

# Stitched

The wind was blowing so hard I could just barely feel the house shaking; causing me to wonder if it could rip the house from its foundation. I knew Oklahoma was windy, but damn I don't remember it ever being this bad. My younger brother and I sat on the couch in the living room playing Star Wars Battlefront I on his PlayStation 2. It was nearly noon but the two of us were still in our pajamas. Our mom had already left for work, so it was just us and our dad. It was a clear, sunny Saturday, and while normally I would have been outside, enjoying the beginning of Spring, I had agreed to play a round or two with Leo. We were in the middle of an intense battle on Coruscant, both my brother and I sitting upright on the couch, sweaty hands gripping the controllers tight, when my dad entered the room.

“Leo, I need your help outside.” My dad, Daniel, stood in front of the two of us, blocking our view of the TV.

“Dad, move!” Leo and I said, almost in perfect unison. I craned my neck to try and see around my dad's frame, but it was no use. Though my dad wasn't a big guy, the most fat he had on him was carried in the form of a slight beer-belly, he still managed to block our view since we didn't have a big TV. It was one of those old ones with the box in the back, which barely accommodated two player gaming. No matter how many times my brother begged our parents to get a flat screen, the answer had always been no since there was nothing wrong with the TV we had now.

“Come on, it’ll only take a minute.” He sighed, stepping out from in front of the TV just in time to allow my brother and I to watch our characters on screen get shot and die. We both squinted our eyes to glare at him. “What?” he asked, looking confused.

“You killed us.” I said, as if it were obvious. “We let down the Republic and lost Coruscant.”

“You lost a croissant? Well, you better find it before the dog eats it.” If my dad saw me roll my eyes, he didn’t let it show. “Now come on, boy, get a move on.”

“Why don’t you have River help you?” Leo protested. “She’s older and bigger than me, make her help for once.” My brother had a point, he had only turned twelve a couple of weeks ago, while I was quickly approaching my seventeenth birthday. But whenever my dad needed help around the house, he always went to Leo. I figured it was a male thing and counted myself lucky that I didn’t have to stand around holding a flashlight while listening to my dad cuss at inanimate objects.

“Because I asked for you, not your sister. Now let’s go.” My dad said, leaving the living room and heading into the kitchen.

“You better go,” I said, taking the controller out of my brother’s hand. “Don’t want to keep Dad waiting.”

Leo sighed before standing up and stretching his thin arms above his head, causing his monster truck t-shirt that was almost too small for him to rise and expose his belly. “Dad’s still in the kitchen,” he said. “So, until I hear a beer can open, I know I’ve got time before he’s actually ready to go.”

I chuckled, "You've got a point." My dad was rarely ever seen without a beer in hand, a fact that I had always known but hadn't put any thought into Leo noticing. Before he could finish his stretch, I reached out to tickle his exposed belly, but my attempt was met with his hand quickly slapping mine away.

"Don't do that." Leo scolded. "I'm not a little kid anymore."

"When did you get so fast?" I asked, watching my brother's scowl turn into a sly smile.

"When I grew up." Leo's sly smile turned into a triumphant one.

"Ha, whatever." I said, leaning back into the couch and kicking my feet up on the coffee table. "You're still a little kid to me."

Leo glared, though I could tell it was only half-hearted, before turning to leave. Stopping in the doorway, he shot me a warning look before saying, "Don't start another game without me." I set the controller down and put my hands in the air in submission. He exited the room, still in his pajamas and bare feet. I waited for the sound of the two of them leaving through the kitchen door before I picked up the controller, switched it to one-player mode, and started a new game.

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I was in the middle of my second game when I heard the front door fly open, wind blowing straw from the porch all the way through the kitchen and into the living room. I quickly paused the game and set down my controller, not wanting to get yelled at by Leo for having played without him.

“River!” Leo yelled from the kitchen. I realized that the kitchen door must still be open because straw continued to blow its way through the house. Straw was kept on the porch year-round for our German Shepard, Molly. That’s where she slept at night.

“What?” I yelled back over the howling of the wind. “Shut the door already.” Getting up from my spot on the couch, I made my way into the kitchen. “You’re letting all the straw in.” My brother’s face was pale, making his big blue eyes brighter than usual. “What is it?”

“Dad’s hurt. There’s blood everywhere.” Leo looked like he was caught between puking and passing out.

“Um, okay. Stay calm.” I said, leading him over to one of the padded barstools that stood beside the marble kitchen island. “Where is he?”

“I’m right here,” My dad grunted as he walked into the kitchen, a dirty hand placed over his forehead. Blood was steadily making its way through his fingers. “I told you not to freak out, son. Head wounds always bleed the most. Nothing to be worried about.” He reached behind him and closed the kitchen door with his free hand. “Look at all this straw you let in.”

