

## Somewhere I Belong

*I wanna heal*

*I wanna feel*

*What I thought was never real*

*I wanna let go of the pain I've felt so long*

*Erase all the pain till it's gone*

*I wanna heal*

*I wanna feel*

*Like I'm close to something real*

*I wanna find something I've wanted all along*

*Somewhere I belong*

*Somewhere I Belong – Linkin Park*

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## Prologue

They say that life is a journey. A journey of discovery of your world, of those around you...of yourself. You oftentimes learn little things about yourself that, up until you embarked on such a journey, you never even knew. Sometimes those discoveries are positive, sometimes they are negative, and sometimes they are a mixed blessing.

My journey of discovery uncovered a great deal about my past that I was never made aware of. I never knew that I had a half sister overseas. I never knew the true reason for the obvious physical differences between myself and the rest of my family. I never knew who I truly was.

That is, until now.

I learned about my family. I found out why my family and I are so different from one another. And I discovered who I was.

More importantly, I found the one thing I'd wanted all of my life – acceptance for who I was as a person. I found the place where I truly belonged.

## Chapter 1

"And we all come tumbling down..."

Cassie's voice squeaked on the final word of that lyric, bringing the recording session to a grinding halt. Matthew and I groaned in frustration.

"Cassie, you messed up again!" Matthew complained, pulling out the pop-top of his drink bottle and splashing Cassie's shirt with water. She squealed in surprise and dumped her glass of Fanta over Matthew's head. I watched the scene with barely concealed amusement.

A warning from Mike, the studio technician, halted the in studio shenanigans. "Cassie and Matt, would you *please* quit fooling around? That's some delicate and expensive equipment you're coming close to knocking over, and I really don't think that either of your parents have the money to pay for any damage you might end up doing."

"Sorry Mike!" Matthew and Cassie apologised.

"At least Taylor is behaving himself, that's all I can say. Now come on, if you can get this song recorded then you'll be able to go home early."

The three of us – Matthew Shelton, Cassie Dale and I, Taylor Kennedy – play in a band we started little more than two years ago; our band's name is Renegade, and at that precise moment we were recording yet another independent CD. We had some concerts lined up, and we planned to sell the CD at the shows. It's a nice little enterprise, but we don't intend on doing it professionally. It's 'just too much effort', according to Cassie.

Mike started the backing track again, and the three of us started singing. And of course, we come to the bridge again and what happens? Cassie messes up *again*.

"All right, all right, stop right there," Mike intoned. "Maybe you guys should try the song with Matt or Taylor on lead; it might eliminate the problem of Cassie squeaking on the bridge. We'll do two more run throughs and then we'll wind up for the day; Matt, you do the lead first, and Taylor, you do it second."

Well, as it turned out I could sing the song, untitled as yet, better than Cassie and Matthew, which surprised me to be honest. We'd written the piece to be sung by Cassie, her being the soprano, which meant that it never would have sounded good when sung by Matthew anyway. It looked like having a feminine-sounding voice wasn't so bad when it came to singing after all.

We got the vocal track laid down in no time after we reassigned the role of lead on the song. "So what are we gonna call it?" Cassie asked as we started packing up in readiness to go home for the day. "I have some ideas."

I grabbed one of the lyric sheets that had been left behind on the microphone stand and skimmed the printed text. "I got it," I said, my gaze resting on the first line of the chorus. "*Dying To Be Alive.*"

"Hey, that's pretty good; for a Kennedy you sure have a good head on your shoulders," Matthew said approvingly.

"Jeez, thanks," I muttered.

Cassie giggled. "So, we have a title for the song then?" Matthew and I nodded. "Awesome; we can work on *Borderline* tomorrow then."

I checked my watch. "Uh oh, I'm late for dinner you guys; Mum wanted to talk to me, and she will have my head on a silver platter if I walk in the door any later than six."

Cassie and Matthew laughed. "Okay Tay; we'll see you tomorrow then?"

"Yeah, sure," I said hurriedly as I shoved my music scores into my backpack and slung it over my shoulder, then raced out of the studio and bolted downstairs. Down three flights of stairs I hurtled without even so much as a break to catch my breath, emerging at last in the car park; I raced over to my car, unlocked it and wrenched the car door open. "I'm in deep shit, I'm in deep shit," I muttered over and over as I got in and pulled the door closed behind me, did up my seatbelt and turned the key in the ignition; I slammed a tape into the cassette player as I reversed out of my car's parking spot and drove out into the street.

I must have broken all land speed records driving home through the late afternoon traffic, because at approximately five to six I pulled up in the driveway of my house (76 Bayview Avenue) – it normally takes me half an hour to drive home from the studio, and it had taken me little more than fifteen minutes. Then again, knowing where the back roads are kinda helps a little.

"I'm home!" I yelled, dumping my bag in the inside foyer and kicking off my sneakers. "Hey, is anyone alive in there?"

Mum came walking down the hallway, wiping her hands on a tea towel. "How was recording?" she asked me.

"We actually got that untitled song finished and named today," I replied.

I followed my mother through into the dining room and started to set the table; Mum went out into the backyard and called for my sisters and brother to go and get themselves cleaned up.

"They've been playing in that pile of dirt in the yard all afternoon," Mum told me.

"So why doesn't Dad get rid of it?" I asked as I hopped up onto one of the bench stools and stole a carrot stick from the glass bowl that was set out.

"Well, you know your father, the king of procrastination..." Mum reached out and tousled my hair, then turned back to carving up the chicken.

"So, um...what exactly did you want to talk to me about?" I asked. "I mean, I practically broke the land speed record getting home."

"Taylor Francis Kennedy, what have I told you about speeding? I can easily take your keys away from you, you know."

"Okay, maybe I took back roads all the way home. Happy?"

"Watch your mouth." Then Mum sighed. "Tay, honey, I'd rather you waited until at least after dinner; it's something that your father and I both need to discuss with you."

"Nobody's dying, are they?" I asked, slightly alarmed.

Mum laughed. "Lord, no! Don't you worry yourself; you just go get yourself cleaned up for dinner."

"Okay," I agreed.

My sisters Lila and Emma, and my brother Oliver, were in the bathroom washing their hands and faces. "I'd wash my feet too if I were you guys," I said to them as I reached over Oliver to wash my hands. "Mum will go off her head at you if she sees how black your feet are." Lila giggled as I picked her up and sat her on the vanity, then rinsed her little feet under the stream of cool water. "Emma, you next."

The four of us went back downstairs to the dining room, sliding into our usual places at the table. "Mark, when are you going to get rid of the dirt pile in the yard?" Mum was asking Dad as she put the dinner plates on the table. "The kids were playing in it all afternoon and tracked mud all through the house."

Dad eyed all four of us. "They look pretty clean to me," he said with a slight smile.

"Well, Taylor *was* at the studio all day, and I did ask them to get themselves cleaned up."

Dinner was over and done with fairly quickly; Mum and Dad sent my younger siblings upstairs as soon as the table had been cleared and the dishwasher loaded.

"Okay, spill; what did you want to talk to me about?" I asked; my heart was beating so fast it wasn't funny. I really was nervous about this; what was so important that they needed to talk to me about it?

Mum and Dad looked at each other. "Tay, honey, there's something that we haven't been entirely truthful about."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"I know you've grown up as a Kennedy, but..." Mum trailed off, looking at her hands.

I knew *exactly* where this was going. "Wait...you mean to tell me that I'm *adopted*? That you aren't really my parents after all?"

"Tay, honey--"

"Don't you *dare*, Mum." I stood up so fast my chair tipped over backwards. "I don't want to hear it. You and Dad...you *lied* to me my entire life. I'm never speaking to the two of you again."

I stormed out of the dining room and upstairs to the bathroom, leaning on the vanity and staring at my reflection in the mirror.

Somehow, I should have known it. The rest of my family is dark – dark brown or black hair, brown eyes and olive complexion. Typically Mediterranean. And here I was – blonde hair, blue eyes, and skin so fair that I never tanned, I *burned*. "Recessive genes my left foot," I muttered angrily as I stared at myself. They'd always passed off my obvious dissimilarity to the rest of my family as recessive genes, saying that Mum's grandfather was blonde, or that Dad's grandmother had blue eyes. It was all lies.

At that moment, there was nobody I hated more in the entire world than my so-called 'parents'. I had been teased and ridiculed nearly my entire life for being the 'black sheep' in a family that was so obviously Italian (save for the surname), and now I knew why I had copped so much shit for it. I was *adopted*. And my parents had mentioned it so casually...I picked up a bottle of my mother's perfume (the label read 'Imari'; it was her favourite) and hesitated before hurling it at the mirror. The force of the impact shattered the bottle, splashing perfume everywhere, and cracked the

mirror. A jagged piece of mirror glass fell out; I caught it before it landed in the sink and brought it down across my left wrist, digging the glass into my arm until it started bleeding. The pain that my act of mutilation caused stopped me in my tracks, my hand frozen in mid air, the ceiling light glinting off the piece of glass I held.

I looked down at my wrist and sucked in a sharp breath. "Oh shit," I whispered. Christ it was starting to hurt. I let out a strangled cry and slid down the door of the linen cupboard, burying my face in my hands and ignoring the pain in my wrist.

I heard the bathroom door open, but I didn't look up. "Mark, he's bleeding," came the voice of my mother; she had taken my left hand in her own. "Tay, honey, what did you do?"

"I cut myself," I said hollowly. "I broke the mirror and I cut myself."

"Taylor...why would you do that to yourself?"

"Why should I tell you?" I asked bitterly. "You don't give a shit."

"Taylor, of *course* we care," Dad said. "You're our son."

"No I'm not," I shot back. "You might've raised me, but you're not my parents."

I pulled myself to my feet, heedless of the blood dripping down the palm of my hand and off my fingertips. "Just leave me alone; you're liars, and I hate you."

"Taylor-"

"Just fuck off, would you?" I yelled. "Fuck off and leave me alone!"

I almost ran from the bathroom, into my room; I threw myself facedown on my bed and cried for the first time in years.

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I attacked the strings of my guitar with such savagery that the E string snapped in half. Cursing, I threw my guitar at my closed bedroom door.

There came a quiet knock at my door just after I threw my guitar, and my mother stuck her head into my room. "Taylor?"

"I thought I told you I didn't want to talk to you ever again," I said, turning my back on her. "Don't you understand plain English?"

"Tay, I know you're bitter about this; believe me, I regret keeping the truth about your identity from you for so long. But please...your dad and I, we still love you. Would we have adopted you if we *couldn't* love you?"

"How am I supposed to know the way your mind works?"

She ignored this. "Taylor, your father and I love you so much; why else would we have travelled thousands of kilometres to bring you home with us? We wanted a child of our own so much, but we weren't sure we were ready for one yet. So we decided to adopt instead, and out of all the kids we could have adopted, we chose *you*. I think that's proof enough of our love for you; we could have adopted any kid, but *you* were the one that we brought home to Australia with us." She sat down beside me and tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. "How about this – do you want us to help you find your family? You're legally old enough to look for them."

I thought about this for a little while. Then I nodded. "Okay," I said quietly.

"All right. I'll talk to your dad, okay?"

I nodded again.

"Come on, let's get that cut fixed up." Mum extended a hand to me, which I took, allowing her to lead me into the bathroom. She took a box of cotton balls out of the bathroom cupboard and found a bottle of Dettol; she filled the sink with warm water and splashed in a fifth of the bottle's contents, then soaked a cotton ball in the water and started cleaning up my wrist. She wrapped a bandage around it when she was done, securing the end with a safety pin. "There we go..."

"I'm sorry I yelled at you and Dad," I said quietly.

"Tay, you had every right to. You've been kept in the dark your whole life; I'd be angry as hell if I were in that position. We should have been open with you from the beginning, and I apologise for that."

I swished the fingers of my right hand through the water in the sink. "I'm still sorry." I looked up and stared at my reflection in the now cracked glass, my face broken into fragments. "And...and I'm sorry I broke your perfume bottle."

"It's replaceable," Mum told me. "And apologies accepted."

I managed a small smile and allowed her to pull me into an embrace.

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"So, let me get this straight." Cassie picked off a chunk of pineapple from her piece of Hawaiian pizza and popped it in her mouth. "You, Taylor Kennedy, are adopted."

I nodded mutely, playing with my own piece of pepperoni pizza. In reality, I was still very much coming to terms with the fact that I was adopted. Now when I looked at Oliver, Emma and Lila, I didn't see my younger brothers and sisters. I saw three kids who were as much related to me as my Year 7 English teacher was. My real family was somewhere out there, I just didn't know where. I had so many questions jostling for prominence in my head that I didn't know which one to ask first. What was my real mother's name? Where did she live? How many brothers and/or sisters did I have? Did I look anything like my mother? But I guess the question I most wanted to know the answer to was one only she could answer. Why did she give me up for adoption in the first place? And who knew if I'd ever get to ask her why.

"And your parents only just told you last night?" Matthew asked, sitting down next to me with a piece of plain cheese pizza in hand.

"Oh yeah." I nodded. "I went ballistic. I threw a bottle of my mother's favourite perfume at the bathroom mirror and slit my left wrist with one of the pieces of the mirror." I held up my left hand. "They lied to me all of my life; I'm not about to forgive them yet. I don't know if I ever will."

We got working on *Borderline* after our lunch break; it was a song that Cassie had penned in one of her work lunch breaks, and we'd worked out the music for it a couple of weeks ago. It was another of those nearing completion pieces – it had the instrumental part recorded, but no vocal track as yet.

As we worked on the song, I kept thinking back to the row I'd had with my parents the night before, how I was bordering on sanity and going *insane*. It was one of the few songs we'd ever recorded that I could relate to in some way. And in a rare instance, it only took a couple of takes to get it right – normally it took up to six takes, and sometimes it even took up to twenty. The twenty take sessions usually dragged far into the night, with no guarantee of making it home before three the next morning.

"Hey, do you guys wanna go out tonight?" Cassie asked as we finished *Borderline* and got ready to work on one of my pieces, one I'd written both the words and music of the night before – after I'd calmed down considerably and replaced the E string on my guitar, I went out onto the second floor balcony of the house and stared out at the stars for at least an hour before writing a piece I'd titled *Home*. It was slower and a good deal more melancholy and bitter than the pieces I



normally wrote, but it had reflected my feelings at the time. It had only taken me three quarters of an hour to write.

"Yeah, I'd like to; I wouldn't mind a night out on the town," Matthew replied. "Tay? What do you think? Want to go out tonight, just the three of us?"

Right at that moment, a night out with my friends sounded like just the thing to pull me out of the rut I'd dug myself into. I nodded. "Sounds great."

"Well, how about we work on the instrumental of *Home* now, and we'll get the vocals done tomorrow," Cassie suggested; Matthew and I shrugged, and we got down to work.

I called home just as we were winding up for the evening; it was about five pm.

"Mum, Dad, it's Taylor," I said after the answering machine finished its spiel. "Just letting you know that I'm going out with Matthew and Cassie tonight, so don't save me any dinner okay? I don't know exactly when I'll be home, but I'll call again when we're about to leave. I'll see ya." I hung up and shoved my phone into the back pocket of my jeans, then turned to Cassie and Matthew. "So, we going or what?"

"Yeah, we're going," Matthew said. "Just lemme grab my keys."

"So, where are we going and what are we doing?" Cassie asked as we left the building. "I wanna get a tattoo."

"Another tattoo?" Matthew asked. "You're crazy."

Cassie stuck her tongue out at him. "We should *all* get one," she said. "Like, I don't know...the word 'together' in Chinese or something like that. Make it actually mean something. Something that represents *us*. Dale, Kennedy, Shelton."

We walked out to our respective cars. "Okay, we meet outside of Celtic Dragon in Newtown, then we go have dinner and check out a movie," Cassie said, the three of us having agreed on how to spend our night out. "See you guys there."

"Renegade is gonna rock da house!" Matthew hollered, his head sticking out of the driver's side window of his car. Laughing, I gunned the engine of my car and shot out into the street after him, heading toward the bright lights of Sydney.

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"Taylor, don't you even deny it; you were so close to crying like a fucking baby."

Cassie giggled as she sipped her strawberry daiquiri, wincing as she moved her left shoulder just a little too far. We'd gotten our tattoos right after we'd met up outside of Celtic Dragon; it was a tattoo studio in Newtown. Each of us had gotten one tattoo to identify us with the band, and another of our own choosing. The 'band' tattoo was the Southern Cross; our 'personal' tattoos were an angel (Cassie), a redback spider (Matthew) and the Star of David (me). I'd also gotten my eyebrow pierced.

"I was *not!*" I protested. "I've had tattoos done before you know; I'm used to it."

"How many?" Matthew asked, eyes narrowing.

"Four," I replied with a smirk. "A dragon on my lower back, an ankh on my left shoulder, a shooting star on my right wrist" I detached my watch, which I normally wore on my left wrist, and displayed the shooting star I'd had tattooed soon after my eighteenth birthday "and a shark on my chest. The two we each got today make six." I put my watch back on and picked up my chocolate Mudslide. "I can take pain; I slashed my wrist yesterday, remember? Tattoos are *nothing*. Neither is one measly little piercing." I flicked my eyebrow piercing with a fingernail.

"I'm glad *you* think so," Cassie grouched. "Every time I get a tattoo I'm in agony for *days*."

"Exactly how many have you got, Cass?" Matthew asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Now? Three, maybe four. Five, even. I lost count. But every single tattoo I get, for days afterward it hurts like nothing else. That's why I limit myself to one every three months." She checked the time on her watch. "Hey, that movie's starting soon; what were we seeing again?"

"*The Scorpion King*," Matthew answered as he dug his wallet from his pocket to pay for our dinner and drinks. "The next session at the Dendy is at seven-thirty, and it's a quarter to right now. Come on, we're gonna be late."

Laughing, smiling and playfully insulting one another, we left the bar and headed towards our final destination for the evening.

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I closed the heavy wooden front door behind me and deadlocked it; the house was dark and silent, the walls lit every so often by a wash of pale light from passing cars (most of which had the

headlights on high beam). It was just after eleven-thirty. I toed my shoes off, leaving them underneath the coat rack in the foyer, and padded quietly upstairs to my room.

I flicked on my ceiling light and hung my corduroy jacket up on the hook on the back of my bedroom door. Turning around, I saw that an A4-sized envelope had been placed squarely on my bedspread, with a note written on a piece of my mother's writing paper, in my mother's flowing cursive script, placed on top of the envelope; why she would leave it for me, I didn't know. I sat down on my bed, picking up the note and the envelope and lying back against my pillows. The note was fairly simple in its wording:

*Taylor,*

*I know that what your father and I did when it came to your true identity – hiding it for nineteen years, in the hope that you would never find out the truth – is something that can't be forgiven easily. I do not know if you will ever forgive us – that's something that only you can decide in the end. But I hope that you know that, despite all of this, your father and I love you more than life itself. You, and Oliver, Lila and Emma, are everything we ever wanted in life. You being adopted has absolutely no bearing on your place in the Kennedy family; if anything, we love you even more because of it.*

*The envelope contains your adoption records – I thought you might like to take a look at them, to gain some insight into who you truly are. I won't force you to go any further with this than you want to – only you can decide that.*

*Don't forget that, no matter what, we still love you. And we always will.*

*Love,*

*Mum*

So...my mother had had my records in her possession all along, without even telling me.

I tentatively reached for the envelope and slit it open, pulling out three sheets of paper – my original and amended birth certificates, and the record of my adoption. Frowning slightly, I read over the papers.

My name at birth had been Jordan Taylor Lawyer, and I'd been born on March 14 1983 in Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA. And my mother's name – Diana Lawyer. As I read further, I picked up on the most likely reason for my adoption – there was no name in the space designated for my father's name, whoever he was.

I set that one aside and picked up the third sheet of paper, ignoring the second one (my amended birth certificate); I knew exactly what it said, I had my own copy of it from when I'd gotten my learner's permit. This...this was the official record of my adoption. I read through it slowly, taking in every last detail.

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OKLAHOMA STATE DEPARTMENT OF WELFARE

OFFICIAL ADOPTION RECORD

Name of subject: *Lawyer, Jordan Taylor*

Sex: *Male*

Date of birth: *Mar 14 1983*

Date of adoption: *Jul 29 1983*

Age at adoption: *4 months 15 days*

Name of adopting mother: *Kennedy (nee Silvestri), Francesca Josephine*

Name of adopting father: *Kennedy, Mark Daniel*

Name given at adoption: *Kennedy, Taylor Francis*

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There was a lot more after that, but that was basically all I was really interested in.

I stifled a yawn; I couldn't risk staying up late, being that I had work the next day, and another recording session after my shift. I slipped the papers back into their envelope and tossed it onto my desk, then turned my light off and slipped beneath my bedspread, falling asleep within minutes.

## Chapter 2

It took me little more than a week, but I finally made a decision.

"Mum, I've decided," I said at breakfast one morning. "I want to get in contact with my family."

Lila, Oliver and Emma immediately looked up from their cereal at me. "Mum, what's he talking about?" Emma asked.

Mum sighed. "Taylor, I really wish you had waited..." She rubbed her temples. "But tell me honestly; are you absolutely sure you want to go through with it?"

I nodded. "Positive. I really do want to find them."

"Mum?" Emma repeated.

"In a minute, Emma. All right Tay, if you're absolutely sure, then we'll start looking this weekend. All right?"

"Okay," I agreed.

Mum then spoke to my younger siblings. "Your brother has only known about this for the last week, so I don't want you to feel that you've been left out of anything. Basically...your brother is adopted."

"He's adopted?" Emma asked. "But...why didn't you ever tell us?"

"I'm starting to wish we had told all of you the truth to begin with," Mum said in slight exasperation. "The three of you are to understand a few things. One, I do *not* want to hear that you have told all of your friends at school about this. It does not leave this house. And two, Taylor is still your brother; he just has different parents to the three of you. Your father and I still love him, regardless of what certain people may believe." She glanced at me. "And he deserves a place in this family just as much as the three of you. Are we clear on this?"

"Yes, Mum," chorused my siblings.

Mum then went on to explain adoption to Lila and Oliver. Emma and I tuned it out for the most part – Emma because her friend Kellie was adopted, and me because I wasn't stupid by any means.

Emma stayed sitting at the dining table after everyone else had left, playing with her hair. Mum had asked me to clear the table and to load and start the dishwasher, and that was what I was

doing at that precise moment. I'd just rinsed off the last plate and stacked it in the dishwasher when Emma opened her mouth.

"Tay?"

"Hmm?" I slammed the dishwasher door shut and pressed a couple of buttons. A well-aimed kick got it going.

"What Mum said...are you really going to try and find your family?"

"Yeah, I am," I replied.

"That doesn't mean you're going to leave, does it? I mean, you're my brother, the best one I ever had..."

I dried my hands off on a tea towel and went back to the table; I sat down next to Emma. "Ems, just because I want to find out who I truly am doesn't mean I love you guys any less. Of course I won't leave you. For heaven's sake, I'm a Kennedy. You are the best little sister I could have asked for."

Emma snorted. "Tay, I'm fifteen; I'm hardly little anymore."

I smiled and ruffled her hair. "You'll always be my little sister. Now, have you got anything special planned for today?"

"No..." Emma said warily.

"Want to come and watch Matt, Cass and I play the recording game? You can help out Mike if you like; he's always complaining that he needs a second pair of hands."

Emma grinned. "You bet I'm coming."

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"I got a hanger on!" I called as I walked into the recording studio and dropped my pack and guitar case on the floor near the mixing desk; Emma hopped up on Mike's usual chair and gazed in wonder at all the switches and dials laid out in orderly rows.

Matthew and Cassie looked up from where they were bent over a table in the corner; Cassie smiled. "Hi Emma!"

"Hi Cassie," Emma replied, returning the smile.

"Oh, don't tell me...Taylor's punishing you for some misdemeanour, am I right?" Matthew asked with a cheeky grin on his face.

Emma snatched up a pen and made to throw it at Matthew; I caught her wrist just as she went to toss it. "Hey, no chucking stuff," I warned her. "There's some expensive equipment in here."

"Sorry," she apologised sheepishly. She put the pen back on the table and sat back in the chair, hands folded neatly in her lap.

Mike arrived about ten minutes later; Emma jumped off the chair she'd been sitting on and retreated to Matthew's former seat. Cassie, Matthew and I took our places behind the microphone, and Cassie went through her lyrics folder to check what song we were up to. "I think this is the last one; *Far Away From Here*," she said. "We've got our next show in about a month; that'll give us a month to practice and get the CD mixed and released." She spoke into the microphone. "Mike, how far along are we on *Far Away From Here*?"

"About halfway," Mike replied. "If you get working straight away, you should be out of here by six."

"Is that AM or PM?" Cassie asked seriously.

"PM, Cassie; you guys haven't had a twenty hour day in weeks, and besides why would you want to keep working past sunrise?" Cassie shrugged at this. "All right, if you guys are ready then let's roll."

I wedged my headphones over my hair and watched Mike as he counted down from five; I tried not to notice Emma pulling stupid faces at us as we sang, as it would only have distracted me, and that was something we really couldn't afford. We were already past the 'deadline' we had set for ourselves; the CD needed to be mixed by the time we started doing the club circuit, which gave us a month. And if you want the truth, a month can go unbelievably fast.

After five straight hours of recording, we took a break; it was about three fifteen in the afternoon. Mike had gone out and picked up some Chinese food for lunch – plain fried rice for Cassie (who was adamant she was on a diet – the girl is literally a stick as it is), curried chicken and rice for Matthew, and sweet and sour chicken for Emma and I. I won't eat fried rice, and neither will Emma or Matthew, so Cassie had a whole Tupperware takeaway container of rice to herself. I honestly don't know how she can eat that stuff; to me it tastes like plain rice soaked in butter and then deep-fried. Disgusting.

When four that afternoon rolled around, it was right back to work; we were putting the final touches on *Far Away From Here*, after which we could go home. I planned to just keep silent until I went to bed; I needed to rest my voice. My throat was killing me.

"Cassie, tell me something; *why* exactly do we subject ourselves to this torture?" I asked, uncapping my water bottle.

"I don't know," she shrugged. She dug around in her pocket and extracted a crumpled package of Butter Menthols. "Want one?" she asked, holding it up.

"You're a lifesaver," I said gratefully. "My throat is so fucking sore that it isn't even funny." I took one, unwrapped it and popped it into my mouth. "Soon as I get home I'm taking a vow of silence for at least a *week*."

"I bet you will," Matthew said. "I bet that by the time dinner tonight rolls around you will be so sick of writing notes that you'll start talking again."

I rolled my eyes. "Matthew, you seem to have forgotten one thing."

"And what's that?"

"I'm not you. Besides, I know sign language; I don't need to write notes to communicate."

"Oh would you two cut it out; we have a CD to finish recording," Cassie cut in. "Now shut up or I'll throw the rest of my fried rice at the two of you."

We shut up.

It didn't take us long after that to get the rest of the song recorded. "Well, I guess this is it for another year," Cassie said as we packed up. "Hey, Tay, I'm just curious about something."

"Curiosity killed the cat," I said as I slid my guitar into its case and zipped the opening closed.

"Taylor, for heaven's sake, I'm being serious here. What if, you know, you manage to find your family, and you decide to go and live with them? What would happen to the band then?"

"Like I told Emma this morning, I'm not going to leave. I've been a Kennedy for as long as I can remember; it'd be too strange for me to 'change allegiances', as it were." I looked up at Cassie, my blue eyes meeting her green ones. "As much as I've said over the past couple of weeks that I hate my parents, I don't really. Deep down inside, I love them more than I've loved anyone. They're the only parents I've ever known."



Cassie nodded. "I just wanted to make sure."

I nodded, then called to Emma. "Emma, come on, we're outta here!"

\* \* \*

I said before that a month can go unbelievably fast. I'm not kidding – it can.

I sat backstage at the club, my acoustic guitar across my knees. Matthew was twirling his drumsticks in his fingers, and Cassie was fitting her flute together; her keyboard was already out onstage.

Tonight was our first show after the completion of recording our CD, which we'd titled *Riders On The Storm* (one of the tracks on the CD was a cover of the Doors/Creed song by the same name). We didn't plan to perform every single song on the CD, more like just over half, and fill in the rest with cover songs. We'd each chosen two songs to cover – Cassie had chosen *Buses And Trains* by Bachelor Girl and *Ordinary World* by Duran Duran; Matthew had chosen *Push* by Matchbox 20 and *Daughter* by Pearl Jam; I'd chosen *Casey Jones* by The Grateful Dead and *What If* by Creed. We had about ten minutes before the show started.

"So, what song were we starting off with?" Matthew asked. "I sort of forgot."

