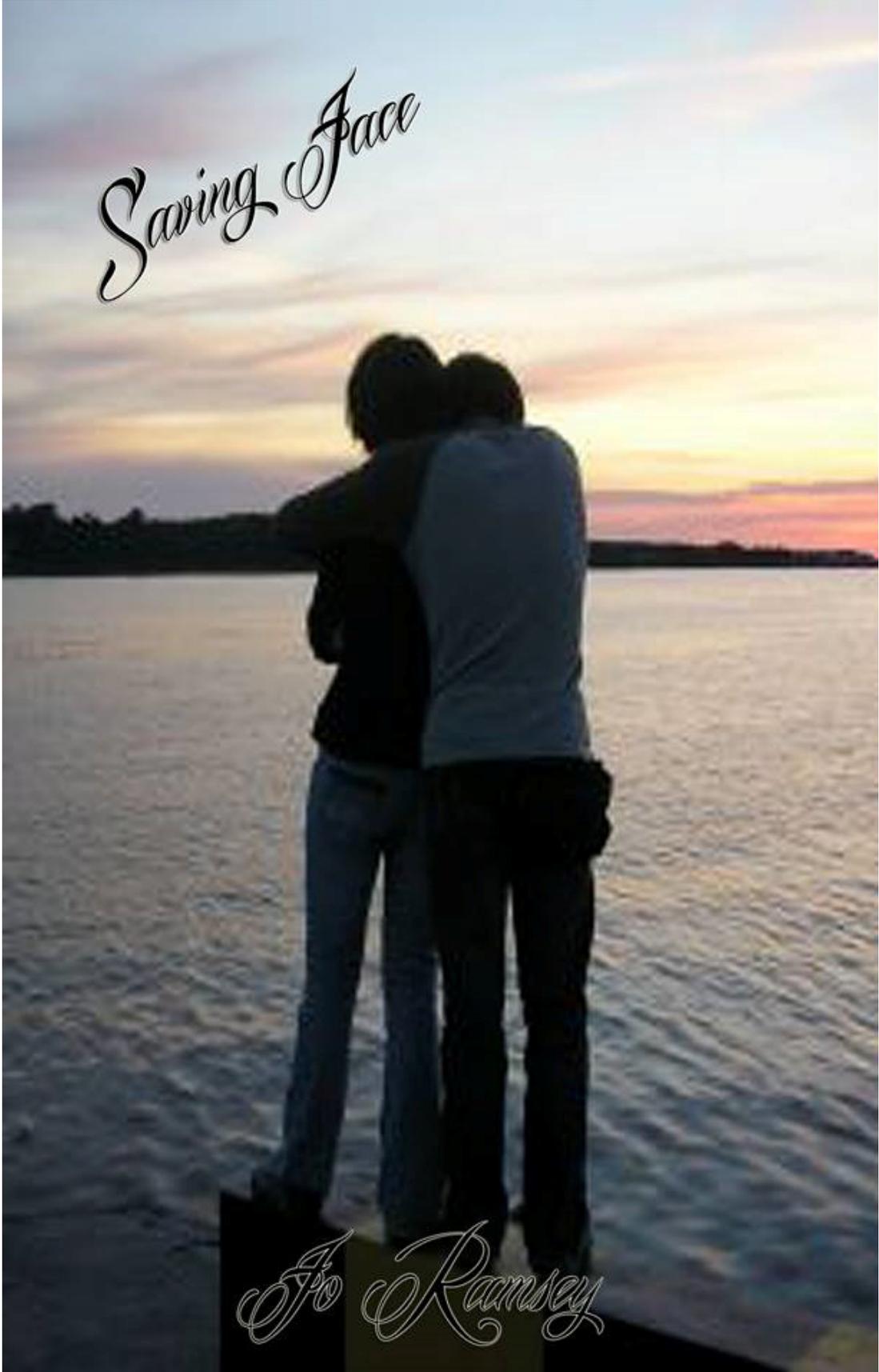


*Saving Face*



*Jo Ramsey*

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## SAVING JACE

Jace told me he wouldn't be in school today, but it's still weird not seeing him here. Every morning, his dark brown eyes and bright white smile are the first things I look for when I walk into the building. He makes this craphole of a high school a whole lot better.

