

November Rain

When you cried I'd wipe away all of your tears

When you'd scream I'd fight away all of your fears

And I held your hand through all of these years

But you still have all of me

My Immortal – Evanescence

Chapter 1

Ebony

Boxing Day 2004. It was just the latest in a line of many, a line stretching from the mid-1980s to the early twenty-first century. Six kids, ranging in age from eighteen to three. Two marshals, known at any other time of year as my parents. And a mountain of wrapping paper to rival Mount Kosciuszko.

Most people who know me believe my favourite part of the Christmas season to be the giving and receiving of gifts. Those people obviously don't know me as well as they think they do, for there is one part of Christmas that I love far more.

And that would be waking up my brothers.

I sneaked into the room belonging to my triplet brothers, Aidan and Taylor, and took a look around before I woke them. It was a typical guys' room, except for the fact that they're both neater than any male I've ever known. Well, usually they are. This morning, however, their room looked almost like a mini-cyclone had gone through overnight. There were clothes strewn everywhere, CD cases were stacked haphazardly on Taylor's desk, and Aidan's skateboard lay upside down in the middle of the floor.

I picked my way across the floor to their bedroom window, stepping over Taylor's hockey gear as I went, and pulled the curtains open. Early morning sunlight came streaming into the room, illuminating the forms of my sleeping brothers. The two of them sleep in bunk beds, the same ones they've shared since we turned three – Aidan sleeps in the top bunk, and Taylor sleeps in the bottom. At that moment, Aidan was sleeping on his stomach, his right arm dangling over the side of his bed and his face buried in his pillow, quilt pulled up to his waist; Taylor was lying on his left side facing me, buried up to his nose, his blonde hair splayed out over his pillow and his face.

But I hadn't come in here to watch my brothers sleep. I had one mission in life right now – a little something I liked to call Operation: Piss Off Aidan Hanson. And I knew just the way to accomplish it.

I picked up Taylor's battered hockey stick from where it lay at my feet with his helmet and rollerblades and moved a little closer to the bunks. Once I was in position, I raised the hockey stick and jabbed Aidan hard in the side with it. It took a few moments for him to react, so I poked him a few more times.

Aidan let out a yell loud enough to wake the dead as he tumbled out of his bunk and landed with a loud *thud* on the floor. Right as he hit the deck, his right hand struck out and smacked Taylor across the face. Taylor jerked awake, his eyes snapping open in what I surmised to be shock, and he glared down at Aidan. I could almost see the gears turning in Taylor's head as he tried to formulate a decent comeback, something that had never been a strong point of his so early in the morning.

"What the *fuck* was that for?" Aidan asked me from where he sat on the floor. "Are you *trying* to kill me?"

I shrugged. "I had to wake you up somehow."

"I hate you Eb'ny," Taylor mumbled, before rolling onto his other side and pulling his quilt back over himself. It wasn't long before he'd gone back to sleep.

Aidan let out a quiet groan and pulled himself to his feet. "I wanted to sleep in, Ebony," he groused. "I don't have to do anything or be anywhere today if I don't want to. And *you* had to go and wake me up."

I grinned. "I learned from the master, Aidan. And anyway, it's eight-thirty – Mum probably would have come up here and woken you up before long." As if on cue, I heard someone coming upstairs. "Speak of the devil." Having fired off that little remark, I left the room and went back up the hallway to my own room to get dressed.

I wandered into the kitchen slightly more than five minutes later, hiding a grin when I saw Aidan sitting at the table in the corner, nursing a steaming mug of what I guessed to be coffee and looking faintly annoyed. "Where's Taylor?" I asked as I started fixing myself some breakfast.

"He isn't feeling well," Mum replied as she walked into the kitchen, carrying an empty glass.

"Well, that's his own stupid fault for pigging out all day yesterday," I said. "Did he tell you what Aidan did to him?"

Mum put the empty glass in the sink and turned around to face Aidan and I. "What did you do to your brother, Aidan?" she asked.

"I don't know what he's bitching about! It wasn't my fault," Aidan whined.

"Evan Aidan Hanson," Mum warned. "I asked you a question, and you *will* answer it. *Without* whining about it, if you please."

Aidan sighed. "I smacked him in the face when I fell out of bed this morning, after *she*" he pointed an accusing finger at me "poked me with his hockey stick!"

Mum let out an exasperated sigh. "Ebony, what have I told you about doing that?"

"I had to wake Aidan up somehow. And anyway, Taylor didn't get hurt. All he got was a hell of a shock."

"Be that as it may, you both know that you're supposed to be careful with him."

I rolled my eyes as I stared down into my bowl of cereal, watching as the milk slowly turned pink. Ah yes, the 'Taylor is fragile' spiel. Both Aidan and I know that our brother is a *lot* stronger than anyone tends to give him credit for. He has to be to have gone through what he's had to. Not long after our eleventh birthday, he was diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma, a rare and aggressive form of bone cancer. He almost died at one point because the cancer just kept spreading, but thankfully in 1999 he made remission and hasn't yet had a recurrence. As much as I'd like to say he came out of the whole ordeal unscathed, I would be lying through my teeth. Not only does he have a scar running from his right knee to his right ankle, he also walks with a slight limp.

"Mum, really, you gotta give him more credit than that," Aidan said. "He's tougher than the rest of us put together. He wouldn't have made it through hell and back if he wasn't." He swallowed the rest of his coffee and stood up, wandering over to the sink to rinse his mug out.

It wasn't long before my younger siblings came wandering into the kitchen, followed by Dad. I chose that moment to go back upstairs, having finished my breakfast.

Aidan and Taylor's bedroom door was wide open as I came upstairs, and I could hear their stereo playing an Offspring song, *Come Out And Play* by the sound of it. Rather than going straight to my room, I decided to have a little chat with my favourite brother.

"Hey Dopey," I said as I sat down on the floor next to Taylor's bottom bunk, tucking my legs underneath me as I did so. He opened one sleepy blue eye, keeping the other firmly closed.

"Don't call me that," he mumbled. "You know I hate it..."

My nickname for Taylor grew out of a marathon drinking session that took place the night we triplets graduated from high school three months ago. For about the last six months, he has been

tired nearly all of the time. Nobody has been able to pinpoint the precise reason for it, and almost every possible cause has been ruled out. Late that night, after I had had far too much to drink for my own good, I gave a still-sober Taylor the nickname of Dopey, mostly because he always looks and sounds as if he's doped up on something or other. And as most nicknames do, it stuck.

"You okay?" I asked, coiling a lock of my long dark brown hair around my right index finger as I spoke. "Mum said that you aren't feeling well."

"I'll be all right," Taylor said. He yawned widely as he spoke. "Mostly I'm just tired." He shifted in his bed, wincing as he moved. "And my leg still hurts."

"Did you tell Mum?" I asked him.

"Yes Ebony, of *course* I did," Taylor replied. "I'm just waiting for the painkillers to kick in, that's all. I'll be all right after that."

"I take it that you aren't planning on going into town with Mum and Dad then," I guessed, and he shook his head mutely. "Didn't think so. I don't think I'll be going either. I want to christen the PS2."

"Aidan and I already did that last night." He pulled his left hand out from under his quilt and pointed at his and Aidan's TV set, which had our new PlayStation 2 console set up on the floor in front. "We watched *I, Robot*."

"Is it any good?" I asked, and Taylor nodded, grinning. "Want to watch it again?"

"Hell yeah."

I gave him a grin of my own and got back to my feet. "I'll go set up downstairs. You get dressed and come down as soon as you're ready. All right?" Taylor nodded his agreement, and I went to disconnect the game console from the TV.

Taylor came downstairs just as I'd settled myself on the lounge in the lounge room, the controller for the PlayStation2 in hand and the DVD menu for *I, Robot* up on the television screen. Everyone else had already left to go shopping in Coffs Harbour. I gave him a smile as he came across to the lounge and sat down beside me, before shifting himself around and lying down with his head in my lap.

"Quite comfortable there, are we?" I asked him. He nodded slightly and looked toward the TV, a silent hint for me to start the movie.

About halfway through the movie, I looked down to see that Taylor had fallen asleep again, even despite the noise from the TV. I let out a quiet chuckle and shook my head in amusement, before returning my attention to the movie.

Sometime around four-thirty that afternoon, the rest of my family returned home from Coffs Harbour laden down with shopping bags. By this time I had shifted myself to the floor, leaving Taylor lying asleep on the lounge, and was playing one of the games we had also received for Christmas. I only realised they were actually home when the volume on the TV cut out, and I looked up to see Aidan standing next to me with the remote control for the TV in hand.

"What the hell did you do that for?" I asked crossly.

"I could hear that all the way outside," Aidan informed me. "The neighbours are going to complain if you aren't careful. Plus Taylor's asleep if you hadn't noticed."

"Oh, quit your bitching," I said. "He's not going to wake up. He fell asleep halfway through *I, Robot* and he hasn't moved an inch since."

"And when was that?" Mum asked, overhearing.

I shrugged. "No idea. Probably about an hour or so after you guys left."

"Oh dear," Mum sighed. She knelt down beside the lounge and brushed a stray lock of Taylor's hair off of his face. "Tay, wake up," she whispered. He stirred and slowly opened his eyes, looking more than a little disoriented. "Time to go back to bed, baby."

"What time is it?" Taylor mumbled.

"It's four-thirty." To Aidan, she said, "Go upstairs with him and make sure he goes straight to bed."

"I'm not tired," Taylor complained.

"Taylor, you have been asleep for the past seven hours," Mum informed him. "Aside from the fact that you're not well at the moment, if you're that tired you should be in your own bed. Now go – I'm not going to argue with you about this."

"Do you think something's wrong?" I asked Mum as she sat down on the lounge. I got up off of the floor and settled myself down next to her, setting the controller aside. "With Tay, I mean."

"Oh Ebony, I don't know," Mum sighed. "He's starting to worry me, I will say that much, but this could be nothing at all."

"I'm getting a little worried too," I admitted. I toyed with the twisted silver bangle I wore around my right wrist. "I just hope he isn't sick again."

"I'm sure it's nothing like that," Mum said. "Now, how do you feel about helping me out with dinner?"

After dinner, I went up to Taylor and Aidan's bedroom. Mum had sent me up to check on Taylor, and to send him downstairs for dinner if he felt up to it. That is, if he was even awake – I was under strict instructions to leave him be if he was sleeping, with the promise of being shouted at if I woke him hanging over my head.

But as it turned out, I didn't have to worry about being quiet. Taylor was sitting in his desk chair by the window in his room, one knee drawn up to his chest with his chin resting on it. He was staring out of the window into the backyard.

"Hey Tay."

He looked over at me and smiled. "Hey Ebony."

"What's up?" I asked as I joined him at the window.

He shrugged. "I've got a lot on my mind, that's all." He sighed softly. "Who would have thought that I'd still be here?"

"You're a fighter, Taylor. You would have survived no matter what."

"Yeah, but you never know what could happen next year. I could beat this altogether, or it could come back. Being a fighter has nothing to do with it. Well, not much anyway. Fate's got a fair bit to do with it if you ask me."

I let out a quiet groan. "Please don't tell me you believe in that fate crap," I said.

"You'd be very surprised what I believe in and what I don't. If it's fate that I survive this, then so be it. If it's fate that this claims me, well..." Here he shrugged, as if to emphasise his point.

I frowned at this, but said nothing in reply. Instead, I changed the subject.

"You missed dinner," I informed my brother. "Mum said for you to come downstairs if you felt like eating something – she saved you a plate. We had sweet and sour chicken."

"Any disasters?" Taylor asked as he stood up and stretched.

"Unless you want to count Aidan still having no control over chopsticks, nope."

Taylor let out a quiet laugh. "So pretty normal, then." He gave me a small smile before preceding me out of the room and downstairs.

* * *

The Hanson household was a complete madhouse on New Year's Eve. We usually walked to our cousins' house on the other side of Sapphire Cove, the town in northern New South Wales where we lived, but this year was a little different. This year, the New Year's Eve celebrations were taking place at our house. If I wasn't very much mistaken, we could be guaranteed of seeing some fireworks – and I'm not just talking about the live telecast that would be broadcast from Sydney at midnight.

Aidan came into the kitchen carrying the monitor for his computer just as the doorbell rang. The rest of it was sitting on the kitchen table, Aidan already having brought it downstairs. I had parked myself on a stool at the kitchen bench, and was playing with a raw carrot stick I'd pinched from the bowl Mum had put on the coffee table in the lounge room. This was despite having absolutely no intention of eating it.

"*Please* tell me that Isaac isn't tagging along this year," I said to my mother. Out of all of my cousins, Isaac was the one I disliked the most, though my dislike was tempered somewhat if I'd had a drink or two. Taylor shared my feelings about our cousin, and because my brother didn't drink Isaac usually bore the full brunt of Taylor's somewhat volatile temper. It was quite amusing to see Taylor mouthing off to Isaac once he got in the mood, being that most of the time my brother was one of the nicest people on the planet.

"I really don't know what you've got against him, Ebony," Mum said, not looking up from filling a glass bowl with Doritos.

"Neither do I," Aidan said, agreeing with our mother.

"He's a computer geek for one thing," I said. "He bored me stupid last year. I almost ended up hitting him over the head with one of Auntie Karen's vases just to get him to shut up. And the worst thing is that Auntie Karen doesn't see a thing wrong with it!" I let out a sigh. "If I end up with a hangover tomorrow morning, it is solely *his* fault."

It wasn't long before the party was in full swing. I had been banished to the lounge room with my siblings and cousins, and was watching Taylor and my youngest brother Zac playing *Tekken 4* on the PlayStation2. Another of my cousins, Nicole, sat beside me on the lounge, while Aidan had commandeered our father's armchair. I liked Nicole rather more than I did Isaac, and could therefore tolerate her presence for far longer than I could her brother's. Playing in a corner of the lounge room with the dolls belonging to yet another cousin were my youngest cousin Avery and my sisters Jessica and Zoë. Mum, Dad, Aunt Karen and Uncle Wayne were out on the back deck, having rather wisely decided to leave us kids to our own devices, and Isaac still held court in the kitchen.

About five minutes after Aidan went back into the kitchen, I joined him to see Isaac tinkering away with my brother's computer. I scowled and arrowed straight for the ice-filled Esky that sat on one of the kitchen chairs near the bench. Even though Nicole was three full years younger than me and thus wasn't even close to eighteen yet, her parents did allow her to drink, just as my parents allowed Zac to. And it was Nicole who had tasked me with getting her something to drink. Rather than making her get it herself, I decided it would be in my best interests to brave the presence of Nicole's older brother.

"Hey Nee," Aidan said, evidently having spotted me.

"Hey Ayd," I replied as I rooted around one-handed in the Esky. "What're you doing?"

"Installing a new operating system," Isaac said.

I straightened up and glared at my cousin. "I didn't ask *you*," I said venomously, before turning my attention to my brother. "What're you doing?" I asked him pointedly.

"He's putting a new operating system on the hard drive," Aidan said. "It's supposedly more stable than Windows, but I'll be the judge of that."

Having received a reply I could more or less be content with, I bent back down over the Esky and resumed my self-appointed task. As soon as I found what I was after – a pineapple Bacardi Breezer for Nicole and a grapefruit Ruski for myself – I dried the bottles off with a tea towel that was sitting on the bench. "Well, don't let me stop you," I said airily as I left the kitchen.

It wasn't very long before Aidan returned to the lounge room sans his computer. Taylor had gone upstairs to bed right after I had left the kitchen, and so in his absence Nicole had challenged Zac to a round of *Tekken*. So far, Nicole was winning – and rather admirably, might I add. Aidan took Nicole's vacated seat and gave me a gentle poke in the shoulder.

"What?" I asked, not shifting my gaze from the television.

"Do you think Taylor's all right?" Aidan asked.

"What do you mean?"

"It's ten-thirty, and he's already in bed."

"He was tired, Aidan. I know for a fact that he didn't get any sleep last night. I'd say he's well within his rights to go to bed early if he thinks he needs to."

"I hope you're right, Nee. I've just got this feeling about it, and it's not good."

I snorted quietly. "Yeah, well, pardon me for being realistic. He'll be fine, Ayd." But for all I told Aidan, even I wasn't sure of what I was saying.

Something Taylor had said a few days before Christmas popped into my head, how the coming year would be one to remember. He'd had no idea how true that would turn out to be – and for all the wrong reasons. For there was something coming over the horizon, and it was about to bring our world crashing down at our feet all over again.

Chapter 2

Taylor

"So how are we going to do this?"

Saturday had long been my favourite day of the week. During high school, it had been because I didn't have school. And now that I was done with my secondary education, Saturday had become the only day of the week when I was able to catch up with the little group I had taken to associating myself with. My friends all worked, and so catching up during the week was often impossible.

One of the many things we had in common was a love of street hockey. It was for this reason that we regularly met up every weekend, even in the driving rain, our meeting place being the grounds of Sapphire Cove High School. We had a long-standing agreement with our old school principal that we could use the school's basketball court for our pick-up hockey games, until such a time as a more permanent venue could be found. Being as we hadn't been able to find somewhere else to play, and it was looking as if we wouldn't be able to, the arrangement stood.

The seven that made up my group of friends consisted of two girls and five guys – the girls being Kate Winthrop and Rachel Murray, and the guys being Ben Dawes, Mark Olsen, Kieran Schneider, Chris Feldman and I. We stood in a loose circle in the centre of the basketball court, rollerblades and helmets on, steadying ourselves with our hockey sticks. This was one of my favourite sports – I had taken up street hockey as a way of rebuilding my strength and stamina after my battle with cancer had ended four-and-a-half years earlier. It was fast, it forced me to think on my feet, and it was also a lot of fun. I'd received my fair share of injuries during games over the years, mostly limited to bruises, black eyes, grazes and twisted ankles, but the pain was worth it for the adrenaline rush it produced.

"Well, there are seven of us, so..." Ben skated backwards and then around the outside of the circle, tossing the scuffed red cricket ball we used in lieu of a puck from hand to hand as he moved. "We can play three-a-side, and have one goalkeeper. That sound good to you lot?"

We all made some sort of sound of assent, and then chose our goalkeeper. A heated game of rock-paper-scissors ended in Mark being chosen. Once Mark was in position, the game began.

About twenty minutes into the game, at around noon, we took a break and took stock of the score so far. We had divided into two teams consisting of myself, Ben and Kate on one team, and Chris, Rachel and Kieran on the other – my team was winning so far, by eight points to six.

"I think we need to work out the stakes of this game before we get going again," Kieran said as he recapped his water bottle. "Something to do with lunch, maybe?"

"The losing team has to shell out for pizza," Rachel said from where she lay on the asphalt, hands clasped under her head.

"It's lunchtime, Rach," Ben reminded her.

"So? I eat pizza for lunch all the time."

"I was thinking something more along the lines of hot chips," Ben said. "How's that sound to you lot?"

We all agreed to this, though I was privately hoping rather fervently that my team didn't lose – I was, for want of a better word, broke.

"Hey Tay, you feeling all right?" Kate asked as I buckled my skates back on. "You're not looking too hot."

"I'm fine," I replied, even though I knew very well that what I was saying was a barefaced lie. "I just didn't get a lot of sleep last night, that's all."

"Tay, I've known you since we were in Kindergarten together," Kate informed me. "And the last time I saw you looking this bad was in Year 7. To be blunt, you look like shit."

I pushed my hair back off my face before jamming my helmet onto my head. "All that is wrong with me, Kate, is that I am getting fed up with everyone asking if I'm all right," I said as I did up the buckle of my helmet. "So unless you want me to give you a whack with my hockey stick, you'll stop asking me. Got me?"

"Jeez Taylor, I was only asking," Kate said, sounding hurt. "Pardon me for being concerned for a friend." She made to skate off, but I grabbed the back of her yellow T-shirt.

"Kate, wait – I'm sorry, okay?" I rubbed my hands over my face. "I'm just getting annoyed with everyone asking if I'm feeling okay. It's really starting to get on my nerves. All I need is a good night's sleep, and I'll be my old self again."

Kate turned in a circle to face me. "Do you promise?"

I nodded. "I promise." I pushed myself to my feet, using my hockey stick as a lever and wincing as another ache started up in my left shin. "Come on, we've got a game to finish."

But we never finished our game. Barely five minutes later, I stopped moving and dropped down onto the asphalt, my leg feeling as if it was on fire. I frantically tried to get my skates off, biting back a scream of pain as I scrabbled at the buckles. Rachel was the first to notice that I was in pain, yanking her skates off as soon as she realised I was no longer chasing after her.

"Holy shit, are you all right?" Rachel asked as she crouched down beside me. "Here, let me do that," she said, catching my hands up as I worked at the stubborn buckles of my skates.

"My leg's killing me," I managed to get out.

As Rachel eased my skates off, the rest of my friends gathered around the two of us, our game forgotten. "Back off you lot," Rachel warned. "Kate, get that Nurofen of yours out of your bag."

"I don't have any left," Kate said, sounding apologetic. "I took the last of it this morning, before I came out here." She edged closer. "What's wrong?"

"My leg feels like it's on fire," I informed her.

"Shit." Kate knelt down on my right. "Your parents won't be home right now, will they?"

"I think my mum is," I answered, trying not to sound as if I was in too much pain.

Rachel nodded once. "Okay. I'll ring your mum and let her know we're taking you to the hospital."

"Oh *hell* no," I objected. Two pairs of hands pushed me down as I tried to stand up. "I am *not* setting foot in another hospital as long as I live."

"You don't have much of a choice, Hanson," Kate informed me, addressing me by my surname.

"You're outnumbered right now."

"Besides, any doctor in their right mind would send you straight to the hospital anyway," Rachel said, picking up the thread. "You've got a sore leg without any explanation for *why* it's sore – you're probably going to need an X-ray to rule out any fractures." To Kate she said, "Get your skates off, and help me get him to Mark's car. And somebody ring Mrs. Hanson and tell her where we're going."

* * *

The emergency department at St. Elizabeth's Hospital was pretty much a hive of activity. Doctors and nurses came and went every few minutes, I could hear distorted voices calling for various people, and at one point I heard the blaring, harsh siren of an ambulance as it pulled up outside.

And the only reason I knew all of this was because I had just arrived barely ten minutes earlier.

I shifted uncomfortably on the examination table I was seated on, trying to ignore the fact that my left shin felt like it had been set on fire. A young female doctor by the name of Dr. Rosa

Bridges, going by the name badge pinned to the front of her blouse, was seated a foot or so away from me, a clipboard balanced on her knees. She gave me a smile before speaking.

"Now, Jordan-"

I resisted the strong urge to reach out with both hands to throttle her when she addressed me by my first name, which I had never liked to be called. Only my parents ever called me Jordan, and even then only when I was in trouble – which was something that rarely happened. "Taylor," I corrected through gritted teeth. "My name is *Taylor*."

Dr. Bridges gave me an apologetic smile. "I apologise. I should have read a little further."

"S'all right," I muttered. "You were saying?"

"I realise you are in some amount of pain, but I need you to tell me what happened – I can't make a judgment about the best course of action to take until I have an idea of what's going on."

"I don't know what started it," I said wearily. "All I know is that sometime in October, my left leg started to ache. I've been able to keep the pain under control, but today something happened to make it worse."

"What were you doing when the pain worsened?"

"Playing street hockey. Usually it makes my leg feel better, but obviously not today." I shifted again. "Look, as much as I've enjoyed talking to you, I kinda want to find out what the hell is wrong with me, so if you don't mind..."

Dr. Bridges smiled. "Of course. I'll have someone take you over to radiology in a short while – I'd like to rule out any fractures to begin with." She rose from her seat. "In the meantime, I'll see what I can do about easing the pain."

"Thank you," I said gratefully.

Dr. Bridges had barely left when I walked my mother. She looked as worried as hell, and I couldn't in good conscience blame her.

"Oh Taylor," she said, shaking her head. "What am I going to do with you?"

"I'm good Mum, how are you?" I said pointedly.

"That's enough, Jordan," Mum said sharply. "Why didn't you tell me your leg was hurting again?"

"Because you had your hands full enough with Zoë this morning," I informed her. "And because I thought I could put up with it. That's why." I swung my feet up onto the examination table and lay down on my back, staring up at the ceiling. "I'll be all right, Mum. It's probably nothing – they'll give me a prescription for the strongest painkillers I can get, and they'll send me on my way." I clasped my hands and lay my head down on them. "And the sooner the better, because it's starting to hurt like a motherfucker."

"Watch your mouth," Mum scolded. "I did not raise you to speak like you were born in a gutter."

"Sorry."

About twenty minutes later, I was doped up on painkillers nearly up to my eyeballs and lying flat on my back in radiology, waiting to find out if my leg was broken. I was fairly certain that it wasn't, considering I'd been walking on it for this long, but it didn't hurt to find out for sure.

This was always the worst part – the waiting. Compared to most of my family, I was an incredibly patient person, in which aspect I took after my mother. But put me in a situation where I was unwell, injured or worried, and then force me to wait, and I turned into the complete opposite of who I normally was. It was not a pretty sight to say the very least.

"So is this going to take much longer or what?" I called out, and heard a burst of laughter in response.

"We're nearly done," the technician called back. "Just hold still for a little while longer."

'A little while' stretched out to nearly ten minutes. By the time the technician came to help me back into the wheelchair I had been brought into radiology in, I was in something of a bad mood – and that was putting it lightly. The fact that the painkillers were beginning to wear off wasn't helping one bit.

"Before I turn you loose, I need to know the name of the doctor who referred you up here – I noticed an anomaly on your X-rays, and I feel it's something that warrants further investigation," the technician said as I got myself as comfortable as possible.

"Dr. Bridges," I replied.

"All right then. Hopefully I won't be seeing you again for some time."

"What, don't you love me?" I asked cheekily.

"Go on, get," the technician said, laughter in her voice. I raised my right hand in a salute as I wheeled myself out into the corridor.

Less than half an hour later, I was sitting in Dr. Bridges' office, waiting to hear the results of my X-rays. Dr. Bridges was seated behind her desk, holding my X-rays up to the fluorescent lights that were set into the ceiling. I got the distinct impression that we were waiting for someone. My suspicions were confirmed less than a minute later, when the door to Dr. Bridges' office swung open, and in walked yet another doctor.

"Sorry I'm late," the new doctor said. "There was an incident up in oncology."

"It's all right," Dr. Bridges said almost dismissively. She slipped the X-ray she was studying back into its envelope before introducing me to her colleague. "Taylor, this is Dr. Naomi Beckett – she's an oncologist here at the hospital."

Oncologist? the little voice in the back of my mind asked, seconds before it clicked. *Oh no, not again...*

"Taylor, was it?" Dr. Beckett asked, and I nodded. "Dr. Bridges asked for my assistance in determining the cause of your pain due to an anomaly she and the X-ray technician both noticed." Dr. Bridges handed the envelope containing my X-rays over to Dr. Beckett, who slipped the X-rays from the envelope and put them up on the light box mounted on the wall. She switched on the light, and the bones of my left leg stood out in sharp relief. I immediately spotted what Dr. Beckett was talking about – a dark patch near the upper end of one of the bones. She indicated it with a pen. "This is what I'm concerned about."

"What do you think it could be?" I asked.

"This is only a preliminary assessment, but I suspect that it may be a tumour. You will need to have tests done in order for a definite diagnosis to be made, however." She switched the light box off and returned my X-rays to their envelope. "Before I make arrangements, however, I need to know if you've suffered any other symptoms that may be related."

"Uh...well, I've been feeling really rundown lately, and I've had a few headaches. But apart from that, it's only my leg that's been bothering me."

"All right then." She pulled a small spiral notebook from a pocket and scribbled something down. "Normally I would refer you to Sydney to have the tests done, but I feel that it would be more beneficial if I arranged for testing to occur here. I'll make arrangements for Monday morning, but in the meantime go home and get some rest."

I nodded silently. My world was slowly falling in on me all over again, and it scared the hell out of me. And the worst thing was that I didn't know what was wrong with me. I knew I was exhausted, that I felt like shit, but I had no idea *why* I felt that way.

Mum was waiting outside in the corridor when I left Dr. Bridges' office. She looked up expectantly as I came to a halt in front of her.

"She doesn't know what's wrong with me yet," I said with a small sigh. "But Dr. Beckett thinks it might be a bone tumour. I'm supposed to have some tests done next week, but until then I'm supposed to get some rest." I laughed humourlessly. "Not much chance of *that* happening."

I spent the next week in and out of hospital, for the first time in years. The barrage of tests that I was subjected to was daunting. I had to contend with X-rays, MRIs, CT scans, bone scans, blood tests, and the one test I dreaded most, above all others – the painful biopsy that would tell me for sure if I was indeed sick again, for the first time since the middle of 1999. The mere thought of being that unwell for the second time in my life kept me awake at night, long after Aidan had fallen asleep.

It was in the middle of January that I found out the results of my tests. The morning of January fifteenth saw my mother and I waiting outside Dr. Beckett's office, Dr. Beckett having called me the previous evening to set up this morning's appointment. Whatever she had to tell me, I had the distinct feeling that it couldn't be good.

"Are you all right, Taylor?"

I looked over at the sound of my mother's voice. She looked rather concerned – I'd barely said one word all day, which I knew worried her a little. I decided to be honest with her, and shook my head.

"I'm scared, Mum," I said quietly. "What if I'm sick again?"

"We will cross that bridge when we come to it, all right? If you're sick again, we will deal with it as best we can." She reached over and gave my right hand a gentle squeeze. "I'm sure it's nothing to worry about."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak, and looked down at my shoelaces.

When my name was called, I got up from my seat and walked into Dr. Beckett's office. I felt as if I were a condemned prisoner on my way to the gallows, and had to fight the incredibly strong

impulse to bolt. I really did not want to find out my test results, but it was the only way I was going to find out if I was sick again.

"Thanks for coming in this morning, Taylor," Dr. Beckett said as I sat down in front of her desk. "I have your test results back, as I told you last night." She opened the envelope that sat on her desk and pulled out a sheaf of papers. "Taylor..." She sighed quietly. "I'm afraid I have some bad news."

"What do you mean by bad news?" I asked.

Dr. Beckett put the papers down on her desk and clasped her hands together before her, interlacing her fingers. "I'm sure you recall my concern about your recent X-rays," she said, sounding as if she was stalling for time. I nodded, and she continued. "Your test results indicate that I had every reason to be concerned." She let out another quiet sigh. "Taylor, I'm sorry to tell you this, but the anomaly on your X-rays has been diagnosed as a low grade osteosarcoma."

I sucked in a sharp breath through my nose. "I...I'm sick again?" I asked in utter disbelief. I shook my head almost violently. "N-no way. There has to be some mistake..."

"There's no mistake – I could easily refer you to have more testing done, but the result would come back exactly the same." She leaned forward. "I know this is something of a shock -"

"No *shit*, Sherlock," I muttered.

Dr. Beckett frowned, but said nothing. "Now that we know what we are dealing with, I believe that the best course of action is to refer you for treatment in Sydney."

I sighed and leaned back in my seat. "Right. So when do I have to start treatment?"

"As soon as possible. The earlier you begin treatment, the better chance you have of a full recovery." She opened a binder that sat on her desk and began to flip through it. "I'm going to refer you to see Dr. Nicolas Rochester, at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital – he comes very highly recommended, and so I have no qualms about doing so."

I nodded and shifted uneasily in my seat. This couldn't be happening again. I had come so close to the five-year mark, and now I was back at square one. It was one of my worst nightmares brought to life.

"Dr. Beckett, I have a question..."

"Fire away," Dr. Beckett said.

"You've probably seen in my records that I'm in remission from Ewing's sarcoma – it'll be five years since I entered remission in June. Is this going to affect that?"

Dr. Beckett shook her head. "No, it won't. What we are dealing with is something entirely different. You have nothing to worry about in that regard."

I nodded. "Okay, good."

I fell silent as Dr. Beckett wrote in her binder, and then shifted focus to the computer that sat on her desk. When she was finished typing, she printed out a single sheet of white paper and sealed it in an envelope. "Guard this with your life," she said as she handed the envelope to me. "I am also going to fax a copy down to Sydney, but you will need that to prove that it was, in fact, me who referred you."

I nodded and stood up, and shook Dr. Beckett's hand. "Thank you, Dr. Beckett."

"It's my pleasure." She bent down and scribbled something on a piece of paper. "I want you to know that you should always feel free to call me at any time, should you have any concerns." She handed the piece of paper to me, and I saw that a phone number was written on it.

I nodded my thanks, pocketed the piece of paper, and headed out of the office, my gaze downcast. It was time to break the news to my mother.

Mum looked up as I came to stand before her, and I bit my lip when I saw the hope in her eyes. This was going to break her heart.

"Dr. Beckett told me my results," I said quietly.

"Oh?" Mum said. "What did she say?" She sounded so hopeful, and I was about to shatter that hope into tiny fragments all over again.

"I'm sick again, Mum," I told her.

"Oh Taylor," Mum whispered. She got up out of her seat and pulled me into a tight embrace. "My baby..."

That did it. I didn't want to cry in front of my mother, but my resolve completely crumbled. I broke down right then and there, not caring who heard or saw me. My life had just gone to hell all over again, and therefore I reckoned I had every right in the world to lose it.

"This is what we're going to do, okay?" Mum said as she guided me to sit down next to her. "We're going to go home, and I want you to try and get some rest. You let me worry about everything else."

I nodded miserably. "Tell me this is just a bad dream, and that I'm going to wake up soon," I whispered pleadingly. "Please, Mum..."

"I wish I could, Tay," Mum said quietly. "I wish I could..."

Chapter 3

Aidan

"Aidan...Earth to Aidan..."

I snapped out of my reverie and shifted my gaze from the *Elektra* movie poster that took up half the opposite wall to the face of one of my co-workers. For some reason, Tuesday mornings were always slow at the cinema in Coffs Harbour where I'd worked for the past year and a half, which gave me a chance to work out the guitar chords for my latest favourite song in my head. But this morning, my guitar was the furthest thing from my mind.

To put it simply, I was worried.

"God Aidan, you're off with the pixies more than usual today," Thea, the aforementioned co-worker, said. As usual, she looked as if she had jammed her finger into a light socket – her bright pink hair stood up all over her head, a stark contrast to her work uniform of a red shirt and black dress pants. "What's eating you?"

"Oh, it's nothing," I said dismissively.

"Uh-huh," Thea said, her tone of voice speaking volumes – she didn't believe me for a second.

"Don't bullshit me, Aidan. Something's up. You're not humming for one – if nothing was wrong you'd be driving me mad humming Metallica or something."

"I don't like Metallica," I said automatically.

"Sure you don't. Come on, spill."

"It's just that...my brother had to have a load of tests done last week. He's supposed to get the results back today. And I..." I unconsciously pulled on one of my dreadlocks. "I'm worried as hell."

"Shit, I don't blame you. What was he being tested for?"

"Cancer. I'm hoping that he hasn't had a recurrence, if he's even got anything wrong with him – I reckon that'd be worse than if they found a new one."

"A new one?" Thea asked, sounding puzzled.

"He's been in remission for four-and-a-half years. If it's come back I think it might just kill him, even if the cancer doesn't. He fought like mad to beat it last time, and if that was all for nothing..."

I shook my head. "He'd probably off himself right then and there."

Just as Thea opened her mouth, my mobile phone rang. "Hold that thought," I said as I dropped down into a crouch and hunted around in the cupboard beneath the ticket counter for my phone.

I found it under my skateboard and checked who was calling – it was Mum, so I answered it.

"Hey Mum," I said as I straightened up.

"Aidan, I need you to come home straight away," Mum said. She sounded as if she had been crying fairly recently.

"Mum, what happened?"

"I'll tell you when you get home. Can you pick your sister up from work on your way, please?"

"Yeah, 'course I will." I swallowed hard. "I...I'll see you soon."