“Dad, let me see it.” I gave Leo a reassuring pat on the back before walking over to my dad. He stood about a head taller than me, so I gestured for him to bend down enough for me to examine his wound. Blood stained the collar of his volunteer firefighter t-shirt. I wondered why he still wore that shirt; he hadn’t been a volunteer fireman in years. “Move your hand.” I instructed. He did as I asked and removed his work-worn hand from his forehead, revealing a decent sized gash about two inches above his left eye.

“See? It isn’t anything to be fussing over.” My dad said, quickly moving his hand back to the wound to stop the bleeding.

“Uh, yeah Dad, it kind of is.” I said as I moved to a nearby drawer and pulled out an old washcloth. “Here,” I offered him the rag, he took it and pressed it against the wound. “I think you need stitches. I’ll take you to the ER. Let me get dressed. Leo, you too.”

Giving me a look of protest, which was met with a defiant look of my own, he shrugged. “Okay, fine.” My dad grumbled, “Grab me one for the road, son.”

Leo looked at me as if asking my permission. “Dad, you know Mom’s rule about open containers in the car, not to mention it’s against the law.” I said, answering Leo’s unspoken question.

“Hon, I know I’m not acting like it, but this gash on my head does hurt.” My dad said, turning to Leo. “Now grab me the damn beer and let’s get going.”

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“How’d this happen?” I asked, once the three of us had piled into my Pontiac Grand AM, which had only recently become mine since getting my license a few months ago. My dad sat shotgun while Leo occupied the center seat in the back. When I’d asked him why he sat in the middle he said that this way he could be a part of the conversation better. I’d chuckled and playfully rolled my eyes. Being the youngest, Leo had always had an irrational fear of being left out.

“It’s windy as hell, River. Haven’t you noticed?” My dad asked as he cracked open one of the two beers he had ended up bringing. One for the trip there and the other on the way back, as he had put it.

“Yeah, Dad, I noticed.” It was about a twenty-five-minute drive to the nearest emergency room. One of the disadvantages of country living. I glanced over at my dad, praying that he didn’t get any blood on my cloth seats. “But what cut you?”

My dad took a long, contemplative sip before answering. “Well, I was working on the gutters, you know,” I nodded for him to continue. “And I had Leo holding the ladder so I wouldn’t fall off.” I could see my brother nodding his head in my rearview mirror, corroborating Dad’s story. “Well, Leo had just handed me my screwdriver and as I turned back around that damn strip of gutter got blown loose and cut me wide open.”

“And dad would’ve fallen if I hadn’t been holding the ladder.” Leo chimed in. “Isn’t that right, Dad?”

“You did good, son.” My dad said, turning back to give his son a smile.

“Lucky it didn’t cut your eye.” We’d made it off the dirt road and onto the highway, which meant nothing but fields of wheat and cattle until we reached the closest major city of Ellis. I rolled up the windows and turned on the A/C since we’d be driving at a higher speed now. After a few moments of cold air filling the car, I noticed an unpleasant smell. It was like copper mixed with sweat. I realized it came from the blood that had begun to dry on both the rag and my dad’s forehead. “I guess it’s not too hot out today.” I muttered as I turned off the A/C and rolled the windows back down.

“I wonder what Mom’s going to say when she hears about this.” Leo said to no one in particular.

“Oh shoot, I forgot to tell Mom.” I realized as I reached into the pocket of my jeans and grabbed my cell phone. “Here,” I said, reaching back to hand it to Leo. “Text Mom and let her know what’s going on.”

“I could’ve done it.” My dad said, finishing off the rest of his beer.

“No offense Dad, but I’d rather not get blood all over my phone.” I watched out of the corner of my eye as he crushed the flimsy can and tossed it out the window before reaching for the second can at his feet. So much for there and back.

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“How long are we going to be here?” Leo asked, sitting on the edge of the oversized waiting room chair and swinging his legs back and forth.

“I don’t know.” I replied absentmindedly as I stared down at the piece of paper on the clipboard that sat in my lap. I had offered to fill out the papers since my dad had his hands full with the bloody rag on his forehead. Leo sighed dramatically as he slouched back into his chair. I finished filling out the papers, having only to ask my dad a few questions here and there, and handed them back to the lady at the front desk.

“Daniel?” A nurse called out from the swinging doors a couple minutes later. My dad got up and followed her, the doors swinging shut behind the two of them.

“I’m bored,” Leo stated, flipping through a kid’s magazine that had a bunch of different kinds of jungle creatures on the front of it.

