her head. "I don't blame you but that doesn't mean I can let you do that. First let's stop by the restroom."

I walk beside Hollis but she's leading us.

Once the bathroom door shuts behind us she reaches into her purse and pulls out a box.

She hands it to me and at first, I don't really see the box but after a minute I finally start to see.

The small box is a pregnancy test. "Do you think you're pregnant again?" I ask her.

She smiles and shakes her head. "Oh no, Annalynn is a handful right now. That's not for me, it's for you."

"What? I'm not pregnant."

She raises her eyebrows. “Are you sure? Lyndsay, Seth and Drake all confirmed you’ve been vomiting for the past few days, usually in the mornings after a certain smell hits you. You’re a nurse so you know that’s a sign.”

“It is but I’m not pregnant. We haven’t even been trying and...” I stop to try and think when my last cycle was but I’m blank. “It’s just not possible,” I say with a shake of my head.

“It’s not possible at all?” Hollis asks, but we both know it is. Truth is I’m scared. I don’t know if I can handle finding out I’m pregnant in the hospital bathroom where Axell is lying in a coma in ICU. It all just seems to be too much.

“I can’t do this here,” I finally manage to croak out.

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Sadie

Hollis drives us to my house. Jovi isn't staying here right now which I'm thankful for.

Leaving the hospital was a hard decision for me but Hollis is right I could be pregnant, and I do need to find out for sure.

If I am then I have to make sure to take care of myself better during all of this for our baby's sake and if I'm not, then I can move on.

Hollis starts some coffee and I head into our bathroom.

It still smells like Axell or maybe it's my mind playing tricks on me.

It's funny how when something is missing from your life, you'll find it everywhere and in every little thing.

It takes me a good ten minutes to even get the courage up to pee on the stick.

I lay in on the counter and climb into the shower.

I figure by the time I get out I'll know the truth.

When I step out there's a sun dress hanging on the back of the bathroom door and a pair of shoes and clean undergarments just inside the door.

I get dressed without glancing in the direction of the bathroom counter where the test lays. I can't bring myself to look at it.

I open the bathroom door and Hollis is sitting on the bed sipping coffee. She hands me a cup as she approaches. I see the expectant look in her eye, but I shake my head. "I can't do it," I admit quietly.

Hollis gives me a smile and rubs my arm. She steps around me and into the bathroom she walks to the counter. When she looks back at me there are tears in her eyes. "You're pregnant."

I stand there staring at the little stick lying on the counter.

The stick that just changed everything. I always thought that when I found out I was pregnant Axell would be there but he's not here.

He's lying in a bed unconscious, fighting for his life.

A strangled sob escapes my body like a war cry.

Hollis is there in a flash pulling me into her arms and letting me cry out all of the stress.

A little while later, after I manage to eat a little breakfast, I head back to the hospital.

I'm in my car now because I don't want to have to depend on anyone driving me.

I make my way up to Axell. Jagger is sitting in the chair next to the bed.

He gives me a small, forced smile as I enter.

“How are you holding up?” he asks me as he moves out of the chair and motions for me to sit.

I’m about to protest but I know it would do no good.

I shrug. “As good as I can. How are you?”

“I’m okay. It’s odd. Axell has always been the rock for all of us.

Whenever anything has started to fall apart, he’s always been there to pick up the pieces and hold us all together.

Seeing him like this I just don’t even have words for how it makes me feel.

I hate it though. I can only imagine how you’re feeling,” Jagger says.

“It is odd. This isn’t a place you think of when you think of Axell. It’s the last place you want him to be in. I hate the fact that he was rushing to get to me. This is all my fault,” I confess.

Jagger reaches over and takes my hand. “No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is. Before I left for South Carolina I told Axell things I should have told him years ago, but I didn’t. When I left we weren’t on good terms. Everything was uncertain. He was only rushing because of that and now here we are and it’s my fault.”

Jagger shakes his head. “It’s not your fault.

Axell had forgiven you for not telling him about Drake.

” My head whips up because I didn’t know he even knew about that.

“He told me because he needed to talk to someone. I guess out of all of us I was his best bet. Anyway, he was over it and looking forward to moving on together as a family, Drake included. He was anxious to get to you but really this wasn’t anyone’s fault.

Sometimes shitty stuff just happens. Axell’s a fighter and he’ll make it.

” I nod and Jagger leaves with a promise to return later.

It’s been a week since I got back to L.A.

A week since Axell’s accident. There’s been no major improvements in his condition but no declines either.

We are just sitting ducks, waiting for something to happen.

My nails are bitten down to the quick. I have an appointment myself today.

It’s my first appointment to check on the baby, our baby.

Hollis is going with me since Lyndsay is working.

They are the only two I have told so far.

I don’t want to go around announcing it the world when I haven’t even got to tell the father yet.

The doctor comes in and tells me that they plan on slowly pulling him out of the drug induced coma.

What he really means is they will lower is drug dosage so that his body can wake up, if he can.

