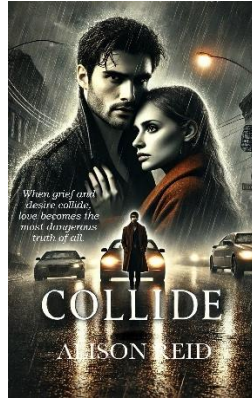


# Collide

by Alison Reid



The trauma bay was cold—too bright, too sterile. Machines beeped in steady, indifferent rhythms. The hum of the fluorescent lights felt like mockery. And Derek lay there.

Still. Silent. Peaceful in a way that hurt to look at.

Jason stepped closer, his heartbeat a thunderous echo in his ears. Derek's face wasn't twisted in pain; he looked almost asleep. But that stillness—that unnatural quiet—told the truth.

Jason's breath hitched. Memories crushed in: Derek laughing at something stupid, Derek calling him for help, Derek insisting he was fine when he wasn't.

And the bitter truth—Jason hadn't been around much lately. Work had swallowed him. Derek had been dealing with... something. Something Jason had brushed off, promising, "We'll talk soon."

There would be no soon.

Regret surged through him like acid, burning its way into every corner of his chest.

Then—slowly—regret sharpened. Hardened.

Turned into rage.

His mind flashed to the last call. To Derek's broken voice. To the woman's voice in the background—soft, pleading.

Sarah.

The betrayal. The cheating. The panic in Derek's voice. The way he'd sounded moments before everything went horribly wrong.

Jason's jaw clenched, anger building with terrifying clarity.

She had been there.

She had been with him.

She had pushed him to this edge. *Hadn't she?*

If she hadn't betrayed him...

If she hadn't hurt him...

If she hadn't been in that car—

The grief in his chest twisted hard enough to steal his breath.

Jason curled his hand into a fist. He didn't know the full truth—not yet. But he would. He had to.

And when he found out exactly what part Sarah played in Derek's final moments...

She would pay for it.

He couldn't do this. Not right now.

The walls felt as if they were closing in on him, the air too thin, too sharp in his lungs.

He needed answers.

Jason stepped out of the room where Derek now lay still and impossibly quiet, his legs moving on instinct alone. His thoughts were a violent storm—rage, disbelief, grief—each one crashing into the next. He barely registered the nurses rushing past, the chaotic urgency of the emergency department surging around him.

Until he saw her.

Sarah.

She lay on a stretcher, pale and streaked with blood, her lashes fluttering in a ghost of consciousness. A trauma team surrounded her, working in swift, coordinated motions, but Jason barely noticed their hands, their equipment, their urgency. His gaze tunnelled in on her—fragile, broken, surviving.

His chest clamped tight.

*Who the hell was this woman?*

*What had she done to Derek?*

His brother was dead. And she—this woman whose voice he'd heard pleading in the background—was still breathing.

*Why?*

Had she ever cared about Derek at all? Or had he been nothing more than a stepping stone, an inconvenience, another casualty of her selfishness? The questions burned like acid, feeding the fury rising in him.

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