But he isn't here. He didn't tell me why he was going to be absent. He just grabbed me yesterday on the way to the bus and said, "I won't see you tomorrow, Logan. Hope you have a good day." He walked away before I could ask what was going on.

I'm worried about him. It's lunch block, and I've texted him about half a dozen times this morning to make sure he's okay. He hasn't answered, and that isn't like him. Usually he answers texts from me even when he's sitting in church or at dinner with his family. No one knows about him and me, but that doesn't mean he ignores me.

Jillian drops into the seat beside me and plonks her lunch tray on the table. "Where's your Siamese twin?"

"I don't know." I pull my phone out of my pocket to see if Jace has answered in the past five seconds or so since last time I checked. Because I wouldn't have felt my phone vibrate against my hip or anything. "He said something yesterday about being absent. Maybe an appointment or something."

I don't think that's true, though. Jace tells me about every appointment he has no matter how minor. He hates everything to do with doctors and medical stuff, though he's never told me why. Even going to a dentist freaks him out, so he always tells me when he had to go somewhere. He says he can't tell his parents the appointments bother him, but he can tell me everything.

"If he's in an appointment, he wouldn't be able to answer texts," Jillian points out.

"But all morning? I've been texting him since before homeroom." If Jace's appointment is taking all day, something must be really wrong.

Jillian pokes the so-called meat on her tray with her spork. "He was weird yesterday."

My chest gets tight. Jillian calls lots of things weird, so there might be nothing at all to what she's saying. Except now that I think about it, Jace was quieter than usual yesterday. He didn't smile as much. In school, we don't let on that we're a couple, so we don't talk a lot or act affectionate. But yesterday, he barely even looked at me, and that isn't normal.

"Weird how?" I croak.

"Like not talking." She hesitates. "He gave me that CD. You know how he always carries it around even though he says he doesn't have a CD player? He said I can have it because he doesn't need it anymore."

I can't answer. The CD is from an old "hair band," and I don't know why Jace keeps it in his backpack. I asked about it once, and all he would say was it reminded him of someone he missed.

He would never give that away. The day I asked about it, he wouldn't even let me touch

it when I wanted to see the song titles.

“Something’s wrong.” I blurt it out before I can think. “Cover for me.”

“Where are you going?” Jillian’s eyes widen as I stand up. “Logan, you can’t skip. Jace just had an appointment, right?”

“Not if he gave away that CD.” I grab my tray. Even when I’m freaking out, twelve years of “clean up after yourself” kick in automatically.

“Logan?”

I hurry away without answering her and dump my tray by the door. The whole thing goes into the trash. I don’t have time to scrape the food and then put the tray on the pass-through like we’re supposed to.

I manage to get to the front door without anyone stopping me. Teachers are either in class or monitoring the cafeteria, and the administration doesn’t pay much attention. And the secretaries aren’t at their desks in the office, right beside the door, so they must be at lunch. I have to leave by the main door even with the risk of being stopped. From the beginning of homeroom until the end of last period, all the other doors in the building have alarms set so no one can sneak in or out.

I bang out through the one un-alarmed door by the office. Still no one stops me. My heart’s pounding about eighty miles a second, and I have no idea where I’m going. I’ve never just walked out of school before.

But my gut’s screaming at me that something’s wrong with Jace. He hasn’t answered his texts all day. Even if he had a wicked long appointment, he should have answered the texts I sent right before school. Doctors’ offices don’t open at seven in the morning.

And he gave Jillian his CD. The one he wouldn’t let me hold. The one he said he kept with him all the time because he wanted to remember. He didn’t tell me who he was trying to remember, though.

I have no idea where I’m even going. My car’s in the student lot, the old junker that belonged to my grandmother until my parents, aunts, and uncles decided she shouldn’t drive anymore. I start it up and head to Jace’s house, even though I don’t think he’s there.

His mom’s car is in the driveway. Jace’s car that his parents bought him when he got his license last spring is gone.

Jace’s mom makes me nervous. Something about her feels like she could explode any second, even though she’s always smiling and offering snacks and drinks. There’s darkness in her eyes, and she never really looks at Jace even when she’s smiling at him. Even if he and I weren’t trying to keep anyone from finding out about us, I wouldn’t spend much time at his house. His mom almost never goes anywhere, and she makes me nervous.

