

It Only Takes Once

Bobby's arm wrapped around Gina's waist. They stood alone in front of the gray marble headstone. His heart tightened as if in a vise. Five years. Alyssa had been gone five years. He sucked in a breath.

"I don't know if I can do this." Gina sniffed.

What did he say? It was what he wanted, but pain lingered and wouldn't let him escape.

"See, you're having second thoughts too."

"I..." He wiped his eyes with his forefinger and thumb. "We've talked about this. Even discussed it during marriage counseling. I love you, Gina. I want to marry you."

"But the guilt?"

Oh yes, the guilt. He nodded.

She squeezed her arms around him and sobbed into his chest. "I miss her."

"Me too."

His mind whirled back in time. Back to the carefree days of their senior year of high school.

"Come on guys. Let's go." Alyssa grabbed Bobby's hand and yanked him toward the car and waved for Gina to join them.

He crunched through the grass and stumbled over his own feet. "You can't drive, you've been drinking. We all have."

“Yeah, yeah. It’s all country roads to town. Nothings gonna happen.” Alyssa stood on her tiptoes and kissed him square on the lips.

Well, if she could find his lips that quickly, she’d be able to drive. He knew he couldn’t. He swatted her and fumbled for the door handle.

Gina stood beside him. “We shouldn’t let her drive.”

“She’s determined. Hey, where’s Grant?”

“He’s scum. I never want to see him again. Let’s go.” Gina slid into the backseat.

“Come on you two. I want to get out of here.” Alyssa revved the engine.

Bobby plopped down in the seat next to her, buckled in, and ran his fingers through her hair. “Hit it, babe.”

The ’76 Camaro roared down the dirt road. Gravel sprayed from the tires and pinged against the wheel wells. Bobby swayed as the trees flew by at dizzying speeds. He grabbed the seat to steady himself. “Slow down, honey. You’re gonna make me sick.”

“Oh come on light weight. Get a grip.” Alyssa leaned into him capturing his mouth with hers.

“Alyssa!” Gina’s ear piercing scream echoed through the car.

Metal ground against metal. Crunching of plastic and the exploding pop of tires grated in Bobby’s brain.

The world flipped and rolled until it came to an abrupt stop. Silence. Was he dead? A hiss tumbled into his ears. He blinked. *Come on man, focus.* He dangled upside down from his seat,

his seatbelt holding him in place. The smell of dirt mixed with burnt rubber assaulted his nose. He turned his head. A white light of pain flashed before him. His shoulder burned in agony. Sucking in a breath, he opened his eyes. Where was Alyssa?

“Alyssa.” He croaked. Weeping emanated from behind him. He peered into the backseat. Gina lay on the floor or should he say the ceiling. Her ankle twisted at an awkward angle. She whimpered.

His voice a fraction above a whisper. “Gina, are you okay?”

“I can’t move my leg and my head hurts.”

“Anything else?”

“No. What about you?”

“Something’s wrong with my shoulder, but I’m not sure beyond that. Do you see Alyssa?”

“No.” Gina’s sobs grew louder.

“Don’t cry. When help arrives, they’ll find her.” Oh how he hoped it would be soon.

He drifted in and out of sleep for what he could only guess had been several hours. A wail of a siren inched its way into his hazy brain.

A voice hollered. “I have two in the car. The driver’s missing.” Eyes stared back at him. “Hey son, how many of you are there?”

Bobby licked his lips. His mouth drier than the desert. “Three.”

“All right. We’re looking for the driver, but we’ll have you out and on the way to the hospital soon.”

“Backseat. Gina. Her first.” His head pounded and he wanted out, but they needed to get to Gina.

“Don’t worry. We’ll take care of her.”

His eyes closed. *Hang on girls, they’re getting us out of here.* The dark abyss beckoned him.

Hush voices invaded his sleep. He pressed his back into something soft. It felt so good to be laying down. If only he could open his eyes. Darkness pulled him under once again.

“Bobby? Bobby, wake up.”

Peering through slits in his eyes, a figure came into focus. “Gina.”

“I’m here.” Gina scooted her wheelchair closer to him.

“How are you?”

“Broken ankle, and a headache, but I’m okay.”

He licked his lips. “Good.” He slid his hand up to his shoulder. “How bad’s my arm?”

“You had surgery to repair damage to your shoulder, but they said it should be as good as new.”

“Is that why I’m so out of it?”

“That and you have a concussion.”

That explained a lot. His head pounded like having the worst hangover ever. His eyes shot open. Hangover. “Alyssa. Where’s Alyssa.”

Gina stood and eased herself on the edge of his bed. “They found her...”

“Oh good. How is she?”

“Bobby, they found her body.” Gina whimpered. “She was thrown from the car. They said she died on impact.”

“Nooooo!” Bobby moaned and fell into Gina’s arms. Tears streamed down his face. Racked with sobs, he wrapped his good arm around her. “We talked about getting married.”

Gina held on tight and rubbed his back. “I know.”

Of course she knew. Alyssa was her best friend.

Her tears trickled down his back and his dampened her shirt. But neither seemed to care.

The world came back into focus. Gravestones surrounded him. The breeze blew through the trees ruffling his hair. Gina still in his arms and Alyssa’s headstone stood like a beacon of his stupidity. How could he have let her drive drunk? But that was then. Now he stood with Gina, his fiancé. Alyssa would have a special place in his life, but Gina had stolen his heart. He needed to let go of the guilt or it would tear him and Gina apart. Not only as a couple, but as individuals as well.

“Gina.” He lifted her chin with his finger and gazed into her watery eyes. “We need to put the guilt aside. For me it’s blaming myself for letting her get behind the wheel. For you...it’s falling in love with your best friend’s boyfriend.” He cocked a smile.

Gina’s mouth dropped open. “How did you know?”

“Oh sweetheart, I see it every time we talk about the future. Alyssa would want us to be happy. I truly believe that.”

Gina bit her lip. “I think you’re right.”

Tears dripped from Gina’s chin as she ran her hand along the marble headstone. “I’ll take good care of him, Alyssa.”

Bobby laced his fingers with Gina’s. He looked down at Alyssa’s grave, and back up at Gina. His past and his future. He took a deep breath. Time to let go of Alyssa and the guilt. They’d made a stupid mistake that night and it had cost them Alyssa, but he wouldn’t allow one night to take the rest of his life from him.

“Come on, honey. It’s time we live life to the fullest and it starts with us, together.”

Lifting up on her tiptoes, Gina brushed a kiss against his lips. “I’m ready.” She tugged his hand.

He kissed the top of her head and walked away from the weight of their mistake and toward the future with the woman he loved.

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” 1 John 1:9 NIV

“As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.”
Psalm 103:12 NIV