"*Riders On The Storm*," Cassie replied. "Then it's *Far Away From Here*, *Borderline*, *Buses And Trains*, *Home*, *Dying To Be Alive*, *Ordinary World*, *Push*, *Daughter*, *Down*, *Not The Same*, *Casey Jones* and then *What If* to finish off."

Matthew's brother Casey stuck his head into the room. "Hey, you guys ready to go on?"

"Yeah, we're about ready," Matthew replied. He stood up and jammed his drumsticks into his back pocket.

We'd chosen to take the 'smart casual' route for the evening's show – which for us basically translated as 'if it's clean, then wear it'. Matthew wore his baggy six-pocket cargo pants, white long-sleeved shirt, black Creed T-shirt and his black Etnies; Cassie wore her jeans, blue peasant top and her sandals; I wore my jeans, a hooded long-sleeved shirt and my Vans. A Harley Davidson bandanna was tied securely over my long hair, keeping it out of my face. "Taylor, you need a haircut," Cassie told me. "Long hair is so 1997."

"And you would know this *how*, exactly?"

Cassie simply rolled her eyes and played a few scales on her flute.

We took the stage at about nine-thirty, launching right into *Riders On The Storm*. We got through the first four songs in the set list before any of us spoke to the audience.

"Up next is a song that we've called *Dying To Be Alive*; it's a song about not leaving anything up to chance, and taking control of your life before it's too late. Here it is." Cassie nodded to me, and we started the song.

"I heard you crying...somebody stole my soul...how could I be dying...I turned twenty 5 days ago...we're all on the ground just crying out...would somebody save me please...I won't sit around just thinking about...the troubles that tomorrow brings...

"I'm dying to be alive, yeah...I'm dying to be alive, yeah...let's not go through our lives...without just dying to be alive...

"The people you've touched...the way you touched them...I hope they touched you too...`cause in this life it's hard to tell...what's false and what is true...we're all on the ground just crying out...would somebody save me please...I won't sit around just thinking about...the troubles that tomorrow brings, yeah...

"I'm dying to be alive, yeah...not trying to just survive...let's not go through our lives...without just dying to be alive...

"And we all come tumbling down...no matter how strong...we all return to the ground...another day gone...a day closer to fate...and soon we'll find it's a little bit too late...

"The things you see...the way you see them...will never be seen again...let's go through life living on luck...betting ten thousand to ten...mistakes I've made in this life...I can't say why or when...but the thing that's strange is you only live once...I'll never look back again...

"I'm dying to be alive, yeah...not trying to just survive...let's not go through our lives...without just dying to be alive, yeah...I'm dying to be alive, yeah...not trying to just survive...let's not go through our lives...without just dying to be alive, yeah...

"And we all come tumbling down...no matter how strong...we all return to the ground...in the days to come you'll say why did I wait...you can't just leave your life up to fate...you got to turn it around before it's too late..."

We followed the song up with *Ordinary World*.

"Came in from a rainy Thursday on the avenue...thought I heard you talking softly...I turned on the lights, the TV and the radio...still I can't escape the ghost of you...what has happened to it all...crazy, some'd say...where is the life that I recognise...gone away...

"But I won't cry for yesterday...there's an ordinary world...somehow I have to find...and as I try to make my way...to the ordinary world...I will learn to survive...

"Passion or coincidence once prompted you to say...'pride will tear us both apart'...well now pride's gone out the window...cross the rooftops, run away...left me in the vacuum of my heart...what is happening to me...crazy, some'd say...where is my friend when I need you most...gone away...

"But I won't cry for yesterday...there's an ordinary world...somehow I have to find...and as I try to make my way...to the ordinary world...I will learn to survive...

"Papers in the roadside tell of suffering and greed...here today, forgot tomorrow...ooh, here beside the news of holy war and holy need...ours is just a little sorrowed talk...

"And I don't cry for yesterday...there's an ordinary world...somehow I have to find...and as I try to make my way...to the ordinary world...I will learn to survive...

"Every world is my world...I will learn to survive...any world is my world...I will learn to survive...any world is my world...every world is my world..."

After we played the next four songs, Matthew spoke to the audience. "If there are any Grateful Dead fans in the audience, you'll know this one; here's hoping that we don't butcher it. This is *Casey Jones*."

Cassie had the lead on this one, and truth be told, she didn't do too bad a job of it.

"Driving that train, high on cocaine...Casey Jones you better watch your speed...trouble ahead, trouble behind...and you know that notion just crossed my mind...

"This old engine makes it on time...leaves Central Station 'bout a quarter to nine...hits River Junction at seventeen to...at a quarter to ten you know it's travellin' again...

"Driving that train, high on cocaine...Casey Jones you better watch your speed...trouble ahead, trouble behind...and you know that notion just crossed my mind...

"Trouble ahead, lady in red...take my advice you'd be better off dead...switchman's sleeping, train hundred and two is...on the wrong track and headed for you..."

"Driving that train, high on cocaine...Casey Jones you better watch your speed...trouble ahead, trouble behind...and you know that notion just crossed my mind..."

"Trouble with you is the trouble with me...got two good eyes but you still don't see...come round the bend, you know it's the end...the fireman screams and the engine just gleams..."

"Driving that train, high on cocaine...Casey Jones you better watch your speed...trouble ahead, trouble behind...and you know that notion just crossed my mind...driving that train, high on cocaine...Casey Jones you better watch your speed...trouble ahead, trouble behind...and you know that notion just crossed my mind...and you know that notion just crossed my mind..."

We ended the show with a rousing rendition of Creed's *What If*.

"I can't find the rhyme in all my reason...I've lost sense of time and all seasons...I feel I've been beaten down...by the words of men who have no grounds...I can't sleep beneath the trees of wisdom...when your axe has cut the roots that feed them...forked tongues in bitter mouths...can drive a man to bleed from inside out..."

"What if you did...what if you lied...what if I avenge...what if eye for an eye..."

"I've seen the wicked fruit of your vine...destroy the man who lacks a strong mind...human pride sings a vengeful song...inspired by the times you've been walked on...my stage is shared by many millions...who lift their hands up high because they feel this...we are one...we are strong...the more you hold us down the more we press on..."

"What if you did...what if you lied...what if I avenge...what if eye for an eye..."

"I know I can't hold the hate inside my mind...`cause what consumes your thoughts controls your life...so I'll just ask a question...a lonely, simple question...I'll just ask one question..."

"What if...what if...what if...what if...what if I...what if...what if...what if...what if...what if I...what if...what if...what if...what if I...what if...what if...what if...what if I..."

"What if you did...what if you lied...what if I avenge...what if eye for an eye...what if your words could be judged like a crime..."

"What if...what if...what if...what if...what if I...what if...what if...what if...what if...what if I...what if...what if...what if...what if I...what if...what if...what if...what if I..."

\* \* \*

I made my way slowly downstairs the next morning, turning the kitchen radio on as I passed the microwave; the radio that my parents kept in the kitchen was an old tape deck that Dad had bought at a local garage sale more than five years earlier – he'd paid ten dollars for it. Near as I could tell, I was the only person awake or at home at that particular point in time. It was about ten-thirty in the morning.

I scratched a mosquito bite that had popped up on my shoulder as I pulled the makings of a cup of coffee from the cupboards and the fridge. While I waited for the kettle to boil, I rooted through the pile of envelopes and papers on the bench, searching for Bryony's last letter.

Bryony Hanson was a girl I'd been writing to since Year 7 – she was my penpal. She lived in America, in the state of Oklahoma. And lately, that had got me thinking...I'd been born in Oklahoma. I'd told her I was adopted, and in the letter I'd gotten in the mail little more than a week earlier she'd told me something about her own family, but what it was I couldn't remember. I'd know it when I read the letter.

I found the pale blue envelope buried under a pile of bills for electricity, telephone, the Internet and pay TV and opened it, pulling out the sheet of notebook paper.

*Taylor,*

*How's everything going? Had any luck with finding your parents yet? I've talked to my parents, but not much luck there, though Mom did say something about having a baby adopted nearly nineteen years ago. But she didn't say anything else about that though. Dad apparently had no idea that before they were married Mom had even had a kid and given them up for adoption, until I brought it up that is, and they spent at least two hours rowing. Dad was so pissed off after that, you have no idea. They've calmed down now of course, but it took a hell of a long time. I asked Mom, while Dad was at work, about the baby she gave up, like what their name was, stuff like that, and this is what she told me – his name was Jordan. Jordan Taylor Lawyer, I think she said. Cool name, isn't it? Better than Bryony Eleanor Hanson, that's for sure!*

*So, tell me Taylor – how's that band of yours going? You said you had some concerts coming up. I would love to be in a band, it sounds like so much fun. I'm the only kid in this God-forsaken family who has even a skerrick of musical ability. The only one. It's mostly a pain when I have homework for my music class at school, and neither Mom nor Dad is around to help me out. But I guess that's what the Internet's for. Although sometimes I can't find what I'm looking for, which tends to piss me off, especially if I have a major assignment due the next day and I've barely even started working on*

*it! That's usually my cue to make some excuse for staying up late to work on it. That, and I love to antagonise my brothers and sisters. Bit hard to antagonise the neighbours when you live on a ranch way outside of the Tulsa city limits! But it's nice out here; I love riding my trail bike around our property. Nice and quiet, just the way I like it. Maybe one day you can come out here and see for yourself. You'd love it here – there's nothin' here but horses and bunny rabbits (or 'bunny wabbits' as my lil' sis Zoë would say; she has a slight problem with enunciation, just like any four-year-old you can name). Oh yeah, and the ferals I live with \*rolls eyes\**

*Anyways, I better scoot, I got a mountain of homework that needs doing and if I don't get it done Mom will have my head on a stick. I'll catch ya later.*

*Peace,*

*Bryony*

The kettle whistled, and I filled a coffee cup with hot water, adding a few teaspoons of sugar and a splash of milk. I carried my coffee and Bryony's letter to the dining table, grabbed a pen and paper off the bench and sat down at the table; I drank my coffee slowly as I wrote a reply.

*Bryony,*

*I apologise if any of this sounds incoherent in any way, shape or form, as I only just woke up a bit more than a quarter of an hour ago. So yeah, I'm still very much half asleep. Anyways, I'll get this started.*

*We had our first concert, after recording our CD, last night – it rocked! We played seven cover songs and six originals – the covers were Riders On The Storm (The Doors/Creed), Buses And Trains (Bachelor Girl), Ordinary World (Duran Duran), Push (Matchbox 20), Daughter (Pearl Jam), Casey Jones (The Grateful Dead) and What If (Creed). In the immortal words of Matthew Shelton, we 'rocked da house'. Matt's an idiot sometimes. I came close to losing my voice after the show, so I don't plan to talk for at least a couple of days. I need to give my voice a serious break, otherwise I'm going to lose it altogether.*

*Thinking back to the stuff my mum gave me last month concerning my adoption, and then reading your letter, I have some more stuff to tell you. My first and middle names weren't always 'Taylor' and 'Francis' (in that order) – I was born Jordan Taylor Lawyer. Maybe there's some sort of connection there. I haven't had a lot of luck really; my parents are still looking into it. We'll get there eventually. At least, I hope so. I really do want to find my parents. Of course, Emma is scared that if I do find them, I'll leave the Kennedys and go and live with my real family. I really do doubt that –*

*after all, I have commitments here in Australia. I have my job, and I have my band. Renegade has a real 'cult' following where I live – wherever we play shows, the venues are packed pretty much to capacity. I can tell just from the crowd reactions that we would do so incredibly well in a professional sense, but Cassie won't have a bar of it. Says it'd be too much effort. Too much effort my foot. It'd be fucking amazing. I've always wanted to travel, and taking Renegade to the next level would give us that chance. Maybe I should kick Cassie out of the band! \*laughs\* Nah, Cassie's my best friend, I wouldn't do that to her. She'd hurt me if even I tried to.*

*I should get going; I start work in a few hours. Until next time...*

*Taylor*

### Chapter 3

After discovering I was adopted, I thought things couldn't get worse.

I was wrong. They could, and they did.

Cassie, Matthew and I had decided to drive down to Wollongong one day in early June. We had a day off – no concerts, and neither of us had to work, so the day was ours. There was an indoor rock climbing centre there that we wanted to check out. Neither of us could have foreseen that something was about to go drastically wrong in every way possible.

\* \* \*

"Okay Cass, I got your back."

Matthew flashed Cassie a thumbs up, and Cassie nodded. She scaled the wall, pausing at the top to allow me to take a photo with her camera, then climbed back down again. Matthew went next, then it was my turn.

I clipped my harness to the rope and nodded to Matthew. He got into position and I started to move up the wall. Having made it to the top of the wall, I signalled to Cassie; she took a photo with her camera and I started to make my way back down.

"Tay, you're going too fast!" Matthew yelled up to me. "Slow it down some!"

Maybe I should have listened. I guess I *was* going a little too fast...

Without any prior warning, the rope went slack. My foot slipped off the wall. And I started falling, hurtling the fifteen metres towards the floor. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Matthew pulling frantically on the rope, trying to slow my descent.

"Someone help!" Cassie screamed. "Please!"

I let out a scream of my own when I realised what was about to happen. "Shit!" I screamed.

A few seconds later, everything went black.

\* \* \*

Matthew dropped the rope. "Cassie, for Christ's sake, get moving!" he yelled as he bolted to Taylor's side and dropped down beside him. "Call an ambulance!"



Cassie did as Matthew told her to; after calling ooo, she took her own initiative and called Taylor's parents. His younger sister Emma picked up.

"Hello?"

"Emma, it's Cassie; can you put your mum on please?"

Yeah, sure; hang on."

Moments later, Francesca Kennedy's lightly accented voice came on the line.

"Cassandra?"

"Mrs. Kennedy, there's been an accident; we're at Hangdog, in Wollongong." Cassie leaned against the wall and anchored the payphone handset between her ear and shoulder. "Taylor was climbing down the wall, and...he fell off."

"Oh my God," Francesca said. "Is...is he all right?"

Cassie cast a glance over at where Matthew was. "I...I don't know," she said softly. "I really don't. I hope he is, but...I don't know. It doesn't look good." She looked around. "I don't know what hospital they'll take him to, but I'm guessing it'll be Wollongong Hospital to begin with."

"All right Cassandra; thank you for letting me know."

Cassie resisted the very strong impulse to tell Francesca '*Only my grandmother calls me Cassandra and gets away with it*'; she hung up and went back over to Matthew. "Is he okay?" she asked softly as she knelt beside Matthew.

"He's unconscious; a bad knock to the head will do that to you," Matthew replied. "But he's breathing."

Cassie gave a sigh of relief. "Thank heavens for that." She rubbed her forehead. "Anything else?"

Matthew shrugged. "I think his ankle's broken; maybe his arm too. Aside from that I have absolutely no idea. I guess we'll find out at the hospital."

The shrill, grating sound of an ambulance's siren sounded outside the building; Cassie and Matthew moved back, watching helplessly as their friend and band mate was loaded onto a stretcher and wheeled out of sight.

They followed the ambulance in Matthew's late model Holden Barina, winding through the streets of Wollongong and parking in a street near the hospital; walking up to the hospital, they spotted Francesca and Mark Kennedy, Taylor's parents, coming up a side street, Francesca clutching rosary beads in her hands. *Bloody Italians*, Cassie groused mentally, thinking automatically of *Looking For Alibrandi*. But she didn't dare voice this around any of the Kennedys, or even any of the Silvestris for that matter; instead she and Matthew kept a respectful distance, even as they entered the hospital and moved towards the emergency department.

"Is he okay?" Cassie asked as soon as the Kennedys had spoken with one of the doctors on duty that afternoon. Francesca looked in no condition to speak, so Mark answered the question.

"It's hard to say, really," Mark replied with a sigh. "They'll be moving him to Intensive Care just as soon as they can get him stable enough. He has a broken arm and ankle; he took quite a fall I'm guessing." He looked at Cassie and Matthew. "Am I right?"

Matthew nodded. "Yeah. He was about halfway down the wall when he fell."

Mark nodded. "I thought so." He sighed again. "Francesca and I would prefer it if you waited a few days before going to see him; it's not that we don't want you to visit, because we do. You're his friends, and it would be wrong of us to prevent you from doing so. All right?"

Cassie and Matthew nodded in unison. "Yeah, that's fine," Matthew said.

"God, I hope he's all right," Cassie said quietly.

"So do I, Cass," Matthew agreed. "So do I."

\* \* \*

Cassie sat silently at her friend's bedside, hands in her lap and just staring at his still form. He'd been unconscious for a week now, showing no real sign of awakening anytime soon.

"Tay, I don't know if you can hear me or not, but in case you can...you gotta wake up. We're all so worried. This is...it's hell for us all. Your mum's taking it the hardest of us all; Emma's been telling me that your mum goes to the Catholic church here in town pretty much every day and lights a candle or two. I think she believes that this is her punishment for keeping the truth about your true identity from you, and that if she doesn't make up for it by going to church every day, she'll lose you. You honestly have no idea how much she loves you; you might not believe it, but I know that if she lost you in this way, it would destroy her. I'm not kidding. I've known you my entire life, been hanging around your family ever since I can remember, and it's obvious just how much

your parents love you. I've even been around when your cousins have come over for whatever reason, and they would lay into you so harshly, calling you the most awful names. And you'd stand up to them, reciting that age-old children's rhyme about sticks and stones and other shit like that. But I knew how much their words hurt you, as much as you said that you didn't care. You *did* care. All you ever wanted in life was to be accepted. It's taken getting a band started to make that happen; I mean, now when your cousins rock up to your place, they don't taunt you anymore. They treat you with the respect you deserve.

"Your friend Bryony from the States called a couple of days ago; I think she rang your house first before she rang your mum's mobile. She's coming over here, according to your parents, just as soon as she can scrape together the money for a plane ticket. She's pretty worried about you as well; she's coming here alone, 'cause I don't think either of her parents are able to get the time off work, and her older brother is going to be working at a camp in Maine for the whole summer. Your dad will probably go pick her up at the airport in Sydney when and if she gets here, bring her here to see you."

Cassie sighed and reached out a slightly shaking hand, covering his closest hand with her own. "Please Tay, please wake up...don't leave us."

\* \* \*

Bryony Hanson was short for her eighteen years of age, and was almost lost in the milling crowd that filled the Arrivals lounge of Sydney International Airport. She eventually caught up with Mark, dragging behind her a beat up green suitcase on wheels.

"Thanks for having me, Mr. Kennedy," she said in her soft Southern drawl.

"It's our pleasure, Bryony," Mark assured her.

"So, um...how is he?" Bryony asked as Mark put the car into gear and drove carefully out into the street; it had been a struggle to load Bryony's gear into the back of the old four wheel drive, but it had been managed with a minimum of fuss and bother.

"It's hard to say, really," Mark replied. "His condition hasn't gotten any worse, but he hasn't woken up yet either. All we can really do is wait."

The rest of the drive down to Wollongong was silent, the tense quiet broken only by the soft hum of music on the car radio. And as Wollongong Hospital came into sight, only one thought came to Bryony's mind.

*Something is about to happen.*

\* \* \*

"That's it Tay; come on, open your eyes..."

It was that voice alone that convinced me that somehow I was still unconscious; I mean, how could Bryony Hanson be there with me? I'd only ever heard her voice over the phone, only ever seen her face in photographs. She wasn't there; she *couldn't* be.

But she was. And her face was the first one I saw when I opened my eyes.

"Hey there," Bryony said.

"Hi," I said quietly. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you to wake up, that's what." She smiled. "I'm going to go find your mom and tell her that you're awake. You stay right there."

And she did just that. She disappeared from my bedside, only to return minutes later with my mother in tow. I unconsciously winced as Mum rushed to my side, tears streaming down her face.

"Mum, please don't," I said as she tried to pull me close to her.

She relented, settling instead for the seat that Bryony had discarded. "Thank God you're all right," she said softly, reaching out and hand and gently laying it against my cheek. I automatically raised my left hand and covered her hand with my own, closing my eyes.

\* \* \*

"Y'know, I've been wondering something."

Bryony looked up from her magazine. "Hmm?"

"Okay, you said in one of your letters that your mum gave a baby up for adoption, before she met your dad. Remember?"

"I do, yeah."

"And I told you what my *real* full name was. I said it was 'Jordan Taylor Lawyer'. And I said that there might be a connection there of some sort."

Bryony bit her bottom lip. "How old were you when you were adopted?"

"Four months."

"You know, I think you may be onto something there. Hang on, just lemme grab something outta my bag." She bent down, rummaging around in the backpack that sat between her feet on the floor, unearthing a mirror; she scooted closer to me so that we could both look into it. "Look at that; that's something I never noticed before now."

Nor, it seemed, had I – to my surprise, the two of us looked eerily alike. The same long, blonde hair (except mine was a slightly darker blonde, and her hair was longer and curlier), the same blue eyes. She smiled, and I followed suit – even our smiles were identical. After all these years of friendship, it had finally clicked.

Bryony Hanson was my half sister.

And it seemed that Bryony had realised the same thing, because her next words were, "I...Tay, you know what this means, right?"

"Yeah, I think so."

She dropped her mirror back into her bag. "You're my brother. You're the kid my - no, sorry, *our* mom had adopted."

"Well, it sure seems that way, doesn't it."

Bryony was silent for a little while. Then she said, "Wait until my mom finds out that my penpal is my *brother*..."

"Bryony, no. I don't want this to get out just yet. I'd rather wait at least until I'm out of hospital; a few months even. I...I'm just not ready yet." Then I frowned. "And you're making the idea of us two being siblings and penpals sound like a bad thing."

Bryony laughed. "I'm sorry, Tay, I didn't mean for it to come out that way. You know I didn't."

"Yeah, I know." I twirled a lock of my hair around a finger. "Bryony, tell me honestly. My friend Cassie says I need a haircut. What do you think?"

Bryony frowned. "I think she's right."

"*What?*"

"But I don't mean you should get it cut *short*. Here, turn around so I can see how long your hair is."

I shifted around so that I had my back to Bryony; she carefully pulled my hair out of the elastic band I'd tied it up into and ran her fingers through it. I felt her fingertips press into my back about halfway down. "Jesus Taylor, your hair's nearly as long as my mom's," she commented. "I can definitely see what Cassie means; I think it'd look nicer and neater if you had it cut to your shoulders." A slight pause. "When was the last time you had your hair cut, anyway?"

"Five years ago," I said quietly.

"Christ, would you speak up?"

"Five years ago," I repeated, raising the volume of my voice slightly.

"Jeez, no wonder it's so long..."

"Oh shut up. I like having long hair."

"Even if it *does* make you look like a chick."

"Hey!" I protested. "I do not look like a girl!"

Bryony snickered. "Um, yeah, you do. Sorry."

I smacked Bryony playfully with my good hand (my left one; I'd broken my right wrist). "I don't like you," I kidded.

"No you don't; you love me."

"Do not."

Bryony laughed. "I think I better go before I get kicked out. You get back on your feet soon, okay?"

"I will. I'll see you soon."

She leaned over and kissed me quickly on the cheek; I watched her go, the tiniest of smiles on my face.

## Chapter 4

"You're kidding me."

I looked down to where Cassie was decorating the cast around my ankle. "Bryony is your *sister*?"

"Yeah," I confirmed. "She's my half sister. We have the same mother, but different fathers. It took looking in a mirror to figure it out. A freaking *mirror*."

"But that's a good thing, isn't it?" Matthew asked. "You've found part of your family. If I were you, I'd be ecstatic."

"Yeah, well, I'm not you am I?" I said. I sighed. "I'm happy, yeah, but in a way I hate it. I'm here, while my family is over in the States."

"They're not really your family," Cassie reminded me.

"I'm related to them in that we have the same mother," I said. "Therefore they are still my family, despite the obvious fact that I've never met them. Besides, details are details. Bryony's my sister, and that's all I really care about."

"Do your mum and dad know about that yet?" Matthew asked me, cocking an eyebrow.

I snorted. "Hardly." I sighed. "No, they don't know yet. I'm not ready to tell them, and Bryony feels the same way. We're thinking...September, maybe October, we'll announce our 'suspicions'. I mean, we're pretty damn sure that we're related. I...I just hope we're right. I honestly think that, if it turns out that Bryony isn't my sister after all, it would kill me. I have no idea who I really am, save for what's noted down in my records. Sometimes...sometimes I wish my parents had never told me the truth; I wouldn't be torturing myself with searching for my past. I mean, yeah I was only four months old when I was adopted, so I've never known any other family other than the Kennedys, but still...I wish I knew who I really was."

Cassie recapped the coloured marker she was drawing with and tossed it onto the coffee table. "You guys want something to drink?" she asked.

Matthew and I exchanged glances. "Yeah, sure," Matthew said warily; I shrugged.

"All right then." She grinned at us. "There's something I've been wanting to try for a while now, but I haven't really had the chance to. I think we have some Milo around here somewhere..."

"Oh Jesus Christ, what's she going to test out on us now..." Matthew grumbled; I groaned

melodramatically. Cassie was always testing out new creations of her own design on the two of us; it normally ended in one or both of us getting sick. She wasn't exactly the world's greatest cook.

"Don't sound so cynical Matthew Shelton; you guys are going to love this." She came back into the living room, a tray in her hands; on the tray were three glasses of chocolate milk. "It's Milo with whipped cream."

"Oh joy," Matthew muttered. All the same, he took a glass and a teaspoon from the tray and poked at the froth at the top of the glass. He scooped up a tiny bit with his spoon and shoved it into his mouth; he raised an eyebrow. "Cassie, I think you may just be onto something here; this is actually pretty good."

"You really think so?" Cassie asked, her cheeks turning pink.

"Cassie, you're blushing," I said absentmindedly. "And yeah, this is really good."

"Thanks," Cassie whispered.

I grinned; Cassie rarely got praise for her cooking, being that she was so, well, bad at it. But what praise she *did* get, it was usually well earned.

"Cassie, I thought you were on a diet or something?" I questioned as Cassie picked up the remaining glass from the tray.

"You're not the diet police Taylor Francis Kennedy, so I suggest you shut your mouth right now before I throw you in the swimming pool."

"You'll be paying to have my ankle and wrist reset if you do that, Cassandra Sapphira Dale." I snickered at the look on Cassie's face and concentrated on finishing my drink.

Cassie's aunt Kendra stuck her head into the living room about ten or so minutes later. "Taylor, your mum's here," she said.

"Okay, thanks," I called back.

With some difficulty, I managed to lever myself upright, balancing on my right foot. "I guess I'm outta here," I said, bending over to grab my jacket; I pulled it on clumsily, nearly overbalancing once or twice, and started to make my way very slowly to the front door.

A hand grabbed onto my right shoulder; I looked back to see Cassie standing there, steadying me.



"Want some help?" she asked.

"Thanks," I agreed gratefully.

When I was settled in the front passenger seat of my mother's car, Cassie stuck her head through the open window. "When you get those casts off I'm throwing you in the pool for sure," she whispered in my ear.

"Yeah, *sure* Cassandra. I love you too."

Cassie leaned a bit closer; thinking she was going to smack me, I pulled away a little, but all she did was kiss me squarely on my cheek. "I'll see you later cutie," was all she said before Mum pulled the car away from the kerb.

\* \* \*

"We didn't start the fire...it was always burning since the world's been turning...we didn't start the fire...no we didn't light it but we tried to fight it..."

I cracked one eye open halfway; Emma was singing along to a Billy Joel song, one which she only knew the chorus of.

"Emma, what the heck are you doing?" I asked, levering myself upright.

"Singing."

"Well, could you please go and sing somewhere else? I'm trying to sleep."

Emma looked back over her shoulder at me. "Sorry," she said.

I reached over and tousled her hair. "Don't worry about it Ems; you might want to be more considerate of other people's feelings though, not many people are so understanding."

Emma nodded and got up from where she sat on the living room floor.

I settled back on the lounge and watched my surroundings through half closed eyes. My ankle and wrist were aching a little, but I wasn't willing to haul myself off the lounge and go in search of some Panadol. Emma was talking to Mum in the kitchen, Oliver and Lila were watching *Lilo And Stitch* on DVD in the next room (I could hear it through the wall), and Dad was around the house somewhere.

I scratched the side of my nose and yawned. Thinking could wait...and at that, I drifted off to sleep again.

What woke me an indeterminate amount of time later was someone singing a Lisa Loeb song, *Do You Sleep*; I liked it a lot, and from the sound of it my mother did too.

"Do you eat, sleep, do you breathe me anymore...do you sleep, do you count sheep anymore...do you sleep anymore...do you take plight on my tongue like lead...do you fall gracefully into bed anymore..."

"I saw you as you walked across my room...you looked out the window, you looked at the moon...and you sat on the corner of my bed...and you smoked with the ghost in the back of my head..."

"Now I don't know and I don't care if I ever will see you again...I don't know and I don't care if I ever will be there..."

