

Enjoy this deleted scene from *Safe & Sound*. Draft Originally Part of Chapter 26 (page 212)

It was just a peck on the cheek, but it also meant so much more.

.....

After that night my life became very mundane. I hadn't left the house in several days and stopped answering any calls and texts I received. The days just start to blend together, seamlessly flowing from one into the next. I would wake up and go for a run, sit on the beach and then write in my journal until the early hours of the morning as I did on this particular night. Mostly, I wrote to my mom. I felt that if she was still around she would have known how to handle the situation with Jay and now Ross.

Dear Mom,

I feel like I'm losing my grip on reality. My days are racing past me and I just sit as a passenger on my own ride. Afraid to take control. Where does one day end and the next begin? If nothing of consequence happens in each day does it count as a day? I used to spend my days educating, molding the minds of little ones, now I feel like I'm wasting away. Does my life have any real meaning?

New fears have crept into my life and leave me with unsettled feelings. Things that were once mundane and necessary now take work. Sleep continues to escape me. I know that nightmares haunt me yet I can't recall the actual nightmare. I startle awake, usually screaming, sweating, trying to catch my breath, fighting back tears. Never knowing what terrifies me but always feeling like I'm being crushed by a big boulder and no one is there to lift it off.

There was a knock on the back door that drew me away from my journal. As I rose from my spot I could see Ross standing there with Mandy slumped against him.

"What's wrong?" I said as I opened the back door.

"She just started getting sick while we were cleaning up from the bonfire. I think she drank too much. Whenever we moved her she just kept moaning. I didn't know what else to do." He said as panic flashed across his face.

"Come in," I said holding the door open. Ross picked Mandy up as she let out another low moan and I swear I saw her eyes roll back into her head.

"You can lay her on the sofa or if you need the bathroom it's through there," I gestured down the hallway.

“The sofa should be fine,” he said as he settled Mandy down and she mumbled several incoherent things and wiggled onto her side.

“Mandy, can I do anything for you?” I asked her not sure if she could hear me.

“No,” she whispered not opening her eyes. I started to panic and glanced at Ross who was standing over her. In that moment, I could see the genuine concern he had for her. Maybe I was right on the beach the other night, perhaps there was something going on between them. I had surely imagined the interest Ross had in me.

“Jill,” Ross softly spoke, breaking my concentration.

“Yes,” I replied turning to face him.

“I’m so sorry to intrude on your evening. We tried moving her to my truck but it was a further walk and I just didn’t know if she was gonna make it,” he offered as a further explanation.

“That’s fine. Can I do anything for you?” I asked feeling helpless in that moment.

“I think I’m going to be sick again,” Mandy faintly whispered interrupting our conversation. Her request sent me quickly dashing into the kitchen to grab the small garbage pail which I passed off to Ross who set it in front of Mandy before she lurked back and got sick, moaning yet again. Ross leaned over and brushed her hair back from her face and I could feel a small pang of jealousy. I instantly felt like I was imposing on such an intimate moment. I quietly crept back into the kitchen to allow Mandy and Ross some measure of privacy.

Shaking my head in disbelief at the situation I set the water on the stove and I leaned on the counter running my hands through my hair as I stared out at the beach. The events of the last day played out in my head like a movie. No matter how I changed the plot, the ending was always the same; disappointment. It was shocking to me to realize how much I already felt connected to Ross. Maybe Stella was right, I needed to make some friends. I couldn’t be alone forever, could I? Of course I wasn’t looking for a romantic relationship but a human connection, conversation would be nice.

“Jill? Did you hear me?” Ross said startling me as he came up behind me. I whirled around and we were so close that my pulse raced as he spoke again.

“Mandy has fallen asleep for now. I hate to move her…” he paused looking at me.

“Oh there is no rush. She can stay here as long as she needs, you both can” I said after a moment. Ross nodded at my statement and wandered back into the other room just as the kettle beside me began to whistle.

After checking with Ross I made two cups of coffee and settled in at the kitchen table with mine as he continued to pace in the other room. Occasionally, I could hear him on the phone in a hushed tone. I continued to stare out the window in the black abyss. While there was obvious distress going on with Mandy and Ross I felt a calm wash over me by having people in the house, I didn't feel so alone. I almost felt needed.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Ross said as he came and sat down beside me at the table only pausing to pick up his cup of coffee off the counter.

