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In An Instant

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In an Instant

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Précis

I will never forget my junior year of high school; not because of the parties, the dances, or the school trips. That year does not stay with me because of the people I met, but rather because of the people I lost. The month before the school year began, I lost my father to an sudden and unexpected heart attack. I entered the school year already dealing with feelings of grief, but those feelings were only intensified as the year progressed. Five students died that year, three from my graduating class. Nights that my best friend and I should have been walking around the mall, talking and laughing, were instead spent attending the wakes of people our age, people who had been there one moment and were gone the next.

That year taught me that people deal with death in a variety of ways. I watched family and friends grieve over open caskets, some seemingly void of emotion, and others barely able to stand from the weight of it all. I remember one father fiercely hugging one of my classmates, crushing her to him after she said a few kind words about his daughter. During each of the wakes, myself and others constantly mentioned feeling like none of what was clearly happening was real; all of us realizing that the denial stage of grief is not always as obvious as insisting the death never happened, but that it occasionally manifests as the belief that you can see the person's chest moving as you kneel at the coffin, or expecting that person to suddenly sit up and start laughing about the joke he just played.

When I sat down to outline the story I would write for my Honor's Thesis, I only knew that I wanted to develop a fictional piece that was driven by emotions. It did not take long to remember the emotional roller coaster I was forced to ride throughout my junior year, and I knew that I wanted to write a story about a loss that is so unexpected it strikes readers as grotesquely unfair.

After experiencing the deaths of family and friends, and watching how those deaths affected each person differently, I chose to write about a family that has to learn to cope with a sudden and heart wrenching tragedy. The goal of my thesis is to take readers on an emotional journey that explores the various reactions to loss and makes them question how they would react in a similar situation. I want readers to understand the fear that develops when a person is forced to realize that his world is far from untouchable. It is one thing to finally accept that a person is gone, but it is something else to finally understand that your loved one is not coming back; I want those who read my story to become aware of the fact that sometimes that second realization is worse. I hope readers will take something away from my story, even if that underlying message simply reinforces a lesson that has already been learned.

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Prologue

We were happy once. We had carved our own little niche in the world, a place where everything was good. And with the exception of a handful of storms, in fifteen years the weather was never worse than partially cloudy. We were all settled...with our lifelong friendships, happy marriages and wonderful children, we were in our own comfortable bubble where nothing could touch us. We were three families that may as well have been one. We were picture perfect or as close as we could get. We were always open, always honest with each other because we learned that that's what worked best. We trusted, we hoped, we loved unconditionally, and because of all that we were strong...we were unbreakable. Then one night something cold and cruel stole into our world...it attacked us from all sides, and in that moment, our unbreakable world shattered.

We were happy once...now we're not. We had everything...until everything fell apart. Now we're trying to fight our way back to that place where everything was good, but we can't seem to find our way, and even when we finally get there...there's this agonizing feeling that there will be dark and dreary clouds looming where there were once blue skies, and the air that surrounds us will leave a distinct distaste in our mouths even when we refuse to breathe in.

Chapter 1

I remember everything so clearly from that day...I can't forget a single detail. I remember the way her hair smelled when she ran and flew into my arms. The way she squirmed and the laughter that erupted from her small body.

Ashleigh Cabott stood in the corner, her back leaning comfortably against the doorway, a smile playing on her lips.

"Mommy...mommy, make him stop." She laughed along with her pleading daughter.

"Sorry, Cassie..." Ashleigh shrugged her shoulders as she spoke. Giggles echoed through the hallway as Jason continued to tickle his daughter. Her face was beginning to turn a bright shade of red as she tried to get away. He stopped suddenly, and the small blonde rested her head against his chest, panting heavily.

"How much do you love me?" He raised a brow, his infamous smirk plastered on his face. He watched her spread her arms as wide as she could, her head tilting back slightly as she attempted to spread them more.

"This much!" She put one last effort into stretching her arms before she flung them around her father's neck, burying her head on his shoulder.

"Well that's good to know...'cause I love you that much too." He kissed the side of her head gently as he felt her arms wrap just a little tighter. His attention was drawn away from the girl in his arms and down to the one that was tugging gently on his pant leg.

“What about me?” The young child’s voice was small and Jason didn’t hesitate to lift her into his arms as well, her blue-grey eyes never leaving his.

“Don’t you worry, Drea...I love you that much too.” Her head found comfort on his other shoulder, a content smile playing on her lips.

“And me...” He watched Ashleigh saunter over to him, a mock pout forming. He looked towards the ceiling, pretending to give her question serious thought.

“Hmmm...I guess I love you too...” She scoffed as she came to stand in front of him, her hands placed firmly on her hips. “Ashleigh...” She turned her head away from him as he took a step closer, causing the distance between them to vanish. He leaned in, kissing her temple quickly before lowering his lips to her ear, keeping his voice low. “I can’t exactly pick you up too...at least not right now...” She turned her head back to face him, a smile breaking through as she eyed him carefully. “But I promise to make it up to you later.”

“Really...” She raised a brow and watched him as he raised both of his. “Okay...I’m holding you to that one.” She leaned up and pressed her lips against his briefly. She pulled back just on time to catch Aundrea yawn.

“Uh-oh...looks like it’s time for someone’s nap.” Jason kissed his daughter’s forehead before he let Ashleigh take the toddler into her arms.

“But I’m not sweepy.” Ashleigh laughed gently as she watched Drea fight to keep her eyes open.

“I know you’re not ‘sweepy’, but mommy just wants you to lie down with her for a while...okay?”

“Kay...” Ashleigh watched the small brunette nod her head before leaning against her mother’s shoulder. She threw a warm smile over her shoulder before she disappeared into the bedroom, her daughter losing the battle against sleep before she even got to the bed.

All deaths could be considered tragedies, but this was so much more to all of us. The whole thing was completely unbelievable... so disturbing, you never forget a moment of it, any detail...something that stays with you for the rest of your life and that can still make your stomach turn after years have passed...that can still drain the color from your face with a single thought. That day changed my life...changed the way I viewed life, altered my perception of everything around me. I never thought I would go through something like this, something more devastating, more painful than anything I ever could have imagined...something that my worst nightmares couldn’t even touch.

“So are you ready princess?” Taylor kneeled down in front of her goddaughter, her white dress pooling around her feet. Cassie nodded happily as she held the basket of rose petals in her small hands. The bride turned to the youngest Cabott and raised one of her perfectly shaped brows. “What about you?”

“Yup.” The grin on Aundrea’s face caused her eyes to light up. Taylor handed the toddler her own basket before standing back up to her full height.

“I can’t believe you two are finally tying the knot.” Lauren gushed in her lavender bridesmaid dress. Taylor couldn’t help but smile as she turned to face her two friends.

“So how does it feel...in less than an hour you’re going to be Mrs. Christian Hendersen.” Ashleigh watched her best friend’s eyes light up as soon as the words left her mouth.

“I’m really excited...and really nervous all at the same time...I mean I can’t wait to walk down the aisle, but a part of me is dying to run away and hide in my bed.” Taylor rolled her eyes as she sat on the bench for the vanity.

“Taylor, you’re supposed to feel like that...it’s normal. The hardest part is taking that first step down the aisle and after that...I guess you just get caught up in the moment and everything becomes smooth sailing.” Ashleigh reassured her friend and was glad to see the nervous brunette nod in response.

“Knock knock...” The three women turned towards the door to see Jason slowly sticking his head through the door.

“Hey you.” Ashleigh walked over to him and kissed him lightly.

“Hey Jase.” He turned his attention from Ashleigh to the dazzling brunette that was getting to her feet and straightening out her dress.

“Taylor, you look gorgeous.” He said genuinely, earning a smile from the giddy bride.

“Thanks. You don’t look so bad yourself...your husband did always clean up nicely.”

The three girls laughed as Jason rolled his eyes.

“Thanks, I guess...anyway, I just came to tell you that Chris is at the altar, ready and waiting, and we walk in 5.”

“You ready, Aunt Taylor?” Taylor turned to face the smiling blonde...a miniature version of her mother, only getting the crystal blue eyes from her father. Taylor kneeled down and winked at her goddaughter.

“You bet I am Cass.” Taylor poked her nose lightly before standing back up. “Let’s do this.”

There’s no forgetting the cheeriness in her voice...or the ecstatic look on her face when we walked out of the room. The smile stayed on her face throughout the entire ceremony. We all had stayed smiling...we didn’t have a reason not too...from watching my two precious girls walk down the aisle...dropping petals on the red velvet carpet...to watching Nathan and Lauren’s youngest son, Brandon, strolling coolly towards the altar, enjoying his important role as ring bearer. I played my part as best man, Ashleigh as the matron of honor, both of us watching as our best friends enjoyed the happiest day of their lives...what should have led to the happiest two weeks of their lives.

Sudden and unexpected...those are the words the reporters attached to the accident, but those words can’t even begin to describe what it was like. The words sound too...calm, nice...peaceful. But that’s not what bothers me most...the thing is...those words sound too painless to describe the “tragic” event that just destroyed my perfect world...the event that caused the weekend to take a shattering, gruesome, heartbreaking turn for the worst...an event that crippled me and the people around me.

