

The Bridge Between Us

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AARON – Five years. Five years, and no matter how hard I try, I can't shake his voice. It's always there. A reminder of what I left behind that night. It takes me back to that moment when I could've done something. Anything. But in the end, I chose to run. I abandoned Ethan, the closest friend I ever had, and left town.

Stretched out on the couch with my tablet, I scroll through the news headlines. I haven't been thinking straight the past few days, ever since Ethan's birthday. Reading the news has become my escape from reality, even though I know deep down, I can never really escape. And I don't deserve to either.

The next headline makes me freeze. "Local Town to Restore Riverside Bridge, Memorializing Ethan Montgomery". I stare at the headline, then muster up the courage to read on. My hometown is restoring the Riverside bridge as a memorial to Ethan. He and I would go there when we wanted an escape. It was our spot to have deep conversations without Sophie – Ethan's younger sister – eavesdropping. It was also where I lost him forever. I close my eyes as my mind takes me back to that painful memory.

Ethan and I were out that night. We were bored so he made up a crazy dare, challenging me to walk the bridge's edge. We would always dare each other to do stupid things, but I had a bad feeling about this one. When we reached the edge, it hit me how narrow that wooden plank really was. The bridge creaked beneath my weight, and just as I lost my balance, Ethan grabbed my hand to pull me back. The sudden weight shift must have knocked him off balance, and he slipped. Paralyzed in fear, I watched him fall, then ran, leaving him there alone. I knew I'd lost him so I kept running, leaving my hometown and that painful memory behind.

But the truth is, Ethan wasn't the only one that I lost that night. I lost Sophie too.

SOPHIE – I used to believe that time healed all wounds, but as time passes by, the scar from losing my brother somehow grows deeper. I stare at the photo on my bedside table. It's a picture of Ethan, Aaron, and I at the park. We were inseparable back then, but that all changed after the accident.

It was hard enough for me to accept losing my brother, but the fact I lost Aaron too broke what little was left of me. After the incident he became unreachable, but I thought he just needed space since it all happened so suddenly. When he didn't show up to the funeral, and my calls and wall of texts went unanswered, I realized he had no plans to ever come back.

The lonely years that followed showed me the importance of having support through life's toughest moments. Now as a school counselor I try to be there for my students the way I wished Aaron would have been there for me. When I comfort my students, a part of me heals in a way too. I hope Ethan is proud of me, even if he's not here to see it.

The Riverside bridge is being restored as a memorial for Ethan tomorrow, and part of me is holding out hope that Aaron will come back for the ceremony. I begin to type a message to ask if he's coming but put my phone down before I can hit send. I don't know why I continue to reach for him when I'm trying so hard to let go. I stare at the picture of the three of us a moment longer, and I know that Ethan would have wanted him there. I steady my shaking hand and reach back down for my phone.

AARON – My screen lights up, and my heart skips a beat when I see who's calling. It's Sophie. I remember the calls and texts she sent me the morning of the funeral, and throughout the weeks that followed. How could I face her after what I did? I leave my phone ringing, until it eventually stops. But the silence makes it all worse.

I can't ignore her forever though, and avoiding Sophie hasn't eased my guilt. She deserves the truth. Tomorrow, at the ceremony, I'll tell her everything. But what if seeing her again only makes things worse? What if she won't hear me out? What if she never forgives me for what I did? The only way to make things right is to face the past, no matter how difficult. I need to tell her what really happened. I missed the funeral, but I can at least be there for the ceremony.

When I arrive the next morning, doubt rushes over me as I remember the silent promise I made yesterday. As I push through the crowd searching for her, I hear a familiar voice call my name. "You actually showed up?" It's Sophie. I feel kind of hurt that she thinks so little of me, but I know I deserve it. "I knew today would be difficult and I wanted to be here for you. For Ethan too," I say, trying to ignore how fast my heart is beating. Her body is tense, hands balled into fists, and she's scoffing to herself.

"Since when do you care about me or Ethan, Aaron?" Her voice cracks and tears fall down her cheeks. "I lost my brother and my best friend all at the same time. Do you have any idea what that was like?" I can feel the pain in her voice. "When you left, a part of me left with you too. And now you show up and act like nothing's wrong when you made each day a living hell for me. You're a monster."

Emotions suddenly overcome me – a strong cocktail of guilt, regret, and anger. It's as if the five-year countdown on my emotional time bomb has finally run out. "Do you think it was easy for me? I was there that night! I saw everything." My eyes are wet, tears streaming down my cheeks as the words just slip out. Her eyes widen in shock as she whispers, "What?"

"I was with him that night," I start my painful confession. "We were walking on the bridge when I lost my footing. Ethan tried to pull me back, but he slipped. He fell and I had no clue what to do. I was terrified and ran away as far as I could, somehow thinking the distance would make it less real. I left him there, all alone. Do you know how many times I think back to that night? The memory haunts me, every day. If only I grabbed him when he was falling, or called out for help, maybe Ethan would still be here. But I didn't. And I hate myself for it." I pause for a minute to catch my breath before continuing. "I couldn't bring myself to face you. How could I when I'm responsible for what happened? I thought running away would silence the screams in my head. But it didn't. It only made them a thousand times louder."

There's a long moment of silence, neither of us really able to say anything. Finally, the silence breaks. "Aaron... it wasn't your fault. After the incident, engineers inspected the bridge. It was declared unsafe and never should have been accessible in the first place. They closed it after that night. It was nobody's fault, just a terrible, unfortunate accident."

I look up and see that her eyes are softer than they were in the last few minutes. I still feel guilty about what happened but hearing that the bridge was in disrepair lightens it in some way. For the first time, I feel a little less responsible for Ethan's fall.

She takes a few steps towards me and places her hand on my shoulder. "I don't hold you responsible for my brother's death. I know you never meant for it to happen. But there's one thing that I do blame you for," she continues. "You abandoned me when I needed you. You never even give me the chance to understand why before you disappeared."

Knowing that she doesn't hold me accountable makes me feel better, even if it doesn't free me from the guilt completely. "Sophie..." I start to say, but my voice trails off. I don't know what to say to her. She smiles at me. Not a big smile, but a reassuring and understanding one. It's enough. "It's okay, Aaron. We'll face what comes next, together."

Hearing her say that makes something shift inside of me. For the first time, it feels like the bars in my mental prison are beginning to fade. I know I may not be able to fix everything. But for now, it's at least enough for me to stop running.