I hung up and dropped back into my crouch, grabbing my skateboard out of the cupboard and shoving my keys, wallet and phone into my pockets. "I gotta get home, Thea," I said. "Family emergency." I didn't know exactly what was going on, but I figured my excuse was a fairly good guess. "Let Craig know where I've gone, will ya?"

"'Course I will." Thea gave me a small smile. "I hope everything goes well for your brother."

I tried to return Thea's smile. "Thanks, Thea."

On my way downstairs, I kept one hand on my skateboard as I tapped away at the keypad of my phone. Rather than just barging into Ebony's workplace and dragging her away without warning, I'd decided to text my sister to let her know what was happening so that she had a legitimate excuse for leaving early. I scanned my message right before I sent it.

Nee, family emergency – Mum said to come home now. Am on my way to pick you up. Be out front of Woolies in five mins, ok?

Satisfied that it gave my sister all the information she needed to know, I hit SEND and ran to my car.

Ebony was waiting out the front of Woolworths when I pulled up in my car. She wrenched the front passenger side door open and hopped into the passenger seat even before I had pulled up alongside the kerb.

"So what's going on?" she asked as she buckled her seatbelt.

"I have no idea," I replied as I pulled away into the street. "All I know is that a bit more than ten minutes ago, Mum rang me on my mobile sounding like she'd been crying. She just told me to come home, and to pick you up on my way – she wouldn't tell me what was going on, just that I had to get home."

Ebony was quiet for about half a minute. Finally, she said, "Do you think it's something to do with Tay?"

"I have no idea, Nee, but I damn well hope not. I figure Mum'll tell us when we get home."

My sister nodded and fell silent once more.

Not twenty minutes after I had left work, Ebony and I arrived home. Mum's car was parked in the driveway, so I chose to park on the grass in front of the lounge room windows rather than parking

my mother in. Almost as soon as I had killed the engine, Ebony was out of the car and up on the front porch, digging around in her handbag for her keys.

"Hang on Nee, I got it," I said as I came up beside her with my keys in hand. I had the front door open before Ebony had even managed to get her keys out. "Mum, we're home!" I called as I stepped inside, closing the door behind my sister once she had entered.

"We're upstairs, Aidan," Mum called back. Ebony and I exchanged glances before heading upstairs.

Mum was in my room with Taylor, who was visibly upset. He was curled up in his bunk under his blankets, eyes closed and crying so softly I could barely hear him. The main evidence that he was upset was the tears that were spilling down his face. Mum was sitting on the bed beside my brother, stroking his hair as he cried. In that instant, I knew something had gone very wrong.

"Mum, what happened?" Ebony asked. "Why's he crying?"

"Sit down, Ebony, and I'll tell you – you too, Aidan," Mum said. We complied immediately – I pulled my computer chair closer to the bunk, and Ebony chose to sit on the floor.

It took Mum a few tries to get the words out. When she finally managed it, I understood why it was so hard.

"Ebony, Aidan...your brother is sick," Mum said to begin with.

"*What?*" I asked, right as Ebony took in a sharp breath. "But it's nearly five years – why now?"

"I don't know, Aidan. But the fact of the matter is that he is sick."

Ebony went to speak, but Taylor chose that moment to open his eyes. "*I am here, you know,*" he said, his voice breaking. "Don't talk about me like I'm not even in the room. I don't like it."

"Taylor," Mum said warningly, and my brother fell silent once more.

"What is it?" Ebony asked.

"An osteosarcoma, in his left leg," Mum replied. "It's a different kind this time, though, so he is still in remission of a sort. The good news is that it hasn't spread, and it's treatable – barring any disasters, there shouldn't be any problems getting it under control."

"Well, that's something good at least," Ebony said, relief evident in her tone. She got up on her knees and shuffled her way across the floor to where Taylor lay in his bed. "Hey Puck," she whispered, and Taylor opened his eyes. "You know we're going to get through this, don't you?" Taylor shrugged, and Ebony frowned before trying something else. "You're going to Sydney, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well then, Aidan and I will be there with you the whole time. There is no way we are going to stay here while you're stuck down there in Sydney on your own. *Right, Aidan?*" She looked back over her shoulder and fixed me with a hard look.

"The dark one has spoken," I said, cracking a smile. "Anyway, we're the Three Musketeers, aren't we? Anything we do, we do it together. And if that means coming to Sydney to keep you company while you're laid up in hospital, then so be it. We aren't triplets for nothing."

It wasn't long afterwards that Mum and Ebony left the room, leaving Taylor and I alone. For the longest time neither of us spoke a word. It was my brother who finally broke the silence.

"I feel like I'm being punished for something," he mumbled.

"What makes you think that?" I asked, confused as to what he meant.

"Because, Aidan," he said as he unburied himself from beneath his blankets, "I can't work out for the life of me if this is something I deserve, or if it's just really fucking bad luck."

"Well, of course it's bad luck," I said. "You've managed to stay more or less healthy and out of hospital for four-and-a-half years, and you haven't done anything worthy of punishment, so what else would it be?"

"I don't know. I just..." He shook his head. "I feel as if there's a target on my back that Fate likes throwing dart after dart at. The past four, nearly five years, Fate's missed the target. But now, Fate's hit the bullseye again."

We lapsed into silence once more. This time, the silence lasted so long that it wasn't broken until our mother returned upstairs at around half-past five. By this time, Taylor had fallen asleep and I was playing *World Of Warcraft* on my computer with the sound muted. She had a blue-green-and-white checked tea towel draped over her left shoulder.

"Aidan, it's time for dinner," she said as she stepped into the room. I nodded and paused my game, rising from my seat and turning to face my mother. "And I apologise for pulling you out of work this morning, but Taylor and I both felt that you and Ebony deserved to be the first to know."

"It's all right, Mum," I assured her. "Tuesdays are slow at work anyway, so it wasn't like I was missing anything by leaving." I cast a glance at my sleeping brother. "Should I wake him?"

"No, he needs to sleep. He can eat later on if he's hungry."

I nodded to show I understood, and followed my mother silently from the room.

After dinner, my parents gathered us in the lounge room to break the news that we had been dreading for so long. I didn't envy my parents right now – this had to be so hard for them. I could only imagine what they were going through. Taylor was my and Ebony's brother, but he was Mum and Dad's son – one of their *children*.

It was Jessica who broke the tense silence we had fallen into. "Why wasn't Taylor at dinner?" she asked. "He isn't in hospital, is he?"

"No, he's not," Mum said. I could see the sheer relief in my sister's face as these words were spoken. "But..." She trailed off, seemingly lost for words.

Dad picked up the thread. "I'm sure you've seen the scar your brother has on his right leg," he said to start off, and both Zac and Jessica nodded.

"He had to have an operation," Zac said. "But what does that have to do with..." He trailed off, the significance of what Dad was talking about seeming to dawn on him. "It hasn't come back, has it?"

"No, it hasn't," Mum said. "But he is sick, though with a different type of cancer than last time."

"He's not going to die, is he?" Jessica asked quietly, unsurely.

"Of course I'm not."

We all turned to the lounge room entrance to see Taylor leaning against the wall, looking rather exhausted. He smiled slightly when he saw Ebony and I, and came into the lounge room to sit down between us.

"Well, we all hope you don't," Mum said. "And you seem to be a lot more positive about this than you were."

"I'm not dying yet, am I? Therefore, there's no point in moping until I am. And if I have my way, that won't be for a good sixty years yet."

"Let's hope that's the case," Dad said.

"So do I," I heard Taylor whisper, so softly that I wasn't sure I'd even heard it at first. Those three words said so much, more than he probably ever meant them to.

"So what happens now?" Zac asked.

"Your mother and Taylor will be relocating to Sydney in a few days or so, and I'm guessing Aidan and Ebony won't be too far behind them."

"Too right," Ebony said emphatically. "We're triplets, aren't we? We're not meant to be separated. And anyone who thinks otherwise doesn't have their head screwed on straight."

Ebony's next action wasn't surprising, at least not to me. She shifted around to her left and put her right hand out. I caught on pretty quick, mirroring her actions and placing my left hand atop her right. We sat there waiting, wondering if our third would take the hint.

He did. Barely a minute later, a palm roughened by the repeated wielding of an old hockey stick landed atop the back of my hand. This was our silent promise, our unspoken agreement, one that we made when words weren't enough or even necessary.

We are all in this together.

* * *

"*Ebony!*" I yelled from where I stood at the foot of the stairs. "Get your arse in gear! We have to get a move on if we want to be there by lunchtime!"

It was little more than a week later. Mum and Taylor had made the trek down to Sydney early the previous morning, in preparation for Taylor's appointment this morning. Ebony and I had elected to wait a day before making our way down the coast, though not without a few misgivings. We had never travelled outside the general Coffs Harbour area by ourselves before – either Mum or Dad had been with us. Despite Mum's worries that we would get lost, Ebony had assured her that we knew what we were doing, more or less, and that we would ring her if we had any trouble along the way.

"Aidan, please keep the noise down," Dad said as he came out of the kitchen. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"Yeah, it's a quarter to five in the morning," I said. "Believe me Dad, I know what time it is."

"Well then, you should be aware that your brother and sisters are still asleep, as you should probably be."

Ebony came wandering downstairs barely five minutes later, her backpack slung over one shoulder and her favourite baseball cap pulled down low over her eyes. She was shoving something down into the right pocket of her jeans as she walked. "Jeez Ebony, about time," I said as she stepped off the bottom stair. "What took you so long?"

"I was looking for something," she replied, before letting out a quiet chuckle. "And now my room looks like a bomb's hit it."

"I sincerely hope you plan on tidying it when you come home," Dad said. "Do you have everything you need?"

A glance passed between Ebony and I, and she nodded. "Yeah, we're good to go." Her gaze dipped down to the watch she wore around her left wrist. "'Spose we'd better get going if we want to be there by lunch time. C'mon Ayd."

Once Dad had extracted a promise that we would be careful, and that we would call either him or Mum when we made it to Port Macquarie, our first stop, we left the house. Dawn was barely beginning to break when we stepped out onto the front porch – it was light enough that I could see where I was going, but still too dark to be able to see anything other than blacks, whites and greys.

"Tell me again *why* we live so far away from Sydney that we have to leave home at five in the fucking morning, just to be able to get there by lunch," Ebony grouched as we got into my car. I'd had a little too much to drink the evening before, so I had given my car keys to Ebony – I was still on my P-plates and would be in serious danger of losing my licence if I drove. The first thing she did once she had got into the driver's seat was shift the seat forward so she could reach the pedals.

"I don't know," I said, shrugging. "Think you can wake me up when we get to Port Macquarie?"

"Yeah, no worries," Ebony said as she turned the key in the ignition and put the car in reverse.

Seven o'clock saw us sitting in a McDonald's on the Pacific Highway in Port Macquarie, eating a breakfast of pancakes drenched in as much maple syrup as we'd been able to con out of the half-asleep girl who had served us. I was eating with one hand and toying with my phone with my other, not even noticing that Ebony was eating the lion's share of our shared breakfast.

"Why don't you just call him?" Ebony asked as the time on my watch ticked over to 7:05.

"Because I'll probably wake him up."

Ebony eyed me. "Ayd, if I know our brother as well as I should by now, he's probably sitting there in that motel room, wide awake, wishing someone would call him and tell him that everything's going to be all right. He's probably scared witless. And frankly...I wouldn't be able to blame him." She slid the remainder of the pancakes across the table to me and put her fork down. "I'm going to go and wash my hands. You ring Taylor and tell him not to worry." She gave me a big smile before wandering off in search of the ladies'.

I put my own fork down and wiped my slightly sticky left hand off on my jeans, before scrolling through my phone's address book in search of my brother's number. Having found it, I hit SEND and waited for him to answer.

After about five rings, a sleepy voice greeted me. "'Lo?"

"I knew you'd be asleep," I said. "'Morning Tay."

"Aidan?" my brother asked, sounding a little more awake. "Wh-where are you?"

"At a Macca's in Port Macquarie. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm all right. When're you gonna get here?"

"Probably sometime around lunch, maybe a bit later. Depends how long we end up being in Newcastle for."

"Kay," my brother said, so quietly I wasn't sure he had even said anything. He sounded so scared, so alone, something completely uncharacteristic for him, that I knew I had to say *something*. But I couldn't find the words.

"I'll let you go back to sleep," I said. "You sound like you need it. See you at lunch, yeah?"

"Yeah, no worries," he said, voice heavy with sleep again. He hung up without saying goodbye, and I was left with the sound of the end-of-call tone buzzing in my ear.

Ebony came back just as I slid my phone into my pocket. "Did you ring him?" she asked as I stood up and gathered everything on the table – the unfinished pancakes, Ebony's empty cup that had previously contained orange juice, my half-filled cup of lukewarm coffee – onto the empty tray that sat on the table alongside ours.

"Yeah," I answered.

"Did he say anything?"

"Not really. He was half-asleep so I don't think he was quite aware of what he was hearing or saying." I didn't say anything more for about half a minute. "He sounded so *scared*, Nee. I've never heard him sound like that before." *And I'm not sure I ever want to hear it again*, I added silently.

We were back on the road again less than ten minutes later, heading down the coast to Newcastle. Ebony was back behind the wheel, eating a blueberry muffin with one hand and steering with the other, humming along to a Fuel song on the radio. I was staring out of the windscreen, trying to keep my mind off of what awaited us at the end of our journey.

We had just breezed through Hexham, nearly three hours after leaving Port Macquarie, when my phone vibrated in my pocket. It was coming up to a quarter past ten in the morning, the summer

sun climbing ever higher in the clear blue sky. I worked my hand into my pocket and extracted my phone, checked the screen and answered it.

"Hey Mum," I said as Ebony drove down Industrial Drive in Mayfield West. "What's up?"

"Good morning Aidan. Where are you up to?" Mum asked.

"We're nearly at Newcastle. It'll take us just over two hours after we get there to make it to Sydney."

"All right. Would you be able to pick your brother up from the hospital when you get there, and bring him over to your aunt and uncle's place? I have to go and see your uncle at eleven-thirty, and I won't be able to pick him up when he's finished."

"Yeah, no worries." I stayed quiet for a little while. "How is he?"

Mum didn't say anything for some time. When she did, she sounded incredibly weary. "He's coping, Aidan. I don't know how, but he is. I just don't know how much more of this he can take."

"He'll be okay, Mum," I said, trying to sound sure. "I know he will. He's a fighter and a Hanson – he'll fight until there's nothing left to fight *for*. He's not about to take this lying down."

By the time we had finished our conversation and said goodbye, Ebony and I had arrived in Newcastle, my sister having stopped at a petrol station. "Grab my wallet for me," my sister requested as she let herself out of the car. "Anything you want from here?"

I thought it over momentarily. "Nah, I'll be right."

"In that case..." Ebony bent down and squinted at the fuel gauge. "Reckon you can get fifty bucks out of my wallet for me?" she asked as she moved away from the car and over to the nearest bowser. I did as I was asked, and had the money ready by the time she came back to the car.

Within ten minutes we were back on the road, heading toward the bright lights of Sydney. "What did Mum call for?" Ebony asked as she manoeuvred the car onto the Pacific Highway once more.

"She wanted us to pick Taylor up at the hospital when we get to Sydney," I said. "She has to go see Uncle Martin, otherwise she'd pick him up herself."

Ebony nodded. "No worries. I was going to make a detour to pick him up anyway." She paused for a drink of water from the bottle she had between her knees. When next she spoke, her voice was quieter. "I wish I could trade places with him, Ayd. He doesn't deserve this."

"Well, nobody *does*, Nee," I gently reminded her.

"Oh, I know that," Ebony said almost dismissively. "What I mean is that he's been through so much already, and we're not even nineteen yet. Every time there's a bug or a virus going around, he ends up catching it. It's like...he's a magnet for this sort of thing."

"He'll be okay, Nee. He always is."

Chapter 4

Ebony

"Oi, Puck!"

I resisted the very strong temptation to roll my eyes. We had only just arrived in Sydney, and already Aidan was making his presence known. He was hanging out of the front passenger window and yelling at the very top of his voice.

"Aidan, shut up," I hissed at my brother. "People are starting to stare."

"Lean on the horn again," Aidan told me.

"Go to hell," I muttered, but I did as Aidan said. If I thought that hearing my brother yell out of the window at someone in the middle of Sydney was bad, then this was far worse. Aidan's car horn was one of the most distinctive that I knew of or had ever heard. In a nutshell, when it was leaned on for long enough, it played the Sydney Swans' club song. The irony was that Aidan hated the Swans with an all-enduring passion, or so he claimed. Therefore, if anything was going to catch our brother's attention, seeing as that was who I assumed Aidan was yelling at, this would be it.

I wasn't disappointed. I ended up looking to my left just as Taylor's head snapped upwards. "Mum called us and told us to pick you up – come on!" Aidan yelled at him.

"Had a bit too much to drink last night, did you?" Taylor asked as he came up to Aidan's side of the car.

"Why else would I let Ebony drive?" Aidan replied, answering our brother's question with one of his own. "If I wanted to get done for drink-driving then I'd have driven, but seeing as I want to keep my licence *and* my car, I decided it was in my best interests to stay out of the driver's seat."

"Fair enough," Taylor said with a shrug, before letting himself into the car. "Christ Ayd, is it back far enough for you?" he asked as he settled himself into the seat behind Aidan. His knees were nearly up around his chin – one of the pitfalls, I supposed, of being over six feet tall.

"You're not the only one in this car who's tall, y'know," Aidan shot back.

"I'm the only one over six foot, though," Taylor countered.

"That's *quite* enough, children," I said to break up their argument before it even began.

"Mum's in Maroubra," Taylor said as he did up his seat belt. "She said something about needing to talk to Uncle Martin."

"Yeah, we know – she told us," I said as I flicked the right blinker on and waited for the right moment to pull away into Missenden Road. "She said to take you there when we picked you up."

Little less than a quarter of an hour later, I pulled the car up outside our aunt and uncle's place in Haig Street, Maroubra, and cut the engine. Mum's Toyota was parked in the driveway, which meant that unless she had gone off with our aunt or uncle somewhere, she was still here.

"You are not leaving my car parked in the *street*," Aidan hissed as I got out of the driver's seat.

"Oh, grow up Aidan, and act your age for once in your life," I said as I slammed the driver's side door closed, locked it and pocketed the keys. "It's just a car, jeez..."

"It is not 'just a car'," Aidan informed me. "I've put a lot of time and effort into it, not to mention nearly every pay cheque I've ever been given. And you wonder why I'm always so worried that Dad's going to take it off me!"

He had a point, I supposed. Aidan's car, his pride and joy, was a tricked-out Subaru Impreza WRX that he had spent many an afternoon and weekend fine-tuning and modifying to his exact specifications. It had surprised me, to say the very least, that he hadn't tried to wrest control of

the steering wheel even once during the more than six-hour drive from Sapphire Cove all the way down to Maroubra. If he hadn't been even slightly inebriated, I supposed he would have.

"What do you think Mum needed to see Uncle Martin about?" Taylor asked as the three of us headed up the driveway to the house. "I mean, it was obviously something she needed to talk about face to face, rather than on the phone or through email."

"Probably something to do with moving down here," I guessed, before stepping up to the front door to ring the doorbell. The sound of feet pelting down the hallway met my ears, and the door was flung open to reveal a pint sized, blonde-haired bundle of blue denim and pink – if I wasn't mistaken, this was one of my cousins' kids.

"Melinda, who's at the door?" called Aunt Melissa – her voice was faint at first, steadily growing louder as she came up the hallway. She stopped behind the little girl and just looked at us, before her face broke into a wide smile. "Come on in you three – your mum said to expect you," she said as she unlocked and opened the front screen door. "Taylor, I heard what happened – how are you holding up?" she asked as Taylor entered behind me.

"I'm all right," he answered. "I'm still trying to get my head around it."

"Well, nobody can blame you for that."

Mum was sitting at the table in the kitchen dining area with Uncle Martin when Aidan, Taylor, Aunt Melissa, Melinda and I entered. The first thing that Taylor did was head straight for the empty seat next to our mother. "How did everything go at the hospital?" Mum asked him as she smoothed his hair back off his face. Aidan and I looked at each other and shrugged before sitting down in the only two empty seats at the table, next to each other and across from our mother and Taylor.

"It went okay. Dr. Rochester gave me these," he said before disappearing beneath the table. He emerged half a minute later with a manila folder in hand. "It's about the stuff he wants me to

take. Well," he added, seeming to me almost as an afterthought, "it's what he wants me to take *if* I go ahead with the treatment. He also told me what stage it's at – it's at IA, so it got caught early." He frowned, as if trying to remember something. "To be exact, he said that it not only is at Stage IA, but it hasn't metastasised, and if I start treatment within the next week there's a good chance it never will. So I've got a good chance of beating this."

"That's good to hear," Uncle Martin said.

"Yeah, it is," Taylor agreed with a small smile, before returning his attention to Mum. "So what did you come out here for?" he asked.

"Well, I'm sure you remember that we stayed in this house last time," Mum said, and Taylor nodded. We'd all stayed here – our aunt, uncle and cousins had chosen to take off around Australia during that year, so it had been perfect timing. "We won't be able to stay here this time, but your uncle knows some people in the real estate business. He's going to find someone who might be able to get us a house or a flat to rent while we're here in Sydney."

Taylor nodded. "Okay, sounds good."

Taylor was quiet the rest of the day, something completely out of character for him. He usually had *something* to say, even if it was just a snide or sarcastic remark. It was rare that he spent nearly a full day in complete silence. I had some idea as to the reason for his temporary muteness, but I wasn't sure exactly why, and I felt I needed to know the full, unabridged story before I decided why he had been so damn quiet all day.

I found out that night.

After we left Aunt Melissa and Uncle Martin's house, Mum led the way to the motel where she and Taylor had stayed the night before. While she arranged for a second room, she sent Aidan, Taylor and I upstairs to the room that would now be Aidan and Taylor's; Mum and I, we had

decided, would share the second. As soon as Taylor let us in, he headed straight for the bathroom and slammed the door closed behind him.

"What's eating him?" Aidan asked me, and I shrugged.

"Beats me. He's been mopey all day." I absently fingered the white gold band I wore on my right ring finger. "I might see if he's all right. Maybe I can get him to cheer up a little." Without waiting for an answer from Aidan, I walked up to the bathroom door and knocked. "Tay? It's Ebony, are you all right?" I called.

"I'm fine."

I bit my bottom lip hard, in an unconscious imitation of what Taylor did himself when he was frustrated, deep in thought or worried. Something in Taylor's tone betrayed his true feelings, as it always did – he had never had much luck in hiding them.

"I don't think you are," I decided. "You've been in a mood all day, and I think you need to talk to someone about it. It's not going to do you any good keeping it all bottled up." With those words, I pushed down on the door handle and let myself into the bathroom.

Taylor was sitting on the cold tiled floor, backed up against the bathtub, knees pulled up to his chest. He was staring at the opposite wall, arms folded on his knees, and didn't flinch even slightly when I sat down next to him.

"Mind telling me what's up?" I asked, and got an immediate answer – Taylor shook his head 'no'. "Jordan, come on," I said sternly, using his first name so he knew I meant business. "I mean it. Something's up, and I want to know what."

"I'm gonna lose my hair, Nee," Taylor whispered.

I bit my bottom lip again, almost hard enough to draw blood. *That* was why he'd been quieter than usual all day – he'd been processing everything that he had likely been told that morning, and it was all beginning to fall into place.

"No you won't," I said, trying desperately to sound sure.

"Yes I will." He barked out a harsh laugh. "It's typical, isn't it – I spend all that time growing my hair out, all those wasted *years*, and now it's all going to fall out anyway. I knew I shouldn't have bothered."

"Hey, I'll have none of that," I said sharply. "You *won't*, d'you hear me? J-just because it happened last time, d-doesn't mean it's going to happen this time." I shut up, realising how shaky my voice was becoming. Some considered it to be vanity, but I knew that my brother held his long hair as a source of fierce pride – he had been teased mercilessly about it, being that he looked somewhat like a girl, but all the teasing in the world had not been enough to pressure him into cutting it short. To him, it was a reminder that he was a survivor and a fighter. The prospect of losing his hair again not only frightened him, I knew that much, but I guessed that it made him feel like a failure.

"I don't want to go through all that again," he whispered miserably. He closed his eyes, and a lone tear slid down his face. "I don't want to be stuck in hospital, I don't want to be sick all the time, I don't want to lose my hair-" He broke off abruptly, sucked in a deep breath and curled his hands into tight fists. "I don't want to *die*, Ebby," he whispered at last. "I'm so scared..."

Knowing words would never be enough right now, I pulled my brother into a tight embrace, holding him close as he released all his fear, his pain and his anguish into my shoulder. Through it all, I kept up a litany of nonsense words and quiet humming, trying my best to calm him down.

Taylor finally calmed down after what seemed like hours – he was still crying, though it wasn't as intense as it had been. It was more out of exhaustion than anything else.

"Let's get you to bed," I whispered. "You need to sleep." I was rewarded with a tired nod, and I helped my brother to his feet.

Mum was sitting at the desk that was next to the motel room's television cabinet when Taylor and I emerged from the bathroom. As soon as she saw us coming out, worry crept with alarming speed and ferocity onto her face.

"Oh my Lord...Ebony, what happened?" she asked as she hurried forward and around to Taylor's other side.

"I'll tell you later on," I promised. "He's just tired."

Mum placed a hand under my brother's chin and lifted his head so she could look into his tired blue eyes. "Are you all right?" she asked him, and he shook his head. "Come on, into bed with you."

I sat down cross-legged on the second of the two beds in the room, listening as Mum settled my brother down to sleep. She was singing to him in Irish Gaelic, her native language – she had grown up in one of the *gaeltacht* areas of Ireland, and had met Dad, an American on exchange to Ireland, when she had gone off to Dublin for university. I'd never learned to speak the language, but it mattered not – listening to my mother sing, even in a language other than English, was comforting all the same.

"Will he be all right?" I asked quietly after Taylor had fallen asleep.

"It will be a long time before he will be anywhere close to what could be considered 'all right'," Mum replied as she stood up, "but for now he'll be okay." She glanced at her watch. "Time for some dinner, I think."

As I followed Aidan and Mum from the room and into the corridor, I looked back over my shoulder at my sleeping brother, and I held back a quiet sigh. Not for the first time, I wished I could switch

places with him. Life had been far from easy for him, and by the looks of things it was about to get much harder.

I wish I could make it all go away, I thought as the door closed behind me.

* * *

One afternoon more than a week later, we all drove out to Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Mum's car, the boot loaded up with a suitcase and backpack that Taylor had crammed with everything he reckoned he'd need over the next couple of months. Though knowing him, there were more than a few things he'd forgotten. And knowing my mother, both Aidan and I would be recruited to go home to pick those things up for him. The first order of business after Taylor had been checked in was an unofficial tour of the hospital's oncology department, led by one of the nurses who worked there. The nurse's identification badge gave her name as RN Angela Coates.

"We generally separate our patients into three groups," Angela said as she led us past the children's cancer ward. "Children and adolescents, young adults, and older adults. You, Taylor, will be in the young adults group – it seems a little unfair on you to stick you with the kids, and I figure you might be a little uncomfortable being with the older adults. You'll have your own room, and it'll be yours until the day you're discharged – we allow our patients to decorate their rooms however they like, within reason of course, so feel free to bring in anything you want that will make it feel more like home. Posters, a few rugs or blankets, books, et cetera. We only ask that you leave anything particularly valuable at home. For example, you can bring in a portable CD player for music or the radio, but not a laptop. Got me so far?" Taylor nodded, indicating that he understood, and Angela resumed her spiel. By this time we were nearly at a set of tightly closed, double glass doors, with a large round red button set into the adjacent wall.

"We have an open door policy in the young adults' ward – the only times we allow you to keep your door closed are when you're sleeping or napping, you want a bit of time to yourself, or you're in the middle of something, shall we say...*private*." She raised one ginger eyebrow at us, before

grinning. "Otherwise, keep it open." She stepped over to the red button and pressed down on it with the palm of her right hand. "All right, this is it – the other patients will introduce themselves, and then you can go ahead and unpack."

The doors swung open, and a wave of noise washed over us. Angela let out a sigh of what sounded like frustration, before leading the way into the ward. The doors swung closed again as I stepped over the threshold.

"This is so not what I expected..." I whispered as Angela strode over to where a slender girl sat next to a stereo system.

"Jacie, turn that down," Angela barked at the girl, who reached out and tweaked a dial on the stereo system, and silence sliced through the cacophony of noise. "That's much better. Everyone, we've got a new inmate – you all know what that means." Angela then beckoned to Taylor, and he walked over to where the other patients had gathered, of whom there were five in total. It was basically a large common area, one with doors set into its walls. "I'll grab the stickers and the pens, and you all get yourselves acquainted," Angela continued.

"You guys don't have to stay," Taylor said, turning around to face us. "I'll be all right."

"Are you sure?" Mum asked.

"I'm positive."

"Well, okay," Mum said uncertainly. "But you'll call me if you need me?" she asked hopefully.

"Yes, I will. I swear." He stepped forward so we could each give him a farewell embrace. I hugged him for longest of all, not wanting to let him go. "Nee, come on, it's not forever," he whispered. "You'll probably be back later this week if I know you as well as I should by now."

"I wish you didn't have to be here," I said.

"Yeah, so do I." He slipped out of the embrace and stepped back a few paces. "I...I'll ring you if there's anything I need," he said quietly.

"Be careful," Mum told him as we went to leave the ward. "And behave yourself!"

"Do you think he'll be okay?" Aidan asked as the glass doors swung closed behind us.

"We can only hope he will be," Mum said.

I cast a glance back over my shoulder through the ward's glass doors, at my brother standing there watching us leave. He had one hand raised in farewell, a small smile on his face. That small gesture said so much – for now, he *was* okay. I could only hope that he stayed that way.

Chapter 5

Taylor

When I could no longer see my mother, Ebony and Aidan, I walked over to where the other patients who 'lived' in this ward, so to speak, were seated, sitting down next to the girl who had previously been sitting next to the ward's stereo. I had just managed to make myself comfortable when Angela came back from where she had been, a handful of coloured pens and a sheet of white adhesive labels in her hands. These she distributed between the six of us. "The rest of you know what to do," she said – to me, she said, "Write your name, nickname, age, hometown and diagnosis on a sticker – we ask that you all wear nametags whenever a new patient joins us, at least for the first week."

I nodded, took a sticker and a pen, and wrote *Taylor Hanson, Puck, 18, Sapphire Cove, Stage IA Osteosarcoma* on my sticker in blue ink, before sticking it to my T-shirt. Around me, the other patients were identifying themselves.

Rebecca Stanton, Bec, 19, Narooma, AML.

Amy Durham, Ames, 22, Richmond, Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Craig Gisbourne, CJ, 20, Parkes, CLL.

Jacie Elstone, JD, 21, Shellharbour, CML.

Grant Alston, Ant, 23, Eden, Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

"Puck?" Jacie asked, frowning at my nametag.

"I play street hockey," I explained.

"Oh. Thought you were an actor or something."

"Don't mind JD – she's a bit of a theatre nut," Craig said as he came over. "Thinks everyone with a theatre related nickname is like her." At my frown, he elaborated. "Puck is a character in the play *A Midsummer's Night Dream* – never heard of it?"

"I have, I've just never read it."

Craig nodded. "No worries." He squinted at my nametag. "Sapphire Cove? Where's that?"

"About a fifteen-minute drive north of Coffs Harbour. Aside from the year I spent in treatment when I was eleven, I've lived there my whole life."

"Treatment for what?" I heard Amy ask.

I closed my eyes and sighed. "I was diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma in 1997 – I nearly died from it. I'll have been in remission for five years this June."

"But that's great!" Amy said. Her tone sobered, and she asked uncertainly, "Isn't it?"

"Well, yeah, but..." I twisted a few locks of my hair around my fingers. "I had this dream when I was younger – I wanted to play soccer for Australia. Especially in the World Cup. And after my treatment, I just stopped playing." I shrugged. "I don't remember why. So I took up street hockey instead."

I finally managed to pull myself away from the scrutiny of the other patients about fifteen minutes later, and I went to my new room, my backpack slung over a shoulder and dragging my suitcase along behind me. When I opened the door, I stopped short at the sight that greeted me.

It was so damn *bare*.

All the room contained was a white-sheeted hospital bed, a night stand, a TV that was bolted to a ceiling bracket above the bed, a table on wheels, and a couple of chairs. A door just across from the left side of the bed led to, I guessed, a bathroom. That was it. I was already making a mental list of the things I wanted Mum to bring from my room at home – my favourite blanket, my CD player, my hockey stick, my guitar, my CD case that I was going to ask Aidan to pack with all the CDs I owned, and the book I had just started to read but had forgotten to bring with me this time.

The first thing I did as soon as I had unpacked was go outside to one of the courtyards, turn my mobile phone on, and make a phone call – I hadn't seen my girlfriend in weeks, and I was almost desperate to hear her voice.

"I miss you," I said as soon as the phone was picked up at the other end of the line.

"I miss you too," Stephanie said, her voice sounding like home. I closed my eyes and let it wash over me. "How are you?"

"I'm okay," I said. "I start treatment tomorrow morning. I'm sort of dreading it – it's going to be full on, almost every day for the next ten weeks."

"Damn," Stephanie said. "That's going to be tough."

"That's an understatement. I'm going to be throwing up all over the place, I can tell you that much now. Makes me wish it was legal to smoke pot for medical reasons."

"Well..." I could almost see Stephanie checking that the coast was clear before she continued speaking. "I'm sure your sister has some of that hidden in her room somewhere. You should ask her the next time she comes to visit. I'm sure she wouldn't mind pawning it off to you if it's going to help you stop throwing up. That's if she hasn't flushed it by now."

"I think I might."

We talked for a fair while longer, about twenty-five minutes. I had just hung up when one of the other oncology nurses came into the courtyard where I was sitting. Her identification badge gave her name as *EN Danielle Rourke*.

"*There you are,*" she said as she came up to me. She sounded relieved, and I immediately felt guilty. "You've been out here this whole time?"

I held up my mobile phone. "Needed to make a phone call."

"Ah." She cocked her head slightly to one side, studying me. "You *do* know that we have payphones here, right? And we generally allow the patients in the ward to use their mobile phones inside, so long as they're kept turned off when they aren't in use."

"I needed a bit of privacy," I said, shrugging. "I don't know the others very well yet, but I had a feeling that they might try and barge in on me while I was on the phone."

"Gotcha." Danielle gave me a smile. "Though your fears are somewhat unfounded; the others are usually pretty good about respecting each other's privacy for whatever reason. A closed door is a closed door." She glanced at the watch she wore around her left wrist. "I'd best get you back to the ward. Angela is nearly having kittens."

Oops. I felt heat creeping up my neck and face – my first day in the ward, and I'd already worried the nurse who had been so kind as to welcome me to my temporary home nearly out of her mind. No doubt about it – I felt as guilty as hell.

I kept my gaze directed toward the floor as Danielle led me into the ward, not willing to meet the gazes of the nurses or my fellow patients. I couldn't help but feel as if I had broken a vital, unspoken rule of the ward – whenever you leave the ward, tell somewhere where you're going, or Angela will go mad with worry.

"False alarm, everybody," Danielle said cheerfully as she guided me to an empty seat at the table set off to one side of the ward's common area, where a covered tray and a glass of water were set. "*Someone* just needed a little privacy."

I lifted the metal cover off of the tray in front of me and stared at what had lain underneath. A plate containing chicken, white rice and vegetables, a white bread roll wrapped in cling wrap, a knife and a fork. It was typical hospital food, and while I didn't doubt it was meant to be good for me it was bound to taste like all hospital food did – like shit.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jacie lean over and take a closer look at my dinner. "Oh, you got the good stuff," she complained.

"I fail to see how this can be considered good," I muttered as I picked up my knife and fork, speared the chicken with the tines of my fork and sawed off a bite with my knife.