He spun around quickly, causing his youngest to giggle as she kept herself balanced on his feet. “Daddy...do it again.” Drea shrieked twice...once during her request and then again when Jason granted her request. Jason smiled down at the precious toddler that had somehow managed to keep herself awake past 11:00 pm. Through the corner of his eye he caught sight of his eldest being twirled and then dipped by her uncle.

Nathan pulled the small blonde back up to a standing position before grabbing her hand in his, her other hand on his waist and his on her shoulder. “So...did you have fun today?” He watched her nod with a smile. “What do you say to ice cream at the park with me and Aidan?” All boys her age were disgusting...except for her cousin. Aside from Cassie, Aidan firmly believed all girls had cooties. Born 5 months apart, the two kids had remained inseparable since they were toddlers and truly able to remember people other than their parents.

“Okay.” She gave a wide smile which was immediately followed by a yawn. She rested her head comfortably against her uncle’s stomach, her lips still curved upward.

The night had gone perfectly, better than any of had anticipated. The morning after, we had all gone out to breakfast before Chris and Taylor had to leave for their honeymoon. The meal had been filled with light conversation, mostly memories about high school and college. We had all parted ways just before noon...Chris and Taylor heading to the airport, Nathan taking the boys back to their house, and my sister heading to my house with Ashleigh the girls and me to pick up the things she had left there while getting ready for the wedding. It just all happened so fast. One minute everything was normal...Cassie playing with her new American Girl doll Taylor had bought her last week...Drea chatting animatedly with Ashleigh and Lauren. Then it all changed. It didn’t get chaotic...it just changed...more than any of us could have imagined.

“Drea...” Cassie’s irritated voice stopped the conversation between the other passengers... Jason quickly glancing back through the rearview mirror, and Ashleigh twisting in her seat to look back at her daughters just as her eldest gave an exaggerated sigh.

“Sorry, Cassie.” Aundrea tried to reach the doll she had accidentally knocked out of her sister’s hand, but her small arms could barely reach past her car seat, let alone reach the floor. She leaned back in her seat, her eyes cast downward as she pushed her chestnut hair back behind her ears. “I didn’t mean to.”

“I know...it’s fine.” Cassie eyed the doll that had fallen behind her mother’s seat, far past her reach. “Mommy, can I get Samantha?” Ashleigh groped blindly behind her seat, but came up empty handed.

“Make sure you put you seat belt back on.” Ashleigh turned back around in her seat...she didn’t need to be facing Cassie to know that she once again had a bright smile on her face.

Jason’s eyes darted between the road and his daughter’s reflection. He watched her slide back into her seat as he drove through the empty intersection, laughing to himself at how quickly her mood had gone from annoyed to content. “JASON...”

It was like a bomb went off, and then...I don’t know what happened after that...I keep trying to remember, but I can’t. I had turned towards Ashleigh to see her panicked eyes looking past me. By the time I turned to look out my own window, the blue F-150 was already there. I closed my eyes and suddenly there was glass everywhere...twisted pieces of metal sticking out...one piece protruding from Lauren’s stomach. That’s the first thing I remember after the SUV stopped moving. Maybe there was nothing to remember after that point...maybe it really did just happen that fast.

I watched Ashleigh crawl...watched her drag her body from the twisted remains of the wreck. I can still hear her piercing scream when she got out of the SUV. I tried to call out to

her...but I couldn't find my voice. No matter how hard I attempted to scream...nothing came out. I had been jerked forward, my head hitting the steering wheel...but Cassie...she flew past me...away from me...away from all of us.

She won't talk about it...I didn't even know what had happened until I was in the hospital and I watched the news. No one had told me how Cassie died...or why Ashleigh was in shock and hadn't spoken to anyone in three days. The SUV had continued moving after Cassie was thrown through the windshield...I didn't see what Ashleigh did. I wasn't the one who sat on the side of the road holding our daughter's mangled body, her bones visible in places they shouldn't have been, and her neck bent at an unnatural angle. I didn't see any of it...but Ashleigh did...she saw it all.

Drea and Ashleigh were both okay...physically okay. But my other little girl...my first born...my pride and joy...she was stolen from me...ripped out of our lives in the blink of an eye. How do you go on your honeymoon after this? You don't. Chris and Taylor were the first ones to show up at the hospital...and Taylor didn't leave Ashleigh's side in the three days that we were there. Chris had to go home and bring her a change of clothes because she refused to leave her best friend, unless it was to check on the rest of us. But she only did that once, she couldn't bear to walk away from distraught girl she was used to seeing with a smile. I didn't see Ashleigh the first night, they wouldn't let me leave the bed and she wouldn't come to me...I'm not sure if she really had to will to make herself move. My mother had offered to keep Drea for us, but Ashleigh simply latched onto her hand...not saying a word, but clearly indicating a no.

It was on the fourth day that Ashleigh and I were both released. Chris and Taylor drove us home, and as we walked into the house and everything was eerily calm...quiet. "Daddy, I'm

hungry.” I looked down at the brunette in my arms and pulled her close to me. She’s too young to understand this...to grasp what happened to her sister.

I glanced at Ashleigh as she ascended the stairs. I had a strong feeling where she’s going...Cassie’s room. Chris and Taylor watched her too and then turned to meet my gaze. The smiles I remember so clearly from just a few days ago were nowhere to be found. How do you celebrate your wedding anniversary after this...knowing that the same day that brought you such joy was immediately followed by one that brought others pain. I wish I knew they would be happy...but I don’t know that. I don’t know that everything’s going to be okay...if my family is ever going to be stable again, because right now all of us are falling apart...except for the little brunette in my arms who only knows that her arm keeps hurting...that mommy’s sad...and that Cassie didn’t come home with us.

Chapter 2

There was no wake...the family didn't want it...Ashleigh wouldn't allow it. So there was just a funeral...a small and closed off funeral that was for immediate family only and a few close friends. But one member of that family was still in that hospital...Lauren was still laying in the ICU.

Ashleigh had watched as they lowered the small casket into the ground, Aundrea in her lap and Jason gripping her hand tightly. Tears fell silently from his eyes, but Ashleigh remained eerily calm through the entire funeral. She had the antidepressant and sedative to thank for that...they were the reason she wasn't clinging to the casket...cursing the men that were burying her child. How did she know what she would do without the drugs? She knew because she desperately wanted to lunge at the two men, shoo them away from her child that they were about to put six feet underground...but the sedative wouldn't allow her to do any such thing. So she sat there, and watched helplessly as two people she didn't know gave her no choice but to say goodbye to her daughter.

She had never been one to wish harm on other people, but as she watched the casket disappear, she couldn't help but feel relieved...vengefully happy...that the other driver had died before reaching the hospital. Gregory Stanford had run a red light, and his carelessness had taken away her child...she was glad he didn't survive. She never imagined she would become one of those people who found it impossible to forgive...but she also never thought she'd have to bury her child.

Jason pulled her body into his, her head falling into place on his shoulder. It was odd to see her without tears, but he understood why. His eyes shifted to his daughter, even she was

crying...crying for her lost playmate....for her lost source of comfort when Mommy and Daddy got into a fight...for the sister that was there one minute and gone the next. She didn't understand it, but she knew something was wrong. She knew everyone was sad...that she hadn't seen her grandparents since she last saw Cassie...that Aunt Lauren, who always came to the house on Saturday morning, wasn't there when she ran down the steps. She knew Aunt Taylor had been spending a lot of time around the house...with her mom...that the two of them were always crying. She knew that Daddy had been busy making phone calls, or arrangements, as she had heard him say once...that Uncle Chris had to help him make the calls because Daddy would get upset and cry. He never cried, but he had been crying a lot lately, all the adults around her had been crying a lot...even Uncle Nathan who was always smiling and acting silly...he tried to smile for her, but she could still see the tears glistening in his eyes. Everything was just different.

It was as they walked somberly across the moist grass that the sedative started to wear off...and that was when the first tears slid down her pale cheeks. But no one would know that...not with the black veil covering her face. She gripped her daughter's hand tightly as they walked to the car.

There was no reception afterwards...the only people in the Cabott residence were the same people who had been there for the past week, with the addition of Cassie's grandparents. Nathan had left to go see Lauren, leaving Brandon to play with Drea, but taking Aidan and Kyle. At thirteen, Kyle just wanted to see his mother, but Nathan took Aidan simply to get the young boy's mind off his cousin...his best friend. The normally talkative boy had grown quiet after being told about the accident. Cassie was the only one he could tell anything and everything to...he had another best friend, but he wasn't Cass...no one would ever be his cousin.

While Drea and Brandon played in the yard with Chris, the rest of the group made small talk on the deck. Ashleigh's father had barbequed in an attempt to make the afternoon seem somewhat normal. The meal started silently, someone occasionally making stupid and pointless comments, anything to cut through the thick tension that loomed in the air.

"Daddy..." Jason looked away from the food he had barely touched and down at the small brunette who was now standing next to him.

"Yeah..."

"Do you 'member when Cassie sprayed the hose on the slide, and I got to go down it?" Her eyes were sparkling as a smile played on his lips.

