

The Basement Tapes

Prologue

October Skies

*These shattered dreams from broken wings of love
October skies and city lights were all a blur
And high tide came washing them away*

* * *

After the funeral, I want you to go back to the house with Audrey. Under the stairs in the basement, next to the Christmas decorations, there is a cardboard box with your name written on one of the sides. Take that box home with you, and go through it when you're ready.

I might not be around any longer, but you will always be my baby girl, and I will always love you. Nothing in Heaven or on Earth could ever change that.

Love always,

Dad

I sniffled quietly as I finished reading my father's final words to me. They might have only been in the form of a letter, words on blue-lined notebook paper penned in Dad's familiar right-slanting hand, but as I read them I could almost hear him speaking to me.

"Miki?"

I very nearly didn't hear my stepmother speaking to me at first. "He hasn't even been gone a week," I said quietly, my voice choked with tears. "It feels like it's been a year already." I dug the heel of my left hand into my closed left eye. "Why does this hurt so much?"

"It hurts so much because you loved him," Audrey told me gently. "I'm hurting too, but I think your pain is greater than mine because he was your father. That's always a huge loss." Out of the corner of my right eye I saw Audrey flick on the left blinker. "It will get better one day, Miki. That much I can promise you. The pain will never completely disappear, but eventually it'll stop hurting so badly."

The rest of the drive from the Kembla Grange Lawn Cemetery back to the house where I had essentially grown up was a quiet one, with the rumbling of the engine, the *hiss* and *click* of the

windshield wipers and the occasional rhythmic *tick-tick-tick* of the right and left blinkers the only sounds to be heard. I was too caught up in my memories to notice that Audrey had stopped speaking to me, and I was in no mood to open my mouth. The house in North Wollongong where I had spent most of my childhood and my early adulthood, close to the university, was where the wake was to be held – which made it the one place I least wanted to be. But even despite this, I knew that as my father's only child I played the most important part, and so I had very little choice in the matter.

The street outside the house was so packed with cars lining the kerbs that Audrey was having a hard time finding the driveway. "The vultures are already gathering," I heard her mutter, and I saw her hands tighten around the steering wheel. It wasn't hard to see what she meant – a decent number of those in the waiting crowd held expensive looking digital cameras, which could only mean one thing. Journalists. And as soon as Audrey parked the car, they began to swarm in earnest.

Years of tagging along when Dad went on tour had taught me one thing in particular when it came to dealing with the press – you don't ever let them get to you. You just ignore them, let their vicious words, rumours and vitriol slide off your back like droplets of water off the feathers of a duck. But even so, all those years of being hounded and annoyed by those in the media were finally beginning to come to a head. It took me just ten seconds of being blinded by camera flashes to completely snap.

"Why can't you just leave us alone?" I screamed as soon as I was out of the car. "All you fuckwits care about is getting the next story. You don't give a damn that there are people *grieving* here. My father *died* last week, and we've barely had a chance to say goodbye to him. And here all you bastards are, clamouring for your next photo opportunity with not a whit of concern for your subjects. All I want today is to just be left in peace so that I can begin to properly mourn the loss of one of the most important people to me. Just fuck off, all right?" I quickly glanced at the watch I habitually wore on my right wrist. "And if you twats aren't gone within the next fifteen minutes, I'm calling the police."

My rant over, I squared my shoulders, held my head high, and made my way through the tightly packed crowd to the front veranda of the house.

"You really shouldn't have said that to them, Miki," Audrey told me as soon as we were safely inside the house, the front door closed and locked behind us. "They'll have a field day with it."

"To be completely honest Audrey, I don't really give a damn anymore," I replied tiredly. I rubbed at my temples with my thumbs, feeling the beginnings of a headache starting to build behind my eyes. "Somebody had to say it to them, and I've wanted to for a long time. And frankly, I feel so much better now."

Audrey pressed her lips together in a tight, thin line, but otherwise didn't make any sort of a response.

"*There* you are, Michaela."

I tensed reflexively upon hearing the full, proper version of my first name, my eyes snapping shut out of nothing more than pure instinct. Its usage more often than not meant only one thing to me – that I was in deep trouble. And seeing as I had done nothing to warrant being in deep shit, so far as I knew anyhow, I could see no reason for being called by that name.

At least, not until I opened my eyes and turned around – and came face to face with the two people I hated the most in the entire world. My paternal grandparents.

"I'm sorry, were you *speaking* to me?" I asked, putting as much venom into my tone as I could muster.

My grandmother took a step forward. "Now see here Michaela-" she started.

"There you go again!" I interrupted. "And anyway, what gives you two the right to even *be* here? The last time I checked, you had *disowned* my father for something as small as fucking his girlfriend and getting her knocked up. With *me*, I might add. You never got to get to know me because of that, and you brought it on yourselves." I took in a deep, shaky breath. "My dad *hated* the two of you, and he raised me to feel the same way. And you know what? I don't even give a damn that you were never a part of my life. If you'd treated my father a little better when I was a little girl, maybe things would be different. But they're not, and neither of you deserve to be here. So just go away and leave us all in peace." I turned to head into the lounge room, but thought better of it for just a second. "Oh, and by the way? My name's not Michaela. It's *Miki*."

Fighting the urge to give my pathetic excuses for grandparents the finger, I followed Audrey into the lounge room and all but fell onto the lounge next to my uncle. "Why are they even *here*?" I asked plaintively. "They hated him while he was still alive, so what's so different now?"

"I don't like it either, Miki," Uncle Zac told me. "But you have to give them a little bit of credit – they might have washed their hands of him long ago, but they're at least here today. You have to

remember that while you lost your dad, they've lost a son. And that's a huge loss by anyone's measure."

"And you lost your brother," I said softly. "That has to hurt a lot."

"More than you know, Miki." He drew me close and gave me a quick, tight hug. "Come on, it's time for you to say a few words."

"I don't want to. It means that I'm beginning to accept that he's gone and won't ever be coming back." I hiccupped quietly. "I couldn't even say goodbye when he was being buried. How am I supposed to get up in front of everyone and tell them how much Dad meant to me?"

"You'll do it because it'll make him even prouder of you than he ever was in life. Do you know what he told me one day when you were a little girl?" he asked, and I shook my head. "He told me that you were his sunshine. You made his life brighter just by being in it." I felt him squeeze my shoulder gently. "Now you go out there and shine for him one more time."

And I did just that. After lunch, everyone went out into the yard. I stayed on the back deck with Audrey and my uncle, knowing I was standing just above the basement room that had been mine from the day Dad, Audrey and I had moved in until the day I had left home three years earlier.

"Can we have quiet, please?" Audrey asked, her clear voice ringing out across the fenced off patch of grass and terracotta paving. One by one the relatives, family friends and my father's colleagues in the music industry that had preceded us to the house quietened, until the only sound that could be heard was that of distant traffic weaving its way through the city. "Thank you. Now, while we are all grieving the loss of someone who was very dear to us, there is someone who feels this loss more keenly than most – his daughter Michaela, or Miki as she is affectionately known. She has a few words she would like to say to us all."

I stepped forward very slightly, putting my hands on the railing of the deck as I closed my eyes. This was my moment now, my chance to tell all those present just how I felt now that my world was slowly but surely crumbling down around me.

"I loved my dad," I said to begin. "I still do, and I always will. It's just that, now...he's no longer around for me to say those words to him. And it sucks. It really, truly sucks.

"I know how fortunate I was to have had him in my life for as long as I did. He was my dad for twenty-seven years, which is longer than a lot of people get. It doesn't make this any easier, though – it still hurts so badly that I'd rather die than face another day without him.

“When I found out that my dad had been killed, my whole world stopped. There are really no words to describe how I felt. And now that he’s gone there’s a gaping chasm deep inside me, one that I know in my heart can never be filled.” I drew in a deep breath, trying to steady myself. “I want him to come home so badly and tell me that he’s never leaving me again, that he’ll always be there for me when I need him the most. Well, right now is when I need him the most...and he isn’t here anymore.”

That was the moment I well and truly lost it. My voice faltered and broke, and I felt the first tears begin to slide their way down my face. In that moment, I was nothing more than a little girl who missed her daddy and wanted him to come home – a want that would never again be fulfilled. I felt myself being pulled close to someone who I knew could only be my uncle, and I buried my face in his dress shirt and let the tears come. He wasn’t my father, could never *be* my father, but he was the next best thing.

I ended up hiding myself away in my old bedroom for the rest of the wake. It was now mostly a storage and practice room, but some vestiges of my childhood remained. Prominent among them was my old toy box, which had been painted a blinding purple and plastered with glittery stickers of fairies and mermaids. But what I was looking for wasn’t in my toy box.

I found it just where Dad had said in his letter it would be, next to a long white cardboard box that I knew could only contain a Christmas tree. It was a fairly nondescript cardboard box, taped shut with silver duct tape and my full name written in black text across one side. *Michaela Marie Hanson*. For some very strange reason the only person I had never minded calling me by my proper first name had been Dad, but even then I could only stand seeing it in text.

Without even hesitating I sat myself down on the floor, ripped off the duct tape and unfolded the flaps at the top of the box. Inside the box was nothing but cassette tapes.

“Miki, are you down here?”

The door at the top of the stairs opened, and I looked up just in time to see Audrey coming down into my room. “Yeah,” I called back as I went back to staring at the tapes. As soon as Audrey stepped off the last stair onto the carpet, I fairly exploded. “*Cassette tapes*, Audrey! That’s what he told me to find. A whole box of cassette tapes that I can’t even listen to because I don’t own a tape player.”

“Hold up a second, Miki. When did he tell you this?”

"It's in the letter he left for me. Told me to look for this box. I'm not even going to be able to find out what's on them because nobody sells tape players anymore."

Audrey crouched next to me and took the box out of my hands. "I am very sure that we have one around here somewhere," she said gently. "Come upstairs – bring the box with you, and we'll see what's on them."

While Audrey was hunting around for a tape player, I sat myself down at the kitchen table, picking at a leftover chicken sandwich as I poked through the box. Most of the tapes were labelled as having been recorded from the radio, and others were pre-recorded singles and albums, but one of the tapes was different from the rest. Written on its label in my father's handwriting was *T. Hanson – EMI Australia demo – October 4 2009*. I knew exactly what it was – a copy of the same demo recording that had landed him a record deal so many years ago.

"Here we go," Audrey said as she came back into the kitchen, carrying a small tape player. She unwound the power cord and cleared a space on the kitchen bench before plugging it into a power point. "What did you find?"

"Dad's demo tape." I held it out to Audrey, trusting that she would know how to use it. "I think I need to listen to this one first." She took the tape from me, opened the hatch that would hold the tape in place, and slid the tape home. "And can you tell me how you and Dad first met?"

"Oh, I think I can definitely tell you that story." She pressed play after closing the hatch, and soon I could hear my father's achingly familiar voice tumbling from the speaker of the tape player. "The day we met, my car was giving me no end of trouble. And right when I was on my way to work, the poor thing just gave out..."

Chapter 1

Down Again

*I'll be braving the winters the best that I know
'Cause nothing's the same when you wait for something
I was alone till I thought it was better that way*

* * *

"Daddy."

A pair of little hands curled around the brass doorhandle, pulling it downward so that the door could be pushed inward. The room beyond was darker than the rest of the unit, the drapes at the window pulled tightly closed. Into the room tiptoed a six-year-old girl, who was carrying a mobile phone in one hand and clutching the ears of a fat purple toy rabbit in the other.

"Daddy?"

The hand holding the ears of the rabbit let go of the toy, and the girl raised herself up on tiptoes. She felt around for a light switch with the very tips of her fingers, drawing her bottom lip in through her teeth, and pushed down on the switch when she had located it. Bright fluorescent light flooded the room, lighting up all that was contained within – a built-in wardrobe with mirrored sliding doors, a dark blue plastic laundry hamper that was close to overflowing, a dark grey hard guitar case, a queen-size bed with a black bedspread, and a set of pine night tables.

The girl reached up onto the bed and put the phone down atop the bedspread, climbing up once her hands were free. The object of her quest lay very close to the middle of the bed, facing the window and almost buried in the covers. Only a shock of messy light brown hair and the sound of someone breathing gave any indication that the occupant of the bed was anything that could even remotely be considered human.

She grinned widely, before creeping up to the head of the bed on her hands and knees. Once she was seated, she grabbed a handful of hair and lifted it upward, and leaned in very close.

"Daddy!"

And just like that, Taylor Hanson was wide awake.

"Jesus *Christ!*" he all but shouted. He twisted around in bed only to come face-to-face with his daughter. "Miki, for hell's *sake,*" he groaned. "What time is it?"

"Don't know," Miki replied. She scrambled back to the end of the bed and retrieved the phone. "Uncle Zac's on the phone," she told her father, holding out the phone to him.

"You mean that he *was* on the phone," Taylor corrected. "Did you hang up on him again?"

"Uh-huh."

Taylor let out a rough chuckle. "Michaela Marie, you are an absolute terror," he laughed softly before flipping his phone open. It wasn't long until he was scrolling through his phone directory in search of his brother's number, and was soon dialling.

"Hello?"

"Your niece hung up on you," Taylor informed his younger brother. He glanced across at Miki, who had climbed back down off the bed and was now contentedly playing with her toy rabbit. "She pretty much screamed in my ear to wake me up." He rubbed at his free ear as if Miki's shriek had given him an earache. "So what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Only that I'm on my way down there right now. Train's just pulled into Helensburgh."

"Shit," Taylor muttered. "Well, thanks for the heads-up. I have to get dressed now."

"Yes, please do," Zac said, his tone vaguely disgusted. "The last thing we need is for everyone in Wollongong to be scarred for life."

"Oh, you know you love it."

Zac let out a bark of laughter. "Right. Anyway, you get some pants on and meet me at the station. And I hope you've got breakfast going, because I am starving."

"You're coming grocery shopping with me in that case. There's almost nothing in the kitchen."

"What, your last orgy cleaned you out?"

"Do you want to *walk* all the way to my place?" Taylor asked pointedly.

"Okay, sorry. I'll see you soon."

"See you soon," Taylor said, and hung up. "This should be fun," he muttered.

"Daddy?"

Miki had now abandoned her toy, and was peeking up over the edge of the mattress at her father. "Yeah Miki?" Taylor asked.

"Is Uncle Zac coming to visit?"

"Yes, Uncle Zac is coming to visit. Which means that you need to get dressed, and I need to have a shower before I get dressed." He kicked the covers off and raised himself up, swinging his feet over the side of the mattress. "You go and watch TV for a little bit, okay?"

"Okay!"

Taylor watched Miki run off out of his bedroom, dragging her rabbit along the floor behind her, before running his hands through his hair and letting his eyes drop closed. Based on past visits he knew that it typically took Zac's train forty minutes to travel between Helensburgh and Wollongong. He also knew that it took him around five minutes to get from Keiraville into the centre of Wollongong, longer if the traffic was backed up. "Dear God, give me strength," he muttered as he opened his eyes and stood up.

One long, warm shower later, he was beginning to feel considerably more human. "Miki," he called out as he left his bedroom, rubbing his hair dry with a towel as he walked. "Miki, time to get dressed – you can watch TV again later." He looked into the lounge room only to see Miki sitting on the floor in front of the television, so close that her nose was almost touching the screen. "Miki, I'm not going to tell you again..."

"But Daddy, it's almost finished!"

"I said that you could watch it for a little bit. And when I tell you to go and get dressed, that means you have to go and get dressed. We have to go and meet up with Uncle Zac very soon, and if you don't hurry up we'll be late." He went into the lounge room and knelt down next to Miki. "And we both know what your uncle's like when we don't meet him on time. TV off, now."

Miki let out a sigh. "Okay."

"Good girl." Taylor turned the TV off and got back to his feet, scooping Miki up as he straightened. "And after we've picked up your uncle, we'll go shopping."

"I like shopping!" Miki said happily. She squealed as Taylor tossed her over his shoulder and carried her out of the lounge room. "Can I have chocolate when we go shopping?"

"If you hurry up and get dressed, I'll think about it." They entered Miki's bedroom, and Taylor deposited Miki onto her bed. "I'll find you something to wear, then you get yourself dressed. You've got five minutes." He crouched back down and took Miki's right hand in his own, and touched her watch. "When the big hand here" he tapped the face of her watch "gets to the nine, I want you to come out into the kitchen so I can fix your hair up. Then we'll go. All right?"

"Okay Daddy."

Taylor quickly kissed Miki on the forehead, straightened up again and turned towards Miki's dresser, opening drawers and pulling out jeans, socks, a purple T-shirt and a white long-sleeved undershirt. "Don't forget – when the big hand gets to the nine."

The two of them left for Wollongong station at ten to eleven, Taylor's Mitsubishi joining the traffic snaking its way into the heart of the CBD. It was a cold July day, one that in Taylor's mind was reserved for staying in bed and catching up on his reading. Unfortunately for him, not only did he have to collect his darling brother from the train station, but he also had to restock the kitchen cupboards. Both had the potential to take all day if he chose to let them. An INXS song was playing on the radio as he turned onto Robsons Road, and he sang along with the chorus.

"Touch me and I will follow...in your afterglow...heal me from all this sorrow...as I let you go...I will find my way when I see your eyes...now I'm living in your afterglow..."

"Daddy?"

"Yeah baby girl?"

"Are you singing?"

"Yes, Miki. Did you like it?"

Miki seemed to consider this for a few moments. "Yes," she replied at last. "Can I sing like that?"

"I don't know. Why don't you try it for me?"

Taylor glanced in the rear view mirror just in time to see Miki frowning in seeming concentration.

"I don't know what the words are," she said at last.

Taylor chuckled quietly. "That's okay, Miki. Maybe you can try again another time."

The 9:27 am service from Sydney Terminal rolled into Wollongong station right on schedule, pulling to a stop alongside platform 2 at one minute past eleven. "Stay away from the edge, Miki,"

Taylor called out as Miki ventured close to the train, right as the doors opened and passengers began pouring out onto the platform.

"She's not going to fall off the platform, mate," a voice beside him said. Taylor looked to his left to see Zac standing not half a metre away, hands in his pockets and an overfilled duffle bag slung over one shoulder. Between his feet was a backpack that had one very frayed strap.

"You need a new backpack," Taylor pointed out.

"And you need to stop worrying so much," Zac retorted, before calling out. "Hey Miki!"

Miki turned around, and even from where he stood against the exterior wall of the station building Taylor could see her eyes light up. "Uncle Zac!" she shouted, and ran over to her father and uncle.

"Hey squirt," Zac said as Miki launched herself at him. "Shouldn't you be in school today?"

"It's school holidays!" Miki said happily. "Daddy doesn't go to work when I'm on school holidays," she added thoughtfully.

"Yes I do Miki, you're just having too much fun at Auntie Jackie's house to notice," Taylor said. "You ready?" he asked Zac.

As if in response, Zac bent down and picked up his backpack. "When you are."

Once Zac's gear had been loaded into the backseat of his brother's car, and once Miki had been buckled back into her booster seat, they set off. The drive from the train station to the Woolworths supermarket in the middle of town was a short one, and it wasn't long until the three of them were wandering up and down the aisles.

"So has Jackie said anything about Claire lately?" Zac asked from his position behind the trolley. They'd stopped in the produce department first. He had one hand on the handlebar of the trolley and the other playing with Miki's pigtails.

"Why would she?" Taylor asked in reply, not looking up from hunting through the apples. "Jackie knows how I feel about her sister."

"She's Miki's mother, Tay."

"And she *also* ran off when Miki was six months old," Taylor retorted. He picked a couple of likely-looking apples from the pile in front of him, examined them closely, and dropped them into a

plastic bag. "On my *birthday*, I might add. So you'll have to excuse me if I don't particularly give a damn about her."

Zac raised his hands in seeming self-defence. "All right, keep your hair on. I was only asking."

"Daddy?" Miki asked as Taylor moved on to the oranges. She was seated happily in the trolley's child seat, drumming on the handlebar to a beat only she could hear.

"Yeah baby?"

"Who's Claire?"

Taylor and Zac looked at each other briefly, blue meeting brown for just an instant. "She's an old friend of your daddy's," Zac replied, deciding that a little white lie was best in this instance. "She did a very bad thing when you were a baby, and your daddy doesn't like her very much anymore."

"Oh. Did she go to jail?"

"No," Zac replied. "What she did wasn't bad enough for that."

"She damn well should have," Taylor muttered.

The trolley slowly filled as they made their way through the supermarket. It didn't take Taylor long to remember why he avoided grocery shopping with his brother and his daughter like the plague. They were both extremely sneaky when it came to making additions to the trolley. He had already been forced to remove a tin of Milo and a packet of jelly snakes, and they weren't even halfway through the supermarket.

"I don't like her having too much sugar," Taylor said when Zac protested. "She's too much like you already, and we both know how you get when you're hopped up on it."

"She's a kid, Tay," Zac said. "Let her be hyper once in a while."

"I want to make sure she's raised right, Zac. Our parents made enough mistakes with me – I don't want history to repeat itself."

"Taylor, listen to me okay? You're a good dad. Yeah, Mum and Dad did make a lot of mistakes, but you were their first. Of course they're not going to be perfect parents the first time out. Hell, they made tonnes of mistakes even with me."

Taylor frowned. "That doesn't make me feel any better, you know." He dropped a jar of coffee grounds into the trolley's basket. "And at least our mother didn't continually tell you whenever she got on the piss that you were a *mistake*."

"She wouldn't," Zac said in disbelief.

"Every time you, Jess and our father went out and left me at home with her," Taylor replied. "Soon as the front door closed out came the Bacardi and the Coke, and I'd just have to sit there and take it."

"I had no idea," Zac said quietly. "Really, Tay, I swear I didn't."

"Yeah, well, just be thankful it wasn't you."

And with those words Taylor walked off down the aisle, hands in the pockets of his jeans and head bowed. Zac watched him go for a few moments before following him.

* * *

Monday was a whirlwind of activity. Zac was due back in Penrith that morning, and Miki had to be dropped off at her aunt's house before Taylor could even think about going in to work. School holidays were the worst times to work in a cinema, as far as he was concerned.

"What time is your train again?" Taylor asked as he cleared up after breakfast. He was already in his work clothes, having showered and dressed almost as soon as he'd gotten out of bed.

"Just before a quarter past eight," Zac replied.

"I still can't understand why you don't drive down. It wouldn't take you so long to get here for one."

Zac raised an eyebrow at his brother. "Have you even taken notice of petrol prices these days?" he asked incredulously. "Yeah, it wouldn't take me so long, but I'd be wasting all my pay on putting petrol in my car. I get the train down, it might take me a few hours but it only costs me fifteen-eighty each way."

"Yeah okay, keep your hair on." Taylor carried the cereal bowls to the sink, rinsed and stacked them, and started putting away the cereal boxes, the sugar bowl and the milk. "Miki, go and get dressed okay?"

"Okay Daddy." Miki slid down off her chair and ran toward her bedroom.

"Good girl," Taylor said absently. Once the sink was packed, ready for the dishes to be done that night, he ran his hands through his hair, dug around in his pockets and pulled out a rubber band, and tied his hair back into a low ponytail. "I need a haircut," he muttered as he tucked the strands that were too short for a ponytail behind his ears. "Wouldn't mind a cigarette either."

It was nine-thirty by the time Taylor finally made it to work. Miki had turned clingy in the interim between dropping Zac at the train station and arriving at her aunt's house, and it had taken Taylor promising that she could stay up late and watch a movie to appease her. He had conveniently neglected to mention that his definition of 'late' did not necessarily match his daughter's.

"Sorry I'm late!" he called out as he ran into the lobby of the Greater Union cinemas on Burelli Street. His work colleagues and his boss were already in the middle of the morning meeting, otherwise known as the daily delegation of duties. Glenda looked up from her clipboard just as Taylor skidded into his place.

"Nametag, Hanson," came a mutter from beside him.

"I don't believe I asked you to open your mouth, Stratton," he retorted.

"That's enough," Glenda said sharply. "So nice of you to join us at last, Taylor."

"Didn't miss much, did I?" he asked as he pulled his nametag from his front left pocket and fixed it into place on his shirt.

"As I was *saying*," Glenda said, returning to the task at hand, "this is the second week of school holidays, so today is naturally going to be busy. To that end, this is how I want you all to divide up today. Stratton and Hanson, you're on the box office and the phones. Lydia and Michael, take the candy bar. Vanessa, Xavier and Anne, you're checking tickets – decide between yourselves who's taking which theatre. Luke, Camilla and Joshua, projectors – same deal as Ness, Zave and Anne. Rest of you are ushers and cleaning after each session. Shift supervisor is Hanson here – you lot answer to him today. If you need to take a break, radio in to him and let him know – radio in again when you're back on duty." Glenda looked up from her clipboard again. "Hanson, if *you* need to take a break, either let Stratton know or radio in to me."

Taylor snapped off a mock salute. "Will do, boss."

They all split off into their designated groups not long afterward. The first sessions of the day began at ten o'clock, with the cinema opening for business fifteen minutes beforehand, and so in the quarter hour between the end of the meeting and the start of day there was quite a bit to be done.

"I want you on the phones this morning," Taylor told his co-worker as they set themselves up at the box office. "We'll swap after lunch." He glanced at her nametag, feeling just a slight twinge of annoyance. Nothing annoyed him more than being called by his last name at work, but he knew that calling him by the name he was more accustomed to would confuse everyone. Both he and Stratton shared a name – something he was reminded of when the phone rang for the first time that day.

"Greater Union Wollongong, this is Taylor Stratton speaking." Minutes later Stratton held out the phone to Taylor. "Hey Hanson, your brat's on the phone."

Taylor glared at her as he took the handset. "She is *not* a brat, for your information. Get back to work." Stratton rolled her eyes but moved over to the ticket counter, and Taylor stepped back against the wall so he could take the call in relative privacy. "Hey Miki."

"Hi Daddy," Miki said. "Auntie Jackie said she's taking me and Matilda and Renee to the movies."

"Oh is she?"

"Yep! She said we can see *Harry Potter*."

"Did she now?"

"Uh-huh. But I told her I was gonna ask you first."

Taylor chuckled softly. "Good girl. Though I thought you'd want to see *Hannah Montana*, not *Harry Potter*."

"*Hannah Montana* sucks."

"That's not very nice, Michaela," Taylor chastised, using his daughter's proper name so she knew he meant business. "Put your aunt on the phone."

"Okay Daddy. I love you."

"I love you too, baby girl."

There was a sort of rustling sound, and soon Taylor heard the voice of his ex-girlfriend's sister.

"Hey Taylor."

"Hey Jackie. What's this about you taking my daughter to see the new *Harry Potter* movie?"

Jackie sighed. "I told the kids that if they behaved themselves while I cleaned the house, I'd take them to see a movie this morning. Matilda and Renee have been at me all school holidays to let them see that movie, and, well, a promise is a promise."

Taylor let his eyes drop closed briefly. "You and your promises. Where are you taking them to see it?"

"Greater Union Wollongong. Figured it was best seeing as you're there anyway, and I can bring Miki out to you if the movie freaks her out."

Taylor reached back and pulled hard on his ponytail, something he had a tendency to do when he was annoyed or frustrated. "All right. Just remind me to pay you back for Miki's ticket when I pick her up tonight."

"I will, don't you worry." Jackie was silent for a moment. "Also, I think I should warn you that I saw Claire hanging around in front of Crown Central yesterday afternoon."

Taylor swore silently. "Wonderful," he said flatly. "Thanks for the heads-up, Jacks."

"No problem. I'll let you get back to work."

Taylor was so completely rattled by the news that his ex-girlfriend was back in town that the rest of the morning passed by in more or less a complete blur. He barely noticed when Jackie brought her kids and Miki in to see the sixth instalment in the *Harry Potter* series, answered his radio and the phones completely mechanically, and hardly acknowledged Stratton when she informed him that she was taking a break. A hand on his shoulder broke him out of his stupor, and he looked back over his shoulder to see Stratton standing behind him, holding a large brown paper McDonald's bag.

"Glenda told us two to take our lunch break," she said. "Lunch is my treat." She shook the bag slightly. "Come on."

They ended up walking up into the Mall, sitting down on the steps leading up to Church Street North to eat their lunch. "So what's eating you?" Stratton asked as they unpacked the contents of the bag.

"My ex-girlfriend's back in town," Taylor replied as he checked over his lunch. "I haven't seen her since my twentieth birthday."

"So six-and-a-half years, then?"

Taylor nodded. "Yeah. She walked out on Miki and I and never came back." Satisfied that his chicken burger was the way he liked it (chicken, tomato, bacon and cheese, hold the mayonnaise and salad), he put it back together and took a bite. "Personally I think I'm better off without her, and my daughter's definitely better off for never having really known her."

Stratton eyed him briefly. "Why do you think that?"

Because being with her was more or less killing me, he almost replied. "She was manipulative, for one," he answered instead. "Emotionally abusive, too." He was completely aware that he was describing his mother, but his co-worker had never met his mother or his ex – going on that alone, he knew he could get away with it. "And I despise manipulators and abusers with a passion."

"Sounds like a real piece of work."

Taylor laughed mirthlessly. "That's an understatement if ever there was one."

"What will you do if you run into her while she's here?"

"I honestly couldn't tell you. Best case scenario, I'll ignore her. Worst case, I'll do something that'll get me in trouble with the cops. Entirely aside from assault being a criminal offence, I'm pretty sure that guys who bash women are considered to be cowards. And I don't intend for myself ever to be seen that way."

"Well, let's hope that you do end up ignoring her."

"You and me both."

The two of them ended up heading back to work just before one-thirty. Taylor had just walked past the Amphitheatre stage when Stratton called out to him.

"Hey Taylor."

He stopped walking and turned around. She was still standing on the steps where they had spent lunch, hands in the pockets of her work pants. "Yeah?"

"You don't have to call me by my last name, you know." She walked down to ground level and began wandering over to the stage. "And I do have a first name, in case you weren't aware. Taylor's my middle name – my dad's called me by that name all my life, and it's pretty much stuck."

"Well, what's your first name then?"

“Joanna.”

“That’s a nice name.”

He was rewarded with a bright smile. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll call you Joanna, then. Should cut down on the confusion.”

The newly-christened Joanna nodded. “That sounds good to me.” She tapped her name tag. “Though don’t go thinking I’ll get Glenda to have a new tag made up for me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. And you know, Taylor’s my middle name too.”

Joanna raised an eyebrow at him. “Pull the other one, it plays *Jingle Bells*.”

“I’m serious. Here, I’ll show you.” He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and opened it to his driver’s licence. “There. My full name is Jordan Taylor Hanson. I’ve always gone by Taylor as well – for some reason my parents thought it sounded better than calling me Jordan all the time.” He closed his wallet and returned it to his pocket. “And really, by this point in time I’m far too used to being called by my middle name to want to go by any other.”

“Well, join the club.” Joanna nodded toward Burelli Street. “Come on. Glenda will be wondering where we’ve got to.” And with those words, she started walking briskly down the hill. Taylor stood there for a few moments, just watching her go, before following her lead.

He was so surprised by being called by his middle name, after three years of Joanna calling him by his last name, that he didn’t even think to ask what had changed her mind.

Work finished at five-thirty, and after he had signed out he walked down Burelli Street toward the lights opposite Cooney’s Tavern. It was highly unlikely that he’d be able to get to his car through the mall itself, being as it was a Monday, so he basically had to go the long way.

“Hey Taylor, you coming to Cooney’s this arvo?” he heard one of his co-workers call out. He looked back over his shoulder to see Joshua Campbell coming up behind him. “Rach asked me to ask you if you’d be dropping in for a drink. She wants to talk to you about something.”

Taylor shook his head. “Nah, I gotta go pick up my kid from her aunt’s house, then I have to get home.”

“So leave the kid at her aunt’s a little while longer.”

“Not happening, Josh. Sorry.”

Joshua shrugged. "Oh well, I tried didn't I?" He reached out and clapped Taylor on the shoulder. "See you tomorrow, then?"

Taylor nodded and raised his hand for a high-five. "Definitely tomorrow."

Jackie's house was in Gwynneville, not far from where Taylor and Miki lived, and so it didn't take Taylor long to get there after work. He could see someone that looked very suspiciously like Miki standing at the front door, peeking out through the flyscreen, as he got out of his car.

"Michaela Hanson, close the front door!" Jackie was yelling as Taylor came up the front yard. "You're letting all the heat out!"

"But Daddy's here!"

"Yeah, and he can ring the doorbell just like everyone else. Now close the bloody door!"

"Too late," Taylor called out as he stepped up onto the front porch. Miki pushed the door open and ran out of the house. "You ready to go home, kid?"

"Yep!"

"That's my girl. Go get your stuff, okay?"

"Can we have pizza for dinner?" Miki asked. "Please, Daddy?"

"I don't see why not."

Miki let out a cheer and charged back inside. She returned minutes later with her backpack and her jacket. "Pizza pizza pizza!" she chanted as father and daughter walked to the car, and Taylor smiled. It was moments like this that he was happiest – and he never would have wished for his life to turn out any other way.

Chapter 2

Messing With My Head

I sit back, still waiting

It's so hard, so frustrating

You run hot, and then you're cold

* * *

The less than harmonious strains of Buckcherry's *Crazy Bitch* rang out, startling Taylor out of a doze. It was just another lazy Friday, but with one significant difference – Miki had stayed overnight at her aunt's place, which had given Taylor the opportunity to have a decent sleep-in and clean the unit from top to bottom. The cleaning part hadn't taken him very long, mostly because he was a neat and tidy person to begin with – something that came in useful when it came to dealing with a landlord who delighted in springing surprise inspections on his tenants.

"Bloody hell," he mumbled as he started hunting for his mobile phone. He eventually found it wedged against the back of the lounge, vibrating away next to his shoulder. How it had found its way there, he didn't particularly care – all he knew was that whoever was on the other end, they were ruining what had been a perfectly good nap. He didn't even think to check who was calling before flipping his phone open. "This had better be really fucking good," he grumbled to answer it.

"Lovely mouth you've got there, Taylor. Do you kiss your mother with it?"

He suppressed a groan. "Hello Josh. What the hell do you want this time?"

"Rach has been on at me all day about the open mic night, so I figured I had better give you a bell and ask. You coming or not?"

Taylor let out a string of obscenities so foul that if Miki had been the one spouting them off, she would have been hauled into the bathroom and had her mouth washed out with soap. "Remind me again why I even said I'd think about it?" he asked. "I have to pick Miki up from her aunt's house this afternoon."

"Your kid can't stay there for a few hours longer?"

"Well, yeah, but-"

"Good. I'll tell Rach you'll be there. It's covers tonight, so make sure you've got at least three under your belt."

"Yeah, okay," Taylor said, completely resigned to having his friends decide his social calendar for him. "I'll ask Jackie if she can keep Miki around for another night."

"Atta boy." Taylor could almost see Joshua grinning triumphantly. "See you at eight." He hung up, and Taylor was left staring at his phone in disbelief at what he had just agreed to do.

"I am so fucking *screwed*," he breathed. It had been at least eight years since he had last played his guitar in public – nowadays, being a parent took precedence over the music that had once been such an integral part of his life. Chasing around after a very active and at times hyperactive six, almost seven-year-old girl left very little time for creative pursuits. He occasionally took his acoustic out of its case, but usually only got as far as tuning it before Miki demanded his attention, and had no idea if he could even remember how to play it. "Joshua Campbell, you are a fucking bastard."

He'd known the Campbells for a long time, so he knew there was no way in the world that Rachael would let him back out. She could make anyone and everyone feel guilty for even deigning to consider reneging on an agreement, however flimsy that agreement might have been in the first place. Crossing her was a very bad idea – this he knew from experience.

There was only one thing to be done. Fire up the computer, get iTunes going, and pick a few songs to try and learn before eight o'clock.

Three hours later, his fingers stinging and hands aching so badly he thought they would fall off without much effort at all on his part, he put down his guitar, paused iTunes and started hunting for the cordless phone. Once he had located it – strangely enough, it was in his bedroom under the covers at the end of his bed – he went hunting through its directory in search of Jackie's phone number.

"Come *on* Jacks, pick up the damn phone," he muttered, tapping his fingers impatiently on the bench top in the kitchen as he waited for Jackie to pick up at the other end of the line.

"Hello, this is Matilda Tierney speaking," the voice of a little girl said sweetly.

"Mattie, it's Uncle Taylor – can you put your mum on please?"

"Hi Uncle Taylor!" Matilda said happily. "Mum's in the shower right now."

All of a sudden he was assaulted by images of his ex-girlfriend's near-double, naked and soaking wet, standing under a torrent of water – which he promptly slammed and locked a mental door on.

"You didn't need to tell me that, Mattie. Just...just get your mum to call me back when she's out of the shower, okay? And don't make her rush things either, let her take her time."

"Okay. Love you Uncle Taylor."

"I love you too Mattie."

Fifteen minutes later the cordless rang, the LCD screen displaying the name *Jacqueline Tierney*, and he snatched it up and answered. "Hello?"

"So what did you want to talk to me about this time?"

"I need you to watch Miki for another night."

"You're kidding me, right?"

"Jacks, come on – when was the last time I asked you for a favour? I have to go out tonight, and I won't be home until late." Sensing that Jackie was about to go on a verbal rampage, he kept talking. "It's *one* night, Jacks. That's all I'm asking for. And I'll make it worth your while, anyway."

"You bring me a bottle of Tia Maria when you pick Miki up in the morning and you have yourself a deal."

"Done. Put Miki on."

Taylor could have sworn he could hear Jackie rolling her eyes. "Yes, Your Royal Highness."

The next voice he heard belonged to Miki. "Hi Daddy."

"Hey Miki. Auntie Jackie's going to let you sleep over again tonight, okay? I'll come and pick you up in the morning."

"Okay."