“You two seem really close,” I blurted out before thinking through the statement. Did I want to know the answer I thought to myself?

“We are...we were,” Ross said correcting himself.

“I don't mean to pry,” I quickly added.

“No it's okay. Mandy and I have been friends since we were kids, we used to live in the same neighborhood until mom and I moved to Nashville. Actually her parents still live in that neighborhood, been there thirty years,” he paused for a brief moment. The conversation was slow and felt forced, I sighed and fidgeted in my seat unsure of what to say next.

“Mandy and I kept in touch and eventually tried dating long distance. We spent hours on the phone,” he said to no one in particular.

“What happened?” I asked trying to keep the conversation going.

“I got into NYU and she didn't. But I don't think her heart was ever set on leaving Oak Island. In fact, I think she was relieved when she got her rejection letter. We got into a huge argument the night before I left for school. She wanted me to apply to somewhere closer to here, like UNCW. I knew that wouldn't make me happy so I went to New York anyway,” he paused shifting in his seat and taking a slow sip of coffee, almost lost in thought. “After that things were different and then my mom got sick. I think Mandy thought that we would give things another try when I finally moved back after graduation. But it just wasn't the same, I had changed...and she hadn't,” he said quietly looking at me.

“I'm sorry,” I replied back just as quietly.

“Now you know.”

“I didn’t mean to ask,” I said more defensively than I meant.

“Your eyes did,” he said getting up from the table and heading back into the other room, leaving me as always breathless.

I couldn’t help but follow Ross into the other room. I sat down cross-legged on the rug facing him and Mandy who was still asleep on the sofa. He paced around the room, glancing at Mandy and I occasionally. It was an odd, awkward situation and I could tell neither him nor I knew what to say next.

“I think it’s okay if I try and take her home now,” he finally said after a couple minutes.

“Really, there is no rush,” I stated not ready to be alone.

“Would you sit with her while I go and get my truck?” He asked in a way that let me know it was not up for discussion.

“Of course,” I replied. He checked on Mandy one more time and left out the back door. I watched until he disappeared into the blackness.

“Ross?” Mandy whispered from the sofa several moments later.

“He will be right back,” I replied getting up to sit next to Mandy on the sofa.

“He should have left me on the beach. I would have been fine,” she replied back keeping her eyes closed.

“He seems like a good guy. I’m sure he would do this for anyone,” I added.

“We used to date you know,” Mandy added.

“Really?” I wasn’t sure where this conversation was going.

“I thought he was it, you know the ‘one’. But then he went off to New York and he came back so different, so distant. I thought after some time back he would come around, be the same old Ross. It never happened,” she paused.

“Why are you telling me this?” I whispered back.

“Because he likes you. I mean *really* likes you.” She said sighing again. The room felt smaller around me and I could feel my cheeks turn red. It was a good thing Mandy still had her eyes closed.

“What makes you think that?”

“The way he looks at you...he used to look at me that way,” Mandy said as she shifted on the sofa letting.

“Are you sure?” Several more moments passed and Mandy didn’t answer.

“Mandy?” I asked. I leaned in further and saw her chest rise slowly, she had fallen back asleep. It was my turn to sigh. Even in her inebriated state she was still challenging. I got up and moved to another chair and watched her sleep while taking inventory of my emotions.

I heard a soft knock on the front door. Thinking Ross returned with the truck I got up and opened the front door.

“Mr. Colton?” I asked confused as to why the owner of the local hardware store was standing on my front porch at one o’clock in the morning.

“Ross called and told me that Mandy was here. I’m so sorry to intrude,” he bowed his head slightly almost seeming embarrassed by the situation.

“Yea, she is here,” I stammered still confused.

“May I come in?” he asked.

“Of course,” I stepped to the side as set of headlights swept across the driveway. I heard a door slam and saw Ross rush up the steps.

“Mr. Colton,” Ross said when he entered the house.

“Ross, thank you so much for calling.”

“You didn’t need to come out here. I would have brought her home.” Ross added.

“She is my daughter, I need to be here. Plus she’s not your responsibility anymore,” Mr. Colton said looking at Ross who just nodded.