"Do you eat, sleep, do you breathe me anymore...do you sleep, do you keep me anymore..."

"You kick my foot under the table, I kick you back...I can't say I'm able...to stand for you or fall for you ever again...wish for a perfect setting...wishing that I am letting you take me where you want me all over again...you can't give yourself absolutely to someone else..."

"Now I don't know, and I don't care if I ever will see you again...I don't know, and I don't care if I ever will be there..."

"I saw you as you walked across my room...you looked out the window, you looked at the moon...and you sat on the corner of my bed...and you smoked with the ghost in the back of my head..."

"Do you eat, sleep, do you breathe me anymore...do you sleep, do you count sheep anymore...do you sleep anymore..."

"I don't know, and I don't care if I ever will be there...will be there..."

The next song to come on the radio was Heart's *These Dreams*; I smiled as I listened to my mother sing – to me, home was wherever I could hear Mum singing along with the radio.

"Spare a little candle...save some light for me...figures up ahead...moving in the trees...white skin in linen...perfume on my wrist...and the full moon that hangs over these dreams in the mist..."

"Darkness on the edge...shadows where I stand...I search for the time on a watch with no hands...I want to see you clearly...come closer than this...but all I remember...are the dreams in the mist...

"These dreams go on when I close my eyes...every second of the night I live another life...these dreams that sleep when it's cold outside...every moment I'm awake the further I'm away...

"Is it cloak 'n' dagger...could it be spring or fall...I walk without a cut...through a stained glass wall...weaker in my eyesight...the candle in my grip...and words that have no form...are falling from my lips...

"These dreams go on when I close my eyes...every second of the night I live another life...these dreams that sleep when it's cold outside...every moment I'm awake the further I'm away...

"There's something out there I can't resist...I need to hide away from the pain...there's something out there I can't resist...

"The sweetest song is silence...that I've ever heard...funny how your feet in dreams never touch the earth...in a wood full of princes...freedom is a kiss...but the prince hides his face...from dreams in the mist...

"These dreams go on when I close my eyes...every second of the night I live another life...these dreams that sleep when it's cold outside...every moment I'm awake the further I'm away...these dreams go on when I close my eyes...every second of the night I live another life...these dreams that sleep when it's cold outside...every moment I'm awake the further I'm away..."

"Hey, Mum?" I called.

"Yes?"

"Can I put one of my CDs on?"

"That depends on what it is."

"Well...it's a Goo Goo Dolls CD."

"I think that would be fine; tell me where it is and I'll go get it."

"It's on my desk."

Mum disappeared upstairs, returning with my prized copy of *Dizzy Up The Girl*; she slotted it into the CD component of the living room stereo and skipped through the tracks. The song called *Iris*

came tumbling from the speakers; having picked up the rhythm, I started singing along immediately.

“And I’d give up forever to touch you...’cause I know that you feel me somehow...you’re the closest to heaven that I’ll ever be...and I don’t want to go home right now...and all I can taste is this moment...and all I can breathe is your life...’cause sooner or later it’s over...I just don’t want to miss you tonight...

“And I don’t want the world to see me...’cause I don’t think that they’d understand...when everything’s made to be broken...I just want you to know who I am...

“And you can’t fight the tears that ain’t coming...or the moment of truth in your lies...when everything feels like the movies...yeah you bleed just to know you’re alive...

“And I don’t want the world to see me...’cause I don’t think that they’d understand...when everything’s made to be broken...I just want you to know who I am...and I don’t want the world to see me...’cause I don’t think that they’d understand...when everything’s made to be broken...I just want you to know who I am...and I don’t want the world to see me...’cause I don’t think that they’d understand...when everything’s made to be broken...I just want you to know who I am...I just want you to know who I am...I just want you to know who I am...”

Not long after the song finished, the phone rang; Mum disappeared into the kitchen to answer it, and soon the sound of rapid Italian speech came drifting out into the living room. She’d be on the phone for a while; she always was when it came to the Silvestris – Italian through and through, all of them. And I couldn’t stand them. They were the ones who tormented me in the first place; I had every right to hate them.

I stared up at the living room ceiling, trailing the fingers of my left hand down the cast that immobilised my right; both casts would be coming off by the end of July, something I was more than glad of. Bryony and I had decided, by way of email, that we would reveal our suspicions to our families a few days after I had them taken off. It was torture keeping this secret; I had to mentally berate myself every time I came close to revealing it. If Mum thought she was going to lose me, then I’d never hear the end of it. Her damned Silvestri pride would make sure of that. Suddenly, rejoining my *true* family didn’t sound like a bad thing.

I yawned and allowed myself to drift off to sleep right there on the lounge, blatantly disregarding the feelings of whoever would be forced to carry me upstairs to my room.

## Chapter 5

"Mum, Dad, I...I need to talk to you."

It was a couple of days into August. In keeping with 'the plan', I'd waited until after dinner to bring up the four month old issue of my adoption. That way, I could be assured of their full attention when it came to revealing my suspicions.

Mum paused in loading the dishwasher, and Dad looked up from reading the newspaper. "About what, exactly?" Mum asked.

"My adoption, what d'you think?"

"Taylor," Dad warned.

"Sorry," I said automatically.

"Emma, Lila, Oliver, go to your rooms please," Mum said; she loaded the last plate into the dishwasher and turned around. "I'm going to count to ten..."

"Okay, okay, we're going," Emma groused; she grabbed Lila and Oliver's hands and led them upstairs, throwing a glance back over her shoulder as they went.

"Now, what was it you wanted to talk about?" Mum asked as she sat back down at the kitchen table.

I drew a deep breath to calm my nerves. "Bryony and I found out something when she came over here."

"And what would that be exactly?" Dad asked.

I ducked my head. "She's my sister," I said softly.

"Tay, speak up; we can't understand a word you're saying."

"I *said*, she's my sister. Bryony is my sister."

Mum and Dad looked at each other. "Are you sure?" Mum asked.

I nodded. "I'm positive. I even have proof."

I ran upstairs to my bedroom and scouted around for the Polaroid photograph that Bryony and I had taken with Dad's camera. It was really the only proof I had, but it would have to do – there

was just no other way I could show that I was telling the truth. I found it pinned to the cork noticeboard above my desk and took it back downstairs with me.

"There," I said, dropping it on the table. "That's my proof."

Mum picked the Polaroid up and examined it. "They *do* look a lot alike, Fran," Dad said reasonably. "It's quite possible that they're related."

"How old is Bryony, Taylor?" Mum asked.

"She's eighteen," I answered. "Birthday is May 17."

When neither Mum nor Dad said anything for about ten, maybe fifteen minutes, I started mentally debating ways to convince them that I was telling the truth. *Bash them over the head with a baseball bat. Shove them into the walk in freezer at Coles. Push them over a cliff.*

Finally, Mum spoke. "Well, Taylor, either this is a very convincing mock up, or you're telling the truth."

"I'm telling the truth! Dad, you let me borrow the camera; you saw Bryony and I go and sit out in the backyard and take the photo. And how would I mess with the photo, I don't have a scanner *or* any programs on my computer that would let me *do* that sort of thing!"

"Taylor, relax," Dad said. "I believe you. Has Bryony told her parents?"

"I think so."

"Okay." He got up out of his seat and started pacing. "The next time you talk to Bryony, tell her that your parents want to talk to *her* parents."

"I'll go email her now," I suggested; Dad nodded, and I hightailed it up to my room.

Settling myself before my computer, I dialled up to the ISP and surfed over to my email account; after logging in, I typed out an email.

\* \* \*

To: 'Bryony Hanson' <peanut\_butter\_and\_honey@hotmail.com>

From: 'Taylor Kennedy' <princeofdarkness@aol.com>

Subject: Told them yet?

Date: Sat Aug 10 2002 18:42:39 +1000 (AEST)

Bryony,

Well, I just told my parents about what we figured out – Dad believes me, but Mum doesn't. Worse, they want to talk to your parents. Can you believe that? My own *mother* can't accept that maybe, just *maybe*, one of my best friends, someone I've known since Year 7, is my sister! I think it's that damned Italian pride of hers that she's always spouting off about.

Y'know, I can't understand why my parents didn't tell me I was adopted in the first place. At least then I would have had an answer for why I was hated so much by my cousins. *That* would have been proof to me that they loved me. Not some bullshit about travelling thousands of kilometres. They could've adopted right here in Australia, but no...they just *had* to go to the USA. To me, that's nothing more than *stupidity*. Complete and utter stupidity.

Let me know soon what's going on, okay? 'Cause for some inexplicable reason, leaving my family here in Australia isn't starting to sound so bad after all.

Taylor

\* \* \*

The next afternoon, there was an email from Bryony waiting in my inbox for me.

\* \* \*

To: 'Taylor Kennedy' <princeofdarkness@aol.com>

From: 'Bryony Hanson' <peanut\_butter\_and\_honey@hotmail.com>

Subject: Re: Told them yet?

Date: Sun, Aug 11 2002 19:00:47 -0700 (CDT)

Taylor,

Yeah, I've told them, and they believe me. Mom thinks it's a very real possibility that you and me are related. Dad is slightly sceptical, but I think he's starting to warm to the idea. And they're willing to talk to your parents about the whole deal – email me with your phone number and I'll give it to my parents, and they'll call you guys.

Y'know, just between you and me, I think Mom is thinking of getting you and your parents to come over here sometime soon. I overheard my parents talking a few nights ago about it, and now that they know what you and I do...it'll probably happen sometime soon. But don't take it as

gospel, whatever you do, 'cause if they find out I was eavesdropping then I'm in deep shit. And yeah, it's probably your mother's pride that's kept her from telling you the truth if you ask me.

I better go, I have chores that need doing.

Bryony

PS: Got your hair cut yet?

\* \* \*

I snorted at the postscript of Bryony's email. Had I had my hair cut yet...it was the most predictable question that anyone had ever asked me.

I sent a return email with my phone number plus the answer to Bryony's question, then grabbed my guitar and went out onto the second floor balcony.

The winter sun was setting over the houses that populated my neighbourhood as I settled myself in the cane chair that Mum kept out on the balcony and balanced my guitar on my knees. I started tuning it, listening intently for any discordance in sound. I didn't have a guitar tuner, but I'd learned to tune my guitar by ear. Though soon I'd probably have to buy a proper tuner; still, it was a useful talent to have.

My guitar tuned, I ducked back into my room for my music folder – it contained each and every song I'd learned to play over the years. I flipped through it and found the song entitled *Star*, by Bryan Adams – it would be a good one to help me get back into practice. I wedged my feet against the balcony and balanced the folder on my feet, then started playing.

"What you gonna do when you grow up...what you gonna do when your time is up...what you gonna say when things go wrong...what you gonna do when you're on your own..."

"There's a road...long and winding...the lights are blindin'...but it gets there...don't give up...don't look back...there's a silver linin'...it's out there somewhere..."

"Everybody wants an answer...everybody needs a friend...we all need a shinin' star on which we can depend...so tonight we're gonna wish upon a star we never wished upon before...to find what you're looking for..."

"There'll be times...in your life...when you'll be dancin' an' shit...but you ain't gettin' it...don't get disillusioned...no, don't expect too much...'cause if what you have is all you can get...just keep on tryin'...it just ain't happened yet..."



"Everybody wants to be a winner...everybody has a dream...we all need a shinin' star when things ain't what they seem...so tonight we're gonna wish upon a star we never wished upon before...gotta get where you're headed for..."

"Everybody wants some kindness...everybody needs a break...we all need a shinin' star when things get hard to take...so tonight we're gonna wish upon a star we never wished upon before...so tonight we're gonna wish upon a star we never wished upon before..."

"What you gonna do when you grow up...what you gonna do when your time is up...what you gonna say when things go wrong...what you gonna do when you're on your own...what you gonna do when you grow up...what you gonna do when your time is up...what you gonna say when things go wrong...what you gonna do when you're on your own..."

I nodded, satisfied. It didn't sound half bad.

I pulled the folder forward again and searched through it for another piece, coming across the music for Third Eye Blind's *Semi Charmed Life*. Shrugging, I started playing it.

"I'm packed and I'm holding...I'm smiling, she's living, she's golden, she lives for me...she says she lives for me, ovation, her own motivation...she comes round and she goes down on me...and I make her smile like a drug for you...do ever what you want to do...coming over you...keep on smilin', what we go through...one stop to the rhythm that divides you...and I speak to you like the chorus to the verse...chop another line like a coda with a curse...come on like a freak show takes the stage...we give them the games we play, she say..."

"I want something else...to get me through this...semi charmed kind of life, baby, baby...I want something else...I'm not listenin' when you say...goodbye..."

"The sky was gold, it was rose...I was taking sips of it through my nose...and I wish I could get back there...some place back there...smiling in the pictures you would take...doing crystal meth will lift you up until you break...it won't stop, I won't come down, I keep stock...with a tick tock rhythm, I bump for the drop...and then I bumped up...I took the hit that I was given...then I bumped again and then I bumped again...I said how do I get back there to...the place where I fell asleep inside you...how do I get myself back to...the place where you said..."

"I want something else...to get me through this...semi charmed kind of life, baby, baby...I want something else...I'm not listenin' when you say...goodbye..."

"I believe in the sand beneath my toes...the beach gives a feeling...an earthy feeling...I believe in the faith that grows...and the four right chords can make me cry...when I'm with you I feel like I could die...and that would be all right, all right..."

"And when the plane came in she said she was crashing...the velvet it rips...in the city we tripped on the urge to feel alive...now I'm struggling to survive...those days you were wearing that velvet dress...you're the priestess I must confess...those little red panties they pass the test...slide up around the belly face down on the mattress..."

"One, and you hold me, and we are broken...still it's all that I want to do, just a little now...feel myself with head made of the ground...I'm scared, I'm not coming down, no no...and I won't run for my life...she's got the jaws now locked down in smile but nothing is all right...all right..."

"And I want something else...to get me through this life, baby...I want something else...I'm not listening when you say...goodbye, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye..."

"This life was gold, it was rose...I was takin' sips of it through my nose...and I wish I could get back there, someplace...back there, in the place we used to star...aye aye aye aye...I want somethin' else..."

I remained out on the balcony long after the sun had set, playing my guitar and thinking over the enormity of the situation that I faced.

Was I angry that I'd had the truth kept from me my entire life? Definitely. I'd always been taught that it was important to tell the truth; I'd been punished many a time for lying and then being caught out for it, mostly by my Italian grandfather – in fact I still had some of the marks. One on my lower back, a couple on the backs of my ankles, and one on my left shoulder. The scars on my back and shoulder had been disguised by tattoos not long after I turned eighteen, to hide them from prying eyes.

Did I wish that I'd been told of my adoption as soon as I was old enough to understand? Hell yeah. There'd always been something in the back of my mind, telling me that something wasn't right, but I'd always put it down to intuition; my intuition was so wildly inaccurate that I'd never been able to pick the winner of the Melbourne Cup, so why would I trust it? Now it seemed that it *had* been accurate for once, but I hadn't listened to it.

But was I ready to learn the whole truth about who I was? I kept telling myself that I was, but there was a tiny little voice in the back of my mind that, despite my best efforts, I couldn't help

but listen to. *If she loved you, she wouldn't have given you away*, it kept saying. *She would've raised you. She hates you. She wants nothing to do with you. She didn't want you.*

To this I always replied, *Of course she loved me. Sometimes the best way to show love is to let someone go. It proves you loved them enough to give them a better chance at life.*

I sighed and gazed out at the crescent moon. Tomorrow would be the day I found everything out – tomorrow I would discover the truth. But if I'd known just what would happen, I don't think I would have been so willing to find out who I really was.

\* \* \*

I lay on my bed in my darkened bedroom, staring up at the ceiling.

The phone call between my parents and Bryony's parents had ended hours ago; I'd eavesdropped on part of it, right up until the point where Bryony's mother had confirmed what my mental voice had said.

She hadn't wanted me.

Just hearing her say that had killed me inside. Those four simple words had painted an immediate picture in my mind of who she was to me. If she loved me, she wouldn't have had me adopted. She would have raised me.

For over five hours I had resisted the strong temptation to cry, to let my feelings go. But when my mother, the one who *did* love me, came into my room a couple of hours after dinner had come and gone, I couldn't fight it any longer.

"Tay?" came her voice; dim light from the hallway spilled into my room. "Honey, are you awake?"

"Yeah," I answered.

"Why didn't you come down to dinner?" she asked me. She turned on the lamp on my desk and sat down beside me on my bed. "You've been up here for hours..."

"I heard what she said," I said, my voice devoid of emotion. "I heard what she said about me. She didn't love me."

"How much did you hear?" Mum asked gently.

"I heard enough," I answered, bitterness invading my tone. "I listened right up until the point where she said she hadn't wanted me, but she didn't believe in abortion. That little voice I've been hearing in my head was right for once in my life."

"You didn't hear the whole story, though." She helped me to sit up. "After we heard you hang up the extension, the whole truth came out." A pause. "She said that over the years, she's wondered just what became of you. She did love you, Tay, but she couldn't admit it to herself. Sometimes...the best way to show your love for someone is to let them go."

"She didn't want me, but she still loved me?" I snorted. "Sounds like a serious whack job to me."

"Taylor," Mum chastised me.

"Sorry." I rubbed my eyes. "So, what're we going to do?"

"We're turning control of this whole situation over to you, that's what," Mum replied. "From this point forward, you get to call the shots. We won't force you to do anything you don't want to."

I thought about this. "I'm not so sure anymore whether I want to meet her, not after knowing how she felt about me." I looked at Mum. "What about Bryony?"

"She confirmed it. She said that Bryony *is* your half sister. You were right. I'm sorry I doubted you."

"Apology accepted," I replied.

"So, how does a late dinner sound to you?" Mum asked me. "We had tortillas for dinner, but I know you don't like them, so..."

I smiled. "I'm sure I can find something."

"That's my baby. Come on short stuff, let's go find you something to eat."

I allowed Mum to wrap an arm around my shoulders as we went downstairs; I started rummaging in cupboards and drawers, looking for something edible for my dinner. I hadn't even realised I'd missed dinner, and now...I was fucking *starving*. I found some Swiss cheese, some mini pizza bases, a tin of crushed pineapple, a tub of pizza sauce and a couple of Roma tomatoes. Tomato, pineapple and cheese pizza it was. *Maybe there's some Italian in me after all*, I thought as I constructed my pizzas and slid them under the grill. *Guess I'm not as much of a Yank as I thought I was*. I chuckled and crouched down to keep an eye on my dinner. "Mum, do we have any whipped cream around here anywhere?" I asked. "Y'know, the canned stuff."

"I think we might."

"What about Milo?"

"Yeah, in the pantry. Why?"

"You'll see." I pulled the griller tray out and levered the pizzas onto a plate, then went in search of the Milo and the whipped cream. Having found them, I made the same drink that Cassie had made at her place not a month earlier. "That's why," I said, setting two nearly full glasses of chocolate milk on the bench. "Cassie's little invention. Matt and I were positive it was gonna make us sick, but it didn't."

Mum smiled. "I suppose one of those is for me?" she asked, pointing to the two pizzas I'd mocked up.

"Yeah, if you want it," I answered. I picked up one and passed the plate across the bench to Mum.

"Mum, what would you say if I told you I wanted to go professional?"

"Professional with what?"

I rolled my eyes. "The music," I said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the known world. "Matt and I are more than ready to, we've been ready to take Renegade to the next level ever since we finished recording our second CD, but Cassie won't have a bar of it."

There was silence for some time. Then Mum said, "You're telling me that, if Cassandra-"

"Cassie, Mum; her grandmother is the only one who calls her Cassandra and actually gets away with it," I broke in.

"All right, Cassie then. If Cassie agrees to Renegade becoming a fully-fledged recording group, you would make an attempt at getting a contract. Is that what you're saying?"

I nodded. "That's exactly what I'm saying. What would you say about it?"

Mum smiled at me. "I would say go for it."

"You're serious?"

She nodded. "Taylor, I'm not as out of touch as I would have you believe. I have heard and I have seen you, Matthew and Cassie perform. You three are amazing. Phenomenal, even. And I am no record company executive, but Renegade could really go places. I do mean that." She nodded upstairs. "Every time you go out on the balcony with your guitar, your father and I can hear you."

You have a real gift there, both for singing and playing the guitar. In fact, I would go so far as to say you have a talent for everything that has anything *remotely* to do with music. You don't have a guitar tuner, do you?" I shook my head. "That's one. You're able to tune your guitar by ear. I can't think of many people who can do that."

I finished off my drink. "I'll have to see what Cassie says, but if we can convince her...who knows what will happen?"

\* \* \*

Convincing Cassie to go professional, to take Renegade to the next level, was harder than both Matthew and I thought it would be. For one thing, Cassie had been steadfastly against a professional recording career from the start, and once Cassie Dale gets into a rut there's not much point in trying to shift her.

"No, no, and for the last time no."

"Cassie, please..."

"Taylor, don't even start with me. Besides, what if you go and live with the Hansons? What then?"

"I won't be," I said.

"Yeah, I bet."

"Cass, do you really think I would want to go and live with a mother who never wanted me in the first place?"

Cassie paused in scribbling down the lyrics for a song she'd heard on the radio the night before. "She never wanted you?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Nope. But she didn't believe in abortion so she just gave me up for adoption. I've never met her but I already hate her."

"Taylor, that's not very nice," Cassie said.

"Yeah, well..." I fiddled with the strings of my guitar. "I don't care. Bryony's my sister, and that's all the family I need. I don't need a mother who didn't care enough to give me a decent start in life."

"Well, you know what they say," Matthew broke in. "Sometimes the best way to show love is to let someone go."

"Copycat," I said absently. I put my guitar down and pulled forward a lock of my long hair; I started staring at it, and my eyes crossed. Cassie eyed my hair and raised an eyebrow.

"Taylor, if you don't go and get a haircut I will cut it myself," she said. "If I was looking at you from the back I'd think you were a chick." I tore my gaze away from my hair, looking her right in the eye, and she flinched. "And uncross your eyes; that's creepy."

"Wimp," Matthew kidded.

"Um, Matt, I don't think that was such a good idea," I said, uncrossing my eyes and tossing my hair back over my shoulder. "You know what she does when she gets angry..."

"Yes, he *does* know," Cassie said through gritted teeth. "And I'm about to do it..."

"Oops," Matthew said; he screeched and set off at a run when Cassie jumped off of the lounge. "Taylor! Save me from the bitch from hell!"

"No, you're on your own here!" I yelled back, smiling in satisfaction as I heard a loud splash that could only mean one thing – Matthew got thrown in the pool. My suspicions were confirmed when Cassie came striding up the garden path, her T-shirt damp. But when she saw me, she got a calculating smirk on her face.

"Remember what I said last month?" she asked loudly.

"Oh shit!" I said. "Damnit!"

"Oh yeah, you better fucking believe it Taylor!"

I jumped to my feet and ran through the house, Cassie hot on my heels. She was keeping her promise – once I had my casts taken off, she was going to shove me into her backyard swimming pool. And there was no way I was going to let that happen. Unfortunately, she caught up with me just as I finished my second circuit of the yard and prepared to start a third, latching a hand onto the back of my shirt and sending me flying off of my feet.

"Jesus, way to go Cass; do you *want* me to break my ankle again?" I asked crossly.

"Oh shut up; you know you love it. March, cutie pie."

"Don't call me that!"

"I'll call you what I damn well please. Now move."

Grumbling, I got to my feet, wincing at the pain in my ankle; Cassie poked me repeatedly in the back as I walked reluctantly toward the inground pool that had pride of place in the Dale family's backyard. Then, just as I neared the edge of the pool, Cassie stuck her foot out and tripped me; I went flying into the water and she followed soon after, climbing up onto my shoulders and dragging me into the deeper end. I managed to throw her off into the water, wincing at the pain in my wrist. The cold water only seemed to exacerbate it, so I kept it out of the water as much as was possible.

"Cassandra Sapphira Dale, what in blazes are you doing?"

Cassie froze and turned around, as did Matthew and I. Cassie's mother stood on the pool's wooden decking, arms crossed over her chest.

"It is ten degrees out here; explain yourself."

"Just having fun," Cassie said sweetly. As if to contradict Cassie's statement, Matthew sneezed. I accidentally let my right hand drop into the water, yelping as ice cold needles of pain spread themselves through my hand and wrist; I pulled it out and cradled it against my chest.

"Out of the pool, all three of you, and go get yourselves dried off."

We did as Mrs. Dale said, changing into dry clothes and tossing our wet clothing in the clothes dryer in the laundry.

"So, Cass, you want to take this to the next level or what? Is Renegade going to go professional?" I asked, taking the hot pack that Mrs. Dale handed me; I wrapped it carefully around my wrist and settled back into the lounge, feeling warmth spread through it.

"I already told you we weren't going to," Cassie retorted. "It's too much effort."

"It is not!" Matthew protested. "Cass, do you know how long Tay and I have been ready for this opportunity?" Cassie shook her head. "We've been ready for it ever since we put the finishing touches on our second CD. And I know you are too; you love sharing your gift with the world, and you love the rush that performing live gives us. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that you *crave* it. Would I be right?"

"No," Cassie said stubbornly.



"I smell smoke," I piped up. "Cassie, you take the crowds we get at our little club shows, and you multiply that by at *least* ten thousand. *That* would be our audience, should we take this to the professional level *and* make it in the business. It would be amazing."

"I still don't want to do it," Cassie replied.

"Okay Cass, think of it this way." Matthew scratched the left side of his jaw. "Why did you want to start Renegade in the first place?"

"Well, lemme see..." Cassie leaned back. "I like music, besides which I'm good at it, and I love to perform."

"Exactly. If we do this, you can prove that love to millions, maybe even *billions* of people around the world. You're an amazing musician Cass; all you have to do is have faith in yourself. We could really go far with this."

A tiny smile appeared on Cassie's face; Matthew's surreptitious praise for her talents was wearing her down.

"You really think we could?" she asked shyly.

"Think?" Matthew asked in mock incredulity. "Cass, I *know* we can go far. We have talent, we have drive, and we already have an independent fan base that we can constantly rely upon to show up at our gigs. If we can manage to get ourselves signed to a major recording label, and get an album recorded, all we'll need to do is get the word out to the faithful. They'd spread the word about us faster than you can blink. Why do you think we have to book bigger venues for each of our gigs? Those who are already fans of our music tell their friends and family, and those new converts turn up at every show to support us. It's a nice little enterprise that we've got for ourselves here."

He eyed Cassie critically. "So, what do you say? Do we make an attempt at going for the big time, or are we going to play chicken?"

Cassie frowned. "You're making being an independent outfit sound like the worst thing on Earth," she said.

"It is, in a roundabout way," I cut in. "Think of the money we could make out of this. Providing we got signed, of course. We all have jobs outside of Renegade; being independent doesn't give us nearly enough pocket money. Matt, how much money did we each get out of the last club tour?"

Matthew counted on his fingers, muttering under his breath. "Just shy of a hundred and fifty dollars," he said.

"See, Cass? I make *that* much in a week at work. It's fuck all. We break the big time, we could multiply that by a thousand at least. Maybe even a million. Music's a fickle business, but if we can show that we have the talent, we can go places."

Cassie sighed deeply. "All right," she agreed finally. "Let's do it."

Matthew and I high-fived one another. "So what now?" Cassie asked.

"Well, what's our best independent recording?" Matthew asked. "We've got six, don't we?"

"More or less," I said. "I think the last one we did, that's our best. We can scrounge up a few copies and post them off to some recording companies, see which ones bite. But" and at this I held up a finger "we do *not* rely on this. We get writing songs for another independent, just in case this doesn't pan out as planned. We make preparations to hit the studio again. And we make plans for another club tour. If we're going to do this, we need to have a backup plan. And it needs to be a bloody good one if you ask me. We have to do this the *right* way."

We needn't have worried, though. For things were about to get just that little more interesting.

## Chapter 6

I wandered downstairs one Thursday morning in mid-September. It had been over three weeks since we'd sent out the CDs, with no result as yet. We'd kept reminding each other that it took time, and that record executives got hundreds of demo tapes every day. But still...it was getting a little discouraging.

The answering machine was blinking furiously when I checked it; I hit the play button and listened to the message.

"Taylor, you get your skinny arse over here right now." It was Cassie. "Matt got a letter in the mail yesterday that he very conveniently forgot to tell us about, from Sony Records. He hasn't opened it yet, so I have no idea whether they want to take this further or not. But you had better get yourself dressed and over here to Matt's place, or I'm out. Got it? Remember, Matt's place." The recording ended.

I stood there for about ten minutes, staring at the answering machine in shock. A letter, from a record company...something finally clicked, and I practically flew upstairs. I dressed in record time (jeans, plain black T-shirt, sneakers) and shot back downstairs, snagging my wallet, phone and keys off of the kitchen bench. I scrawled a quick note on the notepad left on the bench precisely for that purpose before I left the house.