This time, I have to deal with her. I park at the curb and go to the front door. She opens right away when I ring the bell, like she’d been standing there watching me park. She wrinkles her forehead and blinks a couple times. “Logan? It isn’t early release, is it? Jace isn’t home yet.”

“It isn’t early release, but Jace didn’t come to school.” She had to know that already. If a

parent didn't call the school to say their kid would be absent, the school called them.

"He went to school this morning." She frowns and rubs her eyes.

That's when I realize she's crying.

"He didn't come to school," I say again. "Are you all right? Did something happen?"

"It's a bad day." She pauses and touches the corners of her eyes with her fingertips. "He didn't go to school? Where is he?"

She's messed up. I don't know what she's crying about, but she sounds like she doesn't even understand what I'm saying to her, and that really worries me.

"I don't know where he is." I take a deep breath. I have to get through to her, and I hate doing it because she's already upset. "Mrs. O'Neill, I've been texting him all morning. He isn't answering. He isn't here, right? So do you know where he went?"

"I don't know." She gulps. "He said he was going for a drive before school. He left early. I thought he went to school. The school called but I thought they were wrong. Sometimes they're wrong."

"Yeah." I don't have much to say about the school's attendance system. I'm losing my patience. Whatever's going on with Jace's mom isn't as important as finding Jace. Maybe I'll end up making a fool out of myself for panicking like this, but I can't shake the feeling something's really wrong. "Where did he go for his drive, did he say?"

She shakes her head. "Sometimes he goes down to the harbor. Down where those marinas are."

"Thanks." I don't bother saying goodbye.

Our town's right along the ocean, but the way the land goes, we have a nice sheltered harbor that makes a great place for boats. We have four or five marinas in a line around the harbor, and at this time of year there aren't many people in them. Boating around here doesn't really kick off until Memorial Day, and it's only April.

I speed across town but slow down when I get to the harbor road. I have to watch where I'm going and keep an eye out for Jace's silver Nissan. I don't know for sure that he's here or why he would have hung out here all day, but it's the only place I can come up with to look.

And it's where I find him. His car's parked in the lot of the last marina before the road gives way to houses my family wouldn't be able to afford in their lifetime. The Nissan is the only car in the lot, and I park beside it and yank my key out of the ignition while trying to get out. I end up tangling myself in my seat belt and barely manage not to face-plant on the pavement.

Once I recover, I check Jace's car, where he isn't. And then I look around. I don't see him anywhere in the parking lot or on the section of docks I can see from where I stand. Yet something insists to me that he's here. Some sense of him that I can't figure out.

I head for the docks, because that would be the most logical place to find him. He likes the ocean. He's told me that before.

A chain link fence separates the parking lot from the waterfront section of the marina and the docks. I peer through the fence and my heart stops.

Jace is teetering back and forth at the edge of the main pier.

I open my mouth to yell to him and stop myself. I would startle him, and he might fall. At best, he'd hurt himself falling backward onto the pier. At worst, he'd fall forward. It's a pretty warm day, probably fifty degrees, but the water's still way too cold to be in.

Maybe he's just looking at the water. Whatever upset his mother might be bothering him too, and he might just want to calm himself down. He might be just fine.

I don't believe it, though. The way he's kind of rocking back and forth says he's trying to decide whether to jump.

I should call someone, but I don't know who. Jace's mother wouldn't be any help. She didn't even know he wasn't at school. I don't know if this counts as an emergency, so calling 9-1-1 might be a dumb idea.

To my left, the gate in the fence is slightly open. It's chained shut, but there's enough of a gap to squeeze through. That must be how Jace got in. And it's how I'll get in, because I have to make sure he's okay.

I barely make it through the gap, and as my shirt catches on a piece of wire I realize someone might see me. I'm not supposed to be here. Then again, neither is Jace. If no one's called the cops on him yet, I'm probably safe.

Heart racing, I slowly walk down the pier. I try to land my feet a little harder than I usually would so Jace will hear me coming, but I still don't dare to speak. If he hears me, maybe he'll step away from the edge, but if I say anything, I might scare him.

I'm about two-thirds of the way to him when he glances over his shoulder. His eyes widen a little. "Logan, what the hell are you doing here?"