“Here,” I said, handing Leo my phone. “Play a game or something. Just stay off my social media.” I looked around the room, it was smaller than I had expected it to be. My dad

convinced me to take him to an emergency care clinic instead of a real hospital, claiming it would be cheaper. I leaned back in my lightly padded chair, trying to get comfortable. The place smelled like a weird mixture of bleach and cigarette smoke, which I assumed came either from the rugged looking man a few chairs to my right or one of the three ladies that sat at the front desk, all of whom looked like likely candidates. The lady that had handed my dad the papers looked to be in her late forties, around the same age as my dad, though her hair was way out of style, which suggested to me that she was older. It was a weird mix of straight, side-swept bangs while the back was all spikey and standing up in weird places. That, and the fact that it had been poorly dyed an almost platinum blonde told me she was trying to appear younger than she actually was.

“Here,” Leo said, shoving my phone into my hand. “I’m going to use the bathroom.”

“Don’t talk to strangers.” I said playfully, watching him disappear into the men’s room. My attention turned from the ladies at the front desk to the flat screen TV that hung in the corner of the room. Let’s Make a Deal was playing at a low volume. I watched as the subtitles tried to keep up with the audio. I found it funny that the words were never able to keep up with the conversations happening on the show, there was always a slight delay or misspelling. I wondered whose job it was to type the words, then I wondered who would ever want a job like that. My phone buzzed in my lap, pulling me out of my thoughts. I looked down to see a text from my mom saying that she was glad that Dad was alright and to pick something up for dinner.

“Hey, look,” Leo had returned from the bathroom and was standing right in front of me, pointing in the direction of the swinging doors. “Dad’s all better.”



“That was quick,” I mumbled as I got up to greet my dad and the nurse that walked him out. I noticed the way my dad clung to her arm, almost like the gash in his head had suddenly caused him to forget how to walk on his own. He hadn’t had any trouble walking before we got here. The nurse was young, probably only four or five years older than me. Her dark brown hair was pulled back into a tight bun, which made her look more mature than I’d assumed her to be. Her makeup was minimal, but she really didn’t need any at all. She was beautiful. I glanced back at the three older receptionists and wondered if they ever got jealous of the young nurses that worked here.

“He’s good to go, just needed a few stitches.” The nurse, Beth as her name tag stated, handed me a piece of paper with some scribbly looking writing on it.

“Just a few stitches,” My dad chimed in. “Don’t be modest. It took fifteen stitches to seal this sucker up.”

I glanced down at the piece of paper, which Beth noticed. “That’s just a prescription for some antibiotics, to make sure the wound doesn’t get infected.” She said. I nodded in response. “Now, your father might be a little out of it for a few hours.” I glanced over at my dad, but he was too busy lifting the bandage on his forehead and showing Leo the stitches. “The doctor gave him some pretty strong painkillers. Just be sure to keep an eye on him.” Beth said, speaking directly to me.

“Okay, will do.” I said before turning to my dad and brother. “Let’s go. Mom wants us to pick up something for dinner.”

Dad turned to Beth and placed a hand on her shoulder, giving it a light squeeze. “Thank you, doll.” He said, using his best Southern accent. Beth beamed brightly in reply, exposing a

perfect set of white teeth. My stomach tightened and a feeling of unease began to spread throughout my body as I watched the two of them. I glanced at Leo to see if he felt it too, but he wasn't paying any attention. Instead, he was standing at the door.

“Come on, let's go home.” Leo said, holding the door open. “I'm hungry.”

I shot the nurse one last glance before following Leo and my dad out the door.

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We'd stopped at a KFC after filling my dad's prescription, having decided we were all in the mood for something fried. I glanced at Leo in the back seat holding the bucket of chicken. “Don't eat anything until we get home.” I reminded him. He stuck his tongue out to me in response.

“Stop at the Jiffy Trip before we get home.” My dad instructed, looking at the bandage on his head in the little mirror on the sun visor.

“What for? I've got plenty of gas.” I replied.

“Don't argue,” He said, pushing the visor back in place. “I'm thirsty and my head hurts.”

My grip on the wheel tightened slightly. “You've got plenty to drink at home.” I reminded him carefully. I glanced at him for a moment and noticed the way his eyes seemed to be shifting from the road to me, and back again, as if he were having trouble focusing. “Are you alright, Dad? You looked kind of, um...”

“Drunk.” Leo said, looking at Dad with a worried expression.

“Just do it.” He said, louder than he needed to. His tone indicated that any further arguing was pointless, so I didn't reply.

I glanced out the window at the golden wheat field we were passing. The wind continued to blow, making the field look more like an ocean at sunset than a field of wheat. I thought back to when I was younger, my brother and I sitting in the back seat of this same car. I remembered how I would try and distract Leo, when Mom and Dad started arguing, by challenging him to a contest to see who could count the most cows before we got home. He always won. The sound of my dad's phone ringing snapped my attention back to the road.