"You be nice to your cousins for me, all right? I might have something special for you when I pick you up if you're a good girl tonight."

Miki's tone of voice immediately brightened. "Okay!"

"Good girl. I'll see you nice and early tomorrow morning, okay?"

"Okay Daddy. I love you."

"Love you too, princess."

Once he had hung up, he looked at the clock on the kitchen wall. It displayed the time as being half-past five, meaning he had two-and-a-half hours to have his dinner, get ready and drive into town. Not having Miki running around the place would make it much easier to get ready on time.

Seven-thirty saw him parking around the corner from Cooney's Tavern, acoustic guitar in its case on the front passenger seat. It was already dark outside, not to mention freezing cold. As much as he didn't really like to go out to the pub much, it was at least a good shelter from the winter chill. Especially seeing as the heating in his unit left much to be desired.

"There you are!" he heard Joshua shout as he entered the main bar of the Tavern, carrying his guitar case by its handle in his left hand. A look to his right revealed Joshua sitting at the bar, an empty glass before him. "Over here, mate!"

"You sound pissed already," Taylor said as he joined his friend at the bar. "How many have you had so far?"

"Just the one." Joshua nodded back over his shoulder, to where a small, low stage had been set up. "Rach is taking down names and songs over there. I'll hold down the fort for you while you go sign up."

"Aye aye, cap'n," Taylor said, snapping off a mock salute and sliding off his bar stool. It was easy for him to see Rachael sitting on another bar stool next to the wall, a clipboard on her lap and the cap of a permanent marker in her mouth, and he started to make his way through the milling crowd. "Hey Rach."

"Hey yourself," she said without looking up from her notepad, upon which she was writing *Taylor Hanson* in thick, black letters. "What will you be singing for us tonight, Taylor?"

In response, Taylor stuck his right hand into the corresponding back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a folded up sheet of notebook paper. "Hang on Rach," he said as he unfolded it. "I picked these out completely at random, so don't you dare laugh – *Sophomore Slump Or Comeback Of The Year* by Fall Out Boy, *Life Is A Highway* by Tom Cochrane, and *Small Town* by John Mellencamp."

"Who says I'm laughing?" Rachael said, and Taylor watched her write the three song titles down next to his name. "You're number ten – I'll be pulling numbers out of a hat, so keep an ear open. And I'm not going to just pick another number if you're off taking a leak, so don't drink too much before you come on."

"Yes ma'am," Taylor replied.

"And don't call me ma'am." She wrote down the number 10 next to Taylor's name on her notepad, on the opposite side to the song titles. "Now get lost."

Taylor raised an eyebrow at Rachael's brush-off, but shrugged and headed back to the bar. "Just an orange juice, no ice, thanks mate," he said to the bartender when he had resumed his original seat. "What's eating her?" he asked Joshua.

"She hasn't had as good a response to this as she thought she might get," Joshua replied with a shrug. "So she's sort of annoyed and taking it out on everyone who rubs her the wrong way."

"Did you tell her that it's early days yet? I mean, this is the first one she's even attempted to put on, isn't it?"

"Oh, I told her that. She seems to think that if something she tries to arrange isn't a success the first time out, though, it's a complete failure right at the start."

"Well, she needs to get over herself," Taylor said, right as his drink was put down on the bar. "Thanks mate," he said to the bartender.

At eight o'clock sharp, the open mic kicked off. "All right everyone, welcome to the first of what we hope will be many open mic nights here at Cooney's Tavern," Rachael said into her microphone. "We have a decent turn out tonight, so I hope everyone is ready to hear some of Wollongong's bravest pissheads belt it out onstage. During the first song some of the staff will be wandering around with scoring sheets and pencils, for you all to decide the winner. First, second and third prizes are free drinks at the bar for one hour after the open mic." Here she picked up an ice cream container from next to her bar stool and shook it up a little bit. "Our first performer is..." She dipped her free hand into the container and took out a slip of paper. "Number eleven! Dean Morris, get your arse up here!"

It was easily an hour and a half before Taylor's name was called. The second the first syllable of his surname had been yelled out, he was up off his barstool and pushing through the crowd with his guitar in hand. He had no idea if he would even be able to pull it off, but he figured that

everyone watching was already two sheets to the wind as it was, so he knew they probably wouldn't care much if he fucked it up.

Before he set himself up to sing, a face in the crowd caught his eye. She was sitting at a table not far from the stage with a group of what he assumed were friends, a glass of red wine in front of her. He felt like he was sixteen instead of twenty-six as he just watched her, feeling like he had when he'd laid eyes on Claire for the very first time. It didn't take long for his twenty-six-year-old self to take over again, and he spoke to the crowd.

"I picked all of these songs completely at random, and at least one of them is my daughter's so deal with it." He shook out his fingers and lifted his guitar from its case, settling it on his knee and slinging its strap around his neck. "First one's called *Sophomore Slump Or Comeback Of The Year*."

Praying to whatever deity was listening that he wouldn't make a complete and utter idiot of himself, he began to play his first song.

"Are we growing up or just going down...it's just a matter of time until we're all found out...take our tears, put them on ice...'cause I swear I'd burn the city down to show you the light..."

"We're the therapists pumping through your speakers...delivering just what you need...we're well read and poised...we're the best boys...we're the chemists who've found the formula...to make your heart swell and burst...no matter what they say, don't believe a word...'cause I'll keep singing this lie if you'll keep believing it...I'll keep singing this lie...I'll keep singing this lie..."

"Are we growing up or just going down...it's just a matter of time until we're all found out...take our tears, put them on ice...'cause I swear I'd burn the city down to show you the light..."

"We're travelled like gypsies...only with worse luck and far less gold...we're the kids you used to love...but then we grew old...we're the lifers here till the bitter end...condemned from the start...ashamed of the way...the songs and the words own the beating of our hearts...'cause I'll keep singing this lie...I'll keep singing this lie..."

"Are we growing up or just going down...it's just a matter of time until we're all found out...take our tears, put them on ice...'cause I swear I'd burn the city down to show you the light...there's a drug in the thermostat to warm the room up...and there's another around to help us bend your trust...I've got a sunset in my veins...and I need to take a pill to make this town feel okay..."

"The best part of 'Believe' is the 'Lie'...I hope you sing along and you steal a line...I need to keep you like this in my mind...so give in or just give up...the best part of 'Believe' is the 'Lie'...I hope

you sing along and you steal a line...I need to keep you like this in my mind...so give in or just give up...are we growing up or just going down...

"Are we growing up or just going down...it's just a matter of time until we're all found out...take our tears, put them on ice...'cause I swear I'd burn the city down to show you the light..."

A few half hearted cheers rang out, and Taylor swallowed hard. *Maybe that wasn't the best song to start off with*, he thought nervously as he started in on the second song.

"Life's like a road that you travel on...when there's one day here and the next day gone...sometimes you bend and sometimes you stand...sometimes you turn your back to the wind...there's a world outside ev'ry darkened door...where blues won't haunt you anymore...where the brave are free and lovers soar...come ride with me to the distant shore...we won't hesitate...break down the garden gate...there's not much time left today..."

"Life is a highway...I wanna ride it all night long...if you're going my way, I wanna drive it all night long..."

"Through all these cities and all these towns...it's in my blood and it's all around...I love you now like I loved you then...this is the road and these are the hands...from Mozambique to those Memphis nights...the Khyber Pass to Vancouver's lights...knock me down get back up again...you're in my blood, I'm not a lonely man...there's no load I can't hold...road so rough this I know...I'll be there when the light comes in...just tell 'em we're survivors..."

"Life is a highway...I wanna ride it all night long...if you're going my way, I wanna drive it all night long...life is a highway...I wanna ride it all night long...gimme gimme gimme gimme yeah...if you're going my way, I wanna drive it all night long..."

"There was a distance between you and I...a misunderstanding once but now we look it in the eye..."

"There ain't no load that I can't hold...road so rough this I know...I'll be there when the light comes in...just tell 'em we're survivors..."

"Life is a highway...I wanna ride it all night long...if you're going my way, I wanna drive it all night long...gimme gimme gimme gimme yeah...life is a highway...I wanna ride it all night long...if you're going my way, I wanna drive it all night long...gimme gimme gimme gimme yeah...life is a highway...I wanna ride it all night long...if you're going my way, I wanna drive it all night long...gimme gimme gimme gimme yeah..."

This time the response was far more positive. He figured it had to help that he'd played one of the songs that he knew was on Cooney's Tavern's jukebox. Just as he went to play his final song, one he knew was sure to get the crowd going, the mystery woman looked up at him.

And she smiled.

It didn't take much for him to smile back, and soon he was singing for the final time that night.

"Well I was born in a small town...and I live in a small town...prob'ly die in a small town...oh, those small communities...

"All my friends are so small town...my parents live in the same small town...my job is so small town...provides little opportunity...

"Educated in a small town...taught the fear of Jesus in a small town...used to daydream in that small town...another boring romantic, that's me...

"But I've seen it all in a small town...had myself a ball in a small town...married an L.A. doll and brought her to this small town...now she's small town just like me...

"No I cannot forget where it is that I come from...I cannot forget the people who love me...yeah, I can be myself here in this small town...and people let me be just what I want to be...

"Got nothing against a big town...still hayseed enough to say 'look who's in the big town'...but my bed is in a small town...oh, and that's good enough for me...

"Well I was born in a small town...and I can breathe in a small town...gonna die in this small town...oh that's prob'ly where they'll bury me..."

Taylor couldn't help the smile that erupted as the audience broke into applause at the end of the final song. He knew he had a very slim chance of winning, but somehow that didn't bother him – all that mattered was that he hadn't completely lost his musical touch.

Bright and early the next morning, armed with the largest bottle of Tia Maria he had been able to afford, he walked up the garden path to Jackie's front door and knocked sharply on the frame of the screen door. This time it was his three-year-old niece Renee who answered the door.

"Hey Nee," he said softly as he crouched down to his niece's level. "Can you go get your mummy for me?" Renee nodded and wandered off, and Taylor straightened back up to his full, admittedly rather imposing height. It wasn't long until Jackie came to the front door, and Taylor held up the

bottle of Tia Maria. "I come bearing gifts," he said, shaking the bottle slightly. "Now where's my kid?"

Jackie granted him a tight smile before yelling out, "Miki, your dad's here!"

Right before Miki came tearing up to the front door, Taylor caught a glimpse of a very familiar head of bright red hair coming up around the corner, and he felt a chill surge down his spine.

"What the *hell* is she doing here?" he asked through clenched teeth.

Jackie just *looked* at Taylor. "She's my sister, Taylor. I can have her come to visit me any time I like."

"And I don't want her around Miki."

Jackie shrugged. "Well, you were the one who wanted me to keep Miki over for another night. You brought it on yourself as far as I'm concerned."

"Hi Daddy!"

Out of pure instinct, Taylor bent down and caught Miki up in his arms. "Hey baby girl," he said. "Did you have fun with your cousins?"

Miki nodded. "Yep! Auntie Jackie let us make jam drops, an' she let me lick the spoon," she said happily. "An' I got to meet one of Auntie Jackie's friends."

"What's her friend's name?"

"Claire." Miki looked up at Taylor. "Is she your friend too?"

"I don't know. She might be – a lot of people are called Claire."

"Are a lot of people called your name?"

"No, not very many. It's a very special name." Over Miki's head he said, "Thanks for having her over, Jacks."

Jackie handed over Miki's backpack and jacket, which Taylor took into his left hand. "No problem."

"Bye Auntie Jackie!" Miki called out as she and Taylor went out to the car. Taylor could feel Miki waving at Jackie over his shoulder.

"Now, tell me the truth," Taylor said as he was buckling Miki into her booster seat, "were you a good girl for Auntie Jackie? Only good girls get to do what I've got planned."

"Yep!" Miki replied, before frowning. "What do good girls get to do?" she asked after some thought.

By the time Miki had asked her question, Taylor was behind the wheel and doing up his own seat belt. "Good girls," he said as he adjusted the rear view mirror, "get to have McDonald's for breakfast, and then they get to play in the playground for a few hours." He looked back over his shoulder just in time to see Miki smiling happily.

"Pancakes!" she shouted, and Taylor chuckled quietly before turning on the ignition and putting the car into gear. Gone was his irritation that Claire had been within cooee of the daughter she had abandoned six-and-a-half years earlier. In its place was contentment at being able to spend his Saturday morning with his little girl – and that was something nobody had the power to take away from him.

Chapter 3

Not A Day Goes By

I never needed

Someone to belong to

Someone to belong to me

* * *

"Daddy?"

Taylor looked up from the previous day's newspaper across the table at Miki. She was still in her pyjamas, which consisted of little more than a light purple long-sleeved top and long pants, the latter of which had penguins dotted across them. It was Tuesday morning, and Miki's first day back at school after the winter break. "Yeah baby?"

"Are you going to work today?"

Taylor nodded and picked up his coffee mug. "I'll be going there after I've dropped you at school."

"I don't want to go to school. I want to go to Auntie Jackie's."

"Well, you can't. Auntie Jackie has to go back to work today." He took a careful sip of his coffee, knowing it was still hot enough to burn him if he drank it too quickly. "And you have to go to school – I'll get in trouble if you don't."

"But I don't *want* to!"

He looked at Miki over the rim of his mug. She was almost at the point of throwing a tantrum. "That's *enough*, Michaela. You are going to school today, and that's final."

"No!"

Almost as if in response, Taylor got up out of his seat and walked around the table to where Miki sat, and dropped down into a crouch next to her seat. "Miki, I want you to listen to me very carefully. If you don't go to school, do you know what could happen?" When Miki shook her head, he continued, "I could be fined. And even worse, you might not be able to live with me anymore. I like being your dad, and I don't want anyone to take you away from me. So just...be a good girl for me, and don't argue with me about it, all right?"

"Okay Daddy," Miki said quietly.

Miki's school was on the same street that they lived on, within walking distance from the block of units the two of them called home, so once Miki was dressed and ready to go it didn't take them very long to walk to the school gate. Miki's outburst at breakfast had surprised Taylor – ever since her first day of kindergarten, she had loved going to school. It wasn't like her to just point blank refuse to go.

"You be a good girl for Mrs. Davis, all right?" Taylor said to Miki when they had stepped just inside the school's boundary fence. He had crouched down so that he was eye to eye with his daughter. "I don't want to get a phone call from the principal telling me that you beat up one of the boys in your class."

"I don't beat up boys!" Miki said indignantly.

"Miki, I'm joking," Taylor said, laughter bubbling up in his voice. "I know you don't bash boys." He grinned somewhat deviously. "I heard you kiss them, though."

"Daddy!"

"Miki!" Taylor mimicked, adopting his daughter's shrill tone, before giving Miki a quick hug. "Have a good day, princess. Uncle Matthew will be here this afternoon to pick you up."

He was halfway home when he saw it – a dark green Holden Barina rolling slowly to a stop alongside the kerb. Its driver looked vaguely familiar, though he couldn't remember where he had seen them before. He was about ready to keep walking home when the car's passenger side window lowered with a soft hissing sound, and a voice called out to him.

"Excuse me, do you have a phone I can borrow?"

He looked to his left to see the car's driver looking straight at him. "Uh, yeah, of course," Taylor said, and started rummaging through his pockets. He finally found it in the left pocket of his hoodie, stepped up to the car and handed it in through the open window.

"Thank you so much," the driver said, her tone grateful. "Mine's out of credit, and I need to call the NRMA..." She flipped it open and started dialling. "I won't be long."

"Take your time," Taylor said dismissively. He was beginning to get the feeling that he wouldn't be making it to work that morning.

Around fifteen minutes later his phone was returned to him. "I know I said it already, but thank you. I really appreciate it." The driver smiled, and Taylor suddenly remembered where he had seen her before.

"You were at the open mic last week," he realised.

"I was wondering where I'd seen you before!" she said, laughing. "Taylor Hanson, right?"

Taylor nodded. "Yeah, that's me."

"I'm Audrey Carmichael." Audrey unbuckled her seatbelt and opened the driver's side door, stepping out of the car onto the street. "It's nice to see you again."

"You too." Taylor shoved his hands into the pockets of his hoodie and looked down at his sneakers, feeling the chill winter breeze begin to whip a few loose strands of his hair around his face. He hated winter with a passion – it had never been particularly kind to him.

"So what are you doing on Gipps Road?" Audrey asked as she walked around the bonnet of her car, stepping up onto the footpath.

"I live on this street," Taylor replied. "A few doors up that way, just past the nursery." He pointed up along the street, toward the block of units. "I just dropped my daughter off at school."

"Oh right," Audrey said. "I remember you mentioning you were a dad. How old is she?"

"She's six," Taylor replied. "She'll be seven in the middle of September."

"You look a little young to have a six-year-old."

"Yeah, I know I am," he replied with a shrug. "I was nineteen when she was born. She's the best thing that's ever happened to me."

They were both silent for a short while. A school bell ringing nearby shattered the quiet they had lapsed into.

"I shouldn't keep you," Audrey said. She hopped up onto the bonnet of her car, resting the heels of her shoes on the bumper bar. "You've probably got work or something, so..." Here she shrugged. "I'll be fine here by myself – this isn't the first time this has happened. More like the sixth time this year."

"I don't think I'll be missed much at work," Taylor said. "It gets pretty quiet during school terms, so I'm probably not needed today." He flipped his phone open and clicked through to his phone directory. "Should probably make sure, though." A few keystrokes later, he was dialling into work.

"Greater Union Wollongong, this is Taylor Stratton speaking."

"Joanna, it's me."

"Oh, hey Taylor. Not coming in today?"

"I think that's probably obvious by now." He glanced up at the cloudy sky. "My car's broken down, so..." He shrugged, even though he knew that Joanna couldn't see it. "Just let Glenda know I'll be in as soon as I've had it fixed."

"She's going to be pissed off at you."

"Yeah, well, that's her problem. Just tell her, all right?"

"Jesus Taylor, keep your hair on. I'll let her know."

"Thanks, Joanna."

"Don't mention it."

They both hung up simultaneously, and Taylor snapped his phone closed. "Well, I'm free for the rest of the day. Where were you headed?"

"Just to work – I'm over at Dymocks in the Mall."

"I could always give you a lift over that way. I mean, if you'd like me to."

"No, it's all right. I could do with a day off, anyway. It's been hell the last couple of weeks, what with school holidays and all that. Can I..." She trailed off, and Taylor handed her his phone. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," he said, making a mental note to check his phone credit when he got home.

Audrey had just finished her phone call when an NRMA truck drove up the street. She slid down off the bonnet and waved for the driver to stop. "I can take it from here," she told Taylor as she went to the passenger side door and popped it open. "Thanks for staying with me."

"It's no trouble," he replied as Audrey handed him his phone back for the second time. "I guess I'll see you around." Completely on impulse he started to rummage around in his pockets again in search of his wallet and a pencil. "Look, if you need anything at all, give me a bell," he said as he hunted through his wallet for a spare piece of paper. He unearthed an old grocery list, flipped it over and wrote down his name and his mobile phone number. "Even if your car's broken down again and you need a lift."

"Oh, thanks," Audrey said as she took Taylor's number, her tone one of surprise. "You don't have to."

"I know what it's like to not be able to rely on your car," Taylor told her. "When I first moved down here, just after my daughter was born, all I had to drive was an old Falcon. It broke down so many times in such a short period of time you wouldn't believe it, and I couldn't afford to have it fixed until I was completely settled in. That wasn't until she was about six or seven months old." He pulled gently on his ponytail. "And even then things were still messed up, so..."

"I understand, don't worry," Audrey assured him. "I've only just moved here myself. It's hard going, I know."

"It does get better, though," Taylor said. "Once you get settled in and everything, you know?"

"Let's hope it does." Audrey smiled slightly. "I'll see you later on."

Content that Audrey would be fine now that the NRMA was on the scene, he resumed his walk home. Whether he would see her again, he had no idea – Wollongong and its outer suburbs weren't exactly a village by any stretch of the imagination, and he could go months without seeing anyone he knew outside of work. He'd already gone years without seeing anyone from home, though he didn't consider that to be any great loss.

A minute or so later he was unlocking the front door of the third unit in the block with one hand and unzipping his hoodie with the other, grateful to be out of the cold. He hadn't had a day off from work since he'd come back from his annual break over Christmas. To be at home on a day when he knew very well he should have been at work, and not being sick at the same time – that was his idea of heaven.

As soon as he had locked the front door and hung his keys up on their hook next to the door, he toed his sneakers off and headed straight for the kitchen. Like most work mornings during school terms breakfast had consisted of a cup of coffee and little else, even though he knew that he didn't function well when he hadn't eaten. Somewhere in the cupboards he knew there was a

packet of pancake mix, and he had a bottle of real maple syrup right at the back of the refrigerator. Both were a treat he preferred to keep for birthdays and Christmas, especially because of Miki's propensity to go bouncing off the walls if she got even the smallest amount of sugar into her system. It was just one of the reasons how he knew that Miki was all his – she was so uncannily like her Uncle Zac that if she was male and seventeen years older, the two of them could be twins.

As he closed the refrigerator after collecting the milk and the maple syrup, he caught sight of two photographs from much happier times. One was of his family before it had fractured – his mother and father, his little sister Jessica, Zac, and himself. Unwittingly he reached out and touched a fingertip to his sister's face, wishing that she hadn't taken their parents' side when it had counted the most. He missed her more than he had words to describe how much.

The second photograph was one he kept up purely because it had been the first photograph ever taken of Miki. She had been just two hours old at the time. Back then he had still been madly in love with Claire, not knowing that just six months later she would be gone. It had been completely against the regulations of the maternity ward, but he had climbed up on the bed behind Claire and had his father take a photograph with his digital camera. It wasn't the best photograph in the world, but it was still special to him.

Soon enough, his breakfast was ready – a stack of pancakes drenched in so much maple syrup he knew it was going to leave his fingers all sticky. Just as he sat down to eat, the beginning of *Back In Black* by AC/DC rang out from his phone – he had a new message. Without even thinking, he flipped it open and keyed through to read the message.

Jackie gave me ur #. I miss u taylor. Can we talk sometime?

He knew just from the first five words that the message was from Claire, and he nearly hurled his phone at the wall. All of sudden, he just wasn't hungry anymore.

* * *

"I don't even know why I'm doing this, Jackie."

The following Thursday evening, Jackie met up with Taylor at Five Islands Brewery. They had both decided it was neutral ground for Taylor's meeting with Claire, both of them knowing that if things got too heated, it would be easy to escape the situation with a minimum of bloodshed. The two of them stood at the railing that ran along the perimeter of the Brewery's outside seating

area, looking into the half dark out to sea. Jackie's husband Matthew had volunteered as babysitter to Miki and her cousins that evening.

"Well, you're the one who said you wanted to see what she had to say," Jackie said with a shrug. "And anyway, I thought you hated her."

"I do hate her, Jacks. The one and only good thing I got out of our relationship was Miki. Everything else...well, you know what she did to me when we were still together." He dragged the toe of his left sneaker along the concrete. "I don't know if I'll ever forgive her for what she did to Miki and I, but I suppose I'm willing to hear her out." He gave Jackie a sidelong glance. "Do you know what I almost did when I realised she had texted me?"

"Threw your phone at the wall?"

Taylor nodded. "Yeah. Of course, I realised just in the nick of time that I can't afford a new phone, so it stayed intact."

"Shows how mature you are, then."

Footsteps sounded behind them, and Taylor turned around to see Claire coming up the footpath.

"Hey Jackie," he heard her say, her soft voice barely audible over the hum of traffic.

"Hey Claire," Jackie said, her tone of voice warm and inviting. The two sisters embraced briefly, before Jackie stepped aside. "I assume you know Taylor?"

"Considering I lost my virginity to him, I'd say so." As Claire said this, Taylor felt a surge of anger flare up from deep inside. *Is that all I am to her?* He stood as still as he possibly could as Claire walked up to him. "Hello, Taylor."

"Claire," Taylor replied tersely.

"I might leave you two to catch up," Jackie announced, shaking her head almost imperceptibly when Taylor opened his mouth to protest. "I'll be just over here." She pointed to a small round table that had four metal chairs around it, just before heading over to sit down.

For a few moments, not a word was said between Claire and Taylor. Neither of them looked at one another – it was as if Claire was too ashamed to meet Taylor's gaze, and Taylor thought he might be too tempted to hit Claire if he even so much as glanced her way.

"Why did you text me?"

It was Taylor who broke the tense, uncomfortable silence. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Claire turn her head in his direction, but kept staring out at the darkness.

"I missed you, Taylor--"

Taylor snorted. "Don't bullshit a bullshitter, Claire. You didn't miss me. You wouldn't know how to." Here he turned to face her. "If you missed me so fucking much, then why the hell didn't you try to make contact before?" He took a step forward, so that he was almost nose-to-nose with her. "I'm not going to say that I missed you, because that would be the biggest fucking lie in the history of creation. You were nothing but trouble when we were together."

"Then why did you stay with me for so long, then? And for that matter, why the hell did you even knock me up?"

"That last one was an accident, and you fucking well know it."

"I don't care *what* it was. You still knocked me up."

Taylor took in a deep breath and let it out slowly but shakily. "I stayed with you for so long because deep down inside, I was positive that things would get better at some point. Every night before I went to sleep I kept telling myself that things would be better in the morning, that soon I wouldn't have to worry about if we'd have enough to eat the next day, or if the power or water would be disconnected because we hadn't paid the bills. But to be completely honest, I stayed with you for so damn long because I wanted us to work things out, if only so that Miki would grow up with both her mother and her father." He put his hands over his face and closed his eyes. "I did love you at some point, Claire. I really did. Hell, I even wanted to marry you. I was almost positive that if we did end up tying the knot, then we'd *have* to make things work. Unlike *some* people, I believe that when you marry someone, it's for life."

"Well, I don't. Sometimes you *can't* make things work out, Taylor, no matter how hard you try." Claire shrugged her shoulders. "My parents couldn't."

"They just didn't try hard enough, then."

Claire raised an eyebrow. "'Didn't try hard enough?'" she echoed, her tone incredulous. "Taylor, do you have any idea what my father did to my mum? He *bashed* her. Jacks and I, we were scared to death that one day we'd come home from school and find Mum lying on the kitchen floor in a pool of her own blood." She started counting off on her fingers. "He bashed her at least once a week so badly that the bruises took weeks to heal, raped her at least twice in my memory, almost strangled her, and once I remember him using a stainless steel frying pan to beat her around the

head. He did the same to Jacks and I, though to a lesser extent – he was always careful to beat us where the bruises and scars wouldn't show."

"You think you're the only one who copped abuse, Claire?" Taylor asked. "I did too. I'm just as damaged as you are."

"I never saw any scars."

"None of them are physical. Emotional and psychological abuse is just as damaging." Now he turned his back to the sea, leaning on the railing with his elbows propped up behind him. "I never wanted to be alone with my mother. She might have given birth to me, but she never truly loved me. My father didn't realise that, and consistently left me at home with her. At least once a week, he'd take my brother and sister out somewhere, but I'd have to stay at home and 'keep my mother company'." He used his fingers to form air quotes around the last four words. "Being told by my father to keep my mother company was just another way of saying 'keep your mother away from the liquor cabinet'. Soon as I turned my back, she'd be rooting around in there in search of something to mix with Coke, or whatever it was we had in the refrigerator. And as soon as she had her drink made, she'd sit me down on the lounge, clamp one hand around my wrist, and make me endure her drunken tirades." He bit his bottom lip. "God, I don't even know why I'm telling you this. I keep telling myself that I hate you and wish you'd just throw yourself off a high cliff."

"It's cathartic though, isn't it?"

Taylor barked out a laugh. "That's one word for it." He scuffed the toe of his shoe along the concrete. "Every time she got on the piss, she would call me a *mistake*. My father never believed me, of course, and I never expected him to. As much as I wish they'd never kicked me out, in a way I am glad that they did. At least that way, I got away from her for good."

Out of the corner of his eye, Taylor could see Claire studying him. "You know, for someone who is as emotionally damaged as you claim to be, you are remarkably well adjusted," she commented.

Taylor shrugged. "I really had no choice in the matter. Not since you up and walked out on me." He turned his head to look at her. "How could you do that to me and our daughter?"

Claire didn't respond for a short while. "You wouldn't understand," she said at last.

"*Make* me understand, Claire. You were always such a good actress when we were together. You even managed to make me believe that you were on the Pill the entire time we were together. I don't know why I let you feed me that bullshit for so long."

Claire shrugged. "It's not my fault that you take just about everything at face value."

Taylor forced himself to bite back a scream of frustration. Claire hadn't changed a bit in the six years and four months that they'd been apart – she was just as infuriating as she had been while they had still been a couple.

"You're leaving?" Claire asked as Taylor started walking toward where Jackie was seated.

"Yes, Claire, I'm leaving. I have to go and pick up my daughter, and then I need to get home. Miki's got school in the morning, so it'll be an early start tomorrow for us both."

"Oh," Claire said quietly. "I was hoping we could talk for a little while longer."

Taylor just looked at her. "Unlike you, Claire, I have responsibilities that I have to uphold – ones that put me at risk of having Miki taken away from me if I let them slip. And one of those is ensuring that she's in school each day. I can't get her off to school if I stay out all night talking to the mother who abandoned her. I had a hell of a time convincing the authorities to give me custody of Miki, and I know there are quite a few people out there who would love nothing more than to deprive me of being her dad. They wanted me to track you down so they could give *you* sole custody, even though I told them hundreds of times that you'd abandoned Miki and I, and that you weren't even capable of the care of a *goldfish*."

To Taylor's surprise he saw Claire visibly flinch, and he knew his words had struck a nerve. He forced a wry smile and turned his back on her, and kept on walking away.

"So I take it things didn't go so well?" Jackie asked on the walk back to where the two of them had parked their cars. Taylor was walking with his hands in the pockets of his jeans, head bowed and staring at the toes of his sneakers.

"That would be an understatement," Taylor replied. "She still can't understand how damaging her leaving was. She still says she misses me, and yet couldn't be bothered to get in touch with me at any point to see if Miki and I were okay. And she knows very well that Miki is her daughter, but she won't ask how she's doing." He shook his head in dismay. "As much as I wish sometimes that things were different, not for one second do I want us to get back together. I'm grateful every day that I've got Miki. I think I would be completely lost without her. She's my whole world."

"I know she is," Jackie said. "You're hers too – I've lost count of the number of times I've seen her eyes light up whenever someone so much as mentions your name. She adores you."

Taylor looked up and at Jackie, who smiled, and he gave her a smile of his own. In that moment he forgot all about Claire and everything bad in his life that was primarily her doing – instead, all of his thoughts were of his little girl, in whose eyes he could do no wrong.

Chapter 4

World's On Fire

*Promises never meant to keep
When all that the shadows need
Is a good man to hide in a dream*

* * *

Not long after trading began on Monday morning, Taylor's phone vibrated in the front right pocket of his work pants. Glenda had assigned him, along with Vanessa and Luke, to run the projectors that day, which was his favourite part of working at the cinema. It was just him, the projector for theatre two, and the reels of film that held the movie that was currently being beamed out through a tiny square hole in the wall.

He sneaked a quick look at the reel that was being fed through the projector at that moment. Satisfied that he could get away with checking his phone quickly, he worked it out of his pocket, flipped it open and looked at the screen – he had one new message, from a number he didn't recognise. One press of the select button had the message open, and he was soon scanning the lines of text.

Hi taylor, it's audrey. Thx for giving me a hand w/ the car last wk. Would u like to meet up 4 coffee sometime?

He nearly dropped his phone in surprise. It was the last thing he had expected when he had given Audrey his mobile number – he'd figured that she had a boyfriend already, or even that she was married. An absence of a wedding ring on her left hand hadn't phased him – he knew that plenty of married people didn't wear rings, his parents included.

He didn't even hesitate in replying. Pressing the Options button, he clicked on Reply and was soon tapping out a response.

Hi audrey – are you free between 1 and 2 this arvo? I go for my lunch break around then, so maybe we could meet up @ gloria jean's in the mall. I'd like to get to know you better.

Ten minutes later his phone vibrated again, right as he was swapping film reels. He waited until the reels had been swapped before checking his phone.

Sure, i can meet you there. :) see you then.

At ten minutes past one he radioed in to Glenda to let her know he was heading off on his lunch break, waiting until she had entered the projection room before leaving. He left his radio at the box office for Xavier to look after, taking his wallet, iPod and sunglasses from his locker, and headed out onto Burelli Street.

He had been waiting outside Gloria Jean's Coffees for around fifteen minutes, playing *Phase* on his iPod, when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He hit the menu button and flipped his earphones out of his ears, and looked to his right to see Audrey standing next to him. "Hi Taylor," she said with a smile.

"Hey Audrey," Taylor switched off his iPod, wound the earphone cord around it, and slid across the hold switch before sliding the iPod into a pocket. "Well, shall we?" he asked, motioning at the doorway that led into the café.

"Don't mind if I do," Audrey said cheerfully, and preceded Taylor inside. They both joined the short queue of people waiting to be served. "So how has your week been?"

"Busy," Taylor replied. He opened up his wallet and checked how much cash he had to hand. "Though I wouldn't have it any other way to be honest. I don't like sitting around much. What about you?"

"It's actually been pretty quiet. And I like it best when it's quiet." She tugged at the hem of her uniform shirt, a black collared button-down with the Dymocks emblem embroidered in red right above the pocket. Her name tag, dark red with her name embossed in cream lettering, was pinned to her shirt across from the embroidery. "Lets me get a bit of reading done."

"Next please!"

The two of them stepped up to the sales counter. "Hi, welcome to Gloria Jean's," chirped the barista behind the counter. "What would you like today?"

"I'll have a chai latte and two raspberry friands," Audrey replied, before looking up at Taylor. "I'll get this one. What'll you have?"

"You're sure?"

"Completely. Now come on, tell me what you want."

Taylor now turned his focus to the blackboard on the wall above the coffee machines. "I'll have..." He trailed off as he scanned the café's offerings. "A caramelatte, and a blueberry scroll."

"Coming right up," the barista said with a smile. "Could I get your names please?"

"Audrey and Taylor," Taylor replied.

Once Audrey had paid, they stepped aside while they waited for their drinks to be made up. "How long have you worked at the cinema?" she asked, leaning against the wall and crossing her legs at the ankles. Her gaze snapped onto Taylor's face, and she raised an eyebrow at him.

"Five years," Taylor replied. "I do a bit of everything there – today I'm on the projectors, but sometimes I'll run the box office, and other days I'll work the candy bar. I've worked there the longest out of almost everyone, so on the days I'm working I'm usually shift supervisor." He looked at Audrey. "How long have you worked for Dymocks?"

"I've been with them since I finished high school, so about six years now. Used to work at the one up at Rouse Hill, but when I told my managers that I was looking to move down this way they arranged for me to transfer to the Wollongong store."

"That was nice of them."

"Yeah, well, they liked me a lot there. Mum pitched a fit when she found out I was leaving Sydney." Taylor snickered softly at this, and Audrey gave him a dirty look. "Oh, and your parents didn't when *you* left home?"

"Well, no." Taylor looked down at his feet. "They didn't. They were actually glad to see me go."

Audrey was about to make a comment on this when their order landed on the sales counter. She collected her chai and the paper bag she figured contained her friands, Taylor following with his own latte and blueberry scroll.

"Outside, d'you reckon?" Audrey asked. "It's a bit packed in here, and I feel like I'm overheating. They've got the heat cranked up far too high."

"That works for me," Taylor replied, and he followed her through the crowd out into the outdoor seating area.

"So what's your little girl's name?" Audrey asked once they were seated.

"Michaela," Taylor replied. "But everyone calls her Miki – I only use her proper name when she's in trouble. And that's pretty rare, so Miki she remains." He set his scroll down on the paper bag it had come in and flipped open his wallet to a photograph of himself and Miki, taken by Zac a couple of months earlier. "That's her right there on my lap."

"She's adorable," Audrey commented. "Looks just like you."

"Thanks." He took a sip of his latte, following it with a bite from his scroll. "She got her eyes from her mother, but the rest is all me."

"Is she your only child?"

Taylor nodded. "At the moment, yeah. She's a good kid. My entire world, pretty much – I don't know what I would do or where I'd be without her." *Probably six foot under by this point in time*, he thought darkly.

At a quarter to two, Taylor finished off the last of his scroll and crumpled up the paper bag into a ball. "I should probably start heading back to work," he said as he opened his wallet and took out a ten dollar note.

"I said this was on me," Audrey said, confused.

"I know, but I don't want you to feel put out," Taylor said.

"Trust me, I don't. Call it a proper thank you for helping out a stranger, and buy something nice for Miki with it." Audrey gave him a smile. "And don't even think about arguing with me about it, because you will not win."

"Okay, okay," Taylor relented and slipped the note back into his wallet. "But at least let me cover next time."

Audrey raised an eyebrow at him. "And what makes you think there will be a next time?"

"Because I meant what I said in my text – I really would like to get to know you better. And if that means meeting up for coffee every lunch time, then so be it." Here he shrugged. "I like the coffee here, and it's better than sitting around in Michel's Patisserie drinking *their* shit."

Audrey hid a smile at this. "Yeah, I'd better start thinking about heading back to work myself." She picked up her own wallet and pushed back her chair. "Same time again tomorrow, then?"

"Sounds good to me," Taylor agreed as he stood up out of his own chair. "It was good seeing you again, Audrey."

That meeting set off a pattern that lasted into August. The two of them would meet at Gloria Jean's during their lunch breaks on the days that they were both working and spend anywhere from fifteen minutes to three-quarters of an hour talking about whatever it was that came to

mind. And with each lunch time meeting, Taylor found himself gradually opening up more and more to Audrey – he was beginning to consider her a friend, and in his mind friends kept very little in the way of secrets from one another.