"You weren't at school, and you didn't answer my texts." I take a couple more steps. "What's going on? I went to your house. Your mom thought you were at school."

"I told you I wouldn't be!" His face twists. "Damn it, Logan, why couldn't you just deal with that? Why are you frigging stalking me?"

"I'm not." His accusation stings like hell. I try not to show it. He's upset, but I don't think it's really about me. "You always answer my texts. And you did say you'd be out today, but you didn't tell your mom, apparently. Jace, talk to me. What's going on?"

"Go away." He turns back to face the water.

He teeters more.

My heart pounds so hard all I hear is the blood rushing through my ears.

Jace lifts one foot.

Before I know what I'm doing, I lunge and grab him around the waist. He flails and for a second I think we're both going into the harbor, so I yank backward. We tumble to the pier, both on our backs with Jace half on top of me.

He screams and bursts into tears.

For a second, I don't know what the hell to do. Then it registers on me that he's crying. I sit up and pull him into my arms. There's a post behind me, and I lean against it, holding Jace tight because if I let him go, I might lose him.

I love him. I can't lose him.

"It's okay," I say softly. I don't know if he can even hear me, so I say it again. "It's okay. I'm here, and I won't let you go."

He makes a noise, and after a second I realize he's saying something. His words are garbled by crying, but I make out, "Over there. He was there."

"Who was?" I smooth his hair on his forehead. "Jace, you're scaring the shit out of me. Tell me what's wrong. I want to help."

"My brother."

I must have heard him wrong. Jace doesn't have a brother. He told me it's just him and his parents in the four-bedroom house they bought here in town last year. He's an only child.

Except obviously not, and I don't know if I want to hear what happened. But if it brought Jace to the edge of this pier ready to jump, I need to let him say it. "What brother?"

He gulps and snuffles. "Brice. His name was Brice."

*Was.*

Even more than before, I don't want to know. But now I have to find out what happened. "You told me your parents have kept their boat here for a few years and you moved to town last spring because they were tired of driving up from the South Shore."

"He died over there." Jace raises a shaking arm and points at the other side of the pier. "It was my fault. It's all my fault, and my mother can't even look at me!"

I hold my breath. I have no clue what to say. I'm starting to see the pieces. Jace had a brother, one he never told me about. One who died in the marina where we're sitting. And now I remember the story from the year before.

From April eleventh. Today's date, one year ago. A college kid home for the weekend came with his father and younger brother to get their boat in the water for the season. There was some accident; I can't remember all the details. Someone fell, and someone hit their head.

And someone died. Jace's brother died. The news didn't report the name, or if they did I missed it because I had more important things to worry about like math tests and the Spring Fling dance I took Jillian to. But Jace showed up at school about a month later with dark, haunted eyes. Those eyes were the first thing I noticed about him his first day.

No one changed schools in the middle of the final quarter of the year without a good reason. Jace never told me why his family had moved. Now I know.

"You guys came here to be closer to where it happened?" It's sick. Who would want to

live where someone they loved died?

He nods, his head moving against my chest. "Mom wanted to be near him. His spirit or what the frig ever. She didn't want to be away. She kind of lost it." He sobs again. "This morning... It happened today. I mean, last year, but... It was a Sunday. We just got the boat back in the water, and Dad wanted us to come check on it. So we did, and I slipped over there."

He points again and moves, and I tighten my arms around him so he can't get away. If I let go, he'll jump. His brother died and now he wants to die. He hasn't said so, but I believe it a hundred percent.

My heart aches. I want to fix him and I can't. All I can do is hold on and pray maybe someone did see me sneaking into the marina. Maybe the cops are on their way right now. I don't even dare to let go of Jace with one hand so I can get my phone, otherwise I'd call the police myself. Or someone. Someone who can help, because I can't.

I can only hold on.

"I fell," Jace says, so quietly I barely hear him. "Into the water. It was so cold, and I couldn't breathe because I went under. They told me Brice jumped in after me and hit his head on something. I woke up in the hospital. Dad was there. Mom wasn't. She wouldn't even speak to me for a few days. She thinks I killed Brice."

