

Chapter 3

Andy woke to the sound of screams, high-pitched, frantic cries cutting through the early morning air. His head pounded like a jackhammer, his mouth dry and bitter from the whiskey he'd drowned himself in the night before.

He groaned, shielding his eyes from the harsh sunlight, and realized he was on a beach, sprawled on the sand like debris washed ashore. His shirt was damp from the ocean mist, and the taste of salt clung to his cracked lips.

The screams grew louder. Panic clawed at him, his mind flashing back to the accident, but then he saw them, a mother and her two children.

The woman was crouched beside her young daughter, who was sobbing uncontrollably, her little face red and blotchy. Her older brother stood a few feet away, arms crossed, guilt etched into his features.

"Sebastian, you need to apologize," the mother said firmly.

"But Mom! I didn't mean to lose it," the boy protested, referring to the pink unicorn, now a small dot floating farther away with the tide.

"Intentions don't always matter," she replied. "You still need to apologize and find a way to make it right."

Sebastian scuffed his foot in the sand. “How can I fix it? You won’t let me get it!”

“It’s too far, and it’s dangerous,” the mother said. “But there are other ways to make up for it.”

The boy frowned, clearly frustrated. “Like what? Give her my basketball? She doesn’t even like basketball.”

“Then think of something else,” the mother said calmly. His sister was still sobbing.

Andy sat up slowly, watching the interaction despite the ache in his skull. His body protested every movement, his head pounding, but he couldn’t look away.

Sebastian’s expression suddenly lit up, as if a lightbulb flickered on. He walked over to his sister, determination in his steps.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice quieter now but steady. “I didn’t mean to lose your unicorn. Here, I want you to have this.”

Andy’s brows furrowed as he watched the boy pull a colorful friendship bracelet off his own wrist. The girl gasped softly, her sobs halting as she stared at it, wide-eyed.

“Take it,” Sebastian insisted. “It’s yours now.”

Her lip quivered. She seemed unsure, as though weighing whether the loss of her toy equaled the value of his gift. Before she could decide, Sebastian gently grabbed her wrist and slid the bracelet on, tugging the tails lightly until it fit.

A smile finally broke through her tear. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“Am I forgiven?”

In a gesture that caught even the mother off guard, she threw her arms around her brother in a fierce hug.

The girl settled back beside her mother, her sadness forgotten as she began building a sandcastle.

Andy’s eyes burned, and he swiped at them with the back of his hand, as if trying to shield himself from the rawness of the moment.

On the walk home, the scene replayed in his mind. The boy’s sacrifice, the girl’s forgiveness, and the mother’s gentle insistence on making things right echoed in his thoughts.

You’ll have to make it up in some other way.

Those words stuck with him, reverberating louder than the guilt and self-loathing that had consumed him for weeks. For the first time since the accident, a seed of hope took root.

He couldn’t undo what had happened. But maybe he could make amends in some other way. Maybe he could help. He could protect the boy. Contribute, however small, to his life... if he was still alive.

Andy started walking faster, his mouth set. He felt his guilt lift just slightly, like a crack of light breaking through the dark clouds.

He knew what he had to do. Walking away from what had happened wasn’t an option anymore. He couldn’t hide from the wreckage of his own making. He had to confront it head-on.

He would move to Georgia. He would find the boy. And he would dedicate his life to making sure that kid had a chance at something better. He would pay whatever price it took to make things right.