"Yeah, I remember." Jason wore a sad smile as he responded to his daughter.

"Can me and Uncle Chris show Brandon?" The pain was evident on Jason's face, but he ignored the tearing in his heart as he leaned down and gently kissed Aundrea's forehead.

"Of course you can, sweetie." He watched her run back down the steps, grabbing the hose when she reached the bottom, and dragging it over to the swing set.

"I remember that day," Jason turned to face Taylor who was now wearing a nostalgic smile of her own. "They played on that thing for hours...and you actually stood there the entire time holding that hose for them. God...you spoil them so much." Tears glistened in her brown eyes as she recalled the day from barley a month ago.

"Spoiled." The entire table turned to look at Ashleigh, the mother who had barley said three words all day.

"What?" Taylor questioned, not really hearing what her friend said.

"Spoiled...he spoiled them...he spoiled her." Her voice was hoarse, her words seeming bitter, but her tone telling a different story...her tone relayed pain.

“Ashleigh...” the brunette next to her frowned, cursing herself for her word choice. “I didn’t mean...”

“I know...” Ashleigh cut her off as she grabbed her best friend’s hand. “I’m sorry...” She bit back tears as Taylor pulled her in for a tight and much needed hug. “That was a good day.” Her voice cracked with the words and she could feel the emotion starting to overwhelm her as she pulled back from Taylor’s embrace. The distraught mother stood up quickly and turned away from the table. She started to walk away but stopped when she felt Jason grab her wrist. She turned back to him and could see that he was ready to follow her inside, but she shook her head and pulled out of his loose grasp. “Really, I’m fine. I just need a minute.” With trembling hands she tucked her blonde hair behind her ears before turning and walking back into the house, her husband staring after her.

Her feet carried her through the entire length of the house and then out the front door. She wanted to be as far away from her home as possible...too many ghosts lurking behind every corner. She walked down the relatively empty sidewalk, unconsciously moving faster and faster until she was nearly running...trying in vain to escape from something she could not name.

She did not see the tan Explorer that drove past her, but her brother-in-law noticed her as he turned the corner. Nathan dropped his two boys off at the house, telling Kyle to inform Jason that he was with Ashleigh, before quickly reversing out of the driveway and heading back down the street. It was in front of the town library that he finally found her, still too lost in her thoughts to notice as he parked his car and started to approach her. She was standing against the brick wall right outside the doors with her hand clutching her chest as tears seeped quickly out of her eyes. He walked slowly over to her...hesitant in his movements, not exactly sure what he was supposed to do. Did she want to be comforted, or did she want to be left alone? She needed

to cry, and usually that meant for everyone to just leave her be...but this wasn't the usual...this wasn't even close to anything that had previously brought his sister-in-law to tears. So he took a chance and placed a gentle hand on her back. She choked on a heavy sob, her collar bone protruding as she hunched her shoulders forward. Her head hung low as her legs gave out on her. Her frail body collapsed towards the ground, and she soon found herself in Nathan's arms. But it hurt for him to see her like this...to know one of his sons was barely speaking to anyone, barley sleeping or eating anymore...to know that his wife was lying in a hospital bed...that his entire family was suffering this unbearable heartache. He had tried so hard to be strong for everyone...for his brother-in-law...for his boys, for his niece who expected him to smile for her, and for the fragile woman who was currently shaking in his arms. But he could not keep the charade up anymore...the memory of watching them lower his young niece into the ground had pushed him over the edge, and soon enough he fell to the ground with Ashleigh in his arms.

They stayed in a crumpled mess at the entrance of the library, people looking towards them...knowing that the woman breaking down in front of them was Cassandra Cabott's mother. And they all thought the same thing as they watched with tears glistening in their own eyes...that poor, poor woman...how hard this must be for her. But not a one of them had a clue what she was going through...they couldn't fathom the amount of pain any member of the family was feeling.

"I'm so sorry." His words were barely audible from the sobs escaping his throat. He tired so desperately to compose himself...she didn't need this. He couldn't breakdown now, not when she needed someone to take care of her. He felt her pull away from him, and he watched as she slowly got to her feet, her hazel eyes roaming around the crowd that had gathered around them...the group of people just standing there...staring. Their pitying eyes were on her...on the

poor mother who had so tragically lost her daughter...on the woman who had just had a breakdown in broad daylight.

“Ashleigh...” He was on his knees still, tears slightly blurring his image of her. He forced himself to his feet and reached out to her, his hand grazing her tense shoulder, but she shrugged him off.

“No...Nate I, I can't.” She shook her head and walked away from him, her eyes still shifting around the crowd. “Sorry...show's over.” Her words were bitter...her eyes cold as a vibrant red bled into her pupils, a result of her heavy set of tears. She hated the looks of sympathy, but her anger wasn't truly meant for them.

She entered the library, quickly navigating her way to the bathroom, people's eyes still following her. She pushed the bathroom door open and let it swing shut behind her, saving her from the sudden feeling of claustrophobia...the people that seemed to be closing in on her from all sides. She went to the last stall and fell to her knees, heavy sobs wracking her body as her stomach twisted and pulled in all the wrong directions. Her fingers pulled roughly at the elastic band in her hair, the ponytail on her head suddenly feeling too tight, giving her a headache. Her curls fell down and around her shoulders before she leaned over the toilet and emptied her stomach. She hadn't been able to eat this morning, just pushed the food around on her plate, so now it was acid that was rushing up her throat, burning her insides before it left her body.

She felt the hair being pulled back from her face, a hand rubbing small circles on her back. She looked over her shoulder and found Nathan kneeling behind her, a few tears still creeping slowly down his pale cheeks. She did not keep her focus on him for long though, as her body forced her to turn back around and vomit again. Eventually the liquid stopped leaving her body, and she was left with dry heaves that caused even more pain to her tiny body.

Tears pooled in the corner of her eyes when she finally pulled her head up and then proceeded to fall back against the divider. “Why did this happen...why us...why Cassie?” Her eyes were full of so much pain, so much confusion. She was begging him for answers, pleading with him to tell her what any of them did to deserve this. But he didn’t have the answers...his eyes were the same as hers...he was asking the same questions she was...looking for the same answers...answers that they both knew no one could provide.

“I don’t know.” She had prayed that he would magically be able to give her some sense of closure, but deep down she knew it wouldn’t happen, and when he proved her right, she let the tears cascade down her face, running over the same salty tracks the previous tears had left behind.

He fell into place next to her, their shoulders touching lightly as a heavy sigh escaped his parched lips. She turned her neck and focused on him, noticed the stress in his face, the tears he was pushing back. She knew what it looked like when you were trying to be strong...trying to convince others that you were okay...she had worn the look quite a few times as a teenager, and he was wearing it now.

“You don’t have to be strong for me, Nathan...or for Jason. You’re going through your own problems right now and...” She started but he cut her off...she should’ve known he would...he was Nathan Adler...he wasn’t going to show that much emotion and let his guard down for anyone if he could prevent it. He had broken down with her outside...she couldn’t expect anymore from him...not today.

“You know who would love to see you?” He turned his gaze towards her and watched as she wiped the tears from under her eyes. “Lauren...she woke up last night.” Her eyes widened at the information.

“Nate, why aren’t you with her?” Her brows wrinkled in confusion...they had all been waiting so long for Lauren to wake up, especially Nathan and the boys.

“Because she told me I needed to be with you guys this morning...and she was right.” She watched as he stood up, knowing his words were genuine as he gave her a small smile.

“Nathan...” He shook his head and stretched his arm down towards her.

“Come on...I know she’ll love it if I bring you with me.” Her eyes held uncertainty but she gave him her hand and let him pull her up. She jumped when the toilet automatically flushed when she moved past the sensor, and she swatted Nathan in the arm when he laughed at her. A small smile crept onto her face, and it didn’t take her long to realize it’s the first real smile she’s had on her face since the accident...and as soon as the thought registered in her mind, the smile vanished, leaving Nathan to wonder if it was ever really there at all. “You know...you’re right...it is okay for me to be upset, but it’s just as okay for you to smile, Ashleigh.”

She looked down...ignoring his words as she let go of his hands and walked over to the sink. She pulled her hair back into a ponytail before turning on the faucet and rinsing out her mouth. Her hands were trembling slightly when she turned off the faucet, and when she pulled her body back up to her full height she could see him through the mirror, a worried look on his face. Tears burned in her eyes again, and he saw them as well, but she refused to let them fall.

“Don’t...” It’s all she said and all she needed to say...he knew what she meant. He knew why she would not smile...the guilt she carried at the thought of being happy when her daughter’s gone. She has to learn that it’s okay to smile, to laugh...that eventually she has to move on and start living her life again...without Cassie. But he left it alone for now...she’d been through enough for the day...dealt with more stress than she should have...because of that

he did as he was asked, and he wrapped an arm around her shoulder, letting her head lean against him as he guided her out of the building.

She can't recall the ride to the hospital...it's all a blur. One moment she was closing the car door and the next they were in the parking lot of a hospital she had spent too much time in. But it would be better this time...Lauren was awake.