"It gets loads worse," Rebecca said. She was toying with her own dinner – it looked like a poor facsimile of lasagne. "But you gotta eat it, even though you're just gonna puke it all up, otherwise they'll put you on a drip and feed you that way until you start eating again."

I must have had a look of utter disgust on my face, because everyone at the table just burst out laughing. Even the nurses did.

"Bec, enough talk about throwing up – we are in the middle of dinner, and people are trying to eat here," Danielle said. "And Taylor has this look on his face that says he's going to put his hands around your throat and strangle the life out of you if you open your mouth one more time and don't put food in it."

More laughter rang out around the table – even I laughed this time. And for the briefest of moments, I forgot that I was in hospital, that I had cancer, that I was sick and would get even sicker before this was all over – right now, it was just as if the six of us was a group of friends sharing a meal together. It was the calm before the approaching and gathering storm.

I spent that night, my first as a patient at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, curled up in bed watching The Comedy Channel on Austar, laughing my head off at *South Park* and *The Daily Show*. I was enjoying myself while I still could be happy, while I still had complete control over that one part of myself.

This was the first day, the first night, of the rest of my life. But I was still Jordan Taylor Hanson.

I was still *me*.

* * *

It began the next morning.

I had gone back to sleep after breakfast – I felt as if I hadn't got nearly enough sleep the night before. It was as if I had just managed to get comfortable when I was woken again.

"Sorry to wake you, Taylor," I heard Danielle say apologetically as I drifted into wakefulness. "But it's time – you have to take your medicine."

I nodded sleepily, rubbing my eyes as I sat up. "I'm going to check your line first, all right?" Danielle said as she rolled up the left sleeve of my shirt. I'd had a PICC line placed the previous evening after dinner – the line came out of my arm just below the crook of my elbow, and was taped down so that it didn't snag on my blankets or clothing. "Does it hurt anywhere?" she asked, and I shook my head. I didn't think I could talk if I tried – I was still too tired to really even think, let alone speak. Danielle gave me a smile before stepping aside.

Angela came into the room then, carrying a tray laden down with equipment. A third nurse followed her into the room, wheeling an IV stand along with her – this she wheeled up to the head of my bed. "We'll start you on the cisplatin first," Angela said. "Okay? That will take at least an hour, so you can go back to sleep if you like."

"Okay," I mumbled.

Angela studied me for a little while, before reaching over and giving my left shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Just relax," she said, before she set to work.

I slid back down in bed, watching through half closed eyes as Angela and the nameless nurse hooked me up to the chemotherapy. The whole time they were working, my mind drifted back to a couple of mornings ago, when I had agreed to go ahead with the treatment – particularly in relation to the side effects of each medication. All four drugs would most likely cause me to throw up. The cisplatin could cause hearing loss and nerve damage. Methotrexate had the possible side

effect of leukoencephalopathy, which Dr. Rochester had defined as a form of progressive and usually fatal brain damage. As for the doxorubicin, it had the rather unpleasant and possible side effect of heart damage. But these side effects were rare, as Dr. Rochester had been quick to assure me. Still, it didn't stop me worrying.

I ended up sleeping most of the day, only waking up when I felt a hand tucking my hair behind my ears. The hand, I found when I opened my eyes to a room flooded with late afternoon sunlight, belonged to my mother.

"Hey Mum," I said quietly.

Mum smiled. "How are you feeling?"

"Exhausted," I replied honestly. "I went back to sleep after they hooked me up, and I'm still tired."

"It'll get better," Mum assured me. "You know that well enough by now."

"I know, I know..." I shifted myself upright, gathered my hair back into a ponytail, and started scoping around for a rubber band so I could tie it back. "Got a rubber band I can borrow?" I asked, and Mum started to dig around in her shoulder bag. She pulled out a bright green elastic band that I assumed belonged to either Jessica or Zoë, handed it to me, and I looped it over my hand as I caught up the trailing strands of hair. "So what's in there?" I asked, having spotted the large brown paper shopping bag that sat at Mum's feet next to her shoulder bag.

"And what makes you think I'm going to tell you?" Mum replied, answering my question with one of her own.

"Because you wouldn't have dragged it in here with you if you didn't plan on telling me," I informed her, wrapping the elastic band around my hair as I spoke. "You'd have left it in your car."

"Very good." She leaned down and lifted the bag onto my bed. "I had Aidan and Ebony bring this from home when they drove down last week," she said. "It's just a few things to make everything a little easier, and to brighten this room up a little."

I grinned and started digging through the bag, unearthing all that my brother and sister had packed for me, without me even asking them to. I found my Discman and a brand new set of headphones, my copy of *The Hobbit* – I had just started to reread it when we had left Sapphire Cove, and I had clean forgotten to pack it – a thick black zipped folder that I knew, just by its sheer weight, contained every CD I owned, my journal, a handful of pens with a rubber band wrapped around them, and my book of lyrics.

"There are some other things in the car," Mum informed me as I unzipped my CD case and flipped through its pages. Linkin Park, Crowded House, Midnight Oil, REM, Nirvana, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Spin Doctors, Smashing Pumpkins, The Offspring, The Wallflowers, Fuel, Eve 6, Garbage, 3 Doors Down, Limp Bizkit, Powderfinger, Nickelback, Eminem, Lifehouse, P.O.D. – they were all there. Ebony and Aidan had even contributed some of their favourites – Goo Goo Dolls, Michelle Branch, Hole and No Doubt from Ebony, and Taxiride, Spiderbait and Silverchair from Aidan. "I'll bring them in before I leave."

"Thanks," I said absently as I plugged my headphones into my Discman and started to hunt through my CDs for something to listen to.

Three o'clock, it began again – another dose of chemotherapy, only this one was a short burst, rather than something I could easily sleep through. I kept my eyes focused studiously on the ceiling, my headphones clamped over my ears and my Discman pounding Midnight Oil's *20,000 Watt RSL* album against my eardrums, as another nameless nurse pushed the drug into my veins. After a quarter of an hour it was over until tonight, which was when I was due to start on yet another part of my treatment.

Mum came back in after I had been disconnected from the chemotherapy, carrying a wooden crate packed with odds and ends. Over one shoulder she carried my acoustic guitar by its strap. And behind her I could see a flash of bright red hair, shining in the fluorescent glare from the light strips set into the ceiling.

I knew only one person with hair that colour.

"Steph!" I yelled. I didn't know how the hell she had gotten herself down here, and I really didn't care – the fact remained that she had travelled nearly six hundred kilometres down here to Sydney to see me.

Stephanie popped her head up from behind my mother's shoulder and grinned at me. "Hello stranger!" she chirped out happily. "Fancy seeing *you* here..."

"What are you doing here?" I asked as Stephanie very nearly sprinted into the room and bounced onto my bed.

"Do I have to have a reason to visit my boyfriend in hospital? I mean, *honestly...*" She reached out with her right hand and tweaked my nose between her thumb and index finger. "So is it kicking your arse yet?"

I shook my head. "No, not yet. I figure it won't hit me until next week, if it does at all."

The smile disappeared from Stephanie's face. "I can't even imagine what it has to be like for you," she said quietly. "You have to go through this every *day...*" She shook her head.

"It's only for the next ten weeks," I reminded her. "After I have the tumour removed it'll probably decrease to once a month – at least, that's what happened the last time." I looked to my mother for confirmation, and she nodded. "Of course, I'll be having chemo in between learning to walk again, and that's going to take me at least a year..." I sighed again. "It's sort of degrading, actually. I can walk perfectly well, and yet I'm going to have to learn all over again. For the third time, mind you."

"Enough depressing talk, let's see what's in here," Stephanie said as she hopped down off my bed and picked up from the floor the crate Mum had brought in. She resumed her spot on my bed, dumped the crate between my knees, and started sorting through it. The first thing she dragged out was the blanket that usually lived on the end of my bed at home, folded neatly in case I needed something warmer than my usual quilt at night (which was often) – it was fleece, and an inky blue so dark that it was nearly black. Underneath the blanket was an assortment of bits and pieces – a photo album bound in what looked like black leather, more books, a stack of magazines, a few rolled up posters, my guitar tuner, six packets of spare guitar strings, all of my bandannas and beanies, my sketchbook, a brand new packet of lead pencils, and – for some reason – a box of matches. Why that last object was in with the rest of my things, I had no idea, being that I didn't smoke or have any reason to be lighting fires.

I found out why it was there a few hours after Mum and Stephanie had left.

After dinner, I took my guitar and tuner out to the courtyard I had gone to the previous afternoon, after telling Angela where I would be if anyone needed me, and found somewhere comfortable to sit. I needed to practice – I hadn't so much as picked up my guitar in over a week. Just as I settled my guitar on my lap to tune it, I heard something rustling around inside. I reached a hand in through the sound hole, under the strings, and pulled out a clear plastic ziplock bag that had a white envelope wrapped around it with a rubber band. The ziplock bag held something that looked suspiciously like dried parsley.

I frowned as I unwrapped the envelope from around the bag and slit it open. Inside was a letter in Ebony's handwriting.

Tay,

*WHATEVER THE FUCK YOU DO, DO **NOT** OPEN THIS IN FRONT OF OUR MOTHER.*

The bag contains a decent third of my stash. It's marijuana, in case you've never seen it before (and knowing you, you thought it was parsley or something like that). I figured that you would probably need something to keep you going – you hate throwing up, I know that much, and even despite your high tolerance for pain I know that it gets to be too much for you sometimes. There's a packet of rolling papers inside one of your beanies, and I put a box of matches right at the bottom of the box Mum probably brought in for you.

Please, whatever you do, don't smoke this in front of Mum. Don't even tell her you have this, or where you got it. And for God's sake, don't smoke it all at once. Only use it if you absolutely need to. I don't know when I'll be able to get more.

I'll see you soon. Fight like hell, Tay – I know you can do it.

Love Nee

"Ebony, you are a *lifesaver*," I murmured as I tucked the marijuana back into my guitar almost reverently. My sister was right – I did hate throwing up, but I wasn't alone in that aspect. And I had honestly lost count of the number of times the pain of my last illness had gotten far too much for me to handle. While I didn't remember a lot about that almost half-decade of sheer hell, I did remember the pain and the throwing up in rather vivid detail. The drugs I had often been given on top of my chemotherapy treatment that were supposed to stop me throwing up and to deaden the pain could only do so much, and it hadn't been enough sometimes. If this did what it was supposed to, then I reckoned things would be a lot easier than they had been previously. At least then the pain wouldn't cause my parents to beg my doctors to sedate me so that it didn't completely overwhelm me.

I sat out there in the courtyard until it got too cold to sit out there any longer, staring up at the sky and playing my guitar. Things weren't so bad yet, but it was only Day One. Therefore, I wasn't about to make a judgement until I had completed at least three or four cycles – though I was fairly

sure I would feel the same way about it as I always did. The face of my digital watch read 19:59 – one minute to eight o'clock in the evening – by the time I headed back to the ward.

Chapter 6

Aidan

The screen of my computer looked exactly the way my mind felt. Blank.

Two weeks had passed since Taylor had gone into hospital, and for the past two weeks there had been a feeling deep down inside that there was an integral piece of my puzzle missing. I felt incomplete, damaged almost, all because my brother – my best friend – was almost six hundred kilometres away. Every time I even so much as glanced at the bed that my brother had slept in for close to two decades, that feeling intensified to the point where it was nearly unbearable, and I eventually had to look away.

It was far worse for Ebony, though. Of we triplets, Ebony and Taylor were the closest. It was rare to see one without the other, to the point where everyone thought the two of them were twins, and that I was their older brother by a couple of years, rather than by the five minutes that separated Ebony and I. I had never seen my sister so upset, so distraught. I alone could see past the façade that she routinely presented to the world, and I alone knew she cried herself to sleep at night. We all missed our brother, true, but I knew that she missed him the most of all. She always did.

Letting out a sigh, I shut my computer down and stood up. I needed to talk to someone. And being as only Ebony really knew what I was going through right now, she was my best bet for when it came to some semblance of sympathy.

I found my sister sitting at her desk in her bedroom, tapping away at her computer, her mobile phone sitting in its customary place next to the monitor. I could see myself reflected in the screen of the monitor as I settled myself on my sister's bed. "What're you doing?" I asked.

"Talking to Nicole on MSN," Ebony replied. "And Taylor promised me he'd call tonight – he'd better hurry up though, I'm about ready to head off to bed."

As Ebony finished speaking these words, her phone rang, and she picked it up. "Speak of the devil. I've got it on hands-free, so if you think you can keep your mouth shut you can listen in." I nodded, and she answered her phone. "Hello?" she said as she propped her phone up against the monitor.

"Hey Nee, it's me."

"Hey, how are you?" Ebony asked, immediately recognising our brother's voice, heavy with exhaustion as it was. We had both heard him sounding like that so many times we'd lost count, but it was still startling to hear it.

"I'm okay."

Ebony looked back at me and raised an eyebrow. There was a plain look of disbelief on her face.

"Uh-huh," she said as she turned back to looking at her phone. "Why do I not believe you?"

I heard Taylor sigh. "I never can get anything past you, can I?"

"Comes with being your big sister, Tay. Come on, out with it."

"I hardly think that an age difference of twenty-two minutes qualifies you as my 'big sister'." He was quiet for a little while. "I feel like shit," he admitted finally. "It's only the second week and it's already kicking my arse."

I could only imagine the look on Ebony's face when Taylor admitted that he was feeling less than great. She had confided in me many a time over the past couple of weeks that if she could switch places with our brother, she'd do it in a heartbeat. And while I hadn't told her as much, I would do the same – Taylor was my brother, and as far as I was concerned it should have been either Ebony or me this time. To even things up, as it were.

"You'd better not tell Mum that," Ebony said.

"I know, I know." He let out another sigh. "It's not fair, Ebony. Why is it always *me* getting sick? I...I don't get it. T-this has to be some massive cosmic joke to someone. I'm like a pawn or something to them."

"Tay, go to bed," Ebony said gently. "You're exhausted – I can hear it in your voice. Plus you're rambling again, and you only ever do that when you're tired."

"Oh, all right," Taylor said, sounding uncharacteristically reluctant. Usually when he was tired he didn't protest when someone told him to go to bed, especially when that someone was a good twenty minutes older than he was. "Talk to you tomorrow?" he added hopefully.

"Yeah, tomorrow," Ebony agreed. "'Night Tay."

"'Night Ebony." He hung up, and the end-of-call tone echoed through the room.

Ebony hung up herself and turned toward me. "I don't know how he does it, Ayd," she said, the faint sound of tears in her voice. "He's so strong to our faces, but..." She shook her head. "I wish he'd just let us see how things really are for him – if there's two people he shouldn't have to lie to, it's us. We'd never judge him for not being able to handle this. He should know that by now. We're his family – how could we?"

"I think he does know that, Ebony," I said. "But you know what he's like – he hates people thinking he's..." I paused, trying to think of an appropriate word. "Weak. You know? He wants us to think he can handle this kind of thing without any trouble." I thought for a little while. "Plus there's the issue of that girlfriend of his..."

"Stephanie?" Ebony asked, and I nodded. "Aidan, trust me – if there's one person that Taylor *doesn't* worry about impressing, it's her." She furrowed her brow. "That's something I really don't understand. He doesn't care if Stephanie doesn't see him at his absolute best, and yet he throws up this façade around us. Shouldn't it be the other way around?"

"Ebony, it is close to eleven-thirty," I informed my sister. "Therefore, it is far too late to be pondering what makes our brother tick." I got to my feet. "I'm going to bed."

Lying in bed a few minutes later, staring up at the darkened ceiling, a million and one thoughts began their nightly cycle through my head. For some strange reason, my mind had chosen to dredge up a memory from a year or so earlier and had pushed it to the forefront.

"What do you want to do with your life?"

Taylor looked over at me from where he lay on his bunk. Up until this point, he had been thumbing through the book his English class had studied in fourth term the year before. The book was so old, having belonged to our Aunt Karen before Taylor had managed to get his hands on it, that the cover had long ago disintegrated and the title page had fallen off. Now, he dog-eared the page where he was up to, closed the book and put it to one side.

"After the HSC, you mean?" he asked.

*"Yeah, after that. I mean, there has to be **something** you want to do."*

*"Well..." He sat up, stretched, and eyed me. I was sitting on my computer chair, the computer game I had been playing long forgotten by now. "I honestly don't know **what** I want to do, Ayd. I mean, I'm fairly confident that I'll get a high UAI, so I could probably do anything I wanted, but..." He sighed. "Right now, all I want is to get through remission. I want to prove to myself that I didn't fight for nothing at all."*

"Well, what if you had never got sick? What if you didn't have that hanging over your head?"

His response this time was instantaneous. "I'd want to be a musician. Go to uni, study music, maybe go into production and do a bit of recording on the side."

"Why am I not surprised?" I asked rhetorically. "I think you should go ahead and do it. Forget about seeing if you make it past five years – we all know you're going to make it anyway. Get out there and show the world what you're made of."

"How do you know?" he asked.

Knowing what he was referring to, I replied, "I just do. Call it brotherly instinct."

As the memory finished playing itself out, the smile that had sneaked its way onto my face slid away in almost an instant. I had long known of my triplet's all-encompassing passion for music. The piano in the downstairs sunroom was his – our grandmother had passed it down to him in her will. The shelves in the sunroom were packed with books, folders and boxes of sheet music, all of it his, ranging from Bach, Beethoven and Mozart to John Frusciante, Nick Cave and Jeff Buckley. He had been given his guitar for our sixteenth birthday, and had taken to working its strings like a duck takes to water. Music was nearly all he lived for.

But at the same time, he had always been reluctant to let his music completely take over. His reluctance stemmed from the ever-present threat of one of the myriad of illnesses he had fought against during his life tearing him away from everything and everyone that he loved. The fear of that happening overrode his very nature, the pure stubbornness that made my brother who he was. If he had never fallen ill, then I was positive he would be chasing his dreams by now, not allowing them to rust away.

I rolled over and stared at the wall. Unbeknownst to most people who knew me, I harboured much the same ambitions as my brother. I had always known that if I did end up doing music for the rest of my life, I would only want to do it with my brother by my side. But if he didn't end up beating this, that if we ended up losing him in the end, I knew it would never happen. And underlying it all was the chilling realisation that if we lost him...it would tear our family apart.

* * *

"I *told* you we should have come earlier!"

The scene inside our brother's hospital room was one that was all too familiar to Ebony and I. Almost every time we had come to visit him over the past month, he had been fast asleep, with a bandanna tied over his hair. And every time we had come to visit him, we had noticed something. The posters that we had brought down for him, along with the strands of Christmas lights we had nicked from the box in the roof cavity a few weeks ago, sat in a corner of the room, untouched. Either he hadn't found the time to put them up, or he had just been too tired to. We both believed it to be the latter.

"Nee, he's always asleep when we come down here," I reminded my sister. "Doesn't matter how early it is when we get here, he's never awake." I checked my watch. "It's ten o'clock, so he's going to be out until at least three. 'Bout time we got cracking."

While Ebony ducked out into the ward, I went over to where the crate of posters and Christmas lights sat in a corner and lifted it into the air, carrying it over to the chair that perpetually sat near the head of Taylor's bed and setting it down noiselessly. It was packed nearly to the seams with rolled-up posters, with coiled strands of coloured and clear Christmas lights draped over the top. I picked the lights up first and set them aside, before proceeding to draw poster after poster from the crate.

I had just unrolled a fairly large Green Day poster when Ebony returned, a couple of orderlies in tow. "Your girlfriend here said you needed some help hanging some lights," the taller of the two said, indicating my sister with a nod of the head.

"She's not my girlfriend, she's my sister," I corrected. "And yeah, we'd appreciate it. We had an electrician check and tag them before we brought them in, so you don't have to worry about the electricity being shorted out or anything."

"No worries, mate," said the shorter of the two. "You just tell us where you want them."

It wasn't long before the room was beginning to look a little more like home. Posters adorned the walls, the Christmas lights had been strung up across the ceiling, and the blanket that usually lay across the end of Taylor's bed at home had found a new home on the end of his hospital bed. His sketchbook, journal, lyrics book, Discman and headphones, and his copy of *The Hobbit*, along with a handful of pens and pencils, had been set on his night table within easy reach. In the top drawer of the nightstand, beneath Taylor's Year 12 jersey, Ebony had hidden a plastic zip-lock bag filled with marijuana that she had taken from inside Taylor's guitar, a packet of rolling papers, and her favourite lighter. I had long since resigned myself to the fact that my sister was a pothead, but it was difficult to accept that my brother was beginning to wander down that same path, even if he did only do it to lessen the effect his treatment had on him.

Ebony had just put the now-empty crate back where we had found it when a knock sounded at the door of the room. "I'll get it," I volunteered. Ebony raised a hand in acknowledgment, and I headed across to let the mystery visitor in.

Standing at the door when I opened it was Stephanie. Under her left arm she had a large glass jar, and she carried a plastic shopping bag in her right hand. She grinned at me as she entered the room.

"What the hell is *that*?" I asked as she hopped up on the end of Taylor's bed.

"Lolly jar," Stephanie replied as she shoved the jar between her knees and popped open the catch that was keeping it sealed. From the shopping bag she took packets of barley sugars, jellybeans and lollipops; she tore open each packet in turn and poured its contents into the jar. "I figure that even if he doesn't want to eat what they're trying to force down his throat here, he can always dig into this," she explained as she resealed the jar. "That way, when he throws up he's only going to throw up sugar and not much else." She slid off the bed and carried the jar over to Taylor's nightstand, setting it down carefully within reach.

Stephanie and Ebony had left to head down to the hospital cafeteria to pick up something for lunch when Taylor awoke. I gave him a grin when I figured he was awake enough to focus, and he returned it in kind.

“Mornin’ Sleeping Beauty,” I teased.

“Fuck you, Aidan,” he replied around a yawn. I watched him look around the room, meeting his gaze when it came full circle once more. “What the...did you guys do this?” he asked.

“Ebony and I did, yeah,” I replied. “Stephanie brought in the lolly jar. She reckons that you ought to be eating something at least, even if it isn’t the healthiest thing in the world.”

“Anything’s better than that shit they try to force on us in here.” He eased himself upright and breathed in deeply, his eyes closed, before removing his bandanna and quickly running his hands through his hair. A quick examination of his fingers resulted in what sounded to me like a sigh of relief. “And I’m going to take junk food over anything healthy whenever I can get it.”

“You and me both,” I agreed.

Ebony and Stephanie returned at around one-thirty, each of them carrying a McDonald’s takeaway bag in one hand. “I thought you were going to the cafeteria,” I said as I accepted my lunch.

“Yeah, well, it all looked like shit,” Ebony replied. “Not hard to tell why Taylor here hates eating it.”

“I’m not deaf, you know,” Taylor said without looking up from dissecting his lunch. Ebony had bought him his favourite, a double cheeseburger, and right now he was working at getting all the pickles out of it. “And I wish you wouldn’t talk about me as if I were.” He reassembled his lunch and started eating.

"So," Stephanie said as she finished off her lunch and screwed her wrapper up into a tight ball, "it's your birthday in just over two weeks. Figured out what you all want yet?"

"Some new wheels for my skateboard," I replied. "Maybe a new deck, too."

"I asked for some new boots," Ebony replied.

"Tay?" Stephanie asked. "What about you?"

Taylor was silent for a little while. "Nothing," he replied. "There's only one thing I really want, and I can't have it."

It wasn't hard for any of us to tell what Taylor wanted for our birthday. He wanted to be well and healthy, without the shadow of illness hanging over his head. It was all he had ever wanted since the age of eleven. And it was something he had never been able to have.

"Well, just think of something else you'd like, then," Stephanie said. "I'm sure you can come up with something." She looked at her watch. "I should be heading off," she said as she stood up. "Otherwise I'll never make it back up the coast before dark." Farewells were said all around, and Stephanie took her leave.

"So what are we going to do for the next hour and a half?" Ebony asked. "They're going to want us to clear out before you go back on the chemo, Tay, so I daresay we can't start anything that'll take us hours to finish."

"So Monopoly's out, then," I mused. "Poker?"

"Don't have my cards or chips with me," Ebony said.

"Jacie has a tarot card deck," Taylor volunteered. "Though I don't know how we could play poker with it. I don't know how the different cards match up with a normal pack." He seemed to think for a little while. "I've been writing a song if you guys want to hear it."

"You serious?" I asked, and Taylor nodded. "But you've never shown us any of your music before."

"We're nearly nineteen, Aidan," my brother reminded me. "We aren't children anymore. I think I'm too old to be keeping something that's as important to me as my music as private as I have been. It's something to be shared." With those words, he pushed his blankets aside and got out of his bed, padding barefoot over to where his guitar sat in a corner. "It isn't much yet – I only have the tabs down right now. I'm going to have to wait until I come home to be able to write the music." He picked his guitar up and came back over to his bed. "Just...don't laugh, okay?"

"We won't," Ebony promised, and I nodded my agreement.

Instead of getting back into bed, Taylor perched on the edge of his mattress and balanced his guitar on his knees. He closed his eyes for just a few moments, seemingly composing himself, before beginning to play.

As he played the skeleton of what had the potential of becoming a fully-fledged song, I found myself wishing not for the first time that he'd never fallen ill. He had nearly everything that was essential for a career in music – talent, drive, determination and, according to Stephanie, looks. The only thing he didn't have was the assurance that his health wouldn't fail at any given moment...the only thing I knew was stopping him.

"That was wonderful," Ebony said, unbidden, as soon as Taylor finished playing. "I can't wait to hear it when it's finished."

"You really liked it?"

Ebony nodded. "I loved it." She levelled a steely gaze at me. "Aidan?"

"What Ebony said. Damn mate, if that's what it sounds like just on guitar, imagine what it'll sound like when it's finished."

Taylor gave us a small smile and set his guitar aside. "It's for Stephanie. I wanted her to know how much she means to me, and this is my way of telling her."

"I think she already knows," Ebony said. "I think she's known for a long time. But if she doesn't already, that song of yours will really drive it home."

"I think we should be heading off, Ebony," I said. "Let Tay have a nap before they try to make him sick again." Taylor laughed out loud at this and lowered his guitar off his bed down in front of his nightstand. "See you later, yeah?"

"Yeah," Taylor replied absently. He had curled up in bed and was watching TV, eyes already having fallen to half-mast.

"I think things are starting to look up," I said as Ebony and I headed out of the ward.

"You know, Aidan," Ebony replied as the automatic doors swung closed behind us, "for once, I think you just may be right."

Chapter 7

Ebony

"Wakey-wakey, Jordie! Rise and shi-innne!"

The fourteenth of March marked our nineteenth birthday. Granted, it wouldn't be as good a day as it would have been had Taylor not gotten sick earlier in the year, but Aidan and I still planned to make it a memorable one. And as with all Hanson triplet birthdays, it began with Aidan and I waking our brother up.

"Did you *have* to say it that way?" I hissed in Aidan's ear. We stood at the left-hand side of Taylor's bed. He was curled up under his blankets, fast asleep. We knew that the nurses were giving him, and him alone, a day off from treatment, as a birthday present of sorts, so we figured he was sleeping off what he had been dosed with the day before. We weren't worried – he was sick, and sick people had a tendency to sleep a lot.

Almost in answer to Aidan's little call for him to awaken, Taylor rolled over and curled up even further under his blankets, mumbling, "G'way, 's too early..."

"Too early my fucking arse," Aidan said. "It's ten-thirty in the morning for your information."

I knew Taylor extremely well. It was hard not to, considering that we were triplets. Therefore, I wasn't surprised by what he did next. He rolled back over to face us, opened one very sleepy eye, and said, "Aidan, since when did your arse go around fucking?"

I let loose a peal of laughter as Aidan's face slowly turned crimson. "Oh Aidan, you walked right into that one!" I crowed gleefully. Aidan's response to this was to give me the finger.

"Come on Tay, time to get up," I said once I had composed myself. "Get yourself dressed and get out to Aidan's car – we've got a pretty big day ahead of us."

"But I don't have a day pass," Taylor protested.

"Hush, we've taken care of all that. You just worry about getting yourself outside." I made to turn away and head toward the door, but thought better of it. "You've got fifteen minutes. So if you aren't dressed and ready to go by a quarter to eleven, Aidan is coming in here and stripping you naked, and then we will be sending you on a walk through The Rocks. At lunchtime. Therefore, unless you want most of Sydney to see you walking through there in all your naked glory, I would suggest that you hurry up." I gave him a very devious grin and followed Aidan out the door.

Our destination that morning was the Dendy cinema in Newtown. As soon as Aidan had parked his car alongside the kerb outside, he opened that morning's *Daily Telegraph* to the entertainment section and found the cinema listings. "This morning, we have the choice of *All Over The Guy*, *A Beautiful Mind*, *The Musketeer*, *New Skin*, *Rollerball*, *Waking Life*, *Affair Of The Necklace*, *Gosford Park*, and *Kate And Leopold*," he informed us. "I've wanted to see *A Beautiful Mind* and *Rollerball* for a while."

"Majority rules," I reminded him. "I'd rather go and see *Kate And Leopold*."

"So what do you want to see, Taylor?" Aidan asked our brother. "It comes down to you – you have the deciding vote here."

Taylor was silent for a little while. "I've heard good things about all three," he said. "But I'm going to have to go with *A Beautiful Mind*."

"It's settled then," I said. "Come on, let's go; don't want to miss this, do we?"

We got out of the car – I hung back a little while to help Taylor out of the back of the car, as he was a little unsteady on his feet – and headed into the building that housed the cinema. While Aidan went off to pay for our tickets, and making a mental note to pay him back later, Taylor and I sat off to the side and talked.

"I've noticed something," I said. "Your hair."

Almost as soon as I spoke, Taylor reached for his hair and yanked on it, almost as if he were making sure it was still there. "What about it?" he asked, tone wary.

"I distinctly remember you saying something about how it was all going to fall out. So what happened?"

"I...I don't know," he said. "It's one of the side effects of what I'm taking, though Dr. Rochester said that everyone's reaction is different..." He rubbed the underside of his left wrist, where the buckle of his watch usually sat. "I guess that one didn't affect me."

"Don't speak too soon," I warned him. "You're not done yet."

"I know, I know." He sighed softly. "I've got a little bit less than a month left of the really intense chemo left, then after my operation I've got a *year* of it to look forward to." He pulled a face. "Oh *joy*."

"Well, look on the bright side. Once you're done with this lot, you might have to have it for a year, but it won't be as intense, right?"

"Dr. Rochester said it wouldn't be."

"See? True, you'll still have to put up with it, but it won't be as hard to put up with. And who knows – your doctor might end up letting you go back home, instead of being stuck here."

"I can only hope so."

The movie started at seven past eleven. And as the lights went down and the opening credits rolled, I grasped Aidan's right hand with my left and Taylor's left hand with my right, and allowed myself a smile.

We were all officially nineteen years old.

"We made it," I heard Taylor say quietly. I looked over to him, and he grinned. I returned the grin, squeezed his hand, and turned my attention to the movie.

Just over two-and-a-quarter hours later, we emerged from the darkness of the cinema into the bright sunlight of the street outside. The first thing Aidan did as soon as we reached his car was hold out his hand.

"Give it over," he said to Taylor.

"Give *what* over?"

"You know what." Aidan flicked his gaze to the Australian flag bandanna that Taylor had tied over his hair. "Come on, give it over before I take it from you."

Taylor narrowed his eyes. "You wouldn't *dare*."

A feral grin crept onto Aidan's face. "You just said the magic word, brother mine," he informed Taylor, before reaching out and pulling the bandanna off of our brother's head. "Hold him still Nee," he said to me, and I grabbed onto Taylor's shoulders so that Aidan could blindfold him. Despite my best efforts, I had obviously gripped a little too hard, for right as Aidan finished tying the knot at the back of his neck Taylor let out a quiet whimper of what I guessed to be pain; I knew I had guessed correctly when I loosened my grip, and he lifted the bottom edge of his blindfold and threw me a grateful look. He would have a bruise on each shoulder the next morning, and it would all be my doing. I knew I owed him a sincere apology later on.

It wasn't long before we had piled back into Aidan's car in our usual arrangement – Aidan driving, a blindfolded Taylor in back, me in the front passenger seat – and were heading out to Maroubra. Aidan and I had been planning today's main event for weeks now, timing it for the one day that we knew, barring anything unforeseen, Taylor would be temporarily released from hospital – our birthday.

"Where exactly are we going?" Taylor asked from the backseat.

"You'll see," Aidan said loftily.

"Aidan, you know I hate surprises..."

"Even birthday surprises?" Aidan asked.

"*Epecially* birthday surprises." Taylor scowled. "I'm sure you remember our sixteenth."

Aidan pulled a face. "I do now. How could I forget? You threw up all over Auntie Karen, and then Mum blamed me for getting you all nervous. I'll have you know I did nothing of the sort."

"We know you didn't Aidan," I said hurriedly. "We know." I didn't think it was such a good idea for Aidan to get pissed off this early in the day, considering what would be happening when we arrived at the house we'd been renting. The house was just a few doors down from our aunt and uncle's place, and while not as large as our house back home in Sapphire Cove, it was plenty big enough for any gathering we might have cared to hold.

Like today's, for instance.

Cars were parked on both sides of the street when Aidan pulled up in our driveway and killed the engine. "Can I take it off yet?" Taylor asked, a definite whine in his voice. He was pointing to his bandanna-turned-blindfold.

"Not yet," I said as I checked my appearance in the rear-view mirror. "Wait until we get inside."

"Wait until we get inside'," Taylor grumbled as he hauled himself blindly from the backseat.

"That's what you say every single time..."

I kept a hand on Taylor's shoulder as Aidan led the way up the front path, guiding him toward the house. One misstep would send both of us crashing to the paving beneath our feet, and that would have been a disaster.

"Watch your step," I warned as Taylor very nearly tripped on the steps leading up to the front porch.

"This would be a *lot* easier if I wasn't blindfolded, you know," Taylor retorted.

"Oh, hush," I said.

Within a minute we were inside and walking up the front hallway, Aidan and I flanking our brother. As we neared the kitchen doorway, I could hear voices tumbling over one another so thick and fast I couldn't tell who owned which.

"What's going on?" Taylor asked as we drew level with the doorway.

I didn't answer. Instead, I signalled to Aidan to stay with our brother as I entered the kitchen. The kitchen and dining room were filled with our relatives, and I could just see the heads of some of my cousins through the doorway into the lounge room. Mum was standing at the kitchen bench, talking to Aunt Melissa while she filled a glass bowl with potato chips.

"We're here," I told her in a low voice. "Aidan and Taylor are waiting in the hallway outside."

Mum nodded to indicate she had heard me, before signalling for quiet. "Ebony, would you bring your brothers in?" she said to me, and I headed off to the hallway again.

"Okay, *now* you can take the blindfold off," I said to Taylor. "But you'd better keep your eyes closed until we say to open them." I unknotted the bandanna and made sure his eyes were closed before allowing him to begin walking forward. As we moved into the kitchen, the only sound to be heard was that of our footsteps on the tiled floor. And it wasn't long before I remembered why Taylor hated surprises so much.

When we had moved into the middle of the kitchen, I tapped Taylor on the shoulder, and he opened his eyes. As soon as I figured he had registered just what was going on, he reacted just as I almost expected he would.

He fainted.

"Aidan, help me get him up," I hissed to Aidan. This definitely wasn't going as we had planned it to. We got Taylor back to his feet and half-carried him into Aidan's bedroom, which was just off the kitchen. It wasn't long before he came around again.

"I daresay we won't be doing *that* again," Aidan muttered.

"Well, at least we know for next year," I said as I sat down next to the bed. Taylor was lying on Aidan's bed, staring at the ceiling, and he turned his head to look at me.

"You're assuming there will *be* a next year," he said with one eyebrow raised.

"Would you stop talking as if you're not going to get through this?" I asked. "I'm trying to be optimistic here."

