

After the Sirens

The world outside the hospital felt painfully indifferent. The sun cast its golden light over the town, a stark contrast to the darkness suffocating him. His mother drove him home in tense silence, her worry filling every inch of the car.

She parked in front of his apartment. "Let me come in and help you settle."

"No need." His voice was flat, almost mechanical. "I'll be fine. I just... I need to be alone."

She reached out, her hand hovering near his cheek. "Andy, you have to..."

He turned away, his shoulders stiff. "Please."

She hesitated, her lips pressed into a thin line. "I left some food in your fridge. Call me if you need anything, all right?"

He was already pushing the door open before she could get the last words out.

Andy made his way to his apartment and sank onto the couch, wincing as the motion sent a dull ache through his fractured ribs.

His phone buzzed on the coffee table. He already knew what it would be: another message he couldn't bring himself to answer.

Mason: *Hey bro, haven't heard from you. Mom said you're a mess. Please call.*

Another buzz.

Jessica: *Hi Andy, I heard about the accident. I'm so sorry.*

Danie Beaulieu

I'm here if you want to talk or need any help.

The notifications piled up.

Chief Donnelly: *Sorry about your accident, Andy. Take all the time you need. We're here when you're ready.*

Jerry: *Andy, call me. Let me know you're okay, man. I mean it.*

The flood of concern should have felt comforting, but it didn't. It only amplified the suffocating guilt. How could he even look at these people? How could he explain what was tearing through him, or the fact that he felt like a stranger in his own skin?

He grabbed the phone and silenced it, tossing it onto the couch beside him.

The police had cleared him. No alcohol, no reckless speed, just a split-second distraction in a terrible storm, and a truck in the wrong place at the wrong time. But a woman was dead. Maybe her son too. And he was alive. That was the only truth that mattered.

The next few weeks blurred together, each day bleeding into the next, with pain as his only constant companion. Unshaven for days, he barely recognized himself in the mirror. His clothes, too, remained unchanged, much like his mood.

Trying to drown the memory in alcohol felt like the only way to rid himself of the sight of the dead woman—and her boy, now scarred and wounded, maybe beyond repair. Was he even still alive?