“Where is she?” Mr. Colton asked looking from Ross to myself.

“On the sofa, just over there,” I pointed in the direction of the sofa. Mr. Colton turned and slowly approached the sofa, mumbling something to Mandy. Ross turned to look at me with an unnamed emotion on his face. Maybe it was sorrow, regret, humility?

“Daughter?” I whispered to Ross as I crept closer.

“Didn’t see that coming?” asked Ross and I just shook my head.

“Ross can you help me? My back isn’t what it used to be. I don’t think I can carry her anymore.”

“Yes sir.” Ross quickly approached Mandy and carefully lifted her up. She only fidgeted once, finally settling her head on his shoulder and drifting back off to sleep. I held the door open as Ross slowly made his way to Mr. Colton’s car with Mandy.

“Jill,” Mr. Colton said as he stopped to look at me on his way out.

“Yes,” I mused at the absurdity of the entire evening.

“Thank you for what you did for Mandy.”

“It was nothing.” Really I didn’t do anything, I thought to myself.

“My daughter isn’t a saint but she is my daughter. I always want the best for her and sometimes she doesn’t make the best decisions. Letting him go, it will probably be the biggest regret of her life. One I don’t know if she will ever be able to accept.” He nodded in my direction and started to walk thru the door.

“Who?” I asked unsure of what it all meant.

“Him,” he said looking at Ross who was now headed back up the steps towards us.

“Sir?” I asked again confused.

“Goodnight Jill,” he said. He met Ross on the steps and the two of them whispered to each other for several minutes before exchanging a handshake. With that Mr. Colton got in his car and drove off.

“What a strange night,” I commented to myself as Ross joined me on the porch.

“Who wants normal?”

“Normal is stable,” I challenged back.

“Normal is boring,” Ross chuckled. “Jill thank you for being so...”

“First everyone is apologizing and now everyone is thanking me. I really didn’t do anything, really.” I said interrupting him.

“You did more than you know,” he finally said after a couple moments. By this time I had wandered over to the stairs and sat down looking up at the night sky.

“You know what I love about this place?” I asked changing the subject.

“The sand in your toes? The salt on your skin?”

“The stars at night.”

“You come to the beach for the stars?” he questioned sitting down next to me.

“I come to the beach for all the same reasons everyone else comes to the beach,” I chuckled. “But at night the stars seems to twinkle just a little brighter and it makes me think your wishes are more likely to come true. When you look out at the ocean there comes a point where the water ends and the sky begins and it all just seems so...” I paused.

“So what?” Ross asked.

“So obtainable.” I finished leaning over and resting my head on Ross’s shoulder.

“I couldn’t agree more,” he added wrapping his arm around my shoulder staring into the night sky with me.

It felt like hours that Ross and I continued to sit there not speaking but gazing out in the sky, silently wishing upon the stars. There were so many unspoken questions between us but for that moment it didn’t matter. No matter how strange the events that brought us together were in that spec of time everything made sense. Finally, Ross stretched out each arm and stood.

“It’s after three and I still have to get to work in a couple hours.”

“Of course,” I understood but I just didn’t want it to end.

“I’m sure I’ll see you around the job site,” he added as if he read my disappointed.

“Since your job site is my house I think the odds are in your favor,” I added dryly.

“Goodnight Jill,” he grabbed my hand and gave it a tight squeeze before heading down the stairs to his truck.

“Goodnight Ross,” I called back. As much as I had teased him the other day for how we kept bumping into each other. I know wished we would stop parting the way we did. Each time he left I felt like he was taking a small piece of me with him.

.....

That night was no better than other nights. Nightmares continued to haunt my sleep. I hadn’t been asleep for more than an hour when the first one ripped me from sleep in sheer panic. That night was no better than other night, nightmares continued to haunt my sleep. I hadn’t been asleep for more than an hour when the first one ripped me from sleep in sheer panic. Letting my breath slow I got out of bed and headed downstairs. On the kitchen counter sat my journal from the other night. I stared at the journal as thoughts continued to flood my mind overwhelming me. Having no other release I grabbed the journal from the counter and sat down on the sofa and let everything I was thinking and feeling flow onto the pages of the journal and just like the other day the words came easily and freely. Losing track of time I wrote until the sun began to rise and until my eyelids grew heavy.