On a Wednesday near the beginning of August, when Audrey arrived at Gloria Jean's, there was no familiar black-clothed figure playing with his iPod while he waited for her. She wasn't particularly phased by this – she didn't have as far to walk as he did, and on more than one occasion he had been a couple of minutes late. There wasn't much of a line at the counter, and so rather than waiting outside in the cold she ducked inside the coffee shop and joined the queue.

"Back again, I see," the barista behind the counter said when Audrey reached the head of the line. "Your friend isn't with you today?"

"No, not yet," Audrey replied. "Just the usual for me today – he'll probably order his when he gets here."

"You got it," the barista said with a smile.

After she had paid, and while she waited for her order to be delivered, she sat down at a free table and took out her mobile phone. There weren't any new messages or missed calls to greet her when she checked its screen, something that wasn't anything particularly out of the ordinary. A few key presses had a new message open, and she was soon tapping out a text message.

Not coming for coffee today? I'm @ gloria jean's as usual if you're still up for our meeting.

Before she had a chance to send the message her phone rang, *Poker Face* by Lady Gaga blasting out from its speaker. She rolled her eyes, knowing her sister had sneakily changed it the last time she had visited, and answered.

"Hello?"

"Hey Audrey, it's Taylor."

Audrey blinked. This was a first – usually Taylor texted her if he needed to talk to her. "God, you sound awful," Audrey commented without thinking about what she was saying. "Oh shit, I'm sorry – I know how that must have sounded."

"No, you're actually not that far off the mark," Taylor assured her. "I haven't had a bit of sleep – Miki's sick, so I'm home today looking after her. She brought the flu home from school last week and it's finally reared its ugly head."

"That's not good. You sound like you're close to getting it yourself."

She heard Taylor let out a rough-sounding chuckle. "Yeah, I wouldn't be surprised if I was the next one to catch it. Little kids love spreading their bugs around, and Miki's no exception I'm afraid."

"Oh, I know all about that, trust me. My little sister absolutely loved doing that when she was a kid. She would wait until she was as close to your face as possible, and then she'd let fly with a cough or a sneeze."

"That sounds really nasty."

"That would be a severe understatement. She was a real brat back then." Out of the corner of her left eye she saw one of the baristas coming up to her table with her order. "Look, why don't you go have a nap? You sound like you could do with one. Not to mention that you'll catch Miki's virus so much more easily if you're exhausted."

"I think I might go and do that." Audrey almost imagined she could see Taylor rubbing his eyes with his free hand. "I have no idea how long I'll be home with Miki – I took her to the doctor this morning, and it's looking like she could be sick for anywhere up to a week. If she's anything like I am, and I know for a fact that she is, it'll be back for a repeat performance a week or so after she gets better."

"So I'll see you when she's back at school, then?"

"Most likely, yeah. If I end up getting sick, I probably won't be back until a week or so after that."

"Okay. I hope Miki feels better soon."

Audrey could hear the smile in Taylor's voice the next time he spoke. "Thanks, Audrey."

"No worries. I'll talk to you later."

They both hung up at the same time, and as Audrey started in on her coffee a plan began germinating in her head. At the same time Taylor was standing in his kitchen, leaning on the kitchen bench with his head bowed and eyes closed. The last time he had been as exhausted as he was right in that moment had been in the months after Claire had left in the dead of night, when he'd had nobody to rely on or to look after Miki when he needed to sleep or go to work. In his darkest moments, of which there were many, he wished that he'd just let Claire go ahead and do what she had insisted was for the best, but common sense always won out. He knew things would be far worse if not for his little girl being in his life.

After quickly checking on Miki, and deciding she'd be asleep for a little while longer, he headed into the lounge room, snagging his hoodie from where it was hanging on the back of one of the kitchen chairs as he passed. It was a few sizes too big for him, which came in useful if he needed to wear a few layers underneath, but it was warmer than most of the coats and jumpers he owned – making it the perfect blanket for a quick nap.

He ended up sleeping longer than he had originally intended to. A loud knock roused him, and he cursed the whole way to the front door. It took squinting through the peephole in the front door of the unit to stop his tirade.

"Audrey?" he asked in surprise when he had opened the door.

"Hi Taylor," Audrey said cheerfully. At her feet were three canvas shopping bags that were filled with groceries.

"How did you know where I live?" Taylor asked. "I don't remember telling you my address."

"It's called the White Pages. Can I come in?"

"Uh, yeah, of course." Taylor stepped aside, allowing Audrey to enter the unit. "And what do you mean, the White Pages?" he asked as he followed Audrey through to the kitchen.

Audrey didn't answer until she had dumped her groceries on the kitchen floor. "I mean what I said," she replied as she crouched down on the tiles and started unpacking. "If you exclude the law firm, the construction company and the two listings for one hyphenated surname, there are twenty-one listings for 'Hanson' in the current edition of the local White Pages. Two of those are listed as living in Keiraville. And only one of those Keiraville listings is in there as 'Hanson, T'. Wasn't too difficult to work things out after that."

"Oh." He shoved his hands in the pockets of his hoodie and watched as Audrey busied herself with her self-appointed task. "And not to sound rude, but what are you doing here anyway?"

"I figured you wouldn't feel much up to cooking anything, seeing as you've got your hands full with a sick kid. And I don't think your kid would want to eat much. So I'm going to cook dinner for you both. Does she like chicken soup?"

"Yeah, she does. So do I."

"Good. I was hoping as much. Do you have a big cooking pot?" Wordlessly, Taylor pointed to the drawer underneath the oven. "Oh, thanks."

"Daddy?"

Taylor looked behind him to see a pyjama-clad Miki standing in the kitchen doorway, clutching her stuffed purple dragon to her chest with her left arm and rubbing her eyes with her right hand. "Miki, what are you doing up?" he asked as he went to crouch in front of her. "You're sick baby girl, you should be in bed."

"I heard you talking," she mumbled sleepily. "You woke me up."

"I'm sorry princess," he whispered in apology, and kissed the top of her head. "Do you want to sit with Daddy for a little while?" he asked, and when Miki nodded he straightened up and took her up into his arms, walking over to the kitchen table and sitting down in one of the chairs. "Audrey, I'd like you to meet my daughter, Miki."

Audrey looked up from chopping an onion and smiled. "Hi Miki."

"Are you Daddy's friend?" Miki asked from her spot on Taylor's lap, around the thumb she had shoved into her mouth.

"Miki, don't suck your thumb," Taylor said automatically, pulling Miki's thumb from her mouth as he spoke.

"Yes, I'm your daddy's friend," Audrey replied. She tipped the onion into an empty bowl and started dicing up a carrot.

"What're you makin'?"

"I'm making chicken soup for you and your daddy to have for dinner," Audrey replied, now having moved to chopping up a stick of celery.

Miki seemed to consider this for a few moments. "Don't look like chicken soup."

"I'm making it from scratch," Audrey said. "It's special chicken soup – it'll make you feel a lot better."

"You know how Grandma makes her spaghetti from a recipe and not out of a packet or a tin?" Taylor asked Miki. "And we call it scratch spaghetti?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that's what this is – scratch chicken soup."

"Oh." Miki put her thumb back in her mouth and put her head on Taylor's chest. "Okay."

Audrey chuckled and went back to chopping up vegetables. "She's a cheeky one, Taylor."

"Don't I know it. She's just like her uncle was when *he* was a kid." He ruffled Miki's hair and pulled his hoodie tightly around her.

"Daddy?" Miki mumbled against Taylor's shirt.

"Yeah baby?"

"Can I go back to school tomorrow?"

"No, not tomorrow. You have to stay at home for a little while longer."

Miki looked up at her father, her normally solemn grey eyes staring accusingly up at him. "But you promised! And Mrs. Davis said you can't ever break a promise 'cause it's not nice."

"Yes, well, some promises have to be broken." He leaned in close and quickly kissed the end of Miki's nose. "You're still sick, and when you're sick you shouldn't go to school. You don't want to make all your friends and your teacher sick, do you?"

Miki shook her head. "Nuh-uh."

"That's why I had to break that promise, Miki. When you're all better, then you can go back. But until Dr. Gregory tells you that it's okay, you're staying home with me."

"But you'll get sick too."

"Yeah, well, that's the price I pay for being your daddy. And anyway, if it means I get to spend more time at home with my little princess, I don't care one little bit."

"I like it when you stay home with me," Miki whispered, before sneezing loudly.

"So do I, kid." He got up out of his seat. "I'll be right back Audrey. Have to take the flu factory here to the bathroom."

In the bathroom with the door closed behind him, Taylor sat Miki down on the vanity and handed her a tissue. "Do you like Audrey?" he asked as Miki blew her nose.

"Why?"

"Because – and don't tell her I told you this – I like her. I like her very much."

"Oh." Miki peered at her father over the tissue. "I like her a little bit."

Taylor smiled and reached for the hairbrush. "I suppose that's all I can ask for at the moment. You don't know her very well yet."

"Nope." Miki crumpled up the tissue into a ball and sat still as Taylor pulled the brush through her hair, holding the tissue ball in her hands.

"Well, give it a little bit of time. I'll bet you anything that you'll like her before your birthday gets here."

Miki looked up at Taylor and frowned. "My birthday?"

"Yep, your birthday." He finished brushing Miki's hair and found two elastic bands, separating the blonde locks into two sections. "Which will be in about five weeks. What do you want to bet?"

"Jelly beans?"

Taylor wound one of the elastic bands around one of the sections of hair. "Are you sure? Because you know I like jelly beans even more than you do."

Miki nodded hard. "Yep." Then she screwed up her nose. "But not black and green jelly beans. Those are icky."

With a chuckle, Taylor pulled the other section of Miki's hair through the other elastic band. "They definitely are. So we're betting a packet of jelly beans with the green and the black ones taken out, then?"

"Three packets."

"Two."

Miki grinned, showing a mouth full of little white teeth. "Okay!"

"Good. Two packets it is."

They returned to the kitchen about five minutes after they had left. Audrey was still hard at work cooking, and Taylor sat Miki down at the table before walking around behind the bench. "Do you need any help?" he asked.

"Can you dice up the chicken?" Audrey asked. "I put it in your fridge, on the top shelf."

"Yeah, no problem." Taylor went to the fridge and opened it up, taking out a parcel of white butcher's paper that had a barcoded sticker holding it closed. This he put down on the bench before opening the cupboard under the stove to take out the second chopping board, and taking a knife out of the knife block that he kept at the wall end of the bench, next to the electric kettle. "So what's in this soup anyway?"

"If I remember the recipe correctly, and I should because it's my grandmother's and she drilled it into me hard enough..." Audrey picked up the bottle of olive oil Taylor could only assume she had brought with her, as he hadn't bought any in recent memory. "Olive oil, onion, carrot, celery, potato, chicken stock, chicken, spaghetti and parsley. And toast to go with it." She opened the bottle up and smiled at Taylor. "I know it doesn't sound all that appetising, but I promise that it's really good."

"Oh, I believe you." Taylor finished dicing up the chicken and turned on the tap to rinse the knife. "Usually I just crack open a tin of soup if that's what we're having for dinner, so anything homemade has to taste better than whatever comes out of a can. I've never been much of a cook."

"You've managed fairly well up to this point, haven't you?"

"Well, yeah, I suppose."

"Then why try changing what works?" Audrey flashed him a bright smile.

"Good point." He set the knife down on the edge of the sink and rinsed his hands off under the still running tap.

It wasn't very long until dinner was ready to be served. "Audrey, would you join us for dinner?" Taylor asked while he was dishing up the soup into bowls. He peered into the pot. "There's plenty here."

Audrey paused in folding up her shopping bags. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely positive. It was your idea to cook dinner, so I think it's only fair if you get to eat the end result." He opened the cupboard under the bench and took out another bowl.

That evening there were three at the dinner table instead of the usual two, just as it was when Zac came down from Sydney to visit. But in direct contrast to those visits, the scene in the kitchen was one that could have been had Claire not taken off all those years ago. It was a scene that Taylor liked seeing, and one he hoped would happen more often.

Chapter 5

Run

*Sometimes you gotta say
Things that don't come easy
They say just follow your heart*

* * *

"Yeah I'm alive...but I don't need a witness...to know that I survive...I'm not looking for forgiveness...yeah I just need light...I need light in the dark as I search for the resolution," Taylor sang as he finished scrubbing a frypan. Another work week had come and gone, and a very busy one at that. Granted, it hadn't been as busy as it was during school holidays, but with the movie *Coraline* coming to cinemas in New South Wales the previous Thursday, and *District 9* having its release that day, the box office had raked in the takings quite readily. A blessedly free weekend stretched out before him, and he intended to spend it doing one of his favourite activities – sleeping.

"Miki, have you finished your homework?" he asked as he rinsed out the frypan and set it in the draining rack. He was always amazed at the amount of dirty dishes that were produced by two people over the course of one day, though he knew it probably would have helped if he didn't leave the breakfast dishes to be washed with those from dinner.

"I have to do my spelling," Miki replied.

"But that's all you have to do?"

"Yep."

"Good girl. After you finish your spelling you can watch TV for a little while, and then it's bedtime, all right?"

"Okay Daddy."

Taylor pulled the plugs out of the drains, turning the tap back on so he could rinse the soap bubbles out of the larger of the two sinks. "Go and get your spelling book out of your school bag," he said once the sink was cleared of bubbles. "I'll check over your maths homework while you're doing that."

When Miki returned to the kitchen table, her spelling book in hand, Taylor had finished looking over the maths homework she had started after dinner. "All right, what spelling do you have to do tonight?" he asked once Miki had climbed up onto his lap.

"Mrs. Davis said we have to find the missing sounds," Miki answered.

"Oh I see. I remember doing those when I was your age. You show me what page you're up to, all right?" he said, and waited for Miki to locate the right page. On the page were ten pictures, with ten words that each had one letter missing from them. "Can you read out what it says at the top of the page?"

"Can...you...find...the...miss-ing...sound'," Miki read out slowly, using her left index finger as a track for her eyes to follow. "'Write...down...the...whole...word'." She looked up at her father. "Is that right?"

"Yep, that's right. Now, what does the first picture look like?" He tapped the first picture, that of two hands.

"They're...clapping?"

"You don't sound very sure about that."

"They're clapping!" She grabbed her pencil and wrote down 'clap' in the first space on the page.

"You're a smart cookie, aren't you? Now, try out the next word for me."

By the time Miki had finished her spelling homework, she was nearly falling asleep over her work book. "All right you, time for bed," Taylor decided.

"I'm not tired," Miki mumbled as Taylor picked her up and carried her into her bedroom.

"I think you are. You almost fell asleep over your homework." Taylor set Miki down on her bed and pulled her pyjamas out from under her pillow. "Come on, off with your uniform."

It was almost like dressing a rag doll, but Taylor soon had Miki changed out of her school uniform and into her pyjamas. Soon she was tucked up in bed, and Taylor was about to turn the ceiling light off when a sleepy little voice piped up. "Daddy?"

He looked back over his shoulder. "Yeah?"

"I like it when you sing. Can you sing for me?"

"I'm not very good at singing, Miki."

"Yes you are!" Miki insisted. "An' I like it. Please, Daddy?"

"All right," he relented. "But then you have to sleep, all right?" When Miki had nodded her agreement, he walked back over to the bed and sat down right near the end of the mattress.

"What do you want me to sing?"

"Something you wrote."

Taylor raised an eyebrow at Miki. "And what makes you think I've ever written anything?" he asked, and Miki shrugged. "I think I can probably come up with something." And reaching down into the deepest recesses of his mind, he unearthed a chorus and the first verse of the first song he had ever written, all the way back in Year 7 Music.

"When you have no light to guide you...and no one to walk beside you...I will come to you...oh I will come to you...when the night is dark and stormy...you won't have to reach out for me...I will come to you...oh, come to you..."

"Sometimes when all your dreams may have seen better days...when you don't know how and why, but you've lost your way...have no fear when your tears are fallin'...I will hear your spirit callin'...and I swear that I'll be there, come what may..."

By the time he had finished singing the first verse, Miki had fallen fast asleep, carried off to the Land of Nod on her father's voice. Taylor smiled slightly and got to his feet, carefully so as not to wake Miki up, and tucked her in before leaving the room, switching off the ceiling light on his way out.

He had just settled himself on the lounge in front of the TV when his mobile rang. Sneaking a quick glance at the clock on the wall, and then at the TV (it was five past eight, and *The New Inventors* was just beginning its weekly broadcast), he muted the volume and answered. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's Audrey."

"Oh, hey Audrey. What's up?"

"I was wondering if you were free tomorrow night. There's a new indoor skating rink that opened up down in Oak Flats about a month ago, and I'm thinking of heading down to go for a skate."

Taylor raised an eyebrow at this, even though he knew Audrey couldn't see it. "You want me to come roller skating with you?"

"Well, you and Miki, but that's the general idea, yeah."

"Audrey Carmichael, are you asking me out on a *date*?" Taylor asked.

There was a pause, and Taylor was almost positive he could see Audrey turning crimson. "I suppose I am," Audrey said at last.

Taylor couldn't help smiling when Audrey made her admission. "So when and where do you want Miki and I to meet up with you?"

"You've been along Industrial Road in Oak Flats, I assume?"

"Of course I have."

"Well, the rink's in the building next door to the Australia Post delivery centre. It's a white building with a blue roof, and it's got an orange sign out front of it. If you drive down Industrial from the Corpus Christi end it'll be on your left, about two-thirds of the way along the road. I'd get there at around six-thirty if I were you guys, it'll give you enough time to find somewhere to park. The car park has a tendency to fill up really quickly on Friday nights."

"And you'll meet us there?"

"Yep. Make sure you two bring your skates, because the ones they have for hire aren't exactly what I'd choose to wear given the option. They don't fit very well."

"I'm sure I can dig mine up from somewhere. Miki got a pair from her uncle for Christmas last year, so she'll be right. She's been on at me to take her skating somewhere other than our driveway for ages."

"Well, this is the perfect opportunity then," Audrey replied. "So I'll see you both there?"

"Definitely."

"And just so you know, it doesn't finish until nine-thirty, so I hope that won't be too late for Miki to be up."

"If I dose her with sugar early enough she'll be hyper for a good few hours."

Audrey laughed. "Okay then. I'll see you tomorrow night."

"See you Audrey."

They both hung up at almost the same moment, and Taylor snapped his phone closed before unmuting the TV.

The next evening, Taylor drove over to Gwynneville after he had finished the week's grocery shopping. He had both his and Miki's pairs of skates, along with a change of clothes and shoes for Miki, in the boot of his car, and only needed to collect his daughter from her aunt and uncle's house. Wrapped up in Miki's jeans, hoodie and T-shirt was a lone Freddo Frog – it didn't look like much, but that one piece of chocolate was more than enough to send Miki on one hell of a sugar trip. He wasn't looking forward to dealing with Miki when she came down off the high – she would be extremely irritable and something of a complete brat.

"Daddy!" Miki squealed when Jackie let Taylor inside her house. "Are we going skating now?"

In response, Taylor held up the clothes, the shoes and the Freddo Frog. "As soon as you change out of your uniform and into these, and once you've had your chocolate, then yes, we're going." He handed the clothes to Jackie. "Can you help her change into these, Jacks?"

"Yeah, no problem," Jackie replied. "Come on, Miki."

"Uncle Taylor, can I come skating too?" Matilda asked from where she sat at the kitchen table, her homework book in front of her.

"I think your mum and dad want you to stay home tonight, Mattie," Taylor replied. "But maybe if you ask them nicely enough, your mum might take you skating over the weekend. Though don't tell her I said that."

Matilda giggled and ducked her head. "Okay."

Miki and Jackie soon emerged from the bathroom, Jackie carrying Miki's folded school uniform. "Now, you sit down and have your chocolate while I put your shoes on," Taylor said as Miki came up to the kitchen table. He sat down in an empty chair, Miki's little purple Converse sneakers settled in his lap, and while Miki ate he slipped her shoes onto her feet, tying the laces up nice and tightly in double knots so they didn't come undone.

"Can we have pizza for dinner?" Miki asked when she had finished her chocolate.

"No, not tonight," Taylor answered. "But we can have McDonald's if you like."

“Okay!” Miki said happily, and Taylor smiled. He was thankful that Miki was so easily pleased, and nothing like many only children he encountered – he knew he’d done a good job in raising her until that point, though the occasional bit of reassurance on his brother’s part didn’t hurt matters.

They arrived at the Oak Flats Rollerskating Rink just before seven to find the car park crawling with people. “Stick close to me, Miki,” Taylor cautioned as he unbuckled Miki’s seat belt. “There are a lot of people here tonight, it’s going to be very busy.”

“Over here, Taylor!”

Taylor looked up from locking the car, and saw Audrey standing next to the outside wall of the rink, one hand raised as if to beckon them over. He picked up the bag containing the skates with one hand and took Miki’s right hand in his other, and led her across the car park. “Hey Audrey,” Taylor said when he and Miki were within what he guessed to be Audrey’s earshot.

“Good to see you could both make it,” Audrey said with a smile. “And I’m glad to see that you’re feeling better, Miki.”

The rink opened a few minutes later. Once they had paid the entry fee and were inside, they walked down the ramp to the rink itself and sat down on the bottom row of the seats across from the DJ’s booth. “Audrey, can you keep an eye on Miki for me for a few minutes?” Taylor asked as he set down his and Miki’s skates.

“Yeah, of course I can,” Audrey replied without hesitation. “I’ll help her put her skates on.”

“Thanks, Audrey,” Taylor said, sounding grateful, and headed back up the ramp.

“Aud-ree?”

Audrey looked over from taking Miki’s skates out of the bag. “Yeah?”

“What does ‘disown’ mean?”

Audrey raised an eyebrow at this. How a six-year-old would know a word like ‘disown’, she had no idea – and nor did she have any idea how she would explain the concept in terms Miki would understand.

“Well, it means that your mummy and your daddy don’t want to be your mummy and daddy anymore,” Audrey replied after some thought. She was unlacing Miki’s sneakers as she spoke.

“Where did you hear that word?”

"Daddy said to Uncle Zac one day that my nan and my pop disowned him," Miki replied with a shrug. In her little voice the word sounded so innocent, but Audrey knew better than to see it that way. To disown a child was, in her mind, something so drastic and final that she couldn't fathom any parent doing it. Not least of all to Taylor.

"Why would they do that?"

Again Miki shrugged. "I don't know. But he doesn't like them very much." After a short pause she added, "I don't like them very much either."

Audrey slipped Miki's right foot into one of the skates and started lacing it up. "I can see why he wouldn't like them very much," she mused. "I wouldn't either if my parents did that to me."

"What wouldn't you like your parents doing to you?"

Audrey paused in tying Miki's laces and looked up to see that Taylor had returned. "Miki just mentioned that your parents disowned you," she replied as she looked back down at Miki's skate. "She wanted to know what it meant. It's a big word for a little girl."

And in that moment, Taylor's entire demeanour changed. She finished lacing Miki's skate up just in time for Taylor to pull Miki onto his lap, reach for the other skate, shove it onto Miki's left foot and start doing up its laces. "Michaela, we are going to have a talk about this later," he said to his daughter, his tone low and somewhat threatening.

"Am I in trouble?" Miki asked, and Audrey thought she actually sounded scared.

"You are in a *lot* of trouble, Michaela." He finished lacing up the skate and started doing up the buckles on each skate. Once the buckles were done up, he set Miki on the floor and gave her a little push to send her on her way. "I'm sorry about this, Audrey," he said quietly.

"What could you be sorry for?" Audrey asked. "Though now I can see why you only call her 'Michaela' when she's in trouble. She was actually a bit scared there."

Taylor didn't respond to this, just sat there with his hands on his knees, head hanging low and eyes closed. To Audrey he looked completely exhausted and defeated. "I wanted to tell you myself," he said at last. "I just wasn't ready yet, and I couldn't find the words for it. And then Miki goes and tells you for me." He straightened up a little and stared up at the ceiling. "It's been almost seven years since they did it to me, and it still hurts as much as it did when they told me to leave."

Audrey shifted a little closer to him and put a tentative hand on his left shoulder. "I reckon it would," she said softly. "I can't imagine any parent doing something like that."

"Well, mine did." Taylor got to his feet and stepped around in front of Audrey to retrieve his skates. "I haven't skated since high school, so I'm probably going to be a little shaky," he said, changing the subject as he sat back down. "It's kind of ironic – I taught Miki to skate, but I haven't skated myself since I was seventeen."

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea then," Audrey said, beginning to feel somewhat nervous.

"Nah, I'll be all right," Taylor said. He snapped the buckles on his left skate closed and started in on his right. "I'm pretty tough – haven't broken a bone yet, and I don't intend to start breaking any tonight."

Little did he know that Audrey's words would turn out to be somewhat prophetic.

Audrey followed Taylor onto the rink a few minutes after he skated off. For the first few circuits of the rink she skated close to and kept an eye on him, noting that he was indeed somewhat unsteady on his skates. He was staying within grabbing distance of the half wall that surrounded the rink, the fingers of his right hand lightly brushing the brick work, the hallmark of a nervous skater. It wasn't until the DJ announced that the skating direction was to reverse that the date came to an abrupt end. One moment he was on his feet, the next he was sprawled out face down on the blue linoleum floor of the rink. And Audrey hadn't even seen him fall.

"Are you okay?" Audrey asked as she helped Taylor to sit up. "I didn't even see you fall over." As soon as Taylor was sitting he immediately cradled his right hand against his chest, holding it in place with his left, and she knew straight away that it was very badly sprained, if not broken.

"My wrist," he mumbled. Audrey heard him take in a very shaky breath, his eyes squeezed shut. It was clear to her that he was in incredible amount of pain, and she knew she needed to get him to the hospital as soon as she could. "I-I think it's broken."

"And you know this how? According to you, you've never broken a bone in your life," Audrey informed him.

"Just get my skates off," he sighed. Just as he said these words one of the rink attendants came skating over.

"Is everything all right?" the attendant asked as she dropped to her knees on the rink floor.

"He took a bit of a tumble," Audrey replied from where she was knelt at Taylor's feet, undoing the buckles and laces on each of his skates. "His first time on skates since high school, so I'm not exactly surprised to tell you the truth."

"Oh, thanks so much for the vote of confidence," Taylor said, his tone sarcastic but laced with pain.

"Well, all I can do for now is ice his wrist and pop it in a sling, but you should probably drop into Emergency before you head home tonight," the attendant said as Audrey slipped Taylor's skates off his feet. "Do you need us to call a taxi?"

"No, I drove down here," Taylor replied as he was helped to his feet. "Audrey, how are you getting your car home? I mean, if my wrist *is* broken, I can't exactly drive."

"I didn't drive here," Audrey replied as she skated after Taylor and the attendant off the rink, carrying one of Taylor's skates in each of her hands. "My car's at the mechanic's until next week. I caught the train down after work and then walked from Albion Park station."

Once Taylor's wrist was iced up and his arm in a sling, and after Audrey had chased Miki down and taken her skates off of her feet, the three of them left for Shellharbour Hospital, with Audrey behind the wheel of Taylor's car for the very first time.

"How's the arm feeling?" Audrey asked as she pulled up to the traffic lights just outside of Corpus Christi High School.

"Freezing cold," Taylor replied. "But at least it isn't hurting at the moment." In the rear view mirror Audrey saw him quirk one of his eyebrows upward. "'At the moment' being the operative term here."

"Well, just you wait until they go to set it," Audrey said as the light turned green. "It'll kill like you're being murdered."

"Somehow, I really don't like the sound of that," Taylor said, now sounding very worried.

"Daddy?" piped up a very anxious voice from the back seat.

"Yeah Miki?" Taylor answered.

"Why is your arm hurting?"

Taylor closed his eyes and put his head back on the head rest. "I fell over, Miks. And sometimes when you fall over, it makes your arm hurt."

"When Katie fell over last week she came back to school, an' her arm had a..." Miki trailed off and frowned, with Audrey coming to the rescue.

"A cast?" she prompted.

"Yeah!" Miki replied. "She had a cast on her arm, an' Mrs. Davis let us draw an' write our names on it after roll call. Daddy, do you have to have a cast on your arm?"

"I don't know Miks," Taylor answered. His wrist was starting to hurt again, the numbness wearing off. "Audrey, do you have any Nurofen on you?"

"No, sorry," Audrey said apologetically. "I don't even have any Panadol, it's all on top of the fridge at home." She took her eyes off the road for just a moment, looking up at the Chemist Warehouse outlet on the other side of the road. "And I don't even know if the chemist would be open right now."

"Make 'em put a purple cast on, Daddy," Miki added.

"I'll think about it," Taylor said, privately thinking that the only way he would allow the colour purple to be anywhere near or on his body, however temporarily, would be if he were pissed right out of his skull.

It didn't take them much longer after that to reach Shellharbour Hospital. Somewhat unusually for a Friday night there was very little traffic to hinder their passage, and Audrey was soon parked as close to the emergency department as possible. She let Miki out of the car first, once she was out herself, before helping Taylor to get out of the front passenger seat.

"This is definitely not how I imagined my Friday night," Audrey said as the three of them walked into Emergency.

"You think you're the only one?" was Taylor's irritated response, a tone that Audrey let slide – she knew it was only the pain talking. "For the first time in my life I'm walking into Emergency for a reason other than being with my drunk mother, and it's with my arm in a sling. The worst part is that I'm right fucking handed."

"Well, let's hope it isn't broken then," Audrey replied, before walking up to the triage desk. "Hi, would we be able to see a doctor please?" she asked the slightly bored-looking nurse on duty.

"What's your emergency?" the nurse asked, her tone almost as bored as her expression.

"I'm pretty sure I broke my wrist," Taylor replied. "And it's really fucking hurting so I'd appreciate being able to one, see a doctor *now*, and two, get some heavy duty painkillers into my system. I'm in a lot of fucking pain here." That he wasn't even attempting to modify his language so that Miki didn't pick up a few naughty words before she reached her teens was a true indicator of the sheer amount of pain he was in – and it was a level that was quite significant.

"I'd appreciate it if you could watch your language," the nurse said. "Do you have your Medicare card and a form of photo identification with you?"

"I do, as a matter of fact." To Audrey he said, "My wallet's in my back right pocket. I need my driver's licence and my Medicare card."

"I'm on it." Audrey had Taylor's wallet out quick as a flash, and found his driver's licence and Medicare card just as quickly. "Now how about getting a wriggle on and calling a doctor out here to see my boyfriend?"

"Just a moment," the nurse said as she started to type away. Her tone was one that brooked absolutely no argument, and soon she was sliding Taylor's Medicare card and ID back across the desk. "If you'll just take a seat in the waiting area, I'll have a doctor come out to see you momentarily."

"Thank you," Taylor said gratefully as Audrey returned the two cards to his wallet. "Really appreciate it."

The waiting area was nearly deserted, with only a teenage girl hunched over a plastic mixing bowl, a woman Audrey guessed to be the girl's mother, and a man around Taylor's age holding an ice pack wrapped in a tea towel to his forehead to break the monotony.

"This might just be the pain talking," Taylor said as he lowered himself very slowly into one of the seats, "but I'm sure I heard you refer to me as your boyfriend a little while ago."

"Well, yeah, I did," Audrey replied. "Though that was mostly just to make that stupid bitch get her act together."

Taylor tilted his head very slightly to his right. "So you wouldn't want to make that a reality, then?"

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Taylor nodded. "Yeah. I like you, Audrey. I haven't said anything until now because I wasn't sure I wouldn't be laughed at."

"Well, I wasn't about to laugh at you, because I like you as well." Audrey let out a soft chuckle. "We're something, aren't we?"

Taylor smiled at this. "Oh, we're something all right."

Chapter 6

She Said

*I could take your hand
Or I could take your world
I'm counting down the hours*

* * *

Loud and insistent knocking at the front door roused Taylor from a much-needed nap on the Sunday afternoon after his and Audrey's disaster of a date. He had barely been able to sleep the last couple of nights, even despite dosing himself with the painkillers he had been prescribed after having his wrist set and casted, and so had taken to napping at every chance he got.

An x-ray at the hospital had confirmed his suspicions and worst fears. The doctor who had examined him had diagnosed it as a 'distal radial fracture', but those three words really only meant one thing – he had a broken wrist. To make matters worse, his broken wrist was his right – and for a right-handed person, this was nothing short of disastrous.

"Jesus Christ," he mumbled sleepily as he sat himself up, using his left hand for leverage. "*Hold your fucking horses!*" he yelled out as the knocking started anew. In that moment he was grateful that Jackie had taken Miki for the weekend – his daughter had heard enough from his gutter mouth on Friday night to last her until she was at least thirteen. After sitting still for a moment to make sure he could actually stand up, he got to his feet and meandered to the front door.

"Oh, what the hell do *you* two want?" he asked irritably upon discovering who it was that stood on his doorstep. Standing there were Joshua and Rachael, both bundled up against the August chill. Upon spotting the bright blue fibreglass cast that encased Taylor's right hand, wrist and forearm up to a few centimetres below his elbow, Joshua raised an eyebrow.

"I see that the fuck-up fairy has paid you a visit," he said. "How did you manage to break your arm? And your *right* arm at that?"

Taylor scowled and stepped to one side so that Joshua and Rachael could enter the unit. "I fell over," he replied, closing the front door as soon as Rachael was inside.

"Doing what?" Rachael asked as she unbuttoned her coat.

Taylor sighed and closed his eyes. "Rollerskating," he admitted, and braced for the gales of laughter that were sure to erupt.

He wasn't disappointed.

"You went *rollerskating*?" he heard Joshua ask, his tone one of incredulity, and opened his eyes just in time to see his friend start snickering madly. Rachael was being a little less obvious about it, choosing to laugh silently into her hand.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up you bastards," Taylor muttered as he headed to the kitchen. "So what are you two doing here anyway, other than to annoy the shit out of me?"

"There's going to be another open mic in about two weeks," Rachael said. She was climbing up on a bar stool as she spoke. "You interested?"

"I hope you realise that you'll have to get me good and drunk before I get anywhere close to even considering it," Taylor said, not looking up from poking one-handed through the refrigerator. "I only did it last time because I knew my life would become a living hell if I backed out." He found what he was searching for, a one kilogram tub of banana and honey yoghurt, and backed away from the fridge. "And anyway, I don't have anyone who could watch Miki for a night that doesn't make me pay them in Tia Maria. I can't exactly bring a six-year-old into Cooney's."

"But if there was someone available to watch your kid, you would?" Rachael asked, her tone hopeful.

"You sound like you're begging me," Taylor told her without looking up from tipping some of the yoghurt from the tub into a bowl. "I'm not doing it, Rach. I need to take some time out so I can heal up, and going to the pub to make an utter idiot of myself doesn't count as taking time out. Plus, in case you haven't realised by now, I not only have a broken wrist, but I'm also right-handed. It's very fucking difficult to play the guitar with a cast around that particular wrist."

"Spoilsport," Rachael groused.

Taylor chose to ignore this, and snapped the lid back on the yoghurt tub. He had just stowed the yoghurt back in the refrigerator, and was digging through the cutlery drawer for a spoon, when Joshua chose to mention something that Taylor had completely forgotten about.

"Hey, you have a brother, don't you?"

"Not that it's really any of your business, but yes."

"So you get him to watch your kid for a night. Aren't you supposed to be intelligent?"

"Obviously not intelligent enough to have told you to fuck off long ago," Taylor muttered. "He lives in Sydney, Josh," he said. "He doesn't drive down here, so it takes him a couple of hours to get down this way. I can't just ask him to drop everything and come down here."

"Like I said, the next one's in two weeks," Rachael reminded him, in the sort of tone she reserved for her nieces and nephews. "And I don't give a damn what excuses you have, but you *are* coming to the open mic." She pointed at the cordless handset, which sat in its wall cradle. "Pick up the damn phone, call up your brother, and ask him to come down here. It's not rocket science."

"I hate you."

Rachael smiled sweetly. "I know you do. Now call him."

Muttering obscenities and threats under his breath the whole while, he fetched the cordless handset and dialled Zac's mobile, hitting the keys awkwardly with his right thumb, pressing the TALK button when all the appropriate buttons had been pressed.

"Irukandji Design and Productions, Zac Hanson speaking."

"I thought you didn't work on Sunday arvo."

"Hey Tay," Zac said, sounding weary.

"What're you doing at work? I thought you were going to the footy today."

"Mike called in sick, so Matt asked me to come in – reckons he'll pay me double, so I'm not really complaining. I'll go to the footy next weekend." There was a sound akin to a pencil scratching its way across paper. "So what did you want to talk to me about?"

"When were you planning on coming down here next?"

"In about three or so weeks. I wasn't sure exactly."

Taylor swore silently. "Reckon you could come down a week earlier than that?"

"What for?" Zac asked, and Taylor couldn't help but notice that he sounded somewhat suspicious.

"I was wondering if you'd be able to watch Miki for me. Rachael's dragged me into doing another open mic and I don't have anyone to play babysitter."

"You can't ask Jacks?"

"She makes me pay her in alcohol. Tia Maria to be exact. And that puts a huge dent in my pay."

"Oh, you poor *baby*."

"Shut up Zac."

Zac snickered quietly. "What's in it for me?" he asked. "I mean, usually it's me deciding that I actually *want* to sit on a train for hours on end, all because my only brother decided he wanted to be as far away from Sydney as possible while still being close to the train line. You've never *asked* me to come down before."

"I'll let you turn my cast into a canvas."

"Your cast?" Zac asked, evidently puzzled. "You break something?"

"My right wrist. Snapped one of the bones clean in two."

Taylor could hear the wince in his brother's voice when Zac next spoke. "Ouch."

"Yeah."

"How'd you do that? I didn't think you were that accident-prone."

"I'm not." He sighed softly. "I went on a date on Friday night, at a rollerskating rink, and I pretty much went arse over teakettle. Broke my fall with my right hand and broke my wrist."