They took the elevator up to the ICU, the ride quiet, but no tension lingering in the air...just a sense of grief. The feeling followed them all the way to the room. Nathan walked in first, a small smile in Lauren's direction. Ashleigh moved slowly behind him. The moment she locked eyes with alarmingly pale woman laying in the bed the tears returned to her eyes. She forced herself to look away...she did not want to cry anymore...she was so tired of the tears...tired of the pain...she just wanted it all to go away. She wanted to go back to the day her life crumbled at her feet...find a way to change it...make the day end differently...find a way to bring her precious little girl back to her so the hurting would stop.

"Ashleigh..." Lauren's voice was weak and raspy from the breathing tube that had been down her throat for a week...the one they made her cough to remove only last night. But Ashleigh could still hear the concern in her friend's voice. She looked to the ceiling, hoping the tears would just disappear, somehow fall back into the place they came from if she just held her head back long enough. But it's not working...she knows it never will, so she blinks hard and looks to the side, focusing on the barren white wall. She was willing to look at anything except Lauren, because if she looked at her the tears would fall...and if they started again she did not know when they would stop...if they would ever stop.

"Ashleigh..." Lauren called again, tears already streaking down her face. She hadn't been around for the past week...hadn't been there to help her brother and his wife through the

hardest period in their lives. She had woken up last night to find Nathan sleeping in a chair next to her bed. She couldn't remember what had happened, but he had looked so tired even in his sleep...she could see it in his face...so she let him be and opted to watch TV instead. It was as she was flipping through the channels that she passed by a news channel. She wanted to at least know what day it was...how long she had been here. But those thoughts left her mind when she saw a picture of her niece on the screen...followed by what looked like an accident scene...but the volume was down, and she had no idea what was going on.

She had gripped Nathan's hand as hard as she could, digging her nails into his skin to make sure she woke him up. She watched his head shoot up and his gaze focus on her. She tried to ask him what was going on, but the tube in her throat was preventing her from doing anything. She jammed down on the call button and waited for a nurse to come in. She was worried...something was wrong...she could feel it. Nathan could see it in her face, and when he glanced at the TV he understood why she was so panicked...so anxious to talk. His face fell immediately...how was he supposed to tell her this? He stood back as they asked her to cough and pulled the tube from out of her mouth. They told her that her throat would be sore for awhile...that it was best not to talk much for the next twenty-four hours...but she ignored them and forced the words to come out of her mouth. She had asked him what was going on...why she was here? All he could say was that there had been an accident...and she suddenly remembered it...remembered being in the SUV...talking to Ashleigh and Drea from the back seat. Her voice was barely audible when she asked about her niece...the little girl that had spent the previous night smiling and playing with her cousins. The little girl she had watched dance with her uncle, nearly falling asleep against his stomach as they swayed back and forth. She only had to look in his eyes to know what had happened...why Cassie's picture was on the news.

Once the nurses made Nathan leave, she had raised all hell in the room until they found something that was going to tell her exactly what had happened that night. Although they all knew who she was and what had happened to her family...none of them had the nerve to tell her the details, so they found her a newspaper and let her read it...watched as the tears formed in her eyes...watched her heart rate increase. And then they gave her a sedative to put her back to sleep...to keep her calm.

She had woken up early the next morning to find Nathan once again by her side. She had prayed that it was all a bad dream, but from the aching pain in her stomach to the look on her husband's face...she knew it had all happened. He had told her about how everyone was holding up...told her about her sons...about Aidan shutting himself off from everyone else.

And now Lauren was staring at Ashleigh as the latter fought back tears...struggled to find some sense of peace in her life. She called her name one last time and slowly Ashleigh turned to face her. The blonde closed her eyes as the tears started up once again, the constricting pain slowly making itself known. She walked towards the bed and collapsed into the chair. She let Lauren take her hand, and soon her head was resting on the bed next to her sister-in-law's body. Lauren stroked her hair gently as she watched her friend's body shake. Nathan leaned against the wall and let his wife comfort the girl who had spent the majority of her day in tears.

It was an hour later when the room door opened again. Jason, Taylor and Chris walked in to find Ashleigh and Lauren asleep and Nathan sitting on the end of the bed watching TV. Nathan had called Jason telling him where they were and that Lauren was awake...gave them some good news on a bad day. They had dropped the kids off with their grandmother before venturing to the hospital. Nathan glanced towards the trio before turning down the TV. He lifted himself from the mattress causing both of the girls to wake up, Ashleigh immediately

following his gaze to the door. She watched as Jason walked toward her, her hand finding his as he kissed the top of her head.

“Hey Sis.” He lets go of his wife’s hand as he wraps his arms gently around Lauren, relieved to feel one of her arms slide around his back.

“How are you?” Lauren’s raspy voice sounded pained despite its low volume. He couldn’t fathom an adequate response, so he simply shook his head, earning a gentle squeeze of his hand from his sister. The silence that lingered in the room was far from comfortable, but none of them could find the words necessary to ease the tension. They let the dull sounds from the television fill the silence and succumbed to the fact that being together would have to suffice for the moment.

Chapter 3

Neither of them could pinpoint the first argument that happened after the accident. They do not know when they went from leaning on each other to pushing each other away. But two months later and the fights had only continued to escalate.

They wouldn't say it...but everyone saw it...Jason and Ashleigh's marriage was slowly falling apart. They weren't grieving properly. Neither was willing to talk about what had happened and in turn the stress just continued to build and they continued to hurt...not together, but alone. Jason was throwing all his energy into trying to be strong for Aundrea, trying to show her that things were okay. He was constantly moving, because if he was busy there was no time stop and lose himself in the pain.

Ashleigh couldn't find the energy to move more than what was absolutely necessary. She was still unwilling to smile for anyone but Drea ... unwilling to let herself be happy...to even think about it. They had tried to keep the truth from their friends, but both Taylor and Nathan had walked in on the heated arguments...fights over stupid little things...fights that happened just because they were both angry... each needed someone to lash out at and the other was just there.

It was when no one came around and interrupted the fights that things escalated and words were said that couldn't be taken back. Arguments about who left the light in the hall on turned into Ashleigh screaming that he should have been paying more attention to where he was going...into Jason scolding her for letting Cassie take her seat belt off. They had thrown the blame around more times than they could count. And they eventually shut themselves off from each other...neither of them able to look in the mirror because soon he stopped placing the blame

on her and started to see the truth in her words...and she stopped blaming him, thinking if she had just done something differently.

The couple with the fairytale romance was suddenly on the brink of divorce. Jason had stopped sleeping in their bedroom a week ago; instead he spent his nights alone in the guest room. He and Ashleigh never spoke anymore...at least they never carried on a conversation that was between just the two of them. They could barely look at each other now. He loved her...he truly did, but this thing was weighing heavily on both their shoulders, taking an unexpected toll on their marriage. They just couldn't seem to connect on anything anymore.

It was almost noon, and she was still in bed, her body curled up under the heavy comforter. She didn't care if they were in the middle of some horrendous heat wave...it didn't matter that she was starting to get hot and uncomfortable...she wasn't moving. Her jackass of a husband had turned off the air conditioner a little over an hour ago...he said something about wanting her to get up, but either he or Aundrea was bound to get hot eventually, and the central air would magically start working again.

Her doctors had taken her off the antidepressants yesterday...claimed she didn't need them anymore, and that she would just wind up becoming addicted to the tiny pills. She had agreed with them then...but now...now she would call them all idiots and ask where they got their medical licenses from. She hadn't taken the small white Lithium pill this morning, and as a result her emotions were all over the place. She was hurting, couldn't find the energy to make herself move. But as she continued to hide from the world under the navy blue comforter, she found herself feeling more and more angry. Angry at herself...at Jason...at Gregory Stanford...her doctors...the media...she was angry with the world for taking her daughter away.

“Ashleigh...” Jason walked into the room with a heavy sigh. He understood that she was hurting...he was still dealing with all of this too. But they had another daughter to raise...they had a life to get back to. As much as he didn't want to, he had to return to work, bills needed to be paid...the mortgage and car insurance companies weren't going let any missed payments slide...they wanted their money and the bills weren't going to pay themselves. He couldn't keep them afloat by himself. Sure they had money...they were living comfortably...but that was when they were both working. Her boss had been understanding...said that Ashleigh could take as much time off as she needed, but he couldn't pay her if she wasn't working.

Jason walked around to her side of the bed and kneeled in front of her. “Ash, you have to get up...you can't just lay here like this.” He could see the salty tracks left behind from her tears...but she had stopped crying awhile ago. “Aundrea needs you...I need you. You've gotta start moving again. I know that it hurts...that it's hard...but you can't stay like this forever, Ashleigh.”

“Screw you.” Her voice was cold and bitter. He stumbled to his feet as she swung her legs over the edge of the bed and sat up, obviously irritated. Hours of crying and lack of sleep had resulted in her eyes matching her bright red camisole.

“Ashleigh...” His voice was hesitant...he wasn't sure what to say...what would make this better.

“No...don't you dare come in here and tell me what I have to do...what I can't do.”

“What about Drea...”