"Yeah, well, I wish you wouldn't. I think I have a right to be realistic."

Our mother chose that moment to enter the room. "Well, that was quite the entrance," she commented dryly.

"Not my fault if I hate surprises," Taylor said. "Think we can keep things a bit more low-key next year?"

"I think we can manage that." She came further in and sat down on Aidan's bed next to Taylor.

"Think you're up to unwrapping your presents? It's just that there are quite a lot of them, and I don't think Aidan and Ebony can handle the job on their own."

That was all it took to get Taylor up on his feet again, and he preceded Aidan and I out the door.

* * *

"Oh, come on Puck, you can do better than that! Ram the fucker you chicken!"

I smothered a giggle as I neared one of the ward's hospital rooms. I knew that the patients resident here often drifted between each others' rooms, there being an open door policy and all the patients being fairly good friends; it seemed that my brother had decided to spend time in Craig's room this afternoon.

Sure enough, Craig's room was exactly where I found him. He had pulled up a chair next to Craig's bed, and the two of them were playing a fast and furious game of *Gran Turismo 4*. Or rather, Taylor was playing while Craig watched.

"Having fun, are we?" I asked.

"Yep," Taylor replied without taking his eye off the screen. "And I suppose *you* could do better?" he asked Craig.

"No shit. Give us the controller and I'll show you."

Taylor handed the controller over to Craig, but kept a finger crooked around the cord. Just as Craig got going, Taylor pulled on the cord ever so slightly, the movement startling Craig so much he drove the car he was controlling into a trackside barrier. This action sent Taylor into a fit of nearly uncontrollable laughter, and caused Craig to throw the controller at Taylor.

"You did that on purpose!" Craig very nearly yelled. "What the hell was that for?"

"Nobody shows *me* up," Taylor replied, still laughing. "Not even my mates." He shifted his gaze to me. "And *definitely* not my brothers or sisters."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Mind if I talk to you for a bit?" I asked my brother, hoping he realised it wasn't exactly a request. Sure enough, he got up out of the chair he had been sitting in and followed me out into the lounge area.

"What about?" he asked when we were settled on the large lounge that sat a few metres away from the TV.

"It's been almost ten weeks, hasn't it?"

Taylor nodded. "Yeah. Dr. Rochester told me that my final cycle for this stage will be completed next week. And then I've got my operation. There's no word yet on when that'll be happening, but it'll be sometime next month."

"And after that you can come home," I said, a hopeful note in my voice.

"I damn well hope so. I'm sick of being cooped up here. I'll have to talk to Dr. Rochester about a transfer to St. Elizabeth's."

"If he doesn't allow it, he knows where to find me," I said. I curled my right hand into a fist and smacked it against my left palm. "I'll pound him good."

"Nice," Taylor said wryly, one eyebrow raised.

"I'm serious. You're just as much a part of this family as any of us are, and I hate the idea of you being in Sydney without us. And I don't give a damn what Mum says, I am *not* going home if you can't come too."

"Do you *always* have to resort to violence?" Taylor asked, before yawning widely. "I'm going to bed," he said, and got to his feet.

"So how are you feeling about it?" I asked as my brother settled himself against his pillows.

"Nervous as hell," he replied. "Part of me doesn't want to go through with it, but I know I have to." He picked at his blanket. "Mostly I hate the idea of having to learn how to walk again."

"But it's worth it, right?"

"It had better be." He grinned at me. "Otherwise I'll have some very strong words for at least one person."

I gave him a smile of my own and stood up. "I'll drop back in on the weekend and see how you're going," I said before leaving the room.

Chapter 8

Taylor

Ten weeks.

Admittedly, it wasn't the longest I had ever been in hospital. But in terms of treatment, it was the most intense. Never before had I had to have chemotherapy six days a week for just over three months – I didn't receive treatment on Saturdays, and nor did any of my fellow patients, as it was meant to mimic the break usually allowed between cycles. Not that it did much good.

There was a distinct upside to it all, though. I got to know the other five inhabitants of the ward quite well during that time, particularly Craig and Amy. I spent many a late night in either of their rooms, playing video games or watching TV – Craig got me hooked on *Tekken 4* and *Unreal Tournament*, and I held Amy fully responsible for my addiction to *Grey's Anatomy*. In return, Craig would bring his PlayStation2 into my room on the days I was feeling less than great, and Amy would come and watch TV in my room in the evenings.

Over those two-and-a-half months, my hospital room became something of a home away from home. I had posters up on the walls, my blanket from home had been spread out on my bed, on top of the hospital-issue ones, and my sketchbook, journal, lyrics book and whatever book I might be reading at any given moment were usually within arm's reach on my night table. The lights that Ebony had strung up across the ceiling of my room had been joined by a network of coloured paper chains that had been donated by my youngest sister, and the fluorescent light strips had been covered in blue cellophane. As a result of the latter, whenever the overhead lights were switched on my room was bathed in blue light. The lolly jar that Stephanie had donated and filled with lollies of various descriptions had been refilled quite often, mostly owing to Amy choosing to raid it whenever she came to watch television with me.

The side effects from my treatment began to hit me just after I finished my second cycle of chemotherapy, and it was around that time that I pulled the marijuana that Ebony had given me out of my guitar, rolled a couple of joints and headed out to the courtyard to smoke them. Surprisingly enough, the nurses turned a blind eye when I came back inside after a smoke, even though I probably smelled of marijuana smoke and more than likely had a vacant look in my eyes.

"We've seen it before," Danielle had informed me when she came in to check on me just before lights out one evening in late January. "We don't condone it, of course, but we figure that you lot are going to do it anyway even if we try to discourage you. Just make sure you don't do it inside."

And more than once, I woke up in the middle of the night completely overwhelmed by the horribly familiar feeling that I was going to throw up, though it was by no means limited to the night time. I had fortunately escaped the side effect I had been dreading most, that of losing my hair, but I still had a further year of treatment remaining so I knew it could still happen.

In the first week of April, the first stage of my treatment ended, and the countdown to the next stage began.

"You're scheduled to go into surgery on April twenty-third," Dr. Rochester informed me when we met on the seventh of April. Dr. Rochester was my Sydney-based oncologist, and reported back regularly to Dr. Beckett on my progress. I'd liked him from the moment I had walked into his office for the first time – he reminded me a lot of Dad. Both my father and Dr. Rochester had warm brown eyes, slightly greying dark brown hair, and fine wrinkles at their temples. Even his mannerisms and way of speaking reminded me of Dad, leaving me to wonder whether he and Dad had been separated at birth. "Afterwards, you will need to be in a wheelchair for at least a month, while your leg heals – you'll be able to begin rehabilitation and physical therapy then." Dr. Rochester paused to allow me to take this in, before continuing. "I will warn you now – your rehabilitation is going to be intense, and it is bound to be difficult, but it is necessary if you are going to be able to walk again afterwards."

"I know," I said quietly. "Will I have to be asleep for it?" I asked, dreading Dr. Rochester's reply.

"I usually recommend it, but I am aware of your past reactions to general anaesthesia, and so I have been exploring other avenues. My recommendation in your particular case is spinal anaesthesia – you would remain awake, but you would not be able to feel anything below the injection site."

I bit my bottom lip and frowned. I wasn't sure I liked the idea of that – the thought of being aware of having a part of me taken away didn't really appeal to me.

"It's entirely up to you, of course," Dr. Rochester said, as if he had sensed my unease. "Take a few days to think it over, and come back to see me when you have made a decision."

As soon as Dr. Rochester turned me loose, I went straight back to the ward, fished my stash out of my guitar and found the other paraphernalia I needed to roll a couple of joints, and headed out to the courtyard for a smoke. This time, Amy followed me.

"Hey, what's up?" she asked as I sat down against one of the walls and started rolling my first joint of the day.

"I have to have surgery on the twenty-third," I replied.

"Shit," Amy said. She pointed to the bag of marijuana I had brought out with me. "You mind?"

I shrugged. Amy picked up the bag, took a rolling paper from the packet, and started rolling a joint of her own. I lit both of them when we were done with a practiced flick of my thumb on the lighter Ebony had given me a couple of weeks earlier, and sat back against the wall.

"So what're they doing?" Amy asked. She put the end of the joint between her lips and inhaled.

"Exactly what they did back in '99." I stuck my joint in my mouth, rolled up my right jeans leg and showed her the scar from my last operation. "They're going to cut my leg open, remove my tibia, and replace it with a titanium prosthesis before they sew me back up again." I rolled my jeans

back down to my ankle and inhaled from my joint, exhaling a cloud of smoke before continuing.

"And I'm scared shitless. I was in a coma for three weeks the last time."

"I don't blame you." I saw her gaze drift to my leg. "Ever thought of getting a tattoo?"

"What for?"

"Well, I can tell that you're self-conscious about it. Why else would you keep it covered? A tattoo would disguise the scar, providing of course that you picked one that incorporated your scar in the design. Something like a Celtic cross, maybe."

"I always thought about getting a tattoo," I mused. "But not on my leg. I've always liked this design called the five forces of nature."

"What's that?"

"Hindu design. From the bottom up it's a square, a circle, a triangle, a crescent and a dot. Earth, water, fire, air and ether. I'd get it on my left arm. In Hindu they call it the *Pancha-Mahabhoota*." I let out a rough chuckle. "I probably mangled that, but whatever. I don't speak Hindu."

Amy's gaze drifted up to my face, and she studied me for a moment. "Wait here," she said, handing me her joint.

"Where are you going?" I asked as she stood up.

"I need to get something from my room. Be right back." She dusted off the back of her pants and headed inside.

Less than five minutes later she returned with a thick pencil case. She took up her position once again and motioned for me to shift around so that my left side was facing her, before rolling up the sleeve of my shirt to my shoulder. "What the fuck are you doing?" I asked as she took her joint back and stuck it in her mouth.

"Shut up and smoke, and let me be an artist. Okay?" She gave me as sweet a smile as she could with her joint sticking out of the corner of her mouth, unzipped her pencil case and tipped out an assortment of coloured permanent markers into her lap. One hand hunted through the mess of colours, before fishing out a bright blue marker. "Now hold still – if I mess this up it's going to take a very long time for it to come off. It's not like you can get this off with soap and water. Well," she allowed, "you could probably get it off with a scrubbing brush, but that'd hurt like a bitch." She uncapped the marker, shoved the cap onto the opposite end from the nib, and started drawing. "Now, it was a square, a circle, a triangle, a crescent and a dot, right?"

"Equilateral triangle. And the crescent has to be drawn so that the lower of the curved sides is on top of the triangle."

"Gotcha."

Amy still hadn't finished drawing when I finished my joint. I needed two hands to roll my next one, so I contented myself with looking up at the sky. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Amy cap a purple marker and reach for a green one. "You're *still* not done?" I asked.

"Nope. Nearly finished, though – just got the crescent and the dot to go."

"Well, hurry up – I need another smoke."

Amy rolled her eyes. "Impatient much? Just hold still a little while longer, and *then* you can smoke."

"You sound like my mother."

"Oh be quiet." She gave my left cheek a light slap, and I felt a slight pressure on my arm as she started to draw the crescent that made up the 'air' component of the design.

When she was done, I immediately reached for the makings of another joint. "If you don't watch out you're going to get yourself addicted," Amy noted as I rolled a joint, lit it and stuck it in my mouth.

"My leg hurts," I defended. "And I've felt like I'm going to puke for hours. This" I tapped my joint with my right index finger "stops me feeling like I'm going to throw up in my lap right here and now."

"I'm not criticising," Amy said. "Just making an observation." She swept her markers back into her pencil case and zipped it back up. "If you're feeling up to watching TV, come into my room in about" she checked her watch "twenty minutes," she added as she stood up.

"Okay," I said absently. "I might go and have a nap, actually – I'm kinda wiped."

"Suit yourself. My door's open if you want to chat or anything."

I nodded. "Thanks, Amy."

"Anytime."

* * *

The twenty-third of April rolled around much faster than I would otherwise have liked. If I hadn't had my impending trip to the operating room hanging over my head, I might have enjoyed my break from the chemotherapy a lot more. Instead, I spent my two weeks recovering from my treatment in a state of dread. I knew that I had nearly died when I was thirteen, though I didn't remember any of the details. I didn't want that to happen again.

Mum came to visit on the afternoon of the twenty-second. Before she walked in the door, my mind drifted back to her visit just after my meeting with Dr. Rochester.

"I'm supposed to have my operation two days before Anzac Day," I told Mum. I lowered my gaze to my hands. "But I'm not so sure I want to go through with it."

"Why not?"

I twisted my blanket in my hands. "I'm scared." Pre-empting my mother's next question, I continued, "Mostly of not waking up afterwards. Dr. Rochester is giving me the option of having spinal anaesthesia rather than a general, but I don't think I want to be awake while they take away a part of me. Even if that part is virtually useless by now." I chanced a sideways glance at my mother. She was studying me, her blue eyes solemn. "I know I'm being stupid," I said with a sigh.

"You're not being stupid," Mum said. "You have every right to be worried. In fact, I would be worried myself if you weren't. It's human nature. Especially for someone in your position."

I knew exactly what she was talking about, so I said nothing in response. Instead, I said, "So I have two choices. I take the spinal, and I resign myself to being awake and able to hear everything that goes on. Or I bite the bullet and go ahead with the general, and take the risk of never waking up."

Mum was quiet a little while. "In the end, it is wholly your decision," she said finally. As I watched her, I could nearly see the cogs and wheels turning in her head as she tried to decide what to say.

"I know it is. I just want your input before I go ahead with it."

"There are risks with anything like this," Mum reminded me gently. "But it's been over five years since you last had any sort of operation. A lot can happen in five years, as you well know." She gave me a small smile, just a slight quirking upwards of her lips. "In other words, I think you should go ahead with it."

"Yeah, that's what I figured." I traced a pattern on the quilt cover. "Okay. I'll do it."

That had been a good two weeks earlier. I had gone to meet with Dr. Rochester again on the tenth, and had informed him that I was willing to go ahead with being knocked out. And now, with only twelve hours to go, I was beginning to seriously regret my decision.

"Something on your mind?"

I shifted my gaze from my TV to my mother. She was sitting in the chair that seemed to have a permanent place in my room, silently studying me.

"I just want this over with," I answered. "And sooner rather than later."

"I know you do," Mum said. She gave me a smile and reached across, putting a hand on my shoulder. "You're still worried about tomorrow, aren't you?" she asked, and I nodded.

"I just...I keep getting this feeling that something's going to go wrong," I said quietly. "I keep dreaming about it." I gave Mum a tight smile. "If it goes off without a hitch, as soon as I come around you have every right to tell me 'I told you so'."

"I'll make sure to hold you to that," Mum said with a smile of her own.

Mum left just before dinnertime, with the promise that she would be back early the next morning. Before she walked out the door, I made a request that I must have made when I was thirteen.

"Will you stay with me until I go in?"

Mum nodded, and the look in her eyes told me that I had asked her this same question nearly six years ago. "Of course I will."

"Thank you," I said quietly.

The next morning, I was woken so early that the sun was barely up. "It's time," Danielle told me as I drifted into wakefulness. She didn't need to say anything more than that – I knew exactly what she meant. She gave me an apologetic smile and moved off out of my range of sight.

Within five minutes I had changed out of my pyjamas into a plain white hospital gown that left me feeling very exposed, had taken my necklace and both bracelets off, and had pulled my hair back into a loose ponytail. And as I perched on the edge of my mattress, swinging my bare feet back and forth with my hands on my knees, I felt that horribly familiar feeling of dread begin to creep up once more. Something was going to happen today, and it was going to happen to me.

But I couldn't back out now. It was far too late to change my mind, too late to back down. I had made my decision, and now I had to live with whatever consequences that arose.

At seven o'clock sharp, they came for me – Dr. Rochester and an orderly I had never seen before. Mum, Ebony and Aidan were close behind them.

"Good morning, Taylor," Dr. Rochester said with a smile. "All ready to go?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," I replied. My fingers twitched, and I gripped my knees even harder.

Dr. Rochester nodded, seemingly satisfied. "Good, good." He produced a clipboard and began flipping through a sheaf of papers. "Now, I know you're probably sick of being poked and prodded by now," he said as he took his stethoscope from the pocket of his shirt, "but I'm just going to give you a once-over before you go up to theatre. All right?"

Hardly in a position to object, I nodded and loosened my grip on my knees. As Dr. Rochester performed a final check-up, he quizzed me on what I needed to say when I reached the operating room. He would be accompanying me just as far as the doors – which was exactly as far as Mum, Ebony and Aidan would be allowed to go – and would be able to confirm everything I said, but it needed to come from me.

"All right then," Dr. Rochester said as he returned his stethoscope to his pocket. "Let's go."

"My destiny awaits, right?" I joked.

We made an odd sort of procession through the corridors of the hospital. Aidan and Ebony led the way, backed up by Mum and Dr. Rochester; the two of them walked alongside the bed in which I lay, staring at the white ceiling as we went. I shifted my focus away from the ceiling just as our procession arrived at a set of double doors. A nurse dressed in pale blue was waiting for us.

"Good morning Dr. Rochester," the nurse said cheerfully – a little too cheerfully for going on ten past seven in the morning, I felt.

"Good morning Celia," Dr. Rochester replied. He unclipped a single sheet of paper from his clipboard and handed it over. Celia scanned it quickly, before looking to me with a smile.

"Taylor, was it?" she asked, and I nodded, deciding it was in my best interest to keep my mouth shut. I knew that if I did open my mouth, I'd say something I would later regret. I answered all of the nurse's questions with a nod or a shake of my head, breathing a mental sigh of relief when she was finished.

"You'll be all right," Ebony said as she gave me a tight, somewhat awkward hug. She leaned down to whisper to me, so close I could feel her breath on my ear, "And when you get out of here, I'll take you out and we'll get so pissed we'll have trouble finding our way home." I found it hard to smile at this, settling for a smirk instead.

Aidan was next. "You're going to teach me to play hockey when you get out of here," he told me matter-of-fact. "I want to see what all the fuss is about."

"Ask me nicely and I might think about it." I cocked an eyebrow at my brother. "And if you're nice to me while I'm getting better, I may let you borrow my hockey gear."

He nodded, seeming to accept my terms. "I'll see you when you wake up," he said, giving my left hand a quick squeeze.

As Mum stepped forward, I tried to sit up, but when she shook her head slightly I stopped. Instead, she crouched down so that we were eye to eye, and we locked gazes.

"I am so proud of you," she said softly. "I know you're scared, and that you don't really want to do this, but that's what makes you brave – you're doing it anyway." She tucked a few escaped locks of hair behind my ears before hugging me tightly. "Don't let go, no matter what."

"I won't." I swallowed hard. "I'll see you all in a few hours." *I hope*, I added silently. Not that I didn't trust my mother's steadfast belief that I would wake up when it was over, but I wasn't exactly hopeful. My so-called track record didn't exactly give me a lot of confidence.

Lying in the operating room minutes later, staring up at the ceiling, I found myself wishing – and not for the first time, either – that things hadn't turned out this way. This wasn't supposed to happen. I was supposed to go to university to study music down in Wollongong, but I'd had to reject my offer. I couldn't exactly study for a degree when I was undergoing chemotherapy – I would have missed far too many classes, and those classes that I would have made it to would have been continually interrupted. I had to put my health first.

"Taylor?"

I looked in the direction of the voice – it had come from my right, and it had been one of the nurses who had spoken. She pulled down her surgical mask and gave me a smile. "Are you ready?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yeah. I'm ready."

"All right then. Just relax."

I returned my focus to the ceiling. Out of a corner of my eye, I could see my PICC line being untaped from my left forearm, and an IV being connected to it. A mask was placed on my face, over my mouth and nose, and a voice I didn't recognise instructed me to count backwards from one hundred.

"One hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight..."

The ceiling began to spin.

"Ninety-seven, ninety-six, ninety-five..."

Everyone's voices, and a myriad of other sounds I didn't recognise, went up in volume a few notches.

"Ninety-four, ninety-three, ninety-two..."

Darkness began creeping in at the sides of my vision, and I started losing focus.

"Ninety-one, ninety..."

I gave myself over to the darkness.

Chapter 9

Aidan

Almost as soon as Taylor had gone into theatre, Ebony took off back down the corridor. I wasn't exactly surprised – anytime she didn't want to immediately deal with something, she usually went off on her own until she was completely ready to make sense of it. The way I tended to see it, if her way of coping with stress worked for her, then I wasn't about to change that.

My mother, however, was not so convinced.

"Aidan, please go after her," Mum said, sounding somewhat weary.

"She's not going to want me anywhere near her," I protested.

"I don't much care right now, Evan. I need to call your father and tell him that your brother has gone into theatre – I'm worried enough about him without having to worry about your sister as well."

I sighed. "Fine," I reluctantly agreed.

It didn't take me long to find her. She was standing just outside the hospital's main entrance, a lit cigarette in hand, staring at her sneakers.

"I don't think you're supposed to smoke here," I said idly as I came up beside her. Evidently she wasn't paying much attention to anything bar her shoes, for when I touched her shoulder she nearly hit me, dropping her cigarette in the process.

"Bloody *hell* Aidan!" she very nearly shouted. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Scaring the shit out of you, obviously," I replied. "Maybe you should be paying attention to more than just your feet."

Ebony ground her cigarette out under the toe of her right shoe, bent down and picked it up. "I need to go for a walk," she decided as she dropped the extinguished cigarette into a nearby bin. "Come on."

"Lemme tell Mum first." I took my phone out of my pocket, texted Mum to tell her we were going off for a walk, and we set off out of the grounds. "So what's up?" I asked as we headed along Gloucester Drive.

"Everything," my sister replied. "It's like an avalanche, you know? It's all just teetering at the edge, waiting for the right moment to tumble in on us."

"It's not just that, is it?" I prompted.

Ebony was quiet for a little while. She started kicking a plastic bottle cap along the footpath as we walked, kicking it off the footpath as we turned into Missenden Road.

"No, it's not," she admitted finally, as if she was ashamed. "I'm worried, Aidan. I've had this feeling the last couple of weeks that something's going to go wrong, and I don't like it."

I cast a sideways glance at my sister. Like me, she trusted wholeheartedly in her instincts. Which would be nothing out of the ordinary, except for the fact that, unlike me, she was almost always right. We had all learned long ago to take whatever she said very seriously, especially in regards to our brother and his various illnesses.

"Let's just stop for a minute," I said as we approached the intersection of Missenden Road and Carillon Avenue. "What exactly is worrying you?"

We stopped walking, and Ebony leaned up against a nearby fence. As she stared up at the sky, her hand started to sneak toward the pocket of her jeans, and I smacked it away.

"Don't," I said sternly. "At least, don't do it around me. Now answer the question."

"It's hard to explain, Aidan," she said.

"Well, just try to explain."

"It's just..." She shifted her focus from the sky to the traffic that was beginning to build in the street before us. "I don't know what it is. If I tried to put my finger on it, we'd be here all week. But you remember what it was like when we were thirteen, don't you?"

"Unfortunately."

"It's like that." She started to worry at the hem of her T-shirt. "And I think it's going to happen again, but..."

"But what?"

"It's going to be worse this time."

"Define 'worse'."

Ebony's left hand drifted up toward her chest, settling over her heart, and I swallowed hard. That was all the explanation I needed.

"I hope to God you're wrong, Ebony," I said. "I truly do."

"You think I don't?" She stood back up straight, dusted off the back of her jeans, and set off across Carillon. "Come on. I want to see how far we can get before Mum starts wondering where we are."

As it happened, we ended up walking for a full half hour, ending up out the front of the Enmore Theatre, before my phone rang. I checked the caller ID before I answered.

"Hi Mum," I said. Pre-empting her next question, I said, "We're just outside the Enmore Theatre."

"Did you *walk* that far?" Mum asked, sounding somewhat suspicious.

"Course we did. Ebony wanted to go for a walk, so we figured we'd see how far we could get before you wondered where the hell we were."

"All right. Take your time heading back."

"We will. See you later on."

I hung up and slipped my phone back into my pocket. "So what now?" I asked Ebony. "Head back, or do you want to walk a bit further?"

"I don't mind either way. I could do with some breakfast, though." She took her wallet from her back pocket and thumbed through it. "But I think you'll have to pay. I have five dollars, if that."

After a surprisingly expensive breakfast of raisin toast, fresh fruit salad, orange juice and coffee (the juice had been Ebony's, while I had succumbed to my inner caffeine junkie and ordered coffee), we started to head back to the hospital. Ebony seemed to be a little happier now that she'd had something to eat, but in her case appearances could be very deceiving. From the way she was biting her lip, I could tell that she was still very worried.

And as things turned out, she had every reason to be worried.

Mum and Dad were both waiting for us when we got back. Neither of them looked too happy, and Mum was rather pale. A doctor I didn't recognise was sitting with them, the nametag on her blouse reading *Dr. Belinda Cox*.

"What's going on?" I asked, even though I didn't need a response to know that something had gone wrong. I only needed to look at my mother to figure that out.

"Something happened to Taylor," Ebony said quietly, and Dad nodded. "Is he all right?"

"He's just fine," Dr. Cox said. "But he will be staying in Intensive Care for the next week, just as a precaution before he returns to the ward."

"What happened?" I asked. If Taylor had to stay in Intensive Care for a week, it couldn't be anything good.

"He went into cardiac arrest as he was being brought out of the anaesthesia. It likely won't be known until later this week if any appreciable damage has been done, but he should be no worse for wear."

I felt cold inside, almost as if a block of ice had dropped into the pit of my stomach. My brother had almost died. I'd almost lost one of my best friends, a realisation that scared the hell out of me. It was a horrible feeling, and I knew I never wanted to experience it ever again.

We sat there for what felt like ages after Dr. Cox departed down the corridor; I was lost in my own thoughts, though I couldn't speak for my parents or my sister. It was Ebony who finally spoke.

"I hate it when I'm right."

"What do you mean by that?" Mum asked.

My sister toyed with the tail of her plait. "I had a feeling that something like this would happen, but I didn't say anything to you because I thought you would tell me I was imagining things." She looked over at Mum. "I probably should have said something."

"There's no point in worrying about that now," Mum said, sounding almost resigned. "How about you and Aidan head back to the house – your father and I are going to sit with Taylor for a little while." She reached down for her handbag, picked it up and started rooting around in it, finally pulling out a ring of keys. "You can take my car back."

"Okay," I agreed, and caught the keys when she tossed them to me. "Will you tell him that we'll come visit tomorrow?" When Mum nodded, I stood up and pushed gently on Ebony's shoulder.

"C'mon Nee, let's go."

The whole way back to Maroubra, Ebony was quiet, which worried me slightly. "Hey, you okay?" I asked when I had parked the car outside of our house.

"I'm fine. I think I just need to get some sleep." She yawned, as if it would make her reason for being quiet sound more convincing.

It didn't work.

"Ebony, I think you've forgotten that Mum had to drag you out of bed this morning," I reminded my sister. "You've had more than enough sleep."

"Well, can you really blame me for wanting to sleep through all this?" Ebony asked, sounding almost defensive. "You have to understand how I feel – somehow, I knew this was going to happen, and I didn't say a word!"

"No doctor would have listened to you," I said, trying to sound as reasonable as possible. "Doctors aren't interested in sibling instinct – they're interested only in what's medically possible."

"Oh, I know that." We were inside by this time, and Ebony had sat herself down on the lounge in our lounge room. She propped her feet up on the coffee table. "But I still feel horrible about it."

"He'll be all right," I said, realising that Ebony was nothing more than worried. "I know he will."

* * *

For all our intention of going to see Taylor the next day, neither of us got within spitting distance of the hospital for three days. By that time it was almost the end of April, and nearly time for Taylor to return to his ward.

I had decided, during our drive out to Camperdown, I'd let Ebony make the first move, as it were. As close as Taylor and I were, and as well as I knew him, sometimes he could be very unpredictable – whenever he chose to act out of the ordinary, I usually let Ebony deal with him. For some reason, he responded to our sister better than he responded to me.

So while Ebony pulled a chair up close to our brother's bedside, I perched on an empty bed and listened to their conversation.

"What do you want?" Taylor asked when Ebony had been sitting there watching him for a couple of minutes.

Ebony did not sound at all pleased when she answered Taylor's question, and to be honest I could hardly blame her. "So this is the welcome I get after not seeing you for three whole days?" she asked, sounded wounded. "I suppose I'll see you later on then." She made to stand up, but I saw Taylor put out a hand to stop her.

"Ebony, wait – I'm sorry, okay? It's just...you were staring at me. You know I hate being stared at."

"I wasn't *staring*." Ebony settled back down in her seat. "I was just watching you, that's all." She looked down at her lap. "You scared the hell out of me – out of all of us, really."

"Yeah," Taylor said absently, trailing off. "I've been meaning to thank you, by the way."

"For what?"

"That little...present you left for me inside my guitar."

"Oh, that." She let out a quiet chuckle. "I'm surprised Mum never noticed it was in there."

"I'm surprised she never noticed either. She carried the damn thing all the way from her car up to my room – I'd have thought she'd have heard it rustling around in there." I watched as Taylor reached over and grabbed hold of Ebony's nearest hand. "It was a fucking lifesaver, Nee. I haven't thrown up nearly as often since I started smoking it. So thank you."

"You're welcome, Tay. How much do you have left?"

"About half?" Taylor shrugged as best he could while he was lying down, flat on his back. "Plus I haven't touched the stash that's in the drawer of my night table, so I think I'm good for a while yet."

"Oh, good. I was afraid you'd run out."

"Nah, not even close. I think I'm nearly out of rolling papers, though."

"I'll get you some more the next time I'm out shopping. Though whenever I'm short on papers, I tear pages out of my Bible. Best substitute for rolling papers I've ever found. And it's not like I ever go to church anymore, so what other use do I have for it?"

"Ebony!" Taylor said in what I knew to be mock astonishment. "That's sacrilege! Not to mention blasphemous."

"Oh, I know. But it's fun. You should try it sometime."

"Yeah, well, after all I've been through, I'd rather stay in the good books of Him up there." He nodded toward the ceiling.

Ebony shook her head at this. "I can't honestly see any reason for you to still believe in that shit, Tay. If there *was* a higher power, then I doubt you would have ever gotten this sick."

"I like to think of it as a test of my faith. And I think I've done pretty well so far. I haven't died yet, right?"

"True," Ebony conceded.

The two of them talked for a little while longer. At around eleven-thirty I decided I wanted to have a chat, and so I tapped Ebony on the shoulder. "Feel like letting me talk to him?" I asked, raising one of my eyebrows. She stuck her tongue out at me and got up from her seat so I could sit down in her place. Now that I didn't have to look past Ebony's head, I was able to have a closer look at my brother.

Dr. Cox had been right, I decided – all things considered, he looked no more worse for wear than he had three days prior. He wasn't as pale as he normally was (I supposed that being off the chemotherapy for nearly a month had that effect), but there were two noticeable differences in

his appearance. His left leg was bandaged from his foot up to just above his knee and propped up on pillows, and because he was shirtless I could see two bright red patches on his chest that looked suspiciously like burns.

"See something you like?" Taylor asked somewhat sarcastically after a little while, and I knew I'd been staring.

"Very funny," I shot back. "How're you feeling?"

"Aside from the fact that three days ago I was electrocuted, and now I'm going to have a dirty great big scar running down my leg? I'm fine."

"You don't *sound* fine."

Taylor sighed and stared up at the ceiling. "Sorry, Aidan. I'm just frustrated. I'm not allowed to move my leg until I get the bandage taken off and my stitches taken out, and all I want to do is get out of this bed and go for a walk. I hate feeling like an invalid."

I said nothing in response to this. Instead, I decided to make reference to my brother's newest vice.

"I never would have picked you as a pothead," I said idly. "You don't even drink, so what gives?"

"Alcohol's nasty," Taylor replied. "And I'm not a pothead."

"You smoke pot."

"There's a difference between smoking pot and being a pothead. The only reason I smoke it is because it stops me throwing up. Plus it's good for my muse."

"You have a muse?" I asked, surprised.

"Of course I do. I'm a writer, aren't I?" He grinned. "It's Stephanie, if you must know. And she isn't exactly wearing much in the way of clothing."

"She would kill you if she knew you fantasised about her being naked."

"Which is why she is *never* going to find out. Though I have to admit, it's better than fantasising about some actress I'm never going to meet. At least with Steph, I have a chance."

"Well, that's one way to put it I suppose." I picked at the armrest of the chair I was seated in. "I've been meaning to ask – have you come up with anything more for that song you're writing for her?"

As soon as I asked that question, Taylor's whole demeanour changed, and I filed it away for future reference – ask him about his music if I want him to cheer up. A grin crept onto his face.

"I came up with some lyrics and the basic melody," he told me, sounding excited. "Only I can't write it all down. I don't have any composition paper."

"You could record it," I said with a shrug.

"I don't have anything to record it with, though."

"Well, I do." I pulled my phone from my pocket, and almost switched it on before remembering that I shouldn't, at least not right at that moment. "But we should probably do it later. I don't want to be blamed for fucking up the electronics in here."

Taylor grinned, and started to laugh before stopping short. "Okay, don't make me laugh. It hurts too much."

I snapped off a mock salute. "Think you can hold it over until you're back in your room? I'll probably be able to duck out to the shops before you do, and I'll buy a voice recorder or something."

"I should be able to."

"Aidan?" Ebony called, and I looked back over my shoulder. "We should get going – one of the nurses has been watching you with one eye on the clock for about the last minute or so. I think

we've worn out our welcome for now."

"All right. I'm coming." Ebony nodded, and I turned my attention back to my brother. "I guess I'm off for now. And don't forget about that song of yours – I do want to hear it."

"Okay." He gave me another smile. "I'll see you soon."

"Definitely," I agreed.

Outside in the corridor, Ebony eyed me. "So what did you two talk about?"

"Music, mostly. He's come up with lyrics and a melody for his song, so when he gets back to the ward we're going to make a recording of it. It'll be something for him to refer to when he gets his hands on some paper to write down the notes."

"You could probably get a voice recorder from Tandy or Dick Smith – I'd go with one of the electronic ones, though, rather than one that records to a tape. They're more expensive, but you'll be able to transfer the recording straight to a computer."

"I'll keep it in mind." I cast one last glance back at the doors to the Intensive Care Unit as we started to walk down the corridor. "You think he's okay?"

"All things considered?" Ebony asked, and I nodded. "I think he's better than okay. I just hope he *stays* that way."

Chapter 10

Ebony

Near the end of May, the most crucial and integral part of Taylor's recovery began – he had to learn to walk all over again. Ordinarily I wouldn't have gone along to my brother's first session, but Mum wanted someone other than Taylor to report back to her on how things had gone – it wasn't that she didn't trust him, but sometimes he over-exaggerated. And being that Aidan had gone back up the coast to put in a few days' work, the job of telling Mum how things had gone fell in my lap.

Surprisingly enough, the therapist that the hospital had assigned to my brother – his name was Daniel Thomson, according to the badge he wore on his white polo shirt – had been quite happy to let me sit in on the proceedings, so long as I kept my mouth shut. Once I'd agreed to this, the session began in earnest.

The therapy room that Taylor's sessions were to take place in, apparently, was filled with different kinds of exercise and therapy equipment – exercise bikes, treadmills, weight machines, racks laden with barbells, and rowing machines – that looked more like torture equipment than anything else. In fact, the whole room looked very much like a modern torture chamber.

"Before we begin, I need to make something very clear," Daniel said to open the proceedings. He was crouched next to my brother's wheelchair, at the edge of a sea of blue gymnastics mats that covered the floor of the therapy room. "This is going to be an extremely difficult and long road. You are going to have to do a lot of hard work over the next year, otherwise you will have a very slim chance of achieving a full recovery."

"I know," I heard Taylor say. "And I'm up for it."

"You don't sound very sure," Daniel said flatly. "And I frankly don't believe you."