"You idiot. I hope this girl was worth it." There was a pause. "It *was* a girl, right? You haven't gone all Anthony Callea on me have you?"

"*No, Zac,*" Taylor replied. "I'm still completely straight, and yes she was very much worth it. So much in fact that she decided she wanted to put up with me."

"You actually found someone who was willing to do that?"

"Is that really so surprising?" Taylor asked. He sucked in a quick breath as a sharp ache started up in his wrist. "Look Zac, I have to go and take some painkillers, so think about it and email me when you've decided what you're going to do."

"Okay. You heal up soon, all right?"

"I'll try to. See ya Zac."

"See ya Tay."

Taylor pressed the TALK button on the handset again, using his left hand this time, and replaced it back in the wall cradle. "Happy now?" he asked Rachael, his irritation very clear in his tone.

"Oh yes, very happy." She grinned at Taylor and picked up her handbag from the kitchen table. "We're doing originals this time, so get composing. See you in two weeks."

The moment that he had closed and locked the front door behind Rachael and Joshua, Taylor all but ran to the kitchen and opened the cupboard above the oven. Knowing that it was the only place he was sure *not* to lose them, he'd put his painkillers in the red plastic basket that lived in that cupboard. All of the medications belonging to him and Miki were stored in there, and had been ever since he'd moved in – packets of Panadol and Nurofen, bottles of Dymadon and strawberry-flavoured Children's Nurofen for Miki, the allergy medicines they both took for hay fever every spring (Claratyne tablets for him, and Claratyne syrup for Miki), and now his painkillers. He filled a glass with water, popped two of the tablets once he had found the packet, and checked the time before taking them.

By the time someone else started to knock on the door, he was in a much better mood. He supposed it was a combination of the painkillers and having eaten something that had made his irritation evaporate. When he saw just who was standing on his doorstep, his good mood got even better.

"Hey Audrey," he said as he let his girlfriend inside.

"Hey yourself," she replied, raising herself up on tiptoes for a kiss. "How's the wrist feeling?"

"It's still pretty sore." He lifted his right hand and moved his fingers and thumb just slightly. "The painkillers are helping a lot, though." He spotted a black backpack that sat on the floor next to Audrey's feet. "What's with the backpack?"

"You ever done karaoke before?"

"A couple of times, why?"

Almost in response, Audrey picked up the backpack and carried it across to the lounge. She unzipped it and took out a black PlayStation 2, a controller, two microphones, two cords, and two game cases.

"I thought you might like something to take your mind off your wrist," she said as she set the game console up on the coffee table. "So we're going to play *SingStar*. But first..." She looked up from plugging one end of the power cord into the back of the console. "I know there's something you're not telling me about you," she said. "It's probably the last thing you want to think about, I know, but I really want you to talk to me about it." She shrugged. "You never know, it might help a little."

"You're sure you want to know?" Taylor asked dubiously. "You might hate me once you've found out all the gory details. It isn't pretty."

"I'm sure." Audrey tapped a spot on the lounge next to where she sat. "Tell me all about it, and then we can get down to the serious business of kicking your arse."

Taylor barked out a laugh, but joined Audrey on the lounge. He was silent for a while as he gathered his thoughts.

"Miki told you one of my major secrets already," he said finally. "It's true – my parents did disown me. I was kicked out of home two days before Christmas in 2002, and written out of my parents' wills not long after that."

"They *didn't*."

Taylor nodded. "As you can probably guess, that was a pretty miserable Christmas. My girlfriend at the time – her name was Claire – wasn't speaking to her father, and her mother was away up in Brisbane. Plus two of my grandparents were off caravanning around Australia, and the other two live in Perth, so we basically had nowhere to go. So Claire, Miki and I spent a week over Christmas and New Year's in a Salvation Army refuge. We'd found a place to live down here, but the tenants at the time weren't able to move out until after Christmas." He drew his knees up to his chest, wrapped his long arms around his legs, and propped up his chin on his knees. "Do you know the reason why my parents disowned me?"

Audrey shook her head.

"It's because I got my girlfriend pregnant." Audrey watched as Taylor's eyes dropped closed. "Everything else before that, they were perfectly happy to turn a blind eye to. But as soon as I told my mother and my father that they were going to be grandparents, and outside of wedlock at that, they completely flipped." He laughed humourlessly. "Ruined Christmas 2001, that did. I was told in no uncertain terms that if I didn't force Claire to get rid of it, I could forget about being their son. I would only be permitted to return home if I left Claire, or if I gave Miki up for adoption."

"But you refused to do that."

"Obviously, yeah. I wasn't about to force Claire to kill our kid, even though that was something she wanted. I couldn't do it – I mean, that was something I helped create. But also because finding out I was going to be a dad...it saved my life."

He opened his eyes right at that moment. "Claire and I, we went to different schools, and we met for the first time at an inter-school sports day when we were in Year 10. We just kept bumping into each other afterward, like down at the shops or at the train station. I'm not ashamed to say that I was in love with her for the time we were together, because I honestly was." He rubbed the pad of his left thumb along the crook of his right elbow. "About three months after we met, just before the School Certificate exams, she sneaked onto school grounds during lunch, grabbed me and pulled me behind the bike shed, and she gave me something I later found out was a joint. I just thought it was a really badly rolled cigarette. She told me to smoke it, said it'd relax me, slipped a lighter into my pocket, and hightailed it off the grounds before the teacher on duty caught her."

He now uncurled himself, putting his feet down on the carpeted floor. "That one joint started an avalanche. I was smoking pot on a regular basis by the time I turned seventeen. It didn't take me long to 'graduate' to the harder drugs after that, and soon enough I was doing coke and heroin as well. Claire quite happily encouraged me, she called me her 'partner in crime'."

"Your parents didn't notice?"

Taylor shook his head. "Not a bit. I either managed to hide it really well, or they really didn't care. I know my father had his hands full with my brother and sister and with keeping my mother out of the liquor cabinet, and my mother was just in a constant alcoholic haze." He worried at the hem of his T-shirt with the fingers of his left hand. "Claire and I, we had always been so careful to make sure she never fell pregnant, but at the same time we had so many scares that it was frightening. She pretty much had me convinced that she was on the Pill, but I know now that she wasn't."

"Just before Christmas in 2001 was when it all fell apart. She called me in a panic early one morning and told me that I needed to come over to her place straight away. I found her sitting wedged in a corner of the bathroom, holding something in her hands and crying."

"A pregnancy test," Audrey realised softly, and Taylor nodded.

"Yeah. A blood test confirmed what we'd both feared. We had very different reactions to the news – she was terrified of what her father would do to her if he found out, but me...I was excited that I was going to be a dad, but at the same time it was a massive wake-up call. I had been slowly killing myself for two years, and I knew that if I didn't stop it all right away, I'd most likely be dead before my son or daughter was born. So I quit that day – went completely cold turkey, and I forced Claire to do the same. I haven't touched any drugs aside from prescription and over-the-counter medications since then.

"Miki was born exactly six months after I turned nineteen, and we named her for my maternal grandparents, Michael and Maria. At that point I knew I had three months left to leave home of my own accord. My father had sat me down just before Miki was born and told me that he didn't give a damn if I had somewhere to live or if I had to go and live out on the streets, but I was to get out of his house in exactly three months or he'd force me out. The very last nice thing he ever did for me was to take a photo of Miki, Claire and I two hours after Miki was born. He never spoke to me or acknowledged my existence again.

"I still remember the words my mother said to me the day I was told to leave. She...she called me a disgrace, and told me that she had never been so ashamed of anyone in her entire life."

"That's awful," Audrey said softly.

"It gets worse. Barely seconds before she slammed the front door in my face, she told me that she dearly hoped I turned up dead in a ditch one day."

"What a bitch!" Audrey spat without even thinking. "She actually said that to you?"

Taylor's only response was a nod. Talking about his estrangement from his family still hurt as much as it had all those years earlier, especially when it came to remembering his mother.

"A week or so after Christmas, we left the refuge and came down here. Moved into this place, just the three of us. I got a job at Redback Music over at the Mall, and Claire stayed home with Miki. Those first couple of months were hell – we only had one income, so I was constantly worried that we wouldn't be able to stretch my wages far enough to cover all of our expenses. Claire and I both went hungry for days at a time so we could have enough money to pay the bills, or so that Miki had new clothes or food to eat. Our car kept breaking down, and we couldn't afford to catch the bus or the train, so whenever the car was out of commission we had to walk everywhere.

"And then, on my twentieth birthday...I woke up that morning to find that Claire's side of the bed was empty, and that she'd not only cleared out everything of hers, but she'd emptied the jar on

top of the refrigerator that held our emergency fund, and the car was gone. There was no note to tell me where she'd disappeared to, and her sister had no idea where she was. I ended up filing a missing persons report that afternoon. Two days later Jackie called me to let me know that Claire was back in Sydney, and she'd moved back in with her mother."

"Did you ever see her again?"

"Yeah, I saw her last month. She hasn't changed a bit." Taylor let out a quiet sigh. "So it's pretty much just been Miki and I for the last six-and-a-half years. I see my brother every so often, but my sister hasn't spoken to me since I left Sydney. I miss her the most – she took my parents' side in the whole mess, and that's what hurts most of all."

He was quiet after that, and Audrey figured she wouldn't get another word out of him about it all. She knew she was right when Taylor reached across to the coffee table and picked up one of the game cases Audrey had brought with her. "So how do you play *SingStar* anyway?"

It didn't take Audrey very long to explain the game's mechanics, and in almost no time at all she had loaded up *SingStar Rocks*. "I'll go first, just to give you a rough idea of how it works in practice," she said as she picked her first song – Killing Heidi's *I Am*. "Basically the aim is to get as high a score as possible – the most points you can score is ten thousand, but to actually get that many you have to hit every note perfectly and in time with the song, and that's damn near impossible. The most I've ever scored is about nine-and-a-half thousand."

Doesn't sound too hard, Taylor mused silently as Audrey went through her paces. He paid very close attention to the display that was superimposed over *I Am's* music video, especially to the lines that he figured indicated the notes he was supposed to hit in whatever song he ended up choosing. Approximately three-and-a-half minutes later Audrey was finished singing, having racked up a score of almost nine thousand points, and Taylor took the microphone from her. "I can pick anything I like?" he asked as he scrolled through the list of songs available.

"Anything. Though you should probably pick one you know well, seeing as it's your first time playing it."

"Yeah, that'll be difficult," he muttered, finally landing on one he knew vaguely well – Nirvana's *Come As You Are*. He picked 'Normal' as the song length and waited for the song to start up, singing almost as if his life depended on it when his cue came.

"Come as you are, as you were...as I want you to be...as a friend, as a friend...as an old enemy...take your time, hurry up...the choice is yours, don't be late...take a rest as a friend...as an old memoria, memoria...memoria, memoria..."

"Come doused in mud, soaked in bleach...as I want you to be...as a trend, as a friend...as an old memoria, memoria...memoria, memoria..."

"And I swear that I don't have a gun...no I don't have a gun...no I don't have a gun..."

"Memoria, memoria...memoria, memoria...no I don't have a gun..."

"And I swear that I don't have a gun...no I don't have a gun...memoria, memoria..."

Audrey was left speechless when Taylor finished his song. His first time playing the game, and he had achieved a nearly perfect score of 9,996. Every note had been hit perfectly, except for a few spots during some particularly long notes when he'd run out of air and had to take a breath.

"Have you ever considered a career in music?" Audrey asked conversationally as Taylor keyed his name in, pressing X on the controller to register his score on the song's high-score table.

"I did at one point," he replied as he stretched. "But that was before Miki came along. These days I'm lucky if I can tune my guitar before Miki starts screeching at me."

"Would you still want to do it?"

Taylor nodded. "If someone gave me the chance, I'd pretty much jump at it. I'm not much good at the song writing side of things, but I can hold my own on covers."

"As you've already demonstrated."

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, it's just that my dad has his own recording studio, and he produces music on the side. Indie acts mostly, and soundtracks for low-budget indie films. Nothing too high-profile. He basically told me a couple of months ago during my last visit that if I came across someone who was...well, not to put too fine a point on it, but someone who was worthy of a bit of studio time, he'd give me, and by extension them access to the studio so they could put down a few tracks. Would you be up for it?"

"I think I would be. What do I have to do?"

Almost in response, Audrey grabbed her backpack again and opened the very front pocket. She took out a blank audio cassette still sealed in its plastic wrapper. "You got a tape recorder around here anywhere?"

Chapter 7

Evolution

I've lost my saviour

I've lost my soul

And I know you say so

* * *

Just after he had walked Miki to school the following Friday morning, Taylor's phone rang from the front left pocket of his jeans. Normally he kept his phone in his right pocket, but common sense had won out for the time being – not only could he not get his entire right hand in his pocket because of the cast, but it felt a little awkward to reach across to his right pocket with his left hand.

"Hello?" he said into his phone once it was out of his pocket and opened.

"Hey, it's Zac," his brother said. "You busy?"

"Depends on what your definition of busy is," Taylor replied. He had started walking back up Gipps Road by this point.

"I need you to pick me up from the train station."

Those words made Taylor stop walking right in the middle of the footpath. "Jesus Zac, some advance warning would be nice! You do know that it's a bit hard for me to drive, don't you?"

"What, this isn't advance warning?" Zac asked. "I only just got on the train from Penrith. I'm not even going to be *in* Wollongong for another three hours. And I'm sure it's not *that* hard to drive, your fingers aren't broken as well are they?"

"No, of course they aren't." Taylor closed his eyes briefly and let out a frustrated sigh. "Just make sure you ring me or something when you're leaving Central, so I know how much time to allow for the drive into town."

"Will do."

"And just so you know, you're driving back to my place, so I hope you brought your licence with you."

"I still get asked for ID at the pub Tay, of course I've got my licence with me."

"Yeah all right, I'm just checking. See you at twelve-ish, then?"

"Sounds about right to me. See you when I see you."

The display on the answering machine was flashing when Taylor made it home. He closed and locked the front door behind him before checking how many messages were waiting for him – just the one, something that didn't really surprise him. Most people who would have called him had both his home and mobile phone numbers, and they knew to call his mobile instead of leaving a message on his answering machine if they couldn't get hold of him at home.

When he played the message, he knew straight away why the caller in question hadn't rung his mobile.

"Good morning, this is James Carmichael calling from Quayside Studios in Sydney. My daughter Audrey forwarded your tape on to me last week. If you could call me back before close of business today, I'd like to discuss the possibility of doing some recording. I can be reached at 02 7010 5624 up until five-thirty. I look forward to hearing from you soon."

Here the recording cut off, and Taylor was left staring at the answering machine in disbelief. When he had allowed Audrey to record him singing a few songs, he hadn't thought anything would come of it. Never in a million years. On that cassette tape he had recorded covers of *What You Want* by the John Butler Trio and *Seven Nation Army* by The White Stripes, along with three original songs that he had been saving for the open mic. Somehow he knew those songs wouldn't be used for their original purpose anymore.

He went into the kitchen and found a pen and his notepad, and replayed the message so that he could write down the phone number. A few more replays to make sure he had the number jotted down exactly, and he was fetching the cordless, setting it to hands-free before dialling.

"Quayside Studios Sydney, this is Jemma speaking."

"Hi Jemma, my name is Taylor Hanson," he said in response to the receptionist's greeting. "Would it be possible to speak with James Carmichael please? He called me about ten or fifteen minutes ago, and I unfortunately missed his call."

"Yes, of course. Hold please."

The next voice he heard belonged to the one person he dearly hoped he would never be on the wrong side of. His girlfriend's father.

"James Carmichael speaking."

Taylor took a deep, shaky breath before he spoke again. "Mr. Carmichael, my name is Taylor Hanson – you called me about ten minutes ago."

"I was hoping I would hear back from you," Mr. Carmichael said.

"Yeah, I'm sorry I missed your call – I was taking my daughter to school. Audrey mustn't have given you my mobile number. You said something about recording?"

"Yes, yes I did. When would you be free to come up to Sydney?"

"I'm on leave from work at the moment, so any day over the next four or five weeks except for the fourteenth of September works for me."

"How about..." Taylor could hear a very faint rustling of paper. "I can pencil you in on the twenty-eighth of August. Is there a specific time you would prefer to meet?"

"I can be in the city by nine-thirty."

"Then nine-thirty it is." He rattled off an address in The Rocks, which Taylor wrote down as quickly as his right hand would let him. "Bring any instruments that you would use in the studio, and have two songs ready to perform – one cover, and one original."

The terms of the meeting agreed to, he ended the call and went to the calendar hung on the kitchen wall. In the space assigned to August 28 he wrote the meeting details letter-by-letter with his left hand, the fingers of his right hand now aching too much to let him write, keeping his forearm from elbow to wrist braced against the wall so that his hand stayed steady. For the first and probably the last time, he was more than grateful that he had spent so much time learning to write with his non-dominant hand, all while he should have been studying or doing his homework. Once the most important details about his appointment were jotted down, he capped his pen once more and wandered into the lounge room, settling himself down on the lounge with a cushion on his lap supporting his right arm.

He had been watching *The Morning Show* for around an hour when his mobile phone vibrated and blasted out *Back In Black*. He didn't even bother muting the TV as he flipped his phone open with his good hand and clicked open the message.

Just got on train from central. Train leaving @ 10:27 if u want 2 check the timetable. Pretty sure it's not an express so could take a couple hrs. See u @ 12-ish or so.

Zac was right, Taylor discovered when he had loaded the South Coast line timetable on the CityRail website. The train was most certainly not an express service. In fact, it stopped at every station on the line between Waterfall and Thirroul, only speeding past Bulli, Woonona, Bellambi, Corrimal, Towradgi and Fairy Meadow.

"You picked a hell of a time to come down here," Taylor muttered as he keyed in a return message and sent it.

He spent the next hour after that pottering around the house, doing a little cursory cleaning and tidying up. He knew very well that his brother didn't care about a little mess – to Zac's mind, it meant that the house in question looked lived-in. Any cleaner or tidier, he had often said, and it would have looked no better than one of the display homes over at Haywards Bay. Years of renting, however, had ingrained in Taylor that it was far easier to keep the place tidy than it was to go on a major cleaning spree whenever his landlord wanted to do an inspection.

The drive into Wollongong took about as long as he thought it would. He parked his car in the car park on the Lowden Square side of the train station barely a minute before Zac's train was due to arrive, and stayed in the driver's seat for a few moments before he even considered getting out. The late winter sun had come out from behind the clouds overhead during the drive into town, warming everything up a little, but not enough for him to want to leave his jacket in the car for the few moments that he would be outside.

Zac was standing just inside the doorway of the waiting room on platform 2 when Taylor had crossed the road between the car park and the station itself. "You weren't kidding," Zac said when he saw his brother's right hand. The rest of Taylor's right arm was hidden inside the sleeve of his hoodie.

"Nice to see you too, Zachary," Taylor retorted.

"Well, *someone* hasn't had any coffee this morning."

Taylor ignored this remark. "So how long are you here for this time?"

"About five weeks," Zac replied. He was swinging his duffle bag over his shoulder as he spoke.

"How did you manage that?"

"Told Matt that you weren't well, and that you'd asked me to come play babysitter for my niece. So he put me on the payroll as a temporary freelancer for the next month-and-a-bit, and told me that if I needed extra time to give him a bell."

Alarm bells had started ringing in Taylor's head as soon as those first six words had left Zac's mouth. "And exactly how sick am I supposed to be?" Taylor asked cautiously, knowing he probably wouldn't like what his brother had to say.

"Matt is under the *very* misguided impression that you just got diagnosed with leukaemia."

"And you didn't even think to correct him?" Taylor asked, incredulous. "I've never had that in my life!"

"Didn't you have that scare when you were fifteen?" Zac asked as he followed Taylor over to the car park.

"Yeah, I did, and a scare is all it was. It was glandular fever, I'll have you know."

"Yeah, okay, I know what it was." He took Taylor's car keys from his brother's hand and went around to the back of the car so he could pop the boot open. "Don't get all pissed at me because you were idiotic enough to go skating and snap your wrist, you show-off."

"You'd want to show off too if your girlfriend was as hot as mine is," Taylor said as he opened the front passenger door and got in.

"She'd better not be another redhead," Zac said as he joined his brother in the car, settling himself into the driver's seat.

"Why don't you see for yourself?" Taylor worked his phone out from the left pocket of his jeans and handed it over. "There's a photo of her on my phone. And Claire wasn't a natural redhead anyway, I know for a fact that she dyed it."

It didn't take Zac very long to find the photograph that Taylor was talking about, and he let out a low whistle. "Damn Tay, she's a fox," he commented. "Where did you pick her up from?"

"Side of the road."

"No Tay, really."

"Really. She lives on Gipps Road as well, and she was on her way to work one morning when her car broke down. I was on my way home from dropping Miki at school when she asked to borrow my phone. Gave her my number, not even thinking I'd ever hear from her again, and..." Here Taylor shrugged. "Almost a week later, she texts me and asks if I want to meet up for coffee."

"And as they say, the rest is history," Zac said as he closed Taylor's phone and handed it back. "So where to first, oh brother of mine?"

"Well, I need to go to the chemist and pick up some more Panadeine, and I wanted to have a look through Surf Dive 'n' Ski and EB Games – it's Miki's birthday soon, and I haven't decided what I'm getting her yet."

"What did she ask for?" Zac asked as he turned the key in the ignition.

"She wants a dog, but the landlord doesn't allow pets."

"Could always get her a toy dog," Zac suggested with a shrug. "I'm sure Myer's got a few of those."

"They're probably hundreds of dollars, too." Taylor let out a quiet sigh. "I'll figure something out."

"Well..." Zac pulled the car up at the intersection of Crown and Station Streets. "I was actually considering getting her a Nintendo DS Lite as a combined birthday and Christmas present, seeing as her birthday's so close to December and all that."

Taylor raised an eyebrow at his brother. "Zac, her birthday is almost exactly as close to Christmas as mine is," he pointed out.

"Tay, your birthday is nine-and-a-half months before Christmas."

"And it's also two-and-a-half months *after*. Never stopped any of our grandparents from buying me birthday *and* Christmas presents. There's no point in getting her a combined present, she'll just think you forgot to get her something for Christmas."

The traffic light turned green, and Zac turned right into Crown Street. "Okay, just for her birthday then. What do you think?"

"You really spoil her, you know."

"What else are uncles for?"

Taylor looked out the passenger side window, at all the little shops that lined the left side of Crown Street. "Let me think about it."

* * *

The train doors opened at Circular Quay train station, and Taylor stepped out onto the platform. He could see out across Darling Harbour toward the Sydney Harbour Bridge and Luna Park from

where he stood, and he allowed himself a smile. For the first time in so long, he was happy to be home. He had grown up right in the heart of Sydney, in the suburb of Potts Point, and even though he rarely came anywhere close to the Sydney CBD nowadays – usually if he went to Sydney, it was for Christmas shopping at Miranda Fair or to visit Zac out at Penrith, though occasionally he paid his grandparents the odd visit – he still knew his way around the city like the back of his own hand.

He glanced quickly at his new watch, bought only days earlier to replace the one that Miki had quite happily drowned in the bathtub. She had decided it made a wonderful treasure for her Barbie dolls to go diving for, and had subsequently earned herself a half-hour time-out in her bedroom. His train from Redfern, caught after he had bolted upstairs from platform 1, along the concourse and downstairs to platform 7, had arrived at Circular Quay at almost ten to nine, giving him nearly half an hour to kill before his appointment at Quayside Studios. With this in mind, he readjusted his grip on the handle of his guitar case and set off toward the station exit.

After a quick breakfast at McDonald's, he unzipped his messenger bag and started to hunt through it for his mobile phone. He found it tangled up in the cord for his iPod's earphones, and spent a good few minutes untangling the earphone cord before he was able to rescue his phone. A quick search through his phone directory, and it wasn't long before he was dialling home. If he was lucky, he would be able to catch Miki before Zac walked her to school.

"Hello?"

"Hey Zac."

"Oh, hey Tay. What's up?"

"You haven't dropped Miki at school yet, have you?"

"Nope, not yet. Want to talk to her?"

"Yes please."

The next voice he heard belonged to his little girl. "Hi Daddy."

"Hey baby girl. Are you being a good girl for Uncle Zac?"

"Yep!"

He smiled at this – of course she was.

"When're you comin' home, Daddy?"

"Not until tonight. I have a special meeting with Audrey's dad today."

"Is it for your music?"

"Yeah Miki, it is. Mr. Carmichael wanted to hear me sing and play my guitar this morning." He toyed with the guitar pick he kept on his key ring, tapping it against the tabletop. "Do you promise to be a good girl for Uncle Zac this afternoon after school?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"Good girl. I might bring something home from Sydney with me for you if you keep that promise. Put Uncle Zac back on, okay?"

"Okay, Daddy. I love you."

"Love you too, princess."

He heard Miki's voice whispering to her uncle, and then Zac's voice in his ear. "So do you want me to pick Miki up from school this afternoon?" he asked.

"Yeah, if you wouldn't mind. I have no idea what time I'll be getting home tonight, it depends on how long I'll be at the studios, so just order pizza for dinner. And Miki's promised that she'll behave herself after school today, but I'll check in with you when I get home to make sure. I'll text you when I'm on the train home so you can pick me up at Wollongong station." There was no answer, and Taylor frowned. "Zac, were you even listening to me?"

"Yes, Taylor, I was listening. I was also making notes so that I don't forget anything. I know how you get when people screw up. Me in particular."

"Okay, okay, keep your hair on. I was only asking." He took his phone away from his ear just long enough to check his watch. "I need to get moving – I have no idea how long it's going to take me to get to the studios, and I really don't want to be late. I'd rather stay on Audrey's dad's good side."

"Good luck with that. I've only been going out with Hayley for two weeks and her father already hates me."

"I find that hard to believe, Zac." Taylor was gathering up his rubbish as he spoke.

"Hayley's dad hates artists," Zac said, and Taylor could almost hear the shrug in his brother's voice. "He doesn't like musicians either, so his hatred of me is twofold."

"Drummers aren't exactly musicians."

"Hey, watch it!" Zac protested, sounding slightly wounded. "I'm not *just* a drummer."

"You didn't keep up with your piano lessons past Year 2," Taylor pointed out.

"Neither did you!"

"Right, because I was not only so ridiculously *bad* at it, but I found something I'm much better at." He pushed his rubbish onto its tray, picked up his messenger bag by its strap and slung it around his neck, and left his guitar at the table while he put his rubbish in a nearby bin. "I'll see you tonight – don't let Miki have any sugar. And believe me, I'll know if she does."

"See you tonight," Zac echoed, and he hung up.

Quayside Studios was located on George Street in The Rocks, across the road and down a bit from Rockpool. Before he stepped through the glass door into reception, Taylor stayed out on the footpath and ran through the lyrics and tabs of the songs he had prepared for this meeting. He was nervous for more than one reason – the primary reason being that the last time his skills as a performer were so closely scrutinised had been during the 2001 Higher School Certificate's practical Music examination, a full eight years earlier. He had never liked being put on the spot, no matter how much he psyched himself up for it.

Taking a deep breath, he pushed open the door and walked through the doorway, up to the reception desk. The receptionist was typing away on a computer keyboard, and she looked up when Taylor tapped the little bell that sat on a ledge.

"Welcome to Quayside Studios," she said warmly. The nametag she wore read JEMMA, and Taylor knew this was the same person he had initially spoken on the phone with. "How can I help you today?"

"I've got an appointment with Mr. Carmichael at nine-thirty," Taylor informed her.

"Your name, please?"

"Taylor Hanson."

Jemma resumed her typing momentarily. "Ah yes, here we are," she said in what sounded like triumph. "Please take a seat, and I'll let him know that you've arrived."

He wasn't waiting very long, and had only managed to flick through the first few pages of *Australian Musician's* March 2009 issue when he heard footsteps heading in his direction. He looked up to see someone he knew could only be Audrey's father.

"You must be Taylor," he said warmly, a hand outstretched in greeting. "I'm James, Audrey's dad. Come on through, and bring that guitar of yours with you."

Taylor took the hand and shook it before rising to his feet, looping the strap of his messenger bag around his neck, and picking his guitar case up.

"So how far have you come this morning, Taylor?"

"I live down near Wollongong, Mr. Carmichael—"

"I'll have none of that," he was interrupted. "Call me James – Audrey's already taken a shine to you, so let's dispense with the formalities. I'm sure you don't like being called 'Mr. Hanson' very much."

Taylor managed a very relieved smile. He liked James already, just from the first few minutes of talking to him. He and Audrey were very much alike, from what he had been able to tell in the short while that they had been speaking.

James led him to a spacious office upstairs, at the end of a very long corridor. The office had a view of Darling Harbour and Circular Quay, its large window taking full advantage of the light from the winter sun.

"Take a seat, Taylor," James said as the door was closed behind them. "We'll have a bit of a chat, then I'd like to see what you can do on the strings. I've already *heard* what you can do, but it's nice to see for myself just what my potential clients are capable of." It was here that he noticed Taylor's right hand and wrist, and the cast encasing them both. "Though I do have to ask if you'll be able to play today."

"I shouldn't have any problems with it. The doctor who set my wrist said it would be fine, so long as I don't try to play left-handed."

After a discussion about music and what Taylor wanted to do with his, James rose from his seat. "I think I've heard all that I need to," he said as he walked around from behind his desk. "Let's adjourn to one of the studios – I think it's best if I hear you in there, the acoustics are better."

Bent over at the mixing desk in the studio that James led Taylor to was a very familiar head of dark brown hair. Its owner looked up just as James closed the door, and Taylor found himself staring right into a set of brown eyes.

"I didn't know you were coming up today!" Audrey said, surprised. "I would have given you a lift if I'd known. Why didn't you tell me?"

Taylor shrugged. "Thought you'd be working, that's all."

"Well, how about I give you a ride home? I'll be heading that way at around three."

"Sounds good to me."

Audrey grinned. "Awesome. So my dad's getting you to audition today, I take it?"

"That's exactly what I'm getting him to do today, Audie," James said. "Go and make yourself comfortable, Taylor – I'll let you know when I'm ready to hear you play."

No sooner had Taylor finished a quick tune of his guitar when he heard James' voice coming at him from all directions, and he nearly fell out of his seat in shock. "Ready when you are, Taylor," James said. He was standing next to Audrey at the mixing desk, looking out through the window in the wall that separated the control room from the performance space. "I'd like to hear your original song first."

Taylor nodded and settled his guitar back on his right knee, doing a lightning-quick run-through of the song in his head before he began to play.

"Sometimes honesty gets in the way...help me turn around...I feel like everyone's playing a game...I want to turn around...so when everything breaks it's okay...I'm nervous now in the end..."

"Sometimes honesty pulls me away...help me turn this 'round...I feel like everyone's playing the game...I'm certain now in the end..."

"Well you go home to the same room...you stare at the space on the wall...and you know that in your mind, it's not right...it's all that we see come...waiting for the day that you will know..."

"I could just so easily fall in...it feels right...I step closer...cracks appear in walls and I can't see...the other side...it's all right for you...it's all that you want..."

"Well you go home to the same room...you stare at the space on the wall...and you know that in your mind, it's not right...it's all there sinking...you're falling away 'cause it is true...it defines you...the moment you break is the moment you change...it's all fine on the outside...waiting for the day that you will know...waiting for the day that you will know..."

"Walk away...this is wrong...it will stay...stay for long...you will change...you will become...you're the same..."

"Is there anything inside...how far would you go...how far would you go...how far would you go...how far..."

The last echoes died away quickly, and as soon as he got the nod he started in on his version of one of his favourite songs.

"A woman on the radio talks about revolution...when it's already passed her by...Bob Dylan didn't have this to sing about...you know it feels good to be alive..."

"I was alive and I waited, waited...I was alive and I waited for this...right here, right now...there is no other place I want to be...right here, right now...watching the world wake up from history..."

"I saw the decade in...when it seemed the world could change...at the blink of an eye...and if anything...then there's your sign of the times..."

"I was alive and I waited, waited...I was alive and I waited for this...right here, right now..."

"I was alive and I waited, waited...I was alive and I waited for this...right here, right now...there is no other place I want to be...right here, right now...watching the world wake up from history...right here, right now...there is no other place I want to be...right here, right now...watching the world wake up from history..."

"Right here, right now...there is no other place I want to be...right here, right now...watching the world wake up..."

He had closed his eyes right as he had started singing, letting his fingers find the strings from memory, and opened them just in time to see Audrey clapping. Beside her, James was looking at Taylor, a very thoughtful look on his face. It was near impossible to tell if he approved or not.

"Audie, why don't you and Taylor head out and grab an early lunch," James suggested when Taylor had re-entered the control room. "Pop back here in a couple of hours – Taylor, you can leave your things here if you like."

"I think he likes you," Audrey said as the two of them headed back to the ground floor and out onto George Street. She sounded very sure of herself, at which Taylor raised an eyebrow.

"And you know this how?" he asked.

"Couple of reasons. He's using my nickname around you – he wouldn't do that if he disapproved of you. He got you to perform in the studio, rather than in his office. And I'm willing to bet all the money in my wallet at the moment that he got you to call him James right off the bat."

"How much money's in your wallet?" Taylor asked very innocently.

"About fifty dollars in notes, and another ten dollars in coins."

"You get to shout lunch then. And yeah, the second I called him Mr. Carmichael he corrected me."

"I knew he'd like you," Audrey said.

They caught the 11:30 train from Circular Quay, having stopped downstairs just long enough for Audrey to buy her train ticket, disembarking at Town Hall four minutes later. "So what do you want to do for lunch?" Audrey asked as they climbed the stairs up to the concourse from platform 1.

"Isn't there a KFC or two around here somewhere?" Taylor asked, hoping he was right and that the two he knew were located on George Street hadn't closed up shop sometime during the last seven years.

"Yeah, but it depends on how far you want to walk. There's one right down on the corner of George and Bathurst, it won't even take us a minute to get there once we're out of the station." Audrey took her wallet out of her handbag so she could take out her ticket, with Taylor quickly following her lead. They put their tickets through the ticket barrier that barred the way out of the station, and started heading through to the George Street exit. "Or we can head all the way up to Sydney Central Plaza, but that's a good four or five minutes away on foot, and we would have been better off staying on the train until St. James anyway."

"I think we should stick around here," Taylor decided. "It won't take us so long to get back to The Rocks if we do."

Not five minutes later they had walked down to KFC and bought their lunches, and had taken up seats next to a window that looked out at St. Andrew's Cathedral. "My parents got married there," Taylor said idly after they had been eating for a few minutes.

"They did?" Audrey asked.

Taylor nodded and picked up a piece of popcorn chicken that had fallen out of his Roller. "May 17 1980 was the day. Only day of the year that my mother was completely sober and actually tried to show me that she cared even a little bit." He was quiet for a little while afterward. "As far as I know, my parents and sister still go to services there."

"Did you ever go with them?" Audrey asked.

"Yeah, right up until I turned fifteen. I guess I never really understood it all – it never made sense. One Sunday morning, after we'd caught the train in from Kings Cross, I slipped away and headed in the opposite direction up George Street. And I will tell you right now, I had far more fun in those three hours away from my parents than I would have had sitting in church." Almost as an afterthought, he added quietly, "They never even noticed I was gone."

Audrey couldn't mistake the tone of Taylor's voice for anything else other than *hurt*. Even despite the façade he displayed to the world, she could easily tell that deep down inside he was barely more than a lost little boy that desperately wanted someone, *anyone*, to tell him that they cared. He had been through more in all his twenty-six years of life than anyone should have to deal with in an entire lifetime.

"I can tell you something right now," Audrey said as she finished her Twister. "Your parents, not that they can even be called that, they never deserved you as a son. You're so much better than them. And I will *always* notice when you're not there."

Chapter 8

Forever Lately

I am missing you around

These narrow halls

These empty walls

* * *

"Taylor Hanson?"

Upon hearing his name, Taylor rose from his seat in the waiting room, picking up the large white envelope that held his most recent x-rays from where it leaned against the wall as he moved, and followed his doctor through to her office. Three days earlier Dr. Thorpe had asked him to go to Radiology at Wollongong Hospital to have x-rays taken of his right wrist, to see how well it was healing. That morning he had gone back into Wollongong to pick them up, on his way to his appointment, and had no idea just what Dr. Thorpe would have in store for him.

"Good to see you again, Taylor," Dr. Thorpe said as doctor and patient took their seats. On the desk in front of her was a thick folder that had **HANSON, JORDAN TAYLOR** written on it in black permanent marker. "I believe you have a present for me?"

"Well, I wouldn't call it a *present*, but it's wrapped up like one," Taylor replied as he handed the envelope over.

Dr. Thorpe slit the envelope open and took it across to the light box that had a place on the wall next to the examination table. She switched it on and slipped the x-rays into position. "I am *never* going to get used to seeing my arm like that," Taylor said when he saw the bones of his right hand and wrist thrown into sharp relief, laughter rising up in his voice. "That's just weird."

While Dr. Thorpe was looking over the x-rays, Taylor had a look around her office. He visited the medical centre so infrequently that every time he had an appointment, he could always find something that wasn't present the last time. Along with the usual equipment – examination table, scales, light box, a height chart on the wall, filing cabinet, desk with a computer and printer, and a locked glass cabinet filled with vials of medication, syringes and other bits and pieces he didn't know the names of – she had a small potted fern and a watering can on a shelf next to the window, a CD player atop the filing cabinet, and rather amusingly a small stuffed Tweety Bird perched atop the monitor of her computer.

"Well, your wrist is healing quite nicely," Dr. Thorpe said, snapping Taylor out of his reverie. "Have you been needing any painkillers on a regular basis?"