“Don't throw that in my face, Jason...you can't use her to win this one. I've been moving...not for me...not for you, but for her...I've pushed myself because of her...I know she needs me. I'm just asking for one day...one morning...” She ran a hand through her hair,

untangling her thinning curls...stress had wreaked havoc on her physical state. She gave an exasperated sigh as she stood up and forced her feet to move forward. She tried to shove past him, but he grabbed her arm and pulled her body back in front of his.

“You’ve had one day...countless mornings. Get up, get dressed...and leave the house for something other than a damn therapy session.” He ran his hands roughly over his face as he gritted his teeth. “You have got to snap out this...whatever deep dark hole you buried yourself in...climb out of it. I can’t do this on my own, Ashleigh. I lost my daughter too...I’m hurting just as much...but unlike you, I realize that I can’t just mope around all day and expect things to just magically get done.”

She slapped him hard across the face, leaving a red imprint on his now burning cheek. “What should I be so eager to get up for...so I can bury myself in work like you...or so I can come home to this?” She gestured between them with her hand as she rolled her eyes. “Thanks, but no thanks”

“I didn’t do this to us. I’m busting my ass to keep us afloat and all you wanna do is sulk all damn day. But you don’t seem to think I have any right to say something to you.” He was screaming now...too tired and frustrated to care about the level or tone of his voice.

“If I wanna sulk...there’s not a damn thing you can do to stop me. You didn’t see her, Jason...you just heard about it. I was the one that saw her...the one that held her and waited for someone to come.” Her breathing was becoming shallow and her ears were starting to ring as anger consumed her entire body.

“I know that...you won’t let me forget it. You saw her, Ashleigh...you held her...but I lost her too...and in the end it all hurts just the same. You can blame me all you want...but what

was I supposed to do.” Tears sprung to his eyes as he spoke. He knew what was coming, and it hurt more and more each time he heard the words leave her mouth.

“You were supposed to see the truck.” She shoved her hands against his chest with enough force to push him back. “You were supposed to grab her...she was never supposed to go past you. You were just supposed to stop it.” Her throat was burning as she clutched her chest, unable to catch her breath. She was panting heavily...hyperventilating, and the room was starting to spin from the lack of oxygen.

“She flew past you...why didn’t you grab her? You could have reached for her just as easily. But hey...if we had just taken the long way home, or better yet, if she her seat belt on...then no one would have had to reach at all.”

She reared her hand back again, but he grabbed her wrist the second he was able to. He wrapped his arm around her back, pulling her into his chest. His anger had once again gotten the better of him. He never meant to say those things. He couldn’t keep using his pain as an excuse, he knew better than to cross that line simply because his wife had.

“Calm down!” He was yelling to get his voice above hers, but it was to no avail as she continued screaming at him.

“Fuck you” tears were streaming down her face now, but it didn’t stop the venom in her voice.

“Ashleigh...”

“Get off of me...”

“I will when you stop acting like this.” He’s got her arms gripped so tightly that she should be crying out in pain, but she’s too irate to feel anything.

“Stop acting like what...like I actually feel something.” She breaks away from him finally, but she’s unsure if she finally managed to pull away, or if simply let go. “It was two months ago Jason...just two months. Do you want me to just get up and forget everything that happened? Do you want to me to pretend everything’s okay? That’s what you do, right?” It felt like that wind had been knocked out of him...her words had cut him deeper than she realized, far deeper than she intended.

“It’s not about pretending anything. It’s about doing what has to be done because our lives don’t just get put on hold. It still hurts, Ashleigh...I’m still hurting.”

“Bullshit. You walk around here like nothing’s wrong...smiling and laughing like nothing happened. You got over this. She died...your daughter died, and come you off just fine...no one would ever know that you gave a damn...”

“ENOUGH!” They both jumped at the voice that echoed louder than either of theirs. They turned towards the bathroom door to find Nathan glaring at them. “You’re both too damn busy arguing to notice me and Lauren come in. You’re too busy screaming at each other to notice that your daughter is downstairs terrified. We’ve been down there trying to calm her down for the past ten minutes...but you wouldn’t know that.” He watched as both their faces fell...his sister-in-law suddenly shivering from the cold air coming through the vents.

Taylor picked up Aundrea later that afternoon, all of their friends deciding that the couple needed time alone to work things out. They were supposed to sit down and talk, but they had spent the day on opposite sides of the house, making sure to never cross paths.

Jason yawned as he dragged his feet down the upstairs hall. He needed to go into his room to get clothes, then it was off to guest room downstairs. He stopped before he reached the

bedroom though. Cassie's door was partially open. They always kept the door closed...all the way...always. He pushed the door further open and looked inside. There was no light on, but he could see his wife clearly from the moonlight shining in through the window. She was just sitting on the bed, her head down, her hands gripping onto something. He stepped closer to her and finally saw the stuffed animal resting in her lap, her fingers clutching tightly to the fur of Cassie's favorite teddy bear...the one she wouldn't sleep without. She never really named him...he was just Teddy. Jason had won the bear at a carnival when Ashleigh was pregnant with Aundrea. Cassie has been slightly bothered when the attention wasn't solely on her anymore, so Jason had taken her to a carnival and won Teddy for her...it had been just the two of them that night.

Ashleigh looked back at him briefly, moisture glistening in her eyes. Her head fell again as she blinked back the tears. Jason sat on the other side of the bed; he took one more glance at his wife before pulling one leg up on the mattress. He took a chance and wrapped his arm around her thin waist and was relieved when she let him pull them both down onto the bed. She curled herself deeper into him, still hanging on to the stuffed animal...it still smelled like Cassie.

She turned around and buried her face in his chest, the bear resting between them as they lay curled up on the twin size bed. "I miss her, Jase...I miss her so much." Her broken tone shattered his heart, and he pulled her body closer, their legs quickly becoming entangled.

"I know...I...I miss her too." They could both hear his voice cracking more with each word before he leaned his head down into her curls. He could feel an increasing amount of tears...her tears soaking through his thin shirt, and his drooping quickly into her hair. It was a first for them...the first time they had broken down with each other...the first time they openly admitted to each other that they missed their daughter.

“I’ll wait in the car with Drea...” Jason nodded towards his brother-in-law, the latter sending a regretful glance toward the blonde standing solemnly by the stairs, her hazel eyes showing the first real emotion in days...grief.

“Thanks, Nate...” Jason watched Nathan turn and walk out of the house, Aundrea’s small hand held in his. The front door closed before he turned around to face his wife. Nearly ten years of marriage, and in just a few months they’d come dangerously close to losing it all. “Ashleigh...” He took a step closer to her, but she took a step back.

“Just go...” Her voice was weak, barely audible. She sounded tired...she looked it too. The day had been long for all of them...including the newlywed sitting at the top of the stairs, out of view, but within earshot. After the heated argument yesterday, everyone had agreed that the separation was best. Actually going through with it had been tougher than expected though. It took a toll on everyone watching their marriage come to this. Jason and Ashleigh couldn’t get past their loss and staying together was just causing more problems.

“Ash...” He ignored her request and took another step toward her. She backed up again, trying to avoid his touch, trying to avoid the conversation, because to her it would be easier if he just left. He continued walking towards her until he had her against a wall. “I’m sorry.” His eyes were burning with unshed tears. He had a bag he had to get from upstairs still, but there were things that needed to be said before he left their home.

“Don’t do this, Jase...please...” She closed her eyes as she turned her head away from him. She just wanted him out, prolonging things was only going to make it harder...that was the whole reason he was staying with Nathan until he found a new apartment. But he wasn’t going

to leave, she already knew that, so it didn't shock her when his hand found its way into her hair, and she unconsciously let her body sink into his when he pulled her against him, his lips hitting her forehead before venturing to the top of her head.

“I love you...I have always loved you, Ashleigh, and despite everything that's going on, despite what we've been going through, that has never and will never change.”

“Jase...” Her tears seeped through his shirt as she spoke. Her voice was desperate...this was hard enough without a speech from him.

“I know it hurts, Ash...I do. I know that it's hard, but you have to start moving. And I don't mean move on from Cassie, I would never do that nor would I ask you to. I just want...Drea and I need you to do more than barely make it through the day. Sure, there'll be days when it's all too much and you can't get out of bed, but that can't be everyday anymore, Ash. We need you. I miss you. I miss my wife.” He pulled her closer to him and despite her weight loss, she still fit perfectly into his arms. Her arms pressed against his chest, and her fingers clutched his now wet shirt. They stayed that way for a few minutes before he pulled back to rest his forehead against hers. There was one more thing that had to be said, and it killed him to know that she actually needed to hear it...but he'd look her dead in the eyes and say it if it was what she needed. “I am so sorry for ever making you think that you're in this alone...for making you think that I'm not hurting too, because I am, Ash. It hurts every day, from the second I wake up to the second I go to sleep...it hurts. I still wake up every morning and keep my eyes shut, and I pray that this morning will be different, that I'll open my eyes and Cassie and Aundrea will be cuddle up in between us, and you'll be on the other side of them smiling in your sleep...but it never happens and my heart breaks a little more every time. The thing is...we're already falling apart ...we can't afford to fall apart anymore. I've been trying to hold us together, to keep us

going, but I couldn't do it...I failed... and I'm sorry, Ashleigh, I'm so sorry." He pulled her to him again just as the tears started sliding down his cheeks. He held her for a few minutes before stepping back and wiping his eyes. He'd hold her forever, but that wasn't going to fix anything, and if he didn't push himself he would never leave the house. "I'll stop by tomorrow with Drea..." He watched her nod slowly. "I love you..."