*Mum, Dad,*

*I've gone over to Matt's place; we got a letter from a record company. Wish us luck!*

*Taylor*

Cassie was waiting impatiently at the front door of the Shelton house when I pulled up in the driveway. She bolted out of the house and practically dragged me out of the car, pulling me one handed up the driveway.

"Hey, hey, watch the arm!" I protested. "It's still sore!"

"Sorry, Tay," she giggled. "But I'm just so *excited* about this!"

"You changed your tune awfully fast," I commented as I settled down on the Sheltons' living room floor. "Matt, open the freaking letter, I want to see what they've got to say about us."

"Hold your horses Taylor, I'm getting there." Matthew sat down on the coffee table and used a plain old kitchen knife to slit the envelope open. He skimmed the sheet of paper that he extracted from the envelope, a smile working its way onto his face as he finished reading.

"What's it say?" Cassie asked, bouncing excitedly on the lounge.

"In a nutshell, it says that they were more than impressed by our recording, but they want to see us in action first. They're willing to send a talent scout up here to see us perform, after which they will reserve final judgment. If they like what they see" he paused for dramatic effect "we have ourselves a recording contract."

"You're shitting me," I said. "That's all we have to do? Play one show, and if they like us we're signed?"

Matthew shrugged. "Pretty much, yeah. So, what do we tell them?"

I leaned back against the lounge. "How fast can we get a show organised?"

"A few days, maybe a bit more than that."

"Say a week then. We'll need to scrounge up some money to book Central Coast Leagues Club for a night, unless we can get Max to do us a favour..." I looked to Matthew, who frowned.

"I told Max about us going in for a record contract, and he told me that if we had someone coming up to suss us out, he'd let us have the club free of charge for an evening. So we have a venue, we just need to get the word out."

I looked to Cassie. "Can you get us some flyers run up?"

She nodded. "Sure can."

We grinned at each other. We were just one step away from the big time now – it was up to us to make sure we didn't blow it.

\* \* \*

"Do you eat, sleep, do you breathe me anymore...do you sleep, do you count sheep anymore...do you sleep anymore...do you take plight on my tongue like lead...do you fall gracefully into bed anymore..."

We were nearing the end of our showcase concert, the final song being a cover of Lisa Loeb's *Do You Sleep* with Cassie on lead. It had been an exercise in futility trying to discern who was here to

judge our performance, and who was here simply to have a good time, so we had been giving it our all ever since we took the stage at nine. It was now very close to eleven-thirty, and all three of us were exhausted. It was all I could do to keep playing my guitar, let alone sing.

"I saw you as you walked across my room...you looked out the window, you looked at the moon...and you sat on the corner of my bed...and you smoked with the ghost in the back of my head..."

"Now I don't know and I don't care if I ever will see you again...I don't know and I don't care if I ever will be there..."

"Do you eat, sleep, do you breathe me anymore...do you sleep, do you keep me anymore..."

"You kick my foot under the table, I kick you back...I can't say I'm able...to stand for you or fall for you ever again...wish for a perfect setting...wishing that I am letting you take me where you want me all over again...you can't give yourself absolutely to someone else..."

"Now I don't know, and I don't care if I ever will see you again...I don't know, and I don't care if I ever will be there..."

"I saw you as you walked across my room...you looked out the window, you looked at the moon...and you sat on the corner of my bed...and you smoked with the ghost in the back of my head..."

"Do you eat, sleep, do you breathe me anymore...do you sleep, do you count sheep anymore...do you sleep anymore..."

"I don't know, and I don't care if I ever will be there...will be there..."

The song ended, and the audience exploded in cheers and applause. There were shouts for an encore as we gave ourselves a moment to rest up before leaving the club.

"What d'you say to giving them what they're asking for?" I suggested. "We've never done an encore performance before, and I know the perfect song." I told them the song I wanted to play as the encore, and Cassie and Matthew agreed. "Okay, let's do it."

We went back out onstage and got back behind our instruments. I nodded to Matthew, and he counted in; I had the lead on this one.

"Cigars in the summertime under the sky by the light...I can feel you read my mind...I can see it in your eyes under the moon...as it plays like music every line...there's a rug with bleeding dye under

the fan...in the room where the passion's burning high...by the chair with the leopard skin under the light...it's always Penny and me tonight...I said oh oh...

"On the plane step up with both my feet...riding in seat number 3 on a flight to NYC...got my bean in a coffee cup next to my seat...catch the view and another good book to read...sending me home on the friendly skies...missing her eyes...it's always Penny and me tonight...

"Cause Penny and me like to roll the windows down...turn the radio up, push the pedal to the ground...and Penny and me like to gaze at starry skies...close our eyes, pretend to fly...it's always Penny and me tonight...I said oh oh, yeah...oh no no no...

"Staring at a million city lights...but it's still Penny and I all alone beneath the sky...feel the wind brushing slowly by...if I could soar I'd try to take these wings and fly...away to where the leaves turn red...but no matter where I am instead...singing along she's feeling alright...we're making it by in the pink moonlight...it's always Penny and me tonight...

"Cause Penny and me like to roll the windows down...turn the radio up, push the pedal to the ground...and Penny and me like to gaze at starry skies...close our eyes, pretend to fly...I said oh, oh...close our eyes pretend to fly...it's always Penny and me tonight...

"Penny likes to get away and drown her pain in lemonade...Penny dreams of rainy days and nights up late by the fireplace...and aimless conversations about the better days, yeah...

"Singing along she's feeling alright, yeah...we're making it by in the pink moonlight...it's always Penny and me tonight...

"Cause Penny and me like to roll the windows down...turn the radio up, push the pedal to the ground...and Penny and me like to gaze at starry skies...close our eyes pretend to fly...yeah said oh, oh, close our eyes pretend to fly...it's always Penny and me tonight...said oh oh...Penny and me tonight...Penny and me tonight...Penny and me tonight..."

The crowd erupted once more. Cassie, Matthew and I exchanged exhausted smiles before returning backstage.

"My God, that was amazing," Cassie said, catching the water bottle that Matthew tossed her.

"Well, if we manage to get signed, that's what'll be waiting for us," I said, catching a second bottle of water.

"Excuse me."

We turned in our seats. A diminutive young woman with flaming red hair stood framed in the doorway; she came further in at Matthew's nod. "My name is Rachael Whalan; I represent the Sydney offices of Sony Music Australia," she introduced herself.

"You watched the show?" Cassie asked.

"I did," Rachael confirmed. "And I have to say, it's nice to finally be able to put faces to the names and the music. Now, I know that it's late, and you probably want to get home." We all nodded. "I'll make this quick then. To be honest, that was one of the best shows I've ever seen played. How old are the three of you?"

"Matt's twenty, and Cassie and I are both nineteen," I replied.

"And you've been doing the club circuit for two years?"

"Yes," Matthew confirmed. "We've released six independent CDs, and we're making plans to go back into the studio before Christmas."

"Well, what would the three of you say to moving your base of operations to Sydney for, say, six to eight months?"

"You're...you're willing to sign us?" Cassie squeaked.

"I still need to consult my colleagues, but I think I can safely say that I am. Would the three of you be able to come to Sydney next Friday?"

"Definitely," Matthew agreed.

"Right then!" Rachael said cheerfully. "I will see the three of you next week."

Cassie, Matthew and I nodded our assent; Rachael smiled (a little too happily for pushing eleven forty-five at night I felt) and left us to our own devices.

"Well..." Cassie said, still in shock.

"What did I tell you, Cass?" Matthew said.

"Yeah, yeah..." Cassie yawned and rubbed her eyes. "God, I am so tired..."

"We all are, Cass," I said. "Jesus, how are we gonna drive home? We'll be running our cars off the road."

"I'm sure we'll manage somehow," Matthew said.

We did manage it. Against all odds, I made it home in one piece; Mum was sitting in the dining room when I made it in the door.

"How was the show?" she asked me as I collapsed in one of the dining table chairs and finally let a massive yawn burst forth.

"Amazing," I said with a tired smile. "We're this close to getting signed." I held up my right hand, with my thumb and pointer finger barely a millimetre apart.

Mum smiled. "I'm proud of you, Taylor."

I returned the smile and hauled myself up out of my seat. "I think I better get to bed; I'm so tired it's not funny."

I wandered up to my room and fell into bed still fully dressed, falling asleep almost instantly.

\* \* \*

I watched as Matthew's brother Casey got up on the milk crate that someone had dragged out of the garage and called for our attention. "Hey you lot, shut up would you?" He waited for everyone to stop talking before he continued. "Now, there are three people in this room who are set to become the most famous trio that Gosford has ever seen. They managed to get themselves signed to Sony Music Australia yesterday."

Excited murmuring spread itself through the crowd. Casey smiled, then called Cassie, Matthew and I up to the front of the room. "You all know and love my brother and his friends as independent band Renegade; the next six months will see them living it up in Sydney as they record their debut album." He turned to the three of us. "How'd you like to give us a performance right now? Just a capella, to show us what convinced the record execs to sign you."

Matthew shrugged. "Sure, why not?" Cassie and I agreed, and after a short discussion we picked the song Cassie had written over six months earlier.

"I heard you crying...somebody stole my soul...how could I be dying...I turned twenty 5 days ago...we're all on the ground just crying out...would somebody save me please...I won't sit around just thinking about...the troubles that tomorrow brings..."

"I'm dying to be alive, yeah...I'm dying to be alive, yeah...let's not go through our lives...without just dying to be alive..."



"The people you've touched...the way you touched them...I hope they touched you too...'cause in this life it's hard to tell...what's false and what is true...we're all on the ground just crying out...would somebody save me please...I won't sit around just thinking about...the troubles that tomorrow brings, yeah..."

"I'm dying to be alive, yeah...not trying to just survive...let's not go through our lives...without just dying to be alive..."

"And we all come tumbling down...no matter how strong...we all return to the ground...another day gone...a day closer to fate...and soon we'll find it's a little bit too late..."

"The things you see...the way you see them...will never be seen again...let's go through life living on luck...betting ten thousand to ten...mistakes I've made in this life...I can't say why or when...but the thing that's strange is you only live once...I'll never look back again..."

"I'm dying to be alive, yeah...not trying to just survive...let's not go through our lives...without just dying to be alive, yeah...I'm dying to be alive, yeah...not trying to just survive...let's not go through our lives...without just dying to be alive, yeah..."

"And we all come tumbling down...no matter how strong...we all return to the ground...in the days to come you'll say why did I wait...you can't just leave your life up to fate...you got to turn it around before it's too late..."

Applause and cheering echoed around the room at the conclusion of our impromptu performance. Cassie, Matthew and I high-fived one another and turned our attention back to what Casey was saying.

"If I'm not in any way mistaken, Renegade leaves for Sydney on Saturday morning, and will be living and working in the big city until March, May at the most. Am I right?" Casey glanced over at us, and we nodded. "All right then. Ladies and gentlemen, I will now take my leave." He stepped down off of the milk crate.

I ducked over to the drinks cooler that had been shoved up against a wall, digging around in the ice for a chocolate Mudslide; I found one and pulled it out, then wandered back over to where Matthew and Cassie were talking.

"So how exactly are we supposed to get to Sydney with everything we're gonna need for the next six months?" Cassie was asking.

"I could probably con Dale into letting us borrow his van, in return for him borrowing my Lancer." Matthew snorted. "Not much contest there; I'd rather drive the van than my old bomb of a car."

"That's all well and good, but what if we want to go out somewhere one night?"

"I'll drive down in my car," I volunteered.

"Sure, if you like," Matthew said. "Well, I guess it's settled then."

Cassie sighed. "I can hardly believe that we're not going to be coming back home until March," she said.

"There's Christmas, dimwit; as if they'd make us work on a public holiday," Matthew reminded her. "But yeah, it's slightly daunting."

"Didn't we plan on yanking *Riders On The Storm* out of the tracklist, adding in a few more songs and that would be our album?" I said. "That's what I thought anyway. That shouldn't take us very long at all."

"I think they want us to record the album over," Matthew said. "Y'know, make it that little bit more professional."

"Something like that," I shrugged. "I guess we'll find out when we start work."

I climbed up on the pool table and cracked open my drink. "Well, here's to the next six months," I said.

Cassie climbed up beside me, and Matthew sat himself down on my other side. "The next six months," they said in unison.

\* \* \*

I stood in the middle of my bedroom, taking in everything that surrounded me. I wanted to fix this image in my head before I left for Sydney – I wouldn't be home until December at the earliest, something I wasn't exactly prepared for. I'd never been away from home for this long before.

"Taylor?"

I turned around to see Mum standing in the doorway. "Yeah?"

"Time to go."

I nodded and picked up the backpack that sat at my feet, slinging it over my shoulder. Goodbye Gosford, hello Sydney. The record company had rented out a house for the three of us to live in while we worked on the album – we hadn't been there yet, but I hoped to high heaven that it was a nice place. Otherwise I'd be out of there quick smart and fucking off back home. I took one last look at my room as I walked out. "I'll be back," I whispered.

Dad, Emma, Lila and Oliver were waiting in the living room; they stood up as Mum and I came downstairs. "Have fun in Sydney," Dad said as we embraced. "Don't work too hard."

I nodded and crouched down to Lila's level once I'd been released. "You be a good girl for Mum and Dad, okay?" I told her; she nodded. "And Oliver, you behave yourself."

I straightened up and beckoned to Emma. "I'll miss you," she said softly, hugging me tightly.

"I'll miss you too, Ems. I think I'll miss you most of all."

"Can I come visit sometimes?" Emma asked shyly.

"Of course you can; I'll be back for Christmas, don't forget. You know my email address, right?" Emma nodded. "Well, anytime you want to come down for a visit you email me, and I'll see when we've got a night off. I'll take you to see a movie or something like that. I promise."

I looked at my family as I got into my car, tossing my backpack into the back seat – they stood in a little group of five on the front porch. I fixed that image in my mind as I reversed down the driveway and drove down the street.

\* \* \*

Two hours later I pulled up in the driveway of a two-story house in Darlinghurst; I recognised Dale Shelton's van immediately, and pulled in behind it. A curtain at one of the upstairs windows was pulled aside, a curly ginger head popped out and the curtain was closed again. Cassie had seen me.

"You've got to see this place!" Cassie insisted, dragging me inside. "It's fuckin' huge! And get this, we don't even have to lift a finger; the record company's hired a housekeeper."

"That's bloody brilliant."

The house was enormous. We had a bedroom each; there were two bathrooms, a massive practice room, our bedrooms and a study upstairs, while downstairs were the kitchen, dining area, living

room, laundry and a smaller bathroom. We had broadband Internet access and pay TV as well. It was heaven on earth.

"Hey, wanna try out the spa bath later on?" I whispered in Cassie's ear. She giggled and blushed. "We'll have bubbles, candles, Ronan Keating playing on that CD player of yours, everything."

"And alcohol too; don't forget the alcohol," Cassie reminded me. "Can't have a Dale-Kennedy sandwich without alcohol."

I chuckled. "I'll duck out and pick up some Mudslides and Ruskis after dinner," I promised.

"Sounds good to me," Cassie agreed. I leaned over and kissed her ear, and she giggled again.

For all Cassie's tough and self sufficient exterior, inside she was just another girl. Growing up as one of only two daughters in a family of six kids will invariably do that to you – her sister was three years old and therefore not really worth worrying about. We'd known each other practically all our lives, and had liked each other since Year 10, but we had only recently made our feelings known to one another.

We got all our belongings moved into our rooms and unpacked in record time, settling down in the living room with our dinner by the time six o'clock rolled around. And we spent the first night in our new home switching back and forth between Austar and free-to-air TV, shooting the breeze and just having fun.

*This is the life*, I thought as I settled back into the lounge, Cassie curled up against my left shoulder. *I could really get used to this.*

## Chapter 7

“Okay Taylor, let’s take it again from the top. And try to pace your singing a little more; you’re singing just that little bit too fast.”

I nodded and scanned the lyric sheet to make sure I had the words right.

The first recording session for October was going okay so far; we were recording *Home* (the vocals anyway) today, and I was taking Emma out to the movies after recording had finished for the day. We planned to check out Adam Sandler’s newest movie, *Mr. Deeds*. So I really wasn’t concentrating on work, rather I was preoccupied with my sister’s impending visit.

“Sorry guys,” I apologised as I messed up again. “My sister’s coming down from Gosford this evening; I haven’t seen her in nearly a month.”

“That’s okay Taylor; we’ll pick it up again tomorrow,” said Cherie.

“Thanks,” I said gratefully. I hung my headphones on their hook and left the studio, grabbing my guitar case on my way out. I had little more than three hours to get home, get changed and fit in some web surfing before Emma arrived; it would be very interesting to see just how I managed it all. It was going to be quite the challenge, that was for sure.

Despite insurmountable odds, I made it home with one and three-quarter hours to spare; it’d taken me over an hour to navigate the still unfamiliar streets of inner-city Sydney, due to the fact that I rarely ventured so far into the city – add to that the usual late afternoon traffic hassles and you have a recipe for potential disaster. I vowed to print out a few maps from WhereIs and spend most of my spare time studying them until I knew them like the back of my own hand.

There was a note, written in Cassie’s looping scrawl, left on the kitchen bench for me; I picked it up and read it to myself.

*Tay,*

*Matt and I have gone out to the shops to pick up some stuff that we forgot to ask Trish to get for us when she went shopping on Tuesday. If we aren’t back by midnight, send out a search party.*

*Cass*

*PS- If we don’t see you before, say hi to Emma for us, and have fun at the movies.*

Trish was our housekeeper; she was young, being in her late twenties to early thirties, and her main duties were to do the shopping and clean the house (but to leave our bedrooms and practice room the way we left them). All other chores that needed doing around the house were our sole responsibility.

I rummaged through the fridge and pantry, searching for something to eat. I tossed aside two packets of two minute noodles, a can of minestrone soup, a couple of packets of Tim Tams and at least four packets of corn chips before I found something decent – an open box of Uncle Toby’s muesli bars. Blueberry, to be precise. I shoved my hand in the box and pulled out two, ripped open the wrapping of one and replaced everything I’d removed from the pantry in its designated spot. I elbowed the pantry door shut and made my way upstairs to my room.

At home I always kept my bedroom tidy, everything in its place. But here in Sydney, I was letting myself go a little. The only people who ever saw the interior of my room were Matthew and Cassie; what reason did I have to keep it tidy? Even so, my sister was coming down for the weekend, and I didn’t think she’d much like it if she came into my room only to be presented with a week’s worth of clothes that still hadn’t been put in the laundry to be washed. So with that fixed firmly in my mind, I set both muesli bars on my bedside table and started cleaning up my room. CDs were returned to the CD tower behind my bedroom door, clean clothes were stowed in my wardrobe, dirty clothes were taken downstairs to the laundry, crockery I’d used and not returned to the kitchen were deposited in the kitchen sink to be washed and bath towels were taken back to the bathroom. I made my bed, straightened the books on my makeshift bookshelves, and even tidied up the cables for my TV, VCR, PlayStation2 and stereo. That done, I rummaged around in my wardrobe for something decent to wear to the movies, coming up with jeans and a short-sleeved shirt. Casual, but nice enough to wear to the movies without being picked as someone from out of town. Nobody need ever know that I wasn’t a resident of Sydney on a permanent basis, just temporarily.

There came a knock on the front door of the house at around seven; I’d showered and changed, and was now sprawled on the lounge watching the start of *Home And Away*. Unlike a lot of guys, I liked watching it; Tammin Sursok just happened to be one of the hottest chicks to grace Australian television, which was my main reason for watching it. Groaning, I hit the mute button on the remote and hauled myself off the lounge; I padded barefoot to the front door and opened it wide. There on the front porch stood Emma, ‘dressed to kill’ with her backpack sitting on the porch at her feet.

“Well, well, well, look who the cat dragged in,” I said dryly, snapping Emma out of her reverie. She looked up sharply, then she grinned happily.

"Taylor!" she squealed, launching herself at me.

"Ouch, watch the shoulder," I said, wincing involuntarily as Emma threw her arms around me. "I missed you too."

"I can't believe it's been nearly a month since I saw you!" she said as she followed me into the house. "Wow, I love the house. You guys got lucky."

I shrugged. "It's a little too big for my tastes. I think I'm too used to home." I looked around and shrugged again. "They didn't spare any expense, that's for bloody sure."

"So, where do I sleep?" Emma asked seriously.

I jerked my thumb over my shoulder. "Upstairs. You can either sleep in Cassie's room with her, or in my room with me. I don't think you'd want to share Matt's room; he tends to not wear much to bed, if you catch my drift."

"I think I'll sleep in Cassie's room," Emma replied.

I nodded. "Go on upstairs; it's the one next to the bathroom, end of the hallway. We'll get going after you come back downstairs. Oh, and Emma?"

Emma paused in heading toward the stairs. "Yeah?"

"Cassie and Matt say hi. They're out doing the shopping."

Emma nodded and proceeded upstairs.

I ducked back into the kitchen and flipped Cassie's note over; taking up a pen, I scrawled my own note.

*Cass, Matt,*

*Emma and I have gone out to the movies. Cass, Emma's sharing your room – I didn't think it wise to make her share Matt's room, considering his penchant for sleeping naked. See you guys tonight.*

*Tay*

Having propped the note up against an empty coffee cup that had been left on the bench, I found my wallet and keys, then went to the foot of the stairs and yelled, "Come on Emma, we're gonna be late!"

Emma came back downstairs, still wearing the same outfit but this time carrying a small black handbag. "Who dropped you off, by the way?" I asked as I switched the TV off and led Emma out of the front door.

"Dad," Emma said simply. "I told him that we'd probably be back here at around eleven, and that he could drop in for a visit if he wanted, but he said he had to get home. Everyone at home sends their love; Mum said that you owe her a phone call."

I nodded. "All right; I'll call her when we get home tonight."

Emma smiled and settled back in the front passenger seat of my car. "Let's go show these city slickers how to party the Gosford way."

"You said it sis." We high-fived one another; I eased the car into gear and backed down the driveway. And the two of us headed out for a night on the town.

\* \* \*

I looked over Cassie's shoulder at the book she was reading. "What're you reading?" I asked her.

"*The Hitch Hiker's Guide To The Galaxy*," she replied. "It's not bad, but I've read better."

"Well, I've got a couple of *Narnia* books upstairs if you want to read those."

She looked up at me sharply. "*You* read the *Narnia* books?" she asked.

"Yeah, so? I happen to think they're really good."

"They are, aren't they? What ones?"

"Um..." I frowned in an effort to remember what books out of the *Narnia* series I had. "*The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe*, and *Voyage Of The Dawn Treader*."

"I haven't read those ones yet."

"Well, they're on my bookshelves if you want to read them." Cassie nodded. "Oh, and Cass, either we need to sound proof my room or keep the volume down. I think you were squealing loud enough last night to wake the dead, or at least my sister."

Cassie blushed slightly. I chuckled and kissed her cheek. "Don't worry; she goes home on Monday, and after that no need for sneaking around."



I walked around to the front of the lounge and sat down next to her, tucking a few escaped locks of curly hair behind her ear. "What do you think about having a Monopoly tournament tonight?" I asked her. "I brought a set of the Australian version with me, and it's just sitting on the floor under my bed gathering dust."

"Sounds good to me," Cassie agreed. "Whose turn is it to cook tonight?"

"I think tonight is pizza night," I replied. "I'll call up the local Pizza Haven place and we'll eat it while we're playing."

"Cool," Cassie nodded. "It's a date then."

\* \* \*

I grinned evilly as Cassie moved her playing piece towards Kings Avenue, loving the look of desperation in her eyes. In the two hours that we'd been playing, I'd put hotels on half the properties around the board – Kings Avenue, Flinders Way, Salamanca Place, Hay Street, Rundle Mall, Petries Bight, Wickham Terrace, Bourke Street, Castlereagh Street and Pitt Street to be exact. I also owned all the railroads and both utilities. Emma owned Todd Street, Davey Street, Barrack Street, North Terrace, Victoria Square, Stanley Street, Collins Street and George Street. Matthew owned Smith Street, William Street and Elizabeth Street. And poor Cassie owned lonely little Macquarie Street. So as it were, Cassie was being forced to pay thousands of dollars in rent, and she definitely wasn't happy about it.

"Pay up," I said as Cassie landed her cannon on Kings Avenue. She rolled her eyes in resignation and slapped two thousand dollars' worth of Monopoly money into my outstretched hand.

"Don't I get any special treatment?" she pleaded.

"Pfft, as *if*..." I sat back, grinning, and started counting my money.

Cassie shrugged and passed the dice to Emma; Matt started crowing, earning a look of disapproval from both Cassie and I. "No nookie for Taylor tonight!" he shouted gleefully.

"Nor the rest of the week," Cassie agreed, smirking.

Matthew started cackling like an old woman, and I cast him a weird look. "Mate, what is your problem?" I asked as Emma rolled a ten, which landed her on Salamanca Place; she passed \$550 across the board to me.

"The house is actually going to be quiet tonight," Matthew replied, still cackling. "Every night for the past month Cassie's been moaning her head off."

"You're just jealous."

"As if."

"Oh, go play with yourself." Emma and Cassie both giggled at this, and Matthew actually looked slightly embarrassed. He reached behind him and extracted a slice of cheese pizza from its box, tearing the melted mozzarella cheese off of the base and shoving it in his mouth.

"Matt, if you're just going to eat the cheese why the hell did you get an entire cheese pizza?" I questioned.

"I'm not eating just the cheese," Matthew retorted, his mouth still full of cheese. I recoiled in slight revulsion and took the two dice from Emma; I rolled a seven, which (to my relief) landed me on a Community Chest square. I took the topmost card off of the pile and read the wording on the back out loud. "'Grand opera opening. Collect \$50 from every player for opening night seats.' All right you guys, pay up; you owe me fifty bucks each."

"Bullshit!" Cassie said. "Gimme that card." She snatched it out of my hand and read it for herself, muttering all the while; rolling her eyes, she handed me \$50. "Well, I'm outta money; it's getting late anyway."

"Yeah," Emma and Matthew agreed. "I think Taylor won that one."

"Oh, I won it all right," I nodded. I looked at my watch and started packing up the game board. "We've got a recording session tomorrow anyway; we're going to need as much sleep as we can get. Wanna tag along tomorrow, Emma?"

Emma shrugged. "Yeah, sure."

Upstairs in bed, I stared at the ceiling; I couldn't sleep. The events of the past seven months were still weighing heavily on my mind.

Had I been too abrupt in judging my birth mother before I even spoke to her myself? She'd said herself that she hadn't wanted me, but...had she somehow regretted it, years later? For reasons unknown, something inside of me was changing once again. I *wanted* to get to know her now; I wanted to talk to her and find out what she was really like.

I got out of bed and left my room, padding down the hallway to the study. The computer was still on, humming away, so I clicked into my email account and sent my mother an email.

\* \* \*

To: 'Francesca Kennedy' <italianqueen@aol.com>  
From: 'Taylor Kennedy' <princeofdarkness@aol.com>  
Subject: My mother  
Date: Sat 4 Oct 2002 23:49:56 +1000

Mum,

I know that in the past I've said that I don't ever want to meet my real mother, but I've changed my mind. I'd like to talk to her – can you email me back with the Hansons' phone number as soon as possible, so that I can give her a call? Bryony told me what it was, but I can't remember it. Thanks.

Miss you lots,

Love Tay

\* \* \*

I listened absently to Cassie and Matthew as they recorded their vocals for *Home*; it was just about finished. As I listened to them arguing over pitch and timing, I toyed with the scrap of notebook paper on which I'd written a phone number. Mum had emailed me back with the phone number I had asked for, and I'd scribbled it down only minutes before we left for the studio.

*What have you got to lose?* I asked myself. *Worst case scenario is that she'll hang up on you.*

I took a deep breath and fished my mobile phone out of my pocket; fingers trembling a little, I punched in the number: 0011 1 918 228 4398. Hitting OK, I raised the phone to my ear and waited for someone to pick up at the other end.

A familiar voice answered. "Hello?"

"Bryony? It's Taylor."

"Taylor! How are you?"

"I'm good. We're in the middle of recording our album; Cassie and Matt are arguing about their vocals."

Bryony laughed. "Was there something you wanted?" she asked. "It's not like you to just call out of the blue; usually I'm the one calling you."

"Actually, there is. I was wondering...would I be able to talk to your mum? Just for a little while?"

"Sure you can. Hang on a tick."

While I waited to speak to Bryony's mother, I milled over what I was going to say. What do you say to someone who you only discovered existed seven months ago, who you *know* didn't even want you in the first place? By the time she spoke, I'd decided to just say what came into my head.

"Hello?"