"I'm sure she doesn't think that." I only say it because it seems like the right thing to say. I don't really believe it. Not after all the times I've seen Mrs. O'Neill not looking at Jace even when she was smiling at him.

He doesn't believe it either. "She does. She said it when I came home from the hospital. She said I killed Jace. Later on she and Dad said she didn't mean it, she was just grieving. But she meant it. She mostly doesn't even talk to me anymore. It was a year ago."

"I know." I kiss the top of his head because I don't know what else to do. He's babbling, but he needs to. And as long as he's talking, he's with me, which means he's alive. He might not want to be, but he is.

"I was going to jump." He moves a little again, and again I hold him more tightly. "I've been standing there forever trying to jump. I can't swim. If I go in, I don't come out. But I'm too gutless to do it."

I stroke his hair. "No. Not gutless. You're too *brave*. Living takes guts. Dying doesn't."

"My mother would be glad." He takes a long, shuddering breath. "She wouldn't care."

"She would." *Why doesn't anyone come help us?* I'll sit here forever if I have to, but Jace needs more help than I can give him. I need to get him away from the pier. Away from the marina, from his mother, from everything that's hurting him, and I have no way to do it.

He shakes his head. "She'd be glad. The boy who killed her son would be gone."

"Her other son would be gone." I hesitate. I don't know what to say to make this better. "Jace, let me help you. Please. I want you around. Lots of people want you around. What happened to Brice wasn't your fault. It was an accident. Please let me help."

"You can't." He snuggles against me, and I wish to hell I could take away his pain. "No one can."

"People can." I dare to move one of my hands to my pocket. "Please. I can call someone."

"Why did you come here?" He looks around. "I came here to be alone."

"You aren't alone." I don't know if hearing it helps him, but saying it helps me.

"Go ahead," he says."

I keep one arm around him and manage to fish my phone out of my pocket with the other hand. Hitting the right numbers with one hand while trying not to drop the phone isn't easy, but I won't let go of Jace. Not until I know someone else is here to help me keep him safe.

Besides, 9-1-1 is only three digits. Not too hard.

A woman answers. "What is your emergency?"

"I need help for my friend." I name the marina. "I'm sitting with him on the pier. He..." I trail off, not willing to say out loud what Jace wants to do. "He needs help. He isn't injured. He's..."

I have no idea how to explain. Thank God, the woman seems to understand. "I'll have someone there in five minutes. Are you and he safe until then?"

"Yes." I glance down at Jace, who's staring at the water but isn't trying to move. "We can hang in here that long."

"I'm going to stay on the line with you," she says. "Will your friend talk to me?"

"I don't know." I hold the phone so Jace can see it. "Will you talk to the dispatcher, Jace?"

He shakes his head. "I can't talk to anyone. They'll all think it's my fault."

I bring the phone back to my ear. "Did you hear him?"

"Yes," the woman says. "That's okay. Just stay on the line. Someone will be there soon."

"I used to love the ocean," Jace says. "I used to love going on the boat. Now I can't stand it. They made me move here where Brice died and I hate it. Every single day, I remember him."

"I understand," I say, because it seems important to say something.

We sit there for a few minutes. I don't know what to say, and the woman on the phone isn't talking either, though I can hear her breathing. Then a car door slams in the parking lot, then two more doors.

I glance toward the gate. Two male police officers and a guy in jeans and a sweatshirt are standing there. The guy unlocks the gate, and the officers walk through.

"Hey, guys." The officer speaking is tall with red curly hair. Grant. He went to school with my oldest sister. "What's going on?"

“Jace is upset.” Again, I don’t want to say Jace came here to kill himself. Grant isn’t an idiot. He can figure out what’s happening. “He skipped school. I found him at the end of the pier a little while ago.”

“My fault,” Jace murmurs.

Grant nods at me and crouches in front of us. “Jace, I’m Grant. Can you tell me what’s happening today?”

Jace shakes his head. Grant looks at me.

“This is Jace O’Neill,” I say. “His brother was Brice.”

Grant raises his eyebrows, and I know he gets it. He waves toward the other officer, who hurries back through the gate.

“Jace, I’d like to bring you back to the parking lot.” Grant’s voice is low and soothing. “We can talk there. It’s getting windy and kind of cold out here, isn’t it?”

“I don’t care,” Jace says.

