

An Act of Realization

The two headed to Chase's 2004 red Jeep Wrangler, a gift from her parents on her 17th birthday. Chase tossed Axle the keys as she pitched her bags into the backseat. Chase liked to observe the scenery while driving so it was better if Axle drove around the cliffs that caused her to get motion sickness. Chase finished with a click of her seat-belt as Axle revved the engine and pulled out of the parking spot. Axle turned up the radio, a new Rihanna song blasting out of the speakers, as he accelerated out of their high school parking lot.

They were out of their town of Dalesfield in less than five minutes, passing the local grocery store Chase's family owned and ran themselves. Chase McKenna worked at McKenna's Groceries every weekend, working as a cashier and a shelf stalker. She liked working there, being a part of the family business even when her father wanted to keep her safe at home. Chase sighed. *He only does it because he worries about you and he loves you. I just wish he would think of me more than just his sick, little girl who survived,* she thought.

Chase hated that her dad still saw the cancer side of her instead of who she was now, after being in remission for the past three years. She continued to gaze at the passing trees as the Jeep strolled along the interstate, her thoughts returning back to when she was fourteen and diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Chase and her parents found that this was a type of cancer that happens at any moment in a person's life, at any given age and physical health, after Chase had suffered a sufficient weight loss and ran a high fever for longer than a person should. Chase's cancer was slow-growing, so the doctors caught it before spread too far in her body. She still had to go to chemotherapy, but only five visits before the cancer was in

remission. Those five visits were the worst experiences of her life. She lost her hair and got sick at the slightest thing, vomiting all the time. *No wonder he thinks me fragile, but I'm not fragile. I survived.*

“What are you thinking so hard about over there, Chase,” her friend Axle Kentner asked, keeping his hands loosely on the steering wheel, his eyes never leaving the curvy road in front of him, but he turned his golden face towards her let her to know that he was listening.

She tore her stare away from the window to look at him. *Should I lie to him and say nothing?* She considered him for a minute. His face was relaxed, just waiting for her to tell him whatever was bothering her. His face was so open, patient. She decided to go with the truth. “I was just thinking about my diagnosis three years ago. About how my dad still sees me as his *sick little girl* and how he wants to protect me from the world. You know he doesn't like the fact that I go to the woods with you and hike for miles right?”

Axle let the slightest bit of worry and sorrow show on his face before replacing it with a small lop-sided smile. “I know he doesn't like us going out by ourselves in the woods he lets us do it. He even supplies us with snacks and water. I don't think he sees you as his 'sick little girl.' He's a dad and his job is to protect you.” He laughed, filling the entire car. Chase smiled at his lame joke, laughing a little to show how lame she thought it was.

“Maybe he's right in thinking that I shouldn't be pushing my limits like I am. I mean I'm not out of the woods, so to speak, with the cancer. I have only been in remission for three of the five years until chances are my cancer won't come back.”

Axle shook his head as he pulled into the parking space close to the beginning of the trail at Dale Forest. He still shook his head as he turned the engine off, as if he couldn't believe Chase would say that. He unbuckled himself then turned to look at her in the eye. "You're wrong on two things. One you're dad thinks you are one of the strongest people he knows. I know this because he told me. And two, you are strong. How many people can go through what you did and still want to live life by going outside in the blazing sun and heat to sweat their butts off? Not many people. You're just lucky to have me around to keep you out of danger here." His smirk spreads into a full smile as he turned to step out his open door.

Chase stared after him, not believing him, but she knew he meant every word he said. She got out as well, turning around to take off the sweatpants she wore above her shorts and her jacket. She rummaged through her bag to change out of her ratty old black Converse into her sturdy hiking boots. Axle was waiting for her at the end of the car, waiting for her to finish. He gave her one of those nods that guys said that meant "Come on" and they walked towards the entrance of the trails.

"Which way do you want to go," Axle asked.

"The hardest trail there is here: trail eight." *I need to feel a rush.*

"Again? Fine. Well let's go before I change your mind to something I want that's easier."

His smirk returned on his face as they started towards the trail. Chase loved being outdoors and doing the harder trails. They were a reminder that life wasn't easy. She needed to remember that right then, to feel her strength be returned to her.

The trail was tricky. If a person went on this trail they had to keep their eyes on their feet but also above their heads because the earth below them could change at any moment, going uphill or down a steep, rocky landscape. Above, the trees were high enough that branches wouldn't reach them but a person hiking would have to watch for the broken branches or limbs dangling from the lower branches, so close that it and a person's forehead would leave with a parting kiss that would give the person a headache.

This is how Chase felt while going through the trail at a faster rate than she and Axle would normally be at. She felt she had to look out for every little difference that could harm her, anticipate what could endanger her. She felt alive again; breathing heavy but just right to get the right amount oxygen in, her arms pumping increasing her balance. The adrenaline flowed through her.

Their brisk pace helped them reach the half-way point, an outlook above a green lake where people could take a break at, faster than they had ever before. Axle stopped in front of her, both of them breathing heavy with sweat sliding down the sides of their faces and around their hairlines. They both reached for their water bottles and drank, allowing the water to cool them off before Axle spoke. "Chase I want you to listen to me. I meant what I said in your car. You're strong. I wouldn't lie to you. We just finished hiking two miles in thirty-five minutes. That's unbelievable, especially because you are small and have short legs. But you kept up with my long strides. If that isn't strength, then I don't know what is."

Chase stared at him, at a loss of words. Instead of responding, she took a drink from her water bottle, processing what he said. *He's right. I have taken on cancer at a young age. I've been living my life the way I want to. Doubting myself is pointless.*

"Thanks Axle. You're right. I shouldn't be letting the past be getting to me. I should be proud that I fought my battle and I'm still here. I guess...I guess I am just terrified that it will come back and I won't make it through this time. There is something my father always tells me when I am skeptical myself."

"What does he say?"

"He tells me that if I didn't go after what I want, then I'd never have it. If I don't ask, then the answer will always be no. I guess I didn't have the strength to ask if I will keep surviving my battle. I don't want that answer to be no."

"It won't be no. And if you don't step forward, you're always going to be stuck in the same place."

"That's exactly it. I'm not going to be there again. I'm going to live my life to its fullest. No more doubts. Like how I doubt you will beat me back to my car...." She yelled this last bit as she started running towards the rest of the trail, careful to watch her step, Axle hot on her trail laughing the whole way back.

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