I took a deep breath and spoke. "Almost nineteen and a half years ago, you gave a baby, a boy you named Jordan, up for adoption. That baby was adopted by a young Australian couple with no children of their own. And seven months ago, they were told by their parents for the first time that they were adopted." I took another breath. "That baby was me."

After she got over the initial shock of finding out who I was, we got on like a house on fire. About fifteen minutes later, Cassie called me over so that we could start recording the vocal track of *I Don't Know*, and I reluctantly ended the phone call.

"I have to go; Cassie's getting kinda impatient. We need to get back to work anyway."

My mother laughed. "All right Taylor; you go get back to work. I'll talk to you again sometime soon."

"Okay," I agreed. "Love you."

I hung up and returned my phone to my pocket.

"All right, let's take it from the top," Cherie said when the three of us were in position.

I took a deep breath, then let fly on the song that Matthew had written little more than eight months earlier.

"Well I can't take this any longer...well I can't be this anymore...well I'm not getting any stronger...I don't know how to feel this anymore..."

"Well you can tell me what you want...after all that you've done for me...we can't make it all undone...can't you see that..."

"I don't know what to think...and you can't tell me we're dreaming...I wish that I could just let this go...what I'm thinking...I don't know what I'm feeling...we just need space for breathing...I wish that I could just let this go...what I'm thinking but I don't know..."

"I've had these thoughts a thousand times before...I'm up against a wall I can't ignore...I wish you didn't feel so good to hold...`cause then it wouldn't be so hard to know..."

"Well you can tell me what you want...after all that you've done for me...we can't make it all undone...can't you see that..."

"I don't know what to think...and you can't tell me we're dreaming...I wish that I could just let this go...what I'm thinking...I don't know what I'm feeling...we just need space for breathing...I wish that I could just let this go...what I'm thinking but I don't know..."

"I wish I could tell you that everything...was gonna be alright...I just wanna love you...so maybe I can let this go..."

"Well you can tell me what you want...after all that you mean to me...we can't make it all undone...can't you see that..."

"I don't know what to think...and you can't tell me we're dreaming...I wish that I could just let this go...what I'm thinking...I don't know what I'm feeling...we just need space for breathing...I wish that I could just let this go...what I'm thinking but I don't know..."

Cherie gave us a double thumbs-up as we finished singing. "Great work guys! We'll do the instrumental on Tuesday; take a break tomorrow, you guys deserve it. Go home and get some rest."

"I second that motion," Cassie volunteered; we all laughed.

Emma met up with us as we left the studio. "So, what's on the agenda for tonight?" she asked as we walked out to the van.

"We're having a night in," Cassie answered. "We worked hard today; Cherie's right, we deserve a break."

Right at that moment, a break sounded like it was heaven sent.

I settled back into my seat and closed my eyes. It was going to take at least half an hour, if not forty-five minutes, to get back to the house, and we *did* deserve a break; I planned to just sleep on the way home. And I did just that, falling asleep within minutes.

\* \* \*

"What're you watchin'?"

Emma jumped in surprise, twisting around to look at me. "Jesus Taylor, you shouldn't sneak up on people like that!" she said.

"Oh, you know you love it." I grinned at her. "All packed are we?"

"Yeah," Emma replied. "Thanks for letting me stay over this weekend; I had fun."

"You don't need to thank us, Emma," I told her. "You're my sister, and you're welcome to stay here anytime you want. And I'm glad you had fun."

Emma smiled. "Tay, you know the movie *Anastacia*?"

"Yeah..."

"You know the song at the end, during the credits? What's it called?"

"*At The Beginning*; it's by Richard Marx and Donna Lewis. Why do you ask?"

"I was watching it on DVD a couple of weeks ago, and right before the credits came to showing the name of the song Lila unplugged the PS2."

I chuckled. "Well, I think Cassie has that song on CD," I said, nodding toward the CD tower that stood next to the stereo cabinet. "Go grab it and put it on."

Emma nodded, getting up off the lounge and crossing to the CD tower; in the meantime I walked around to the front of the lounge and sat down. She put the CD in the CD player and skipped through the tracks; I fished around for the remote and turned the volume up.

"Sing it with me, okay?" I said as Emma sat back down again. She nodded, and the two of us started to sing.

"We were strangers, starting out on a journey...never dreaming, what we'd have to go through...now here we are, I'm suddenly standing...at the beginning with you..."

"No one told me I was going to find you...unexpected, what you did to my heart...when I had lost hope, you were there to remind me...this is the start..."

"And life is a road and I wanna keep going...love is a river, I wanna keep flowing...life is a road, now and forever, wonderful journey...I'll be there when the world stops turning...I'll be there when the storm is through...in the end I wanna be standing at the beginning with you..."

"We were strangers, on a crazy adventure...never dreaming, how our dreams would come true...now here we stand, unafraid of the future...at the beginning with you..."

"And life is a road and I wanna keep going...love is a river, I wanna keep flowing...life is a road, now and forever, wonderful journey...I'll be there when the world stops turning...I'll be there when the storm is through...in the end I wanna be standing at the beginning with you..."

"I knew there was somebody, somewhere...like me alone in the dark...now I know my dream will live on...I've been waiting so long...nothing's gonna tear us apart..."

"And life is a road and I wanna keep going...love is a river, I wanna keep flowing...life is a road, now and forever, wonderful journey...I'll be there when the world stops turning...I'll be there when the storm is through...in the end I wanna be standing at the beginning with you..."

"Life is a road and I wanna keep going...love is a river, I wanna keep going on...starting out on a journey..."

"Life is a road and I wanna keep going...love is a river, I wanna keep flowing...in the end I wanna be standing at the beginning...with you..."

The song ended; at the same time, Emma twisted around to look at the front door of the house. "Dale's here," she said, spotting the figure, blurred by the panes of frosted glass in the wooden front door, standing on the front porch. "I better go."

She stood up; I hauled myself off of the lounge and followed her to the front door. "I repeat what I told you last month," I said as Emma made to open the door and go outside. "Anytime you want to come down here for a visit, you just email me and I'll see if we're free."

Emma nodded and hugged me. "I'll see you soon."

I stood there on the front porch, waving as Dale Shelton's borrowed Mitsubishi Lancer backed down the driveway and disappeared from sight. And with the thought of a night in watching *South Park* repeat episodes on The Comedy Channel fixed firmly in my head, I turned tail and re-entered the house, closing the front door after me.

## Chapter 8

I started in surprise as a heavy Postpak was dumped rather unceremoniously on the kitchen table, right on top of the music score I was trying to memorise. I glanced up to see Cassie standing there, a look of distaste on her face.

"What's with the scowl?" I asked as I made to open the parcel. "And what the fuck is this?"

"I don't know, but it's from your mother."

I affected a scowl of my own and opened it up. "Oh shit, it's my mother's photo album."

"So?" Cassie asked. "That's not so bad."

"Oh it is, believe me." I eased the photo album out of its protective covering and set it down on the table. "This is a little test that my mother devised when I started asking girls out. She goes through each and every photo album in the house, looking for photographs of me, which she then sticks into another photo album. And one evening, when I invite my girlfriend over, she sits the unsuspecting girl down in the living room and hands over the photo album; the girl has to look through it with my mother watching. And if the photo album doesn't scare her off, she's a keeper for sure."

"So what kind of photos am I going to be looking at?" Cassie asked as she pulled it towards her.

"That's just it," I admitted. "I really don't know."

Cassie shrugged. "Well, let's find out shall we?" She opened it to the first page and giggled. "Aww, you were such an adorable baby..."

"Oh I was, was I? What about now?"

Cassie scrutinised my appearance. "Get a haircut and maybe I'll tell you."

I responded to this by crossing my eyes at her; she flinched. "Jesus Taylor, I really wish you wouldn't do that! It creeps me out no end."

"You know you love it."

She snorted and continued flipping through the photographs. "Oh Christ, I hate that photo," I said, shuddering; Cassie had found a photograph of me dressed up as a medieval prince, as part of my role in a school play when I was in Year 6.



"Why? I think you looked very handsome."

"I looked like a freak. There's a difference."

"Oh, shut up."

She continued flipping pages and scrutinising each picture that came to light. The final photograph was one that had been taken nearly a year ago – it was of Cassie, Matthew and I after a concert. Cassie had somehow found her way up onto my shoulders; she was wearing a purple and black zebra-striped cowboy hat on her head and drinking from a can of Bacardi and Coke. Matthew was sitting at my feet, and for some very strange reason he was chewing on his drumsticks. Of course, the bottle of Bacardi he had in his hand may have had something to do with it; he *did* look slightly drunk. And there I was in the middle, the only sane person in the whole photograph, an almost full lemon Ruski in hand.

"So, what do you think?" I asked as Cassie closed the photo album.

"Mark me down as a 'keeper'," she replied. "Y'know, we grew up together; I can't believe your mother forgot about that."

"Now that you mention it...Jesus Christ my mother can be so fucking *stupid* sometimes!"

Cassie chuckled. "I bet you're glad you aren't related to her."

"Oh yeah. You bet I am." I cast a sidelong glance at Cassie. "You sure you weren't freaked out by the photos?"

"Taylor, the only things that freak me out about you are your long hair, your habit of crossing your eyes just that little bit too often, those big feet of yours and the incredibly phenomenal talent you have for playing the guitar. It took me thirteen *years* to learn what I know how to play on the piano, and it only took you eighteen months to learn to play guitar like a pro. But...those things are what I love the most about you. You're a non-conformist, which is something that this world needs more of." She smiled sweetly. "Just promise me one thing."

"Sure, anything."

"*Please* get a haircut. You can still have long hair if you get it cut to your shoulders. And...before you get it cut, I'll plait a couple of locks of it. They call that kinda thing a rat tail; it'll be proof of just how long your hair used to be."

"But I don't wanna get my hair cut..."

"You can be so fucking vain, you know that?" Cassie laughed. "Come on, don't you want to give your mum and dad a surprise when we go home for Christmas?"

"I don't know...well, I guess having long hair *can* be a pain in the arse sometimes." I sighed. "Okay, okay, I'll get it cut."

Cassie grinned. "Wait here." She raced upstairs, returning with a hairbrush, a couple of shark clips and an armful of elastic bands; she pushed me off the lounge onto the floor, pinned most of my hair on top of my head, and started to plait what she hadn't pinned up. "Quit wriggling around; this is trickier than you'd think," she scolded after about ten minutes. She pulled on the plait a couple of times, then unpinned my hair. "Okay, all done."

"Jeez, about bloody time! I guess this means that I *have* to get it cut now."

Cassie nodded wickedly. "Absolutely."

\* \* \*

I stared at myself in the bathroom mirror. One trip to the barber later and my hair was considerably shorter than it had been that morning. The sole clue that my hair had ever been longer than it was now was the lonely little plait that swung loose over my shoulder.

"Doesn't that look better now?" Cassie asked sweetly, coming up behind me and resting her chin on my right shoulder. "I think it looks much neater than it did."

I cocked my head to the side and squinted. "I guess you're right," I agreed. "So...we're going home for Christmas, right?" Cassie nodded. "When exactly do we get to go home?"

"What's today, the 27<sup>th</sup> of November?" I nodded. "Saturday. I was talking to Rachael about it, and she said that we can take December off; we're due back at work on January sixth."

"Man, a whole month off work; that's gotta be good."

"It's good all right. So...what's on the agenda for tonight?"

I shrugged. "I was thinking...strip poker?"

Cassie's eyes lit up. "Hell yes." Then she frowned. "It's not as fun when it's just the three of us, though. We need more players."

"What about inviting next door over? They did say that they'd love to hang out sometime. I think I have a deck of cards in my room, and I'm sure that Matt has a couple of packets of poker chips."

"Sure, sounds good to me. Pasta for dinner?"

"Actually, what about we order in some Chinese food and some pizza, and Matt can go and get some alcohol? We'll need Bacardi, Ruskis, Mudslides, Jack Daniels and Tia Maria, unless we already have some here."

Cassie frowned. "I think we have about three bottles of Bacardi, and one each of Jack Daniels and Tia Maria; we'll need Ruskis and Mudslides."

"I'll put Matt on the case soon as he gets back from the studio." I grinned at Cassie's reflection in the mirror, and she smiled back. This would be the night to end all nights.

The fun began at around seven thirty. Our neighbours in Darlinghurst were a group of students from the Sydney University of Technology, or UTS – Diana Summers, Amara King, Rowan Hill and Danika Cameron. Matt had gone out to the bottle shop half an hour earlier and picked up three six-packs of Ruskis (lemon, grapefruit and cranberry) and two four-packs of Mudslides (both of them chocolate). The Chinese food and the pizzas were waiting in the kitchen, Cassie and I having driven out to pick them up. And with pizza, Chinese food and alcohol in hand, we gathered in the living room, and Amara laid down the ground rules for our game.

"First rule, nobody has to get *completely* naked, but the girls must lose their bras if it comes down to it. Second rule, it's a three-drink minimum. None of us has to drive home, so drink as much as you like. Third rule, the person with the *lowest* hand loses some of their clothing. Last person to lose all their clothing is the winner."

We all agreed to these terms, and the game began in earnest.

Half an hour and a considerable amount of alcohol later, the scene was a great deal different than it had been at the beginning of the game. Cassie and Diana had both lost all the required items of clothing; Rowan was down to his cargo shorts; Danika only had to lose her bra and socks; Matthew was down to his jeans and socks. I was the only one still fully dressed. And we were all at various stages of drunkenness. Unless something drastic happened, it looked like I was going to win.

"Shit, this can't be happening," Diana complained. She blew a couple of locks of jet-black hair out of her face.

"What can't be happening?" Danika answered, swatting away Rowan's wandering hand. "Taylor's winning, so bloody what? You're having fun, aren't you?"

"Well, yeah-"

"Then quit complaining, and have another Ruski."

"I'll Ruski you in a bloody minute," Diana grumbled, but she took a lemon Ruski and cracked it open.

We wound up the festivities at around eleven, leaving the cleaning up for the morning. And as I climbed into bed and burrowed beneath the blankets, there was just one solitary thought on my mind – that Saturday couldn't come quickly enough.

\* \* \*

The familiar street sign that marked Bayview Avenue came into sight, and I pushed my sunglasses up onto the top of my head. I had lived on this street practically my entire life, knew all the neighbours, had explored each and every inch of its gutters and drains, and yet...I was nervous. I was nervous about coming home. Maybe the fact that I hadn't actually set foot inside the front door in over three months had a lot to do with it.

The front door of the house was opened even before I'd shut off the engine of my car, and Emma came barrelling out; she wrenched open the driver's side door and flung herself at me. "Shit I missed you!" she cried. "I really did!"

"I missed you too Emma," I said. "Please, can you get off me so I can get my stuff outta my car?"

"Okay, okay..." Emma backed away so I could get out of the car, and she clung to me like a barnacle on a rock all the way up to the front door. "When did you get your hair cut?" she asked as we went in the door.

"Wednesday afternoon," I answered. "You like it?"

Emma nodded. "Yep."

"I'm home!" I yelled as I dumped my backpack near the front door. "Hey, anyone alive in there?"

"In the kitchen!" came my mother's voice. I grinned and bolted through the house to the kitchen. Mum was standing at the stove, stirring something in one of the big spaghetti pots that we used for spaghetti; the unmistakable aroma of her homemade spaghetti sauce filled the air, intermingling with the steam that rose from the second pot on the stove. One pot for the sauce, the other for the spaghetti – it was organised chaos, and not a pretty sight if one sleeve accidentally trailed in the sauce. Not a pretty sight at all. I crept up behind my mother and wrapped my arms around her; she jumped in shock. "What in blazes..." She looked back over her

shoulder, and she smiled. "Welcome home, honey," she said warmly, twisting around and hugging me tightly. "My goodness, I missed you so much..."

"I missed you too," I replied.

She stepped back, holding me at arm's length, and looked me up and down, her forest green eyes running from my now shoulder length hair, to my ratty old cargo shorts, to my beat-up Airwalk sneakers. "I never would have believed it," she said softly, fingering my lone plait that was the sole proof of my hair's former length. "Cassie talked you into it?"

I nodded. "Yeah, on Wednesday."

"And what of my test?"

"She passed with flying colours. Cassie Dale's a keeper; you have absolutely nothing to worry about."

"Good. Now, you keep an eye on the sauce while I go and pick some tomatoes from the garden." I snapped a mock salute, and she disappeared out the back door.

Dinner was on the table within the hour. For the first time in over three months, I ate dinner with my family, something I'd truly missed.

They say home is where the heart is. Whoever first said that is a genius, for no matter where Renegade would take me, I'd always consider the house on Bayview Avenue in Gosford home.

## Chapter 9

Something heavy and vaguely child-sized landed square on my back early one morning in December; I realised it was Christmas morning when my sleep-fogged mind registered that there were sleigh bells jingling above my head at the same time.

"Merry Christmas Taylor!" Lila shrieked right in my ear. "Get up!"

I groaned and extricated my face from my pillow, forcing my eyes open and squinting at Lila. "Li, it's five in the freaking morning," I groaned. "Go play with your stocking."

"No!" she yelled. "Get up!"

I retaliated by kicking Lila off of my bed, pulling my pillow over my head and trying to go back to sleep.

My sleep was interrupted once more about three hours later – this time my mother was the culprit. "Tay, honey, wake up; Lila and Oliver have been waiting to open their presents for over two hours."

"Don't I know it," I agreed as I hauled myself upright. "Lila came barrelling in here at five and practically *ordered* me to get up."

Mum chuckled. "Well, come on, up you get; there are a few things waiting for you under the tree."

The 'few things' turned out to be some of the most incredible gifts I'd ever received. A laptop computer, three CDs (*The Eminem Show* by Eminem; *Highly Evolved* by The Vines; *Three* by The John Butler Trio) – and a Fender Stratocaster electric guitar plus amplifier.

"Oh, wow," I whispered as I tore the wrapping paper away from my new guitar. It was honestly one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen in my life, and I'd seen a lot of those (Cassie included).

"You deserve it," Dad said. "We are so proud of you for getting signed; you, Cassandra and Matthew have worked incredibly hard over the past couple of years. And I know we don't have to say this, but be careful with it."

"I will be," I promised. "I won't even let Cassie or Matt touch it." And really, I wouldn't – I was going to be the only one allowed to lay even a finger on it.

Dad laughed. "I wouldn't go *that* far, but it's yours; you may as well call the shots."

"Can I have a go?" Emma asked hopefully from where she was admiring her new ballet shoes.  
"Later on?"

"You can look at it, but not touch," I replied. "I'll show you some stuff later if you like, but you'll have to play my acoustic."

Emma nodded.

After breakfast, I nicked upstairs. The family would be here in less than an hour, and first priority on my list was a shower. I needed to wash my hair; now that it was shorter, it was a damn sight easier to take care of. Cassie had taken to streaking non-permanent fluorescent hair colour through it, and remnants of her last colour trip were still in my hair. Pink, purple and blue to be precise. I grabbed some clean clothes out of my wardrobe and went into the bathroom.

One hot shower later, I was sitting at the kitchen table re-plaiting my rat tail; I could now do it by feel alone, as opposed to having to stand in front of a mirror and plaiting by sight. I could also do it in half the time, which was definitely a good thing. For by the time I rewound the rubber band around the end of the plait, the doorbell was ringing. First to arrive were Mum's family, the Silvestris – I tolerated them, but I preferred to keep well out of their way, especially when it came to my Italian grandfather. I had absolutely no respect for him, same as he had never respected me, and it drove my mother nuts.

"Taylor, honey, *please* try not to aggravate your grandfather this year," Mum begged as she rushed to open the front door.

"If he doesn't get on my nerves first," I said. "You know that he hates me."

"Taylor, please, for me?"

I sighed. "Fine."

My grandmother came striding into the kitchen and spotted me sitting at the table. "Taylor Kennedy, where are your manners?" she asked in heavily accented English.

*I'll give you manners in a minute*, I grumbled inwardly. "Ciao Nonna," I said resignedly. I guess after that she figured she wouldn't get anything else out of me, for she left me alone after that.

Dad's family, the Kennedys, descended little more than ten minutes later, freeing me from my grandmother's constant scrutiny of my hair, my clothing, everything. She only ever acted like that toward me, never toward Emma or Lila or Oliver. Probably because I was adopted.

Dad's sister-in-law (and therefore my aunt) Jo was quite honestly my favourite relative out of all the Kennedys. She was the one who had noticed my talent for music first (when I was thirteen no less), and had coerced my parents into buying me a second-hand acoustic guitar and allowing me to take lessons. I still had that first guitar, which I'd named Jo, and it was in fact the guitar I'd been playing at the show the night we got our contract. Even though I now had a brand new electric guitar, there was no way in hell that I'd ever replace my first guitar. It was my baby, my pride and joy, and aside from when I had hurled it at my bedroom door back in April I had never mistreated it; it was in excellent condition.

"Who's the rock star now?" called Aunt Jo as she walked into the dining room.

"Hi Auntie Jo!" I said, allowing her to catch me up in an embrace. "You're never gonna guess what Mum and Dad gave me for Christmas." When she shrugged, I replied, "A Fender Strat electric guitar."

"Ooh, now that would have cost a pretty penny," she commented, eyes lighting up. She affected a mock stern gaze. "You're not going to replace that old acoustic of yours now, are you?"

I feigned an expression of mock horror. "Of course not! That old acoustic happens to serve me very well; I was playing it the night we got our recording contract."

"Speaking of recording, how's it going?" Aunt Jo asked, sitting down at the table beside me. "Are you behind schedule, or are you going to be finished on time?"

"Actually, we're ahead of schedule. Everyone at the studio thinks we'll be finished by mid February. We'll probably start touring in April, May at a stretch. I can't wait, to tell you the truth. It's going to be a blast."

"I'm sure it will be. You have absolutely no idea how proud of you we all are; Renegade will put Gosford on the map for sure."

"I bet the Silvestris aren't proud of me; I know that my grandfather isn't too happy about it, and neither is my grandmother."

"Ah, they don't count," Aunt Jo said dismissively. "You're a Kennedy for heaven's sake, not a Silvestri. Who really gives a damn what they think? Well, except for your mother," she added quickly. "I bet your parents are proud of you."

"Why else would they get me a brand new, most likely very expensive guitar?" I shrugged. "Unless of course they bought it on eBay."



Aunt Jo laughed. "I seriously doubt that." She grinned at me. "Well, I best let you get back to staring into space; I don't want to monopolise you all day. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas Aunt Jo."

I didn't stay sitting at the table for long after that. Before long I had ventured into the living room, where Jacqui, Liza and Rhett were all watching *Shrek* with Lila and Oliver. After watching the movie for a little while, I went upstairs and liberated my acoustic guitar from the depths of my bedroom. I took it out onto the back deck with me and settled myself into a deckchair. An argument between my grandparents (Mum's parents) and my parents was brewing over near the fence; on the pretence of tuning my guitar, I listened to the argument.

"Why do you continue to allow this family to be continually shamed by his actions?" my grandfather raged. "He has no consideration of family values, no respect for his elders."

"You seem to forget that he is *adopted*," Mum spat. "And he only has no respect for the two of you because neither of you respect *him!*"

"Then you shamed the family first!" my grandmother retaliated. "And now you are allowing him to do this! Allowing him to further ignore his heritage!"

"Mother, *he is not Italian!* None of us even know what his heritage *is!* And for crying out loud, he is *nineteen years old*. He will be twenty in less than three months! He has been an adult for over one and a half years now, and he has shown it in more ways than you can imagine. He has a job, he has a girlfriend, and he is on his way to achieving a dream that is his, and his alone." Mum ran a hand through her black curls. "Mark and I, we thank God each and every day that we have him; we love him more than even we're able to comprehend. I may not have brought him into this world myself, but he is still our son and we still love him."

My grandfather continued his tirade. "He has absolutely no place in the family, Francesca! No place whatsoever! You have brought shame upon the family three times now – first when you married *him*" he shot a look of pure venom at Dad "second when you adopted a child, and third when you allowed him to pursue a career path that will come to nothing! I will never consider him as part of this family. Never."

I decided at that point to intervene. Leaving my guitar propped up against the wall, I strode over to the fence.

"Taylor, what in the world are you doing?" Mum asked me.

"Saying what I should have said long ago," I replied. "You said yourself that I'm an adult; let me prove it." Mum nodded, she and Dad backed away, and I faced my grandparents.

"I am *ashamed* to be your grandson, do you know that? My mother has done nothing to bring shame on the family, and neither have I. Do you know how many people my age dream of being musicians, but never make that dream come true? Yet here I am, and I've done what hundreds of kids haven't. I've formed a band, and we've been signed. If anything you should be *proud* of me."

I turned to my grandfather. "Do you know *why* I don't respect you? Because you don't respect *me*. I haven't forgotten the way you abused me when I was a kid; it's a bit hard to forget when I have scars all over my body from your 'punishments'. And my cousins from your fucked up side of this family have taken it upon themselves to continue the abuse when you haven't been around to do it yourself! One of their pranks against me actually came this close" I held my right thumb and index finger at the tiniest interval "to claiming my life. I bet you didn't know that, did you? My cousins held me underwater until I very nearly *drowned*. One of them even stood on my back so I couldn't get to the surface and take a breath. I had to be resuscitated by my own mother; it would have killed her if she'd lost me that way. I am so lucky to be alive after everything that the Silvestris have inflicted on me in my life, you really have no idea. And another thing – if you think that I have no place in this family, then consider this. My mother, the woman who brought me into this world, did not want me. If I hadn't been adopted by the Kennedy family, Heaven only knows what would have become of me."

I then turned to my grandmother. "It's true that I don't know my own heritage. I only know that I'm American. Hell, I could have some Italian in me for all I know, but that's just it. *I don't know*. I will probably never find out what I truly am. And personally, I'm far better off *not* knowing. My parents don't give a flying fuck what family I was born into. They only care for who I am now. I became an adult, a fully functioning member of society, at 3:50 in the morning on March fourteenth last year. And in less than three months, I'm going to be turning twenty. I have my own identity; my girlfriend says that I'm a non-conformist, because of all my tattoos, my eyebrow piercing, my long hair, everything about me. And she loves me for that. If you don't like that I'm not the perfect grandchild, then guess what? The two of you can kiss my American ass."

I stepped back slightly. "The two of you are the worst examples of human beings ever to walk the face of this earth. You are racist for one thing. So what if I'm not Italian? I am still a person; I still breathe and I still have a heart that beats, just like everyone else in this world. I still have feelings. And right now, I am proud to be a Kennedy, but I am *deeply* ashamed that I was ever associated with the seeming perfection that is the Silvestri family. Now if you please, I have to practice."

I turned on my heel and strode back over to the deck; I grabbed my guitar and went back into the house, up to my room. About five minutes afterward, my bedroom door creaked open and my mother sidled in.

"Baby, what are you doing up here?" she asked me.

"I don't belong down there," I said quietly. "He's right; I'll never be a part of this family."

"Oh, baby, don't you listen to them," Mum said; she sat down beside me on my bed and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "You're as much a part of this family as your sisters and brother are. And your dad and I, we are so proud of you. You've done something that nobody else in this family has ever managed to do, and you've managed it at nineteen. That's quite an achievement if you ask me."

"I guess..." I looked at my mother. "Is that why you got me that guitar?"

Mum nodded. "That, and you deserved a new guitar. You've had that old acoustic since you were thirteen, and I know you've probably had enough of having to borrow Dale Shelton's electric guitar for every concert and recording session. Am I right?" I nodded. "So now you have two guitars. And I expect to see you playing your new one at your first concert."

I nodded. "I promise."

"That's my baby. Now, I want you to come downstairs and help me out with Christmas dinner; I want you to help me stuff the turkey."

"Aw, Mum..." But regardless of my feelings toward turkey stuffing, I left my guitar on my bed and followed Mum downstairs.

When Christmas dinner was finished, I – on the request of my family – gave an impromptu performance on my brand new guitar. Aside from the little disagreement between my parents and grandparents, it'd been a great Christmas – I had a new computer, a new way to antagonise the neighbours (meaning my new guitar), new CDs...it was all good. I was happy, probably happier than I'd been in months. And if everyone we worked with at the studio was right in their predictions, life would be a damn sight better before long.

\* \* \*

I shouldered my guitar case as I walked up the front path to the Dale family's front door, whistling as I rang the doorbell and stepped back. It was Boxing Day, and that was usually the day that

Matthew, Cassie and I got together and compared Christmases. I guess we could have waited until we returned to Sydney, but I couldn't wait; I wanted to show off my new toy.

Cassie flung the front door open, a huge grin on her face. "Wait till you see what I got for Christmas!" she said as she dragged me into the house.

