



184 Look after my sister.

Ryan staggered back as the flashes of the day from eight years ago spiralled out of his memories. He had never forgotten it, never let go of the guilt. He had always carried the weight of it, burying it under the layers of denial. 1

He had survived by convincing himself that Zeke's death wasn't his fault. That it was the cruel twist of fate beyond his control.

But no matter how much he forced himself to believe it otherwise, deep inside, he knew the truth —the truth that he was responsible for it all. Responsible for Zeke not being here. It was because of him that Zeke died. If not for his actions, he would still be alive.

The weight of his guilt bore down on him, pulling him into a haunting memory that had terrified him for months and had let go of him even after years.

Flashback:

Cicus Valleys was known for several reasons but the best one of all was that it gave the best scenic view. Especially the spot that Ryan has always held a favourite in his heart. It was the only place that gave him peace and a breather of the purest air that could heal his anxious and

confused soul.

Whenever his mind wouldn't be able to focus, he would always come here and try to find his peace.

And that day was just another day and he had come out of his dormitory to enjoy a moment of relief. Lost in the thoughts that had been keeping him occupied too much, he didn't notice someone approaching until he felt an arm wrap around his shoulders.

"Accept it, Ryan. You have fallen for her." The voice teased but his confidence was unshakable.

Ryan turned to glance, and already recognizing the voice. "Shut up, Zeke," he sighed, shaking his head. "I am not having this conversation again. I told you already, that girl is nothing but a ... compulsion to me. I have no other choice but to get engaged to her. There are no feelings attached between us here in this nominal relationship."

"Compulsion', 'nominal relationship' –aren't those too big words?" Zeke asked, raising his brows in skepticism. "Tell me something simple, would your mother have been able to force you into it if you were really against it? I mean I never heard anything or anyone that could stop 'the Ryan Foster' from anything."



Ryan frowned but said nothing. And his silence only made Zeke chuckle.

"See, I told you. If you weren't having even half a percent feelings for her, you would have opposed this from happening at all costs. But you accepted it willingly because you simply can't control yourself from falling for her. She has already left an impression on you and now you can't wipe it off."

"I..." Ryan could speak for a moment, but when he saw Zeke muffling a laugh, he punched him lightly and said, "Those are just your cooked-up theories. They aren't true."

"Really?"

"Of course," Ryan said confidently but there was an edge of denial in his voice that he was desperately trying to mask. "I got tired of the arguments every time I came home. Since I had no one in my life, I thought agreeing to this would bring peace. Now that the engagement is done, my mother won't pester me anymore, and I can finally relax."

"Oh," Zeke nodded in understanding, but his eyes still held the mischief. Still smiling, he shook his head and gestured towards the trail leading to the cliff. "Come on, let's walk. You need to clear your head before you drown yourself in excuses."

Ryan smirked. "Race you there," he said, getting up and setting off before Zeke could even prepare himself.

When Zeke realized the challenge in Ryan's words, he also ran on in his command, racing along the narrow trail. "Even like that, you won't be able to win against me, brother," Zeke roared loudly as she ran past Ryan. 2

As he reached the cliff's edge, Zeke turned back to see Ryan panting a few steps behind him. "Still slow," he teased, leaning against the boulder near the edge.

Ryan rolled his eyes, catching his breath. "You are lucky I am not competitive about this."

"Competitive?" Zeke grinned and crossed his arms. "You couldn't beat me even if you tried."

Ryan smirked and stepped closer, eyes gleaming with playful mischief. "Oh yeah? Let's see if I can at least knock you off." He then reached out and gave Zeke a playful shove on the shoulder—not hard but enough to startle him.

He didn't think must until the ground beneath Zeke's feet crumbled unexpectedly.

"Ryan!" Zeke yelped in terror, flailing his arms to regain his balance.

His loud shriek like that made Ryan act fast. He



lunged forward, grabbing Zekel's wrist, but in the moment of force, he was also pulled forward.

They would have fallen together if Ryan's other hand hadn't grabbed the wooden fence on the side. But the relief was short-lived when the realization stuck with him. The fence wasn't strong enough to hold their weight for long.

"Zeke," Ryan screamed, high on adrenaline. "Keep your hold firm on my hand. Don't leave it. Do you hear me?"

Zeke didn't respond, but his terrified eyes met Ryan's. He nodded, but just as he did, Ryan felt the weight of his friend slipping from his hold. The ground shifted again beneath them, and Zeke's momentum was too strong.

Shaking his head at Ryan, Zeke shouted. "Let go. Ryan! If you don't let go, you will fall too."

Ryan shook his head. "No, I am not letting go!" He tightened his grip, his fingers digging into Zeke's wrist.

"Ryan, don't be stubborn," Zeke said again. "We both know you might not be able to hold me for long. At least save yourself."

"Zeke, I am not —"

"Ryan, I have a younger sister. We lost our parents when we were young. And with me gone,



she would be alone here." 1

"No, she won't be alone because you aren't going anywhere, Zeke. Believe me, I will save you."

But Zeke seemed to have accepted the fate already. Smiling at Ryan, he said, "Ryan, this didn't happen because of you. We both were playing and — don't dare blame yourself for it. This must have been my fate. Just promise me, you will look after my sister for me. Just make her capable and resilient in this world so that she can survive. I won't ask you to carry her burden all your life, just make sure she lives well and that's it." 3

Ryan shook his head, not ready to accept the cruel fate yet. But before he could make any other effort to turn it, Zeke's weight pulled him free.

"Zeke!!" Ryan shouted, watching in horror.



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