"I should remind you that I've done this before," Taylor said through gritted teeth. "And therefore, I know exactly how hard this is going to be. I know that I'm ready. I've been ready for the last month."

The two of them eyed one another for what seemed an eternity. Finally, Daniel nodded, seemingly satisfied.

"Well then. Let's get started, shall we?" Daniel said as he stood.

The first thing Daniel had my brother do was wheel himself over to a set of steel parallel bars, not unlike those used by gymnasts in the Olympic and the Commonwealth Games. "So what do you want me to do first?" he asked, sounding somewhat wary.

"To begin with, I want you up on your feet, and I want you to walk as far as you can along these bars." Daniel placed a hand on the rightmost of the parallel bars. "At the moment, my sole expectation is that you make it at least a quarter of the way along." He looked at Taylor. "I won't lie to you – it *will* hurt. You will be using muscles and joints that you haven't actively used in over a month, and as soon as you start moving them they are going to start doing some serious protesting. It's an indicator that they're working properly."

"Okay," Taylor said unsurely, before pushing himself to his feet. I couldn't help but notice that he was favouring his right side. As if in response, Daniel went up behind Taylor and gently pressed down on my brother's left shoulder.

"Your leg can take it," Daniel said as Taylor's foot came to rest on the floor. "It's just a matter of training your brain to remember that. The tibia may not be the strongest bone in the human body, but it is pretty damn strong regardless. And considering that both of yours are titanium, they're even stronger than they were before. Walking a few steps isn't going to hurt it."

"If you say so."

"I do say so. Now show me what you can do."

At that, Taylor gripped the bars with both hands and took what was his first step in over a month. As soon as his left foot landed once more, his knee buckled and he collapsed, with his grip on the bars the only thing keeping him from crumpling on the floor. I heard him stifle a cry and almost ran over to him, with Daniel's warning that I would be kicked out if I interrupted the only thing keeping me seated.

"Easy does it," Daniel said as he helped Taylor stand back up. "Try stepping out with your right foot first, rather than your left, at least until your left leg becomes stronger."

It was slow going, but Taylor finally made it to the point that Daniel had designated as his goal. Almost as soon as he reached that point, he let go of the bars and fell onto the floor, breathing hard with tears streaming down his face. It wasn't hard to tell that he was in a lot of pain.

That was the last straw. If there was one thing I couldn't stand, it was seeing my best friend hurting. I scrambled to my feet and ran across to him, skidding to a stop on my knees next to his crumpled form. "Shh," I whispered as I helped him to sit up. "It's all right..."

"I can't do it," he cried. "I *can't*..."

"'Can't' is a word that should not be in anyone's vocabulary," Daniel admonished as I helped Taylor back into his wheelchair. "I think that's all for today – I'll see you again tomorrow morning."

"Like hell you will," Taylor muttered, but he nodded and allowed me to wheel him from the room.

The next few weeks were filled with much of the same. Every morning Taylor would head off to therapy, where Daniel would put him to work on the equipment in the therapy room for a few hours, and I would watch from the sidelines. Each session was concluded by a walk along the bars to whatever point Daniel felt Taylor was capable of. His afternoons were spent working on the exercises Daniel had directed him to do, with the intention of strengthening his knee and ankle. And each evening after dinner, he would lie down in bed with heat packs on his left knee and

ankle, doped up on painkillers nearly to his eyeballs, and watch TV until such a time as he fell asleep.

I had my tasks too, of course. After each of his sessions, I would call Mum to tell her how things had gone. She always asked me the same questions – how each session had turned out, how Taylor was feeling by the end, and an estimate of how much progress he was making. In the beginning, my answers were always the same, but as the weeks dragged on they changed ever so slightly.

My feelings about it all never once altered, however. As important as I knew my presence was for Taylor's sense of morale (not to mention my mother's endless curiosity), I hated it. Every session saw him in more and more pain, and once I'd called Mum afterwards I would find the nearest women's toilets, lock myself in a cubicle, and cry. I wished I could be as strong as my brother, who after his first session never once cried, but my wish never came true.

"Where exactly do you go after my sessions?" Taylor asked just before I went to ring Mum after his latest therapy session. It was the middle of June by this point.

"Do you really want to know?" I asked.

"I asked you, didn't I?" He eyed me, and I sighed.

"I go and ring Mum and tell her how you're going," I began. "And then...God this is so embarrassing." I laughed somewhat hysterically. "I find the nearest toilet, lock myself in a cubicle, and I cry."

"What the hell for?"

I looked at Taylor, who actually looked somewhat alarmed. "I hate seeing you hurting," I said, as if it were obvious. "It hurts me, deep down inside – I wish you didn't have to put yourself through it, but I know you have to."

"Ebony..." He sighed and shook his head. "I had no idea." He put a hand out and grasped my left hand. "You don't have to watch, you know. I know you only do it because Mum doesn't trust me not to exaggerate."

"I should, though. You wouldn't get back to your room otherwise."

He smiled slightly. "Point taken. But no more hiding, okay? If you're going to cry, at least have the hide to do it in front of me." Another smile, this one slightly impish, and I couldn't help but grin back.

"Okay," I agreed.

* * *

"I want you for always...I hear your name in every word I say...I'm a fool and I don't care...I hear your name in every word I say...every word I say...every word I say..."

The unmistakable sound of Taylor's voice, singing a song I had never heard before, met my ears as I approached his hospital room. It was rough, mostly because he hadn't sung much in the past year, but it was music to my ears all the same. It was almost the end of June – by this point, Taylor had been in the hospital for five months.

A handwritten sign on the closed door stopped me in my tracks. In Aidan's hand, it read *Keep Out – Recording Session In Progress*. It didn't take me long to figure out what was being recorded – it seemed that Aidan had finally bought his tape recorder, and was using it to make an audio recording of the song Taylor was writing for Stephanie. Not wanting to incur either of my brothers' considerable wrath if their recording session was interrupted, I decided to wait until Taylor finished singing. So that I knew when he was done, I kept watch through the small window set into the door, and as soon as I saw Aidan press a button on his tape recorder, I let myself in.

"Sounds like it's starting to come together," I commented as I settled myself on Taylor's bed. He was sitting in a recliner next to the head of his bed, hooked up to the chemotherapy again.

"I s'pose so," he said with a shrug.

"I'm sure it's not all that bad. Can I have a listen?"

"If you want," Taylor replied. He nodded to Aidan, who rewound the tape, and soon I was listening to Taylor's song drifting from the voice recorder's somewhat tinny speaker.

"You want my honest opinion?" I asked when the song had played itself out. Once Taylor had nodded, I looked straight at him. "This is one hell of an amazing song. Stephanie is going to love you for this."

"If you say so," Taylor said, sounding dubious.

"I do. If you ever did something with this, hell...you could really go places. Might even put Sapphire Cove on the map. You've got a real talent for this kind of thing."

"There's no point in it, though." He picked at the seam of the armrest of his chair. "I'm cursed, Nee. I'm always getting sick. Being sick all the time is not going to help me if I ever end up deciding to make something of myself. Nobody would ever take me seriously."

"First of all, you're not cursed. You just have a lot of bad luck. That's all. And second of all, you have enough musical talent for any record executive to be understanding about your health problems, because they will be tripping over themselves in order to have you on their books. They'd love you."

"Ebony, just..." He sighed and looked up at the ceiling. "Leave it alone, okay? As much as I'd love to do something like that with my life, it is never going to happen. Not in this lifetime."

Rather than push the matter, I merely nodded. "So what's the first thing you want to do when you get out of here? I mean, didn't your doctor tell you that you could go home soon?"

"Yeah, as soon as I learn to use my crutches." He shifted slightly. "The first thing I'm going to do, the minute I get back home, is have a nice, long, hot bath. I only ever get to have showers in this place. It's ridiculous."

I couldn't help but smile at that. "What about after that?"

"I'm going to sleep in my own bed for, like, a month." He cracked a grin, but it quickly faded. "I know it won't happen, though. I'll still have to finish my treatment, I'll need to continue my rehab..." He shrugged. "Sleeping for a month will have to wait until this is all over and done with, much as I hate it. I'm not out of the woods just yet."

I opened my mouth to speak, right before someone tapped at the door. It creaked open, and I looked back over my shoulder to see one of the nurses sidling in. "Hello Ebony," she said warmly. "Taylor, if you're ready, I'll unhook you, and you can have a nap if you want."

"I'm more than ready," Taylor replied, laughter in his voice. He held his left arm out, palm up, and the nurse came over to disconnect him from the machine that pumped the drugs through his veins. When that was done, he hoisted himself up from his seat and immediately pulled himself up onto his bed.

"I can't wait until I never have to go through this shit ever again," he muttered as he curled up on his side, facing me. "It won't be a day too soon."

"I might let you get some sleep," I said as I rose from my perch. "You look like you need it."

"Thanks sis," Taylor said quietly as he drew his blankets up over himself. "See you tomorrow?" he said hopefully.

I nodded. "Yeah, sure. Tomorrow."

Chapter 11

Taylor

In the middle of July, nearly six months after I had been admitted to hospital, my time in Sydney came to an end. It was Dr. Rochester who broke the news, during one of my bi-weekly sessions with him.

"So Daniel tells me that you're making exceptional progress," he said.

"That depends on your definition of 'exceptional'," I said. "Because I am fairly sure by this point that he didn't take his definition from any dictionary I've ever heard of."

Dr. Rochester raised an eyebrow at this. "He tells me that you can now walk the full length of the bars without collapsing, and that you've learned to use crutches to the point where he's comfortable with a lower level of supervision." He clasped his hands on his desk, interlacing his fingers. "In other words, you have met the conditions we agreed on in order for you to be discharged. And in addition to this, you are responding well to the lower intensity of treatment that I've had you on for the past few months. At this point, I feel that it would be beneficial to you if you were much closer to home."

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. "What are you saying?" I asked.

"I will be discharging you from this hospital next Friday, and will be placing you in the care of your usual oncologist and one of Coffs Harbour's therapists from the following Monday until the day your treatment and rehabilitation end, with the recommendation that you be treated as an outpatient." Dr. Rochester gave me a smile. "You're going home."

I was powerless to resist my next actions. I punched the air triumphantly and yelled out, "You little *ripper!*"

I was going home. I was going *home*, back to Sapphire Cove, back to my family and my own bed. Home...that word had never sounded so sweet.

"Are there any limits on my activities?" I asked, resuming my role as the dutiful patient.

Dr. Rochester leaned back in his seat and studied me. "I believe that the decision about that should be left entirely up to your usual doctor. However, my personal medical opinion is that you are more than strong enough to resume your usual activities. My only advisement is that you ease back into everything as gradually as possible. You have made fantastic progress in the six months you've been here, and I would hate to hear that you've undone it all. The only limit I am going to ask Dr. Beckett to impose is that you stay off the skates until you complete your rehabilitation."

I nodded my agreement – hell, I was going to agree to anything if it meant I could finally go back home. "Thank you, Dr. Rochester," I said as we shook hands across the desk.

"The pleasure is mine, as always."

Back in the ward, in my room, I scrounged around for my mobile phone and found it under my pillow. I scowled as I noted that the battery was running low – I'd need to recharge it soon. Scrolling through my phone directory, I located my mother's mobile number and dialled.

"Mum guess what?" I said as soon as my mother picked up.

"Good morning Taylor," Mum said, sounding greatly amused at my obvious enthusiasm.

"I'm going home!" I told her excitedly. "Dr. Rochester is discharging me next Friday."

"Oh Taylor, that's wonderful," Mum said. "Your father will be so happy to hear that."

"You do realise that this is far from over, don't you?" I asked. "I don't finish my treatment and rehab until May next year."

"Yes, I know." I heard what sounded like a muffled version of my favourite sister's voice, and I couldn't hide a smile. "Oh, Ebony wants to talk to you."

"Well, I want to talk to her too – put her on, will you?"

I could almost see my mother smiling. "Here she is," Mum said as she – I assumed – passed the phone handset to my sister.

"Hey Taylor," Ebony said.

"Hey Nee," I said almost nonchalantly.

"Okay, something's up," Ebony said. "Care to tell me what the hell is going on?"

"I get to go home next Friday," I informed her with a grin, though she couldn't see it.

The squeal that Ebony let out was nothing short of deafening. I yanked my phone away from my ear, wincing as the sound hit my eardrum. "Jesus Nee, way to deafen me," I grouched crossly as I rubbed my ear to get rid of the sting.

"Sorry. But you brought it on yourself, really – you *will* get me all excited. So what happens now?"

"Well, I get a weekend off to rest, and the Monday after I get home I have to go and see Dr. Beckett so she can get me started on my treatment as an outpatient. At least, that's what I hope will happen. If it does, I'll only have to be in the hospital for a few hours each month. And come May next year, barring anything particularly disastrous, it'll be all over. I'll never have to see the inside of a hospital ever again."

"Let's hope so."

We talked a little while longer, before I hung up and started digging around for my phone charger. The one and only thought on my mind was that next Friday couldn't get here quickly enough.

The twenty-second of July marked the day of my discharge from hospital. My excitement at finally being able to go home had ended up in me getting up at six o'clock – I hadn't been able to get back to sleep, and so I had passed the time by watching *Today* until it went off the air at nine. After that I'd changed into street clothes, had packed away everything I'd brought with me, taken down all the posters and lights, and had said goodbye to my fellow patients. Amy, Craig and I had exchanged addresses, with a promise to keep in touch. On the floor at the foot of my bed were a suitcase, my backpack, my guitar case, and a crate that held posters and Christmas lights. My crutches were propped up at the end of the bed.

At nine-thirty the door to my room opened, and I looked up to see Dr. Rochester standing in the doorway. I nodded for him to come in, and he stepped over the threshold, taking his stethoscope out of a pocket.

"I know you're sick of being poked and prodded, but I need to give you a quick once-over before I turn you loose," he explained. "Then you can go."

"Okay," I said with a small sigh, and proceeded to take my T-shirt off. From there Dr. Rochester checked my heartbeat and breathing, and closely inspected my PICC line.

"Everything seems to be fine here," he said as I pulled my T-shirt back on. "Now, you sit tight, and I'll go and find you a wheelchair."

"Thank you," I said gratefully. I didn't yet trust myself on crutches, and I couldn't yet walk unaided – a wheelchair was the only option I had.

Soon, I was being wheeled through the corridors of the hospital, followed by a small group of orderlies. I held my backpack on my knees, and the rest of my gear was being carried by the procession behind me. Angela and Danielle also accompanied me.

The morning light nearly blinded me as we emerged from the building. As my vision cleared, I saw my father's car parked bare metres away, and I couldn't help myself.

"Dad!" I yelled, and the driver's side window wound down. The minute he spotted me he was out of the car, and I was up on my feet with the help of Angela and Danielle. It had been so long since I'd seen my father – he was a lecturer at Southern Cross University, and often couldn't get away. "I missed you," I said as we embraced, my voice muffled by his shirt. "I missed everyone."

"We all missed you too," Dad said as I disengaged myself and sat shakily back down in the wheelchair. "Are you ready to go home?"

"You have no idea," I replied. "I just want to crawl in my bed and sleep."

Dad smiled at this. "Well, come on. We have a long drive ahead of us."

"Don't remind me." I took my crutches from one of the orderlies and slipped my arms into them, making sure I had a tight grip on the handles before levering myself upright. "I think I'm just going to sleep most of it."

As my gear was packed into Dad's car, Angela and Danielle said their goodbyes. "I don't want to see you again for a long time, Taylor Hanson," Angela said as she hugged me. "Go home and be with your family – you deserve it."

"I will."

"Make sure you keep us updated on how you're going," Danielle added as she got her hug. "Come back for a visit when you've made five years."

"I promise I will."

When all the goodbyes had been said, and all of my belongings had been packed away, I moved across to Dad's car, stopping short when I saw that the front passenger seat had been pushed right back. How the hell I was going to get myself into the car, I didn't know, not unless I had some help.

"Dad?" I asked. "I don't think I can get into your car..."

"Hold on a second," Dad called back. The boot was open, and he was rooting around in search of something. What I saw him holding when he closed the boot made me raise an eyebrow. It was a long wooden fruit crate, empty of course, with a pillow strapped to the base.

"What the hell is that?" I asked.

"Zac put this together on the weekend," Dad replied as he came around to the passenger side.

"He figured you might want something to prop your leg up on while we're driving home." He set the fruit crate on the floor in front of the passenger seat, open side down, and once I'd leaned my crutches against the passenger side door he helped me manoeuvre myself into the front seat. While he stowed my crutches in the backseat, I closed my door and buckled my seat belt.

The first hour or so that we were on the road, it was mostly quiet. I stared out of the passenger side window at the passing scenery, which mostly consisted of buildings, parked cars and the odd traffic light. Dad broke the quiet we had lapsed into as we left the city, heading north.

"Something on your mind?"

I shrugged. "Not really. I just want to get home." In the rear-view mirror I saw Dad raise an eyebrow, and I sighed quietly. "You know me too well. It's just...I know I made five years back in June, but I can't help but wonder if it's *really* gone. I've had it hanging over me for so long that I don't know anything else. I don't think I'd know what to do with myself."

"Well, you know what?"

"What?"

"Don't focus on it until you find out for sure. You need to focus on what's here and now – getting through your treatment and your rehabilitation. You have an appointment with Dr. Beckett on Monday, right?" When I nodded, Dad continued, "Ask her then if she would be willing to arrange for tests to be done, if only for your own peace of mind."

"I was planning on it anyway," I said, yawning. "I might see if I can get a few hours' sleep – can you wake me when we get to Sapphire Cove?" Dad nodded, and I settled down for a nap.

As it turned out, Dad didn't need to wake me. I ended up waking barely a minute before we crossed the bridge into town, and managed to focus just in time to see the familiar roadside sign bearing the words *Welcome to Sapphire Cove*. I could hear the waves crashing on the shore in the cove that the town had been named for, and I knew I was home.

Just before four-thirty, the car turned into Endicott Close and drove down the street I had lived on my entire life. I started keeping an eye out for number 18 through the windshield, craning my neck to try and see better. I'd never been so excited to get home in all my life.

"Easy does it," Dad warned. "We're almost there – I'm sure you don't want to go back to hospital yet."

"Yeah, well, almost's not good enough," I replied.

The voice of my youngest sister was the first thing I heard after the car came to a stop in the driveway; I stuck my head out of the open window and watched her hurtling down the driveway, her blonde pigtails bouncing off of her shoulders. "Tay!" she squealed.

"Whoa, slow down Zo; lemme open the door," I called to her. She slowed down considerably, and I popped the passenger side door open. Almost as soon as the door was open, she had jumped into my lap and was hugging me tightly.

"I missed you Tay," she said. "I missed you *this much*." She loosened her grip and spread her arms wide.

"Aw Zo, I missed you too." I tickled her left cheek with the end of one of her plaited pigtails, and she giggled. "Hop down so I can get out of the car, okay?" She jumped down off of my lap, and Dad came around to the passenger side with my crutches. Once I was out of the car and on my feet, the three of us headed up the driveway and up onto the front porch, leaving all of my gear

in the car. The front door opened before I'd even knocked once, and I couldn't help but grin when I saw Zac standing there in the foyer. "Hey mate," I said by way of a greeting, slipping my right arm out of its crutch so I could give him a quick brotherly hug. "It's good to see you."

"Tay!" Ebony yelled as she and Aidan came downstairs; she took the remaining stairs two at a time, Aidan following close behind, and bolted through to where I stood. "Oh my God, I missed you so much," she said as the three of us hugged.

"Ebony, you saw him yesterday," Aidan said.

"Well, looks like there's no separating the three of you now," Dad joked as he came up behind me.

"Definitely not," I agreed as Ebony and Aidan let go. "The Three Musketeers are back."

Mum chuckled as she and I embraced. "I never thought I'd hear that old nickname again. Welcome home, honey."

"Tay, you *have* to see your room," Ebony said, beckoning me toward the stairs.

I looked at Aidan. "Should I be worried?" I asked with a slight frown.

"Nah," he replied, shaking his head and smiling. "But I have a feeling that you'll be very surprised."

'Surprised' was probably the understatement of the year. When Aidan turned the doorknob and pushed the door of our room open, my mouth dropped open. Gone were the dark walls, the stars from the ceiling, the curtains at the window, the dark carpeting; in their place were light blue walls and wood flooring. Our old bunk beds had disappeared, replaced by two double beds; the beds had been placed end-to-head in the far left corner. A built-in wardrobe had replaced the old wooden wardrobe. In fact, the only parts of the room that I recognised were the bookshelves, our stereo cabinet, Aidan's computer and our desks – everything else was new.

"Damn..." I whispered. "When did you guys get all this done?"

"We started planning it just after Dr. Rochester said you'd be able to come home today," Ebony said; she'd come up behind me and put her arms around my shoulders from the back, resting her chin on my right shoulder. "Dad, Aidan, Zac and I got it all finished about two weeks ago." She pointed at the bed that was directly beneath the window; I recognised the quilt on it as my own. "That's your bed there."

"You guys did all this?" I asked; Aidan nodded.

"Yeah," he answered. "I mean, we're not kids anymore. I think we're a little bit too old for bunk beds, don't you?" He laughed. "So, do you like it?"

I nodded. "I love it."

"There's one more thing," Ebony said; she guided me further into the room. "Remember how Mum or Dad always had to pry you away from the computer downstairs, and how you were always pestering Aidan or I to be able to use ours?" she asked, and I nodded. "Well, you don't have to anymore."

"What-" Then I saw it – the computer that used to be downstairs in the living room now had its home on my desk. I finally had my own computer. "Jeez, it's about time..."

Aidan laughed. "Dad got a new computer from work, so we moved the old one in here," he explained. "It's not new, but it's a computer at least. And we left all the programs and shit on there, so all you need to do is clean it up, mess around with the settings, shit like that. I'll help you out with that if you want me to."

I made my way slowly over to my bed and sat down, looking up at Aidan and Ebony. "We're together again," I said softly. "The Three Musketeers are together again."

Chapter 12

Aidan

Over the next couple of months, life returned to some semblance of normality. Everyone was back under the same roof – during Taylor's time in hospital down in Sydney, Dad had stayed in Sapphire Cove with Zac, Jessica and Zoë. It had been a true test of our family – never before had we been split up for so long. That we had been able to slip right back into our usual roles and routines said a lot about us – that we were so familiar with one another that we could pick up right where we'd left off, but at the same time that we were so used to Taylor being sick most of the time that it was almost a matter of course.

And as the days went by, Taylor continued to steadily improve – he was still sick, but now that he was home it seemed to me that it wasn't affecting him so much. He couldn't yet walk unaided, but we all knew that would happen eventually. It was just a matter of time and making sure he kept up with his rehabilitation.

One day in the middle of September, I decided on the spur of the moment to go into Coffs Harbour with Taylor and Ebony. I had never been present at any of my brother's sessions – that was usually Ebony's domain, so to speak, but I felt it was about time I played a bigger role in my brother's recovery.

"Are you entirely sure you want to watch this?" Ebony asked as she parked her car in the hospital car park, near the outpatient entrance. "It can be a bit shocking."

"Ebony, not only am I a grown adult, but I also watch horror movies for kicks," I reminded my sister. "I don't shock easily."

"Yeah, well, I used to say that too," Ebony replied as she hauled herself out of the driver's seat.

"But that was before I went to Taylor's very first session. Scared the hell outta me."

"It's nice to know that seeing me in pain *scares* you so much," Taylor said dryly. Ebony and I were both out of the car by this time, and Ebony had ducked around to the passenger side so she could help Taylor get out of the backseat. He'd tossed his crutches and his messenger bag out onto the asphalt before he'd even attempted to shift himself from his seat. "If it freaks you out so much, why d'you keep coming?"

"I'm a sadist," Ebony replied so seriously I wasn't entirely sure if she was joking or not. "And we all know why sadists like seeing others in pain."

The look that appeared on Taylor's face right as Ebony spoke made me let out a snort of laughter. It was pure revulsion, something not often seen in terms of the facial expressions Taylor tended to exhibit.

"Tay, relax, I'm kidding," Ebony said, laughter bubbling up in her voice, as Taylor slung the strap of his bag around his neck and settled it on his right shoulder, slipped his arms into his crutches and curled his fingers around the handgrips. "I don't get off seeing you in pain. You're my brother, which would make it incest. And incest is gross as hell."

"No *shit*, Sherlock." With those words, Taylor began ambling his way toward the outpatient entrance of the hospital. "Come on. I'm gonna be late, and Nicki likes it when I'm on time."

"Who's Nicki?" I asked as Ebony and I followed our brother.

"His physiotherapist," Ebony replied. "She's very nice, but she's very strict and a real slavedriver. She really pushes Taylor to his limits – it means he's in a lot more pain after his sessions than he was back in Sydney, but it's working. You see how fast he's moving?"

I could definitely see how fast Taylor could move on his crutches. He had only been in rehabilitation for three-and-a-half months, since the end of May, but the progress he had made was impressive to say the least. I could bet that if he hadn't been pushed so hard since he had begun his rehab, he would still be in a wheelchair right now.

Ebony and I followed Taylor through the labyrinthine corridors until we reached the rehabilitation wing of the hospital. Here, Taylor stopped for a short break, leaning hard on his crutches as he took in one deep breath after the other.

"Maybe we should've got you a wheelchair," Ebony said unsurely.

Taylor shook his head almost violently. "No," he said when he had finally caught his breath. "I need the practice. I'm not going to get walking again if I don't keep moving."

That was true. It was obvious that Taylor subscribed to the school of thought that said that you either used what you had or you lost it entirely – evidently, Taylor chose to use what he had.

Our eventual destination, once Taylor was ready to keep going, was a room at the very end of a very long corridor. Here, Taylor knocked three times on a door that had a frosted glass window with *Therapy And Rehabilitation* in black block letters on it set into the wood. It swung open to reveal a tall woman wearing cargo pants, joggers and a bright yellow polo shirt – she had curly black hair pulled back in a ponytail and hazel eyes. This, I assumed, was Nicki.

"So nice of you to join us at last," Nicki said dryly as she stepped aside to allow Taylor to move through the doorway. "Ebony," she said to my sister in greeting, to which Ebony inclined her head in reply. "And you are?" was thrown at me as I made to follow my brother and sister.

"Aidan – I'm Ebony and Taylor's older brother," I replied.

"So *you're* the elusive brother then," Nicki said. She moved aside, and I stepped through the doorway after my triplets. "I ought to tell you, then, that if you're going to be here, you need to keep out of the way, shut your mouth and at least make an attempt at not interfering."

I nodded. "I can do that," I agreed.

The room I followed Nicki, my brother and my sister into was devoid of anything that could be used as therapy equipment. Dark blue gymnastics mats ringed the floor, and running along three

of the walls were long benches. The fourth wall, directly opposite the door, was a large window that had a view of the hospital grounds. Ebony headed to the benches as soon as she entered, leading me to assume that Nicki had told her the same thing as she'd told me, so I followed her.

"I see what you mean about Nicki," I said to Ebony as Nicki had our brother work through a series of stretches. "She *is* strict. I don't envy Taylor at all, having to put up with her."

"I don't either," Ebony replied. "He doesn't have to put up with her every session, though – he's got another therapist that he does hydrotherapy with three times a week."

As soon as Ebony said 'hydrotherapy', I blinked. "Wait, you mean someone actually managed to get him *in* the water? I thought he was scared shitless of it."

"Apparently he likes the idea of being able to walk properly more than his water phobia," Ebony replied. "So he got over it pretty quick. He didn't really have much of a choice."

Taylor's water phobia had started when the three of us were almost thirteen, during our first year of high school. He'd almost drowned during our high school's annual swimming carnival, and ever since that day he had been terrified of water unless it was the shower or the bathtub at home. Evidently, though, he was so committed to getting back on his feet once more that being in or around water didn't bother him in the slightest anymore.

"I think you're ready to come off the crutches," Nicki said once Taylor had finished his stretches. Taylor started to protest, but Nicki held up a hand to silence him. "You're ready. I've seen you move when you're on your crutches – you're nearly as fast as someone who is able to walk unaided. Any faster, and you'd probably trip over yourself." She turned to look at Ebony and I. "Ebony, would you come here and spot your brother, please?"

"What do you need me to do?" Ebony asked as she came up to where Nicki and Taylor sat, on a mat near the doorway.

"I need you to get your brother to his feet, and I want you to walk alongside him, at his pace, and catch him if he falls or even comes close to it. Keep a hand on his shoulder or his back if you think that will help him." To Taylor, Nicki said, "You have ten minutes. Up on your feet, off the mats, and walk across the floor and back as many times as you can within those ten minutes. Ebony will spot you."

As much as I expected him to, Taylor didn't say one word in protest. Instead he got to his feet somewhat unsteadily, and Ebony helped him to move off of the mats and onto the bare floor.

"On three?" Ebony said, and Taylor nodded once. "All right. One, two, three." As soon as Ebony said 'three', the two of them moved off across the floor. Not surprisingly, even with Ebony's hand resting against his back, Taylor moved unsurely – without the benefit of his crutches keeping him upright, there was a good chance that he could fall at any given moment. He walked as if he were blind, though he used his feet rather than his hands to find his way.

When the ten minutes were up, Taylor sat himself back down on the mats. He was clearly exhausted – he was breathing hard, face bright red, hands trembling. But he had done it – he'd walked with only Ebony's hand guiding him. For the first time in almost four months, he had walked almost unaided.

Nicki gave him a full twenty minutes to collect himself, before gesturing for him to get back up. "Now I want you to walk without Ebony guiding you," Nicki said as my brother straightened up, Ebony close by his side once more. "She will spot you, but she will not touch you." Taylor nodded and made to begin his set task, but Nicki shook her head. "You have twenty minutes to walk across the floor and back. If you stumble or trip, get back up and keep going. Once the twenty minutes are up, you can go."

Knowing he could go once Nicki had timed twenty minutes seemed to fire Taylor up more than anything had in a while, and he set off across the floor a little faster than before, though not as fast as he used to be. That would come with time and practice, I figured.

When Nicki's watch beeped, signifying that twenty minutes had passed, Taylor quite literally collapsed on the floor, landing on his back, and his eyes fell closed. He didn't move for close on five minutes. I only knew he was even conscious because I could hear him breathing harshly and raggedly and see his left hand moving on the floor, fingers scratching at the rough carpet. But that was all that was moving.

Nicki had told me to stay out of the way and shut up, but I decided to risk her wrath – I was too worried not to. I got up out of my seat and headed across to where my brother lay, kneeling down beside him. "You okay mate?" I asked quietly.

He didn't respond for about a minute. Finally, his eyes opened, and he looked up at me. "I can barely move," he whispered.

"Ebony, go find a wheelchair," I said as I helped Taylor to sit up. He leaned against me and closed his eyes again.

"Is he okay?" Ebony asked worriedly.

"Yeah, I think he's just tired," I answered. "Hey," I said quietly, poking Taylor gently, and he opened his eyes. "You want to go see Dr. Beckett, just in case?"

"No, I just want to sleep. I could do with some painkillers too."

I looked up at Ebony, and we exchanged a glance. "You're going to see Dr. Beckett," Ebony said decisively. "Let me go find you a wheelchair, and we'll go see her."

Taylor let out what sounded like a tired laugh. "Yeah, whatever. You never listen to me anyway."

"Okay," I said unsurely. "Whatever you say." Taylor nodded his head and closed his eyes again.

Once Ebony had returned with a wheelchair, and we'd got Taylor settled into it, I called Mum on my mobile. "Mum, we're going to be a bit late getting home," I told her once she'd answered. "We're taking Tay to see his doctor before we head out."

"Is something wrong?" Mum asked, sounding slightly panicked.

"I don't think so, but we want to make sure anyway. He's pretty exhausted. His physiotherapist decided he could come off the crutches today and made him walk across the room about twenty times."

"No wonder he's tired." I could almost see Mum smile at this. "All right. Ring me again when you're about ready to come home."

"Okay," I agreed. "See you soon."

About fifteen minutes later, Taylor had been to see his doctor, who diagnosed nothing more than exhaustion and prescribed strict bed rest for the next week, and we headed back home.

"Soon as we get home, you're going straight to bed," Ebony said as I drove out into the street. "Mum will kill you if you don't."

"I'm not even that tired," Taylor protested. "Right, Aidan?"

"Oh no, don't you bring me into this," I replied as I switched on the right blinker. "You heard what your doctor said. You really need to rest – you'll undo all your hard work if you don't. You've practically been running yourself ragged the past couple of weeks. I'm sure Nicki won't mind you taking a few days off."

"She better not," Taylor grumbled. I glanced at the rear view mirror just in time to see him close his eyes and start dozing.

* * *

A week later, Taylor was allowed to resume his physiotherapy. I decided to refrain from accompanying my brother and sister to the hospital in future, so the two of them went without me – I could see now what Ebony had meant by 'shocking'. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen my brother looking so exhausted.

I couldn't deny that he was making great progress, though. Every day he got a little steadier on his feet, and every day he could walk further without any sort of aid. And at the end of September, after Taylor's final session for the month, we all got the surprise of our lives.

"Mum! Dad!" I heard Ebony call out that afternoon. She and Taylor had been due back home at any minute now, so hearing Ebony yelling wasn't all that surprising. What was surprising was the excitement in her voice. I decided that this was something I needed to see, and I headed downstairs.

Standing in the foyer were Ebony and Taylor. That in itself wasn't entirely shocking. Seeing Taylor without his crutches, however, was the surprise. Instead, he was leaning on a wooden cane, a tired grin on his face.

"Nicki said I'll probably be walking on my own by Christmas," he said once he'd settled himself on the lounge in front of the TV.

"Are you sure that's safe?" Mum asked. "Didn't Dr. Rochester tell you it'd be a year before you would be anywhere close to that point?"

"Yeah, well, evidently he's never met Nicki Bourke," Taylor replied. "A slavedriver she may be, but she's got me walking again. Even Daniel would never have been able to get me this far. I have to give her that much."

"True," Mum conceded. "And what about your chemotherapy?"

"Dr. Beckett's still looking at May next year, but she's keeping a close eye on my progress. Hopefully she'll change her mind and decide I can come off the chemo in time for my birthday. Now *that* would be wonderful." He shrugged. "Depends on how quickly I make remission."

"Well, if you look after yourself, and actually get some sleep when you need it, then it may just happen sooner than you think." Mum gave him a quick hug. "Go on, upstairs with you. I'll wake you when it's time for dinner."

"Best idea I've heard all day," was the last thing Taylor said as he headed upstairs.

Chapter 13

Ebony

October rolled around not long after Taylor came off the crutches. With its arrival came some of the best news we'd received in many years. The first piece of good news for the year had come in July, a month after Taylor had reached his five-year point – because he hadn't had a recurrence of the cancer that had almost killed him and nearly destroyed our family in the five years since he'd made remission, he was considered to be cured. That news had been cause for celebration, and had resulted in the party to end all parties – because our family was so large, usually the only times our entire family got together to celebrate were engagements, weddings, christenings, graduations and wakes, but this was of course an exception. The party in question had raged on long into the night, and had only ended when Dad realised that the guest of honour, being Taylor, had fallen asleep at the kitchen table.

It was at the very beginning of the month that the first light of hope broke through the darkness. And like anything to do with Taylor these days, I was the first to hear it.

"You have been making remarkable progress," Nicki said at the end of October's first session. Nicki spoke the truth – most of Taylor's sessions with her nowadays, after his stretches, consisted of being timed as he walked back and forth across the floor of the therapy room. Each day he got just a little bit stronger, and during today's session he had walked at what could be considered a normal pace, limping only slightly, and had managed forty crossings of the floor before Nicki had finished timing. It was as good as he was ever going to get. "So much progress, in fact, that I don't believe any further sessions with me would be of any benefit to you."

"So you're saying that I'm done?" Taylor asked, at which Nicki nodded.