Taylor shook his head. "Only the occasional Panadol or Nurofen if it starts aching."

"What about your guitar? Have you had any difficulties with playing?"

"If I've been playing for a couple of hours non-stop I do, but I've been taking breaks every ten minutes so that doesn't happen."

Dr. Thorpe nodded. "Excellent, excellent." She snapped the light box off and took the x-rays down again, stowing them back in their envelope. "While you're here, I'd like to give you a general check-up, just to see if there's anything I need to be concerned about." She nodded over to the examination table, and Taylor toed off his sneakers before heading over to sit down.

Fifteen minutes later Dr. Thorpe had pronounced him healthy, much to his relief, and after arranging another appointment in four weeks to see if the cast was ready to be taken off had turned him loose.

"So what's the verdict?" Zac asked when Taylor walked out of the medical centre onto the footpath.

"I have another appointment in around a month's time to see if it's time to take this off yet." Taylor raised his right hand into the air as he spoke. "Which means another x-ray. But I'm healing well, so that's something good at least."

"Well, that's good then." Zac closed the book he had been reading during his wait – Taylor could see its title was *Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy* – and got to his feet.

Miki wasn't due to be picked up from school for another few hours, so Taylor and Zac headed over to Wollongong Mall. "Did you figure out what you're getting Miki for her birthday yet?" Zac asked as they walked past Subway, on their way to crossing Keira Street.

"I've narrowed it down to a few things," Taylor replied. "I want to get her present today, so what I actually buy her will depend on what I can find in Myer. I might not be able to find any of them."

Just as they reached the level 2 entrance to Myer, Taylor's mobile rang. He quickly yanked it out of his pocket and flipped it open. "Hello?"

"Good morning Taylor, it's James calling from Quayside."

"Oh, hey James." To Zac he mouthed, "*Go on ahead, I'll meet you in the toy section.*" Zac nodded and headed into the store. "What's up?"

"I've been listening over and over again to the tape you and Audrey made, and to the two songs you played for me at our meeting last week," James said. "If you are open to it, I would like to help you bring your music to Australia and to the world."

Taylor almost dropped his phone, tightening his fingers around it just seconds before it would have slipped from his hand. "A-are you serious?" he asked, not wanting to believe what James was saying in case it was all just a long-overdue April Fool's joke.

"I am quite serious. I have been working with young and independent musicians for around the last twenty years, and very few of them have what you do – a true talent for music. So many have the ambition and the determination to make it in the business, but they lack the spark that makes a musician truly great." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "And I'm sure you're as fed up as I am with the stranglehold that *Australian Idol* has on the industry."

"I am, actually," Taylor admitted. "I can't even watch that show on TV. I'm always too worried that one of them will destroy a song I like."

"As am I," James agreed, and Taylor swore he could hear James smiling. "So I take it you would like to come to the studios to record a demo?"

Taylor didn't even need to think about his response. "I'd love to," he answered.

"Excellent. I'll email you with everything you need to know, and we'll take things from there. I look forward to working with you."

He gave James his email address, spelling out the username of his account, before hanging up and stowing his phone back in his pocket. He had never even dared to believe that a career in music could even be possible for him, and yet here all the necessary pieces were, all falling neatly into place. And it was all thanks to Audrey.

He found Zac hanging around the stuffed toys, playing with a stuffed tiger and a stuffed polar bear. "Zac, I thought you were twenty-three, not three," Taylor said casually as he stepped up alongside his brother.

"I'm just having a bit of fun," Zac said.

"Yeah, and at the same time you're supposed to be helping me find Miki's birthday present. Come on, put the wild animals away."

"So who was on the phone anyway?" Zac asked as he returned the toys to their rightful places.

"The studios in Sydney. James, that's Audrey's dad, he's invited me to come in and record a demo." For the life of him, Taylor couldn't help but smile. "Zac, you know what this means don't you?"

"You might get a record deal," Zac replied. "Holy shit, that's..." He shook his head. "That's fucking amazing."

Around half an hour later, they walked out of Myer with one of Miki's birthday presents, a stuffed dog that was nearly as big as the almost-seven-year-old was herself. "EB Games next?" Zac asked hopefully.

"As soon as we put this in the car," Taylor replied. "I'm not dragging it all around Crown Central." He dragged his car keys from his pocket and tossed them at Zac, before handing over the dog. "Meet you in EB Games."

He had been looking over the piles of new and pre-owned games on the tables at the very front of the games store for around five minutes when a pair of hands covered his eyes. "Guess who?" a very feminine voice questioned.

"Maid Marian?" he questioned jokingly, knowing exactly who was behind him. Darkness gave way to light once more, and he turned around to find Audrey standing behind him. "Hey beautiful."

"Hey gorgeous," Audrey said, raising herself up on her toes for a quick kiss. "I didn't expect to see you here today."

"I'm waiting for my brother to get back from the car," Taylor replied. "I'm letting him buy his niece a DS Lite for her birthday. He loves spoiling her, as you can likely guess."

"What else are uncles for?"

Zac made his grand entrance not a minute later, with Taylor making some very quick introductions so that they could get down to the important business of birthday present shopping. "Audrey, this is my younger brother Zachary, otherwise known as Zac – Zac, my girlfriend Audrey Carmichael."

"It's nice to meet you at last, Zac," Audrey said as she shook the hand that Zac had offered. "Taylor talks about you quite a bit."

"Pleasure's all mine," Zac replied. "And you know, you are even more gorgeous in person than you are in pictures."

"Zac, I'm warning you, stop trying to crack onto my woman," Taylor warned. "You've already got one of your own, don't even think about stealing mine."

"He's just being charming," Audrey said. "You could try taking a leaf out of his book, you know."

"Trust me, he isn't always like this." Taylor nodded over his shoulder, into the store. "Come on, we're here so Zac can spoil his only niece, not for any other reason."

Zac quickly found the console he was looking for – the colour on the box was given as 'Metallic Pink', being as the only purple DS Lites the store had were *Hannah Montana* ones – and moved on to picking out games and a case. "So how much younger than you is he?" Audrey asked as they waited for Zac to finish his shopping.

"Two years, seven months and eight days."

"So that would make *your* birthday..." Audrey counted off quickly. "March fourteenth?"

Taylor nodded. "If we're being specific about the year, I was born in 1983." He looked sidelong at Audrey. "You know, I don't even know when *your* birthday is. I mean, I could probably figure out the year – you said you've been with Dymocks since you finished high school, and that was six years ago, so..." Taylor did a bit of counting of his own. "Either '84 or '85?"

"1984. Specifically, January nineteenth. They hired me exactly one day after I finished the HSC."

"So we're not even one year apart."

"It would seem that way, yeah."

Just at that moment, Zac came walking up to them. He carried a white plastic shopping bag that had the red-and-black EB Games insignia emblazoned across both sides. "Well, I'm done, if you two lovebirds are ready to head off."

"What games did you get her?" Taylor asked as he attempted to peek into the shopping bag.

"Hey, no cheating!" Zac scolded. "Let me have my little surprises, will you? Don't worry Daddy, I checked with the sales assistant – the games I got her are completely age-appropriate. And no *Hannah Montana* either."

Taylor raised his hands in self-defence, palms facing out. "Okay, okay. Come on, I want to have a wander through Surf Dive 'n' Ski before we go. I saw something in there last time I was over this way that I think Miki will like, and I want to get something for myself as well."

Ten minutes was all the time Taylor spent in the surf shop, coming out with not only a brand new purple Billabong hoodie for Miki, but also a new pair of sneakers for himself. His favourite pair of Converse high-tops were almost falling apart, the rubber soles slowly coming away from the canvas uppers, and he'd ended up with wet socks the last time he had worn them out in the rain. That in itself had been one hell of a reminder that he needed new shoes as soon as possible.

They parted ways at the base of the escalator heading up to the second level of Crown Central, Audrey being on the last ten minutes of her lunch break and needing to get back to work. "I'll see you soon, yeah?" Audrey said.

"Yeah, of course," Taylor assured her. "Oh, before I forget, your dad's invited me to come up to the studios and record a demo to send out. He rang me this morning."

"Really?" Audrey asked, and when Taylor nodded she all but threw herself at him. "I am so proud of you," she whispered in his ear. "You really deserve this."

"Thanks," Taylor replied, before the two kissed quickly.

"Well, I'll give you this much," Zac said as the two brothers rode the escalator up to the second floor. "She is a definite fox. You really know how to pick 'em." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "And she's nothing like Claire, thank God."

Taylor swatted Zac across the ear as they stepped off the top of the escalator. "Just remember that without Claire, *you* wouldn't be an uncle," he reminded his brother. "And don't you ever forget it!"

* * *

"The next train to arrive on platform three goes to Bondi Junction. First stop Kogarah, then Wollli Creek, Sydenham, Redfern, Central, Town Hall, Martin Place, Kings Cross, Edgecliff, then Bondi Junction."

Taylor tried but failed to stifle a yawn as the recorded announcement finished playing. He was never usually up so early – today, the seventh of September, was his first official recording session, and he was due at the studio at nine-thirty. Zac had all but dragged him out of bed at a quarter to six, and he had subsequently spent the next twenty minutes wandering in a haze around the unit. A shower followed by coffee in the biggest mug that Zac had been able to dig out of the cupboard above the stove had woken him right up, just in time for Audrey to drive him over to Wollongong station so that he could catch the 6:29 train to Hurstville.

His first destination that morning wasn't The Rocks, however. Instead, he was off to visit his grandparents. They lived in Elizabeth Bay, one suburb over and just a few streets away from his old house.

The Bondi Junction train rolled up alongside platform three at 7:41, right on schedule, and Taylor followed the other commuters into the nearest carriage. He found a seat quickly and sat down before anyone could steal it from him, propping his guitar case up between his knees, and settled in for the half-hour trip into the city. The temptation to pull out his iPod was extremely strong but he chose to resist it, knowing it would only put him to sleep and make him miss his stop – instead, he opted to stare out the nearest window and watch the city scenery fly by.

He arrived at his grandparents' house just after twenty past eight, having disembarked from the train at Kings Cross station at eleven minutes past, and rang the doorbell. Somewhat to his surprise, the person who answered the door looked nothing like either of his grandparents. Among other things, she was very blonde and looked to be somewhere in her early twenties. A pair of brown eyes identical to Zac's peered out at him.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

I know that voice, Taylor realised. He hadn't heard it in almost seven years, but he recognised it – and said the first name that popped into his head.

"Jess?" he asked, hoping he wasn't going to make an utter fool of himself by confusing her for someone else.

The woman just stared at him. "How did you know my name?" she asked suspiciously.

Before Taylor could open his mouth to tell her, he saw his grandfather coming down the front hall. "Jessica, who's at the door?" he asked, half a second before noticing his grandson standing on the doorstep. "Good morning Taylor," he said, motioning for Jessica to step aside. "You're here very early."

"I hope it's all right for me to drop by," he said.

"Of course it's all right. Your grandmother will be thrilled to see you." Nicholas gave Taylor a smile and called back into the house. "Lucinda, Taylor's here!"

"Well, don't leave him out on the street!" Lucinda called back, and Taylor fought back a snicker. He took this as his cue to step inside the house and head through into the kitchen.

His grandparents' house had always been like a second home to him, especially when he hadn't been able to stand his mother's abuse and his father's indifference. Even years after his involuntary eviction, it still felt like home. The sight of his grandmother standing at the kitchen stove with her back to him, hovering over pots and pans and armed with a wooden spoon, made him smile, and he stepped up beside her. She looked over when Taylor touched her bare right forearm.

"If it isn't my favourite grandson," she said as she placed her wooden spoon in a nearby spoon rest. "Come and give your old grandma a hug."

"You're not *that* old," Taylor said as he let his grandmother embrace him quickly and tightly.

"Flattery will get you everywhere," Lucinda said, and swatted the back of Taylor's head. "And *you* are far too thin!"

"I've got a six-year-old, Grandma," he reminded her. "She runs me ragged." He shrugged. "I've always been this way, anyway."

"Yes, that's true. Go on, sit down and I'll make you some breakfast."

A quick peek into the nearest saucepan very nearly made him lose what little appetite he had. It looked like very thick white glue, but he knew better than to call it that.

"I think I'll pass," he said. "I already ate, anyway."

"Something horribly unhealthy, no doubt." Lucinda picked up her wooden spoon again and used its handle to point at the wooden kitchen table. "Sit. This is good for you, and it'll fill you right up."

Knowing better than to argue with her further, Taylor stepped away from the stove and over to the table. He stretched his legs out as he sat down, and traced with the pad of his right index finger a swirling design that had been gouged into the tabletop with what he guessed was the metal point of a compass. Not long after he had sat down, Lucinda placed a bowl of porridge and

a spoon in front of him, following with a carton of milk, a squeeze-bottle of ironbark honey and the sugar bowl. The second Lucinda's back was turned, Taylor took the lid off the sugar bowl and started dumping spoonful after spoonful of raw sugar onto his breakfast, before squirting almost a third of the bottle of honey on top. When it was finally drowned with milk, only then did he start eating.

"Jessica, breakfast!" he heard his grandfather call out, right as Lucinda put another bowl of porridge on the table. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jessica sit down next to him at the table and stare at her breakfast.

"I hate porridge," he clearly heard her mutter as she poked it with her spoon, and he pushed the sugar and honey at her.

"Sugar first, then honey, then drown it in milk," he suggested. "Makes it taste more like food and less like something you'd use to hang wallpaper."

"Oh, thanks," Jessica said, sounding surprised. She quickly did as suggested, stirring the milk, sugar and honey through the porridge before beginning to eat.

"You don't remember me, do you?"

Jessica paused in eating as those six words left Taylor's mouth, spoon frozen halfway between bowl and face. "Should I?" she asked carefully, as though her question would land her in a world of pain.

"Almost seven years ago," Taylor began, "my parents disowned me and kicked me out of home because I became a father out of marriage. Out of my two siblings, a brother and a sister both younger than me, my sister took my parents' side, while my brother defended me. I haven't seen my sister since then, and every time I tried to get in contact I was hung up on...so I just stopped trying." He dragged his spoon through his porridge. "And I miss her terribly."

"It wasn't like I had any choice in the matter," Jessica mumbled.

Taylor raised an eyebrow. "So you *do* remember me."

"Of course I remember you! I just..." She dropped her spoon back into her bowl and pushed it away. "I was *fourteen*, Taylor! I had no choice in taking our parents' side in the matter." In a very small voice, she added, "They would have kicked *me* out as well if I'd tried to defend you."

"They didn't kick *Zac* out, Jess. Or disown him."

Jessica let out a humourless laugh. "Well *someone* has to carry on the family name. That was their reasoning."

"Pretty useless reasoning."

"Yeah, I know."

There was silence for a few minutes. "So where did you go after you left?" Jessica asked tentatively.

"You know that Salvation Army refuge in Surry Hills?" Taylor asked, and Jessica nodded. "Spent a couple of weeks there over Christmas that year. I live down near Wollongong now." He stood up briefly so he could get his wallet out of his pocket, and opened it to the photograph of Miki he kept in there. "That's your niece."

"My niece?"

"You knew you were an aunt, Jess," Taylor reminded his sister, his tone only faintly chiding.

"I guess I forgot." Jessica took her brother's wallet and looked a little more closely at the photograph. "She's six, isn't she?"

"Yeah. She'll be seven next week."

"She looks just like you."

Taylor couldn't help but smile when Jessica said those words. "Would you like to meet her?" he asked. "Her birthday party is this coming weekend, and you're more than welcome to come along. She loves meeting new people, especially if they're family."

"Are you sure?"

"I wouldn't be inviting you if I wasn't sure."

Minutes after he finished his breakfast and put his rinsed bowl in the dishwasher, he gathered up his messenger bag and guitar. "I have to head out to The Rocks," he said as he slung the strap of his bag over his head, settling it on his shoulder. "Got a recording session at nine-thirty and I don't want to be late."

"Would you like a ride out there?" Nicholas asked as he walked into the kitchen.

"You don't mind?"

Nicholas shook his head. "Not a bit. I'm headed that way anyhow."

As Taylor and Nicholas headed to the front door, Jessica caught hold of her brother's hand. "I missed you too," she said. "I really did. Mum and Dad, they...they told me and Zac that your name was never to be mentioned again at home, and that we were to forget that we ever had an older brother. We both got smacked if we said your name." She pulled down on the hem of her shirt. "But I ignored them. We both did."

Now she looked up into Taylor's eyes. "I never forgot you. And I never will."

Chapter 9

Little Heaven

*Burns because it has to burn
Change will happen whether we
Are still or moving*

* * *

"Daddy."

The sound of Miki whispering in his ear was what woke Taylor up on the fourteenth of September – Miki's seventh birthday. He eased one eye open to see Miki peering down at him from her spot on her knees next to his shoulder, and managed a very sleepy smile.

"Hey princess," he said. He looked down past Miki to see her new toy dog sitting on the floor next to his bed. "What's that you've got there?" he asked.

"My birthday present," Miki replied.

"Is it your birthday today?" Taylor asked, feigning ignorance. "I didn't know that."

"Yeah you did!" Miki said, indignant.

Taylor let out a chuckle and eased himself upright, before pulling Miki into his lap. "Of course I knew, Miki. I was there when you were born." He pushed Miki's hair back off her face and kissed her forehead. "And I thought you were the most gorgeous baby girl I had ever seen. I still do."

Miki grinned. "Do I have to go to school today?"

"Nope."

"Really?"

"Really." Taylor ruffled Miki's hair gently. "Today is going to be just you and me, seeing as I've been so busy lately. We'll take the train down to Kiama and spend the whole day there. Does that sound good to you?"

Miki seemed to think this over. "Can I have ice cream there?" she asked.

"Definitely. Now, why don't you go and watch cartoons for a little bit while I get ready? We have a big day ahead of us."

Taylor still didn't trust himself behind the wheel of his car, and Zac was hard at work on one of his freelancing projects, and so just after eight o'clock he and Miki walked down to the Foley Street end of Gipps Road, crossing the busy street at the lights just outside of Wollongong City Bowling Club. The Gong Shuttle had a stop just down from the corner of Foley Street and Gipps Street – it was much quicker than walking into the city, not to mention that it wouldn't cost him anything in bus fares.

"Daddy?" Miki asked when they had arrived at the bus stop.

"Yeah?"

"Is your arm going to be better soon?"

"I hope so," Taylor replied. "I have to have another x-ray taken of it in a couple of weeks, and my doctor will tell me then if I can have the cast taken off."

"What's an x-ray?"

"It's a special kind of picture that doctors take to look at your bones. I had to have one when I hurt my arm, and again a couple of weeks ago."

Miki climbed up on the bench seat next to her father and peered closely at his cast. It had a bright green vine drawn on it, courtesy of Audrey's coloured Artline markers, that started on the back of his hand between his middle and ring fingers and wound its way around his arm until the point where the cast terminated below his elbow. Branching off the vine here and there were little red and yellow flowers.

"That's pretty," Miki said. "Are you going to keep it?"

"I don't know yet. I'll probably decide when my doctor says it can come off."

The Shuttle dropped them off at the closest stop to Wollongong Station just before twenty past eight, in front of the vacant lot on Crown Street. A couple of Saint Mary's schoolgirls got on the bus just as Taylor and Miki disembarked and headed for the traffic lights right across the street from Dicey Riley's.

"So what do you want to do today?" Taylor asked as they walked down the laneway toward the southbound platform of the train station.

"Go to the beach," Miki replied determinedly.

"Watch your step," Taylor cautioned. They were halfway down the first section of the stairs leading to Lowden Square at this point. "It's not warm enough to go to the beach yet, Miks. But if you like, we can go down to the harbour and have fish and chips for lunch – does that sound good?"

"Yeah!"

Taylor let out a laugh. "Good." They stepped off the bottom step onto the asphalt and headed into the station building. Twelve dollars and forty cents later they had their train tickets, and were walking out onto the platform to await their train.

The Wollongong to Kiama local train departed the station at four minutes to nine. As soon as they were settled on one of the seats on the lower deck of the middle carriage, Miki unbuckled and unzipped her father's messenger bag and started pawing through it. "Daddy, can I have some?" she asked, having unearthed an unopened packet of spearmint Extra chewing gum.

Taylor looked away from the window, over at what Miki was holding out to him. "Are you going to swallow it?" he asked, and Miki shook her head. "All right, but tell me when you're finished with it." He opened the packet and took out one of the sticks. "You swallow this," he said as he held the piece of gum out to Miki, "and I will not only be very cross with you, but I won't let you have any more until you're a teenager. Not even bubblegum."

"I won't swallow it," Miki promised. "And what's a teenager?"

"A teenager," Taylor replied once Miki had the gum in her mouth, "is what you'll be in six years' time. And it's what I was when you were born."

"How old are you now?"

Rather than just telling Miki right off the bat, Taylor decided to turn his answer into a sort of maths lesson. "How about I let you work that out?" he suggested as he zipped his messenger bag back up, and pulled Miki up to sit in his lap. "How old are you today?"

"I'm seven."

"That's right. And I was nineteen years and six months old when you were born." He took both of Miki's hands and folded down all four fingers and the thumb on her left hand, and the thumb and

index finger on her right. "Now, you have eight fingers and two thumbs – what does that make all together?"

"Ten."

"Very good. You have three fingers up, which leaves how many?"

"Seven."

Taylor now took Miki's right ring finger. "Now we count from this finger here," he said, and counted as he folded each of the remaining fingers down. "Eight, nine, ten. Do you know what ten times two is?"

"Twenty."

Taylor now counted to twenty on Miki's knuckles, starting with her right pinkie finger and ending with the corresponding finger on her left hand. "Twenty," he said right as the train rolled into Unanderra station, "is how old I was when you were six months old. And that was six years and six months ago today. I'm going to touch your fingers now, and I want you to count out loud. The finger I stop on is how old I am."

Miki started counting aloud, reciting numbers as Taylor tapped her knuckles with his right index finger. "Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six, twen-" She stopped short when Taylor stopped counting. "You're twenty-six!" she said, sounding triumphant.

"And six months old," Taylor corrected with a smile.

Miki seemed to consider this. "You're not very old," she said.

"I should hope not!" Taylor laughed.

Their train terminated at Kiama station at twenty minutes to ten, and they were soon walking hand-in-hand down the hill that was Railway Parade. "What would you like to do first?" Taylor asked as they rounded the corner at Kiama Public Library.

"Can we have ice cream?" Miki asked, sounding very hopeful.

Almost in response, Taylor bent down and lifted Miki up into his arms. "It's a little early for that, Miki. But I promise that on our way home this afternoon, we'll go to The Ice Creamery and we'll have some ice cream. I'll let you give me a big smack if I forget, all right?"

“Okay!” Miki said.

That day, Taylor would later decide, was the best he’d had in a long time. It had been many years since he had been able to spend a full day out with Miki, one uninterrupted by work or school, and it was something he resolved to make happen more often. He knew he wouldn’t like the look of his bank account the next time he checked it, but to his mind it was completely worth it – Miki was happier than she had been in weeks, all because she had been able to spend her birthday out with her father.

Just as he had promised, that afternoon they stopped at The Ice Creamery on their way back up Terralong Street. Inside the shop, Taylor let Miki climb up on his back so she could see the full range of ice cream flavours on offer. “Can I have that one, Daddy?” she asked, pointing over his right shoulder at the large tub of honeycomb crunch.

“Sure you can,” Taylor agreed, and caught the attention of the salesgirl. “Hi, can I get one scoop of honeycomb crunch on a regular cone, and two scoops of chocolate mudcake on a waffle cone, please?”

Minutes later the two were sitting outside under the awning at one of the small tables with their ice creams, looking out at Terralong Street. “Daddy, do you have to go back to work soon?” Miki asked.

“I do, yeah,” Taylor replied. “I have to have another x-ray taken next Friday, and my cast will probably come off then. I’ll be going back to work after that.”

“What about your music?”

“I’ll still be doing that. I’m going to call Audrey’s dad up in a few days and see if we can work something out.” He paused as he quickly caught up a bit of ice cream that was threatening to drip onto his hand. “Miki, how would you feel about going to live near Grandnan and Grandpop?”

Miki looked up from her ice cream at Taylor, grey eyes wide. “Why?”

“Because if some very important people like the music I’m making at the moment, then that’s what we might have to do. You like it in Sydney, don’t you?”

Miki nodded slowly, and Taylor knew just from that she was very reluctant about the idea. He understood somewhat – unlike Taylor, Miki had no memories of living in Sydney. The only home she had ever known was the unit they lived in on Gipps Road.

"I'll tell you what," Taylor said as he finished the top scoop of his ice cream and started in on the second. "If we did have to move, I don't think it would be before Christmas, so I'll let you think about it for a little while. I won't make you go to Sydney if you really don't want to. Okay?"

"Okay," Miki agreed, seeming to be content with this.

They resumed their walk back up Terralong Street once they had finished their ice creams. "Daddy, is Audrey going to be my mummy?" she asked from her perch on Taylor's shoulders.

Taylor looked back and up at Miki, one eyebrow raised. "So you do like her, then?"

Miki nodded, and Taylor grinned knowingly. "Didn't I tell you that you'd like her?" He adjusted his grip on Miki's ankles just slightly. "She might be," he said, answering Miki's question. "I like her very much, but it's still very early yet. Maybe one day."

At the top of Railway Parade, just near the stairs that led down to the train station, Taylor crouched down so that Miki could climb down from off his shoulders. He straightened back up again when both of Miki's feet were on the ground. "Did you have a good day today?" he asked her.

Miki nodded and smiled widely, a smile that Taylor mirrored. "Good." He reached down for Miki's right hand, enveloping it in his much larger left hand. "Let's go home."

* * *

The saw blade sliced through the edge of the cast closest to Taylor's elbow, and the two halves of the cast fell apart. It had been six weeks since he had broken his wrist – and six of the longest weeks of his life later, his wrist had finally healed.

"You'll need to start physiotherapy straight away," Dr. Thorpe said as Taylor moved his right hand in a very cautious circle, almost as if his wrist would snap again were he to move his hand too fast. "You'll also need to wear a wrist brace for at least the next three months – the pharmacy next door will be able to fit one for you."

"All right," Taylor agreed. "Is there anything else that I need to know?"

"I would advise you to take it easy at least until Christmas, potentially until March next year. The break has healed, yes, but for the time being you will need to be very careful. Keep using your left hand for most activities if you possibly can, and make sure your daughter knows that your wrist

isn't completely better yet. Aside from that, though, I'd like to see you again in three months' time."

Ten minutes later, Taylor walked out into the waiting room of the medical centre with the phone number of a local physiotherapist tucked away in his wallet. "So everything's good?" Audrey asked as she rose from her seat.

"I have to wear a wrist brace until Christmas, and I need to start doing physio, but aside from that I'm back to normal," Taylor replied. "I am so fucking glad to be rid of that damn cast, you have *no* idea."

"Oh, I think I have *some* idea," Audrey said. She slipped her arm through Taylor's and they walked out onto the footpath outside. "I broke my right leg when I was fifteen. I spent two-and-a-half months in plaster, and a further three months in a leg brace while I did physio. It was awful. I was on the school netball team at the time as well, so I had to spend quite a lot of time on the sidelines."

Taylor winced in sympathy. "Ouch."

They ducked into the pharmacy next door so that Taylor could buy and have a wrist brace fitted, before walking down to the corner of Keira and Crown Streets and crossing at the lights. "What did you want to do for the rest of the day?" Taylor asked as they walked along Keira Street.

"I thought we might go have lunch, then wander around the markets," Audrey replied. "I've got about fifty dollars burning a hole in my wallet right now and I need to spend it."

Taylor let out a quiet chuckle. "That sounds like fun to me."

Audrey's favourite restaurant was located on Market Street, a block north of Wollongong Mall and across the street from the Hotel Illawarra. "Ever been here before?" Audrey asked as they walked up the steps into Chef's Choice.

"No, never."

"You'll love it. Trust me. It's cheap, you can get a really good meal for less than twenty dollars – there's only a few things on the menu that cost more than ten, and you get free rice and green tea with it. I come here with some of the girls from work once or twice a week."

They were seated quickly, with a waitress handing them each a black folder that turned out to contain the restaurant's menu. Audrey made her choice quickly, closing and setting her menu

down on the table. "Bit overwhelming, isn't it?" she said upon noticing that Taylor was still paging through his menu.

"I think that's an understatement."

Audrey chuckled softly. "How about I help you narrow it down a bit?"

Taylor immediately handed his menu over. "You pick for me. You know this place better than I do."

Audrey snapped off a mock, two-fingered military salute. "You like chicken, yeah?"

"Yeah."

"What about mushrooms?"

Taylor shook his head. "Never liked them."

"Okay then..." Audrey started flipping through the menu, pausing every couple of pages, before closing it with a snap. "Honey chicken sound good to you?"

"That sounds great, actually."

"Good." Audrey gave him a smile before catching the attention of a nearby waitress. "Can we get one honey chicken, and one laksa chicken noodle soup please?" she said, the waitress scribbling the order down on her notepad before disappearing off toward the kitchen. She returned in short order with a stainless steel thermos-style teapot and a red plastic container that had a white lid and handle.

"It shouldn't be very long," Audrey said as she reached for the teapot and poured them each a cup of tea. "Let that cool for a bit first," she said as Taylor went to pick his cup up off the table.

Their lunches arrived quickly, just as Audrey had said, and Taylor carefully drank his tea while Audrey dished out rice for them both. "This is my treat," Audrey said as she put the lid back on the rice, "so if there's anything else out of the menu you want, or if you want a drink or two, go for it."

"I think I'm good here," Taylor said as he drew two chopsticks out of their jar at the end of the table. "But thanks anyway."

After lunch they walked back the way they had come from, this time crossing Keira Street at the lights on the corner opposite NRMA. "So the markets, then?" Taylor said as they walked into the Mall.

"Ever been to them?"

"Nope. Friday's my cleaning and grocery shopping day."

Audrey shook her head in mock dismay. "You've been missing out, seriously. The markets are pretty much the high point of my week. I get most of my fruit and vegies from here – they're a bit more expensive than the ones from Woolies, and definitely more pricey than Aldi's, but they're much fresher. Haven't been sitting in a freezer for months on end."

They made a quick pit stop at the St. George ATM just up from the entrance of Globe Lane so that Taylor could withdraw money from his bank account, before continuing on through the Mall. The Friday markets were set up in the section of the Mall that started after the café seating area behind the Amphitheatre, just at the National Australia Bank branch, and extended down to Kembla Street. As they drew closer they could hear the sounds of a late Friday morning in the centre of Wollongong – musicians busking, food cooking on hotplates, and people talking to friends, work colleagues and the stallholders.

"How far along on the demo recording are you?" Audrey asked as the two of them stepped across the unspoken and invisible boundary that separated the markets from the rest of the Mall.

"I'm nearly done, I think." Taylor let out a low, somewhat mirthless chuckle. "That was one good thing about breaking my wrist. I've got a lot more recording done than I would have if I *hadn't* broken it." He shoved his hands into the pockets of his hoodie. "Sometimes I've thought I should have waited until the summer holidays, so I could spend more time in Sydney and get it done quicker, but the last six weeks have been a blessing in disguise. And not just because I've had time off work. I took Miki to Kiama for her birthday, did I tell you that?"

Audrey shook her head. "I don't think you did, no."

"Well, I did. I probably wouldn't have been able to do that if I'd been working. I got to spend a whole day with my little girl on her birthday, when otherwise I would have had to work." He smiled at the memory. "It was a good day for both of us."

Taylor's wallet stayed in his pocket for the first ten minutes that they were in the mall, with Audrey doing quite a bit of shopping of her own. All of her purchases – two jars of honey, three apples, vegetables for making what Taylor guessed was her grandmother's chicken noodle soup,

a loaf of multigrain bread, and a couple of beeswax candles – went into a string bag she had taken out of her handbag at the first stall they had stopped at.

“Aren’t you going to buy anything?” Audrey asked as they drew close to a stall that sold Turkish pastries.

“I am now,” Taylor replied, having spotted what was inside a glass case on the stall’s table. He stepped into the stall’s shade for a couple of moments, walking back out into the sunshine with a clear plastic takeaway food container in hand. “Close your eyes,” he directed as he crammed his wallet back in his pocket. As soon as Audrey had done so, he popped the container open and took a piece of pastry out. “Now open your mouth...”

Audrey’s eyes popped open the second she tasted it. “Holy fuck, what *is* that?” she asked once she had swallowed.

“That, Audrey, is baklava,” Taylor said happily. “My neighbours in Potts Point were Turkish. The mother of the family pretty much doted on me – I think she considered me a second son. Anyway, every Friday after school she’d call me over to their house, and she’d feed me baklava until my teeth ached. You like?”

“Oh yeah, I like,” Audrey said, still slightly stunned at how sweet it was. “I like a lot. It’s really sweet though.”

“Sticky, too,” Taylor said thoughtfully. “Fucking honey gets every-bloody-where.” He quickly ate his own piece of baklava before licking the honey off his fingers.

A few minutes later they sat down on the edge of the fountain near the eastern end of the mall, Audrey settling her bag of groceries between her feet so that its contents didn’t go tumbling out onto the paving. “Audrey, can I ask you something?”

“Of course you can.”

Taylor was quiet a few moments as he considered just how to ask his question. “How would you feel about us moving in together?” he asked finally.

Audrey didn’t answer right away. “I think I like the idea,” she said.

“You do?” Taylor asked, and Audrey thought he sounded a little shocked. “I mean, we’ve only known each other a couple of months, and we’ve only been together six weeks. You don’t think it’s a bit early?”

"Do you want the truth?" Audrey asked, and Taylor nodded. "I don't think that matters. We're good for each other." She shifted slightly in her spot. "I have two conditions before we move in together, though." She held up her right index finger. "One, you meet the rest of my family – my mum, my brother and my sister."

"I can do that," Taylor agreed.

"Good." Now she held up both her right index and middle fingers together. "And two, if my parents ask...you let me tell them what happened to you. I know it hurts you to think about it, and that you hate them because of it, but it's made you the person you are today. A trial by fire, if you will." She put an arm around Taylor's shoulders. "You're a good person, and a great dad. And you should never let anyone tell you otherwise, because they're full of shit." She ran a thumb along the shoulder seam of Taylor's hoodie. "Do we have a deal?"

Taylor nodded. "We have a deal."

Audrey nodded, satisfied, and got to her feet. "Come on. There's still half the markets to go yet. I'm sure you'll be able to find something else you can spend a few dollars on."

And with that parting shot, Audrey gathered up her shopping, brushed down the back of her jeans, and started walking back up the mall. Taylor stayed seated for a few moments longer before getting to his feet and following her.

Chapter 10

Don't Let Me Down

*Nobody got second sight
Nobody gonna see the light
All our hopes and all our dreams*

* * *

"The next train to arrive on platform one goes to Bondi Junction. First stop Thirroul, then Helensburgh, Waterfall, Sutherland, Hurstville, Wollli Creek, Redfern, Central, Town Hall, Martin Place, Kings Cross, Edgecliff, then Bondi Junction."

The announcement was playing over the train station's speakers right as Taylor and Miki hurried up the station steps at North Wollongong. The Gong Shuttle had dropped them off at the train station barely a minute earlier, and going by the station announcement they had five minutes at the very most before the train rolled into the station.

"Daddy?" Miki asked.

"Wait a minute, Miks," he answered. "Let me get our tickets first, okay?"

"Okay Daddy."

Taylor looked back briefly at Miki and gave her a smile. "How about you get my wallet out of my bag for me? It'll make it so much easier for me to get our tickets." He unbuckled and unzipped his bag so that Miki could dig around for his wallet.

In almost no time at all Taylor had their tickets bought and stashed in his wallet, and not a moment too soon. The train that he and Miki were to catch arrived at the station just as he had stowed his wallet back in his bag, and he took up Miki's hand again. "Now what did you want to ask me?" he asked as they stepped onto the train and went in search of somewhere to sit.

"Why are you all dressed up?"

He didn't answer immediately, waiting until they had located two empty seats on the top deck of the second carriage. "We're going to meet Audrey's family," he replied. "And I thought it might be nice if we dressed up a little." He glanced over briefly at Miki, secretly pleased that he had been able to coax her into wearing something other than the jeans, T-shirt and sneakers she generally wore during weekends and school holidays. Instead she wore one of the only dresses

she owned that wasn't her school uniform, with sandals in place of her sneakers. To set something of a good example Taylor had swapped his usual T-shirt and sneakers for boots and a short-sleeved button-down shirt, but had drawn the line at wearing his work pants instead of his jeans. One of his hoodies was folded up and packed away in his messenger bag for the trip home – even though it was the beginning of October and halfway through spring, there was still a chill in the air.

Miki was soon occupied with playing a game on her DS Lite, giving Taylor a chance to catch up on his email. He lifted his bag up onto his lap from where it sat on the floor, unbuckled it and took his new phone from one of the smaller pockets. His flip phone had finally given out only days earlier, the hinge breaking irreparably and rendering the phone completely useless. A trip to the Allphones outlet in Crown Central during his Thursday lunch break had netted him a Nokia smartphone that he had proceeded to spend the evening after work customising. He opened his email application, connected to the Virgin Mobile network, and scrolled through to the most recent email he had received from Audrey.

The closest train station to my parents' house is Quakers Hill, it began. You'll need to change trains at Redfern for a train on the Western Line – it doesn't really matter what train you catch, but if it's one that goes to Emu Plains hop off at Blacktown and catch another train from there to Quakers Hill. Send me a text when you're just leaving Granville and I'll meet you at Quakers Hill when your train gets there. I'll drop you and Miki home after dinner.

My mum is really looking forward to meeting you and Miki – Dad's told her what he knows about you, which admittedly isn't a lot at all, and I've filled her in on the rest. William and Charlotte (that's my older brother and my younger sister) are looking forward to it as well, but I think that Charlotte secretly considers the whole thing to be a bit of a nuisance. She'll hopefully be over herself by the time you get here.