"Then don't leave..." She hadn't been so sure about anything since the accident...but there really wasn't anything to think about in her mind...she didn't want to lose the rest of her family.

"I can't...we can't do this anymore, Ash...it's not healthy. I...I'm sorry." He shook his head before turning around and making his way towards the stairs. He hated to turn his back on her, but he couldn't stand the thought of watching her cry without holding her. He ascended the stairs slowly, stopping when he found Taylor getting to her feet, a tear stained face to go with her guilty expression.

"I'm sorry...I didn't mean to eavesdrop or anything...I just..." He held a hand up to stop her rambling.

"It's fine..." He bit his lip before brushing past her and going into what used to be his bedroom. He came out seconds later with his duffle bag gripped tightly in his hands. He stopped in front of her, his knuckles turning white from holding the bag so strongly.

"Jase..." She hated seeing him this way, seeing both of them so torn apart.

"Take care of her for me, Taylor. You have to take care of my wife...because I can't..." The look in his eyes ...she couldn't find the words to describe what she knew he must have been feeling. There were no words to describe how she was feeling when she heard his broken tone. She wanted so badly to say something...to find the perfect words that would make this all better.

As he stood in front of her, torn and in tears, she wanted to tell him to stay...but instead she nodded silently and watched him leave his home. She doesn't regret keeping her silence. She's almost positive if she had told him to stay he would have done just that...and if Jason hadn't walked out that house, in the next few months, her best friends wouldn't be separated...instead they'd be waiting for the finalization of their divorce.

Chapter 4

Hesitant fingers curled into a fist before slowly rising and colliding with the dark wood of her best friend's front door...or maybe it's ex-best friend...she couldn't be sure anymore. It'd been windy all day, and for the hundredth time Taylor tucked her hair behind her ears, though she was pretty sure that even if it had been a calm day and her hair was out of her face, she'd try tucking it behind her ears anyway...a nervous habit she'd had for as long as she could remember. She knocked again a few minutes later, but still, there was no response. She'd question if anybody was home...but Ashleigh never left the house anymore...not unless it was absolutely necessary...that and the black Lexus was still sitting in the driveway, exactly where it'd been for the past three days. Although she'd never been a quitter, after ten minutes of standing outside in the cold, she was ready to turn around and walk away...that is until she heard the lock click.

She watched as the door cracked open, and the knot in her stomach only tightened as the pale face of her best friend peeked through. Ashleigh's cheeks were splotchy, her curls hanging limply around her face, shadowing a pair of eyes that just didn't seem as lively as they once were....eyes that revealed a diminishing hope that made the Taylor internally shudder.

"Hey...I was hoping we could talk." She wrung her hands as she shifted her gaze between the hazel eyes in front of her and the stone walkway below her. Ashleigh sighed before turning around and walking away, but she left the door open and Taylor took it as her cue to follow her inside. She shut the door quietly behind her, her eyes looking around the house she hadn't been inside of for three weeks. Her feet carried her further into the house and instead of the comforting feeling she was used to getting, it was something cold that surrounded her as she stopped and stared into the living room where Ashleigh had curled up in the corner of the beige

three cushion couch. Everything looked the same...but she knew it was all different now. It was odd enough to actually knock on the front door, but to stop and realize she hadn't just walked into the kitchen of what she'd always considered her second home in 21 days...the feeling was a bit unnerving. She was used to seeing her every day, used to seeing her best friend smile, used to midday phone calls, and weekly lunches...but all that changed seven months ago.

Nothing had been the same since the accident; weekly lunches disappeared, and the easy flow of their lives vanished. "You can sit down, Taylor...I promise not to scream at you for no reason this time." Ashleigh offered a small smile and watched as the uncomfortable brunette tentatively made her way to the love seat on the other side of the coffee table.

There was a part of Ashleigh that still hated Jason for taking away Aundrea, but there was also a part of her that couldn't stop thinking about how good it felt to be in his arms. She'd been barely staying afloat after the accident, but she'd been drowning for the past three months, ever since her husband had walked out on her, taking her daughter with him. He had said it was for the best, but even after she started slowly going through the motions of her life again, all she could feel was her broken heart and the residual anger that was still coursing through her veins.

They sat across from each other, eyes glued to the floor, and lips tightly sealed. The tension was nearly choking them, but neither had the words to bring about the much needed release. So they opted for silence, ignoring the fear that this was only making things worse. Ashleigh had gone back to work, once again started paying half of the bills, and she had finally learned to sleep without medication. She'd been doing well...until three weeks ago when everyone around her decided that she still wasn't capable of taking care of her daughter. It had been Taylor who was elected to break the news, and three weeks ago the two lifelong friends had sat in the same positions they were currently in as Taylor informed Ashleigh that Aundrea would

continue living with Jason. Taylor had expected Ashleigh to be upset, she had even prepared herself for anger, but she hadn't been even remotely prepared for the verbal lashing she'd received. Ashleigh had labeled her a backstabber, claimed that if she were a true friend she wouldn't have sided with Jason. Taylor had spent two weeks trying to reach her best friend by phone, but Ashleigh had refused to answer.

She didn't need to be around to know that Ashleigh was shutting down again...going through the motions just for show before the effort it took to move became too much for her to handle. Ashleigh hadn't been to work in three days...she hadn't even left the house. Back in high school, Taylor would have kept her distance, but she was older now and knew the importance of her friendships...especially her most cherished friendship with the person sitting across from her. She had come to the house determined to make Ashleigh see that she really was on her side...to not let her friend fall back into the hole she had worked so hard to climb out of. The current silence had not been part of her plan. They were both old enough to know that ignoring a problem would not make it disappear, but there was an undeniable comfort in pretending that even wounds this deep would heal by themselves in time.

She wanted to tell Taylor that all she needed was more time. Time for her heart to not drop every time she saw a reminder of Cassie...every time she had to go home without either of her daughters...every time she saw her husband and his eyes didn't light up the way they once did...the way she wished they would. She just needed time because she knew that eventually she'd be okay again. But she needed support. She wouldn't survive...not if she had to fight the uphill battle alone.

Her tongue was glued to the roof of her mouth, which had suddenly become unnaturally dry. "I'm sorry." She didn't look up, but she could feel Taylor's eyes burning into her from

across the table. Taylor nodded slowly, attempting to decipher her friend's words, tone, and expression, but she couldn't be sure that she was reading anything accurately.

“So am I. This wasn't supposed to happen...”

“No it wasn't.” All the energy she put into repressing her anger went to waste when her clipped words and bitter tone entered the atmosphere. It didn't matter though, because despite the brief exchange of apologies that had just taken place, there had been no shift in the air around them. Nothing had changed. No weight had been lifted.

“Ash...”

“I'm sorry. It just hurts, Taylor.” She closed her eyes, her heart pounding in her chest. “It hurt when my best friend told me that she didn't think I was stable enough to take care of my own daughter. And it hurt even more to realize that you were right.” The tears Ashleigh had been trying to hold back slowly leaked from her eyes as Taylor silently moved to sit beside her and wrapped her arms around her friend's shoulders.

“You'll get there, I promise. I'm going to be here to make sure that you get your feet back under you again. Ashleigh, you'll get Aundrea back...you'll get Jason back. Until then, you have me. I'll be here to try and stop you from falling apart, and to pick you up and put you back together when you do. Whatever you need, I'm here.”

“I need you to breathe for me.” Taylor's grip tightened as tears began to leak from her own eyes, her best friend's body quickly becoming wracked with heavy sobs. If that was what she needed, Taylor would find a way to carry the burden until Ashleigh could do it on her own. Because if any of them had learned anything from the entire horrific ordeal, it was that sometimes you had to give and give and give until nothing's left...until it hurts.

And then you give some more.

Chapter 5

When something horrifying happens to someone else, your first instinct is to apologize...to feel pity for that person. And no matter how much you try to deny it, try to convince yourself and everyone around you that it's not true, in the end, that's exactly what you're doing...pitying the person because he or she is hurting...because that's what you think you're supposed to do. It's amazing what happens when the tables turn. To feel the anger that courses through you're veins, consumes your entire being...all because people won't stop apologizing. The words fall on deaf ears and every condolence seems empty, like it's coming from these robotic people that have been taught to spew out the words 'I'm sorry' whenever they see an onset of tears. And although you would give the same look if the roles were reversed...the fact is, that the roles are what they are...the tragedy has happened to you and because of that...every sideways glance...every stare that lasts too long...every godforsaken pitying look...they all do nothing but add fuel to the fire. The looks are no better than the words...no better than the empty promises that things are going to get better.

Someone once told me that nothing was more painful than burying a child. It took less than a second for me to think about losing Cassie or Drea and know without a doubt they were right. The day I watched four nameless men lower my daughter into the ground, I knew that I would never hurt worse than I did in that moment.