"I believe that Warren wants you to keep up your sessions with him, but you no longer have to be subjected to my tender mercies. I only ask that you don't push yourself too hard. You may resume

your street hockey if you so please, but take it slowly at first. It's important that you don't overdo it. You are still unwell, and your doctor would likely kill me if she found out that you had decided to push yourself straight away."

"No worries there," Taylor replied. "I'd rather stay in your good books and in hers as long as I can." He grinned, something that he didn't do nearly often enough.

"Good." And for the first time ever, Nicki smiled back. "Go on, get out of here."

Taylor snapped off a mock salute before getting to his feet. Once he'd taken a moment or two to steady himself, he and I set off into the corridor.

"I want to go to the high school before we go home," Taylor said decisively as we headed out of the rehabilitation wing of the hospital.

"What for?" I asked. "You didn't bring your skates with you, so there's no point."

"I want to see my friends," Taylor replied with a shrug. "I haven't seen them in months. And considering that it's Saturday, I'm not going to find them anywhere else."

"Good point," I conceded.

So instead of going straight home, we took a detour to our old high school. And sure enough, skating hell-for-leather around the outdoor basketball court, were Taylor's friends. Every so often, one of them would stop skating and look in our direction, as if they were looking for someone, before setting off again.

"Aren't you going to get out?" I asked, to which Taylor shook his head.

"Not yet. They'll be stopping for a score check soon – I'll get out then."

I shrugged. "If you say so."

Sure enough, about five minutes after we'd arrived, the skaters on the court gathered in the middle, huddled in a small group. As soon as they did, Taylor popped open the passenger door and eased himself out of his seat.

"You ready for this?" I asked, and he nodded. Without a word, he headed across the car park and over to the basketball court, leaning up against the nearest goalpost with his arms crossed over his chest. It wasn't long before someone noticed his presence.

"*Taylor?*" a girl with dark brown hair asked incredulously; I half-recognised her as Taylor's friend Kate.

"Nice to see you too, Kate," Taylor said dryly but pointedly. And of course, as soon as Kate recognised my brother, the rest of them did. Hockey sticks clattered onto the asphalt of the court, and soon all of Taylor's friends had clustered around him. Rather than immerse myself in the little scene that was unfolding in front of me, I hopped up on the bonnet of my car and watched.

"How've you been?" the only other girl of the group – Rachel, I thought her name was – asked. "We haven't seen you in ages."

"All things considered, pretty good," Taylor replied. "I finished my physiotherapy today, but I still have to do hydrotherapy three times a week. And I'm still on the chemotherapy, I just don't have to be stuck in hospital for it."

"When did you come home?" one of the boys asked.

"Near the end of July. I'd have come to see you guys a lot sooner, but my physiotherapist liked keeping me so busy that I was too tired to do much else."

"Yeah, all right, you've got an excuse," another of the boys said. "You could have emailed us, though."

Taylor shrugged at this. "When I say 'too tired', I mean it. Usually I'd go to bed as soon as I got home and sleep until my mum woke me for dinner. And even then I was usually still half-asleep."

"We forgive you," Kate said loudly, overriding the growing protests of the others. "Just promise us something."

"Anything."

"Don't be a stranger anymore."

Taylor chuckled. "I won't be. I'll even bring my skates next time."

"You mean you didn't bring them with you?" Rachel asked, sounding very surprised. "I think hell just froze over..."

"Yeah, well, I've had much more important things to worry about than my skates the last few months," Taylor replied with a shrug. "I only just got the all-clear to start playing again today. I just have to take it slowly – both my physio and my doctor will string me up if I overdo it."

"D'you think you can hang around for a little while?" another of the boys asked. "It's just that without you around to make up a group of seven, we haven't been really able to play a decent game – we don't have a goalkeeper, so all we've been doing is shooting goals. Kieran's brother did keep for us for a little while, but he didn't really know what he was doing. Plus Mark accidentally hit the ball into his face and broke his glasses, so after that he refused to have anything more to do with us."

"I don't know..." He looked back at me, and I shrugged. "Yeah, all right. Just be careful not to hit the ball at my left leg."

While Taylor and his friends got themselves ready to play hockey, I got my phone out of the car and rang Mum.

"We're going to be a bit late getting home," I said once my mother had answered. "Taylor decided he wanted to make a detour to the high school so he could see his friends."

"He's not *playing*, is he?" Mum asked. She sounded very suspicious. I knew that saying the wrong thing here could make my mother very angry with Taylor, to the point of grounding him, so I decided to err on the side of caution.

"No, just watching," I lied. "Believe me, Mum, he doesn't want you coming down on him. He's being careful."

"All right then. Let me know when you're on your way home."

"I will," I promised.

The game lasted for just over twenty minutes. At the end of it, Taylor bade farewell to his friends and came back over to the car. He looked much happier than he had been lately, which I attributed to being able to see his friends for the first time in months. Well, that, and having finished his physiotherapy at last.

"If Mum asks, we went for a walk along the beach," Taylor said as he buckled his seatbelt.

"Works for me," I agreed as I turned the key in the ignition and shifted the gearstick into reverse.

We arrived home about five minutes later. As soon as I had cut the engine, Taylor was out of the passenger seat, and had taken his backpack and cane from the backseat. When I raised an eyebrow at him, he grinned. "I want to give everyone the shock of their lives," he explained. "They won't know what's hit them until it does."

"I see..." I mirrored his grin, before leading the way inside. "We're home!" I called out as I stepped into the foyer, hanging my shoulder bag up on its hook where it belonged.

"In the kitchen!" Mum called back. Taylor and I exchanged one last glance before heading in that direction. Our mother was sitting at the kitchen table, reading the newspaper, and she looked up as the two of us entered. "How did things go at physio?" she asked.

As if in response, Taylor dropped his cane on the floor and walked over to the kitchen table. "I'm done with physio," he replied. "I still have to keep up with the hydrotherapy, but Nicki doesn't get to torture me anymore." Here he smirked. "Sucks to be her."

"That's not very nice," Mum admonished. "What did you do after that?"

"Hung out with my friends and watched them play hockey for a bit, then we went for a walk along the beach."

"Well, as long as you didn't overdo it," Mum said warningly, and Taylor shook his head. "Good. You're looking much happier, too."

"I won't be *really* happy until I'm off the chemo, but I'll take what I can get."

Mum smiled and closed the newspaper. "Well, seeing as you're back on your feet now, you can help me out with dinner. You too, Ebony."

"If we have to," Taylor said, sounding very put-upon.

"You do. Now come help me decide what to cook."

* * *

The second piece of good news for the month came nearly a week before Halloween. That morning, Mum had taken Taylor into Coffs Harbour so he could see his doctor. It was now late afternoon, and neither of them had come home. To me, that meant one of two things – he'd been given bad news, and Mum had taken him off so that he could try to get his head around it, or he'd received great news and they were just taking their time coming home. Knowing my brother's somewhat unfortunate track record, it would be the former.

A knock came at my bedroom door at about a quarter to four. "Yeah, come in," I said without looking away from my computer. I was in the middle of a particularly heated deathmatch in *Unreal Tournament 2004*, and could not afford to shift my attention elsewhere lest I be picked off by enemy forces.

I had just fired upon a particularly aggressive member of the opposition when a hand dangled a plain white envelope in my face. The envelope had a name, a date and two words printed on it: *Hanson, Taylor – 25 October 2005 – Test Results*. Deciding that my game could wait, I hit the pause button on my keyboard and swivelled my chair around. Standing in the middle of my bedroom was Taylor, and he was looking particularly sombre. This did not bode well.

"So how did things go?" I asked. "Not too well by the look on your face."

Instead of speaking, he handed the envelope to me, and I flipped it over. It had already been unsealed once, making it easier for me to open it up. I ran a finger under the seal, lifted the flap, and pulled out a single, folded up sheet of A4 printer paper. Once I'd unfolded it, I scanned the words that had been typed on the page.

Patient name: HANSON, Jordan Taylor

Diagnosis: Stage IA Osteosarcoma

Date of diagnosis: January 17 2005

Date of test: October 21 2005

Test result: Remission achieved

I stared at those final two words for what seemed an eternity. *Remission achieved...* And then I looked up at Taylor again.

He had the biggest shit-eating grin on his face.

"You knew about this," I said mock-accusingly. "You *knew*, and you had me thinking something horrible had happened to you!"

"I like to keep you on your toes," he replied simply. "Makes life interesting."

"Interesting my arse," I retorted. "So it's over?"

"I'm done with my chemotherapy, if that's what you mean."

"Yes, that's what I mean. I know it won't *really* be over for another five years. I've been dealing with your shit long enough to know that."

He smiled slightly at that, before heading for the door. "Come on. Mum said to bring you downstairs when I'd talked to you."

I followed Taylor downstairs into the kitchen. Mum was at the stove, stirring something in her large soup pot, a bunch of spice canisters scattered on the cooktop around one of the unused hotplates. She looked back over her shoulder and gave us a smile as we seated ourselves at the kitchen bench.

"You've told her, then?" Mum asked, directing her question to Taylor.

"Yep. Had her going for a while, but I told her."

"Good." Mum gave the contents of the soup pot a final stir and put the wooden spoon she was using down on another of the unused hotplates. "Taylor and I have mutually decided to wait until after dinner before we let everyone else find out the good news – I don't want anyone to be distracted."

I heard the front door open and close, and the voices of two of my younger siblings came floating into the kitchen. As the sound of footsteps grew louder, so did their voices. They were arguing about something.

"*Survivor* is so not better than *Big Brother*," Jessica said matter-of-factly.

"What would *you* know?" Zac asked, scorn clearly audible in his voice. "You're in Year 8 for crying out loud."

"And what does *that* have to do with anything?" Jessica retorted. "Because I'm fourteen, I'm not as smart as you? That's bullshit."

"No, it means that you don't know as much." Zac now sounded very condescending. "*Big Brother* is as boring as hell – who wants to watch a bunch of people stuck in a house for three months? It's nothing more than voyeurism."

"Voy-*what*? What the hell is that?" They had come into the kitchen by this time, and hadn't noticed Mum, Taylor or I yet. "Did you eat the dictionary for breakfast this morning or some crazy shit like that?"

"Jessica *Grace*!" Mum scolded. "You are fourteen years old – you shouldn't be using language like that. I don't know where you picked it up from, but you are to stop using it right this instant. You aren't too old to be put over my knee."

"Ayd, Nee and Tay are nineteen and *they* swear."

"They are *adults*, Jessica," Mum said as she began stirring the contents of the pot again. "The three of them are grown adults and are allowed to speak in whatever manner that they choose to. Your father and I might not like it, and we can ask that they not speak that way around us or their younger siblings, but we cannot stop them from speaking that way entirely. You, on the other hand, *can* be stopped from speaking that way. If you speak that way again, I won't hesitate to make you face the consequences of your actions."

"And anyway Jess," I said, deciding it was time for me to explain to Jessica just what voyeurism was, seeing as Zac wasn't prepared to explain anytime soon, "voyeurism is getting a kick out of sneakily watching something. More or less, anyway." I shrugged. "Some people get off on it for some weird reason."

"Oh, okay. Thanks." She started searching in the kitchen cupboards for something to eat.

"Jess, aren't you going to say hello to your brother?" Mum said. "Or your sister, for that matter?"

"I already said hello to him," Jessica said, not looking away from rooting around in the cupboard next to the fridge. Eventually she found an open box of chocolate-flavoured Tiny Teddy biscuits and pulled it out into the open.

"Not Zac, your other brother." Mum nodded toward Taylor.

"Oops." Jessica looked over at Taylor and I, and she smiled sheepishly. "Hi Tay. Hi Nee."

"How was school?" I asked her as she opened the packet.

She shrugged. "French class sucked," she said, before popping a Tiny Teddy into her mouth. She held the box out to Taylor and I. "Want some?"

"Well, since you're offering..." I shoved my right hand into the box and grabbed a handful, Taylor quickly following suit.

"Don't eat too many of those; you won't have any room for dinner," Mum reminded us. "Zac, can you go and pick your sister up from preschool please?"

"Yeah, okay." Zac fished around in Mum's handbag, which was sitting on the end of the bench, for the keys to the Toyota and headed out to the front door.

Dinner turned out to be spaghetti and meatballs, which I knew to be one of Taylor's favourite meals. All through the meal, the two of us kept exchanging glances of amusement – knowing that the two of us, along with our mother (though I supposed she had to have told Dad just before dinner), knew something that the rest of our brothers and sisters didn't. It amused the hell out of me, and I was hard pressed to keep from laughing or even smiling.

"All right everyone, lounge room," Dad directed as we finished eating. "Your mother and I have something that we need to talk to you guys about."

"Uh-oh," Jessica said immediately, just as Zac said, "I didn't do it." Laughter reverberated around the dining room at this, and this time I didn't bother to hide my smile. It had been too long since we'd had something to laugh at.

It didn't take us long to assemble in the lounge room, leaving the dishes on the table to be cleared away later. Zoë had found her way onto Taylor's lap, while Aidan and I sat on either side of him on the lounge. Zac and Jessica seated themselves on the floor. Taylor very absently played with Zoë's pigtails as Mum and Dad spoke. Dad took his turn first, confirming my suspicions that Mum had talked to him about it all.

"You all know that Taylor has been sick for a little while now," he began, "and that he was in the hospital for a few months." Aidan, Zac and Jessica nodded at this. "He went to see his doctor today, and she gave him some good news."

"Is he all better now?" Jessica asked.

"Almost," Mum replied. "Do you remember the party we had in July?"

"Yeah."

"That was because he had been in remission for five years. When you've been in remission from cancer for five years, then you're completely well."

"But he was still sick then."

"I was sick with a different kind of cancer, Jess," Taylor explained. "I hadn't gotten sick again from the one I did have, and so I'm cured of it. If I can make it another five years in remission from this one, *then* I'll be all better. I still have to be careful and keep seeing my doctor to make sure it hasn't come back."

"But you're better?"

"For now, I am."

Jessica nodded, seeming to be happy with this. "Good. That's what I wanted to know."

"If only everyone could be as satisfied as you," Mum said dryly. "Come on then. You can help me stack the dishwasher."

Pretty soon, only we triplets were left in the lounge room. Silence reigned for just a few minutes.

"I can't believe it," Taylor said. He let out a shaky laugh. "No more chemo, no more physio...it's over. It's all over." He looked first at Aidan, then at me. "I don't think I could have done it without you two. Just...thank you."

"Hey, what are brothers and sisters for?" Aidan asked. "Of course we were going to be there for you. There was no way we were going to let you go through all that shit on your own."

"We aren't that cruel," I said, deciding to take up Aidan's thread. "And besides, we love you too much for that. We'd have taken on the whole burden for you if we could, just to make things easier for you."

"You made things easier just by being there," Taylor said completely sincerely. "You've got no idea how grateful I am for that."

"It was the least we could do," Aidan replied. "We're the Three Musketeers, right? Remember our little promise to each other?"

"No matter what, we're all in it together," Taylor recited, before getting up off the lounge and seating himself on the coffee table, facing us. "You know how they say you can choose your friends, but not your family?"

"Yeah," Aidan and I said together. I for one was wondering where this was going.

"I would have chosen you two to be my family any old day. You're the best brother and sister I could ever have hoped for. And I say that completely sincerely."

I was left speechless – Taylor had never said anything like this before. Aidan managed to articulate my thoughts better than I could have right at that moment, and far more succinctly than he usually did.

"We would have chosen you too, Tay," he told our brother. "We'd have chosen you in a heartbeat."

Chapter 14

Taylor

The sense of elation I felt at making remission lasted well into the first half of November. I felt better than I had in months, and had even started playing hockey on a regular basis once again. I was always careful to take it easy – I rather liked being in my mother's and my doctor's good books, not to mention that I didn't want to land myself back in hospital on a more or less permanent basis.

Long after I was sure everyone else had gone to bed, I sneaked downstairs to the kitchen. My mother was in the habit of keeping an eagle eye on the contents of the refrigerator and the pantry, so a kitchen raid was right out of the question. So instead of trying to sneak some food back upstairs, I opened the refrigerator and took the ever-present bottle of orange juice from the shelf on the back of the fridge door. Once I'd found a clean glass and had filled it, I returned the bottle to the refrigerator and closed it quietly.

The overhead lights went on above my head just as I went to pick my glass up off the bench. I was so startled that I spun around, for one reason or another favouring my left foot, and accidentally knocked the full glass onto the floor. It shattered on impact, sending razor-sharp shards of glass skittering across the slate tiles, and the contents spread themselves in a puddle very close to my bare feet. I instinctively hopped out of the way and right into the arms of my mother.

"Whoa, easy does it," Mum warned.

"You scared the shit outta me!" I whispered loudly.

"Well, you *will* leave the lights off," Mum said dryly as I steadied myself. "What are you doing down here?"

"I was thirsty," I replied. "And I wasn't exactly in the mood for water. So I came down to get myself a drink – or at least I was, until you switched the light on and freaked me out."

Mum, rather wisely I thought, said nothing. Instead, she pointed to the laundry door. "Grab the mop and clean that up," she told me. "And watch your feet. I want to talk to you when you're done."

I did as I was told, picking the glass shards up and wrapping them in newspaper once I'd mopped up the spill. The bundle was dropped into the recycling bin before I joined my mother at the table.

"Now, why don't you tell me why you were *really* down here?" Mum asked. She eyed me, the look in her eyes just *daring* me to lie to her.

I let out a quiet sigh and focused on the painting that was hung on the opposite wall. "I had a nightmare," I admitted. "I dreamed that I died, and...it just felt so damn *real*. I really felt like I was dying."

"In case you weren't aware, dreams and nightmares aren't real," Mum reminded me, mischief in her tone.

"I know that. It just felt that way." I looked down at my hands, focusing on the middle finger of my right hand. There was a bandaid around the middle of that finger, between the first and second knuckles; I had accidentally nicked it with a sharp knife while helping Mum cook dinner a few evenings before.

"Are you all right?" Mum asked.

I shook my head, deciding not to lie. "Not really." I started tracing a pattern on the tabletop. "I never thought I'd still be alive," I admitted. "After all the shit I've been through, I honestly thought my time would be up by now."

"You're a fighter," Mum replied. "You always have been, ever since you were born. For you not to fight against any obstacles in your path, whether they be physical or psychological, is near inconceivable. I don't think your heart or your mind would allow it, not unless there was a very good reason not to." She reached across the table and covered my left hand with her right. "You

aren't as strong in the physical sense as Aidan or Ebony, but what's in here more than makes up for it." With those words she lifted my left hand and placed it on my chest, where it rested over my heart. "You are an amazing person, and for that alone I am proud to call you my son."

"You have to say that because you're my mother," I said as I returned my hand to the table.

"That's where you're wrong. I don't *have* to, but I do say it because it is the truth. Stephanie is a very lucky young woman to have you in her life."

I smiled slightly at this. "Mum, what would you think if I said I wanted to ask Stephanie to marry me one day?" I asked. "I'm not saying that I'm going to ask her anytime soon, because I don't think I'm ready yet, but it'll happen someday."

Mum seemed to study me for a little while, and soon I felt as if I were an insect beneath a magnifying glass. "To be honest," she said at last, "you never really seemed the type."

I snorted. "Oh, that's nice."

"If you'll let me finish?" Mum said sharply, and I shut up. "You never really seemed the type, *but* that was before you and Stephanie started going out. The way I see it, if you believe it will make you truly happy, then that's all the reason I need."

"I think it will." I was quiet for a little while. "I'm pretty sure I want to spend the rest of my life with her. But like I said, I'm not quite ready yet."

"Trust me Taylor, when the time is right, you will know." She gave me a smile and stood up. "Now, back to bed, all right? You may not be sick anymore, but you still need your sleep."

I opened my mouth to protest, only to have a yawn escape. "I think I agree with you," I said, and got up.

As I entered the upstairs hallway, I could very faintly hear the sound of someone crying. It sounded like it came from the very end of the hallway. That ruled out either of my brothers, and my parents

– Zac’s bedroom was right next to the room Aidan and I shared, and Mum and Dad’s room was directly opposite Zac’s, next to the upstairs bathroom. The rooms belonging to my sisters formed a U-shape at the very end of the hallway – Ebony’s was right at the end, Zoë’s was next door to Zac’s, and Jessica’s room was between Ebony’s and the upstairs bathroom – so I knew it had to be either of them.

The question of who exactly was crying was answered as I drew level with Zoë’s bedroom door. I immediately recognised my baby sister’s cries, and I knew she’d had a nightmare. Seeing as Ebony slept so deeply that hardly anything could wake her, I knew she wasn’t getting up anytime soon, so it looked as if the task of comforting my sister fell to me.

Sure enough, Zoë was sitting up in bed, crying. Tears were streaming down her cheeks in rivers, letting me know immediately that something had really scared her. “Zo, what’s the matter?” I asked as I closed her bedroom door behind me and turned on the ceiling light. “Did you have a bad dream?”

She nodded, so I sat down on her bed, and she crawled into my lap and buried her face in my shoulder. “Aw Zo, it’s okay...shh...” I rubbed her back gently as she cried. “Whatever it was, it’s not real, okay? It’s not gonna hurt you. I promise.”

It wasn’t long before she stopped crying. “There we go,” I said as she unburied her face, and I smiled as I wiped a few stray tears away. “You okay now?”

She nodded. “Tay?” she asked

“Yeah?”

“Are you all better now?”

I smiled and tucked her hair behind her ears. “I’m *getting* better,” I said. “I won’t be all better for a very long time, not until you’re a lot older. But I will get better.”

"Am I gonna get sick too?"

"No, you won't get sick," I assured her. "I got sick because..." I trailed off. How was I going to explain this to a four-year-old? "It's just something that happens to some people, Zo. I got very unlucky. The main thing is that I'm getting better."

She smiled a little. "I'm glad you're getting better," she said.

"Me too, Zo." I kissed the top of her head. "Come on, back to bed. Okay?"

She nodded and got back under her quilt. "I love you Tay," she said.

"I love you too Zoë."

As I left my sister's room, switching the light off and closing the door behind me, I heard a very sleepy voice call out. "Tay?" the voice asked, and I looked over my shoulder to see Ebony standing in her bedroom doorway, squinting through the semi-darkness. "What're you doing?"

"Zoë had a bad dream," I explained, turning to face my sister.

"Oh okay." She yawned, covering her mouth with the back of her right hand. "How come we never stay up late together and just talk anymore?" she asked quietly. "It feels like it's been forever since we did that."

"Well, I'm just down the hallway if you ever want to talk."

"I know that, Tay."

I turned to go back to my room, but thought better of it. Instead I said, "We can do that now, if you like."

"You don't mind?"

I eyed my sister. "Of course I don't mind."

I followed Ebony to her room, settling down on her bed after she'd closed the door behind us. "So what are you thinking about?" I asked as we settled ourselves.

"Nothing in particular," Ebony replied. She let out a contented sigh and leaned her head on my shoulder. "I missed this."

I knew what she meant. While we were still in high school, Ebony and I would often spend hours on end in her room, just content to be in one another's company. I had been teased often for it, but it was true – Ebony, my sister, was also my best friend. We just clicked on a level that I didn't click on with Aidan. I'd lost count of the number of nights that we'd stayed awake until sunrise, just talking about anything and everything or watching horrendously bad late night television. Sometimes neither of us really wanted to talk, particularly in winter – on those nights, we'd curl up under Ebony's thick feather quilt and just lie there in each other's arms, listening to each other breathe or to each other's heartbeats, falling asleep with the TV and ceiling light still on. We knew one another inside out, how to push the other's buttons, and what made us both tick. I really couldn't imagine my life without her in it.

"So what happens now?" Ebony asked after what felt like an eternity of silence.

"I really don't know. To be honest, I'd rather just take things as they come. Besides which, it's nearly Christmas – all I want to do right now is have fun, eat Mum's turkey, and beat Nicole at *Tekken 4* again."

"That's a good way of looking at it." She was quiet a little while, just staring at her hands. "Have you thought about what you want for Christmas? It's barely six weeks away."

"I've got what I wanted," I replied. "I made remission – that's all I wanted. Anything else, it's just icing on the cake." Seeing Ebony about to raise an eyebrow, I added, "Not that I wouldn't *like* any Christmas presents, though. It just wouldn't bother me if I didn't get any."

"Well, think of at least one thing you'd like. You deserve something at least."

"You sound like Mum."

My sister grinned cheekily. "That's just fine by me."

* * *

Christmas Day dawned hot and sunny. Even at six am, when I woke up, the mercury was hovering near the 27-degree mark (at least, that's what the news report on the radio said), and my room was already uncomfortably warm.

To be honest, the heat or the radio wasn't even what woke me up. It was someone pulling very insistently on the sleeve of my T-shirt, and a small, very quiet voice in my left ear.

"Tay...Tay wake up..."

I opened one eye to see Zoë standing at my bedside, dressed in her pyjamas, and I smiled a little.

"Morning, Zo," I mumbled. "You're up early."

"Santa came!" she told me excitedly.

"Oh he did, did he?" I asked, and Zoë nodded furiously. "Okay, let me wake up a little and I'll come downstairs."

"Can I have a piggyback ride?" she asked.

"What's the magic word?"

"Please?"

I smiled again. "Good girl. Of course you can."

I pushed my covers off and sat up, swinging my feet over the side of the mattress, and Zoë climbed up on my bed behind me. She locked her arms around my neck. "Okay, you ready?" I asked.

"Yep!"

"Good, 'cause here we go..." And with those words, I stood up and carried my youngest sister downstairs.

Once all the frenzy of unwrapping gifts and cleaning up the mess of wrapping paper that had ensued was out of the way, I went back upstairs to my room to get dressed. As I exchanged my pyjamas for some of my new clothes, I studied the small jewellery store box that sat on top of the monitor of my computer. Contained within was something I planned to give to Stephanie for Christmas – something I knew had the potential to change both our lives. For better or for worse, I didn't know. And there was only one way I was going to find out.

"I'm going over to Stephanie's, Mum!" I called out as I came downstairs for the second time that morning. When she came out of the kitchen, I held up the jewellery store box so she could see why I was heading out so early.

"All right," Mum said. "Be careful, okay? And make sure you're home by one."

"I will," I promised.

Stephanie lived two streets over, on Harper Street, so it didn't take me long to get to her house. Once I had checked my pockets to make sure Stephanie's present was still where I'd slipped it, I rang the doorbell. Her mother answered the door.

"Hello, Taylor," Mrs. Woodcroft said when she saw me standing on the front porch. "Merry Christmas. I assume you want to talk to Stephanie?"

"Merry Christmas, Mrs. Woodcroft," I said. "And yeah, I'd love to talk to her, but could I speak with Mr. Woodcroft first?"

"Of course you can," Mrs. Woodcroft said, and she let me into the house. "Stephen is in the lounge room – go straight on through."

Stephanie's father was sitting in the lounge room, watching what looked like a church service on the TV. "Mr. Woodcroft?" I asked tentatively, unsure if he would bite my head off for interrupting him. He looked over to me.

"Well, if it isn't Taylor Hanson! What brings you here on Christmas morning?"

I smiled, half in relief. "Mr. Woodcroft--"

"Stephen, please. You've earned the right to call me by my first name."

"Stephen, then." I took a deep breath. "I've come to ask your permission to marry Stephanie." When Stephen raised an eyebrow, I went on, "I don't wish to marry her *immediately*, because I know neither of us are nowhere near ready, but I do intend to one day make her my wife. I love her with all that I am, and I want to spend the rest of my life with her."

Stephen seemed to study me, before asking me what I knew to be a fairly important question. "I assume you have a ring?"

"Just a promise ring for now. I don't want to commit to an engagement until we're both ready for it."

He seemed to consider this. "You've definitely thought this through, haven't you?" he asked, and when I nodded he continued, "I've always thought that you and Stephanie were right for one another, and Annemarie agrees with me. I would like to know something first, however."

"Anything."

"Do you swear to do right by her? As I'm sure you're well aware, Stephanie has two brothers who are very protective of their little sister, and they would love nothing more than to inflict some serious physical injury if they discovered otherwise. And that's not even mentioning what I would do to you."

My first impulse was to laugh, but then I remembered what Stephanie's brothers, both of them older than her, had done to her last boyfriend when they had found out she'd been cheated on. It was not something I wanted to happen to me.

"I swear," I promised. "Forget what you, Drew and James would do to me, it's what my father would do that I'm worried about."

Seeming to be satisfied with my answer, Stephen stood. "I'll let you get on with things, then."

Stephanie was lying on a towel out on the back deck, dressed in a bikini top and shorts, sunglasses on and face turned toward the sun. I nudged her with a foot to get her attention, and she took her sunglasses off.

"Taylor?" she asked quizzically. "What are you doing here? I thought you'd be at home."

"I need to talk to you," I said, now very nervous.

Stephanie sat up and grabbed for a T-shirt that she'd draped over the seat of a nearby chair. "All right, something's up," she said as she dragged the shirt over her head. "Care to spill the beans?"

I lowered myself to the deck next to her and took the box from my pocket, tossing it between my hands. "You know I love you, right?"

"Yeah, and you know I love you too," Stephanie replied. She sounded somewhat confused.

"Look, I know neither of us are anywhere *near* ready enough to be married, so I'm not going to ask you to yet. But I know I want to one day. I love you with all my heart and my soul – you are everything to me. I can't imagine living my life without you in it. Without you, I don't know where I'd be." I cracked the box open. "Stephanie Anne Woodcroft, will you one day, when the time is right, do me the honour of walking down the aisle to become my wife?"

Stephanie didn't say a word, just stared at me with her mouth open. "I...I don't know what to say," she whispered.

"It's not a proposal – not just yet," I said gently. "Just a promise of intent. But when the time is right, we can swap this" I indicated the promise ring that Ebony had helped me to pick out a few weeks earlier "for a proper engagement ring. And I swear to you Stephanie, I will make you the happiest woman alive. I really do want to marry you someday." I grinned at her. "So are you going to put it on or what?"

She stuck her tongue out at me, but allowed me to slip the ring onto her left ring finger. "How about we give it a year," she suggested. "Christmas Day next year, we revisit this moment. I'm pretty sure we'll both be ready by then, and then you can take me ring shopping." She grinned at me. "Sound good?"

"That sounds fantastic," I replied.

It was then that I decided that life could not get any better than it was, right at this moment. I was getting my life back on track, I was healthy, and I had a girlfriend that loved me.

Little did I know that it was the calm before the gathering storm.

Chapter 15

Aidan

My mobile phone vibrated in my pocket as I left the bakery in Coffs Harbour, the meat pie I'd bought for my lunch in a paper bag that I held in my left hand. Today, the seventh of January, was my first day back at work after Christmas break, and I had decided to take advantage of the good weather by taking an extra-long lunch break. Business was slow today, as was usual for the summer, and I didn't doubt that most of my co-workers would be doing the same as I was.

I chose to ignore my phone until I'd found somewhere shady to sit, which necessitated walking the whole way down Harbour Drive until I came to the park. The focal point of the park was a large Moreton Bay fig tree with low, spreading branches, and it was under this tree that I chose to spend today's lunch break.

While I ate, I pulled my phone from the pocket of my work pants, unlocked it and clicked through to my inbox. I had one new message, from Ebony, and as I read it I nearly dropped my pie on the grass.

Ayd – gone 2 St.Liz's, Tay keeled over during hockey and I can't wake him up. Ring Mum and meet me @ the hospital ASAP.

"Oh *hell* no," I muttered. This was *not* happening.

I ate the rest of my lunch as fast as I could (which, my lunch still being piping hot, wasn't very fast at all) and rang my mother. It took her a little while to answer.

"Mum, it's me," I said quietly.

"Hello Aidan," Mum replied. "What's wrong?" she asked almost immediately, her tone shifting.

"Ebony just texted me. She says that she's gone with Taylor to St. Elizabeth's – he keeled over when he was playing hockey and she couldn't wake him up. Told me to ring you and then to get over to the hospital as soon as I could."

"Where are you now?"

"Sitting in the park under the fig tree."

"Stay there. I'll be there in less than five minutes – I'll pick you up and we can go to the hospital together."

"Mum, I have my skateboard with me – I'll skate over. It won't take me long."

I heard Mum let out a sigh. "All right, but be careful. I don't need two of my children in hospital."

As soon as I'd hung up and returned my phone to my pocket, I picked up my skateboard and ran out of the park.

Less than ten minutes later I walked into the waiting room of St. Elizabeth's Hospital, my skateboard under my right arm. I found my sister sitting in the row of seats furthest from the waiting room entrance, head bowed and hands clasped. She looked up as I sat down in the empty seat to her left and touched her shoulder. Her eyes were filled with unshed tears. "What exactly happened?" I asked her. "You didn't say much in your message."

She took a deep breath. "Tay and I were over at the high school-"

"Sapphire Cove High?" I asked, not sure if she meant the high school in our hometown, or the one in Coffs Harbour.

She nodded in confirmation. "He was playing hockey with his friends," she continued, "and all of a sudden he just collapsed..." She let out a hiccup and dug the heels of her hands into her eyes.

"He wouldn't wake up..."

"Is he okay?" I asked, now very worried. It had only been two-and-a-half months since he had made remission – if this was a recurrence of his cancer, it would kill him in more ways than just one.

"I don't know. Mum's in there with him" she nodded toward the double doors that were set into the wall across the waiting room "and she told me she'd let me know what was going on as soon as she knew."

A chill suddenly inched its way down my spine. "Ebony, you don't think-"

"Don't you *dare* say it," Ebony interrupted fiercely. "There's no way. He fought too damn hard for it to just come back. It has to be something else." She dug around in the pockets of her cargo shorts and pulled out a tissue, and blew her nose. "I can't watch him go through hell again. It was hard enough the first two times." She then glanced at my skateboard. "How'd you get over here, anyway?"

"Skated."

"Oh." She shoved her used tissue into a pocket separate from that which held her tissue stash. "I wondered why it took you so damn long."

About twenty minutes later, Mum came out into the waiting room and walked over to where Ebony and I were sitting, sitting down across from us. The look on her face and the fact she was trying to hide she had been crying told us that whatever it was, it wasn't positive by any means – she had bad news to tell us.

"What's going on?" Ebony asked. "Is he okay?"

Mum shook her head. "Taylor's really sick," she said quietly.

"He didn't catch the flu, did he?" I asked. I knew he'd been feeling a bit under the weather for a couple of weeks, even though he'd tried to hide it. I'd come to the conclusion that he either had the flu or a very bad cold. Mum shook her head again. "What is it, then?"

It took her some time before she was able to speak again, and that alone was a bad sign. "It's far worse than the flu," she said quietly.

"Mum!" Ebony shouted, on the verge of tears. "What's wrong with him?"

"They found a new cancer," Mum replied.

"*What?*" I said weakly. "Holy *shit*..." Ebony grabbed my hand and held on for dear life, and I squeezed just as hard back. I heard her take in a sharp, deep breath.

"Please tell me you're joking," Ebony pleaded. "This isn't funny, Mum..."

"I'm not," Mum said. "It's called acute monocytic leukaemia. They're starting him on chemotherapy immediately, but..." She let out a shaky sigh. "It doesn't look good. They're saying six months, twelve at the very most."

"No," Ebony said quietly, barely able to speak. "Please, no..." I put my arm around her, knowing she needed the support. Mum had tears rolling down her cheeks by this point, and I could hear Ebony beginning to cry quietly. I couldn't believe it...I didn't want to believe it, but I knew it had to be true – my mother would never lie about something as serious as this.

"This isn't *fair*!" Ebony shrieked.

"Ebony-" I started, but she just kept going.

"Not after all he's been through! Why *him*?" she yelled so loudly I saw a few passing nurses look in our direction. I tried to pull her closer but she shoved me away. "He only just *made* remission for fuck's sake!" After a few minutes of ranting she wiped her eyes and composed herself a little.

"I wanna see him."

"Ebony, you can't lose it like that in front of him," Mum told my sister quietly.

"I *won't*," she snapped. "Give me *some* credit, will you? I'm not an idiot."