The problem is that Axell may not be able to wake up.

His body may not be ready or may have a different kind of damage that will keep him in a coma just not a drug induced one.

I've been trying not to stress but this makes me nervous.

It's impossible not to stress even with the idea of our baby and how it might affect its health.

I'm holding Axell's hand praying yet again and pleading with him to wake up soon when Hollis appears in the doorway. Hollis doesn't give me that same sad look everyone else does and I'm thankful for that. I lean over and press a kiss to his forehead. "I'll be back soon," I tell him.

Hollis is great at not trying to fill the quiet with unnecessary conversation.

She knows that right now conversing is not very high on my list of things to do.

I'm grateful to just drive to the doctor's office in the quiet of the music coming from the radio.

Bowie is hosting the show today, so it didn't shock me that she had the radio on when I got in the car.

Too soon we pull up to the doctor's office.

I take a deep breath to try and calm the nerves that have formed on the drive over.

I sign in and we take a seat in the waiting room with the rest of the mom's to be and some of the fathers.

My heart breaks a little that Axell isn't here with me, but I couldn't put this off any longer.

I'd give almost anything to have him here with me right now.

I look around and see that most of the women are clearly farther along than I am, already showing with their baby bumps.

Apparently, one baby starts kicking by the mother's exclaims and the father quickly reaches over and places his hands on the baby bump.

I watch as his face lights with astonishment.

Absentmindedly, I reach down and place my hand over my stomach.

I can't help but wonder if I'll ever get to have a moment like that with Axell.

The nurse appears and calls my name. "Do you want me to go with you?" Hollis asks, and I nod.

I don't feel strong enough to do this by myself today.

We head down the hallway. They weigh me and take my blood pressure which is a little high then we wait for the doctor.

Hollis flips through a parenting magazine while we wait.

Dr. Estrada finally knocks and enters the room.

“Hi, Mrs. James. I’m Dr. Estrada. I understand that you believe you are expecting. ”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, congratulations. So, we’ll do a test and then grab the ultrasound machine and see what we can find out,” he explains.

The doctor confirmed it. I was in fact pregnant about eight weeks to be exact.

I had heard the heartbeat and that had made me cry.

Everything seems to make me cry now days.

He was concerned about my blood pressure but after Hollis explained the situation right now, he backed off but told me to eat all low sodium foods.

I got a blurry picture as I left out that was supposed to be a picture of the baby, but it looked more like a bean of some sort. Everything was happening so fast.

I had to return to work a few weeks ago.

As much as I hated leaving Axell’s side the world didn’t pause for us just because our lives were falling apart.

My morning sickness had finally gone away but the stress hadn’t.

Axel was quickly approaching the six-week mark.

At six weeks he would be moved out of the hospital and into a long-term care facility.

It was a little-known fact that normally if you hadn't woken up from a coma within six weeks you more than likely weren't going to.

I was almost three and half months pregnant.

Everyone around me knew at this point, everyone but Axell.

I liked to believe that he could hear me when I talked to him and that he actually knew we were having baby.

Axell had healed but never woken up. They couldn't understand why but it happened.

I still held onto to a small sliver of hope.

I had to that was how I made it through the days.

Drake would be arriving in a few days. Seth had stayed in South Carolina with him after our mother passed away two months ago.

The house needed to be sold and things gone through and paperwork to take care of.

Seth had done it all and by himself while taking care of my son.

Jovi was excited for Drake to arrive and even helped get his room set up at the house.

I didn't worry too much because I knew Jovi would look out and help Drake adjust.

I had just gotten off from work when I pulled up to the hospital.

I took the stairs since Axell wasn't on the top floor anymore.

He had been moved to a regular room about two weeks after his accident.

I pulled the chair over to the side of his bed.

Axell had lost a lot of weight. For all of the time I've known him I'd never seen him this thin.

His bones had healed, and his stitches were gone.

There was a scar left under his eye, but I think it gives him even more character to his already handsome face.

I took his hand in mine and the weight of the day finally caught me.

The weight of the world was on my shoulders.

I needed Axell. I was tired of being strong all the time.

I was tired of praying. I was just tired in general.

For the first time since the first week he was in the hospital I cried.

I laid my forehead on top of his hand and cried like a baby and pleaded with Axell.

"Axell, I need you to hear me right now. I need you to come back to me. I need you to open those ridiculously pretty eyes that I was always so jealous of. I'm trying to stay strong but I'm breaking Axell.

Even I need help from time to time and you're the only one that can help me.

We're having a baby and you should be here.

You should be here with me to decorate the nursery.

You should be here for doctor's appointments and we should be fighting over names.

You should be here when Drake gets here.

Our family is growing but you're not here and you should be.

I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I never told you about Drake.

I'm sorry that you were rushing so you could get to me when all this happened.

I'm sorry Axell. I love you so much that this guilt and regret are pulling me down.

I miss you so much that I'm actually in pain.