She had good reason to be excited – like me, her parents had given her a new instrument as a reward for breaking the big time. Only her reward was a brand new Kurzweil keyboard. I suspected that Matthew's reward was a new drumkit. All three of us had been playing second-hand instruments from the very beginning, and first priority for us had always been to get new instruments as soon as we could. I had my first electric guitar, Cassie had her new keyboard...it remained to be seen whether Matthew's parents had caved and bought him a new drumkit.

"What did Matt get for Christmas?" I asked as I accepted a bowl of chocolate and cherry Christmas cake drowning in store-bought vanilla custard. The Dales didn't buy a traditional Christmas cake, seeing as nobody in the family liked or even tolerated the taste of it.

Cassie sat down beside me. "A drumkit."

I chuckled. "Of course; why did I even have to ask?"

Cassie pointed at where my guitar case had been propped up against the coffee table. "So, what's in there?"

"One of my Christmas presents."

"Well, come on, show it off."

I put my bowl down on the coffee table and pulled the case toward me; Cassie let out a squeal as I unzipped it. "Oh, wow," she commented. "That's amazing! And your parents actually bought you that?"

I nodded happily. "They did. They said that it was my reward for getting signed, and a well-deserved reward at that. I'll be able to give Dale his guitar back now that I have my own."

"Oh yeah, that you will; that'll make him happy. So, did you write anything new?"

"Yeah, I did actually." I dug around in my guitar case and unearthed some sheets of paper – half were sheets of notebook paper with lyrics written in black ballpoint pen, and the others were sheets of manuscript paper with notes pencilled on the staves. "You remember the New Year's Eve

party that gets put on every year at the lake? Well, I was thinking that, seeing as we're signed up to play this year, we could perform a Christmas song."

"Like...*Silent Night*?"

I shook my head. "Nope. I wrote a Christmas song. All on my lonesome. I don't know what it's going to sound like with all three of us, but it sounds pretty good on the guitar. I just can't decide whether to play it on acoustic or electric guitar, that's all."

"Well, give me a look and I'll let you know what I think." I passed the papers across to Cassie, and she scanned the lyrics and notes that I'd jotted down. "Hmm, not bad."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's not our normal style, but I like it," Cassie clarified. "Matt'll be here soon, he said he'd definitely bring his drumkit, and when he does we can learn it." She settled back into the lounge and broke off a piece of cake with her fingers. "So, how was your Christmas?"

I groaned. "Seriously, Cass, you do not want to know."

"Aw, come on..."

I sighed resignedly, then recounted the story of my Christmas Day; however I skimmed over the finer details, like the fight I'd had with Mum's parents. I didn't think she really needed to know what kind of problems that we were having within the family.

Matthew arrived little more than ten minutes later, his older brother helping him to drag his drumkit into the house. There was the requisite drooling over my guitar, then we got to looking over my song lyrics.

"Well, it's slightly short notice, and it's not really our style, but I think we can probably learn it by next Tuesday," Matthew said finally.

"Jeez, with an attitude like that..." Cassie muttered.

"Oh, shut your trap. I know it's short notice, and that we usually give ourselves a month or more to prepare-"

"Yeah, well, usually we don't have a debut album to record," Cassie cut in.

"Cassie, would you just shut up, please? As I was saying, normally we give ourselves a month. But if we meet up at my place once a day to practice, we could pull this off no worries."

"You really think we could?" I asked.

"Tay, what did I say to Cass four months ago? I said that we could go far with this band thing. And I was right on the mark. So if I say that we can pull this off in less than one week, we can do it. So how about Tay, you hook that Strat up to its amp and the power point, and Cass, you break out that keyboard of yours, and we'll get down to work."

Cassie met my gaze, and we both shrugged. "Let's do it," we agreed.

\* \* \*

The annual New Year's By The Lake town gathering was in full swing by the time our families rocked up; Renegade was scheduled to go onstage at nine, and it was eight-fifteen when we met up in front of the main stage. Cassie, Matthew and I agreed to go looking around at the stalls and meet up at five to nine.

I checked my wallet to see just how much money I had with me, counting ten dollars eighty five, six game tokens from Rowan's Funland (down in Ulladulla – we'd gone there on holiday the previous summer), a flattened cap from a bottle of grapefruit Ruski, one of my chain necklaces, my driver's licence, two train tickets, a couple of shopping docketts, the SIM card from Mum's old phone, my ATM card, my library card, a little plastic zip lock bag with my spare eyebrow rings inside, my membership card for the leagues club and a spare key to my car. A search of my pockets unearthed a further two dollars seventy and a cap from a bottle of Schweppes Creaming Soda.

Thirteen dollars sixty. And I had three quarters of an hour in which to spend it.

Forty minutes later I met Cassie and Matthew back at the stage; I'd been bitten countless times by mosquitoes and was therefore scratching at my exposed arms fairly constantly, but by the looks of it so had Matthew and Cassie.

"Okay, so what now?" I asked as we sat backstage, waiting to be called up for our performance. "Do we just churn out covers or what?"

"I think that would be the best plan of action; we'll play five covers and finish up with *Christmas Time*. That should keep them happy. Then we go get drunk."

"That's always your answer to everything," Cassie laughed. "Go and get drunk." She pulled sharply on one of her pigtails, which had been decorated with bright green tinsel. She'd also stuck tiny little stars on her cheeks and dusted the rest of her face, plus her arms, with glitter powder. A bit extreme I felt, but that was Cassie Dale for you. "So what covers?"

"I reckon we should do that Our Lady Peace song, *Somewhere Out There*," I replied. "We know that one almost better than we know our own music."

"And..." Matthew frowned. "*Million Tears* by Kasey Chambers; Cass, you always did that one really well. *Kryptonite* by 3 Doors Down...actually, three covers plus our original would be better than five covers. We'll start with *Somewhere Out There*, move on to *Kryptonite*, then *Million Tears*, and *Christmas Time* to round out the set. That would be the best course of action I think."

We took the stage little more than five minutes later, launching right into *Somewhere Out There* as soon as we were each in position.

"Last time I talked to you...you were lonely and out of place...you were looking down on me...lost out in space...laid underneath the stars...strung out and feeling brave...watch the red orange glow...watch it float away...

"Down here in the atmosphere...garbage and city lights...you gotta save your tired soul...you gotta save our lives...turn on the radio...to find you on satellite...I'm waiting for the sky to fall...I'm waiting for a sign...all we are is all so far...

"You're falling back to me...the star that I can't see...I know you're out there, somewhere out there...you're falling out of reach...defying gravity...I know you're out there, somewhere out there...

"Hope you remember me...when you're homesick and need a change...I miss your purple hair...I miss the way you taste...I know you'll come back someday...on a bed of nails I wait...I'm praying that you don't burn out...or fade away...all we are is all so far...

"You're falling back to me...the star that I can't see...I know you're out there...somewhere out there...you're falling out of reach...defying gravity...I know you're out there...somewhere out there...you're falling back to me...the star that I can't see...I know you're out there...somewhere out there...you're falling out of reach...defying gravity...I know you're out there...somewhere out there...you're falling back to me...the star that I can't see...I know you're out there...somewhere out there...you're falling out of reach...defying gravity...I know you're out there...somewhere out there...

"You're falling back to me...well I know, I know...you're falling out of reach...I know..."

After *Kryptonite*, we played *Million Tears*; I swapped my electric guitar for my old acoustic, and Cassie moved to the centre of the stage.

"Take my hand...break my stride...make me smile...for every time I've cried...hold my heart...in the palm of your hand...don't listen to it breakin'...just listen to the band...

"Do you wanna ride in my car...it's parked out on the street...or just stay with me awhile...before I fall asleep...take these tears...wash your skin...I'm havin' trouble breathing...since you walked in...

"My hands are tied...my head is reeling...my eyes have cried...a million tears...from wishing you were here...

"All my life...I've welcomed pain...I've made up more excuses...to bring it back again...now I'm here...and I'll drink to the shame...I'll drink to the madness...that made me this way...

"My hands are tied...my head is reeling...my eyes have cried...a million tears...from wishing you were here...

"Take these tears...wash your skin...I'm havin' trouble breathing...since you walked in..."

"All right, our final song is an original song, one that we will probably never record unless we take it upon ourselves to record a Christmas album," Matthew told the gathered crowd. "So treasure this; it's more than likely the only time you will get to hear it." A nod from me, and Matthew counted in. We'd elected to share the vocals on this one.

"Everything is different...but nothing's changed...now we're going in circles...it's Christmas again...can't you hear the sleigh bells ring...all our voices unite...and look up to the heavens...see the stars shining bright...

"Everybody needs a little lovin'...around Christmas time...somehow you got to know you're gonna be all right...do you remember how it used to be...sitting under the Christmas tree...in your heart you'll...find the season...

"We've been blessed by the children...black, yellow and white...they believe in the things...we try to deny...so throw down your weapons...but continue the fight...and let's love one another...on this holy night...

"Everybody needs a little lovin'...around Christmas time...somehow you got to know you're gonna be all right...do you remember how it used to be...sitting under the Christmas tree...in your heart you'll...find the season...

"Oh reach down inside your heart...and see all the love...oh in your heart you'll...find the reason..."



"Everybody needs a little lovin'...around Christmas time...somehow you got to know you're gonna be all right...do you remember how it used to be...when I loved you and you loved me...in your heart you'll...find the season..."

The gathered crowd erupted in tumultuous applause after the echoes died, and I addressed the crowd. "Thank you so much for supporting us in our journey to being signed; we're in the finishing stages of recording our debut album, which if all goes to plan will be released April 2003," I said. "Happy New Year everyone!"

It would definitely be a happy new year for all involved with Renegade; I'd heard whispers that the record executives were seriously considering not forcing us to rerecord each and every song from *Riders On The Storm*; rather, they were planning to add what we had already recorded to what was on the master tape for ROTS and release that. They'd said themselves how impressed they were by it, and it made perfect sense to me. Why force us to rerecord what had already been done? What we were recording at the moment was exactly the same quality as what we'd done seven, nearly eight months earlier; it just needed a little tweaking to make it sound slightly more professional.

Cassie came and curled up next to me as the fireworks started. "I love you," she said to me. "I never thought I would love someone as much as you."

"I love you too Cass," I replied. "I've loved you for as long as I can remember."

"We'll always be together, right?"

I kissed Cassie and pulled her close. "Always," I replied. "Well, here's to 2003...let's make this the best year yet."

"The best year yet," Cassie agreed.

## Chapter 10

Taylor Kennedy  
c/o Renegade Fighters  
GPO Box 9008  
Sydney NSW 2001  
Australia

Friday, January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2003

Hey Bryony,

HAPPY NEW YEAR! Haha, I got you first!

Recording is this close \*holds thumb and index finger at a tiny interval\* to being finished – not long to go now until the insanity well and truly is upon us. Personally, I can't wait. I really can't. This has been a long time coming for us, and it's finally happening. And to think that this time last year, I was the guitar player for a lowly little independent rock group. Just goes to show that dreams can come true if you wish hard enough for it to happen. I love my life, Bry – I have a dream career, I have a great family, I have one of the most amazing girls in the world as the love of my life, and I have some of the best mates a guy could ever hope for. Life is perfect right now, and it can only get better.

What did you get for Christmas? I got some cool stuff – a laptop computer, three CDs and a Fender Stratocaster electric guitar plus amp. I can't even begin to imagine how much all of it would have cost my parents. Actually, I'm not gonna think about it, it'd be too damn depressing. Cass and Matt got new instruments as well – our parents said that they're our rewards for breaking the big time. I'm not pensioning off my old acoustic anytime soon though, it was my first guitar and it still works perfectly. I'll probably never even need another guitar now that I've got those two. But I finally got to give Dale (Matt's brother) his electric guitar back, so he's happy.

The address at the top of the letter is the band address – the record company got us a PO box number, and they've also bought the house we've been living in since September for us to live in whenever we're in Sydney. No hotels for us – we've actually got somewhere in the city to call home. And I have another email address that you can write to me at if you like, instead of my AOL address. Mum will probably forward all my email to my new address, but I reckon it'd be easier this way. So here it is: [taylor@renegade-fighters.com.au](mailto:taylor@renegade-fighters.com.au). If you wanna write to Cass or Matt for

whatever reason, Cassie's is cassie@renegade-fighters.com.au and Matt's is matthew@renegade-fighters.com.au.

Well, I gotta skedaddle, Cass and Matt and I have to do some publicity stuff, and it'll probably take us all night. Talk to you later...

Taylor

PS: I got my hair cut last month – Cassie plaited me a rat-tail to show just how long it used to be. I'll take some photos and email them to you some time.

\* \* \*

"So, what exactly do we have to do?" Cassie asked as we sat down at the kitchen table with our lunch. January was well and truly upon us, and Tamara (our publicist) had asked us to fill out some information about ourselves; she would weed through them after we gave them back to her.

"Tamara gave us these," Matthew answered. "We get two each; we have to fill them out, making them as detailed as we can, and she'll go through them after we give them back to her and put together some sort of detailed piece about each of us, to give to magazines and such. They're almost the same as those email quizzes we've been passing around, but they're slightly different."

"Should be a piece of cake," I said. "Well, let's do it."

We separated for the afternoon and worked on our sheets alone, then regrouped and compared work.

\* \* \*

Matthew Shelton

#### BASIC INFORMATION

Name: Matthew James Shelton

Sex: Male

Age: 20

Birthdate: July 22 1982

Birthplace: Gosford, New South Wales, Australia

Height: 182 cm

Eyes: Brown

Hair: Black

Marital status: Single

#### PERSONAL INFORMATION

Nicknames: Matt, MJ, Matty

Religion/religious background: Baptist

Pets: A Maltese terrier, Max

Languages spoken: English, Italian

Favourite book: *1984* by George Orwell

Favourite magazine: *FHM*

Favourite newspaper: *Sydney Morning Herald*

Favourite music: Alternative and rock – Linkin Park is the best band in the world bar *none*

Favourite movie: *Austin Powers In Goldmember*

Favourite TV show: *Mad TV*, *Star Trek Voyager*

Favourite actor/actress: Actor – Sean Connery; actress – Jennifer Garner

Favourite place: My bedroom at home

Favourite colour: Green

Favourite food: Spaghetti marinara

Favourite drink: Cherry Coke

Favourite sport: Rugby league

#### FAMILY BACKGROUND

Father: Kenneth Shelton

Profession: Accountant

Mother: Darla-May Shelton

Profession: Secretary at Dad's accountancy firm

Brothers: Dale (23), Casey (15)

Sisters: Cassidy (13)

\* \* \*

Name: Matthew James Shelton

Birthday: July 22 1982

Nicknames: Matt, MJ, Matty

Location: Gosford, NSW, Australia

Height: 182 cm

Hair colour: Black

Eye colour: Brown

Do you smoke, drink, or do drugs? I drink socially and smoke occasionally

Music: Alternative and rock mostly

Siblings: Dale, Casey and Cassidy

Pets: A Maltese terrier named Max

#### Random Questions

Do you listen to music on your computer? Yep

Do you wear headphones so you don't distract other people? Sometimes, but mostly I love to antagonise the neighbours

Do you use highlighters frequently? No

Do you carry scissors? No

Do you carry other sharp objects? No

Do you wish you did? Sometimes!

How about fingernail clippers? No

Blue or black ink? Black

Do you own a pair of flannel pants? No

Do you wear slippers around the house? No

Do you untie your shoes before you take them off? Yep

Has someone accidentally given you back the wrong change and you just kept it? Countless times

Ever been to a hockey game? No

Ever watched someone be spit on? No

Ever growled at someone? Yep

Do you have a camera of your own? Yep

Do you spend extremely too much time on your computer? I try not to

Do you ever wave at complete strangers? No

Are you the moron that writes on the bathroom walls? I might be!

Have you ever flashed anyone the peace sign while driving down the road? Sometimes

Do you yell across the bowling alley at people you know? Yep

What's your highest bowling score? 298

Have you ever played tennis? No

Do you have so many inside jokes that it's annoying for other people to be around you? No

Do you and your friends diss each other on a daily basis? Hell no

## Your Favourite Things

Colour: Green

Food: Spaghetti marinara

Drink: Cherry Coke

Outfit: My Quiksilver T-shirt and my jeans

Song: *Square Dance* – Eminem

Band/group: Linkin Park

Movie: *Austin Powers In Goldmember*

Animal: Snakes

TV show: *Mad TV, Star Trek Voyager*

Sport: Rugby league

## Randomness

Are you a virgin: Yep

Do you like pickles: No

Do you have a website: No

Do you have your own phone line: No

Last time you went to the bowling alley: A few weeks ago

What perfume/cologne do you wear: Lynx Gravity

Brand of toothpaste: Macleans

Last time you went to the doctor: Two weeks ago

Do you have a credit card: No

Do you love your mum: Yeah

Last book you read: *1984* – George Orwell

White, dark, or milk chocolate: Milk

Ever dyed your hair: No

What brand shampoo: Pantene

Favourite holiday: Christmas

Last thing you bought: A six-pack of lemon Ruskis

## Have you ever...

Been on a plane: Yep

Cried in public: No

Climbed a tree: Yep

Fell asleep in a movie theatre: No

Met a celebrity: No

Broken the law: No

Said 'I love you' and meant it: No

Made prank calls: Yep

Skipped class: No

Gone to a theme park and checked out all the cute guys/girls: No

The Randomness Continues!

Are you stressed out: No

Do you believe in angels: Yep

Would you ever join the army: No

Do you want a puppy: No, one is enough thank you very much

Ever had a kick me sign on you: Not that I'm aware of

Last time you were scared: When I was ten

By what? A dirty great big funnel web spider

Do you do your own laundry: Yep

Are your nails real or fake: Real

What do you wish you were named: I like my name

Favourite movie star: Sean Connery

Are your parents divorced: Nope, still married

Do you work out: No

Are you muscular: No

Do you take a lot of pictures: Yep

Do you want a baby: Maybe

Ever thought you were pregnant: Um, I'm a guy...

Last time you were sick: Three months ago

Butter or margarine: Margarine

Your feelings on McDonald's chicken nuggets: They taste like shit, to be frank

Do Chinese people really cook cats and dogs: How would I know, I'm not Chinese

Do you believe in Santa Claus: No

Do you go to a tanning bed: No

Are you in love? Not at the moment

Favourite Rugrats character: Chucky

Do you sniff markers: No

Are you dissatisfied with your hair colour: No

What magazines do you get: *FHM* mostly

Do you believe your horoscope: No

What's your sign: Leo

Yet Again Randomness!

Do you like coffee: Yep

Do you write in pen or pencil: Pen

Favourite lip gloss: n/a

Do you wear a watch: Yep

Sunglasses: Raybans are cool

The wussiest sport: Netball

Last CD you bought: *Siamese Dream* – Smashing Pumpkins

How long are you in the shower: Fifteen minutes at the most

Idle Curiosity

When's the last time you slept with a stuffed animal: When I was six

How many rings until you answer the phone: Two

What's on your mouse pad: Nothing, it's black

How many houses have you lived in: Two

How many schools have you gone to: Two

Would you shave your head for \$5000: No

Have any tattoos/where: Yep – the Southern Cross on my right shoulder and a redback spider on the inside of my left wrist

Have any piercings/where: No

Get motion sickness: No

Think you're a health freak: No

Get along with your parents: At times

Like thunderstorms: Yep

\* \* \*

Cassandra Dale

## BASIC INFORMATION

Name: Cassandra Sapphira Dale

Sex: Female

Age: 19



Birthdate: May 17 1983

Birthplace: Gosford, New South Wales, Australia

Height: 169 cm

Eyes: Green

Hair: Red

Marital status: Taken

## PERSONAL INFORMATION

Nicknames: Cassie, Cass

Religion/religious background: Agnostic

Pets: A children's python named Shimmer and a rat named Charlie

Languages spoken: English

Favourite book: *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* by J.K. Rowling

Favourite magazine: *Cosmopolitan*

Favourite newspaper: *Sydney Morning Herald*

Favourite music: Everything but pop, classical, country and techno

Favourite movie: *Blue Crush*

Favourite TV show: *Home And Away*

Favourite actor/actress: Actor – Chris Egan; actress – Jodie Foster

Favourite place: My boyfriend's bedroom

Favourite colour: Purple

Favourite food: Blueberry Danish

Favourite drink: Strawberry daiquiris

Favourite sport: Women's basketball

## FAMILY BACKGROUND

Father: Peter Dale

Profession: Coach for local junior basketball team

Mother: Geraldine Dale

Profession: Shop assistant

Brothers: Andrew (27), Zachary (23), Paul (21), Grant (17)

Sisters: Rebecca (3)

\* \* \*

Name: Cassandra Sapphira Dale

Birthday: May 17 1983

Nicknames: Cassie, Cass

Location: Gosford, NSW, Australia

Height: 169 cm

Hair colour: Red

Eye colour: Green

Do you smoke, drink, or do drugs? Social drinker

Music: Everything but pop, classical, country and techno

Siblings: Andrew, Zachary, Paul, Grant and Rebecca

Pets: A children's python named Shimmer and a rat named Charlie

#### Random Questions

Do you listen to music on your computer? Yep

Do you wear headphones so you don't distract other people? Yep

Do you use highlighters frequently? No

Do you carry scissors? No

Do you carry other sharp objects? No

Do you wish you did? Hell yes

How about fingernail clippers? No

Blue or black ink? Blue

Do you own a pair of flannel pants? No

Do you wear slippers around the house? No

Do you untie your shoes before you take them off? Yep

Has someone accidentally given you back the wrong change and you just kept it? No

Ever been to a hockey game? No

Ever watched someone be spit on? No

Ever growled at someone? Yep

Do you have a camera of your own? Yep

Do you spend extremely too much time on your computer? Guilty as charged

Do you ever wave at complete strangers? Sometimes!

Are you the moron that writes on the bathroom walls? Yep

Have you ever flashed anyone the peace sign while driving down the road? Sometimes

Do you yell across the bowling alley at people you know? Yep

What's your highest bowling score? 187

Have you ever played tennis? No

Do you have so many inside jokes that it's annoying for other people to be around you? No

Do you and your friends diss each other on a daily basis? Hell no

### Your Favourite Things

Colour: Purple

Food: Blueberry Danish

Drink: Strawberry daiquiris

Outfit: My black miniskirt and my red sleeveless top

Song: *Dirrty* – Christina Aguilera

Band/group: Nickelback

Movie: *Blue Crush*

Animal: Pythons and rats

TV show: *Home And Away*

Sport: Women's basketball

### Randomness

Are you a virgin: No

Do you like pickles: No

Do you have a website: No

Do you have your own phone line: Yep

Last time you went to the bowling alley: A few weeks ago

What perfume/cologne do you wear: Imari Summer Frost

Brand of toothpaste: Colgate

Last time you went to the doctor: Couple of months ago

Do you have a credit card: No

Do you love your mum: Yeah

Last book you read: *Tower Of Evil* by Mary Main

White, dark, or milk chocolate: Milk

Ever dyed your hair: Yep

What brand shampoo: Garnier Fructis

Favourite holiday: Easter

Last thing you bought: A chocolate bar

Have you ever...

Been on a plane: Yep

Cried in public: Yep

Climbed a tree: Yep

Fell asleep in a movie theatre: No

Met a celebrity: No

Broken the law: Yep

Said 'I love you' and meant it: Yep

Made prank calls: Yep

Skipped class: No

Gone to a theme park and checked out all the cute guys/girls: No

The Randomness Continues!

Are you stressed out: No

Do you believe in angels: Yep

Would you ever join the army: No

Do you want a puppy: No, my snake might get out and bite it

Ever had a kick me sign on you: Not that I'm aware of

Last time you were scared: Last June

By what? When I thought my boyfriend was going to die

Do you do your own laundry: Occasionally

Are your nails real or fake: Real

What do you wish you were named: Inara

Favourite movie star: Jodie Foster

Are your parents divorced: Nope, still married

Do you work out: No

Are you muscular: No

Do you take a lot of pictures: Yep

Do you want a baby: Maybe

Ever thought you were pregnant: No

Last time you were sick: Can't remember

Butter or margarine: Margarine

Your feelings on McDonald's chicken nuggets: They're not bad

Do Chinese people really cook cats and dogs: I don't know

Do you believe in Santa Claus: No

Do you go to a tanning bed: No  
Are you in love? You bet I am  
Favourite Rugrats character: Lil  
Do you sniff markers: Only the scented kind  
Are you dissatisfied with your hair colour: No  
What magazines do you get: *Cosmopolitan*  
Do you believe your horoscope: Yes  
What's your sign: Taurus

Yet Again Randomness!

Do you like coffee: No  
Do you write in pen or pencil: Pen  
Favourite lip gloss: Bonne Bell LipShox  
Do you wear a watch: Yep  
Sunglasses: Don't wear them  
The wussiest sport: Netball and cricket  
Last CD you bought: *Barricades And Brickwalls* – Kasey Chambers  
How long are you in the shower: Half an hour

Idle Curiosity

When's the last time you slept with a stuffed animal: Few nights ago  
How many rings until you answer the phone: Two  
What's on your mouse pad: A picture of me and my boyfriend  
How many houses have you lived in: Two  
How many schools have you gone to: Two  
Would you shave your head for \$5000: Hell no  
Have any tattoos/where: Yep but I'm not telling where  
Have any piercings/where: Just my ears  
Get motion sickness: No  
Think you're a health freak: No, but other people might have differing opinions on that  
Get along with your parents: Yep  
Like thunderstorms: No

\* \* \*

Taylor Kennedy

## BASIC INFORMATION

Name: Taylor Francis Kennedy

Sex: Male

Age: 19

Birthdate: March 14 1983

Birthplace: Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA

Height: 183 cm

Eyes: Greyish blue

Hair: Blonde

Marital status: Taken

## PERSONAL INFORMATION

Nicknames: Tay

Religion/religious background: Catholic

Pets: None

Languages spoken: English

Favourite book: *The Ultimate Aphrodisiac* – Robert G. Barrett

Favourite magazine: Don't really have one

Favourite newspaper: *Sydney Morning Herald*

Favourite music: Alternative and rock

Favourite movie: *Mr. Deeds*

Favourite TV show: *South Park*

Favourite actor/actress: Actor – Anthony Hopkins; actress – Tammin Sursok

Favourite place: The beach

Favourite colour: Blue

Favourite food: Chicken

Favourite drink: Chocolate Mudslides

Favourite sport: Rugby league

## FAMILY BACKGROUND

Father: Mark Kennedy

Profession: Owner of the local video rental place

Mother: Francesca Kennedy

Profession: Shop assistant

Brothers: Oliver (7)

Sisters: Emma (15) and Lila (5); I also have a half sister, Bryony (18)

\* \* \*

Name: Taylor Francis Kennedy

Birthday: March 14 1983

Nicknames: Tay

Location: Gosford, NSW, Australia

Height: 183 cm

Hair colour: Blonde

Eye colour: Greyish blue

Do you smoke, drink, or do drugs? Social drinker

Music: Alternative and rock

Siblings: Bryony, Emma, Oliver, Lila

Pets: None

Random Questions

Do you listen to music on your computer? Yep

Do you wear headphones so you don't distract other people? No

Do you use highlighters frequently? No

Do you carry scissors? No

Do you carry other sharp objects? No

Do you wish you did? No

How about fingernail clippers? No

Blue or black ink? Black

Do you own a pair of flannel pants? No

Do you wear slippers around the house? No

Do you untie your shoes before you take them off? Yep

Has someone accidentally given you back the wrong change and you just kept it? No

Ever been to a hockey game? No

Ever watched someone be spit on? Yep

Ever growled at someone? Yep

Do you have a camera of your own? Yep

Do you spend extremely too much time on your computer? No

Do you ever wave at complete strangers? No  
Are you the moron that writes on the bathroom walls? No  
Have you ever flashed anyone the peace sign while driving down the road? No  
Do you yell across the bowling alley at people you know? No  
What's your highest bowling score? 246  
Have you ever played tennis? Once for school  
Do you have so many inside jokes that it's annoying for other people to be around you? No  
Do you and your friends diss each other on a daily basis? No

#### Your Favourite Things

Colour: Blue  
Food: Chicken  
Drink: Chocolate Mudslides  
Outfit: T-shirt and jeans  
Song: *I'm The Killer* – Lifelong  
Band/group: Tenacious D  
Movie: *Mr. Deeds*  
Animal: Dogs  
TV show: *South Park*  
Sport: Rugby league

#### Randomness

Are you a virgin: No  
Do you like pickles: No  
Do you have a website: No  
Do you have your own phone line: No  
Last time you went to the bowling alley: A few weeks ago  
What perfume/cologne do you wear: Lynx Gravity  
Brand of toothpaste: Colgate  
Last time you went to the doctor: Can't remember  
Do you have a credit card: No  
Do you love your mum: Oh yeah  
Last book you read: *The Silence Of The Lambs*  
White, dark, or milk chocolate: Milk  
Ever dyed your hair: No  
What brand shampoo: Sunsilks



Favourite holiday: Christmas

Last thing you bought: My lunch yesterday

Have you ever...