He had his eyes closed when we entered his room, but I knew he wasn't asleep. We reached the side of his bed, and Ebony took his hand in both of hers. He opened his eyes slowly, and I swore he was going to cry.

"Hey you," Ebony said quietly. I had to look away – there was a high probability that I was going to lose it, and that wasn't something Taylor needed to see.

"Hey," he whispered. "I guess you heard?" he asked, and Ebony nodded. Mum took my hand and squeezed gently. "Sucks, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," she replied quietly. "God, I'm so *sorry*, Tay," she whispered. He didn't say anything. I don't think he knew *what* to say. I don't think any of us really knew how to act.

"You're not gonna catch it, you know," he said to me quietly but pointedly, evidently having noticed my silence. "I'm not contagious or anything."

"I know," I replied quietly, finally speaking. "It's just...I can't believe this is happening." Ebony was right. This *wasn't* fair.

"It'll be okay, Ebby," he said to Ebony. "I...I'll be okay."

"When can you come home?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "No idea. Couple of days maybe, could be a couple of weeks." He tugged at a few locks of his hair, something he tended to do when he was worried or nervous. "I suppose I'll find out when they get me started on the chemo again." As he spoke, I noticed for the first time the IV in his arm and the bag hanging from the pole beside his bed, and the heart monitor on his other side. We all knew he was going to get incredibly sick – it had been the same both times he'd had

chemotherapy, so I saw no reason why this time would be any different. It would be utter hell, not only for him but for the rest of us.

I pulled up a seat next to Ebony and sat down. "It'll be all right," I said quietly, trying to sound sure. "You'll see. You'll make it through this. Third time's the charm, right?"

Taylor smiled shakily at this – a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I hope you're right, Aidan."

So do I, I silently agreed. *So do I*.

* * *

"Kids, we need to talk..."

It was the next evening, not long after dinner, and just like most evenings we were in the lounge room, watching TV. Beside me, I felt Ebony stiffen, and I reached for her hand. We both knew what our mother was about to say, not that it made it any easier to accept. It was going to take us quite a while to come to terms with the fact that one of us was seriously ill again – if we ever did at all. It was the second time in as many years that we'd had to deal with this, and it didn't make it any easier.

Jessica was the first to speak. "How come Taylor isn't home yet?"

Mum sighed a little shakily. If knowing what we knew was hard on Ebony and I, I could only imagine what it was doing to our parents. This was one of their children that this was happening to. She looked at Dad. "I can't do this," she said.

Dad nodded and cleared his throat slightly. "Taylor won't be home for a few more days. The earliest he'll be able to come home is Saturday."

"Dad, just spit it out, would you?" Zac interrupted. "He's sick again, isn't he?"

"Zac, please don't make this harder than it has to be." Then Dad nodded. "Yes, Taylor is sick again. He has leukaemia." He paused to allow this to sink in. "They're giving Taylor about six months to live. Twelve at the very most."

Jessica burst into tears at these words. "No," she sobbed. "Please, no, not again..."

I went straight into 'big brother' mode – I got up off of the lounge and went over to where Jessica sat, on the floor near the TV, and pulled my sister into an embrace. "Shh...it's gonna be okay," I whispered, before looking up at my parents. I didn't have the heart to tell her the truth, and I knew that my parents knew it.

"I spent all last night trying to convince myself that this isn't happening again," Ebony said finally, her voice barely a whisper. "Why does this keep *happening* to us?"

"I don't know, Ebony," Mum said quietly. "I honestly don't know."

Later that night, I browsed across to Ebony's online journal – I liked reading my sister's thoughts on the world, and so I kept it bookmarked. Though to be honest, what I read in her latest entry made me wish I'd bypassed checking it tonight.

It's official. The world is fucked up.

Yesterday, my family got what is possibly the worst news we've ever received. My brother Taylor is sick again. And I don't mean he has the flu either – he has leukaemia. And what is possibly the worst part about it is that he only has a year to live at best.

I swear that it's some sort of game to whatever higher power is out there. My brother has nearly died twice, and now he has to go through hell all over again. If this is a joke, it isn't funny. Far from it.

I reckon Taylor has a pretty good chance at beating this, but if he doesn't...I don't know what I'm going to do. He's my best friend – he has been my whole life. And if I lose him like this...

You know, I am pretty damn sure that it's an unwritten rule somewhere that seemingly healthy

nineteen-year-old boys are not supposed to get this sick. Especially those who have already been through hell and back twice, and therefore should not have to be subjected to it a third time.

I'm not kidding when I say he's almost died twice. When we were thirteen he was in an induced coma for three weeks after an operation to get rid of a bone tumour, all because he was just too weak and too sick to breathe on his own. And last April, he went into cardiac arrest after an operation to remove yet another bone tumour, right as they were bringing him around. It sounds horrible, but I swear he's a magnet for this kind of shit. Every little bug and virus that goes around, he catches it first and ends up sicker than the rest of us. It's been that way all our lives.

I know I keep telling Taylor that we aren't cursed, but I can't help but wonder if I'm right. This is the third time in his life that he's been diagnosed with one form of cancer or another – not to mention the second time in two years. What did we do to deserve this?

"Oh jeez, Ebony," I whispered as I read the final words of my sister's journal entry. It was just a page on the World Wide Web, nothing more than pixels on my computer screen, but I could feel the pain in those words. She was hurting so badly. It didn't take being psychic to figure that out.

I left my room and went up the hall to Ebony's bedroom. She was curled up in bed, staring into space and biting her bottom lip. I crouched down beside her bed and tucked her hair behind her ears. "Nee," I whispered. "I'm here, Nee..."

"I wish it was me," she whispered at last. "It isn't fair, Aidan – why did it have to be him? He doesn't deserve this..."

I eased her into a sitting position, and sat down next to her. "I don't know, Nee," I admitted. "I really don't know."

* * *

Taylor came home two weeks later. Ebony was in my room with me, playing *Tekken Tag Tournament* on the PlayStation2 again, when Taylor and Dad came in. Taylor was leaning mostly

on Dad, wincing every time his right foot landed on the floor, which meant one of two things – either it was going to rain soon, or he'd twisted his ankle. I figured that the second possibility was the valid one, considering how accident-prone he was.

"Hey mate," I said quietly. "You feeling okay?" Taylor just nodded and sat down on his bed.

"I'll be all right," he answered. "What're you guys playing?"

"*Tekken Tag Tournament*," Ebony replied. "Aidan's winning again." She caught my eye, and I grinned at her.

Taylor laughed. "So nothing much different, then," he joked, and Ebony mock-glared at him. He stuck his tongue out at her and lay down on top of the covers. "Hey Dad?" he said, just as our father was about to leave the room.

"Yeah, Tay?"

"Can you get me some Nurofen or something? My ankle's killing me."

Dad nodded. "Sure thing."

"So when do I get a go?" Taylor asked once our father had left the room and headed downstairs.

"I need to make up for all the playing time I've lost."

Ebony snickered. "Is that all you thought about while you were in the hospital?" she asked, not taking her gaze off of the screen.

"It was the only thing keeping my mind off of the chemo," he replied. "I swear it was worse than last time – I could barely stop throwing up." He let out a sigh. "If it's like that every time, I think I'd rather let this damn cancer do its worst."

His words had an immediate effect on Ebony. She dropped her controller, turned around and smacked Taylor so hard he yelped. "Do *not* talk like that, you hear?"

"You heard what Mum said," he shot back as he rubbed his arm. "And don't hit me! That hurt!"

"If you want to live through this, you will," Ebony said fiercely. "Screw what some doctor says. You are a Hanson, and we do *not* give up that easily."

"Ebony, stop tormenting him for crying out loud," I said. "I'm about to pound you into the ground, and I will if you don't pay attention!"

"Oh, *fine*..."

By the time Dad came back upstairs, the packet of Nurofen and a half-filled glass of water in hand, Taylor had fallen fast asleep, exhaustion written all over his face. I watched as Ebony, looking so sad, gently pushed Taylor's hair off of his face and pulled his blankets up over him. We had another long journey ahead of us, one that I was well aware would not be easy. And I had the sneaking suspicion that no matter how hard Taylor fought, it was going to take a miracle for him to survive this. Nothing short of a miracle.

Chapter 16

Ebony

The first thing I saw on my way back upstairs from the kitchen, a glass of water in hand, was a strip of pale yellow light coming from beneath the closed bathroom door. February was already one week old, and Taylor had been home from the hospital for little more than two weeks. And in those two weeks, I had seen my brother in more pain than I ever had before. He'd had his second round of chemotherapy a day earlier, and it was beginning to knock him around something fierce. I couldn't help but wonder just how much more of this he could take.

I stood in the hallway outside of Aidan and Taylor's room and studied the light that exited the bathroom. There were two possibilities – either someone had left the light on, or someone was in there. It was almost one in the morning, so I figured the first was more likely than the second. Of course, as soon as I'd ducked into Aidan and Taylor's room to check on Taylor before heading to my room, it soon became evident that I was completely wrong. His bed was empty, the covers pushed over to the side nearest the wall. There was no way in the world that he would be outside this late – in fact, now that I thought about it, there really was only one place he *could* be.

"Tay?" I called quietly as I eased the bathroom door open and stepped inside. My brother was sitting up against the wall next to the bathtub, pulling his hands through his hair and shaking. "What're you doing in here? It's past midnight – you should be in bed."

It took him a little while to answer me. When he did finally get the words out, his voice was choked with tears.

"I'm throwing up," he replied. "What else would I be doing in here?"

That wasn't all he was doing. He was crying, and he kept dropping something in the small rubbish bin next to the toilet. Then he spoke again, his tears more than evident this time. "It all just keeps falling *out*..."

I felt tears burning my eyes now, and I choked back a sob. He was hurting so badly... "Oh Tay," I whispered. I didn't know what to say. But really, what *could* I say to him? There weren't enough words in the world.

I set the glass of water down on the vanity and sat on the floor next to him. Expecting him to shy away, but wanting to try anyway, I reached out to Taylor and drew all six feet and two inches of him close to me. The floodgates broke open and he started sobbing hard, and I felt my heart begin to break.

"Why is this happening to me, Ebby?" he cried onto my shoulder, holding onto me as I held him. I could easily put my arms around him – he still hadn't regained the weight he had lost in the last year, and the treatment he was going through at the moment just made it worse. He'd been through so much already – I wanted more than anything to trade places with him, if only to spare him this hell. He didn't deserve this...nobody did. I knew this had to be taking so much out of him, so much more than he ever let anybody know.

"Shh," I whispered to him, rocking him, trying to soothe him. "C'mon, let's get you to bed." I helped him stand, and he leaned heavily on me for support. We made our way slowly down the hallway and into the room my brothers shared, moving slowly so as not to wake Aidan. As soon as we were near enough to Taylor's bed he crawled straight beneath his covers and curled up with his back to me. It wasn't long before he succumbed to exhaustion and fell asleep.

I stayed there a little longer after he had slipped away into unconsciousness. For once I was glad he wasn't facing me – when he was awake he could hide what he was feeling, even though he wasn't much good at it, but in sleep his guard dropped completely, allowing me to see the sheer pain he was in. It was so heartbreaking that the one time I'd seen his face during sleep, I had cried.

"Someone out there has a really sick sense of humour," I said mostly to myself. This had to be one massive cosmic joke. If I didn't know any better, I would have said that someone had a massive grudge against my brother. How could anyone see the funny side of this? I certainly couldn't. "I

wish I could make it easier for you, Tay; I really do." I rubbed his back gently, concentrating mostly on his shoulders. "Love you, Tay," I whispered.

I got up off the floor, shivering slightly, and crept from the room, closing the door behind me. It wasn't fair that any of us had to suffer this way, least of all Taylor. Our family had the worst luck of anyone we knew, and it never got any easier.

I closed my bedroom door behind me and climbed into bed, pulling my covers tightly around my shoulders. I stared into the dark for a while, just thinking, then it was my turn to cry. How could any of this be real?

I felt myself being shaken awake after what felt like bare seconds, and rolled over to face whoever it was that had woken me. "What?" I asked hazily. Through sleep-fogged eyes I saw Aidan crouched next to my bed.

"Hey, what happened?" he asked.

I didn't say anything for a few seconds, trying to gather my thoughts together before I spoke. "I was going back to bed, and Tay wasn't in his bed when I looked in on him. So I went looking for him."

"And?" Aidan prompted.

"He was in the bathroom, and he was throwing up." I hiccupped. "He's so sick, Aidan. I don't know how much more of it he can take."

"I don't know either," Aidan said. "We need to stay strong for him, though. He needs us." He was quiet a little while. "It'll get better, Nee. I know it will."

"That's easy for *you* to say," I retorted. "*You're* not the one who found him throwing up in the bathroom with his hair all falling out."

This seemed to take Aidan aback. "His hair's falling out?" he asked in a whisper.

"That's what I said, isn't it?" I shifted myself onto my back and stared up at the ceiling, barely visible through the half-dark. "I keep hoping that this is just one very bad dream," I said quietly, "and that come morning when I wake up everything will be okay again." I looked over at my brother. "Why the hell does this keep happening to us? I know I keep telling myself we're not cursed, but I'm starting to think otherwise."

"We're not *cursed*, Ebony."

"Oh really? Then why the fuck does Taylor keep getting sick? This is the second time in two years. It could be any one of us, but it's always him."

"It's just bad luck, Ebony. Nothing more than that." I saw him glance at my clock radio. "Look, it's ten past two in the morning. Neither of us is much good half-asleep, so I'd get some sleep if I were you. I promise you Ebony, we will make it through this."

"You don't sound so sure."

"Ebony, I swear to you, Taylor will be fine. I promise. Okay?" I nodded uncertainly. "Get some sleep."

As Aidan left the room I heard him say, so quietly I wasn't sure I was even meant to hear it, "At least...I hope so."

* * *

Coming home from a day out at the shops near the end of the month, the first thing I saw as I entered the lounge room was Aidan sitting on the floor in front of the TV, which wasn't all that unusual. The fact that he had our father's video camera connected to the TV, and was also wearing headphones, was the unusual part. Usually if he was parked in front of the TV, he was playing games on our PS2.

What really caught my attention, though, was what Aidan had playing on the TV. It was one of our home movies, from mine, Aidan and Taylor's first day of high school. I was positive it hadn't seen the light of day in at least eight or nine years. Deciding I wanted to know what in the world he was doing, I leaned down and waved my hand in front of his face. He took his headphones off and looked up at me.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Ask Taylor," was Aidan's reply. "It was his idea to do this in the first place. He'd be able to tell you better than I would."

I shrugged, knowing I wouldn't get any more out of him about the matter, and headed into the kitchen. Both of my parents looked up from their coffees as I stepped through the doorway. "Hi Mum," I said as I headed for the fridge. "Hi Dad."

"How was shopping?" Mum asked.

"It was all right. Didn't find quite what I wanted, but I found a few bargains." I pulled the bottle of pineapple juice from the top shelf, found a glass and poured myself a drink. "What's Aidan doing, by the way? He's got Dad's video camera out and he's playing a video that was taken the day we started high school. I swear I haven't seen it in more than nine years."

"He's been helping Taylor to make a video for your sister," Mum answered.

"Mum..." I put the juice back in the fridge and joined my parents at the table. "In case you've forgotten, I have *two* sisters. Specifics would be appreciated."

Mum eyed me with one eyebrow raised. "He's making it for Zoë."

"What would he do that for?"

"He is of the belief that if he doesn't survive this, Zoë will eventually forget about him."

"That's ridiculous." I sipped my drink before I continued. "Of course she'll remember him. Zoë's his shadow – she thinks the absolute world of him. And besides, the rest of us will make sure she doesn't forget." I shrugged. "Anyway, I can remember things from when I was four. Why wouldn't she be able to?"

"Ebony..." Mum let out what sounded like a very long-suffering sigh. "Just because you can remember events that took place when you were that young does not mean others are able to. Your brother, for instance."

"What, Aidan?"

"Taylor can't. He told me a couple of weeks ago that the earliest memory he is consciously able to recall is from when the three of you were ten. He remembers nothing from before that."

"Oh..." I'd had no idea that my own brother couldn't remember the first ten years of his childhood.

"He's going to get better, right?" I asked quietly.

"He will in time. It may take a few months, but he will get better." Footsteps sounded in the hallway outside, and Mum looked over at the kitchen door. "Taylor, what are you doing up? You should be resting."

I looked back over my shoulder to see Taylor standing in the kitchen doorway. He was leaning on the doorframe, a yellow bandanna tied over his hair. "Hey you," I said, in an attempt to get him to smile. I was rewarded for my efforts with a small grin that quickly disappeared.

"I couldn't sleep," he said in response to Mum's question. He came into the kitchen and dropped into a chair next to Dad. "It's ironic, isn't it?" He let out a rusty-sounding chuckle. "I'm utterly exhausted and want nothing more than to sleep, but I can't. It's ridiculous."

"I'll make you some chamomile tea before you go back to bed," Mum said. "That should help you sleep a bit better." A nod was all the reply Mum got. "Do you feel up to eating anything for dinner?"

Taylor shook his head. "I doubt it. I'm not really hungry."

"Taylor," Mum sighed. "You need to eat – you aren't going to be able to keep your strength up if you don't. I daresay you don't want to be in hospital more than you have to be, but that is what will happen if you aren't careful."

"There's not much point when I keep throwing it all up in the end."

"And there is no point in starving yourself." She gathered up hers and Dad's coffee cups and stood.

"I'll make you some chicken noodle soup and toast for dinner," she said as she headed to the sink.

"You should be able to keep that down at least."

My brother dropped his head into his hands as Mum set the kettle to boil. "She never listens to me," he muttered loud enough for just me to hear.

"She's right, Tay," I said. "You're really starting to worry her. And you're starting to worry me too." He said nothing in response to this, and I decided to change the subject. I wasn't going to get much more out of him. "Mum told me that you and Aidan are making a video for Zoë." When he nodded, I asked, "What for?" This was despite knowing the answer already – I wanted to hear it from him.

"She isn't going to remember me," he said quietly.

"Tay, listen to me." I turned him to face me. "She *will* remember you. The rest of us will make sure of that."

"Would *you* want to remember this, Ebony?" he asked, and I was taken aback at the pain in his voice. "She's *five years old* – she has no idea what death is yet. And she is going to find out what it is far sooner than she should."

All further conversation was forestalled by the sound of the kettle boiling, and the toaster popping. Within minutes Mum had placed a steaming mug of soup, a spoon and a plate that held

a slice of unbuttered toast in front of Taylor. So as not to incur our mother's considerable wrath, he picked the spoon up and started taking very tentative sips of soup.

"Tay?" I asked quietly. I didn't get a response for a further minute or so, nor was I expecting one. He finally laid the spoon back on the table once a full quarter of the mug had been emptied of its contents, and looked at me. "You're not going to die, all right? I have so much faith in you. You are going to beat this. You're strong, and you're a fighter. If anyone can get through this, it's you."

"I wish I could be as positive as you are." He broke a small piece of toast from the slice before him and dropped it in his soup. "You'll have to excuse me for being realistic about this, Nee. I know what my chances are, and I know they aren't good. We can't *all* be a ray of sunshine."

"I'm not *trying* to be positive about this. I'm just telling you what I know. And what I know is that if you really want to, you will get through this, and to hell with what some doctor says."

"Look, Nee..." He picked up the spoon again and fished the bit of toast from his mug. "I don't want to talk about this anymore, okay? I just want to try and get through my dinner without throwing up all over the table."

"Thank you so much for that imagery," I said, completely deadpan. "But all right. I'll leave it alone." I gave him what was meant to be a smile of encouragement and reassurance, a smile that he didn't return. And I caught the most fleeting of glimpses of pain in his eyes as he shifted his focus away from me.

Chapter 17

Taylor

I picked at the hem of my long-sleeved shirt as I waited for Dr. Beckett to finish on the phone. It was the beginning of March, and I had come into Coffs Harbour for my usual monthly appointment. She had called me the afternoon before to set this appointment up, sounding much more serious than she had for almost a whole year. That alone led me to the conclusion that things were going to hell much more rapidly than I otherwise would have liked.

A few minutes after I had arrived, Dr. Beckett finished her phone call and hung up. "Sorry about that," she apologised. "Thank you for coming in this morning – I'm sure you're anxious to find out just what I needed to speak with you about."

"You could say that."

"I've just pulled up your records," she said as she tapped away at the keyboard of the computer on her desk. "When you were first admitted, on January seventh, your sister" she looked to me, and I nodded to confirm what she had said "told the emergency department staff that you had been feeling unwell for about the space of two weeks beforehand, and that she thought you had caught a bad cold or the flu. Within approximately forty-five minutes of your arrival here, an official diagnosis of the M5b form of acute myeloid leukaemia – or, in layman's terms, acute monocytic leukaemia – was made. With me so far?"

"Yes."

"Excellent." More tapping could be heard. "For the last two months, your treatment has consisted of keeping your illness under control. However, because you have had no adverse reaction to the drugs you are being treated with, and also because there has been no improvement in your condition, I believe that it is time I changed your treatment plan, and moved you up to the next level."

"What's the next level of treatment?" I asked.

"It's known as induction therapy. The purpose is to induce remission, and we do this by treating you with high doses of two chemotherapy drugs for a total of ten days. Should remission be achieved, you would then undergo consolidation therapy – without consolidation, it is highly likely that you will have an eventual recurrence. Consolidation would take the form of either an autologous or allogeneic stem cell transplant, or around three to five further courses of chemotherapy."

"What if I went with the allogeneic transplant, but it didn't take?" I asked, wanting to know my options before I decided anything.

"If you took that option, a failure would lead to either an autologous transplant, during which you would receive your own stem cells, or to further chemotherapy. Usually in that case I recommend an autologous transplant, but it will depend entirely on what you decide in the end." She clasped her hands on the desk before her, interlacing her fingers. "What I need to know to begin with is if you are willing to start induction."

"Well, yeah, of course I am," I replied. "Why?"

"I only ask because if you do agree to this, your treatment will be very intense, and it will, for want of a better word, cripple your immune system. Because of this you will need to be in isolation for the entire duration of your treatment, and any visitors will need to cover up in case there is a chance of infection, intentional or otherwise."

"Oh." I thought it over for a little while. "I think it would be worth it," I decided.

"All right then. I'll organise for you to be admitted next week, but until then go home and get some rest. You are going to need it."

* * *

Once I began induction, I quickly found out just what Dr. Beckett had meant by intense. It was, in all truth, among the worst chemotherapy I had ever been through, and there was only one word to fully and accurately describe it.

Brutal.

"Hey Tay."

I shifted myself carefully onto my right side and slowly opened my eyes. Ebony was crouched at my bedside, clad in the regulation facemask, gloves and gown – nobody, not even any of the nurses, was allowed to enter my room unless they covered up. She hooked a finger over the top of the mask and pulled it down so she could give me a smile. "How're you feeling?"

"I feel like shit," I whispered. It had been years since I had felt this way. That I couldn't raise the volume of my voice any louder than a whisper was the true indication of how bad I felt. "What're you doing here?"

She raised an eyebrow at me. "Visiting you. What's it look like I'm doing?" She snapped the mask back into place. "I can't believe you're letting them put you through this."

"You know why they're doing it, Nee. Remember how you keep telling me that I'm not going to die?" I challenged her. She nodded slowly, and I continued, "This is one of the only chances I have. And without it, I *will* die."

"But if it doesn't work..." She trailed off, and a pained look came into her eyes.

"I'll die anyway. I know that."

I saw my sister stiffen up, her hand tensing on the bedclothes. "Please don't say that."

"I'm not about to hide from the truth, Nee." I fought to hold back a yawn but was unsuccessful, and my eyes fell half-closed. I was utterly exhausted – just talking to Ebony had tired me out. She noticed this immediately and straightened up.

"I'm going to head off," she said. "You need to sleep – you aren't going to get any rest if you're talking to me."

"You can stay if you like."

"You sure?" Ebony asked, brow furrowed.

"I'm positive. I'm fed up with people coming to see me, and then leaving after five minutes. It'd make more sense just to ring me up." I shifted my focus to the tightly closed door that was set into the opposite wall. "Besides, I..." I swallowed hard. "I don't want to be by myself."

My sister lowered herself back down into a crouch and pulled her mask down again. "I'll try to be here when you wake up," she assured me.

Too exhausted to speak, I nodded in reply and dozed off.

It was night when I reawakened. The curtains at my window were drawn closed, and light from the corridor outside that shone through the pane of glass in the door lit up the room just enough for me to be able to see the outlines of everything that my room contained. That alone was enough of a clue that it was very late, and a glance at my watch confirmed it – it was almost midnight, and far too late for me to be up.

Right as I made an attempt at drifting back off to sleep, I felt it – a tickling at the back of my throat, as if someone were working the tip of a feather at just the right spot. It was a feeling I knew all too well and utterly despised.

"Damnit," I muttered, and started hunting for my call button.

It felt like an eternity had passed before a nurse entered my room. By this time, I had curled up on my side under my blankets with my arms wrapped around myself, and had tightly closed my eyes. By now I was beginning to feel extremely miserable. A gentle touch on my shoulder made me open my eyes, and I found myself looking into the concerned gaze of one of the night nurses

– if I remembered correctly, her name was Meredith Glazer.

“Meredith?” I asked, wanting to confirm my thoughts, and she nodded. “I think I’m going to throw up,” I told her.

“I was afraid of this,” Meredith said, a sigh in her voice. She gently helped me to uncurl myself, and eased me upright. “I want you to try breathing through it, okay? In through your nose, out through your mouth – let’s see if we can stave off the throwing up for a little while.”

I shook my head furiously, and immediately regretted the movement. “I can’t.”

“You can, and you know it. I know how much you hate throwing up, so I am trying to save you from it for as long as possible.”

“I should be used to it by now,” I mumbled.

“Nobody ever gets *used* to it,” Meredith said sagely. “I would be extremely worried if you did.” She studied me. “I’ll make a deal with you. If you try breathing through it for me for five minutes, but you still feel like you’re going to throw up, *then* I’ll get you up. Agreed?”

“Dictator.”

She smiled sweetly. “I know.”

Five minutes later, I still wanted to throw up. I could see sympathy in Meredith’s eyes as she just looked at me. “You really do feel horrible, don’t you?” she asked, and I nodded. “Well, come on then.” She folded my covers back to the foot of my bed and helped me stand up. “Easy there,” she warned as I stumbled.

I had barely managed to make it into the tiny bathroom that was attached to my room when it started, and I fell to my hands and knees on the freezing cold tiles. It was there that I threw up, tightly closing my eyes as a hand landed on my back. “Sorry ‘bout the floor,” I managed to choke out.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," I heard Meredith say gently. "You're sick, and sick people throw up sometimes. I'll get someone in here to clean up." She eased me to my feet. "I'm going to take you over to the sink, and you can rinse your mouth out before you hop back in bed."

I nodded and risked opening my eyes. Everything tilted slightly on its axis before straightening, and I made the mistake of glancing downwards for just a second.

There was blood all over the floor.

Once I'd rinsed my mouth out, Meredith guided me back to my bed. We had barely made it halfway there when my feet slipped out from under me. She caught me right before my knees slammed into the floor.

"Easy does it," she said softly as she helped me to steady myself. "Take it slowly – you've only got a few more steps, and you'll be back in bed..."

The instant I was safely back in my bed and under the blankets, Meredith pushed my call button. Within minutes another of the nurses who was working tonight's night shift had entered my room, and through a haze of exhaustion and misery I listened to Meredith speaking with her.

"I need you to call Dr. Beckett, and ask her to come in an hour earlier in the morning," Meredith said. "We have a very sick young man here. And please call his parents, as they will want to know about this." The nurse nodded and walked out.

"Get some rest," Meredith said right before she left my room. "Your parents will be here bright and early in the morning." She pulled her mask down and offered me a smile. "It will get better. Just give it time."

"I don't want to do this anymore," I whispered as I drifted back off to sleep.

Needless to say, when I repeated that little remark to my parents in the morning, they were not pleased.

"You don't mean that," Mum said, clearly taken aback. She and Dad had come up to the hospital an hour and a half before visiting hours began, and I knew that Ebony and Aidan would be coming by later on. Until they did, however, I had the pleasure of being given a talking-to by my parents.

"Like hell I don't," I retorted. "I know I agreed to this, but I didn't know it would be this bad. And I can't see how it's worth putting myself through utter hell for days on end when I don't even know if this is even going to *do* anything, other than making me feel worse than I do already."

"This is your life we're talking about," Dad said, the barest note of desperation in his voice. "It's worth it for that alone."

"Dad..." I let out a weary sigh. "It hasn't been much of a life so far. I'm always getting sick. I can't remember much from before my tenth birthday, so I don't know how things were back then, but in the last, what, ten years, I can count only four and a half years where the worst illness I had was a cold. I've been sick so often and for so long that it doesn't seem like my life is even worth living anymore."

Mum gave my right hand a squeeze. "We know you're frustrated."

"That doesn't even begin to cover it," I said irritably. "I really can't understand why our family gets a rough deal all the time, and why it's always *me* who cops the worst of it. If I didn't know any better I'd swear that someone out there really has it in for me." I punched my mattress hard. "It's not *fair!*"

"You're right – it isn't fair," Dad agreed. "Life isn't fair most of the time. You just have to try to make the most of it."

I snorted half-heartedly. "Well, *that's* easier said than done."

"It will get better," Mum said. "Just give it some time." I looked at her, and I could see the smile in her eyes. "I know that's the last thing you want to hear right now, but it's the truth."

"I know." I swallowed hard and looked at my hands. "I hope you're right, Mum."

* * *

Four days after Aidan, Ebony and I turned twenty, Dr. Beckett came to speak with me again. All told, it had been a pretty miserable birthday – I'd been alone for most of it, as neither of my triplets had been able to come and visit. I did, however, get a phone call from them at around seven minutes past eleven, the time I had been born, and had been promised that my gifts would be brought by sometime later on in the week.

"As I'm sure you recall, before you began induction we discussed the two main forms of consolidation treatment," Dr. Beckett said to begin. She opened the clipboard folder that she had brought with her. "Those treatments being further chemotherapy, and a stem cell transplant. Normally I would recommend that you undergo the chemotherapy, but on the basis of your reaction to the induction therapy, I fear it would do far too much harm to you to be of any real benefit. Therefore, I advise that we try for a transplant instead." She sifted through the papers that were contained in her folder. "While you were undergoing induction, your brothers and sisters were tested, and two of your siblings were identified as matches for you."

"Two?" I asked, surprised.

"Two," Dr. Beckett confirmed with a smile. "As I thought might be the case, your brother Aidan came through as a match." There was more shuffling of papers. "And so did your sister Jessica."

The news that Jessica had been identified as a match surprised me more than anything else – if anything, I'd have thought that Ebony would be the second match. It seemed, however, that it wasn't to be. "So what happens now? I mean, out of Aidan and Jess, who's the better match for me?"

"I would have thought, on the basis of you and Aidan being two-thirds of a set of triplets, Aidan would be the better match, but the closest match is Jessica." She closed her folder. "The next

step is to gain both her consent and your parents' permission for harvesting to take place. Just because she's a match does not mean that we have automatic consent for the procedure to take place – entirely aside from your sister still being under the age of sixteen, I still need to discuss the process with her and with your parents. There is no guarantee that they will say yes. And of course, we also need your consent for this to take place."

"What if it doesn't work?"

"Then we have the option of trying again with Aidan, or for you to undergo an autologous transplant."

"Right. Is there anything else that I need to know?"

"Only that there is a high failure rate related to this form of transplant. The percentage of patients who experience a recurrence in the future is between forty and seventy percent."

"Oh." I looked down at my hands, now very nervous. It sounded as if the odds were very much against me. "So I just have to give the word?"

"I would advise that you think about this," Dr. Beckett said seriously. "If you do give your consent, there would be no turning back. You need to be completely sure that this is truly what you want."

"I haven't been able to do much else aside *from* thinking," I said quietly. "It's what I want. I don't want to be sick anymore."

Dr. Beckett seemed to be content with this. She reopened her folder and made what looked like a note on one of the sheets of paper inside. "All right then. I'll discuss this with your sister and your parents, and I'll have a response for you within a week."

Chapter 18

Aidan

"Aidan, are you ready yet?"

The sound of my mother's voice sounded through my bedroom door, and I started moving just that little bit faster. Ebony, Jessica and I, along with our parents, had been asked by Taylor's doctor to come down to the hospital this morning, a sunny Tuesday near the middle of April – Ebony and I because we were Taylor's triplets (and also because Dr. Beckett knew we'd find out what was going to be talked about anyway), Jessica because she had been our brother's donor, and our parents because Taylor was their son. I had been asked by Taylor, having relayed a message through Dr. Beckett, to bring some of his things with him, and so that was exactly what I was doing – packing his journal, a handful of pens and pencils, his new MP3 player and his earphones into my backpack.

"Just about!" I called back as I zipped my backpack up. I checked that I had everything else I needed – mostly my phone, my car keys and my wallet – and left my bedroom, heading downstairs.

Dr. Beckett was waiting for us in the oncology department when we arrived at the hospital. She looked unusually solemn, and had her hands clasped behind her back.

"Take a seat, please," she said. "I know you're all anxious to hear what I have to say, so I'll get straight to the point. Essentially..." Here she paused for a little while, as if she were trying to decide on the best way to break the news she had. "Taylor's body is rejecting the transplant."

I felt a chill go right through me at those words – the six single most frightening words I had ever heard in my life. Beside me I heard Jessica let out a quiet sob.

"Y-you got it wrong," Ebony said. "That can't be right..."

"I would not have called you all here this morning if I had," Dr. Beckett said, and Ebony looked away, chastised. "He is exhibiting all the classic signs of rejection. The only way for this transplant to have not been rejected would have been if he had received a donation from an identical twin, or if he had received his own stem cells. As this is not the case here, there was always going to be a chance of rejection, however slim."

We all sat there for what felt like an eternity, taking this news in. It was to have been his best chance at survival, and it had failed.

"So what happens now?" Mum asked.

"I've talked this over at length with Taylor, as when it comes down to it, it's his decision as to what steps we take next. We discussed the possibilities of a second attempt at transplantation, using a donation from Aidan here or using his own stem cells, but ultimately we decided that it was not within his own best interests if we chose to do so. I can do little more for him now. All I can do, should he be amenable, is start him on a lower intensity of chemotherapy, with the aim of slowing the progression of the leukaemia until such a time as it no longer has any effect."

"So he's giving up?" I asked, dreading Dr. Beckett's response.

"Not giving up, no. This is more taking into account what he is able to handle. To be honest, I am not surprised that he has decided not to try for a second transplant, and nor do I blame him – I have been treating cancer patients for fifteen years now, and I have never before seen such a violent reaction to chemotherapy. To be frank, it sent him through the wringer in more ways than one.

"I'll be keeping him in isolation until he has recovered from the transplant. Once that has happened, and once I am certain that he is strong enough, he will begin chemotherapy once more. After that, as soon as I am satisfied that he is responding well to it, I'll allow him to return home."

She just looked at us, and I could see the sorrow in her gaze. "I'm truly sorry, and I wish there were more I could do."

"Thank you, Dr. Beckett," Dad said quietly. "We know you did your best."

Dr. Beckett nodded in response. "I know you're all anxious to see him, but I can only allow two of you to do so. He needs to rest, and so I will need to limit today's visit to ten minutes, no more."

"Jess needs to see him," Ebony said.

"I agree," Mum said. "Aidan, would you be willing to go with her?"

"Yeah, no worries," I said immediately.

"If you'll both come with me, I'll get you set up so you can see him," Dr. Beckett said as Jessica and I stood up.

Taylor was asleep when we arrived at his room. I almost didn't want to go in – I knew he needed to rest, and to wake him up would rob him of the sleep he desperately needed. But I knew Jessica needed to see him – at the same time, I also knew that my brother would appreciate the company.