If there's anything you think I might have forgotten, let me know – otherwise, I'll see you on Saturday. :)

<3 Audrey

Audrey was waiting at Quakers Hill when the 4:38pm train from Redfern rolled to a stop. She stood away from the edge of the platform as the train doors slid open and passengers spilled out into the October sunshine.

"Audrey!"

Audrey looked down just in time to see Miki running full tilt across the platform, plaited pigtails bouncing on her shoulders. Taylor was right behind her, tapping away at his phone as he walked. He looked up from his phone just long enough to give Audrey a wide smile.

"Did you have a good trip up?" Audrey asked as she and Taylor embraced.

"Yeah, it was all right," Taylor replied. "Miki stayed glued to her DS Lite almost the whole way." He chuckled quietly and shook his head. "I knew it was a bad idea to let my brother give her one for her birthday." He glanced at his phone one last time before sliding it into the right-hand pocket of his jeans. "Well then, shall we?"

Around five minutes after leaving Quakers Hill train station, Audrey pulled her car to a stop in the driveway of a house in Acacia Gardens. Even though he had been born and raised in Sydney, Taylor felt more than a little intimidated. Home for him right up until he had been kicked out had been a two-story Victorian-era terrace house almost at the invisible boundary between Potts Point and Elizabeth Bay – Audrey's parents' house, on the other hand, looked as if it could enclose his parents' house twice over and still have room left to spare.

"Are you all right?" Audrey asked. "You look a bit freaked out."

"Yeah, it's just..." He unbuckled his seat belt. "It's a little more than I was expecting, that's all."

"Oh, I understand completely. I didn't even grow up here, mind you – my parents moved here about four or five years ago from Castle Hill. Don't know why they picked *this* house when it's just them and Charlotte, but I'm not the one who won Powerball so..." She shrugged, as if to say 'not my problem', and unbuckled her own seat belt before opening the driver's side door.

Audrey didn't even bother to wait for her knock at the front door to be answered. She opened the door and let herself, Taylor and Miki inside, closing the door behind them. "Mum, Dad, I'm home!" she yelled out, toeing her shoes off as she spoke. Taylor quickly followed her lead before unbuckling Miki's sandals.

"In the kitchen, Audrey!" a woman's voice called back.

"Well, Mum's home at least," Audrey said. She moved her shoes out of the middle of the front hall with her foot before leading the way through to the kitchen.

Standing in the middle of the kitchen with a glass of what looked like red wine in hand was a woman who looked uncannily like Audrey, and Taylor knew she had to be Audrey's mother.

"Mum, there's a couple of people I'd like you to meet," Audrey said. She reached up and put a hand on Taylor's left shoulder. "This is my boyfriend Taylor Hanson and his daughter Michaela – otherwise known as Miki. And Taylor, this is my mum Elizabeth Carmichael."

"Call me Beth," Audrey's mother said. She set her wine glass down on the kitchen bench and held out her hand for Taylor to shake. "It's wonderful to meet you at last – Audrey seems to be quite taken with you."

"It's nice to meet you too," Taylor replied, before bending down to speak to Miki. "Say hello, Miki," he prompted quietly.

"Hello Mrs. Carmichael," Miki said.

Beth smiled. "And hello to you too, Miki."

The front door opened and closed, and the sound of two sets of feet came pelting up the front hall. "Here comes trouble," Taylor heard Audrey mumble.

"Audrey, be nice," Beth chided. "You keep insisting that you're an adult, so perhaps you should try acting like one."

"Mum, not around Taylor," Audrey groaned, exasperation clear in her voice.

"Hey, is Dad home yet?" a male voice asked – its owner sounded like a younger version of Audrey's father, and Taylor figured it belonged to Audrey's brother.

"No, he's still at work," Beth replied. She picked up her glass of wine once more. "Audrey, I believe you have some more introductions to make?" She motioned for Audrey to turn around.

"Oh right," Audrey said, sounding a little flustered. "Will, Charlie, this is my boyfriend Taylor Hanson and his daughter Miki – Taylor, my brother and sister William and Charlotte Carmichael."

William immediately stuck a hand out, which Taylor shook. "Great to meet you, Taylor," he said.

"Likewise," Taylor replied, already beginning to feel a little intimidated. William seemed to be nice enough, but it was clear that his attitude was one of 'break my sister's heart and I'll break your neck'. That he was taller than Taylor wasn't helping matters.

"Will, be nice," Charlotte said, sounding just a little bored. She looked like a miniature version of Audrey, all dark hair and dark eyes, but unlike Audrey she kept her hair pixie-short and wore dark eyeliner around her eyes.

"I am being nice!" William protested.

Charlotte raised an eyebrow, and in that moment she looked uncannily like Audrey. "Will, right now you look like you want to snap Taylor's neck like a twig," she said, tone matter-of-fact. "It's exactly how you acted when you met her last boyfriend or even *my* current boyfriend, and quite frankly it's making you look like a wanker."

"Charlotte Anne Carmichael, that's enough from you," Beth said sharply. Her tone turned gentler with her next words. "Dinner won't be ready for at least another half an hour, so you all may as well go off into the lounge room. I'll give you a yell when your dad gets home so you can go wash up."

"D'you want a hand?" Audrey asked as her brother and sister wandered off out of the kitchen.

Beth shook her head and turned to the stove, taking up a wooden spoon from a spoon rest near the edge of the cooktop. "I've got everything under control here."

"But you'll let me know if you need any help?"

"Yes, Audrey, I'll let you know," Beth replied, waving her daughter off.

It was all the dismissal that Audrey needed, and she shrugged before leading Taylor and Miki out of the kitchen and down a short hallway into the lounge room. "So what do you think?" Audrey asked.

"I like her," Taylor replied. "She's a lot nicer and saner than my mother, that's for sure."

Audrey's laugh sounded somewhat relieved. "Oh good. You have no idea how glad I am to hear you say that," she said as the three of them walked into the lounge room. William and Charlotte were already in there, seated on the lounge watching TV.

"What are you glad about?" Charlotte asked without looking away from the TV.

"None of your business," Audrey replied. "Where did you go today, anyway? I asked Mum when I got here earlier on but she said didn't know where you'd gone."

"None of your business," Charlotte replied.

"Charlie," William said warningly.

"Sorry," Charlotte said immediately. "I was with Dad at the studio, he's finishing up the mixing on someone's demo and he wanted me to run reception for the day. That's all."

"Did he let you listen?"

"He got me to listen to maybe two songs. Don't know what they were called, but I liked them." She shrugged. "Wouldn't mind hearing more of it, but Will came to pick me up before I could listen to much more." She elbowed her brother as she spoke his name. "You're a real spoilsport, you know that don't you?"

"All part of being a big brother, Charlie my dear," William said airily.

A door opened and closed in some distant part of the house, and half a minute later Beth came into the lounge room. "Your dad's home," she said. "Charlie, can you please go and get changed into something a little more appropriate for dinner? You look like nobody owns you."

"She looks fine, Beth," James said, coming up behind Beth. "Will and Charlie, go and wash up while I have a chat with your sister and her boyfriend."

William and Charlotte departed the lounge room, with Beth following them not long afterward. James sat down in one of the two armchairs once the lounge room door was closed. "I've almost completed the mixing of your demo," he said, motioning for Taylor and Audrey to sit down on the lounge. "I also had Charlotte listen to two of the songs in her lunch break – she heard *She Said* and *Keep It Up*, and from what I could tell she liked them. It's a good sign – if you're lucky enough to snag the interest of a record company and they sign you, it's possible that the general public will feel the same as Charlotte did. I won't promise anything more than that."

"I can understand that," Taylor said. "Is there anything you would need me to do once the demo's been sent off?"

"There is, yes. You'll need to be prepared for the possibility of performing for one or more of the scouts that record companies may send out in the event that they like what they hear. Is there anywhere you would be able to perform if it comes down to it?"

"Well, one of my co-workers, his wife runs open mic nights at the bar she works at. She's managed to rope me into one of them – it's where Audrey and I saw each other for the first time, actually. I suppose I could ask if she has a few of them coming up."

James nodded. "All right. Once you've heard back from her about that, email me with a list of dates. In the event that you get a few of them interested, let me know when you would be ready to perform and I'll pass on the details."

"Okay."

James smiled and got to his feet. "Now then, I believe it's dinner time. I hope you like lasagne."

* * *

During his lunch break a couple of weeks after meeting Audrey's mother and siblings, Taylor got the phone call he had been waiting for.

"I've been in touch with EMI, Liberation Music, Shock Records and Warner Music," James said once the pleasantries were out of the way. "All four are interested in hearing more of your music, and are each prepared to send a talent scout or two down to Wollongong to see just what you're capable of when it comes to live performance."

Taylor was privately thankful at that moment that he was not only in the cinema's staff break room but was also sitting down. "Please tell me you're not joking," he said, his tone almost pleading.

"I'm being completely serious. You've definitely impressed a few people."

"So what happens now?"

"You'll need to decide how soon you'll be ready to perform. Ordinarily I wouldn't suggest that you do it so soon, but I got the impression from Shock at least that they want to hear and see a live performance as soon as possible."

"Impatient much?"

James chuckled. "They're definitely a little impatient, but I can understand their position. When they're as impressed by a demo recording as I believe they were by yours, they want to see what all the fuss is about as quickly as possible." There was a pause filled with the faint tapping of keys on a computer keyboard. "I've pulled up the email you sent me with the dates of the open mic nights, and the next earliest date you've listed is this Saturday."

"October twenty-fourth?"

"That's the one," James confirmed. "Do you think you could be ready to perform this Saturday?"

"I think I can definitely be ready," Taylor replied. He was going to need to arrange with Jackie to have her look after Miki that evening, but there was no doubt in his mind that he would be able to manage it.

"In that case then, I'll email the A&R departments at each record company and let them know the day and time that they should expect to see you. Make sure you drop the organiser of the open mic nights a line to let them know you're up for performing on Saturday."

"Will do. Thanks, James."

He could practically hear the smile in James' voice when he next spoke. "You're welcome, Taylor. Good luck on Saturday."

Almost as soon as he had finished speaking with James, Taylor was back on the phone and calling Rachael at work.

"Cooney's Tavern, this is Rachael Campbell speaking," Rachael said when she had picked up the phone, sounding almost mechanical.

"Hey Rach, it's Taylor – are you still running an open mic on Saturday night?"

Rachael's voice lost its mechanical tone. "I am, yeah. Are you interested in being in it?"

"For once, I am. It'll be at seven-thirty, right?"

"Yeah, that's right." Here her voice turned a little suspicious. "Exactly what are you planning, Taylor Hanson?"

"You'll find out soon enough. I promise I'll make it worth your while. Hell, I'll even invite my brother down. It's his birthday tomorrow, after all, and we haven't been out for drinks in ages."

"Sounds like a plan to me. I'll see you Saturday night in that case."

"See you then," Taylor said, seconds before hanging up.

And that was how, at twenty-five minutes past seven that Saturday night, Taylor found himself sitting at the bar in Cooney's Tavern next to Zac, his guitar case propped against one leg of his bar stool between his knees. Unlike his first open mic, he was just a little nervous. Almost every spare waking moment over the past few days had been leading up to this night – to the performance that had the potential to set his life on an entirely different course.

"You're going to record it, right?" Taylor asked.

In response, Zac nodded toward his camcorder. It was sitting in its case on the bar, with its tripod set up and ready in the space between their bar stools. "It'll be good for blackmail one day," he

replied, earning himself a swat across the back of the head. "Now are you going to tell me what the hell is going on?"

"If you swear to keep it to yourself," Taylor replied, and Zac nodded. "When I finished my demo Audrey's dad sent it to a few record companies, and four of them bit a few days ago." He nodded toward the gathered audience. "Somewhere in that crowd are at least four record company reps, maybe a few more than that, and they've come all the way here to see me play my guitar. And if even just one of them likes what they see..."

"You're kidding."

Taylor shook his head. "I'm not kidding. This is..." He let out a quiet laugh. "I've dreamed of this for so long, Zac. I just never told anyone aside from Audrey or you because I thought I'd be dismissed as just another wannabe musician with too much time on his hands. Part of me wishes I'd done this sooner, actually."

"Well, you know what they say about hindsight," Zac said with a shrug, right as Rachael took the Tavern stage and tapped the microphone that had been set up. The hum of chatter died away almost immediately, and Taylor hid a smile. Rachael had evidently trained the pub's patrons very well.

"Welcome back to Cooney's, everyone," she said to kick off the proceedings. "I'm seeing some very familiar faces here tonight – and some of you are already pissed, I see. You alkies might want to lay off the drink or else I'll have to cut you off early, and I really don't want to have to do that. It means less profit in my pocket at the end of the day." She mimed rubbing a coin between the thumb and index finger of her right hand, and laughter rippled throughout the crowd. "Let's get things underway – as always I'm pulling names at random out of a hat, just to keep you all on your toes." She bent down and picked up a much-abused ice cream container, gave it a quick shake, and drew a name out. "First cab off the rank is Chris Kennedy!"

Unlike his first open mic, it was only half an hour before Rachael called Taylor's name out. He slid down off his bar stool, picked up his guitar case, and wandered up to the stage. "I take it that brother of yours is playing cameraman tonight?" Rachael asked just before she vacated the stage.

"For blackmail, he says."

Rachael barked out a laugh. "Blackmail, right." She grinned and clapped Taylor on the shoulder. "Good luck, mate."

"Thanks, Rach."

He waited until the red light on Zac's video camera was visible before unlatching his guitar case and lifting out his guitar, seating himself on the bar stool that had been set up on the stage. Without any sort of a preamble, as soon as the guitar had been settled on his knee he began to play the opening notes of his first song.

"In the early eighties when I washed up on the shore...I could breathe a little more than I would realise...you can call me crazy, you can call me what you will...you could take the bitter pill if it helps you sleep at night..."

"It's a long, long way my crooked friend...such a long, long way back home, home, home...so close, yet we've come so far...so close, still we've got so far..."

"I can safely say we feel as safe as we like...lest we forget those who died, I never will...such a perfect island, tucked away in the sea...the real land of the free, do you hear me..."

"It's a long way home my crooked friend...but I do appreciate the time we spent...it's a long, long way back home...such a long, long way back home, home, home...so close, yet we've come so far...so close, still we've got so far..."

"So close, yet we've come so far...so close, still we've got so far...so close, yet we've come so far...so close, still we've got so far...a long, a long way home..."

Applause rippled through the crowd, and through the half-dark he could see Rachael smiling from her spot near the side of the stage. He bit back a smile of his own before speaking.

"My next song is an Aussie classic that I'm hoping I won't butcher," he said as he gave his hands a quick shake. "If I do, feel free to run me off the stage." A deep breath, and he started playing the second song.

"Meet me down by the jetty landing...where the the pontoons bump and spray...the others reading, standing...as the Manly Ferry cuts its way to Circular Quay..."

"Hear the captain blow his whistle...so long she's been away...I miss our early morning wrestle...not a very happy way to start the day..."

"She don't like that kind of behaviour...she don't like that kind of behaviour...so throw down your guns...don't be so reckless...throw down your guns...don't be so..."

"Like Scott of the Antarctic...base camp too far away...a Russian sub beneath the Arctic...Burke and Wills and camels...initials in the tree..."

"She don't like that kind of behaviour...she don't like that kind of behaviour...so throw down your guns...don't be so reckless...throw down your guns...don't be so reckless..."

"She don't like that kind of behaviour...she don't like that kind of behaviour...so throw down your guns...don't be so reckless...throw down your guns...don't be so reckless...throw down your guns...don't be so reckless...throw down your guns...don't be so reckless...don't be so reckless...don't be so reckless...don't be so..."

This time the applause was even louder, and Taylor allowed himself a grin. This was turning out a lot better than it had the first time.

"I've just got one more song, and it's a special one – she's not here tonight, but I'd like to dedicate my final song to my girlfriend Audrey Carmichael. She's changed my life, and I'm going to be forever grateful to her for that." A chorus of 'aww's rose up from a corner, sounding distinctly female, and laughter rippled through the crowd. He grinned at this before beginning his final song.

"She came to me...with her arms...open wide...learnt my style...there she stood...like a child..."

"With her hair...flowing down in blue cascades...love, lapping at her feet...life, dancing in a masquerade...my completeness..."

"I could say no words...none would breathe...with my heart...on my sleeve...all was clear...there she was..."

"With her hair...flowing down in blue cascades...love, lapping at her feet...life, dancing in a masquerade...my completeness...all right...she's everything to me..."

"She came to me...with her arms...open wide...learnt my style...there she stood...like a child..."

"With her...hair, flowing down in blue cascades...love, lapping at her feet...life, dancing in a masquerade...hair, flowing down in blue cascades...love, lapping at her feet...life, dancing in a masquerade...my completeness...she's everything to me, yeah..."

The applause for the final song was so thunderous that Taylor almost wanted to slam his hands over his ears to block it out. Instead he got up off the bar stool and, with his guitar still in hand, took a bow, grinning all the while.

I could get used to this, he decided as he packed his guitar back in its case and left the stage, weaving his way through the tables on his way back to the bar. *I could really get used to this.*

Chapter 11

Out Of My Head

*Tell me if I'm in over my head
Tell me if our future is just hanging by a thread
I don't want to begin something I can't face*

* * *

Life returned more or less to normal after the open mic night. With the year swiftly drawing to a close, there were many things that needed to be taken care of – Christmas shopping, an almost endless list of new movies being released and shown at the cinemas, and parent-teacher night at Miki's school just to name a few. And as the days went by, Taylor almost forgot that the demo tape he had spent a month working on was up for consideration by four of Australia's most well-known record companies.

That is, he forgot up until his phone started vibrating in his pocket during work one Thursday morning in mid-November.

"Damn it," he mumbled, and sneaked a quick look at the projector he was supervising. Its current reel was nearly at the point where he would need to change it for the next one, a job he needed two hands and most of his concentration to complete. If his phone was vibrating because of a phone call and not a text message, depending on who was on the other end of the line he knew full well he could still be on the phone when the reel needed to be swapped.

He decided to do the smart thing. Rather than neglect his responsibilities, he radioed in to Glenda to let her know he was taking a break. Only once his replacement had entered the projection room did he finally yank his phone from his pocket and answer it.

"Hello?"

"Good morning, this is Troy Palmer calling from EMI Music Australia," the unfamiliar male voice on the other end of the line said. "Would it be possible to speak to Taylor Hanson, please?"

It took all of Taylor's self-control to keep his voice from shaking when he next spoke. "Speaking."

"I was hoping I'd be able to catch you. How are you doing this morning?"

"I'm good."

"Excellent, I'm glad to hear that. I know you're probably very busy so I won't keep you too long, but would it be possible for you to come here to Sydney this weekend?"

"I think I should be able to. What day exactly did you want to see me?"

"How does Saturday at ten-thirty sound?"

Taylor quickly ran through his schedule in his head. He had nothing planned, though he knew he would need to ask either Jackie or his grandparents to watch Miki while he was meeting with EMI.

"Saturday sounds great."

"Fantastic. I'll pop your name into my schedule in that case. Would you be able to bring your guitar with you as well?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Great. I'll see you on Saturday then – I look forward to meeting you."

Only once he had finished the phone call and returned his phone to his pocket did he realise what he had just agreed to, and his hands started shaking. "Holy shit, what did I just *do*?" he whispered.

"Hey, you all right?"

He looked up from his study of his trembling hands at Joshua. "I'm fine, Josh."

Joshua raised an eyebrow at him. "Mate, you look like you've seen a ghost. You sure you're all right?"

Taylor waved him off. "I'll be fine. I might go and sit in the break room for a little bit though – can you let Glenda know where I am if she asks?"

"Yeah, 'course I can."

Almost as soon as the break room door was closed behind him, Taylor slid down it so that he was sitting on the floor. He drew his knees up under his chin and wrapped his arms around his legs.

"Unbelievable," he whispered. "Un-fucking-believable..."

This was so far beyond his wildest dreams that he hadn't ever dared to allow himself to think of it beyond the occasional daydream. And yet here he was, just three months after recording those five songs onto one of Audrey's blank cassette tapes, potentially about to have his life changed forever. He loved working at the cinema, but he had never seen it as the be-all and end-all of his

working life. To him, it was more of a stepping stone on the way to what he considered to be something greater.

After about five minutes of sitting on his backside against the door, he pulled himself to his feet and took his phone back out of his pocket. He had two phone calls to make, and Audrey was the first.

"Hello?"

"Hey Aud, it's Tay."

Audrey's voice brightened considerably with her next words. "Hey, what's up?"

"Nothing much," he said, trying his best to sound nonchalant. "Just on a break and I thought I would drop you a line to say hi."

"Uh-huh," Audrey said, sounding just a little suspicious. "Why don't you tell me what's *really* up?"

"If I must."

"Oh yes, you must. Now spill."

"I just got off the phone with EMI about five or so minutes ago." His left hand started shaking all over again. "They want me to come up to Sydney to see them on Saturday morning."

"Are you kidding me?"

"Nope," Taylor replied. "I was starting to think they'd forgotten about me. This is just..." He let out a rough, low chuckle. "I can't believe this is happening, Audrey. I just...thank you."

"You're welcome, Taylor. You completely deserve this." There was a brief pause. "What time do you finish work today?"

"Five-thirty."

"Okay, awesome. I want you to meet me at Windjammers after you get off work, all right? We're going out to dinner tonight to celebrate your good fortune."

"You do realise they haven't signed me yet, don't you?"

"If they don't sign you then they have rocks in their heads," Audrey said dismissively. "If I know the industry as well as I ought to by now, this is likely nothing more than a formality."

"If you say so. What time do you want me to meet you there?"

"Well, the restaurant doesn't open for dinner until six, so let's say six-thirty? Gives us both time to go home and get changed."

"Sounds good to me."

As soon as he was done talking to Audrey he dialled James' office number, and took a few deep breaths to calm himself. It wouldn't do him any favours to get himself all worked up before he had a chance to tell James his good news. Not to mention that he still had another six hours left at work.

"Quayside Studios Sydney, this is Charlotte Carmichael speaking," Audrey's sister said to answer the phone.

"Hi Charlotte," Taylor said. "It's Taylor, Audrey's boyfriend."

"Oh, hey Taylor," Charlotte said. "How's things?"

"They're pretty good. Would I be able to talk to your dad for a bit?"

"Yeah, sure. Hold on."

"Thanks, Charlotte."

For a few moments there was nothing but silence on the other end of the line, before James' voice sounded in his ear. "Good morning Taylor," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"EMI just called me," Taylor replied, deciding to get straight down to business.

"Oh really?"

"Yeah." Taylor swallowed hard against the nervousness that threatened to render him speechless.

"They...they want me to come in to see them this Saturday morning."

Taylor swore he could see a mile-wide smile on James' face when he spoke next. "That's fantastic news, Taylor. What time did you arrange to see them?"

"Ten-thirty. They asked me to bring my guitar with me as well." He paused briefly. "Audrey reckons that this is just a formality and that they're bound to sign me – what do you think?"

"It's hard to say really, but I believe this could be a good sign. It's entirely possible that they've made their minds up to sign you, though if I were you I wouldn't go celebrating just yet."

Taylor let out a rough chuckle. "Audrey seems to have got it into her head that it's a foregone conclusion that I'll be on EMI's books by the end of the weekend. Reckons we're going out to dinner tonight to celebrate."

"Audrey always was optimistic." James said this with laughter in his tone. "Right then – since they've asked you to bring your guitar, I can safely assume they want you to perform a few songs for them. Do you have any songs that you can be ready to perform on Saturday?"

"I do, yeah – I've been writing a few songs here and there. I have no idea if they're any good or not, though. How many do you think I should have ready?"

"Three sounds like a good number. I'd make one of them a cover, so you'll only need two of your own songs."

"Okay." In his head Taylor was running through all the songs he had written over the last couple of months, sorting through which of them he'd written music for. "I'll probably spend tomorrow practicing, in that case."

He ended the phone call a few minutes later, James having promised he would meet up with Taylor at the EMI offices on Saturday, and locked the keypad of his phone before sliding it back into his pocket. As much as he wanted to head off home to celebrate right then and there, he still had to finish work – there would be time to celebrate later on.

Almost as soon as his shift ended at five-thirty he was out the cinema's doors, almost bolting down Burelli Street toward Wollongong Central's car park. As he went he was dialling Jackie's mobile number. Miki had gone to her aunt and uncle's house after school as usual – he knew this because Jackie had texted him earlier – and he hadn't thought at the time to ask Jackie to watch her that evening while he was out with Audrey.

"Hello?"

"Jacks, it's Tay. I need a favour." He said this as he stopped at the pedestrian crossing that stretched across Keira Street and jabbed the crossing button a few times.

"What is it this time?" Jackie asked with a long-suffering sigh.

"I need you to watch Miki for me. I'm going out to dinner with Audrey and I don't think kids are all that welcome where we're going. I'd take her with me otherwise. I don't think I'll be out too late."

"I suppose I can keep her here for a few more hours. Do you want to talk to her?"

"Yes please. Thanks Jacks, you're a lifesaver."

Jackie let out a laugh. "No worries, Tay."

The next voice he heard belonged to his daughter. "Daddy?"

"Hey princess. You're going to stay over at Auntie Jackie and Uncle Matt's house for a little while longer, okay? I'm going out with Audrey for a little while tonight."

"Can I come too?"

"Sorry Miki. I don't think little girls are allowed to go where Audrey and I are going tonight."

"Okay Daddy." Miki sounded just a little bit disappointed by this, and Taylor closed his eyes briefly. He hated disappointing his daughter.

"I'll make it up to you later, okay? We'll do something together when you're off school this summer. Just you and me, nobody else."

"You promise?"

"I promise, Miki. You be a good girl for me, okay? I'll pick you up tonight."

"Okay Daddy. I love you."

"I love you too, Miki."

He arrived at the Novotel Northbeach at twenty minutes past six, stepping off the Gong Shuttle at the bus stop across the road from the hotel. A quick crossing of Kembla Street once the bus had pulled away later and he was walking into the hotel, keeping an eye out for Audrey. He quickly spotted her sitting on the edge of the fountain in the lobby and headed straight over to her.

"Well, don't you look dashing," Audrey commented as she stood up and smoothed down the front of her red dress. Taylor glanced down at himself briefly, relieved that he had chosen to err on the side of caution and dressed up a little more than usual – in place of the jeans, T-shirt and sneakers

he typically wore this late in the year were black dress pants, a light blue short-sleeved button-down shirt and his boots. He'd even tied his hair back in a ponytail.

"You don't look so bad yourself," Taylor replied before kissing Audrey quickly. "Love the dress."

Audrey grinned and performed a quick pirouette, allowing the skirt of the dress to fan out around her knees. "Shall we, then?" she asked, nodding toward the entrance to Windjammers.

"After you," Taylor replied.

It wasn't until after they had placed their dinner orders – Audrey's chilli linguini and Taylor's barramundi – that Audrey brought up the reason for their night out together.

"So what exactly did EMI say?" she asked as she toyed with her empty wine glass. "I didn't really want to push you for details when you called me this morning."

"Well, they basically just asked me to come in to see them this Saturday morning, and to bring my guitar with me. Your dad said they'll probably want me to play a few songs for them."

"They will, yeah. What songs are you going to perform?"

"I'm not too sure yet, but your dad said I should have two originals and a cover ready to go. I'll probably decide what songs I'll perform when I get home tonight."

"Did you want me to come with you?" Audrey asked. "You know, for moral support."

"You don't mind?"

"Of course I don't mind. I want to be there when they sign you, plus I just want to see the looks on their faces when they see how brilliant a musician you are."

Taylor felt his face heat up a little. "I'm not that good."

"Oh, yes you are." Audrey set her wine glass back down on the table and leaned forward a little. "You are truly brilliant Taylor Hanson, and don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise. I wasn't there at the last open mic, but for EMI to call you this morning and ask you to come in for a meeting, that speaks volumes to me. They wouldn't have called you up if they didn't want to sign you, okay? Plus there's the fact that my dad wanted to work with you in the first place. He doesn't offer that to just anyone. He'll hire the studio out, yeah, but ninety-nine percent of the time he won't go out of his way to personally invite someone to record a demo." She smiled. "They're going to sign you. I can promise you that much."

"If you say so," Taylor said, his tone somewhat dubious. "I'm not going to get my hopes up, though. I've been disappointed far too often in my life for that."

Audrey didn't say a word in response to this. Instead she reached across the table and slipped her left hand into Taylor's right. "You know I love you right?" she asked.

Taylor nodded before raising Audrey's hand up and pressing a kiss to the back of it. He then interlocked their fingers. "I do. And I love you too."

* * *

On the morning of November fourteenth, Taylor and Audrey met up with James outside the building on Murray Street in Pyrmont that housed the offices of EMI Music Australia. Looking up at its upper floors had made Taylor feel dizzy – it stretched up toward the sky for at least ten storeys. In his left hand was the handle of his guitar case, and he held Audrey's hand with his right.

"Are we all ready to go, then?" James asked, and both Audrey and Taylor nodded. "I know you're probably very nervous Taylor, but you have absolutely nothing to be worried about. Just be yourself."

"Oh, he's nervous all right," Audrey said, before nudging Taylor in the ribs with her elbow. "Right after I got to his place this morning to pick him up he bolted into the bathroom to throw up." Out of the corner of her eye she saw Taylor narrow his own eyes at her, and she hid a smile behind her free hand.

"Right then, let's go," James said, and he led the way into the building.

While James spoke with EMI's receptionist, Taylor and Audrey sat down next to each other in the waiting area. "You're going to blow them away," Audrey said in an effort to reassure Taylor – she could tell that he was still very apprehensive about this morning's meeting. She squeezed his hand tightly. "You know your songs, right?"

Taylor nodded. "Yeah," he replied. "Audrey, what if-"

Audrey cut Taylor off with a finger to his lips. "Remember what I told you on Thursday at dinner? You are *brilliant*, and they will love you. You have more musical talent in your little finger than most 'musicians'" she made air-quotes with her fingers as she spoke this word "do in their entire bodies. You not only impressed my dad, but you got EMI, Shock, Liberation *and* Warner to sit up and take notice of you. To me, that speaks volumes. And I am going to be very shocked if they

don't decide to take you on after all." She stopped speaking as James joined them. "So what's happening?"

"It'll be another ten or fifteen minutes or so," James replied. "They're just making sure everything is set up and ready to go."

"Okay." And with that Audrey stood up. "Excuse me – I need to go find the ladies'."

Once Audrey was out of earshot, Taylor took the opportunity to ask James something he had been considering for at least the last month. "James, I was wondering if I could ask you something."

"Of course."

Taylor clasped his hands together tightly as he tried to figure out what he was going to say without tripping over his voice. "I'd like you to be my manager," he said at last. "You've been nothing but wonderful when it comes to my music, especially with getting my tapes out and all that, and I'd really like it if you could continue to do that for me. It'd mean a lot to me." He lowered his gaze a little. "I'll understand completely if you'd rather not – I know it might be a slight conflict of interest, seeing as Audrey and I are going out and all that."

"I was wondering if you were going to ask me that," James said, and Taylor looked up again. "It would be my pleasure, Taylor. I mean what I said before you started recording your demo – you have a lot of talent, and I'm happy to do anything I can to help you out. And that includes being your manager."

Taylor didn't even attempt to hide the relief he felt when James said this. "Thank you, James," he said.

Audrey had just rejoined them when Taylor's name was called out. The three of them rose to their feet, and Audrey drew Taylor into a tight embrace just before they went into the meeting room. "I am so proud of you," she whispered into his ear. "Come on, let's go and show them what you can do."

Seated at a long table at one end of the meeting room were three men and four women. The man seated in the middle of the table stood as James closed the door behind himself, Audrey and Taylor. "You must be Taylor Hanson," he said as he came around the end of the table. His hand was outstretched as he walked up to Taylor. "I'm Troy Palmer – we spoke on the phone on Thursday morning."

Taylor shook Troy's hand briefly. "It's good to meet you, Troy," he said, doing his utmost to keep from sounding too nervous. Troy was a little younger than he expected – he looked to be just a few years older than Taylor was himself. "This is James Carmichael, my manager, and my girlfriend Audrey."

"Great to meet you," Troy said as he shook hands with Audrey and James. "If the three of you will just take a seat at the front of the room, we'll get down to business."

"Why don't you start by telling us a little about yourself?" one of the women asked once Taylor, Audrey and James were all seated..

Taylor nodded quickly and took a deep breath before speaking. "Well, I'm twenty-six years old – I live down in Wollongong, but I was born and raised right here in Sydney. I've been playing the guitar since I was about eight or nine – I can't remember exactly. I studied Music for my School Certificate and my Higher School Certificate, with the guitar as my focus, but until a few months ago I hadn't really touched my guitar since I finished high school." He shifted a little uncomfortably in his seat. "I've performed at a few open mic nights at a pub down in Wollongong over the last four months, but I didn't really think of doing much with it all until Audrey mentioned taking it up professionally. I've actually wanted to do it for years, but being a dad has kind of made it a little difficult." He managed a small smile at this.

"You're a father?" another of the women asked, and Taylor nodded again.

"I have a seven-year-old daughter," he replied. "I'm a little young to be a dad to her, I know, but I can assure you all that she does exist." Everyone else laughed at this. "Right now I work as a projectionist for a cinema in Wollongong, but I don't see it as being my entire life. I'd like to hope that there's something greater out there for me."

"Well, let's see about that then shall we?" Troy said. "I can see that you've brought your guitar with you, so how about giving us a bit of a show?"

Taylor soon had his guitar out of its case and resting on his lap, left hand curled around the bridge. He made sure the brace he still wore on his right wrist was secured tightly and wouldn't come off easily before beginning to play the first of his two original songs.

"Yesterday I cried...a hundred billion tears on every channel live...more than fame, less than real...instant syndication, maximum appeal...and it dawned on me like a child...every day is passing by...at the speed of life...the speed of life, yeah..."

"And the moments pass me by...I didn't feel a thing, you could almost hear me sigh...watered down, eaten up...always getting more but never get enough...a channel change, a blinking eye...watch another day go by...the speed of life...the speed of life, yeah...the speed of life...

"Coma, karma, read about it...all the sins we crawl around in...underneath a neon sign...this is just the speed of life...

"Yesterday I cried...for all the plans we make and never find the time...running up all the way...I feel I'm leaving something, moving on each day...a channel change, a blinking eye...this is just the speed of life...

"Coma, karma, read about it...all the sins we crawl around in...underneath a neon sign...this is just the speed of life...never stopping, never go...you gotta get or you gotta go...hurricane from butterfly...this is just the speed of life...

"Take what's coming, take me there...let the wind blow through my hair...try to breathe, try to lie...this is just the speed of life...calculated, fabricated, watered down and rehydrated...deadline coming overtime...this is just the speed of life...

"Take what's coming, take me there...let the wind blow through my hair...try to breathe, try to lie...this is just the speed of life..."

Applause sounded as he finished his first song, and he resisted the temptation to get up and sketch a bow. Instead, he took a moment or two to remember the proper chords for his next song, a cover of *Violet Hill* by Coldplay.

"It was a long and dark December...from the rooftops I remember...there was snow, white snow...clearly I remember...from the windows they were watching...while we froze down below...when the future's architected...by a carnival of idiots on show...you'd better lie low...if you love me, won't you let me know...

"Was a long and dark December...when the banks became cathedrals...and a fox became God...priests clutched onto Bibles...hollowed out to fit their rifles...and a cross was held aloft...bury me in armour...when I'm dead and hit the ground...a love back home, it unfolds...and if you love me, won't you let me know...

"I don't want to be a soldier...who the captain of some sinking ship would stow far below...so if you love me, why'd you let me go..."

"I took my love down to Violet Hill...there we sat in snow...all that time she was silent still...said if you love me, won't you let me know...if you love me, won't you let me know..."

His final song was one he had never shown to or played for anyone before today, having finally finished it a few nights earlier. For perhaps the first time in his life he was particularly proud of it, and he only hoped that everyone else in the room liked it as much as he did. His eyes dropped closed as he played the intro, only opening them again when he began to sing.

"I'd stay the hand of God, but the war is on your lips...how can I brace myself for razorblades on whips...when everything with meaning is shattered, broken, screaming...and I'm lost inside this darkness...and I fear I won't survive..."

"I could pray and trick with a double tongue, but the only fool here's me...I choose the way to go but the road won't set me free...'cause I wish you'd see me, baby...save me, I'm going crazy...tryin' to keep us real, keep us alive..."

"This day will die tonight and there ain't no exception...we shouldn't wait for nothing to wait for...love me in this fable babe, my heart is in your hand...our time is waiting right outside your door...and maybe tomorrow is a better day...maybe tomorrow is a better day..."

"I do not deal the cards and I play a lousy hand...I celebrate no victories and my promises are sand...against all this I contrast you...when all is lost the war is through...hey angel, dare the winds now we can fly..."

"This day will die tonight and there ain't no exception...why should I wait for nothing to wait for...let me love you in this fable...hold your heart in my hand...our time is waiting right outside your door...and maybe tomorrow is a better day...yeah maybe tomorrow is a better day...a better day..."

"This day will die tonight and there ain't no exception...why should I wait for nothing to wait for...I won't cry for my solitude...lay my head and dream of you...and hope that you'll come knocking on my door...and maybe tomorrow is a better day...yeah maybe tomorrow is a better day...a better day...I know tomorrow is a better day...I know tomorrow is a better day...yeah maybe tomorrow is a better day..."

After the final round of applause died down, there was a stretch of quiet as Troy and his colleagues conferred amongst themselves. "So what do you think, Dad?" Audrey asked quietly, not wanting to interrupt the discussion taking place at the front of the room.