Been on a plane: Yep

Cried in public: No

Climbed a tree: No

Fell asleep in a movie theatre: No

Met a celebrity: No

Broken the law: No

Said 'I love you' and meant it: Yep

Made prank calls: Yep

Skipped class: No

Gone to a theme park and checked out all the cute guys/girls: No

The Randomness Continues!

Are you stressed out: No

Do you believe in angels: Yep

Would you ever join the army: No

Do you want a puppy: No

Ever had a kick me sign on you: No

Last time you were scared: Can't remember

By what? n/a

Do you do your own laundry: Sometimes

Are your nails real or fake: Real

What do you wish you were named: I like my name

Favourite movie star: Anthony Hopkins

Are your parents divorced: Nope, still married

Do you work out: No

Are you muscular: No

Do you take a lot of pictures: Yep

Do you want a baby: Maybe

Ever thought you were pregnant: I'm a guy

Last time you were sick: Can't remember

Butter or margarine: Margarine

Your feelings on McDonald's chicken nuggets: Never eaten them

Do Chinese people really cook cats and dogs: No idea

Do you believe in Santa Claus: No

Do you go to a tanning bed: No

Are you in love? Yes, unquestionably

Favourite Rugrats character: Tommy

Do you sniff markers: No

Are you dissatisfied with your hair colour: No

What magazines do you get: I don't get any

Do you believe your horoscope: No

What's your sign: Pisces

Yet Again Randomness!

Do you like coffee: Yes

Do you write in pen or pencil: Pen

Favourite lip gloss: n/a

Do you wear a watch: Yep

Sunglasses: Yeah, I wear them

The wussiest sport: Tennis

Last CD you bought: *Get In The Ring* by H-Block X

How long are you in the shower: Ten, maybe fifteen minutes

Idle Curiosity

When's the last time you slept with a stuffed animal: I was really little, that's for sure

How many rings until you answer the phone: Two

What's on your mouse pad: Nothing

How many houses have you lived in: Three that I'm aware of

How many schools have you gone to: Two

Would you shave your head for \$5000: No

Have any tattoos/where: Yep – a dragon on my lower back, an ankh on my left shoulder, a shooting star on my right wrist, a shark on my chest, the Southern cross on my right shoulder and the Star of David on my left wrist

Have any piercings/where: Yep – my eyebrow and my left ear

Get motion sickness: No

Think you're a health freak: No

Get along with your parents: Always

Like thunderstorms: Not really

\* \* \*

"When did Tamara say that the album was going to be ready for release?" I asked as Matthew slipped our completed quizzes into a manila envelope. We hadn't really been into the studio to work since November; all we really did there was help with the mixing process. "They've been tweaking the master tape an awful lot lately."

"March I think is what she said," Matthew answered. "We have to pick a first single, and then film a music video, and we have to give the record company our lyrics as well."

"We start interviews soon as well, don't we?"

"Not until February."

"Thank Heaven for that," I said. "So, what, we get to go home for a couple of weeks soon?"

"Yeah," Matthew confirmed. "And they've been stressing the 'two weeks off' thing; we can't have any more time off than that. Much as I know we all want at least a month off again, we can't."

"Such is the life of a rock star," Cassie said. "You do realise that once all of this starts, we can kiss any hope of a private life goodbye?"

"That's the only thing I *don't* like about this," I said. "I hate the fact that very soon, all of Australia will know my name, how old I am, shit like that." I leaned forward across the table. "I say we make a pact. We promise each other not to let this go to our heads. We remember our roots, we remember who supports us first and foremost, and we remember that no matter where this takes us, we were friends first. Our friendship should be a great deal more important than the band." I put my hand in the middle of the table. "Agreed?"

Cassie and Matthew placed their hands in the middle of the table with mine. "Agreed," they chorused.

"So, what are we going to do for the rest of the day?" Cassie asked.

"Tamara wanted us to draft out some thank you messages for the album; some bands do individual messages, but others do one for the band as a whole, so we need to decide how we go about this."

"Well..." I toyed with my rat tail. "How about we do one each, then we write one together? Best of both worlds that."

"Sounds good to me," Cassie agreed; Matthew shrugged, and we got to work. About ten minutes later we compared our work.

\* \* \*

Matthew Shelton

My first thank you goes to my family, who has been there for me from the very beginning – my parents Kenneth and Darla-May, my brothers Dale and Casey, and my sister Cassidy. Thank you for nurturing my musical aspirations, even though at times they might have seemed slightly far-fetched. And thank you for putting up with my drumming at odd hours, it means a lot to me. I also apologise to my neighbours for keeping them awake late at night, and I thank them all for not complaining too often. I also thank our record company, Sony Music Australia, for giving us a chance to prove ourselves. And finally my band mates – Cassie and Taylor. You're the best friends I could ever have asked for. We made it to the big time – let's show the world how to rock the Gosford way!

Peace out,

Matt

\* \* \*

Cassandra Dale

First shout outs go to my family – my parents Peter and Geraldine, my brothers Andy, Zac, Paul and Grant, and my little sister Becca. Thank you for supporting me in this journey, and for putting up with the three of us when we've been over at the Dale family home for whatever reason. Thanks for being at every show, for tolerating the creative process, for being the first people to hear our music and not say it completely sucked. My boyfriend, Taylor – you're the sweetest, most amazing guy a girl could ever hope to love. I love you baby. Thanks to our record company, Sony Music Australia, for signing us and helping us achieve our goal. And last, but most certainly not least, the two lunatics that have dragged me along for the ride – Matt and Taylor. You're both insane, but I love you guys to pieces. In the immortal words of Matthew Shelton, Renegade is gonna rock da house! Peace out everyone, and I'll catch you all next time.

Cassie

\* \* \*

Taylor Kennedy

My family deserves the most thanks of anyone I know – my parents Mark and Francesca, my brother Oliver, my sisters Emma and Lila, and my half-sister Bryony. And I can't forget my Aunt Jo, who was the one to recognise my musical talent and convince my parents to buy me my first guitar. I love you guys unequivocally, there's just no question about it. Thank you for allowing me to chase my dream, and for being there when I needed you the most. I truly appreciate everything you do for me. My girlfriend Cassie, for loving me unquestionably and without doubting me for a second. I love you, and I always will. Thank you to everyone at Sony Music Australia, for giving us an opportunity to share our gifts with the world. And lastly, the two people who probably mean the most to me in this whole world – Matt and Cassie, my band mates. It's time for us to rock out like we've never rocked before – bring it on!

Taylor

\* \* \*

We decided in the end *not* to write a general band thank you message, and instead settled for a collaborative dedication.

\* \* \*

'If you love someone, put their name in a circle, because hearts can be broken but circles go on forever.'

- Author unknown

This album is dedicated to love, friendship and family, not necessarily in that order.

## Chapter 11

"Hey, isn't that Taylor's band?"

My head jerked up at Emma's words; she was engrossed in watching *Video Hits*, hand on the remote control. She'd been taping music videos all morning. I was sitting at the kitchen table, going over some information for our interview schedule, and could very faintly hear the opening notes of *Home*, which had been chosen as our debut single.

"Turn it up, Emma!" I called. She obliged, the volume shooting up before I'd even finished speaking. She twisted around, her head sticking up over the back of the sofa, and she grinned at me.

"My brother the rock star," she said proudly.

Mum came downstairs at that moment and stood in the living room, hands on her hips. "Emma Renee Kennedy, explain yourself; why is it I can hear the TV all the way upstairs?"

"Taylor's band's on TV," was all the explanation that Emma had to give.

Mum looked at the TV at that moment. "I don't believe it," she said.

"Believe it, Mum," I said, getting up from the table and walking into the living room. "We did it."

"I am so proud of you," Mum said, pulling me into an embrace. "My baby is famous..." She smiled at me. "So, tell me; when do you start doing promotion and interviews?"

"Tuesday," I replied. "I don't know when I'll be back home though; it'll be a long time from now, that's for sure. The album comes out on March 10. And you guys won't have to worry about buying a copy of it; I'll scrounge up a copy and send it over."

"Oh, you don't have to do that-"

"No, I want to."

The phone rang, and I raced over and picked it up; it was Cassie.

"Tay, are you watching *Video Hits*?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yeah, I am; I know, I know, we're on TV."

"I know! Isn't it awesome?"

"Oh yeah. I can't believe all of this is happening."

"Me neither. Hey, we're going back to Sydney soon, aren't we?"

"Yeah, on Tuesday. We've got an interview with *Dolly* magazine that afternoon."

Cassie groaned. "Oh, *joy*; I stopped reading that long ago, yet we still have to be interviewed by them?"

"Unfortunately, yeah. But let's not let on that we aren't too happy about that, okay?"

"Agreed." Cassie sighed. "Y'know, seeing us on the TV kinda cements this all for us, but it's still like it's a dream; I keep thinking that I'm going to wake up, and I'll still be just a normal chick living in Gosford who plays in an unsigned rock group on weekends."

"It does feel like that sometimes," I agreed. "But this is really only the beginning; we have one hell of a journey ahead of us."

"One hell of a journey," Cassie echoed.

\* \* \*

We relocated back to Sydney on Tuesday morning, and had just got all the cleaning and tidying up out of the way when the doorbell (installed only days before we moved back in) rang. Tamara had told us to expect someone saying that they were from *Dolly* magazine to rock up around one in the afternoon; glancing at the clock on the microwave, I saw that it was just after quarter past.

"I'll get it!" Cassie yelled as she bolted past the kitchen bench, dressed in her black miniskirt and a bright red halter-top. She had a silver armband in the shape of a coiled serpent wrapped around her upper arm; it glinted in the late summer sunlight that poured in through the kitchen windows. She disappeared into the front foyer, returning with a tall blonde woman carrying a satchel bag. "Mark's still upstairs beautifying himself I think," Cassie joked as she walked back into the kitchen. "Tay, this is Kate Whitby from *Dolly* magazine; Kate, this is my boyfriend and the band's guitarist and resident pretty boy, Taylor Kennedy."

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you at last," Kate said, extending a hand across the bench; I shook her hand. "*Home* is an amazing song."

"Thank you," I said, blushing slightly.

"Taylor wrote that one on his lonesome," Cassie explained. "Hey, Tay, I thought I was the one who was supposed to blush when they got praise."

"You've had your turn at that; let me have a go for once."

Matthew came downstairs at that precise moment, dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt. I glanced down at my outfit to check that it looked decent – baggy cargo pants, black Quiksilver T-shirt, sneakers – then rummaged in my pockets for an elastic band so I could tie my hair back. I probably should have washed it before I left Gosford that morning, but what's done is done. I found one and pulled my hair back into a tight, neat ponytail, leaving my rat-tail to swing free over my shoulder.

"Okay, let's get this started," Kate said; she sat down at the table, opened her bag and took out a sheaf of papers, a miniature voice activated tape recorder, a spiral notebook and a pen. Cassie, Matthew and I sat down at the table across from her. "Just for identification purposes, we have Matthew, Cassie and Taylor, right?" The three of us nodded. "Okay, first questions first; how did Renegade get started?"

"Well, we've been friends all our lives," Matthew said, "and we were all reasonably good at music. And seeing as I was in the year above these two" he nodded at Cassie and I "all the way through school, this was the perfect way for us to remain friends and still be able to see each other on a fairly regular basis after school ended."

"There was also the factor of the three of us being our own little support group," Cassie added. "Whenever one of us has had to deal with something major in our lives, the other two have been there to offer their support. I won't say what those problems are, because we've pledged to one another that they will stay within the band."

"That's fair enough," Kate agreed. "Cassie, a question for you; is it strange being in a band with two guys?"

"Not really," Cassie answered. "I have four brothers, so I'm used to being around guys. I'm actually more comfortable in an all-male environment; my sister is sixteen years younger than I am, so I basically grew up with my mother as the only other female in a household of males. I'm definitely not your average chick. I hate to cook; I hate wearing makeup. I won't even wear heels unless I'm forced to."

"She didn't even wear a dress to the Year 12 Formal," I said. "I should know; I was her date." Cassie elbowed me and giggled girlishly.



"Speaking of dating, are any of you in relationships?"

"No," said Matthew, at the same time that Cassie and I said, "Yes." We all laughed.

"Cassie and I are dating at the moment," I said. "We've been in a serious relationship since September last year, even though we'd liked each other since Year 10; we were both too chicken shit at the time to admit our feelings to one another. *Meanwhile*, Matty boy here is so shit scared of the opposite sex that he won't even hang out with a girl, let alone date one."

"Ah, I see," Kate said, smiling. "And yet the lead singer of Renegade is a girl."

"Like she already said, she's not your average chick," Matthew said. Cassie smacked him soundly on the shoulder. "Ow!"

"Okay, let's get off the subject of relationships. How did you each decide what instrument you would play?"

"I took piano lessons from the age of seven," Cassie answered, "so I was the logical choice for the keyboard player."

"My Aunt Jo convinced my parents to buy me a guitar when I was thirteen," I added. "I took lessons for about a year and a half, and I've been teaching myself since that point. Which left Matt; Matt, how'd you start out playing the drums again?"

Matthew rolled his eyes. "It was the only instrument left," he said. "Cassie and Taylor were already accustomed to playing their instruments, and if you want the truth neither of them are rhythmically inclined in any way. So I learned to play the drums."

"What's a typical Renegade concert like, for those living outside of the general Gosford area?"

I leaned back in my chair. "Basically, what you see is what you get. We play half original songs, half cover songs. And because we usually play in local clubs, our shows are almost always exclusively for the over eighteen crowd; sometimes we'll do a couple of all ages shows, but it's a rarity. As we've been doing the circuit we've found that the majority of people who buy our CDs are around our own ages."

"The kind of music we play at our shows is basically the same music as we ourselves listen to," Matthew added. "We're all fans of alternative and rock music in general, for example Linkin Park, Sum 41, Creed, Puddle Of Mudd, et cetera. Sometimes we'll play a song from a musical style outside of what we normally play, like at our New Years Eve concert last year we played a Kasey

Chambers song, and at some of our concerts last year we performed songs by Bachelor Girl, Ronan Keating, Kate Ceberano and 1200 Techniques.”

“Speaking of music, what is the song writing process like when it comes to the three of you?”

“We have never been known to write a song together,” Cassie replied. “Never. More often than not each of us will bring a song to the band, and we’ll tweak it slightly, but apart from that each song is an individual effort.”

The interview dragged on for about another one and a half hours, and Kate left with the assurance that the interview would be in the April issue of *Dolly* magazine.

As soon as the front door swung shut, Cassie let out a groan of relief. “Thank God *that’s* over! Hopefully next time we can be interviewed by a more credible magazine.”

“Yeah; she kept staring at me, did you notice that?” I agreed. “It’s not like I’m physically attractive or anything.”

“I think there are some people who would disagree with you on that point,” Cassie said. “I’m gonna go get changed; get out of this infernal outfit.”

“I thought you liked miniskirts.”

“I do. But I hate halter tops.”

“Ah...”

“Taylor, you of all people should know that.”

“Hey, don’t forget we have a photo shoot tonight!” I called after her.

“Dear God, kill me now,” I heard her say quite audibly as she went upstairs.

\* \* \*

“Stop complaining Matt; it wasn’t that bad.”

“Oh yeah? You try being practically held down in a chair and having makeup forcibly slathered all over your face!” He swatted at a non-existent patch of foundation. “And to think we have to do this all over again tomorrow...”

"Yeah, well, just be thankful we're not holed up in some hotel; be thankful we're in familiar surroundings."

We'd holed ourselves up in my bedroom, planning to just relax and watch a movie or two. Cassie, for some very strange reason, had a bowl of piping hot Weet-Bix with her. "Cassie, tell me something; why are you eating cereal at almost eleven thirty at night?" I asked as I threw myself down on my bed, onto my stomach; Cassie and Matthew bounced almost a foot into the air, Cassie holding her bowl well out of the way.

"It tastes good, and it warms me up."

"Christ al-fucking-mighty Cassie, it's the middle of February! It's summer!"

"So? I feel the cold for your information."

"My arse you feel the cold."

She looked back over her shoulder and smiled at me. "Well, maybe you should keep me warm then."

I rolled my eyes and pulled Cassie close, burying my face in her hair. "Mmm, your hair smells nice," I commented, my voice muffled by the mass of ginger curls.

"Jesus Christ, now he's gonna whack off all night to that precise thought," Matthew groaned.

"Hey, as long as he doesn't go next door and screw Amara King, he can do all the whacking off he likes," Cassie said, laughing. "I'm the only one he's allowed to screw."

"Ooh, wanna go practice now?" I asked cheekily, my hand sneaking under the collar of Cassie's shirt to play with her bra straps.

"Not unless you want to be up at six tomorrow morning not having got a wink of sleep all night," Cassie replied. "This weekend, I promise."

"Ooh, I'll be looking forward to that no worries."

"And get your hand out of my shirt."

I reluctantly removed my hand from where it had been wandering for the past few minutes; she flashed me a sweet smile and rested her head on my shoulder. Matthew, meanwhile, had been flicking through the Austar TV guide for the past five minutes, looking for a movie to watch.

"All right you guys, we have the choices of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, *Save The Last Dance* and *Knockaround Guys*," Matthew told us. "Which one?"

"*Harry Potter*," Cassie and I chorused immediately. Matthew changed the channel to Showtime, where the movie was just about to start. "This movie is rated PG; it contains supernatural themes," I intoned along with the TV announcer. "Parental guidance is recommended. Parental guidance recommended my left foot..."

"Taylor, please, we don't require a running commentary; neither of us is deaf," Matthew complained. "Please, shut up before I roll up the TV guide and shove it up your pretty boy arse."

"Y'know Matt, idle threats will get you absolutely nowhere."

"Who says it's an idle threat? Now shut your cakehole before I make good on my promise. Your arse isn't so tight that I can't shove the TV guide up there and leave it to rot."

"Language, boys," Cassie said. "Both of you shut up; the movie's starting and I would really like to watch it."

"You've got the movie on DVD Cass; why do you need to watch it again?"

She didn't answer, already engrossed in watching. Glances passing between the two of us, Matthew and I turned our focus to the TV screen, lapsing into silence.

## Chapter 12

"Well, here it is," Cassie announced as she entered the room, carrying with her the latest issue of *Dolly* magazine; it had ex-Bardot member (now soloist) Sophie Monk on the cover. "Someone needs to tell that girl that wearing pyjamas on the cover of a nationally syndicated teen publication is so not fashionable."

"Well, come on, what's the deal?" I asked as I shoved a carrot stick into my mouth and snapped it in half.

"Well, our album's not being reviewed, but the article that was promised is in there. Do you guys want to read it yourselves, or will I?"

"No, you can read it," Matthew decided; he snagged a corn chip and scooped up some salsa onto it. "Come on, I wanna hear what dirt they managed to dig up on us."

"Well, if you insist," Cassie acquiesced; she opened the magazine to the appropriate page and began to read.

\* \* \*

### Rebels With A Cause

Only last year, the three members of Renegade were just your average independent rock outfit, known only to the residents of their hometown of Gosford and the surrounding area. But their debut single, *Home*, proves that they are anything *but* average. It's time to meet the faces behind the music...

#### MATTHEW SHELTON

Name: Matthew James Shelton

Nicknames: Matt, MJ, Matty

Age: 20

Birthday: July 22 1982

Position in band: Drums

The second oldest in a family of four kids, and the oldest member of Renegade, Matthew takes his role as drummer extremely seriously. As far as he's concerned, "I'm the one setting the pace in this band, and if the other two don't like it then they can go jump."

But Matthew's not serious about everything. The proof – his favourite movie is *Austin Powers In Goldmember*. And he will gladly join his band mates in a game of strip poker when the mood seizes him – with a 'three-drink minimum', mind you. "We aren't alcoholics," he maintains. "We just like drinking."

#### CASSIE DALE

Name: Cassandra Sapphira Dale

Nicknames: Cassie, Cass

Age: 19

Birthday: May 17 1983

Position in band: Keyboards

As Renegade's youngest member and only female, Cassie says she isn't fussed by her current situation. "I have four brothers, so I'm used to being around guys. I'm actually more comfortable in an all-male environment; my sister is sixteen years younger than I am, so I basically grew up with my mother as the only other female in a household of males." She's definitely not your average girl, with her boyfriend even admitting that she didn't wear a dress to her Year 12 Formal. Even so, she'll gladly squeeze herself into a miniskirt if the mood seizes her. She adds, "I hate to cook; I hate wearing makeup. I won't even wear heels unless I'm forced to." But apparently she loves to shop, with one shopping expedition reportedly overdrawing her bank account.

#### TAYLOR KENNEDY

Name: Taylor Francis Kennedy

Nickname: Tay

Age: 19

Birthdate: March 14 1983

Position in band: Guitar

According to girlfriend Cassie, who serves as Renegade's keyboard player, beneath Taylor's 'pretty boy' exterior is a highly intelligent musical genius. The oldest of four kids, and coming from a non-practicing Catholic family, Taylor is the only member of Renegade who *wasn't* born in Australia. He hails from the United States, having come to Australia at the age of four months. In fact – and he freely admits this – Taylor is adopted. Despite this, he says that his parents don't love him any less.

"My parents are the best I could have asked for," he says. "My mother and I are incredibly close; I'm also pretty close with my sister Emma."

So what does Cassie mean when she says that Taylor is a creative genius?

“Consider this – not only has he been playing the guitar for a far less length of time than I’ve been playing the piano, but he can also tune his guitar by ear. It’s a skill that not many people are born with, and it definitely comes in handy.” She also says that Taylor doesn’t even own a guitar tuner, and therefore relies on his finely tuned hearing to tune his guitar.

\*

All three members of Renegade hail from the town of Gosford, on the Central Coast of New South Wales, with their respective parents being mutual friends with one another. One thing inevitably led to another, and Matthew, Cassie and Taylor themselves became friends, often meeting up outside of school to hang out together. The fact that Matthew is older than the other two never occurred to them, and to this day has never been a major issue. “Age means nothing to us,” Cassie says. “Of course, being as old as we are has some advantages.” And those advantages are? “Drinking, of course! We love to go out for drinks on the weekend when we aren’t working, and even when we are. But we’re careful never to drink past our limits; hangovers are never fun.”

“Another advantage of the whole age deal is that we’re legally able to get tattoos without our parents’ permission,” Taylor adds. Collectively, the band’s three members have a total of thirteen tattoos – Matthew has two, Cassie has five and Taylor has six. Taylor also has his eyebrow pierced. They all have the Southern Cross (their ‘band’ tattoo); Matthew has a redback spider, Cassie has an angel, a sunflower, a lightning bolt and a crescent moon, and Taylor has the Star of David, a dragon, an ankh, a shooting star and a shark. “You could even go so far as to say it’s a slight addiction.”

Cassie, Matthew and Taylor may have been friends for years, but Renegade has only been a reality since the middle of 2000. “We realised at that point that the three of us might not get to see each other outside of school as much as we would have liked after Matt graduated,” Cassie says, “so we decided to get a band started. It ensured that we’d retain our ties to one another, and it gave us a fairly valid excuse for all of us to go over to, say, my house for the afternoon. Our families have been highly tolerant of us doing it over the years, and it’s something we really appreciate.”

“We’ve all moved out of home now though,” Matthew adds. “We have our own place in the middle of Sydney, which means we don’t have to hole ourselves up in hotels. We lived there while we recorded our album, so we’re no strangers to the whole house sharing deal.”

Ah yes, the album. Released this month, Renegade’s debut album is a re-release of their last independent album, *Riders On The Storm*. The album’s first single, *Home*, was written exclusively

by Taylor, who says that the song itself is a true to life reflection of his feelings at the time that he wrote it.

"I'd just had this massive fight with my parents; it was nearly a year ago now. Anyway, after I'd calmed down I took my acoustic guitar out onto the second floor balcony at home and just started writing this song. It took me three-quarters of an hour to finish, and while it's not exactly reminiscent of our musical style it's something most people can relate to at one point or another in their lives."

All three members contribute to the song writing process, and they have a unique way of going about it.

"The three of us have never been known to write a song together," Cassie says. "Never. More often than not each of us will bring a song to the band, and we'll tweak it slightly, but apart from that each song is an individual effort."

So how do they think they will cope with their newfound celebrity status?

"We're going to just take this as it comes," Matthew says. "They say life is what you make it, and believe us we're going to make our lives the best they can be."

\* \* \*

"Hmm, not bad," I commented as Cassie finished reading.

"Check out the pin-up that they've shoved in with it," Cassie said, turning the magazine around so that we could see it properly. The poster was one of the photographs from one of our earliest professional photo shoots – Cassie was on the left, wearing that infamous red halter top, her black miniskirt and her Pierre Fontaine heels. Matthew was on the right, wearing his black baggy cargo pants, black Ocean and Earth T-shirt and his slightly scuffed Vans, wallet chain hanging down off one of his belt loops and drumsticks sticking out of one of his pockets. He had his arms crossed over his chest. And I was in the middle, crouched down behind my Fender Strat, wearing my jeans, long sleeved black Quiksilver shirt and my Etnies; my hair was down and my rat-tail swung free over a shoulder, while my eyebrow ring had light reflecting off of it.

"Now *that* is a good photograph," Matthew said approvingly. "The article isn't half bad either."

Cassie closed the magazine and rolled it up; she stuck it into her backpack. "Come on, we have a photo shoot to get ready for; let's go."



\* \* \*

I turned twenty on the fourteenth of March, expecting nothing more than a normal day with my friends (or what was normal for us nowadays anyway). Instead, it was quite possibly one of the best days of my life.

I was woken at about nine thirty in the morning, after someone let off a piercing whistle right in my left ear. My eyes flew right open to see Cassie and Matthew grinning right at me.

"Jesus bloody Christ you two..." I muttered, shielding my eyes against the sunlight streaming into my room. "It's too fuckin' early..."

"Oh, quit your whining; it's your birthday, Tay! Twenty years old!" Cassie whipped my quilt right off of me, tossing it to the floor. "Get up, get dressed, and get in Matt's car; we've got a surprise waiting for you."

"I'd rather stay right here in bed."

"Taylor Francis Kennedy, if you don't get up right this instant I am stripping you naked and sending you on a walk through the Sydney CBD," Cassie threatened. "And there are three and a half million people living in Sydney, so unless you want them to see you in all your naked glory, you had better do as we say. And *fast*."

I flinched. If Cassie makes a threat, then watch out because nine times out of ten, she will make good on it. Even despite this, I decided to see how far I could push her before she bit. I immediately rolled over onto my side and feigned sleep. As soon as I did so, I felt my wrists and ankles being seized by two pairs of hands.

"Right Matt, strip him!" Cassie yelled.

"Hey!" I protested. "Okay, okay, I'm getting up!"

Cassie grinned and smacked my shoulder soundly. "We'll be waiting downstairs, and we *will* be coming back up here at twenty five to ten to check that you haven't gone back to sleep. And you *will* be walking naked through Sydney if we catch you doing so."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. A little privacy if you don't mind?"

"Five minutes," Cassie said before she and Matthew left the room.

I kept muttering to myself as I got dressed and made my way downstairs, running a brush through my hair and then tying it back as I walked. Cassie and Matthew were waiting at the foot of the stairs for me, Cassie twirling her hair around one of her fingers and tapping her foot rather impatiently against the hardwood floor.

"Well, are we going or what?" I questioned. "You two are the ones who saw fit to get me out of my nice, warm bed at nine thirty this morning, so come on, let's make a move."

"Oh, quit your whinging." Matthew fished around in his pockets and pulled out his car keys, then led the way out of the front door. "And you are not allowed to ask questions pertaining to the nature of today's outing."

"Whoa, whoa, hold up just a second." I held up my hands. "Did you eat the dictionary this morning or something?"

Matthew rolled his eyes. "Okay then, no asking questions about where we're going. You'll find out when we get there."

"Aw, you're no fun."

Matthew simply stuck his tongue out at me and, having locked up the house, got behind the wheel of the Lancer; Cassie and I followed suit, sliding into the front passenger and back seats respectively. "Please, can I at least know *where* we're going?" I asked. "Like just a general location?"

Matthew sighed and eyeballed me in the rear view mirror. "Gosford," was all he had to say.

"And you aren't getting any more out of us, so don't even try," Cassie added.

"I wasn't going to," I said. "Believe me, I wasn't going to."

"Good," Cassie said. "Come on Matt, drive."

As Matthew drove, even over the sound of Eminem's *The Eminem Show* album I could hear them talking, more specifically about me and my prowess at ten pin bowling.

"What's his highest bowling score again?" Cassie was asking.

"Two forty six, I think; I know mine is two ninety eight."