I miss your chuckle and stupid smirk that I took for granted.

I just assumed that you'd always be here, you were my invincible man until you weren't, and I don't know what to do or where to go without you so please come back to me.

I'm not me without you," I cry the whole way through.

I doubt he can even understand half of what I said but I needed to beg him. "I love you handsome. Come home."

I left the hospital that night feeling exhausted.

When I got home, I ate dinner that Jovi made then crawled into the bed.

The bed that was empty and cold without Axell beside me, another hurtful reminder that he wasn't here.

I was sound asleep when Jovi came into the bedroom that morning, waking me up after I slept through my alarm.

I got dressed and rushed out the door with Jovi on my heels.

Both of us rushing, I stopped and turned around to Jovi "Don't speed.

If you're late, you're late. I don't care. "

"I won't," he tells me with a nod.

We get into our cars and I dial my manager before pulling out of the driveway.

"I might be a little late. I overslept, and I need to stop by and check on Axell." I was lucky my manager was great.

He told me not to worry about it. I headed to the hospital with Guns N' Roses on the radio.

I took the elevator since I was already running late.

As I approach Axell's room I hear a lot of commotion.

My feet start to move faster and faster until I'm in the doorway.

A doctor and nurse are both standing beside Axell's bed.

When they move Axell's eyes find mine and I've never felt relief like I feel it right now. "Hey beautiful," he rasps out.

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Axell

I check to make sure Sadie is still asleep before I get out of bed.

She cried herself to sleep last night. Jovi and his best friend Lance leave tomorrow for boot camp.

They graduated a couple of weeks ago so now it's time to start the next phase of their lives.

I wasn't sure if he'd really enlist until he told me he already had.

I won't lie it scares the hell out of me for him.

He's the baby and we've always done everything we could to protect him from the world but now he's going out into the world.

The world that can be so cruel and full of hate and evil.

I know he can handle it. Hell, Jovi can handle anything that's just who he is, but I worry about how this experience might change him. Regardless, I'm so damn proud of him.

Last night, my brothers, Drake, and I all went out to eat and bowling, sort of like Jovi's last hoorah before leaving us.

We all enjoyed it, but I know that in the back of our minds we were all worried about

the possibility of never seeing him again.

I hope that doesn't happen because he deserves to be happy.

I know Drake is sad to see him go. They bonded quickly which I was thankful for once I finally woke from my coma.

Having Drake around has actually been an easy transition.

It's like he's always been a part of the family.

He's going to start working at the shop soon.

He might as well already be employed there since he spends the majority of his time there anyways.

Drake is a good kid and like Jovi he's suffered some great losses at an early age but somehow, they've managed to take it in stride.

Sadie and him have a really strong relationship now, and that makes things even better.

I make my way across the hallway and open the door to the nursery quietly.

Dawsyn is crying because she's hungry. It's the only time she does cry.

I pick her up and she stops, her baby blue eyes meet mine and she gives me one of those adorable toothless baby smiles.

The one that has had me wrapped around her finger from the day she was born.

We make our way to the kitchen and I fix her a bottle before going back to her room

and taking a seat in the nursery.

I feed, burp and rock her back to sleep but instead of placing her in her crib I decide to just hold her.

When I had first heard we were going to have a baby I got scared.

I worried I wouldn't be a good dad and it all seemed so impossible to me.

I had lost a good amount of time while in the coma.

Sadie had the time to wrap her head around becoming a mom while I was out.

I still hadn't wrapped my head around the idea by the time I got to go to the doctor with her.

When he pulled out the ultrasound machine and I heard her tiny heartbeat it sunk in.

My need for speed is no more. Actually, none of us are really racing anymore.

Jagger, Bowie and I are busy with our kids.

Ace is busy with Kynlee and Jovi may have wanted to race but never got into it.

Somebody new will come up and take our place and I'm okay with that now.

I'm still rocking Dawsyn as the sun starts to peek up over the horizon.

Sadie comes into the room with a sleepy smile on her face. "Good morning beautiful."

"Good morning babe," she replies. "We need to start getting ready." I nod and place

Dawsyn back in her crib when I turn around Sadie launches herself into my arms while reaching up to trace the scar under my eye left over from the accident.

Surprisingly, it doesn't stand out too bad, but I often find Sadie tracing it.

She always tells me it's a good reminder of what she almost lost and that I'm not invincible.

"Tell me everything will be okay," she demands.

I rub her back. "Everything will be fine." Oddly, enough I believe that.

Sadie was my saving grace in life and even if at the time I didn't know it she gave me two of the most amazing gifts I could have asked for, Drake and Dawsyn.

Our life hasn't been the easiest, but it has been full.

Full of laughs, full of family, full of speed but most of all full of love.

One part of our story is ending but the other part is just beginning.

I take Sadie's hand and pull her back into our bedroom, so we can get ready to go see Jovi off.

Jovi is starting a new part of his story too. I wonder if he's as excited as I am.