"I can't say for sure," James said, his voice just as quiet as his daughter's. "And I don't want to get yours or Taylor's hopes up, but I am very hopeful that they'll have some good news for us."

"So am I," Audrey said, and she reached for Taylor's hand. He took hold of it without looking up from his guitar. And that was how the two of them sat for at least the next couple of minutes.

"I think we've seen all that we need to today," Troy said, and Taylor finally looked up. Audrey gave his hand a quick squeeze of what she intended as reassurance. "And I believe I speak for all of us when I say that we would be delighted to have you on board as one of our artists."

In that instant, Taylor swore he felt his heart stop for just a few seconds. "What are you saying?" he asked, barely allowing himself to believe what Troy had said.

"We would like to sign you, Taylor," Troy said. He sounded faintly amused. "I had already made my mind up when I called you on Thursday, but your performance just now has more or less clinched it for all of us. I believe you would be a tremendous asset to us."

"Holy shit," Taylor whispered. "Holy fucking *shit*..." Behind him he could hear Audrey snickering softly at his reaction to what Troy had said. "You're not kidding me, are you?"

"I think it would be a very cruel trick if we did that. If you'll come up here to the front table, we have a few papers for you to look over and sign."

Audrey watched from her seat as Taylor and James went up to the front table and bent over a stack of white paper. She couldn't hear them talking to one another, but she had a decent idea of what they were discussing – the terms of what would be Taylor's contract with EMI if he ended up signing it. She didn't even bother to hide the grin that had appeared on her face as soon as Troy had spoken the words that were to change the course of Taylor's life forever.

"I told you," she said softly, shaking her head a little. "I *told* you, didn't I?"

At least fifteen minutes passed before James and Taylor were finished looking over the contract that EMI was offering. "What do you think?" Taylor asked.

"It's a good deal," James said. "I'd take it if I were you – I daresay you won't get a better offer elsewhere."

Taylor nodded and took up the pen that lay on the table beside the contract. After taking a deep breath to steady himself, he turned to the final page and wrote *Jordan Taylor Hanson* on the line meant for his name, before signing and dating it. Troy followed his lead shortly afterward.

"Thanks for coming in today, Taylor," Troy said as he and Taylor shook hands. "I'll be in touch regarding your first official recording session."

"Thanks, Troy," Taylor said.

Audrey waited until they were back out on Murray Street before she spoke again. "So what did it say?" she asked.

"Three albums," Taylor replied. "If things go well – and Troy is fairly certain they will – then we're going to reassess things after the third album. Depending on what I decide I want to do, my contract will be renewed or they'll release me from it. I won't worry about that right now though." He laughed suddenly, before catching Audrey up in an embrace. "Thank you, Audrey. Thank you for believing in me."

"You're so very welcome, Taylor," Audrey replied, and the two of them kissed again.

"If you two lovebirds are *quite* finished," James said, causing Taylor and Audrey to break apart. He clapped Taylor on the shoulder. "Congratulations, Taylor."

"Thanks, James." He shifted his guitar case to his right hand briefly so he could take his phone out of his pocket. "I think some celebrations are in order. I asked my brother and my sister to meet us at Pancakes On The Rocks for lunch, if that's okay with you guys?"

"That sounds fantastic," Audrey replied. "I haven't had pancakes in ages. What do you think, Dad?"

"Your mother will have my hide if she finds out we had pancakes for lunch and not much else," James said, chuckling.

"We just won't tell her, then," Audrey said cheekily.

James let out a proper laugh this time. "Pancakes On The Rocks it is, then."

Taylor kept a tight hold on Audrey's hand as they walked the short distance to Pancakes On The Rocks. Right now she was the only thing keeping him properly grounded.

This was what he had dreamed of for so long. Everything he had done and everything that had happened to him up until that point – his drug addictions, becoming a father at just nineteen, being kicked out of home and disowned by his parents, his ex-girlfriend abandoning him and their daughter, even the last six-and-a-half years of raising Miki on his own with very little help from anyone else – had come close to derailing it, but all of that was behind him now. He had his new

career as a professional musician to look forward to, and that was something very few people had the power to take away from him.

“What are you thinking about?” Audrey asked as they crossed Darling Drive at the lights and turned right.

“Just about how lucky I am,” Taylor replied. He tightened his hold on Audrey’s hand. “I think I’m going to hand in my notice at work after New Year’s. I don’t really need to be working there any longer. It’ll give me a chance to spend some time with Miki before she starts school next year and I start recording.”

“Are you going to stay in Wollongong?” Audrey asked. “I’m just saying it might be a bit difficult to be going back and forth between Wollongong and Sydney every day while you’re recording. It’ll be hard on Miki as well.”

“I honestly don’t know. I’ve already told Miki we might have to move, but I can’t say for certain if that’s what we’re actually going to do. I’m going to think about it over the next month or so.” He bit his bottom lip. “I don’t want to take Miki away from her friends, or her cousins – that’s one of the things stopping me from saying outright that yes, we’re going to move up here.”

“I can understand that. I’d hate to make Miki leave her friends and cousins behind.” She stopped walking, took her hand away from Taylor’s and settled both of her hands on his shoulders. “Whatever you decide to do, whether you end up staying in Wollongong or moving up here, I’ll be beside you every step of the way. I promise.”

Chapter 12

Wide Open Road

The sky was big and empty

My chest filled to explode

I yelled my insides out at the sun

* * *

"Are you sure your grandparents will be okay with us coming over like this?" Audrey asked one Sunday morning a couple of weeks later. She, Taylor and Miki had gone up to Sydney for the day, more or less specifically to visit Taylor's grandparents – Taylor had promised his grandmother weeks earlier that he would bring Audrey up at some point, and he had never been known to break a promise without a very good reason.

"They won't mind a bit," Taylor assured Audrey. "I drop in on them all the time when I'm up here. Besides, Grandma wanted to meet you anyway, and they both want to see Miki. Pretty sure my sister does as well."

"If you say so," Audrey said, feeling a little unsure.

"I do say so." Taylor unbuckled his seatbelt and took his keys out of the ignition. "Come on."

True to Taylor's word, neither of his grandparents minded a bit that they had come to visit without much warning. Once Taylor had introduced Audrey to them, and after Nicholas had gone off with Miki into the lounge room to watch cartoons, Audrey and Taylor joined Lucinda at the kitchen table.

"Jessica told your grandpa and I that you have some good news for us," Lucinda was saying as she poured tea for the three of them.

"I do, yeah," Taylor replied. Audrey's hand found his under the table and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Do you remember how Aunt Vickie gave me that guitar when I was a kid, and Uncle Robert taught me how to play it?"

"I remember that quite well," Lucinda said. "Let me guess, it has something to do with that?"

Taylor nodded. "It pretty much has everything to do with that. A couple of days after I broke my wrist Audrey got me to record a few songs onto one of her blank cassette tapes – her dad has his own recording studio, and she passed the tape onto him a little while afterward. Her dad invited

me in to record a demo, he sent it off to a bunch of record companies once it was finished, and..." He didn't even bother to hide the grin that now crept its way onto his face. "EMI signed me two weeks ago. I start recording my first album in January."

"Oh Taylor, that's wonderful!" Lucinda said, sounding very pleased. "Congratulations – that's fantastic news. Nicholas!"

Taylor looked over at the kitchen doorway just in time to see his grandfather poking his head through the doorway, one eyebrow raised in question. "Taylor, tell your grandfather what you just told me," Lucinda prompted.

As soon as Taylor had done as he was prompted, Nicholas came further into the kitchen and clapped Taylor on the shoulder. "Knew you had it in you," he said, sounding proud. "Which is more than I can say for that good-for-nothing son of mine and his shrew of a wife," he added darkly.

"Nicholas," Lucinda said warningly.

"Grandma, it's okay," Taylor said. "Audrey knows what they did to me. Told her everything after I broke my arm." He looked down at the table. "Miki kind of let it slip that they disowned me, and Audrey managed to coax the rest of it out of me the next day."

"I see," Lucinda said. "She knows about Miki's mother as well, I take it?" she asked, and Taylor noted that, perhaps deliberately, she didn't say Claire's name.

"When I say I told her everything, then I mean everything," Taylor replied. "Even my...let's call them my self-destructive habits all through the second half of high school." He ran a thumbnail along the edge of the table. "She's still here, what, three months later, so I guess I didn't scare her off."

"It would take a lot more than you admitting your teenage indiscretions to scare me off, Taylor," Audrey assured him. "A hell of a lot more than that."

Taylor let out a rough laugh. "That's one way to put it." He glanced at his watch briefly and stood up. "I'll be back in a bit," he said before leaving the kitchen.

"So how did you and Taylor meet?" Lucinda asked, her tone conversational.

"Technically the first time was at an open mic night he performed at back in July," Audrey replied. "I'd gone along with a few friends, sort of as a way to blow off a bit of steam after work, and I caught him staring at me while he was onstage. We didn't actually meet properly until a few days

after that – he'd just dropped Miki off at school when my car broke down right next to him. He loaned me his phone so I could call the NRMA and my boss, and he gave his mobile number right before he headed off again. Nearly a week later I texted him, asking if he wanted to meet up for coffee, and the rest is history. We've officially been going out since the middle of August." She hid a smile. "He actually asked me to be his girlfriend while we were waiting to see a doctor in the emergency department of Shellharbour Hospital, after he broke his arm."

"Well, he always was a little bit unconventional," Lucinda said with a smile of her own. "Didn't have much of a choice in that...*family* he had the misfortune to be a part of." She lowered her voice a little. "Just between you and me, Audrey dear, being disowned was probably half of what saved his life. He wouldn't have survived there much longer. He's far tougher than he looks, you mark my words, but all the same he's not as...well, he's not as resilient as his brother and sister are."

"Talking about me again, are you?"

Audrey looked back over her shoulder to see Taylor standing in the kitchen doorway, arms crossed over his chest and one eyebrow raised. "Of course we are," Audrey said, barely missing a beat. "What did you *think* we were going to talk about while you were out of the room, secret women's business?"

"Maybe," Taylor replied, sounding just a little evasive. He walked back into the room and resumed his seat, leaning in to quickly kiss Audrey on the forehead. "I'm not entirely sure I *want* to know what you were talking about, if you want the truth."

Lucinda smiled at this and rose from her seat. "Why don't you help me with lunch, Taylor? That is, if you were planning to stay that long?"

"If I must."

"Yes, you must." Lucinda raised an eyebrow at her grandson. "I hope you haven't already forgotten everything I've ever taught you."

"No, of course I haven't." And with these words Taylor got back up out of his seat, and joined Lucinda at the kitchen bench.

Later on in the afternoon, Taylor, Audrey and Miki said their goodbyes and left to head back down the coast to Wollongong. By intent or accident, Audrey wasn't exactly sure, their route out of the city ended up taking in one street in particular that Taylor hadn't set foot in since just before Christmas 2002.

"I used to live here," Taylor said quietly as Audrey turned into Victoria Street in Potts Point. He didn't say another word until Audrey had neared the intersection of Victoria Street and Orwell Street. "Right there," he said, pointing toward a row of terrace houses painted a pale yellow. "The one with the tree planted out the front."

His next words took Audrey completely by surprise.

"Pull over," he said, and Audrey was shocked at the edge to his voice.

"Taylor, what-"

"Pull the fuck over," he repeated. "We're here so I may as well do something I should have done years ago."

"I hope you know what you're doing," Audrey said as she found a parking spot in front of the street's Thai restaurant. Taylor was out of the car almost as soon as the engine had stopped running, and had crossed the street before Audrey even had a chance to unbuckle her seatbelt.

"Your daddy's gone just a little nuts," Audrey told Miki as she worked to unbuckle the seven-year-old's seatbelt.

"Is he going to yell at my nan and pop?" Miki asked once she was out of the car.

"I think he might be," Audrey replied. She closed the back door, locked the car and checked for oncoming traffic before leading Miki across the street. When they finally caught up with Taylor, he was leaning against the wrought iron fence out the front of his old house, clutching onto the narrow rails so tightly his knuckles had turned white. "Are you sure you want to do this?" Audrey asked him.

He nodded. "I need to do this, Aud. Preferably before I lose my nerve entirely. They need to understand exactly what they've missed out on." He uncurled his hands from around the fence railing, straightened up and opened the front gate. From there it was just a few steps to the front door. "Here goes nothing," he said, and he took a deep breath before rapping sharply on the pane of frosted glass set into the door.

It was a very tense few seconds before the front door opened. Standing framed in the open doorway was an older woman with greying light brown hair, and Audrey knew instantly that this was Taylor's mother.

"Hi Christina," Taylor said, the slightest hint of venom in his tone. Audrey didn't miss the fact that he didn't say 'Mum' – she supposed he had no reason to call her that. "Remember me?"

"Good Lord," Christina said, sounding a little faint. "Taylor? What are you doing here?"

He seemed to ignore her. "You know, I've wondered a few times just what your intent was in kicking me out on my arse and out of the family," he said, his tone almost conversational. The faint anger suffusing his voice betrayed his true feelings, however – he was well and truly pissed off at his mother. "You must have known that neither Claire nor I had anywhere to go. We were both very fucking lucky that the Salvation Army refuge in Surry Hills had a couple of beds and a cot free, otherwise we would have spent Christmas and New Year's *on the fucking street!*"

"Taylor, I-"

"No, you don't get to say one fucking *word* to me, Mum," he interrupted, and Audrey realised that he was close to tears. "You obviously cared far more about the fact that I had become a father out of wedlock than you did about the fact that I spent two years either stoned halfway up to my eyeballs or coked out of my mind. Did you even notice that your oldest child was a drug addict?" Taylor forced out a laugh. "No, of course you didn't. You were too drunk half the time to even give a shit about me. And I'm very sure that you never realised or cared that everything you did to me when I was growing up – not to Zac or Jess, but to me alone – was *child abuse*. You and Dad both did it to me, but at least the worst *he* ever did was neglect me a little bit. Calling me a 'mistake' and a disgrace, forcing me to endure your drunk ranting and tirades whenever Dad left me home alone with you, booting me out on my arse two days before Christmas with barely more than the clothes on my back, and telling me that you were not only more ashamed of me than you'd ever been of anyone, but hoping I ended up dead in a ditch one day? *That* was emotional abuse, Mum, and you damn well know it. And you know, I still haven't worked out if you said that to me because of my daughter or the fact that it took finding out I was going to be a dad to finally get my act together."

He paused for breath and to drag shaking hands through his hair. "I know you never loved me," he continued. "I realised that when I was fifteen and I sneaked off to go hang around Pitt Street Mall on a Sunday morning instead of tagging along to church. You never even noticed or cared that I was missing for *three hours*. I'm sure Zac and Jess noticed, but the two people who should have given even the smallest *damn* that I'd disappeared didn't give a shit. That still hurts, Mum, and I've wondered more than once why you didn't give me up for adoption after I was born if you hated me so much."

For half a second Audrey thought Taylor was going to start crying right then and there. His voice had started to shake audibly, and it took every bit of self-control he could muster just to keep the shaking in check.

"Everything that you and Dad put me through in the nineteen years I lived under your roof has made me bound and fucking determined to be the best dad I can be to my daughter. I don't want her to grow up thinking her dad hates her for nothing more than being born, and I can honestly say that I don't hate her for that. If anything, I love her for it. Until I met Audrey, my daughter being born was the single best thing that ever happened to me. She still is one of them, and until the day I die – which I sincerely hope is *very* far away from now – she always will be. I love my little girl, Mum, which is more than I will ever be able to say for you." He clenched his hands into fists. "I hate you, and I hate Dad. I always will. Nothing will ever change that, for as long as I live. I hope you're very fucking pleased with yourself."

And with that parting remark, he turned his back on his mother and stormed up the short flight of stairs onto the footpath. Audrey allowed herself one solitary glance at the look of utter shock on Christina's face before leading Miki up onto the footpath and back across the street to Taylor's car.

"Tay?" she asked when she saw that Taylor was sitting on the footpath next to the rear wheels of his car, crossed arms propped on his knees and head down. She could see his shoulders shaking, and somewhat surprisingly she could hear quiet crying over the Saturday afternoon traffic that filled the streets of Potts Point. "Hey..." She sat down next to Taylor and slipped an arm around his shoulders. "You really gave it to her just then, you know."

"She deserved it," Taylor said, his voice barely loud enough to be heard. He raised his head and looked over at Audrey. Utter misery filled his eyes, and tears spilled down his reddened cheeks. "I sincerely hope I outlive her, Audrey, because if I'm the one who dies first I don't want her *or* my father to come to my funeral."

"I'll do my best to make sure that doesn't happen," Audrey said, and she stood up before helping Taylor back to his feet. "Come on, let's get out of here." She wiped the tears off his face with the pad of her thumb. "Do you feel up to dropping by my parents' place for a little while? I think it might do you some good to realise that not all mothers are like yours."

"I think so," Taylor replied. "And I think I agree with you – I need a reminder of that sometimes."

Much to Audrey's relief, both of her parents were home when she pulled Taylor's car up into her parents' driveway – both of their cars were parked in front of the garage. "They're probably going

to want to know what just happened, just be warned," Audrey said as she cut the ignition. "Are you still okay with me telling them what happened to you when you were a kid?"

"They deserve to know, Audrey. And really, I wouldn't have agreed to that if I *wasn't* okay with it."

"True." She took the keys out of the ignition and unbuckled her seatbelt. "Come on then."

Before she rang the doorbell, Audrey drew Taylor into an embrace. "I love you, Jordan Taylor. Okay? Nothing is ever going to change that."

"I know," Taylor replied. "And I love you too." He managed a small smile. "I'm going to be all right, Aud. I swear. What they did to me, it's always going to hurt, but it's not as painful as it used to be. It's more like a bruise that I try not to poke too often."

Audrey let out a quiet laugh at this. "That's a good way of putting it."

It took Beth less than a minute to realise something had happened, and she quickly ushered Audrey, Taylor and Miki into the kitchen. "All of you, sit," she ordered gently. "I'm going to put the kettle on and make some tea, then I want to know what happened."

"Daddy?" Miki asked from her seat on Taylor's lap as Beth busied herself with the fixings for tea.

"Yeah?"

"Why're you cryin'?"

Taylor didn't answer immediately. Instead, he planted a kiss on the top of Miki's head and closed his eyes. "I love you so much, Miki," he said softly. "I just yelled at your nan," he added, raising the volume of his voice a little. "And it brought back a lot of bad memories. That's all." He tucked a few stray locks of hair behind Miki's ears. "You know that I would never hurt you, don't you?"

Miki nodded. "You're my daddy. Daddies don't hurt their little princesses."

"I wish that was true of all daddies, Miki. Remind me to tell you one of these days why that isn't the case." He almost said 'you're not old enough' but held his tongue. Instead he said, "It's not the nicest story for little girls to hear."

Beth soon had four cups of tea and a glass of milk set out on the kitchen table. "I'll go and hunt down your dad," she said as she placed a glass jar full of biscuits in the middle of the table,

following it up with the sugar bowl and a carton of milk. "I have a feeling this is something you need to talk to both of us about."

It wasn't long before James joined them at the table. "There's something you and Dad need to know about Taylor," Audrey said as she stirred milk and sugar into her tea. "Well, there's a few somethings, really."

From there, everything Taylor had told Audrey came spilling out. Neither Beth nor James interrupted as Audrey spoke – and Taylor was somewhat relieved that Audrey didn't sugar-coat any of it for her parents' benefit. She laid out in detail everything that had happened to Taylor in the last twenty-six, almost twenty-seven years, not holding back for even a second.

"So there you have it," Audrey said once she was done. "We just had a run-in with Taylor's mother, actually – I don't know how, but we managed to drive into his old street on our way home from his grandparents'. He well and truly let her have it."

"She deserved it," Taylor muttered right before he finished off his cup of tea. He set the cup back down on the table and gently shifted Miki off his lap. "Excuse me."

"Were you still planning on coming up to Byron for Christmas, Audrey?" James asked shortly after Taylor had left the kitchen. "Your mum and I will understand if you'd rather stick close to home this year, especially as it's yours and Taylor's first Christmas together."

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that," Audrey said. "I was wondering if it would be okay if I invited Taylor up this time. I know you're okay with me having friends to stay *after* Christmas itself, being as Christmas is family time for us, but I wasn't sure if it would be all right if I asked Taylor up instead."

"Of course it's all right, Audie," Beth said. "He's more than welcome to come and spend Christmas with us. I will want to ask him a couple of questions first, though."

"Yeah, I figured you'd want to. I'm not going to invite him until I know what his plans are, though – for all I know, he might have already made plans for Christmas. He doesn't have much family, but I know that what family he *does* have is pretty important to him." Out of the corner of her eye she saw Taylor walking back into the kitchen. "Everything okay?" she asked him, and he nodded.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he replied as he resumed his seat.

"Is it okay if we ask you a couple of questions, Taylor?" Beth asked.

"Yeah, of course," Taylor replied.

A glance passed between Beth and James. "Audrey said that you're a former drug addict," James said.

"I am, yeah," Taylor confirmed. "Got my act together when I found out I was going to be a dad. You don't have to worry – I've been clean for the last eight years, and I'm never going to touch them again for as long as I live. Well, except for prescription or over-the-counter medication," he amended. "But that's as far as I'm willing to go. Audrey and Miki are far too important to me to want to go down that road ever again. I know that there's going to be a lot of temptation along those lines with my new career and all, but I've got these two to keep me on the straight and narrow. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that Audrey is more than willing to give me a good hard kick up the backside if I get even the thought of it in my head."

"You've got that right," Audrey said.

"And your ex-girlfriend – Claire, was it?"

Audrey saw Taylor's eyes darken noticeably to a much deeper blue than normal as soon as Beth said his ex-girlfriend's name. "Yeah, her. She's out of my life completely, and for that I'm grateful. Audrey has nothing to worry about on that front. I hate her almost as much as I hate my parents. I can tell you completely honestly that I want nothing more to do with her. Miki is the only reminder I want of her. I do keep a photo of the three of us on my refrigerator at home, but that's only because it was the first photo ever taken of Miki."

"That's completely understandable," Beth said, reassurance in her tone.

It was almost dark by the time Taylor, Audrey and Miki left to resume their journey back down to Wollongong. Taylor stayed back on the front veranda to speak to Beth before joining Audrey and Miki in the car.

"Beth, before we go I just wanted to say thank you," he said, looking down at the toes of his sneakers as he spoke.

"For what?"

"Just...for reminding me that not all mothers are the same. My mother isn't the nicest person in the world, at least not to me, and it's nice sometimes to remember that she's in the minority as far as parents go. Audrey, Will and Charlie are lucky to have you as their mum."

"Oh Taylor," Beth said softly, and pulled him into an embrace. "One of these days I'd like to give those parents of yours a piece of my mind," she said with a sigh, and drew back so that she could look into Taylor's eyes. "You be careful driving home, okay?"

He managed a small smile. "I will. Thanks, Beth."

* * *

"So what are you planning to do for Christmas?" Audrey asked early one afternoon at the beginning of December. The two of them were taking advantage of Taylor's Friday off, along with the fact that Miki's school didn't let out for the day until five to three, by having a long, lazy lunch at City Diggers.

"I hadn't made any plans yet," Taylor replied. "There's a few things that Miki and I do – either we go up to Sydney to spend the day with my grandparents, Zac comes down for a week over Christmas and New Year's, or we spend Christmas Day with Jackie and Matt." He bit into his toasted chicken and tomato sandwich, thinking as he ate. "Though this year I was thinking of taking her camping down the coast for a few days." He eyed Audrey briefly. "Did you have something in mind?"

"I did, yeah. You know how my parents won Powerball and bought that house of theirs?" she asked, and Taylor nodded. "Well, they also bought a house up in Byron Bay. Most of the year they rent it out as a holiday house, but come the beginning of December my parents and my sister drive up there and get the house ready for us, my grandparents, my aunt and uncle and a few of our cousins to spend Christmas there. It's been a little tradition of ours for the last five years or so. They always let Will, Charlie and I invite friends to stay after Christmas and for New Year's, but the week leading up to Christmas and the two or three days afterward are strictly family time. And, well...I asked my parents if I could invite you to spend Christmas with us."

"You did?"

Audrey nodded. "And they said yes. So basically, if you wanted to come up to Byron Bay with me when I drive up there, you're more than welcome to."

Taylor didn't say anything for a little while, finally looking at Audrey after what seemed like forever. "Your parents see me as family?" he asked, sounding a little surprised.

"I guess they do," Audrey said with a small shrug. "You don't have to, but I'd really like it if you and Miki would spend Christmas with us."

"I'll have to ask Miki," Taylor said after thinking for a little while. "She might have a different idea of what she wants to do for Christmas. But I think she'll like the idea." A smile crept onto his face. "She asked me on her birthday if you were going to be her mother, by the way."

"She did?" This time it was Audrey's turn to be surprised.

"Yep," Taylor replied. "I told her it might happen one day, but I didn't promise anything beyond that. She gets a little worked up if I break my promises."

Audrey let out a soft laugh. "I can imagine. So when do you think you'll be able to let me know?"

"This afternoon, probably. I'll ask Miki after I pick her up from school."

He did exactly that as soon as he and Miki were home that afternoon. "What would you like to do for Christmas this year?" he asked her as soon as the front door was closed and locked. "I was thinking you might like to go camping for a few days, just you and me."

Miki seemed to be deep in thought while Taylor was unlacing her school shoes. "Can Audrey come too?" she asked finally.

"You want to spend Christmas with Audrey?"

Miki nodded. "Yep. Can she come with us if we go camping?"

"Actually, I have a better idea." He slipped Miki's shoes off her feet, following closely with her socks. "Audrey asked me today if we wanted to go with her to her parents' other house, all the way up the coast, and spend Christmas there. And I told her I'd ask you before I said we'd come. What do you think?"

"Yeah!" Miki said happily. "I want to do that. Can we Daddy, please?"

"I'll tell you what..." Taylor got back to his feet and sat down next to Miki at the kitchen table. "If you promise to be a good girl between now and your last day of school for the year, then I'll call Audrey tonight and tell her we'll come up the coast with her. But you have to keep that promise as well, okay? I don't want you to come home two days before the end of school and tell me you got in trouble from your teacher, because if you do then we're staying here for Christmas. All right?"

"I'm always a good girl," Miki said, sounding indignant.

"I know that you are. But I still want you to promise me."

Miki then proceeded to draw an X over her heart. "Cross my heart."

"Good girl. Go and watch TV for a little while, okay?"

"Okay Daddy." Miki slid down off her chair and ran through to the lounge room. Once she was out of sight Taylor slipped his mobile phone from his pocket, unlocked it and opened his contacts. Audrey's number was right at the top.

"Hey Tay," Audrey said as soon as she had picked up.

"Hey Aud. I asked Miki and she said yes."

"Awesome," Audrey said, sounding pleased.

"There is a small catch, though – I pretty much made her promise that she has to behave herself until she finishes school for the year. Her last day of term is December eighteenth, so she basically has to be on her best behaviour for the next two weeks. If she puts even one toe out of line, we'll be staying home for Christmas. She always behaves herself, though, so I'm not a bit worried."

"So I should go ahead and tell my parents to expect the two of you for Christmas, then?"

"Yeah, you may as well. I'll let you know if things change for any reason, but I don't see why you can't tell them we'll be there." Taylor reached for a pen and tapped it against the table. "So what's it like up at Byron Bay?"

"It's amazing. It's an absolutely tiny town – there's a bit less than five thousand people living there – so it's very peaceful most of the time, which is most of the reason why my parents bought a house up there. They get a lot of tourists though, especially during Schoolies Week – it's really close to Surfers so that's somewhat of a given, I suppose. They've got a farmer's market there every Thursday as well – Mum will probably get the vegies and other bits and pieces for Christmas lunch from there on Christmas Eve if I'm not mistaken. I think they have other markets and whatnot there as well but I'll probably have to wait until we get up there to find out for sure."

"So I should make sure I don't forget to bring my wallet in that case."

"Pretty much. Also, I should warn you now – it is a *very* long drive north. I planned the trip out in Google Maps not long after I moved here, just to get a rough idea of how far I'd have to drive and how early in the morning I would have to leave to get to Byron by dinner." She let out a low chuckle. "If you take the road up the coast, it's almost eight hundred and fifty kilometres north. It'll take us roughly ten and three-quarters of an hour to get there driving non-stop."

"Christ."

"Yeah. So basically if we want to get there in plenty of time for dinner, and still be able to take an hour or two for lunch along the way, we would need to leave at about three in the morning at the absolute latest."

"Oh bloody hell," Taylor groaned. "That's insane."

"It is a bit, isn't it? But I promise you it'll be worth it. We can probably plot out our route and all our pit stops a day or so before we head off, so I wouldn't worry about it just yet."

"Oh trust me, I'm not even going to *think* about it until at least the fifteenth. I have far too many things I need to get done before that. Christmas shopping being right at the top of my list."

Audrey laughed. "Yeah, me too. Oh, before I forget, make sure you let your brother and sister know that they're welcome to come up after Christmas if they like."

"I will."

They hung up not long after that, and Taylor leaned back in his chair and looked into the lounge room at Miki. She was sitting on the rug in the middle of the lounge room floor, staring at what he figured was cartoons on ABC3. He spent a few minutes watching her before getting up from the table and heading into the kitchen to get dinner started.

Almost two weeks later, after Taylor had finished work for the day and had picked Miki up from her aunt and uncle's house, Audrey knocked on the front door right as Taylor was setting his laptop up on the kitchen table. "Thought we may as well get the planning over and done with," she said as she walked inside. "At least that way we won't be rushing around like headless chickens trying to get everything sorted the night before we leave."

"Good idea," Taylor said. "What day exactly were you thinking about heading up?"

"I did think about going up on Saturday," Audrey replied as she followed Taylor through to the kitchen. "But that might be a bit rough on all three of us, considering Friday is Miki's last day of school and I daresay she won't want to be going to bed particularly early. So I'm figuring either Sunday or Monday instead. The traffic will be a bitch and a half on both days, but it'll be school holidays at that point so we won't be able to escape it."

"Well, I'm on my Christmas break from today until the third of January, so either day works for me. I think Monday might be better, Miki and I have this little tradition of watching *Carols In The*

Domain on the Saturday night before Christmas and it always runs late enough that we tend to sleep in the next morning.”

Audrey chuckled at this. “Monday it is then.”

Taylor had soon brought up Google Maps on his computer, and typed his home address into the first text field on the ‘Get Directions’ page. “Okay, so our first stop after we leave here then – what do you think?” he asked.

“Okay, so we agreed on roughly three o’clock for leaving, didn’t we?” Audrey asked, and Taylor nodded. “If I recall correctly, Newcastle is about three hours north of here – we can probably grab Macca’s for breakfast if we want to. We’ll probably be hungry enough for it by that point.”

“Newcastle it is, then.” Taylor typed this into the second text field, and clicked on ‘Add Destination’. “Coffs Harbour after that, maybe?” he hedged.

“I think Port Macquarie first. It’s almost five hours between Newcastle and Coffs Harbour, and that’s a lot longer than I ideally want to be driving without a decent break.”

“Good point.”

They soon had their road trip itinerary sorted out, and Audrey saved it as a PDF to her flash drive. “I’ll print it out when I get home,” she said as she tucked her flash drive into a pocket of her handbag.

“Sounds good to me.” Taylor closed the tab for Google Maps and closed his laptop’s lid halfway. “I’ve pretty much realised something, Audrey.”

“What, that you’re mad and I’m not?” Audrey joked, and Taylor mock-scowled at her.

“No, not that. It’s just that...the last few years, Christmas hasn’t really meant a lot to me, especially not when it comes to family. I mean, yeah, I spend it with family in one way or another every year, but it’s more so Miki and I don’t have to spend it alone. This year, though, I think it’s going to be very different.” He raised his arms up above his head, stretching a little. “I think this Christmas is going to be the best ever.”

Chapter 13

Keep It Up

I've been holding onto you for so long

I need something to show

For all of this time I've felt alone

* * *

Somewhat unusually, what woke Taylor up on Christmas morning wasn't cars driving up and down Gipps Road past his block of units, Miki jumping on the end of his bed, or even Miki running out of her bedroom to see what Santa Claus had left for her under the Christmas tree. Instead, his alarm clock that morning was waves breaking on the shore of the nearby beach, and calls of birds that roosted in the trees in the yard of Audrey's parents' holiday house – just as it had been for the last four days.

"Morning," Audrey murmured as Taylor worked to sit up in bed. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," Taylor replied. "What time is it?" This question was asked around a yawn.

Audrey's immediate response was to grab hold of Taylor's left wrist and squint at his watch. "Six o'clock, unless your watch stopped sometime last night."

"In other words, too damn early."

Audrey let out a quiet laugh. "No such thing as 'too damn early' on Christmas Day," she said as she sat up and got out of bed. "If I know my dad as well as I ought to by now, he'll have been up since five cooking up a storm in the kitchen. You go and wake Miki up, I'll get all the presents sorted."

Just as Audrey had said, James stood at the stove in the kitchen of the main house, wielding an egg flip in one hand, a red-and-white Santa hat on his head. "Merry Christmas Dad," Audrey said as she came up behind him.

James looked back over his shoulder at her and smiled. "Merry Christmas, Audrey." He returned his attention to the frying pan on the stove in front of him and slid the egg flip under the pancake he was cooking. Another frying pan, Audrey could see, contained eggs and bacon. "Ready for a bit of breakfast?"

"I'm *starving*," Audrey replied. "Are there any tomatoes?"

With his free hand, James indicated the oven beneath the stove. "Grilled and in the oven. There's fruit salad in the fridge as well."

"Brilliant," Audrey said, sounding pleased. "I'll go ask Taylor and Miki if they're up for it as well."

Taylor was sitting on the floor in the lounge room with Miki, the two of them reading the book Miki had received in her Christmas stocking. "What're you guys reading?" Audrey asked as she came up beside them and knelt down on the carpet.

"*Charlotte's Web*," Miki answered.

"Yeah? I loved that book when I was your age."

Taylor looked up briefly from the book and gave Audrey a smile. "*Thank you*," he mouthed – that particular book had been Audrey's idea. Audrey returned his smile and stood back up.

"Dad's got breakfast going if you guys are hungry," she said. "He's got pancakes, bacon, fried eggs, grilled tomatoes and fruit salad."

"Can I have pancakes Daddy?" Miki asked. "Please?"

Taylor pretended to think about his answer for about thirty seconds. "Seeing as you said 'please', and it's Christmas, then I think you can have pancakes for breakfast just this once. But you're going to have some fruit salad as well, okay?"

Miki let out a sigh that sounded rather put-upon. "Okay."

"Good girl." Taylor closed the book and slipped it back inside Miki's stocking, and got back to his feet. Almost as soon as he was standing he picked Miki up, swinging her into the air and grinning as she squealed happily. He carried her into the dining area and set her down in a chair at the table, joining the rest of the Carmichael family. Beth, Charlotte and William had wandered in from their respective bedrooms and had seated themselves at the table while Audrey, Taylor and Miki had been in the lounge room. "James, did you need any help?" he asked before he sat down.

"I've got everything under control, Taylor," James replied. "I'd definitely appreciate an extra pair of hands with getting lunch in the barbecue, though."

"No worries," Taylor said.

Breakfast was soon on the table – three plates filled with fried bacon, sunnyside-up eggs and grilled tomatoes, a glass bowl full of fresh fruit salad, a plate stacked with slices of buttered white

toast, jars of jam, peanut butter, honey and Vegemite, another plate stacked high with pancakes, a bottle of real maple syrup (as opposed to the maple-flavoured syrup that Taylor tended to steer well clear of), and a canister of icing sugar.

"Miki, sit down properly," Taylor scolded as he dished out pancakes onto a plate for Miki. Miki was up on her knees, reaching out across the table to the bowl of fruit salad. "I'll get you some in a minute, okay?"

"I'm hungry, Daddy," Miki said, her tone almost pleading.

"Yeah, and so am I." He poured maple syrup onto Miki's pancakes. "Eat your pancakes, okay?"

"Okay," Miki said, sounding almost contrite. She shifted down off her knees so she could sit properly in her seat, picked up her knife and fork and started eating her breakfast. Taylor filled a cereal bowl halfway with fruit salad and set it down on the table near Miki's elbow before dishing up his own breakfast.

"What time is everyone coming over?" Audrey asked as she tore a slice of toast in half and dipped it in the egg on her plate.

"Ten o'clock, I think your grandmother said," Beth replied. "And we're having lunch at around half-past one, so the turkey needs to go in the barbecue no later than half-past nine. I might get you to help me stuff the turkey, Audrey – it won't take as long to get it done."

"Okay."

"And Charlie, I'll want a bit of help with the trifle as well. Your grandmother will have the pavlova finished already, and your aunt and uncle are taking care of the pudding."

"Yeah, all right," Charlotte said without looking up from her breakfast. "I hope Will's not going to be sitting on his arse watching DVDs while the rest of us are doing all the work."

"He's going to be helping Taylor and I with the barbecue," James said, before looking at William pointedly. "Aren't you, William?"

"Yes, Dad," William said.

Once breakfast was finished, the table cleared and all the breakfast dishes rinsed and stacked in the dishwasher, came one of Taylor's favourite parts of Christmas – opening Christmas presents. Over the last few years, once Miki was old enough to truly appreciate them, he'd taken a great deal of enjoyment each Christmas from watching his daughter tear into whatever presents she

had found under their Christmas tree. This year, he decided as he joined everyone else in the lounge room, would be no different.

He had been sitting on the lounge watching Miki and Charlotte open their presents when out of the corner of his eye he saw Audrey sitting down beside him. She had a wrapped box about the size of a large shoebox balanced on her lap.