I was wrong.

Walking into the house afterwards and realizing that she was never going to come skipping in behind me made it hurt a little more. Waking up the next morning and having to face the fact that it wasn't all a dream was like pouring...dumping salt into my already open wounds.

But finally starting to heal...only to be trampled on by her birthday, has hurt most of all. Finally realizing that she would never celebrate another birthday, never graduate high school...college, never fall in love or survive her first heart break, never get married...that was like drowning. Like burning from the inside out from the lack of the air that's right above you.

They all kept telling me that it would get easier. I never said it out loud, but all I could think was 'when?' When would it stop hurting? How did they know? I could see myself for what I was...this blinding image of desperation, of depression and heartache. I couldn't see easier in my future. I couldn't see the gaping hole in my heart ever healing.

I remember everything so clearly from that day. It's been over ten months and I can still recall every detail...every scent, every feeling, every smile and laugh, every frown and every tear, be it from anxiety or happiness...I can still remember everything from that day. The ability our minds have to store things with such accuracy is astonishing. I wouldn't have said it a few months ago, then I would have cursed that capability, done everything in my power to make that part of my mind stop working, but now...I wouldn't trade that ability for anything. Now I look at it as a gift. As much I would like to forget her death, I never want to forget her smile, her laughter, her innocence.

"Why do you build me up...buttercup, baby just to let me down...and mess me around..."

Music blared out of the speakers as the mother and daughter sauntered around the room. Ashleigh had a hand rested on her bulging stomach as she watched Cassie spin around. She had a bottle of body spray held up to her mouth while her daughter chose a hair brush for a microphone. "And worst of all...you never call baby when you say you will...but I love you still." They each pointed a finger at the other as they continued. "I need you...more than anyone

darling...you know that I have from the start...so build me up...buttercup...don't break my heart."

"You know it's kind of hard to get any work done with all the noise." Ashleigh turned towards the doorway to find Jason with a smirk on his face. She simply stuck her tongue out at him before smiling and spinning around to imitate Cassie.

They both gave an exaggerated sigh before erupting into laughter, still dancing around the room as they listened to the intro for the next song. "Hands up! Baby, hand up!" They both threw their arms into the air with the words. They pointed to each other quickly before each rested their hands on their chest. "Give me your heart, gimme gimme, your heart, gimme gimme." They shimmied their shoulders while wiggling their fingers before repeating the motions and throwing their arms in the air again. Jason didn't bother to get their attention when he snapped the picture of his two favorite girls...soon to be three.

That picture is still sitting on the mantle above the fireplace. I was seven months pregnant with Aundrea at that point. "Mommy, look." I crane my neck to see Drea hanging upside down from the monkey bars, Jason standing next to her, his hands close to her body, but not actually holding her up, giving her a sense of independence.

"Wow." I smile towards her. My eyes eventually shift toward Jason as he helps her get down. He's been living in the house with us for almost a month now...and things seem to be okay.

After he moved out, he bought an apartment not too far down the road so that things wouldn't be too hard for Aundrea. I hated him when he first took her away, but I can't deny that he was right all along...I hadn't been stable enough to take care of her. It took five months, but

eventually I got Aundrea back...though Jason stayed at his apartment. He made it a point to stop by the house every day and see her. Neither of us ever dated other people...it was never about that...we just took some time away from each other...took some time for ourselves. We stayed separated for seven months and twenty-three days. I remember the night he came over to see Aundrea and asked me to dinner before he left. I agreed, and a few days after dinner he moved back in.

Things still aren't the same between us, but we're doing much better than earlier in the year. I honestly don't know if things will ever be the same for my family...if all the damage that was done can ever be repaired. I'm beginning to think of us as this broken vase, one that's been shattered and then glued back together. From a distance everything looks perfect...you would never be able to tell that it was once shattered into what must have been a million pieces. But if you get close enough...you can still see all the minuscule cracks...the chips in the ceramic...and you realize that no matter how close it gets, it will never be the way it once was.

There are still days when everything just hurts...mornings when I don't want to get out of bed. Those are the mornings Jason and I have to work through...together. We talk the way we should have nine months ago, and that's put a stop to the fighting. But there are still those times when he has to leave me alone...let me cry. Those are the moments when I could swear I hear Cassie's voice...hear her laughing. There are times I come home in tears because some little girl that resembles my Cassie smiles at me...those are days when things are really tough.

It was especially hard two weeks ago...Cassie's birthday. Everything just ached that day...all the memories fresh in my mind. Taylor had taken Drea the night before, knowing what the next morning would be like. I cried from the moment I woke up, and Jason just held me. We didn't say anything to each other...he just stayed with me until I cried myself back to sleep. I

had to force myself into the shower when I woke up at noon. I got dressed...finally feeling a little better. I made the bed...fluffed the pillows, folded down the top of the comforter and then smoothed it back out, but as soon as I was done I found myself crawling back onto the center of the bed.

It was around one when Taylor crawled into the bed next to me, her arm wrapping around my waist. She let her lips trail from my cheek to my forehead as I laced my hand in hers...tears once again falling from my eyes, and I could feel them falling from hers as well. It was a few minutes later when Lauren came into the room, slowly laying herself down in front of me. She took my hand in hers as Taylor rested her head on my shoulder and moved her arm so that it was wrapped around Lauren as well. We stayed huddled together for almost an hour...I'm beyond thankful for them...for the comfort they gave me in that hour while I was tucked away, protected between them.

They eventually made me get up though. My head was resting on Taylor's shoulder as we made our way downstairs and out onto the deck. Jason stretched his hand out to me and I gladly took it, letting him pull me down onto his lap. The kids played in the backyard while the rest of us spent the afternoon talking. That was the first time I was able to talk about Cassie and not breakdown...the first time I could remember the good times with my daughter and actually smile. Surprisingly enough, I have an eight year old to thank for that.

“Hey Ade” The blonde dusted off her jeans and sat down next to the young boy. He didn't respond to her, just continued looking out the window of the tree house in his backyard...the tree house he and Cassie had helped his dad build. Tears were building in his eyes but he refused to let them fall. “It's okay for you to be upset buddy...to cry about it.”

“I don’t wanna cry.” He retorted stubbornly, his head hanging low and his shoulders hunched as he sat with his legs crossed.

“Okay...” Ashleigh threw her hands up quickly. “I was just saying.”

“Boys aren’t supposed to cry...Daddy and Uncle Jase never do.” He looked up at his aunt...his eyes glistening with unshed tears.

“That’s not true...they both cry...you might not see it...but I promise you they do.” He frowned as he turned to look at the wooden floor underneath him again.

“Whatever...” he muttered under his breath.

“What’s going on with you, Ade? Hmm?” She leaned down and met his gaze. “I know you’re upset...we all are...but you gotta talk to someone, sweetie. You have to start eating properly...sleeping.”

“You never eat.” She sighed at his bitter response.

“You’re right...I wasn’t eating. But that doesn’t make it right...and I am eating now. I know it’s hard, but you’re gonna get sick if you keep this up...trust me, I know.” She wrapped an arm around his shoulder and pulled him into her as the tears finally broke through.

“I’m trying, Aunt Ashleigh, but I can’t. I keep thinking about her...I really miss her.” His body shook as he threw his arms around her torso, burying his head in her chest.

“I know...I miss her too.” She felt the moisture on her cheeks as she rocked back and forth with her nephew.

“It’s never gonna be the same...” She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. She didn’t know how to respond to that. She couldn’t lie to him...he was right...things wouldn’t be the same...she lost her daughter and he lost his best friend.

“You just have to remember all the good times you had with her...you have to keep her with you.” Her voice was cracking more with each word, getting lighter as she spoke. She felt him nod against her as he choked out another sob.

“I remember when we first tried to paint up here.” He pulled away from her and pulled his knees up to his chest, a nostalgic smile playing on his lips. “We were each supposed to carry a bucket up and I went up first. I spilled some of the paint on the ladder, and when she put her foot on the first step she slipped and fell backwards, and the paint landed all over her. And then when I climbed back down she smeared it all over my face. The lawn was stained blue for a week and dad refused to by us anymore paint.” He laughed lightly.

“So that’s why Uncle Jason wouldn’t tell anyone what he was buying paint for.” She cocked an eyebrow up at the guilty expression on her nephew’s face. She shoved his shoulder lightly and laughed, but she stopped seconds later and her smile slowly fell.

“You can smile, Aunt Ashleigh...Cassie never liked seeing you upset. She would want you to be happy.” Her brows furrowed as she turned to look at the eight year old boy sitting next to her. She closed her eyes as he pulled him into her again, kissing his temple.

“You know what, Ade...you’re right.” She wiped the tears from under her eyes.

“I know...you’re slow, Aunt Ashleigh.” She scuffed as she watched him stand up and roll his eyes playfully. This was her nephew...the boy that definitely took after his father. He was back, and she was glad.

“What do you say to some pizza?” She looked at him with raised brows.

“Can we get mozzarella sticks...the one’s from Primo’s...they were Cassie’s favorite.” He watched his aunt smile down at him and nod.