"Hello?" My dad answered. "Who's this?" He asked, his voice slurring slightly, sounding confused.

"Is it Mom?" I asked. "Tell her we're almost home. Here, give it to me." I reached out to take the phone from his hand.

"It's, it's not your mother." He slurred, swatting my hand away and moving as far away from me as his seatbelt allowed him.

The nurse was right, he was out of it. "Who else would it be?" I asked, still trying to get the phone out of his hand and keep the car on the road at the same time. "Mom, Dad's a little out of it right now." I said loudly, hoping she could hear me. "Give it to me." I repeated.

"Okay, but it's not your mother." He kept repeating, his words slurring more and more. Reluctantly, he handed me the phone.

"Hey, Mom, we're almost home—" I began to say, but was cut off by a worried woman's voice on the other line.

“Oh my God, Daniel. Are you okay? I haven’t heard from you in hours. What happened, is everything alright?” The woman sounded young; her voice shaking with worry. “Daniel, hello, Daniel?” My mouth went dry, and I felt the grip on my dad’s phone begin to slip.

“Mom...?” I repeated slowly. My tongue felt heavy and there was a sudden sour taste in my mouth, like rotten milk.

“I’m not your mother,” The woman said, sounding irritated. “Where’s Daniel, is he alright?”

I moved the phone from my ear and hung up before tossing it into my dad’s lap.

“Who was it?” Leo asked, I could feel his curious eyes looking at me through the rearview mirror. “Was it Mom?”

I didn’t look back at him, I couldn’t. “No,” I replied, my hands gripping the steering wheel so tight my knuckles turned white. “It was a wrong number.”

I pulled into the Jiffy Trip that was just a few miles from our road and parked in front of the big glass window that displayed almost the entire store.

“Are we getting candy?” Leo asked excitedly, sitting up a little straighter.

“No,” My dad replied, struggling to undo his seatbelt. “Stay put, I’ll be right back.”

I watched as my dad staggered to the door and attempted to push it open, though it clearly displayed the word “pull” on the outside.

“Is Dad okay?” Leo asked, watching Dad with the same worried expression he’d worn when he’d burst into the house earlier.

“Yeah,” I said, watching as he finally made his way into the store. “He’s fine. It’s just the medicine he took earlier, it’s supposed to make him...sleepy.”

Leo moved around in his seat, straining to keep an eye on Dad. “He doesn’t look sleepy.”

I sighed heavily as I watched him stagger to the back of the store, almost bumping into the candy and chip displays, reemerging with two tall cans of Bud Light. The knot in my stomach returned as I watched him wink at the girl behind the counter as he grabbed the brown paper sack and head back out to the car.

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We pulled onto the gravel driveway of our house, greeted by Molly running alongside the car. I parked in my usual spot, in between Mom’s blue Corolla and Dad’s white Ford pickup. “Bring the food inside Leo, Dad and I will be in soon.” I looked at my brother through the rearview mirror, giving him a serious look that warned against questioning me. Leo gathered up the food and left my dad and I alone in the car.

“What’s that for, huh?” My dad asked, once again struggling to undo his seatbelt. I quickly reached over and pressed the button for him, releasing him.

“Who was that?” I asked, looking out the front of the windshield, my hands planted firmly on the steering wheel. My arms felt heavy, my stomach continued to hurt. “Who was that woman?”

“It wasn’t your mother.” My dad replied with a sort of slurred chuckle, his head lulling to one side to look at me.

My face felt hot and my back suddenly prickly. “I know that.” I said, my teeth clenched so tightly my jaw began to hurt. I took a slow breath, trying to stay calm, but I felt that prickly feeling spread throughout my entire body, making me feel both hot and uneasy. “Who was she, Dad?” I held the wheel tighter as I turned to look at him. My eyes met his, and I was reminded of the fact that we shared the same eye color; a golden brown, like a field of wheat. It was then that I noticed his eyes were watery, just like mine. He didn’t reply, he didn’t have to. I grabbed my keys from the ignition and flung myself out of the car.

“Hey, where’s your father?” My mom asked as she walked out of the front door and onto the porch. She held a red kitchen towel in her hands and her shirt was spotted with soap and water. I did my best to avoid her gaze, but she could see the distress in my eyes. “Are you okay, sweetie?”

“I’m fine,” I said as I pushed past her, keeping my head down. “Dad needs help out of the car.”

I could tell she wanted to say something more but had decided against it. “Go help your brother set the table so we can eat.” She called over her shoulder before heading towards the car to assist my dad.

“I’m not hungry.” I muttered, heading into my room and locking the door behind me.