"I guess Miki really liked her presents this year," she said, and Taylor looked over at her. She smiled and handed Taylor the box. "Merry Christmas."

He gave her a wide smile before unwrapping the box and lifting the lid off it. Inside the box were a number of wrapped parcels.

"It was easier to put them all in the one box and wrap that up than try to carry all of them up here separately," Audrey explained.

"Fair enough," Taylor said. "I'm not about to start complaining, though." He grinned and started unwrapping the presents inside the box – a black T-shirt that read 'I'm With Genius' on the front in a handwriting font and had an arrow pointing upwards toward the shirt's collar above the text, a brand-new guitar tuner, a book of sheet music with the title *The Little Black Aussie Songbook*, and a woven leather guitar strap. "Thanks, Audrey."

"You're welcome, Taylor," Audrey said with a smile. Taylor then proceeded to pick up a smaller box from the floor near his feet and hand it to Audrey. "This is for me, I take it?"

"No, it's for your mum," Taylor said sarcastically. "Of course it's for you."

"Just thought I'd ask," Audrey said. She peeled off the tape that sealed the box closed and lifted off the lid, setting it aside before unwrapping the presents inside – a necklace and matching earrings, a paperback copy of *Artemis Fowl: The Time Paradox*, and a CD.

"Charlie said you liked the *Artemis Fowl* books," Taylor explained. "And she said you didn't have this one yet." Here he indicated the CD. "I asked James to burn all the songs from my demo tape onto that," he explained.

"Thanks, Taylor," Audrey said, a split-second before she leaned over and kissed him.

"Audrey?" Miki said from her spot on the floor, and both Taylor and Audrey looked down at her. She had a large glass jar with a blue butterfly inside it nestled in her lap.

"Yeah, Miki?"

Miki held up her butterfly-in-a-jar. "Thank you," she said with a wide smile, showing off all of her teeth.

"You're welcome, Miki."

"Where did you get that from?" Taylor asked Audrey as Miki went back to playing with her new toy.

"Same place I got your shirt," Audrey replied. "Site called ThinkGeek. It's pretty awesome."

"I might have to check it out sometime, then." Taylor packed all the presents he had received from both Audrey and Miki into the box that had held his presents from Audrey and got up from his seat on the lounge. "I'm going to go and get dressed, then I'm going to help your dad get the barbecue going."

True to Beth's word during breakfast, the rest of Audrey's extended family descended on the house just after ten o'clock. Taylor had volunteered to stay out on the back deck with William to keep an eye on the barbecue, and so wasn't introduced to the first of the relatives until they started to drift outside.

"This is insane," Taylor said after he had been introduced to so many aunts, uncles and cousins that he was slowly beginning to develop a headache. "I've never *seen* so many people in one place that are all related in one way or another."

"This is nothing," William said. He drank down a few mouthfuls of his Victoria Bitter before speaking again. "Every five years or so, we have a family reunion out Parkes way. Every single member of our immediate and extended family comes out of the woodwork for that. You and Audrey stay together long enough, you'll get to experience that particular brand of insanity for yourself." He eyed Taylor briefly. "How big's your family?"

"Not nearly as big as yours is. I don't have a lot of cousins – both of my...*parents* only have one or two siblings each, and I think only a couple of my aunts and uncles got married and had kids. And we're pretty much scattered all over the country so I've never met most of them. I think a couple of them even moved over to New Zealand at one point."

"Well, you might get to meet them at some point if your music does well enough. How's that going anyway?"

"I start recording around the middle of next month. Going to put in my notice at work as soon as I go back after my Christmas break."

"Daddy?"

Taylor looked over to see Miki standing not half a metre away, wearing her new Christmas dress – it was dark blue with white butterflies dotted all over it. "Yeah princess?"

"Can I sit out here with you? It's too loud inside."

"Of course you can." He lifted Miki up onto his lap and slipped one arm around her to keep her steady. "Are you having fun?"

Miki nodded. "I like my butterfly," she said. "It's pretty."

"You just make sure you're careful with it, okay? It might break if you drop it. And I don't think you want that to happen anytime soon."

Miki shook her head. "I won't break it, Daddy."

"Good girl."

"How's the turkey going?" James asked as he came outside.

"It hasn't caught on fire yet if that's what you're asking," William asked. He lifted the lid off the barbecue and peered inside. "Looks all right so far."

"Good," James said, and William replaced the lid on the barbecue. "Did you want anything to eat or drink, Taylor?"

Taylor shook his head. "I'm good, thanks."

"All right then. Beth's just put out a few bits and pieces on the table inside if you change your mind."

"No worries."

"Daddy, when's lunch time?" Miki asked after James had gone back inside.

"Not for a few hours yet," Taylor replied. He took Miki's right hand in his and pointed to the one and the six on her watch. "When the big hand gets to the six and the little hand gets to the one, then we'll have lunch. Okay?" He studied Miki briefly. "Are you hungry?" he asked, and Miki nodded. "Come on then."

Miki was soon set up in front of the TV in the lounge room of the main house with a little plate of cheese, cabanossi, a peach cut into wedges and a handful of cherries. Deciding she would be content and occupied by the television for a fair while yet, he wandered back into the kitchen and leaned against the bench. Audrey stood there in the kitchen with her mother and sister, the three of them working on one of the desserts for later on that day – the trifle. It looked far different to the sort of trifle that his grandmother made for Christmas each year – this one looked like it was composed of chocolate cake, custard, cream and cherries.

"It's called Black Forest trifle," Audrey explained as she spread custard on a layer of cake and layered cherries on top. "Hopefully it'll turn out well."

"Never made it before?" Taylor asked as he tried to sneak a couple of cherries. Audrey smacked his hand away.

"Unless you want to get plastered, I wouldn't eat those," she said when Taylor shot her a wounded look. "There's kirsch in that."

"Kir-what?"

"Cherry brandy. And nope, we've never made this particular trifle before. It's supposed to turn out a bit like Black Forest cake, but we'll see." She rubbed her cheek with the heel of her right hand so as not to inadvertently get custard on her face or in her hair. "And if we manage to stuff it up somehow, we've still got Christmas pudding and pavlova for dessert."

"You're brilliant, Audrey," Taylor assured her. "You won't stuff it up."

"Don't speak so soon," Charlotte said as she carefully placed another layer of chocolate cake into the bowl that held the rest of the trifle. "She burned pasta once when we were still living in Castle Hill. Made the entire house reek for *days*."

"You're supposed to take my side Charlie, not incriminate me."

"No, I believe that's Taylor's job." Charlotte grinned at Taylor. "He's your boyfriend after all. I on the other hand am your baby sister, and therefore it's my job to incriminate you every chance I get." She gave Audrey a sickly-sweet smile.

"That's quite enough from both of you," Beth interrupted. "Charlie, why don't you go and see if anyone else wants a refill of their drinks? I think Audrey and I can take things from here."

"On it," Charlotte said, a little too quickly Audrey thought. "I've had enough of being a domestic goddess for one day." She wiped her hands off on a tea towel and almost bolted off out of the kitchen.

"That girl will be the death of me one day," Beth said. She shook her head in seeming dismay.

Once the trifle was finished and in the refrigerator, Audrey rinsed her hands off under the tap and dried them off on her skirt. "Feel like giving us a hand with the vegies, Taylor?" she asked. "Seeing as Charlie's had enough of cooking for one day."

"Yeah, sure. What do you need me to do?"

In response, Beth set a plastic bag full of green beans, a paring knife and a metal colander on the bench in front of Taylor. "Top and tail the beans and pop them in the colander. Audrey, you can shell the peas, and I'll handle the carrots. We'll do the potatoes, sweet potatoes and pumpkin after that."

The three of them worked in a companionable silence for the next hour or so. The peas, green beans and carrots went into a pot of boiling water on the stove, and the pumpkin, potatoes and carrots went into the oven with a leg of pork.

"Anything else you need us to do?" Audrey asked once all the vegetables were either roasting or simmering away.

"Not at the moment," Beth replied. "Though I might get the two of you to set the table in the breezeway once James and William have got it set up. We adults are eating in there, and the kids will probably eat in here."

"Yeah, no worries," Audrey said. She grabbed hold of one of Taylor's hands. "Come on, let's go outside in the sun for a bit."

Lunch was ready and on the table just after half-past one. Jostling for position on the long table that had been set up in the breezeway that connected the main house to the villa out back of the property were plates filled with vegetables and either turkey or pork (or in a couple of cases, both), seafood, jars of apple sauce and cranberry sauce, salt and pepper shakers, a ceramic jug full of gravy, glass bowls full of cherries, peaches, plums, apricots or nectarines, shallow glass dishes filled with chocolates and Christmas crackers. It was all a little unfamiliar, Taylor thought as he took his seat at the table between Audrey and one of the aunts of the family. The Christmases he was accustomed to nowadays weren't nearly as elaborate.

"Here," Audrey said, holding out a Christmas cracker to him. She had hold of one of the ends. Taylor took hold of the cracker's other end and yanked hard on it. It went off with a bang like a muted gunshot and spilled its contents out onto the table – a folded-up paper crown, a set of miniature playing cards, and a piece of paper that had the usual ridiculous joke typed on it. "Hey you guys, I've got a joke," Audrey said as she settled her paper crown on her head. She cleared her throat before reading out her joke. "How do you know if there is an elephant living in your refrigerator?"

"No idea!" one of Audrey's aunts called out.

"There's footprints in the butter!"

Groans and laughter rang out around the table. "That was terrible!" William said, before reading out his own joke. "What do you get when you cross a chicken and a caterpillar?"

"Don't know!"

"Drumsticks for everyone!"

Taylor let out a quiet snicker at that joke. "Funny, Will," he called out, and proceeded to pull his own cracker with Audrey. "Oh look at that," he said when its contents were revealed – among them a miniature plastic Slinky. "Miki'll get a kick out of that," he decided.

Once all of the crackers were pulled and the jokes were told, they all got down to the important business of devouring this year's Christmas feast. Nobody at the table said much except to request the gravy, apple sauce, cranberry sauce, salt or pepper to be passed to them, and any conversations were conducted in low murmurs.

"I'm going to check on Miki," Taylor said to Audrey when he was halfway through his lunch. "Just want to make sure none of the other kids are harassing her." Audrey didn't answer verbally, instead nodding and continuing to eat her lunch.

Much to Taylor's relief, Miki wasn't being teased or taunted by the other kids. She was quite happily chattering away to one of Audrey's younger cousins, and looked up when Taylor approached the kids' table. "Hi Daddy!"

"Hey baby girl. Are you having fun?"

Miki nodded. "Yep. Are you having lunch too?"

"Outside with all the other grown-ups," Taylor replied, answering both Miki's spoken and unspoken questions. "I'll probably be back inside later on."

"Okay Daddy," she said, and went back to talking to her new friend. Recognising the dismissal for what it was, Taylor went back to the adults' table and resumed his seat.

"Everything okay?" Audrey asked.

Taylor nodded and picked up his knife and fork once again. "She's having the time of her life."

"That's good, then," Audrey said. She was quiet for a little while, and out of the corner of his eye Taylor could see her studying him. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Are you having the time of your life?"

Taylor nodded. "This is...it's fantastic, really. Best Christmas I've had for a long time."

Audrey smiled at this before picking up her glass of red wine. Taylor mimicked her actions with his own glass of water, and they clinked their glasses together. "Merry Christmas Taylor."

"Merry Christmas Audrey."

* * *

In early January, Taylor returned to work for what would be one of the last times. In a pocket of his work pants was an envelope that contained his typed letter of resignation. Part of him was sorry to be leaving the cinema – not only had he been working there longer than anywhere else, but it was a good job and he liked his co-workers. Another part of him was more than relieved to be leaving it behind – after his employment there officially ended, the only kids he would have to deal with during school holidays would be Miki and occasionally her cousins. Not to mention he wouldn't be forced to deal with periodically idiotic members of the general population of Wollongong five days a week.

He waited until the morning meeting had finished and his co-workers had dispersed before he spoke to Glenda. "Could I talk to you, Glenda?" he asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Of course, Taylor," Glenda replied. "I'd make it quick though."

"Yeah, of course." He swallowed hard and took his resignation letter out of his pocket. "I'm handing in my two weeks' notice," he explained. "I...I got signed to a recording contract with EMI

six weeks ago, and I start recording my first album in a fortnight or so. I don't think I'll be able to balance my employment at Greater Union with going to Sydney every day to record, so I think it's best if I stop working here."

"I see," Glenda said as she took the envelope from Taylor. "Well, I can't say I'm not shocked. Have you decided what your final day here will be?"

"January seventeenth."

"In that case then, I'll make sure to notify head office so that they include us in the next round of group interviews." She gave Taylor a rare smile. "We'll miss you around here, but I am glad to see that you're following your ambitions. I've always felt that there was something greater out there for you than this." Taylor felt his face heat up a little at this. "Go on then, off you go."

"Thanks, Glenda."

Glenda waved him off, and he headed off to take up his position in the projection room of theatre two. He had just set himself up in the tiny room, and was supervising the first reel of *The Princess and the Frog*, when a knock sounded at the door. He opened it to find Joanna standing there in the corridor.

"I hear you're leaving us," she said as she leaned against the door frame.

"I am," Taylor confirmed as he went back to watching the projector. "Landed myself a recording contract back in November and I figured there wasn't much point in working here any longer."

Joanna raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Really."

"That's a surprise. Didn't know you could sing."

Taylor shrugged. "Most people don't. I didn't exactly advertise the fact up until midway through last year."

"And yet you are now?"

"Evidently I am, if EMI sat up and took notice." He looked back over his shoulder at Joanna and raised an eyebrow at her. "Oh, don't look so shocked."

"You got signed to EMI," Joanna said flatly.

"Yes, I got signed to EMI. Your point?"

"When you said 'recording contract' I thought you meant a smaller record company. Not somewhere like EMI. That's..." She let out a low whistle of awe. "That's seriously impressive. Congratulations."

"Thanks."

Joanna studied him briefly. "Feel like putting on a bit of a show?"

"Well, not right now – this room isn't exactly soundproof."

"I wasn't even going to suggest you do it now. I meant during lunch. I'm sure a few of the others will be going for their breaks then as well, you'll have a nice little audience."

"I suppose I can give it a go. I don't have my guitar with me, though – it's at home."

"No reason why you can't do it anyway. You can't be all that bad of a singer."

When his lunch break rolled around, rather than walking up Church Street into the Mall so he could grab some McDonald's for lunch, he joined Joanna in the staff break room. A few of his co-workers had already gathered in the room, talking quietly amongst themselves. All conversation ceased when Joanna stuck her fingers in her mouth and let out a shrill whistle.

"I'm sure you've all heard one way or another that Taylor here" Joanna reached up and clapped Taylor on the shoulder "is leaving us soon," she said, and everyone else nodded. "Before he does leave us though, I've talked him into giving us a little bit of a show." She stepped back a bit. "You have the floor, Taylor."

There was no stage in the break room, so Taylor hopped up on the table he and his co-workers ate their lunch at and perched on the edge. He spent a few moments getting the lyrics and melody of the song he wanted to perform straight in his head before he started his impromptu lunchtime show.

"It must be the end of the road...it must be the end of you and I and forever too...walking the last bridge alone...we've given up on the good times...and the bad we knew..."

"When I'm alone in a cold, dark room, well...there's still someone...that I can tell my troubles to..."

"Me, myself and I will never be alone...we'll find a way to get along...and we'll be fine...when all that's left is me, myself and I...myself and I will never be alone...we will find a way to get along...and we'll be fine...when all that's left is me, myself and I..."

"When did it start getting old...when did it stop being worth the time...just to see it through...I don't wanna get used to 'it's over'...we've already said too much...to make it new..."

"When I'm alone in a cold, dark room, well...there's still someone...that I can tell my troubles to..."

"Cause me, myself and I will never be alone...we'll find a way to get along...and we'll be fine...when all that's left is me, myself and I...myself and I will never be alone...we will find a way to get along...and we'll be fine...when all that's left is me, myself and I..."

"Well it's hard to see you don't belong to me...when I gave you the best part of my life...well I tried to be everything that you want me to be...but I don't have to give you reasons why...when all that's left is me, myself and I..."

"I'm not gonna try to forget...maybe happiness is worth the chance of a bitter end... 'cause here at the end of the road...I don't really care who is right...I'll give you the last word tonight..."

"Cause me, myself and I will never be alone...we'll find a way to get along...and we'll be fine...when all that's left is me, myself and I...myself and I will never be alone...we will find a way to get along...and we'll be fine...when all that's left is me, myself and I..."

Applause broke out when the last echoes of the song had faded away, and Taylor hopped down off the table before sketching a bow, smiling the whole time.

This was what he was meant for, he realised. Not working as a cinema projectionist, or even in any other typical nine-to-five job – he was meant to be a performer, to travel Australia and eventually the world (or so he hoped) sharing his music with whoever cared to listen. Why it had taken him nearly his entire life to figure that out, he didn't know, but in the grand scheme of things it didn't matter. What did matter, though, was that he was finally on the path he had always been intended to travel down.

And as he returned to work after his lunch break, he knew he would never have wanted his life to turn out any differently.

Epilogue

Leave Out All The Rest

Forget the wrong that I've done

Help me leave behind some

Reasons to be missed

* * *

When Audrey called me the Friday evening that my world came crashing down, I thought very little of it at first.

"Miki, sweetheart, it's Audrey," my stepmother said into my ear. She sounded almost panicked, and I could quite clearly hear the sound of tears in her voice.

"Hey Audrey," I said a little distractedly. The villa I rented in Warilla with my cousin Matilda was quiet tonight, Matilda having gone into Wollongong for a night of drinking with her friends. I had thus been left to my own devices for the evening, and I fully intended to make the most of it. And Matilda had left our normally tidy kitchen in a complete shambles. Our ragdoll cat Oscar wound around my feet and ankles as I hunted for a clean pot that was big enough for me to cook my ravioli in, meowing for his own dinner. "What's up?"

"Miki, I need you to turn on your radio and tune it to ABC Illawarra," Audrey told me. "And turn it up so you can hear it."

"Okay," I said, slightly confused. "What frequency is that again?"

"Ninety-seven point three FM."

I abandoned my search for a cooking pot and went to the small radio Matilda kept on top of the refrigerator, taking it down and extending the aerial before switching it on. A quick twiddle of the tuning dial later, I was tuned into ABC Illawarra.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Just listen. The news will be on in a minute or so."

I glanced at the display of the microwave, which sat on a shelf above the oven. In luminous blue digits, it displayed the time as 5:59. Bang on six o'clock, the news started. And as I listened to the broadcast, I slowly began to understand why Audrey had told me to listen.

"A collision southbound on Mount Ousley Road just north of Wollongong during the last half hour between a motorcycle and a sedan has resulted in the death of the 25-year-old motorcyclist, with the 46-year-old driver of the sedan taken to Wollongong Hospital in a critical condition. Police have closed the road to all but emergency services, with all non-essential traffic being diverted via Bulli Pass. It is not yet known what caused the crash, with officers from the Illawarra Local Area Command advising that the road is likely to be closed well into the night as they continue their investigations."

Please let Dad be okay, I pleaded silently. I knew that Dad had driven up to Sydney today, rather than taking the train as he normally did, and that around this time he was usually on his way home. When I next heard Audrey speak, I knew my plea was all for naught.

"Miki, the hospital called me about ten minutes ago," she told me, and I turned the radio off. I didn't need to hear anything more from the newscaster. "Your dad was in that accident. He's been hurt pretty badly."

"He's going to be okay, right?" I asked, cursing myself for sounding like a little girl all over again.

"They don't know – he's in surgery right now."

I closed my eyes and took in a deep breath. "Audrey, I'm going to leave a note for Mattie and then I'm driving up to Wollongong."

"Miki-" Audrey started.

"He's my *dad*, Audrey. I need to be there. No matter what happens, *I need to be there*. He's always been there for me when I've needed him – now I'm going to return the favour."

For a few moments, I was almost certain that Audrey would try to talk me out of it. "Okay, but *please* be careful driving. Your father's already in hospital, I don't need you in there as well. Meet me at the emergency department when you get there."

"Okay."

As soon as I was done talking to Audrey, I dropped my mobile phone into my pocket and quickly cleared all the makings for my dinner off the bench before scribbling out a note for Matilda.

Mattie,

Went to Wollongong. My dad's been in a car accident and I've gone up to see him in hospital. Don't wait up for me, I don't know how long I'll be gone. I'll text you when I know anything.

Miki

The finished note was propped against the loaf of bread that one or both of us had forgotten to put back in the bread tin after lunch. From there, it was just a matter of shoving my feet into my sandals, collecting my keys and my wallet, and heading outside to my car.

Audrey was waiting for me in the emergency department of Wollongong Hospital when I arrived roughly twenty-five minutes later. She looked an absolute wreck – she had been crying fairly recently, as evidenced by the streaks of mascara down her face, her usually neat dark brown hair was dishevelled, and her dark brown eyes were reddened and a little swollen. I could hardly blame her – Dad was pretty much the love of her life, and they were still as much in love with each other as they'd been on their wedding day seventeen years earlier. If Dad didn't make it through this, forget about it destroying me – it would completely obliterate Audrey. Of that I had no doubt.

"What exactly happened?" I asked her after we'd hugged briefly, and I'd led her across to a row of uncomfortable-looking hard plastic chairs. "Dad's usually such a careful driver – this doesn't seem like him at all."

"Nobody knows just yet," Audrey replied. She raked her hands back through her hair, her fingers catching on tangles and knots. "It could be for any number of reasons. I just hope they find out soon."

"Me too," I agreed quietly. "Have you heard anything else?"

Audrey shook her head. "Nothing yet. I'm sure we'll hear something soon, though." She sighed quietly. "At least, I hope we will."

In the end, it was almost three hours before someone came out to speak to us. My phone had been vibrating away madly for half of that time with emails, tweets and Facebook notifications, and in the end I'd gotten so fed up with it rattling away in my pocket that I'd shut it off. Now, though, I was beginning to regret not having anything to occupy my hands.

"Mrs. Hanson?" an unfamiliar voice said, and both Audrey and I looked up to see a doctor standing close by. I knew almost immediately that this particular doctor had news about my dad. All of a sudden, I didn't *want* to know what was going on, but I knew I was going to find out anyway. "My name's Dr. Pearson – would it be possible for me to speak with you?"

"Is my husband okay?" Audrey asked, her tone almost pleading.

Dr. Pearson didn't say anything at first, instead sitting down in the row of chairs that faced Audrey and I. "This is always the hardest part of my job," she said quietly, and a sinking feeling started in the pit of my stomach. *Don't you dare*, I thought vehemently. *Don't you fucking dare tell me that my dad's gone*. "We did all we could, but his injuries were just too severe," she explained. "He...he passed about fifteen minutes ago. I'm sorry."

"No..." Audrey whispered. "Please, that can't be true. He can't be gone..." Out of the corner of my eye I saw Audrey press a hand to her mouth, and she closed her eyes. A lone tear leaked out of her left eye.

"My dad's gone?" I asked, feeling like the seven-year-old I had been two decades earlier. When Dr. Pearson nodded, I shook my head almost violently. "No, he can't be. You look me in the fucking eyes and you tell me that my dad, one of my best friends in the entire fucking *world*, died because some incompetent fucking surgeon *couldn't save his goddamn life!*"

I realised rather belatedly that I was on my feet and had screamed the last few words when I saw that everyone in the emergency department was staring at me, and I quickly clapped my hands over my mouth. "Sorry," I mumbled from behind my hands.

Rather than scold me, Dr. Pearson stood up and faced me, looking me square in the eyes. "What's your name?" she asked gently.

I lowered my hands from my mouth and let them hang by my sides. "Michaela Hanson," I said quietly. "B-but my dad's always called me Miki. Everyone does, really."

"Miki, I swear to you that I and every other surgeon in the operating theatre did everything we could to save your dad." She put a hand on my shoulder. "I know you're angry, and I know you're upset – believe me, I would be too. But there was nothing we could do. We really did try to save him. I can promise you that much at least."

I knew I had to believe her. She had looked me right in the eyes when she had spoken to me, not allowing her focus on me to waver for even one second. "I'm sorry for calling you all incompetent," I said. "I didn't mean it."

"That's quite all right – we all say things we don't mean when we're angry."

I nodded briefly. "Could I see him, please? He...he's my dad – I need to. I wouldn't ask otherwise."

For half a minute I almost thought my request would be refused, but to my relief Dr. Pearson nodded. "Of course you can. I need to talk to your mother first -"

“Stepmother,” I corrected automatically.

“Stepmother, then. You just sit tight for a minute or so, and I’ll take you upstairs when I’m done.”

I felt almost numb as I sat there next to Audrey, listening to Dr. Pearson ask if Dad was an organ donor, if there were any specific arrangements in place in the untimely event of his passing, if there was anyone else that needed to know what had happened. I answered her questions in my head at the same time as Audrey did – yes he was (and that the information regarding that was recorded on his driver’s licence, just as it had been since he’d gotten his learner’s licence when he was sixteen – he’d told me as much when I’d gotten my own learner’s licence), no there weren’t, and both my Aunt Jessica and my Uncle Zac needed to know but we would handle that ourselves. I wasn’t looking forward to making *those* particular phone calls.

“Do you want to come up as well?” I asked Audrey quietly, but she shook her head. I couldn’t blame her for that. “Just thought I’d ask. I’ll tell him you love him, okay?”

“Thanks, Miki,” Audrey said, her voice roughened by tears. She sounded absolutely heartbroken, and I almost started crying myself. But I wanted to hold it together for Audrey’s sake, so I swallowed my tears down. Instead, I leaned over and hugged her tightly before standing up and following Dr. Pearson to a nearby lift.

The operating room that Dr. Pearson led me to was cold, both in temperature and atmosphere, and I almost immediately felt goosebumps pop out all over the exposed skin on my arms and legs. I kept my head down as she guided me into the room and up to the operating table where I knew Dad lay, not wanting to face reality. If I didn’t look up then I could almost convince myself that he was still alive. Even the sounds that surrounded me and filled my ears added to what I knew was just an illusion. But I knew I had to face reality sooner or later, no matter how much it was going to hurt, and so I looked up.

Dad lay there on the operating table, covered with a white sheet up as far as his shoulders, eyes closed and a thin, clear plastic tube sticking out of his mouth. Stitched-up cuts, scratches, grazes and bruises littered his face and shoulders, and I could see a streak of what was unmistakably blood in his hair. He was still breathing, and I could hear that his heart was still beating, but I knew it was just an illusion of what life he’d had only just that morning. What had made him my dad, that was gone and it was never coming back. It was just a matter of making myself remember that.

“I’ll be just outside when you’re done,” Dr. Pearson said from behind me, and I nodded. Footsteps tapped their way across the floor toward the door, fading away into silence. Only once I was

certain I was essentially alone in the room did I finally allow my emotions and my already very raw grief to spill over.

I pulled Dad's right hand out from under the sheet and interlocked his fingers with mine, willing them to curl around my hand like they had done when I was a little girl. I raised our hands to my face and pressed my forehead to them, squeezing my eyes closed and feeling the first tears spill from my eyes. In that moment, I felt more alone than I ever had before.

"I love you Daddy," I whispered, not caring that he would never be able to hear me say it ever again – I needed to say it for my sake. I needed to tell him that I loved him, and that I would never stop loving him. "Audrey loves you too – we always will love you, Dad." I sucked in a breath through my nose and let it out shakily. "And I miss you so much already."

I released his hand, slipped it back beneath the sheet and leaned in to kiss Dad on his forehead. More than anything I wanted him to tell me that everything was going to be okay, even though he wasn't around anymore. I honestly would have given anything to have him back again.

Out in the corridor, I leaned against the wall and slid down it until I was sitting on the cold, hard linoleum floor. Tears stung at my eyes and I blinked, allowing them to fall. I didn't even bother to hold them back – there was no point to that.

This was rapidly becoming the worst day of my life, but I knew there was one day coming that would be so much worse – the day that I would be forced to say goodbye to my father. And I knew without even thinking that it was going to be the hardest day of all.

* * *

The chapel at the funeral home in Kembla Grange was absolutely packed with people – immediate and extended family, friends of both Dad and I, Dad's music industry colleagues, and even a few distant relatives. I sat in the front row at the right-hand side of the chapel, sandwiched between Audrey and Uncle Zac, not very far from a polished wooden casket sitting on a steel trolley. Masses of colourful flowers covered the top and spilled over the sides, almost obscuring the framed photograph of Dad that sat near one of the edges. In the photograph Dad was smiling, sunbleached hair pulled back in its customary ponytail and fine wrinkles at the outer corners of his blue eyes. It was exactly the way that I wanted to remember him, and so I fixed that particular image in my mind.

The moment that the civil celebrant that Audrey and I had hired to perform the service began to speak, I almost began crying all over again.

"We are gathered here this morning to farewell and to celebrate the life of Jordan Taylor Hanson," the celebrant said to commence the service. I bit back a sob when she said Dad's full name. "Brother to Zachary and Jessica, much loved husband of Audrey, beloved father to Michaela, and dearly loved and missed by all of his friends and family..."

I automatically tuned out everything the celebrant said after that. I didn't need to hear everything she had to say about my dad – I knew it all by heart. How he had raised me pretty much on his own, after my mother walked out on the two of us six months after I was born. That he had taught me just about everything I hadn't learned in school – how to tie my shoelaces, to rollerskate, to play the guitar better than almost any professional teacher could, even how to deal with journalists. How he would read to me every chance he got, passing on his love of reading and the written word to me. But most of all, that he had loved me more than almost anyone else in the entire world. He really had been my best friend for all of my life.

When Aunt Jessica took her place behind the lectern at the front of the chapel, I finally paid attention again. I distantly remembered her putting her hand up to speak during the funeral as soon as I'd told her that Dad was gone, and for that I was thankful – neither Audrey nor I could have done it.

"Taylor was pretty much the best brother a girl could ever hope to be blessed with," she said to begin. "He never had the easiest life, at least not up until he hit his mid-twenties, but he always made the best of everything. I will always admire him for that." She curled her fingers over the edges of the lectern. "I was estranged from him for nearly seven years, which is something I am going to regret for as long as I live, but it is a credit to him that he never hated me for that. I still remember the day we were reunited – it was at our grandparents' place one morning in September 2006, and he'd dropped in for a quick visit before he went to work on his demo recording. I hadn't seen him since he was nineteen and our parents kicked him out of home, but when he said my name..." She let out a rough-sounding chuckle. "It was like he'd never left. My big brother still remembered me, even though I wasn't fourteen years old anymore.

"He was also a fantastic dad. His daughter, if you give her half a chance, will tell you how amazing he was at being a father – it was almost as if he was born to it. He raised Miki all on his own from his twentieth birthday up until he married Audrey, not long after Miki turned ten, and because of how wonderful a father he was Miki has grown up into a lovely young lady who sings her dad's praises every chance she gets." I smiled a little at this.

"And on top of all of that, he was an incredible musician. I went to his very first show after his debut album was released, right here in Wollongong, and the atmosphere when he took the stage

was absolutely electric. He could work a crowd like nobody else. One chord on that old acoustic of his had the entire crowd going wild. I was so proud of him after that show ended – the entire show was almost this massive ‘fuck you’ to our parents. Which, granted, he’d already done a year or so earlier than that, but doing it live in front of a few thousand people made it even better.” Laughter rippled throughout the chapel when she said this.

“I am always going to love and miss Taylor,” Aunt Jessica said to wind things up. She hadn’t been even remotely close to tears before she ended her piece, but now it was more than evident that she had been doing her absolute best to hold them back. Her voice was audibly shaking now. “He was taken from us far too soon, and he’s left behind not only a family who are hurting so badly without him, but also a multitude of friends who already miss him. And he’s also left behind an entire legion of fans who I’m sure are wondering what’s going to happen now that he’s left us. We’re all wondering that, I think.” She squeezed her eyes shut, and I saw the first of what I knew would be many tears slip down her face. “I love you so much Taylor – I always will. And I’m sorry.”

She gathered up the sheets of notebook paper that I guessed she had been reading from and hurried back to her seat, where my Uncle Chris embraced her tightly.

Uncle Zac took his turn next. In one hand he carried a somewhat battered netbook computer that he proceeded to hook up to a digital projector. One click of the remote he produced from a pocket sent a blank white screen whirring down from the ceiling.

“Miki asked me to put this together,” he explained while he was setting things up. Audrey’s hand found mine as he said this. “It’s a retrospective of sorts of Taylor’s life, I guess you could say.” And with those words the lights in the chapel dimmed, and a slideshow began to play. In the days following the accident that had taken Dad away from us, I had gone through Dad’s laptop, external hard drives and all of our photo albums in search of enough pictures of him to fill a three-minute PowerPoint presentation. My search had been the cause of many tears and a hell of a lot of angry screaming at Dad for leaving me so soon, but in the end I’d collected nearly a thousand photographs. Uncle Zac had immediately agreed to put the slideshow together for me, and had hinted that there would be a small surprise right at the end.

‘Small surprise’ was a complete understatement, I realised as the slideshow came to an end and a video began to play. It was just Dad sitting in a recording studio with his guitar – and according to the date on the video, it had been taken just two weeks earlier. I nearly wanted to start crying when I realised that this was more than likely the very last footage ever taken of Dad.

It took hearing Dad’s voice to cause the waterworks to start all over again.

"When trouble fills my world you bring me peace...you calm me down, you're my relief...when walls come crashing down around my feet...you light my way, you're my release...

"So say you'll watch over me...when I'm in too deep...tell me you'll always be...there to pull me free...

"When the sun is beating down upon my brow...you are my shade, you cool me down...every time I tried to turn away...you brought me 'round your humble way...

"So say you'll watch over me...when I'm in too deep...tell me you'll always be...there to pull me free...there to rescue me...

"For every time you sheltered me from harm...you showed me truth, you kept me warm...and every time you left me on the street...I found my way, I found my feet...

"So say you'll watch over me...when I'm in too deep...tell me you'll always be...there to pull me free...there to rescue me...there to pull me free...there to rescue me..."

At the conclusion of the video the lights in the chapel went up again, and the projector screen returned to its place in the ceiling.

I was barely aware of the remainder of the service, or even the drive between the funeral home and the cemetery that lay across the highway. I came back to myself at the gravesite as the casket was being lowered into the ground, staring at the bronze plaque at the head of the grave that bore Dad's name, his birthday and the date that would stay with me for the rest of my life.

Jordan Taylor Hanson

March 14 1983 – October 12 2029

Beloved brother, husband, father and friend

In omnibus requiem quaesivi, et nusquam inveni nisi in angulo cum libro

"Miki?"

I tore my gaze away from the marker just long enough to meet my aunt's gaze. She stood close by, holding in her arms the framed photograph of Dad that had sat atop the casket throughout the funeral. "Yeah?" I said, my voice trembling a little.

Aunt Jessica shifted the photo frame into her left hand and started digging in the right-hand pocket of her dress slacks. She drew out a somewhat rumpled envelope and handed it to me.

"Your dad gave this to me a couple of weeks ago," she explained. "He asked me to give it to you after he..." Her voice trailed away.

"After he died," I finished quietly, and Aunt Jessica nodded. "What is it?"

"He said it was a letter. I haven't read it – I knew it was for your eyes only, so I didn't bother opening the envelope to see what it said."

I nodded quickly. "Thanks, Aunt Jessica," I said quietly.

She gave me a smile before stepping forward and drawing me close. "I know you miss him, Miki," she said to me. "I miss him too. I always will."

I drew away after a few seconds. "I should go," I said. "Audrey's probably waiting for me, so..."

"I'll see you back at the house, then?"

I nodded again. "See you soon, I guess."

Being careful not to let the heels of my shoes stick in the ground, I walked through the cemetery to the carpark where I knew Audrey was waiting for me. She hadn't been able to come to the gravesite with the rest of us, and I couldn't blame her for that. It had been hard enough just for me. As I walked I slit the envelope open and took out a folded sheet of notebook paper. The envelope went into a pocket of my slacks just before I reached the car.

"What have you got there?" Audrey asked me as I joined her in the car.

"Dad wrote me a letter and gave it to Aunt Jessica," I replied. At the sight of Dad's handwriting a metaphorical wall of memories slammed into me, and I bit back a sob. I had never imagined this would be so hard.

The engine of Audrey's car roared to life right as I began reading Dad's letter to me, his right-slanting handwriting filling the page of blue-lined notebook paper from margin to edge.

Dear Miki,

I'm sorry.

I know it probably doesn't mean much now that I'm gone, but I am sorry. I'm sorry I've left you so soon. I know right now you're probably hurting more than you ever imagined was possible, and I wish more than anything I could be there to make it go away.

I've said time and again that you are one of the best things that ever happened to me – that much is true. You gave me something to live for – I don't know what would have happened to me if I hadn't become your dad. I will always be thankful for that, and I will always be very proud of you no matter what.

I want you to be there for Audrey right now. She is going to need an incredible amount of support from everyone in the weeks and months to come, even if she doesn't come right out and say it. I know that it's going to hurt a hell of a lot – believe me, I know – but I know you're strong enough to handle it. You're my daughter, and a Hanson to boot – and we Hansons can do anything if we put our minds to it.

There's something else I would like you to do for me. After the funeral, I want you to go back to the house with Audrey. Under the stairs in the basement, next to the Christmas decorations, there is a cardboard box with your name written on one of the sides. Take that box home with you, and go through it when you're ready.

I might not be around any longer, but you will always be my baby girl, and I will always love you. Nothing in Heaven or on Earth could ever change that.

Love always,

Dad

I squeezed my eyes closed when I read those final few lines – my father's final words to me. It hurt reading them, and I had no doubt it would continue to hurt for a long while yet.

I love you too, Dad, I whispered in my head. I always have, and I always will.

~ fin ~