“Yeah they were...” She gave him one last smile before starting down the rope ladder. She watched him climb down, and they were greeted by Nathan when they turned around. He had called her...hoping that maybe she would be able to reach his son. He had been getting worried...he thought Aidan would’ve started coping better by now. It had been almost four months and things hadn’t improved.

“Hey Dad...Aunt Ashleigh and I are going to Primo’s for lunch.” Nathan’s lips parted slightly and then broke into a smile. He could make out the residue from the tears. His son was wearing a small smile, but it was genuine and happier than any of the one’s he had seen since the accident. And now...he was going to get food...whether he was going to eat it or not, Nathan didn’t know, but at least Aidan was willingly going out to eat with a smile on his face. He watched his son walk towards the house before turning to Ashleigh.

“Thank you...” He pulled her into a hug. “Lauren is going to be the happiest person in the world when she gets home later and sees him like this” His wife had spent last night in tears over her son...he was only eight years old, and he was battling depression. Seeing her son that distraught hadn’t made for the greatest welcome home two months ago.

“It’s not a problem...it’s good to see him acting like...you again” she laughed lightly and let the smile linger. He pulled out of the hug but left his arm draped over her shoulder as they walked towards the house.

“I haven’t seen that in a while.”

“Seen what?” She questioned as she furrowed her brows.

“A real smile...at least not one from you that lasted more than two seconds.” He looked down at her as they entered the house.

“Thank your son for that one...he’s a smart boy...good with words. That he got from Lauren.” She laughed when Nathan ruffled her hair.

“Ha ha...you are quite the comedian Sis.” His arm fell to the side as she squirmed and pulled away from him.

“I know.” She winked at her brother-in-law and tried her hardest to suppress the quiet voice telling her that laughing was wrong.

“I’m ready to go.” She turned to look at Aidan who had changed and was now waiting by the front door.

“Is this a bonding moment, or can I join you two.” Nathan raised his brows as he watched his son shrug.

“Sure...I mean, I guess you’re cool enough...what do you think, Aunt Ashleigh?” His aunt laughed before walking towards the door.

“Whatever...I guess we can be seen in public with him.”

“This coming from a girl who married a guy that likes to sit and read worn out, tattered old books...repeatedly.”

“And he’s cooler than you...now that’s pretty sad, Nate.” She didn’t give him a chance to respond before she walked out the house with Aidan behind her. Nathan just rolled his eyes and followed them to the car.

I remember the phone call I got from Lauren later that night...the one where she spent twenty minutes thanking me. She never needed to thank me...I should have been thanking her for having such a wonderful son, a son who gave me a reason to keep smiling. We all seem to be

slowly moving on with our lives...slowly allowing things to get back to normal...or something close to it.

She was humming along to an old tune by The Fray...she just couldn't get into most of the stuff being played these days, so she stuck to all the bands she had fallen in love with during high school and college. She jumped slightly when screams echoed from the front of the house. She walked quickly out of the kitchen and down the hall to see Jason holding Aundrea, the little girl's face bright red and full of tears.

"What happened?" She questioned as she scooped Aundrea into her arms, her maternal instinct kicking in as she rocked back and forth with a hand rested firmly against the back of her daughter's head. Jason had picked Aundrea up yesterday and kept her for the night. He had taken her for a physical this morning and she had been crying since they left the doctor's office.

"They gave her a tetanus shot." Ashleigh closed her eyes and nodded in understanding.

"I guess it was about time for another one of those." She sighed before placing her lips gently against the side of Aundrea's head. "My poor baby" she whispered in her daughter's ear.

"I know it's hurting her, but the band-aid fell off in the car, and when she saw the blood on it she started crying even harder. I think it scared her more than anything." He reasoned as he rested a hand on the his daughter's back.

"Probably..." She opened her mouth to speak, but stopped when there was knock on the door, followed by Taylor tentatively poking her head inside. "Hey Taylor..."

"Hey...she okay?" She nodded in the direction of the sobbing child in her best friend's arms.

“Tetanus booster.” She watched Taylor wrinkle her brows in understanding.

“Ouch...” The brunette bit her bottom lip, her hand still resting on the handle of the door. “I kinda need to talk to you...but it can wait...” She pointed quickly to Aundrea before retracting her hand. “I can just... come back later...or something.” She was talking with her hands, something she usually only did when she was nervous.

“No... I got her...you two talk.” Jason shot Taylor a quick glance before taking Aundrea into his arms and letting her head fall gently against his shoulder. They both watched as he walked up the stairs before turning back towards each other.

“What does he know that I don’t?” Taylor’s eyes got wide as she started fidgeting with her hands.

“What do you mean?”

“He’s doing that thing he does...that looks he gives people when he knows something. It’s like this really quick warning glance he flashes when people have something to say...and he definitely just gave you that look.”

“Can we sit?” Taylor gestured into the living room, her eyes pleading with her friend, her mind trying to find a way to avoid the conversation.

“I’d rather stand.” Ashleigh’s eyes narrowed slightly as she glanced from the couch to her best friend.

“Ashleigh, please?” There were tears glistening in her chocolate brown eyes. “I would really like it if we could just...”

“Taylor...” Her voice was stern as she cut off her friend who was getting ready to ramble. Taylor’s shoulders fell as she sighed heavily and looked down at the wood floor under her feet.

“I’m pregnant.” Her gaze shifted up to Ashleigh, the blonde’s face slowly draining of all color. “I found out earlier this week. I wanted to tell you...I just didn’t know how...I didn’t know what to expect or how you would feel about it...” Tears seeped out of her brown eyes as she forced herself to take a step closer.

“I don’t know...” She whispered, her eyes still focused on the girl in front of her.

“What?”

“I don’t know what I’m feeling right now. I don’t know how I’m supposed to feel. I mean, am I supposed to be okay...or is it supposed to hurt, because right now it feels like both. There’s this dull pain that never goes away, and it just got a little stronger. But I’m happy for you at the same time. I’m excited that my best friend finally gets experience everything that comes with being pregnant. You are happy about this, right? I mean you and Chris do want this?”

“Yeah we do.” A small smile crept onto Taylor’s face. “I’m really happy about this, about starting a family. I mean, Chris and I have all of you guys as family, and were really grateful for that...but this is just different, you know?” She watched Ashleigh nod in understanding. “I was just scared about what this was going to do to you...to us. I would completely understand if you weren’t okay with this...but I don’t wanna lose you...you’re my best friend Ash.”

“You’re not gunna lose me Taylor...I promise.” She pulled her friend into a tight hug, one they both needed.

“So we’re okay, right?” her voice was timid, she was still unsure.

“Yeah...we’re okay.”

Taylor's a little over two months pregnant now. After she told me, it was hard for the first week or two. I was distant and she could tell, but she left it alone, didn't push me about hanging out with her. I was truly happy for her...it just hurt to be around her...she was carrying a child and I had just lost one. But one evening I dropped Aundrea off at Jase's and then went over to Taylor's. I'll never forget the smile on her face when I asked her if she wanted to have a girls' night out. We went shopping, to the movies, out to eat, and then I shocked her and brought her back to my house, told her I was kidnapping her for the night. She had smirked at me and told me it wasn't necessary...that she would come willingly.

"You know, I just spent ten minutes knocking on the front door like an idiot." I looked to the side to see Lauren coming from around the front of the house. Right behind her was Brandon; he gave me a quick wave before taking off full speed towards Jason and Aundrea.

"I'm sorry." I shrugged as I leaned back in the chair, tucking a stray curl behind my ear.

"It was bad enough to find the door locked in the first place...but then to top it off...I come find you all lounging in the backyard..." She scuffed in mock frustration and we shared a laugh a few seconds later. She sat herself down in the chair across from, moving slowly, her stomach still not fully healed.

"Well now you can lounge with us." I watched her shrug her shoulders, her hands flying up in the air before dropping back into her lap.

"Nice hair." She gestured to the two uneven ponytails on either side of my head.

"It's not my fault you have three boys and don't get to experience the joys of having a toddler do your hair. Normally my make-up would be done too...but she opted to play outside instead."

“Now that...that I must have a picture of.” She laughed and I rolled my eyes before joining her. It feels good to be at this point...to be able to get through the day without hurting. People have fed me variations of the belief that things happen for a reason....personally I think that’s a load of crap. I don’t see a reason for why she was stolen from us...no good came from this. But I’m now able to ignore those kind of comments...I don’t let them fuel my anger anymore. I prefer to believe that my daughter is in a better place...that she was so special, God wanted to keep her next to him...keep her safe...and I’ve finally learned not to hate him for that.

Of course I still miss her, not a day goes by that I don’t think about her...but I choose to think about all the joy she brought into our lives...my life. All the times she made me smile. The little things she did that brought tears to my eyes...happy tears.

After 314 days, the hole in my heart has managed to become jagged tear...I don’t see it healing any further. I know it won’t. But I force a smile anyway, and keep in mind that every time I was sure of something, I was wrong. If their words are a promise that eventually it won’t be a fight to make through every day, then I won’t question them. If it means that one day I’ll be able to truly breathe again, then I’ll smile and nod...I’ll believe.