“I do.” I kiss his head again, not caring that Grant’s watching. “I’m cold, and you’re shivering. Come on. It’ll be warmer by our cars.”

“You’re cold?” He turns his head slightly. “I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault, but let’s go with Grant, okay?” My heart starts thudding again. I don’t have any clue what we’ll do if Jace refuses to move. Or worse, if he breaks away from me.

But he slowly pulls away, and Grant stands up blocking Jace’s path to the edge of the pier. Jace and I get up, and Grant stays on Jace’s other side as we walk slowly to the parking lot.

I can’t help letting out a long sigh when our feet touch pavement instead of the wooden slats of the pier. We still aren’t totally in the clear, but at least the water isn’t quite so close.

An ambulance pulls into the parking lot as we walk through the gate. Jace stops and squeaks out a noise I hope I’ll never hear again. “No hospitals.”

“Jace.” I take his hand and step in front of him so I can try to look him in the eye. He doesn’t let me, but at least I’m blocking his view of the ambulance now. “I want you to be well, okay? I want you to talk to someone.”

“No hospitals.” He takes a step backward.

Grant is immediately behind him, speaking softly, reassuring him. I stay right in front of him and walk backward as Grant gets us moving again.

I don’t want to see Jace get into that ambulance either, because I can feel his fear like a mist against me, but there’s no other choice. He needs help, and even if he hates the hospital, he’ll get help there.

He says, “No hospital” again when we reach the ambulance, but he doesn’t put up any fight when the other officer and a female EMT help him into the back. They close the doors on him before I can say anything.

Grant puts his hand on my shoulder and leads me to his car. “They’ll call his parents,” he says. “It’s a good thing you found him. He’s not in good shape. What were you doing out here? Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“It’s the CD.” I know this doesn’t make any sense to him. “Jace had this CD he wouldn’t let anyone touch, and yesterday he gave it away. And he told me yesterday he wouldn’t be in school today. I texted him this morning. He didn’t answer, and we always answer each other’s texts. And then I found out about that CD. He said it’s important and reminds him— It must remind him of Brice.”

Grant looks kind of confused, but he just nods. “So you were afraid something had happened to him? That doesn’t explain why you came out here, though.”

“I went to his house first,” I say. “His mother didn’t know he wasn’t at school. She said he told her he was going for a drive this morning, and that he sometimes comes to the marina. She didn’t say which one, but I drove around until I found him. Is he going to be okay?”

“I don’t know. I hope so.” He pats my shoulder. “You did everything right, Logan. He’s alive because you found him and called us. You’re a good friend.”

“Yeah.” I’m not just Jace’s friend, but this is definitely not the time to bring that up.

“Go on home, okay?” He glances at the ambulance as it heads out of the parking lot. “They’ll take him someplace he can get help, and they’ll notify his parents. They’ll take good care of him. You need to take care of yourself now. I’ll contact the school and let them know what happened so you won’t get in trouble.”

I couldn’t care less about school, but I nod. “Thanks.”

“Call me if you need to talk.” He gives me a little smile. “You saved someone today, Logan. Be proud of that.”

“Yeah.”

I get into my car while he watches. Apparently he’s not leaving until I do. I drive out of the lot and head home feeling numb. Jace almost died. I kept him from jumping today, but that doesn’t mean he won’t try again.

I can’t think that way, though. I kept him from jumping today. He’s on his way to the hospital, and they’ll help him. Maybe they’ll make his parents understand how much he needs them to tell him he didn’t kill his brother.

Maybe they’ll help Jace understand it wasn’t his fault.

Too many maybes are swirling around in my head. I don’t have any answers. I never knew how bad Jace was hurting, and I should have. If I’d paid more attention, maybe he wouldn’t have ended up at the marina today. If I’d asked more questions about his family or why they’d moved here, maybe he would have trusted me enough to tell me.

If I hadn’t known how much that CD means to him, I wouldn’t have thought it was weird of him to give it to Jillian. And if he and I weren’t so close, I wouldn’t have cared that he didn’t answer my texts all morning.

Maybe I failed him, but today I helped. Not much, but enough to keep him alive. And as long as he's alive, things can get better. I can be here for him when he comes home. I can be his friend, and I can love him.

Maybe that will be enough.