"That's going to be a score to beat, that's for fucking sure; I can only manage a one eighty seven at the best of times. Maybe we can recruit Emma to play with us or something, otherwise the Yanks will outnumber us four to three."

"Yeah, that'll work; the teams will be even that way, two guys and two girls per team, Yanks versus Aussies."

What the fuck were they talking about? Ten pin bowling? Bowling scores? Yanks versus Aussies? *Oh, no...not ten pin bowling; I embarrassed the hell outta myself the last time we went! If we have to go to the lanes in Wyoming then I am **not** getting outta the car unless they pay me a hundred bucks **each**.*

As it turned out, Matt had told a little white lie to throw me off the trail; he pulled his car up in the car park of Gosford City Lanes in Wyoming and cut the engine.

"Oh no; no fuckin' way Matt," I said. "I'm not going in there."

"Tay, relax, Kitty isn't the manager anymore; the whole place has been under new management since January," Matthew assured me. "Believe me, I checked it out." He nodded toward the double doors that led into the building. "Besides, don't you want to kick some seppo arse?"

I followed his gaze to see five people standing near the building entrance; I recognised one as being my sister Emma, and another as being...

"Bryony!" I yelled. I threw my car door open and bolted toward my half sister. She pelted toward me and threw herself into my arms. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"Your family made me swear I'd keep my mouth shut," she explained. "Hey, I love this little braid thing you've got going on," she said, winding my rat-tail around her right index finger.

Someone cleared their throat behind us. "Oh, I want to introduce you to some people," Bryony said. She spun me around. "Taylor, meet my stepbrother Isaac, my brother Zac and my sister Jessica; I guess that makes Zac and Jess your brother and sister as well."

I merely nodded, suddenly shy. Matthew walked up to our little gathering at that moment. "Shall we go in?" he suggested. "By the way, all of you need to pitch in about five, maybe ten bucks each towards the cost of hiring the lanes and the bowling shoes. I'm not made of money, despite reports to the contrary. I also didn't bring that much cash with me, and I'm not entirely sure that this place still takes ATM cards."

We all agreed and entered the building; Matt held out his hand for all of us to pitch in with our share, and he went up to the counter to pay. "Don't think I'm gonna go easy on any of you, just because you're family," I stated jokingly to Bryony. "I have my pride to uphold."

Bryony jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "Zac can bowl a perfect game ninety nine percent of the time," she said. "We're not gonna go easy on you either."

We separated, moving over to our designated lanes – we Aussies on lane eight, and the Americans on lane seven. Matthew typed our nicknames for the game into the computer – Matt, Ginge (Cassie), Sparkles (Emma) and Stringbean (me) – as Emma, Cassie and I put our bowling shoes on. I protested quite vocally when I saw what Matthew had called me, and Matthew explained, "Stringbean is what you call someone when they're tall and skinny. Don't get so fucking defensive."

We got into the swing of things fairly quickly, going by the old adage 'A quick game's a good game' for the first game. After half an hour we'd finished – Matthew had 287, I had 282, Emma had 180 and Cassie had 149.

I sneaked over to the adjoining lane to suss out the situation – Zac had 299, Isaac had 291, Bryony had 278 and Jessica rounded out the scores with 277. Not bad at all, I decided as I scurried back to my lane.

"They're good, you guys," I said as I sat back down. "And I mean good. I bet they go bowling a lot."

"Hey! Cass!"

Cassie twisted around in her seat to see who was calling her name. "Jennie!" she called back. "Come on over here!"

Jennie Edmonds, along with her friends Xavier Barnes, Gwen Dixon and Ty Chambers, walked over and dropped their gear off in the seats near the head of lane nine. "And how are the rock stars on this fine March morning?" Gwen asked as she propped her foot up on one of the seats and did up the laces of her shoes.

"The rock stars are just fine, thank you very much," I said. "These two got me up at nine-thirty this morning; I should at *least* be able to sleep later than ten on my birthday." I jerked my thumb over at Cassie and Matthew.

"Oh yeah; it's your birthday today isn't it?" Jennie asked. "Happy birthday!"

"Thank you," I replied with a smile. "I can't believe I'm twenty."

"Me neither," Gwen agreed. "It's like it was only yesterday, you were this skinny, blonde, ten-year-old midget of a thing running around the playground of Gosford East Public School. Time sure flies, doesn't it?"

"Oh it does," Cassie agreed. "And to think Tay, we've been dating for six months now; can you believe it?"

My only response was to kiss Cassie squarely on the lips. "Mmm, you taste like cherries," I told her when we'd broken apart.

Cassie flashed me a grin. "Right answer," she said.

\* \* \*

We finished up at the bowling alley and drove back to Gosford, pulling up outside my house. "Well, we got here eventually, didn't we?" Matthew asked, cutting the engine and hopping out of the car. "Come on, we're late; we were originally supposed to be here at twelve-thirty, and it's one right now."

I entered the house first, compulsively twirling my rat-tail around my fingers; it was something I tended to do when I was nervous for any reason. "Anyone home?" I called in a slightly strangled voice.

"In the kitchen!" came my mother's voice. I walked the familiar path into the kitchen, emerging into the room I'd spent many an afternoon doing homework, writing songs, talking with my family, with my friends. It was the epitome of home to me.

Mum was sitting at the kitchen table, talking to someone who I guessed to be Bryony's mother, two coffee cups sitting on coasters to protect the table's surface. "Coffee, Taylor?" Mum asked me, getting up to find another coffee cup.

"No thanks," I said. "I already had some at the bowling alley, and it's put me off coffee for awhile; I must be used to the stuff we've been making at the house in Sydney, 'cause quite frankly it tasted like shit."

"Language, Taylor," Mum reprimanded me. "And yes, you probably are used to it. Sit down, there's someone I'd like you to meet."

I sat down in a spare seat, and Mum made a couple of introductions. "Diana, I want you to meet Taylor," Mum said. "Taylor, this is—"

"My mother," I whispered, finishing for her. I swallowed and tried to speak, but my mother (my 'real' mother that is) spoke instead.

"After all these years," she said softly, a tiny smile on her face.

"It's...it's nice to meet you," I managed to say. I still hadn't forgotten the phone call I'd eavesdropped on all those months ago. "It's been awhile I'd say."

Diana laughed. "Yes, I'd say so; twenty years if I figure correctly."

I nodded to confirm this. "Yeah, it's my twentieth birthday today. And if I can say something, those half sibs of mine are brilliant when it comes to bowling; they kicked our arses fair and square. Wiped the floor with we Aussies. My pride is shattered *completely*." I pretended to wipe a tear away.

"Oh yeah, we did that all right." Bryony came up and sat down beside me. "Hey Mom."

"Hi honey. Did you have fun at the bowling alley?"

Bryony grinned. "Did we ever! Cassie and Emma are *hopeless*. Zac bowled another perfect game, by the way." She turned to me. "Are you and Cassie and Matt going to sing later on?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, Bry; we don't have our instruments with us, they're still at the house in Sydney. We could probably do an a capella, I guess. I'd have to see what Cassie and Matt say though, but I'm all for it."

Bryony grinned. "Can't wait."

Mum spoke again. "Taylor, there is something important that we need to talk to you about; Bryony, you can stay, seeing as this ultimately concerns you." She cleared her throat. "You should really think about this; it concerns our two separate families. You have ties to the Lawyer, the Hanson and the Kennedy families, in that you are related to the Lawyers by blood, and the Hansons by both marriage and blood, but you are also my son."

"So what you want me to decide," I said slowly, "is whether I stay here, or I go."

"Basically, yes."

"Well, of course I want to stay here! I have a job, remember?"

Mum reached across and covered my hand with hers. "Honey, you need to really think about this. It's important that we know exactly where you stand; it's no good making a completely rash decision then regretting it later on. Whatever you decide is final."

I nodded and excused myself from the table, then went up to the second floor balcony.

"Jesus Christ, what have I got myself into now..." I muttered. This was the biggest decision I would ever make in my life, and I needed to make it *today*.

In one place was the Lawyer family. I had been born into that family as Jordan Lawyer, and no matter what my birth certificate stated, it was my true identity. It was where my looks and my musical talent stemmed from. It was who I was.

Next I considered the Hanson family. My family by both marriage *and* blood, for all the Hanson children from Bryony onward were my half brothers and half sisters. We had the same mother, but different fathers. It was also my identity, but to a lesser extent.

And lastly...the Kennedy family, the only family I had ever known. All of my memories were tied to them in one way or another, and short of permanent amnesia I would never lose them. They too were my family.

Then I considered my band. Renegade. I couldn't just up and leave right after the release of our first album; it just wouldn't be doing the right thing by Cassie and Matthew. They were my band mates, my colleagues...my best friends. I'd known them my entire life.

Cassie. She was my world; she was everything to me. She was my match; my life's companion...my soul mate, even. She understood me in a way that nobody else could. And to up and leave, just like that...it'd destroy her.

It was half past four in the afternoon before I made my final decision. There were some excellent arguments associated with each point, but in the end I had to pick one over the others. It was truly the most difficult decision of my life. I sighed, stood up and went back downstairs, wiping my face off on the sleeve of my jumper.

"I made my decision," I announced as I re-entered the kitchen; everyone gathered there looked up as I spoke. "Both of my mothers, my birth and my adoptive, asked me to make an incredibly difficult decision today. They asked me to decide my whole future, asked me to say where I stood in this. For I have ties to three different families, all with excellent arguments associated with each.

"I considered the Lawyers first. I was born into that family twenty years ago today as Jordan Lawyer, and no matter what my birth certificate states, that's who I really am. By birth, and deep down in here." I touched my chest with my fingertips. "I get my looks and my musical abilities from that part of my lineage.

"Then I considered the Hansons. They are my family by both marriage *and* blood, for all of the Hanson kids save for Isaac, they're my half brothers and half sisters. They're my family too. So they too are my identity, though to a far lesser extent.

"After that are the Kennedys. They're only family I've ever known, and all of my memories are tied to them in one way or another. And short of permanent amnesia, I'll never lose them. They too are my family, and my identity. I identify myself as the oldest son of Mark and Francesca Kennedy, brother to Emma, Oliver and Lila, because that's who I have always identified myself as, for as long as I can remember.

"Of course, after that came the two most important entities to me in my life. My band, and my girlfriend. I can't just up and leave right after the release of our first album. It just wouldn't be doing the right thing by Cassie and Matt. They're my band mates, my colleagues and my best friends. I've known them my entire life, and I can't imagine my life without them in it.

"And Cassie; my darling Cassandra. She's my world; she's everything to me. She's my match, my life's companion, my soul mate, even. She understands me in a way that nobody else can. And to up and leave, just like that...it'd destroy her."

I twisted my rat-tail around my fingers. "After careful consideration of all the angles, and weighing up the pros and cons..." I took a deep breath. "I choose the Kennedys. I'll always be a Lawyer, 'cause that's my true identity. But I can never be a Hanson, as much as I know Bryony really wants me to be; you guys will always be my brothers and sisters though, I can't change that. My future lies here, in Gosford, with my family, my band, and my girlfriend. This...this is who I am now. This is where I truly belong."

My mother came over and embraced me tightly. "I don't know what I would do if we didn't have you, Taylor," she said softly. "We'd be so incomplete without you."

"So would I," I agreed. "So would I."

I broke away. "Cass, Matt, what do you say to doing a bit of singing? Bryony, you can join in too if you like." The three of them nodded, and they came over to where I stood. We conferred for a little while before deciding on *Fire And Rain*, by James Taylor.



"Just yesterday morning they let me know you were gone...Suzanne, the plans they made put an end to you...I walked out this morning and I wrote down this song...I just can't remember who to send it to...

"I've seen fire and I've seen rain...I've seen sunny days that I thought would never end...I've seen lonely times when I could not find a friend...but I always thought that I'd see you again...

"Won't you look down upon me Jesus...you got to help me make a stand...you just got to see me through another day...my body's achin' and my time is at hand...I won't make it any other way...

"Oh I've seen fire and I've seen rain...I've seen sunny days that I thought would never end...I've seen lonely times when I could not find a friend...but I always thought that I'd see you again...

"Been walkin' my mind to an easy time...my back turned towards the sun...Lord knows when the cold wind blows it'll turn your head around...well, there's hours of time on the telephone line...to talk about things to come...sweet dreams and flying machines in pieces on the ground...

"Oh, I've seen fire and I've seen rain...I've seen sunny days that I thought would never end...I've seen lonely times when I could not find a friend...but I always thought that I'd see you, baby, one more time again now...thought I'd see you one more time again...there's just a few things comin' my way this time around now...thought I'd see you, thought I'd see you...fire and rain..."

## Epilogue

September 2003

"She is the woman with the skull tattoo...her skin is black and her eyes are blue...she takes me to heaven when I think of you...she picked me up in a gutter downtown...she is the woman with the skull tattoo...her skin is black and her eyes are blue...she takes me to heaven when I think of you...she picked me up in a gutter downtown..."

The final chords of Eagle Eye Cherry's *Skull Tattoo* sounded, and the crowd exploded. Tonight had just been...phenomenal was probably the only word to describe it. We were living a dream, the three of us – playing to a hometown crowd of fifteen thousand fans. We'd finished the original material portion of the show about three songs earlier, and now were filling in time with covers of our favourite songs. *Skull Tattoo* had been Cassie's choice, and our next song was Matthew's.

"Okay Gosford, our next song is a favourite of Matt's; it's Maroon 5's *Harder To Breathe*. I want to see your hands in the air, and I want to hear those voices!"

Matthew tapped out the count, and we ripped right into the song.

"How dare you say that my behaviour is unacceptable...so condescending unnecessarily critical...I have the tendency of getting very physical...so watch your step cause if I do you'll need a miracle...you drain me dry and make me wonder why I'm even here...this double vision I was seeing is finally clear...you want to stay but you know very well I want you gone...not fit to fuckin' tread the ground that I am walking on..."

"When it gets cold outside and you got nobody to love...you'll understand what I mean when I say there's no way we are gonna give up...and like a little girl cries in the face of a monster that lives in her dreams...is there anyone out there cause it's getting harder and harder to breathe...is there anyone out there cause it's getting harder and harder to breathe..."

"What you are doing is screwing things up inside my head...you should know better you never listened to a word I said...clutching your pillow and writhing in a naked sweat hoping somebody someday will do you like I did..."

"When it gets cold outside and you got nobody to love...you'll understand what I mean when I say there's no way we are gonna give up...and like a little girl cries in the face of a monster that lives in her dreams...is there anyone out there 'cause it's getting harder and harder to breathe...is there anyone out there 'cause it's getting harder and harder to breathe..."

"And does it kill...does it burn...is it painful to learn...that it's me that has all the control...does it thrill...does it sting...when you feel what I bring...and you wish that you had me to hold..."

"When it gets cold outside and you got nobody to love...you'll understand what I mean when I say here's no way we are gonna give up...and like a little girl cries in the face of a monster that lives in her dreams...is there anyone out there 'cause it's getting harder and harder to breathe...is there anyone out there 'cause it's getting harder and harder to breathe...is there anyone out there 'cause it's getting harder and harder to breathe...is there anyone out there 'cause it's getting harder and harder to breathe..."

Cassie took her turn at the microphone next. "If there are any Nickelback fans in the audience, you'll know this one well; we're praying that we don't butcher this one." At Matthew's count we started *Where Do I Hide*, from Nickelback's 2001 album *Silver Side Up*.

"Got a criminal record...I can't cross state lines...first on the bad list...and you're last on mine...looking for a scapegoat...long past due...walking down the aisle...staring straight at you..."

"I still hear him screaming 'where do I hide'...and all he asks, and I say 'hurry inside'..."

"He said, she said...no she don't...be back before morning...and you know she won't...well I remember that summer...like yesterday...and I remember his mother...as he was dragged away..."

"I still hear him screaming 'where do I hide'...and all he asks, and I say 'hurry inside'...a whole lotta memory, yours and not mine...and all he asks, and I say 'hurry inside'..."

"Got a criminal record...I can't cross state lines...first on the bad list...and you're last on mine...looking for a scapegoat...long past due...walking down the aisle...staring straight at you..."

"I still hear him screaming 'where do I hide'...and all he asks, and I say 'hurry inside'...a whole lotta memory, yours and not mine...and all he asks, and I say 'hurry inside'...where do I hide..."

We played Bon Jovi's *Damned* next; the crowd response was growing more and more positive with every song that we played.

"I'm lying here beside you in someone else's bed...knowing what we're doing wrong, but better left unsaid...your breathing sounds like screaming, it's all that I can stand...his ring is on your finger, but my heart is in your hands..."

"Damned if you love me, damned if you don't...it's getting harder holding on, but I can't let you go...damned if you don't need me, damned if you do...God, I wish it wasn't me standin' in these shoes...damned...damned..."

"A door slams like a shotgun, you jump up to your feet...but it's just the wind that's blowing through the secrets that we keep...made me want to want you, God knows I need to need you...by the time this love is over, I'll be sleeping on the street..."

"Damned if you love me, damned if you don't...it's getting harder holding on, but I can't let you go...damned if you don't need me, damned if you do...God, I wish it wasn't me standin' in these shoes...damned...damned..."

"Why won't you talk to me...because I'm too blind to see...why won't you look at me...because I'm afraid to breathe...what do you want from me...all that I can stand...the lies are on my tongue and I can't turn back I know...my soul is damned..."

"Don't worry...I ain't gonna call you or hear you say my name...and if you see me on the streets, don't wave just walk away...our lives are getting twisted, let's keep our story straight...the more that I resist it, my temptation turns to fate..."

"Damned if you love me, damned if you don't...it's getting harder holding on, but I can't let you go...damned if you don't need me, damned if you do...God, I wish it wasn't me standin' in these shoes...damned...damned..."

"Damned if you love me, damned if you don't...it's getting harder holding on, but I can't let you go...damned if you don't need me, damned if you do...God, I wish it wasn't me standin' in these shoes...damned...damned...damned..."

*Christ my Strat's getting a workout tonight, I thought as the audience erupted once more. We had two more songs on our list – Puddle Of Mudd's *She Hates Me*, and Linkin Park's *Somewhere I Belong*. I'd chosen the final song for the night, because it was the perfect song to describe my new outlook on life. I'd found where I belonged, and I was completely happy for the first time in ages. *The sooner we get off this stage, the sooner we can get something to eat; I'm so fucking hungry...**

We waited for the crowd noise to die down slightly before starting the second to last song in the set.

"Met a girl, thought she was grand...fell in love, found out first hand...went well for a week or two...then it all came unglued...in a trap, trip I can't grip...never thought I'd be the one who'd slip...then I started to realise...I was living one big lie..."

"She fucking hates me...she fucking hates me...la la la la...I tried too hard and she tore my feelings like I had none...and ripped them away..."

"She was queen for about an hour...after that, shit got sour...she took all I ever had...no sign of guilt, no feeling bad...in a trap, trip I can't grip...never thought I'd be the one who'd slip...then I started to realise...I was living one big lie..."

"She fucking hates me...she fucking hates me...la la la la...I tried too hard and she tore my feelings like I had none...and ripped them away..."

"That's my story, as you see...learned my lesson and so did she...now it's over, and I'm glad...`cause I'm a fool, for all I said..."

"She fucking hates me...she fucking hates me...la la la la...I tried too hard and she tore my feelings like I had none...and ripped them away..."

"And she tore my feelings like I had none...she fucking hates me..."

I took a deep breath before speaking one last time to the crowd. "Six months ago, I made the most difficult decision of my life. I had to choose between the family I was born into, and the family that I am a part of now. I chose my family now, for when it all comes down to it, this is where I belong. And to finish off tonight, here is *Somewhere I Belong* by Linkin Park. Sing along if you know the words, and even if you don't."

Matthew counted us in, and I sang like I never had before. This was what I had been born to do; this was my destiny.

"When this began...I had nothin' to say...and I'd get lost in the nothingness inside of me...I was confused...and I'd let it all out to find...that I'm not the only person with these things in mind...inside of me...but all the vacancy the words revealed...is the only real thing that I've got left to feel...nothin' to lose...just stuck...hollow and alone...and the fault is my own...and the fault is my own..."

"I wanna heal...I wanna feel...what I thought was never real...I wanna let go of the pain I've felt so long...erase all the pain till it's gone...I wanna heal...I wanna feel...like I'm close to something real...I wanna find something I've wanted all along...somewhere I belong..."

"And I've got nothin' to say...I can't believe I didn't fall right down on my face...I was confused...lookin' everywhere only to find...that it's not the way I had imagined it all in my mind...so what am I...what do I have but negativity...`cause I can't justify the way everyone is lookin' at me...nothin' to lose...nothin' to gain...hollow and alone...and the fault is my own...and the fault is my own...

"I wanna heal...I wanna feel...what I thought was never real...I wanna let go of the pain I've felt so long...erase all the pain till it's gone...I wanna heal...I wanna feel...like I'm close to something real...I wanna find something I've wanted all along...somewhere I belong...

"I will never know...myself until I do this on my own...and I will never feel...anything else until my wounds are healed...I will never be...anything till I break away from me...I will break away...I'll find myself today...

"I wanna heal...I wanna feel...what I thought was never real...I wanna let go of the pain I've felt so long...erase all the pain till it's gone...I wanna heal...I wanna feel...like I'm close to something real...I wanna find something I've wanted all along...somewhere I belong...

"I wanna heal...I wanna feel like I'm...somewhere I belong...I wanna heal...I wanna feel like I'm...somewhere I belong...somewhere I belong..."

After the final chords rang out, the crowd exploded in cheers and applause all over again. The three of us farewelled the crowd and left the stage.

"Oh my God..." Cassie said as she fell into a chair and grabbed a bottle of water off the table. "How incredible was that?"

"Amazing," Matthew agreed.

"Phenomenal," I said. "No, you know what? That doesn't even do it justice."

"Mind-blowing?" Cassie supplied.

I nodded. "That's the one I wanted." I blew a lock of hair out of my face. "Can you believe it? We got signed a year ago, and now look at us."

"You know what I think is totally amazing?" Cassie asked after a few minutes of silence.

"What?" Matthew asked.

"We started out as this lowly little group of kids who got their kicks out of playing to packed to capacity bowling and leagues club auditoriums, and maybe recording an independent album once every couple of months just to keep the punters happy. We weren't even making that much money out of the whole deal; it was just to share our love of music and performing. We had day jobs to pay board to our families. I was a checkout chick. Matt, you worked as an apprentice mechanic. And Tay, you were putting in six hours a day at your family's video shop. And now...we're one of most popular rock outfits in Australia today. We're even booked to play the Livid Festival this year. Doesn't that amaze you guys?"

I dropped down to the floor and started chewing on a carrot stick. "It amazes me all right. This time last year, I was so unsure of who I was. I didn't know my true identity, and it scared me a little. I didn't know where I belonged."

"Well, here is where you belong, with us," Cassie said.

"Yeah, I know that now, don't I? But last year, I didn't know that. It took the hardest decision of my life to make me figure that out. I might be Jordan Lawyer in here" I pointed to myself "but even though that's who I am inside, I can't be that person. That person died when I was adopted twenty years ago. I'm Taylor Kennedy, and I'm proud of it."

"You know Tay, I've been wondering this for the past eight months; what exactly was going through your mind the day you finally realised who you were?" Matthew asked me.

"A lot of things." I ran my hand through my hair. "I was forced to look inside myself that day, and I found five things that make me who I am. My friendship with you guys, my relationship with you, Cassie, and the Hanson, Kennedy and Lawyer families. I was born a Lawyer, but I'll die a Kennedy. And I have a whole family in the Hansons. I can't change any of that. And I don't think I want to; I think I like being a mixed breed. It makes me special. I wouldn't be who I am if one of those elements wasn't there; I'd be incomplete. This band, our career, it's the icing on the cake."

"Is that why you chose to stay here in Australia?" Cassie asked me. "Because of us?"

I nodded. "Mostly, yeah. After I announced my decision, do you know what my mother said to me?" Cassie and Matthew shook their heads. "She said, 'I don't know what I would do if we didn't have you, Taylor. We'd be so incomplete without you.' And she's right. My parents showed me unconditional love by travelling thousands of kilometres to another country and adopting me, and I know that without me as a part of the Kennedy family, they wouldn't be the same. I couldn't do that to them; I couldn't abandon two of the most important people in my life for a family that I've only known since I was thirteen. And I couldn't abandon the two of you; out of all the friends

I have ever had, the two of you are my best friends. I've known you the longest, and my life would be nothing without you. I spent a lifetime trying to figure out who I was, where I belonged, when the answer was right in front of my face the entire time. I belong *here*. I belong here in Gosford, with my friends and my family. Okay, yeah, one half of my family are sadistic, twisted, racist bastards who will never accept me for who I am. They can't look past the blonde hair, the blue eyes or the eyebrow ring to see who I am inside. But the other half, they accept and love me. My Aunt Jo, she's probably the best aunt I have; after all, without her pushing my parents to get me my first guitar I wouldn't be sitting here with you guys. Music is a crucial part of who I am; I would be nothing without my music. And I would be nothing without the two of you."

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### **From the journal of Taylor Kennedy – September 22 2003**

They say that life is a journey. A journey of discovery of your world, of those around you, and of yourself. You oftentimes learn little things about yourself that, up until you embarked on such a journey, you never even knew. Sometimes those discoveries are positive, sometimes they are negative, and sometimes they are a mixed blessing.

My journey of discovery uncovered a great deal about my past that I was never made aware of. I never knew that I had a half sister overseas. I never knew the true reason for the obvious physical differences between myself and the rest of my family. I never knew who I truly was.

That is, until now.

I learned about my family. I found out why my family and I are so different from one another. And I discovered who I was. More importantly, I found the one thing I'd wanted all of my life – acceptance for who I was as a person. I found the place where I truly belonged.

I don't know why it took me a whole lifetime to realise that my place in this world, my little niche, is with the Kennedy family. I'll probably never know. But I *do* know that without them, I would honestly be less than a person. I'd be incomplete. I might have been born a Lawyer, for inside that's my past, present and future, but to all concerned with outer appearances I'll always be a Kennedy. I'm the oldest son of Mark and Francesca, and I'm a big brother to Emma, to Oliver and to Lila. I don't need a piece of paper to tell me that. I know it instinctively. It's something that I am more than proud of, something that I don't ever want to change.

Six months ago, my mother said something to me that has stayed with me since. She said, 'I don't know what I would do if we didn't have you, Taylor. We'd be so incomplete without you.' And



she's right. My parents showed me unconditional love by travelling thousands of kilometres to another country and adopting me, and I know that without me as a part of the Kennedy family, they wouldn't be the same. I couldn't do that to them; I couldn't abandon two of the most important people in my life for a family that I've only known since I was thirteen. And I couldn't abandon Cassie and Matthew; out of all the friends I have ever had, the two of them are my best friends. I've known them the longest, and my life would be nothing without them. I spent a lifetime trying to figure out who I was, where I belonged, when the answer was right in front of my face the entire time. I belong *here*. I belong here in Gosford, with my friends and my family. Okay, yeah, one half of my family are sadistic, twisted, racist bastards who will never accept me for who I am. They can't look past the blonde hair, the blue eyes or the eyebrow ring to see who I am inside. But the other half, they accept and love me. My Aunt Jo, she's probably the best aunt I have; after all, without her pushing my parents to get me my first guitar I wouldn't be in Renegade. I wouldn't be sharing my love of music with the world.

Renegade started out as this lowly little group of kids who got their kicks out of playing to packed to capacity bowling and leagues club auditoriums, and maybe recording an independent album once every couple of months just to keep our fans happy. We weren't even making that much money out of the whole deal, maybe a hundred bucks a show if we were lucky. It was just to share our love of music and performing. We had day jobs to pay board to our families. Cassie was a checkout chick. Matt worked as an apprentice mechanic. And I was putting in six hours a day at my family's video shop. And now...we're one of most popular rock outfits in Australia today. We're even booked to play the Livid Festival this year. To me, that's proof that we've made it.

Music is a crucial part of who I am; I would be nothing without my music. And I would be nothing without my family, without Cassie and Matthew. They're my identity. Even if I had the opportunity to change the past, I wouldn't do it. As much as I resent my parents sometimes for keeping the truth from me my entire life, I know now why they did it. They wanted me to feel I had somewhere I could call home. They wanted me to know that, no matter what happened, I would always have a family.

I'm proud to be a Kennedy. I'm happy to be who I've become. And after all those years of never knowing who I truly was, I've finally found what I've wanted all along.

*I wanna heal*

*I wanna feel*

*What I thought was never real*

*I wanna let go of the pain I've felt so long*

*Erase all the pain till it's gone*

*I wanna heal*

*I wanna feel*

*Like I'm close to something real*

*I wanna find something I've wanted all along*

*Somewhere I belong*

*Somewhere I Belong – Linkin Park*