"You can go first," I said quietly to my sister, and she preceded me into the room.

"Tay?" Jessica said softly when we were at Taylor's bedside. It didn't take him long to wake up. As soon as he saw Jessica and I he smiled a little.

"Hey you guys," he whispered. "Dr. Beckett told you?"

Jessica nodded. "I'm really sorry Tay," she said, now sounding very miserable. "I-I thought it was going to work and then it didn't, and now I feel like it's all my fault-" She broke off abruptly and started crying.

"Jess," Taylor said, trying to get our sister's attention. Either she ignored him or plain didn't hear him. "Jessica *Grace!*" he said in what was essentially a very loud stage whisper. Hearing her full

name got her attention, and Jessica broke off crying. "Jess, this isn't your fault," Taylor continued, reverting to his former tone of voice. "I mean it. It's just something that happens sometimes. The fact that you were even willing to try means everything to me. Okay?" Jessica nodded unsurely. "I don't want you blaming yourself, or anyone for that matter. I just..." He trailed off, frowning – I could tell he was trying to figure out what to tell our sister. "I just got unlucky, Jess," he said finally. "That's all."

Before I realised it, the ten minutes were up. Taylor had already started dozing by this point, so Jessica and I left the room as quietly as possible. It wasn't hard to tell that seeing our brother looking sicker than he had in a long time had deeply affected her – she looked at the linoleum floor as she stripped off her protective gear, biting her bottom lip and blinking furiously.

"Jess?" I asked softly, and she finally looked at me. She had tears brimming in her brown eyes, tears that threatened to spill over at any moment. "He'll be okay, Jess," I said, trying to reassure her.

"Don't lie to me, Aidan," she said. "I'm not a little girl anymore. I'll be fifteen in July – that's more than old enough to figure things out." She rolled the gown, gloves and mask she had worn into a ball and pitched the bundle into a nearby hamper. "He *won't* be okay. You heard what Dr. Beckett said – all she can do now is try to stop it killing him so fast. He's going to die, Ayd." With those words, the first tears began tracking their way down her face. "He's going to die, and there's nothing anyone can do about it." She let out a tiny sob. "I'm going to lose my big brother..."

"Hey..." I lowered myself into a crouch and took Jessica's hands in my own. "He's going to fight this," I told her. "I promise. I'm not going to let him give up, not without one hell of a fight."

My sister looked at me. "Don't make a promise you can't keep, Aidan," she said quietly. With those words, she slipped her hands from mine and walked away down the corridor.

* * *

The scene that had been playing out on the television screen faded out, and I pressed the stop button on the remote control. May was half over by this point – Taylor had come home from the hospital only a week earlier, and life in the Hanson household was beginning to regain a sense of normality. Or as normal as it could get, anyway, when one of our number was seriously ill. I had taken to spending a lot of my spare time out of the house since Dr. Beckett had broken the bad news to us – not because I wanted to avoid my brother after he came home, but because I spent most of my afternoons over at my old high school working on a project for my youngest sister.

It had been Taylor's idea to begin with. What scared him the most about the ordeal he was going through wasn't the disease itself – rather, his fear lay in the very real possibility that he wouldn't be around to see Zoë grow up. And so he had come up with the idea of going through our father's collection of home movies to make a DVD for our sister to watch when she was older. It was a good idea, and in the beginning we had worked on it together. But as the weeks went by, and Taylor progressively got sicker, I had taken on more and more of the project until it had become a solo effort.

And now...it was complete. Two hours of clips had been copied from what seemed like thousands of camcorder tapes onto a DVD that, barring anything unforeseen, would last until the day that Zoë would watch it for the very first time, thirteen years from now.

The door behind me opened as I ejected the DVD from the player, and I looked behind me to see my old English teacher, Ms. Keyte, stepping into the room. She smiled at me, and I returned the smile before beginning to pack everything away.

"All done?" she asked.

"All done," I confirmed. I started to box up the last of the tapes that I'd needed to complete the project. "Thanks for letting me come in to work on it. I don't have any editing equipment at home."

"It's no problem at all, Aidan. Anything for one of my favourite students." Ms. Keyte came further into the room and picked up the case I'd slotted the DVD into. "What exactly have you been working on?" she asked as she looked it over.

"My brother and I have been working together on a project for our youngest sister," I answered. "He has leukaemia, and there's a chance he won't survive it. He doesn't know if she'll remember him should that happen, so he came up with the idea of putting together a DVD for her to watch when she's older. He's going to ask our parents to keep it for her until she turns eighteen."

"And this brother would be Taylor, correct?"

"Yeah, that's right," I answered. When I looked at my old teacher in slight confusion, she smiled mysteriously.

"I've been a teacher at this school since the three of you were in Year 7 together," she informed me. "It's common knowledge among the teaching staff that, entirely aside from the three of you being some of the brightest students to ever graduate from Sapphire Cove High, the youngest Hanson triplet has a list of health problems as long as my arm. Not only that, but your mother teaches here on a casual basis, and generally the only times she doesn't come in are when she takes care of your brother."

"Oh. That would explain it." I zipped up the case that held Dad's video camera, which I'd packed the camera into while Ms. Keyte had been talking, and got up from my chair. "I'm hoping he does get through this, though it's mostly for Ebony's sake than anything else." At Ms. Keyte's raised eyebrow, I said, "The two of them are nearly inseparable. The three of us are pretty close with one another, but it's rare that Ebony and Taylor are separated for more than a few hours. She's taking this hard as it is, but if Taylor doesn't make it through in the end..." I shook my head. "I can't imagine what it's going to do to her."

It didn't take me long to get home, most likely because I had driven rather than walk or skateboard. The sight that greeted me as I entered the lounge room was one that had become all too familiar over the past week – Taylor had parked himself on the lounge in front of the TV, watching a repeat of *The Simpsons*. I dropped my backpack and Dad's video camera on the floor next to the coffee table, and he looked up at me. "You missed dinner," he informed me as he shifted his focus back to the TV.

"Hello to you too," I replied. My brother's only response to this was a shrug. "How're you feeling?"

"Don't ask."

"Oh, I see." I crouched down beside my backpack and unzipped it. From the back pocket I drew out the case that contained our finished project. "So I suppose you don't want to watch *this*, then?" I dangled the DVD case in his line of sight, and I stifled a chuckle as his focus locked straight onto it.

"It's finished?" he asked, sounding more excited than he had in a while.

"Yep. You want to watch it?"

"Oh, that's a stupid question." Taylor eased himself upright and swivelled around so that he was facing the TV. "Of course I do!"

I grinned. "Thought you might." I crossed over to the TV cabinet, switched on the DVD player and dropped the disc into the tray.

"Get *on* with it," Taylor said impatiently.

"Oh, pull your head in," I shot back. I closed the disc tray and sat down next to Taylor. He changed the channel on the TV so we could watch the DVD, and I hit the play button on the DVD remote.

The first two hours of the disc was taken up with video clips, organised into roughly chronological order, with the very first clip taken on the day that the three of us had started kindergarten. It

was still unbelievable to me how young we had been back then, half a decade before hell had broken loose for the first time.

"Is that us?" Taylor asked. He sounded rather shocked.

"You don't remember that?" I asked, and he shook his head.

Before I realised it, the second-to-last video clip was playing – it had been taken from a tape labelled Christmas 2005. The final clip was a message that had been filmed not long after Taylor had approached me with his idea. "I'm not sure I want to see this last one," my brother said as the Christmas video faded out.

"Relax, Tay. You've got nothing to worry about." He looked over at me, a look of disbelief on his face, and I smiled at him. "It's just a video clip."

For a short while, the screen was blank, with the date *15/02/06* displayed in white text in the lower right hand corner. Disembodied voices drifted out of the TV's speakers. It had taken me some time to figure out how to work the video camera. I hid a smile at the thought of what Zoë might think of my filming skills.

"C'mon Aidan, hurry *up*..."

Taylor's voice was the first I heard. It was followed swiftly by my own.

"Hold on Tay, this camera's a bitch to figure out." An image popped up onscreen. "Okay, you ready?"

"I think so."

Beside me, my brother snorted. "You're going to make a fine cameraman one day."

"Shut up and watch it, would you?"

With those words, the onscreen version of my brother began to speak.

"Hey Zoë. You probably don't remember me all that well – I'm Taylor, Aidan and Ebony's younger triplet brother. And I...I'm not around anymore, as you've probably been able to guess. Mum and Dad will have talked to you about that, I assume, so I won't go into it. You'd probably be about eighteen if you're watching this now, which means that our parents have kept this DVD safe for you for the last thirteen years.

"I don't expect you to remember who I am – memories don't last forever. I should know, because I don't remember the first ten years of my life. If you don't, hopefully the clips that Aidan's put together will fill in most of the gaps. If you *do* remember me, then I hope you've enjoyed watching this anyway." My brother's onscreen representation paused for a little while. "Shit, can I start over? I screwed up."

"Tay, just relax," my voice said. "You're doing fine. There's plenty of tape left. Take your time."

When Taylor next spoke, his voice was softer than it had been previously.

"I wish I could have been there to see you grow up. I really do. I know I missed out on so much, and I'm so sorry. You learned what death was earlier than you should have – that's something that no kid should ever have to go through. But...you can't fight fate, Zo – when your number's up, it's up. And I guess my number came up earlier than I would have liked it to."

He didn't say anything for some time. When he finally did, it was obvious that he was trying to not cry – his voice shook slightly as he spoke.

"I love you so much, Zoë," he said softly. "I love you more than you will ever know. If there's something you want from life, and you want it badly enough, go for it. I'll always be with you. I'll never leave you – I promise." A few seconds later, the screen went blank.

I hit the stop button on the remote and ejected the DVD. "You okay, Tay?" I asked.

"No, I'm not," he answered. I looked at him, and I wasn't surprised to see that he was close to tears. "How do you think I *feel*, Aidan? I hate the fact that she's never going to understand why

this happened, because there's no explanation for it. Absolutely none. I've been going through absolute hell, and I can't even explain it."

"Where're you going?" I asked as he got to his feet.

"I need to think – *alone*. I need to get my head around this somehow."

He didn't even make it out of the room before falling to his knees and breaking down completely. I got up from the lounge and went over to him, kneeling on the floor beside him and pulling him close.

"It's not fair," he cried. "Aidan it's not *fair*..."

I didn't say a word, because he had given voice to my exact thoughts.

Chapter 19

Ebony

The rest of May was uneventful, particularly when compared to what had already happened this year. I welcomed the shift back to relative normalcy – an undercurrent of tense anticipation was noticeable, as it had been for much of the year already, but no more than any of us were used to. And as much as I hated seeing my brother so sick from his chemotherapy, I was grateful for one thing – it was keeping him alive.

At the beginning of the month, Stephanie dropped by – she usually came to see Taylor a few times a week, so I thought nothing of it. This time however, she didn't just come to spend time with her boyfriend.

"Ebony, can I talk to you?" she asked as she took off her jacket.

"Yeah, of course you can." I nodded toward the stairs. "You want me to grab my brother or something?"

"No, this is between you and me." Stephanie gave me a sweet smile, one that immediately set off alarm bells in my head. "I will want to talk to him later, though not right now."

"Well...okay," I said unsurely. "Kitchen okay with you?"

"Lead the way," Stephanie replied.

We seated ourselves at the tiny wooden table that had stood in the kitchen for as long as I could remember, facing each other. While I waited for her to start talking, I studied the band that she wore on her left ring finger. It was white gold with two diamonds and a blue topaz set into it, the latter representing her birthstone – the promise ring that I'd helped Taylor to pick out nearly six months earlier. That she still wore it was a good sign in my books – she wasn't about to break up with him.

"So what did you want to talk to me about?" I asked.

She held up her hand. "You know what this ring means, right?"

I nodded. "My brother's promised to marry you one day."

"Right in one." She lowered her hand. "The original plan was to go out to a jeweller's after Christmas this year to pick out an engagement ring, assuming we still wanted to do it. But with everything that's happened this year, we've both realised that if we wait that long, we might not get engaged at all, let alone married." She traced a scorch mark from the bottom of someone's coffee cup with a finger. "What I want to know first of all is if you've ever heard of something called a commitment ceremony."

"Very vaguely."

"It's sort of like a traditional marriage, but it's not legally binding. You don't have to register it, for one thing, and anyone can conduct it. It's usually gay and lesbian couples who have them, because they're not allowed to get married" here she rolled her eyes and muttered 'stupid fucking politicians' "but sometimes couples like your brother and I decide a traditional wedding isn't really their cup of tea, for whatever reason."

"And you're telling me this *because...*" I prompted.

"Taylor and I have talked at length about this, mostly over the phone and instant messages, and we've decided that we don't *want* to wait to get married." She grinned. "We're going to hold a commitment ceremony instead. Even though it's not going to be a *real* wedding, we'll need someone to officiate, and I'm going to need a maid of honour." She then looked right at me. "Ebony, would you be my maid of honour?"

I blinked. "Y-you want *me* to be your maid of honour?"

Stephanie nodded emphatically. "I do." She leaned forward and reached across to me, covering my hands with hers. "I'm asking you not only as my friend, but also as my future sister. It would be an honour to have you at my side."

"I...I don't know what to say," I admitted. "I never expected this..."

"You *could* say yes," Stephanie said cheekily. She sobered rather quickly and added, "Seriously though, there is nobody else I would rather share it with. Well, aside from Taylor of course," she amended.

"You might want to be careful he doesn't hear you saying that," I said dryly.

She cracked a smile at this. "You don't have to give me an answer right now," she said. "Think it over for a few days, and then let me know if you'll do it. I will need an answer by next week, though – we need to start planning everything."

"Okay," I agreed. "Have you set a date yet?"

"That was the first thing we decided. It's going to be held on July fourteenth."

I tried to remember what had happened on the fourteenth of July, remembering the significance of that date after about half a minute. "Isn't that the day you two started going out?"

"My, aren't we a smart one," Stephanie quipped. With these words she stood and moved away from the table. "I mean what I said," she said before leaving the kitchen. "I would be truly honoured if you would say yes."

And having said that, she exited the kitchen, leaving me to think over all that she had said.

* * *

A few afternoons later, a quiet knock sounded at my bedroom door. The house was quiet today – Dad and Aidan were out at work, Mum had gone shopping and Zac and Jessica were at school, so

it was just Taylor, Zoë and I at home. I knew my brother was in his room, most probably resting, and that Zoë was amusing herself in her bedroom, so I had taken this rare opportunity to catch up on my reading. I had called Stephanie just before lunch to tell her that I would be her maid of honour at the ceremony in July, news that had apparently made her day, and so now the rest of the day was mine to do with as I pleased.

"Come in!" I called, answering the knock.

The door creaked open, quiet footsteps padded across the wooden floor, and something started pulling on the left sleeve of my shirt. I looked away from my book to see Zoë standing next to my bed. "Oh, hey Zo," I said as I made a quick note of the page I was up to. "What's up?"

"Tay won't play with me," she said quietly, twisting the hem of her dress in one of her little hands.

"I asked him but he said no."

I sat up, placing my book on my night table as I did so. "Zoë, Tay's very sick at the moment," I said gently. "Sometimes he can't play with you, as much as I know he would love to. And this is one of those sometimes."

"Am I gonna get sick too?"

I shook my head. "I promise that you won't," I assured her. "Tay just got unlucky, that's all." I studied my little sister for a minute or so, then patted a spot next to me. "Hop up here." Zoë climbed up beside me, and I explained, "Zo, the medicine that Tay's taking makes him feel very sick, but he needs to take it – he'll get much sicker if he doesn't." I deliberately omitted the fact that if he stopped the chemotherapy, it would likely be a matter of weeks, if not days, before his illness claimed him. "He'll be feeling better in a few days," I promised her. "Okay? Ask him again to play with you then." I was about to go back to my reading, but thought better of it. "Actually, how do you feel about a story? I'm sure that Tay wouldn't mind hearing one as well – it might

make him feel a little bit better.” Zoë nodded eagerly, and I grinned. “I thought that might be the case. You go and pick something out for me, and I’ll go have a chat with him.”

While Zoë was busy picking out a story for me to read, I went into Aidan and Taylor’s room. Taylor was sitting cross-legged against the side of his bed, thumbing through a thick book. He looked up as I entered. “What’s up?” I asked him. He didn’t say a word, merely shrugging as he returned his attention to the book in his lap. I recognised it immediately – it was the memory book that our parents had been keeping for the past twenty years, a record of the lives of my triplet brothers and I. It was filled with two decades’ worth of photographs, drawings and other little mementos. Each of the children in our family had one, but our parents had combined the books belonging to Aidan, Taylor and I into one. This meant that not only was the book thicker than the rest, it was also much heavier. “You feeling okay?” I asked as I settled myself down next to my brother.

“I’m just tired,” he answered. As if to prove his point, he yawned quietly.

It didn’t take me long to notice that he had stopped flipping through the book, and had turned back to the first page. This page was taken up mostly with a large photograph of the three of us, taken on the evening of our Year 12 Formal a year and a half earlier. The three of us stood at the foot of the staircase in our house, dressed in our best formal outfits. I had worn a long dark red strapless satin gown and a matching wrap, my long dark hair cascading over my shoulders in waves. Aidan and Taylor stood flanking me, both dressed in black suits and ties – Aidan’s shirt was dark green, and Taylor’s was blue. Beneath the photograph was written:

Evan Aidan Hanson

March 14 1986 – 10:40am

Ebony Jade Hanson

March 14 1986 – 10:45am

Jordan Taylor Hanson

March 14 1986 – 11:07am

It was our full names, our shared birthday, and the individual times we'd each been born, penned in our mother's handwriting.

While I waited for Zoë to come running in with the book she wanted me to read from, Taylor and I went through the book, together turning page after page. A fair few pages, fourteen in total, were taken up by class photographs from preschool, primary school and high school. The story was the same for each photograph, from 1991 all the way through to 2004 – I sat in the dead centre of the front row, with Aidan at my right and Taylor at my left. "I remember that one," Taylor said quietly as I turned to our Year 10 class photo. "You kicked up the biggest fuss about having to sit in the front row again." He laughed a little.

"Well, wouldn't you if you'd been in the front row for every class photo since preschool?" I asked as I glanced over at him. Sometime during the past few minutes he had rested his head on my left shoulder, and his eyes had dropped to half-mast. "All right, that's enough for now," I decided, and closed the book. "You need to get some rest."

"I'm not tired," he protested. This was said through a jaw-popping yawn, and I hid a smile.

"Says he who nearly dislocated his jaw yawning," I retorted playfully.

"You sound like Mum."

"And that's a bad thing how?" As I asked this, the bedroom door opened again, and in crept Zoë. She carried a book that was nearly as big as her. "Did you pick a story out?" I asked, and she nodded. "Well, come on then." To Taylor I said, "You get into bed, and I'm going to read Zoë a story; maybe that'll get you to drop off for a little while."

When we were all settled, I took the book from Zoë and examined the cover. The title of the story that had been chosen was *The Nightingale*, by Hans Christian Andersen. It was one of my favourite fairy tales.

"The Emperor's palace was the wonder of the world," I said to begin the story. "It was made entirely of fine porcelain, extremely expensive but so delicate that you could touch it only with the greatest of care. In the garden the rarest flowers bloomed, and to the prettiest ones were tied little silver bells which tinkled so that no one could pass by without noticing them..."

By the time I was halfway through the story, Taylor had fallen asleep, and Zoë was well on the way there. "We'll finish it later," I decided quietly, and I closed the book after making a note of the page. I eased myself to my feet, bending down to pick Zoë up after I'd worked all the stiffness out of my joints, and took my sister and the book back down the hall to her room. Once I'd settled her in her bed for a nap, I returned to my brothers' room.

I must have lost track of time completely, for when the door creaked open behind me I started in surprise. I spun around to see my father stepping into the room. "You scared the shit outta me," I whispered. "Warn me next time, will you?"

"So this is where you've been all afternoon," he said quietly, so as not to wake Taylor up.

"Yeah, mostly. Zoë came to tell me that Taylor wouldn't play with her, which ended up in me reading a story to the both of them. He was tired anyway, I just made sure he actually got some sleep." I watched my brother sleep for a little while. "He's so sick, Dad," I said softly. "How much of this can one person take?"

"I'm starting to wonder that myself." He came up next to me and slipped an arm around my shoulders. "Come on – it's time for dinner. Your mother sent me up here to get you."

"It's that late?"

"It is," Dad confirmed. "You need to start wearing a watch if you're going to keep losing track of time."

I mock-scowled at him, but allowed myself to be led out of the room and downstairs to join the rest of the family.

* * *

At the end of June, I was heading back to my bedroom when I saw a strip of light painting the floor in front of Zoë's bedroom door golden. Being that Zoë usually slept with a nightlight on, this was actually pretty normal, but I felt it was worth checking out regardless.

The sight that greeted as I eased my youngest sister's bedroom door open was one that had become all too familiar over the last couple of months. Sitting in the old wooden rocking chair at the end of Zoë's bed was Taylor – for the third night in a row, he had Zoë curled up in his lap and was fast asleep, bandanna askew. But as was his habit, as soon as I got within arm's reach he woke right up.

"You really must have been tired," I kidded as I picked Zoë up and moved her into her bed. She didn't awaken once as I pulled the quilt over her.

"Yeah, well, I'm sick," was the reply. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him trying to stand up, and I immediately went to his side. "I'm not a fucking invalid," he said in an angry whisper, but allowed me to help him to his feet. "I hate not being able to do things on my own." He sounded very resigned as he said this.

"Yeah, I know you do." I wasn't just saying this to placate him – Taylor had always been fiercely independent, and I knew how much he disliked being reliant on others.

We were both silent as we headed down the hallway. Right as we drew level with my brothers' bedroom door Taylor's knees buckled, and only my arm around his shoulders kept him standing. "Easy there," I cautioned, before realising that he had started to cry. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"How is this fair, Ebony?" he asked me in a tear-choked whisper. "What the hell did I ever do to deserve this?"

I didn't say anything at first. Instead I eased him down onto the floor and sat down next to him, keeping an arm around his shoulders. "You did nothing," I whispered. "Nothing at all. The universe just has a very sick sense of humour."

After what seemed an eternity of sitting in the hallway, I helped Taylor to stand back up. "C'mon, let's get you back to bed," I whispered.

We moved into my brothers' room, and I switched on Aidan's desk lamp before leading Taylor across to his bed. "Can I ask you to promise me something?" I asked quietly.

"Depends on what that promise is." He lay down and pulled his blankets over himself. "I'm not going to break the law, for instance."

"I'd never ask you to do that." I lowered myself to my knees next to his bed so that I could look into his tired eyes. "Promise me that you'll never stop fighting this. I can't fathom the idea of life without you – it's unthinkable."

"You'll have to eventually," he reminded me. "Nobody lives forever."

"I know that. Just...not anytime soon, okay? Please?"

He seemed to consider this for a little while. "Okay," he agreed. "I promise."

"Thank you," I whispered. He smiled a little before drifting off to sleep, his eyes sliding closed.

I sat there for a little while longer, just watching him. His guard had dropped again, and for the first time in so long I saw the exhaustion, the pain and the utter misery I knew he had to be feeling etched in clear relief on his face. All this shit – the leukaemia, the chemotherapy, the knowledge that he was slowly getting sicker – was wearing at him to the point where he was little more than

a thread frayed dangerously thin, and the slightest amount of pressure would cause that thread to snap. He was just too young to have to deal with any of this.

Before I went to sleep, I said a short prayer.

"Please heal my brother," I whispered as I lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling. "I know there's a reason for everything, but I can't see the reason in this. He doesn't deserve what he's going through." I swallowed hard. "I honestly don't know how much more of this he can take..."

Chapter 20

Taylor

"Mum, can I talk to you?"

One thing that I had always been able to count on was that no matter how busy she was, or what she was in the middle of doing, my mother always had time to sit down and talk with me. Especially when I was having trouble sleeping. Right now, she was in the middle of thumbing through the newspaper, a half-drunk cup of coffee near her right hand. It was late at night on a Wednesday at the beginning of July.

"Taylor, you should be in bed," Mum told me without looking up from the paper.

"Yeah, I know that." I scratched the back of my left hand. "But I can't sleep."

"Ah." Mum picked up her coffee cup and drained it. "What did you want to talk about?"

I sat down next to my mother and reached around to the back of my head, and started playing with the tails of my bandanna. "Do you think I'm being fair on Stephanie?"

"I'm not sure I understand you."

I let out a frustrated sigh. "There's no guarantee I'm even going to live beyond the end of this year, Mum. Dr. Beckett gave me a year at the absolute most – it's been nearly six months. How is that fair on Steph if I'm not even going to be around anymore in twelve months' time?"

For a little while, Mum didn't say a word. "I want you to be honest with me here," she said.

"Exactly how much do you love Stephanie?"

I didn't even have to think about that. "With everything that I am," I answered. "As much as it doesn't sound like I'm being fair to Ebony and Aidan, she's my whole world. I've loved her ever since we met."

"And if I recall correctly, you asked her to marry you before you even found out that you were sick. Right?"

"I didn't ask her to marry me," I corrected. "I *promised* to marry her when the time was right."

"The intent was the same, correct?" I nodded at this. "What do you think would be the most unfair to her, then – your life ending, or you going back on your promise?"

It didn't take being a genius to figure out where she was going with this. "Going back on my promise."

"There you go, then." She grasped hold of my hands. "I know why you chose not to try again, and I do understand," she said, referring to what had happened back in March and April. "But I do hope you reconsider before..." Here she trailed off.

"Before it's too late," I said, completing the sentence, and Mum nodded. "I'm not sure I can, to be honest. It..." I swallowed hard as I remembered what it had been like. "It was sheer hell. I don't want to go through that ever again." I suddenly felt cold, and I rubbed my arms in an attempt to warm myself up. "You weren't there that night," I said quietly. "You only heard about it afterwards. If I go through with it, and it happens again..." I shook my head, not wanting to even think about it.

As I spoke those words, Mum stood up. "I'm going to make you some tea," she said, sounding very decisive. Soon enough, the kitchen was filled with the sound of water bubbling away in the electric kettle, followed by steel striking pottery. In less than ten minutes, a mug of tea had been placed before me, with a carton of milk and the sugar bowl within close reach. I immediately reached for the milk and poured a bit into my tea, followed by a few teaspoons of sugar.

"Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?" Mum asked once I had made a decent start on my tea.

"I've been thinking about what Steph's aunt said the last time we met with her," I replied. "She suggested that Steph and I write our own vows for the ceremony, but I'm not so sure that's a good idea."

"Why not? You're very creative – I've read quite a bit of what you wrote in your English and Music classes during high school, your poetry and your song lyrics, and they have a true power behind them. They would put many professional poets and songwriters to shame."

"It's not that, Mum. I know I can write. It's just..." I tapped the side of my mug. "I haven't been able to write a thing since March. I've never had this much trouble writing before – it's like I'm in the middle of a thick fog, and it's affecting my muse. I have an incredible amount of ideas up here" I tapped my right temple "but the bridge between my brain and my fingers has been broken. It's so frustrating that it's unbelievable." I didn't speak for a little while. "I do have a song I wrote for her last year," I said quietly, "only I don't know how she would react to it. I know she dislikes anything to do with romance, but I don't really see this as something romantic – it's just me telling her how much she means to me."

I looked up from my hands to see Mum studying me. "I'd like to hear it," she said. "Or read, whatever is more comfortable for you."

"I'm not much up to singing," I replied. It was the unvarnished truth. Because I was still undergoing chemotherapy, I continued to experience some rather unpleasant side effects – and one of those side effects was that I threw up nearly everything I ate. More often than not, the after-effects not only made speaking rather difficult and slightly painful, but it also made singing near impossible. "But I can go and get my lyrics book – I wrote it in there when I decided I wanted to keep it."

I dashed upstairs as fast as I could (which, admittedly, wasn't all that fast) and into my room, and began rummaging around in my desk drawers in search of the book that contained every set of lyrics that I had ever written. It was a fairly non-descript hardcover notebook with a plain blue cover that, to anyone else, would have looked like nothing special. To me, however, it represented

who I had been, and who I had become – it was my identity. I had bought it when I was thirteen years old, and it was almost complete – I had just a few pages left to fill. I eventually found it buried beneath some old papers I hadn't yet got around to trashing, and headed back downstairs.

"It's at the back," I said quietly as I placed the book on the table before my mother. "Don't laugh, please."

"I would never laugh at you," Mum informed me, her tone slightly chastising. "How long have you been keeping this?"

"Seven years. I've only now come anywhere close to filling it."

Nothing more was said as Mum read through the song I'd written for Stephanie. I'd also included the music for the song, written down in notation as well as tablature, which was something I had never done before. It wasn't that I *couldn't* compose music – rather, I had little patience for it. I was far more interested in getting the words out on paper than I was in sitting at my piano jotting down notes on staves. Most of the music I wrote had nothing to do with my lyrics – I wrote it completely independent of that process, with no particular set of lyrics in mind. But this song was different – I'd felt a real need to make sure it was complete. It being my gift to Stephanie, I felt it would be an insult to her if it was unfinished.

To my surprise, instead of giving my book back to me when she was finished reading, Mum stood up. "Would you play this for me?" she asked.

"What for?"

"I'd like to hear it, Jordan," she said, using my first name. "Entirely aside from that, I haven't heard you play in a long time – it's something I enjoy hearing."

It was reason enough for me, and so I led the way into the sunroom. I hadn't been in here for at least a year – I had been so focused on fighting for my life that one of my greatest passions had fallen by the wayside.

"I'm not sure I remember how to play," I admitted as I lifted the lid that protected the piano keys from dust. My piano was old, a hand-me-down from my grandmother, and so I was more careful to keep it tuned and in good condition than I would be otherwise. My illnesses over the last couple of years had prevented me from taking proper care of it, so Mum had taken over that particular task for me.

"Why don't you try anyway?" Mum suggested. "You may surprise yourself." I looked back toward her, and she smiled at me.

I opened my lyrics book and took out the folded sheets of composition paper, propping them up where I could easily read the notes. Before I even attempted to play the song, I ran through a few simple scales that I remembered from Music classes in high school. When I was done, I fixed my gaze on my music, took a deep breath and began to play.

When I had finished playing the song through, I sat back slightly and looked up at my mother. When I saw the smile on her face, I knew that she approved.

"That was absolutely beautiful, Taylor," she said softly. "The world is going to lose so much when you leave us." She put her hands on my shoulders. "But this family will lose so much more."

My mother's words left me speechless – she had never said anything like that to me before. I just stared at her, unable to form any sort of coherent response.

Mum seemed to understand, for she helped me to stand up and drew me close. And in her embrace I cried. I cried not only for all that my family and friends stood to lose, but for everything that if I didn't survive this, I would be robbed of – the chance to find out who I would eventually become, the opportunity to spend more than a handful of years at Stephanie's side, and following in my parents' footsteps by starting a family of my own. And it was all because Fate had decided that I made a wonderful dartboard for target practice.

I shifted uneasily where I stood next to Stephanie's aunt Elizabeth, eyeing both my family and those who were to become my family. It was the day that Stephanie and I had been waiting for – this afternoon, she and I would swear our love for one another before our respective families. And while it wasn't a wedding in the strictest sense, there was one tradition we had chosen to follow – neither of us had spoken to or set eyes upon the other in about half a week. I had missed her like crazy during our separation, but after today only death would separate us – we would never have to be apart again.

"I am so fucking nervous," I said *sotto voce* to Aidan, who stood at my left side. As Stephanie had asked Ebony to be her maid of honour, so I had asked Aidan to be my best man.

"You think you're the only one?" Aidan replied just as quietly. "I've been worrying for about the last week that I'm going to fuck this up somehow."

I snorted softly. "*You*, fuck something up? That'll be the day." Aidan's only response was a sour look, and I chuckled softly.

The music that had been playing in the background changed, and my attention immediately snapped to the end of the long aisle that stretched out before me. I knew that Ebony would be the first to walk down the aisle, followed closely by Stephanie. We were keeping it low-key on purpose, as neither Stephanie nor I was too keen on anything that was too over the top. As far as the two of us were concerned, the simpler things were, the better.

And sure enough, Ebony was first down the aisle – she wore a long red strapless dress with a matching rose tucked behind her right ear and a red shawl draped around her shoulders, and carried a small bouquet of red and white roses. As she caught my eye she grinned nervously and stepped up the pace slightly, coming up to take her place at Elizabeth's right. She gestured for me to step back slightly.

"You should see Steph," she said softly. "She looks absolutely gorgeous." She gave me a smile. "I really hope you realise just how lucky you are."

I do, I thought as I resumed my original position. *And I thank God every single day that I have her.*

As that thought ended, Stephanie started her journey down the aisle, and I felt my breath catch in my throat. 'Gorgeous' did not even do her justice. She was absolutely stunning – her dress was white and reached down to her ankles, with a matching rose behind her left ear and a white shawl around her shoulders. The bouquet she carried was solid white.

"Hey beautiful," I whispered as she drew up alongside me. "If we weren't out in public..." I trailed off and grinned devilishly at her, letting her imagine how I would have ended that sentence.

"You don't look so bad yourself," she whispered back. "I must say, you can look quite dashing when you want to." I felt my face start to burn at this, and Stephanie smothered a giggle.

Anything else we might have said was forestalled by Elizabeth raising her hands, a signal that read quite plainly 'shut the hell up or there'll be the devil to pay'. The hum of conversation died down quickly, allowing Stephanie's aunt to begin the proceedings.

"We have gathered here on this day to celebrate the love that Taylor and Stephanie have for each other, and to recognise and witness their decision to journey forward together in their lives. We gather to support them as they embark upon their voyage of discovery. Let us also be there for them throughout their partnership.

"The words we say today have no magic or prophetic powers. The power of these vows is merely a reflection of a reality that already exists in the hearts and minds of these two people." To Stephanie and I, she said, "Taylor and Stephanie, nothing I can say, or nothing you can say to each other, will ensure a long and happy, satisfying and committed partnership. Only your love for one another, and your integrity to make your commitment real can do that."

She next addressed the rows of our friends and relatives. "Honoured guests, you have been invited here today to represent the families and friends that have brought Taylor and Stephanie to this point in their lives. They have asked you to join them out of their love and respect for you. As part of the community that surrounds Taylor and Stephanie, do you offer your love and support to strengthen their partnership and bless this family created by their union?"

As one, our friends and relatives replied, "Yes, we do." She seemed satisfied by this, and continued by next addressing our respective parents.

"To the parents of Taylor and Stephanie, congratulations on the part you have played in raising a son and a daughter of such serious purpose. They accept a very mature and meaningful task in taking on this partnership. On their behalf, and on behalf of all those gathered here, I thank you. I remind you that it is more than their blood that is joined here. It is yours as well. Although Taylor and Stephanie have embarked on this partnership through personal choice, it will be enriched by the families from which they come." She turned slightly to face her left, which was where Stephanie's family was seated. "With this in mind, I ask you, Stephanie's parents, to take this man, Taylor, into your hearts, that he might live from this day as your son, for he is dear and beloved to Stephanie and shall be so to you and your family. Do you?"

In unison, Stephen and Annemarie replied, "We do."

"And of you, Taylor's parents, I ask the same. I ask that you take this woman, Stephanie, into your hearts, that she might live from this day as your daughter, for she is dear and beloved to Taylor, and shall be so to you and your family. Do you?"

Mum and Dad's reply was identical to that of Stephanie's parents. "We do."

"Stephanie, hold this man as a gift," Elizabeth continued. "It is in your love that this man might find a greater understanding of himself. You are asked to see the good in this man, to accept him for who he is and to strengthen him so that he might realise his full potential." She next spoke to

me. "Taylor, hold this woman close to you, one to be honoured, a treasure of the spirit. You are asked to grow with her in love, and in so loving this woman, she might discover the vast strength and fullness of purpose that blesses you and everyone she touches.

"To the families and friends of Taylor and Stephanie, we ask you to nurture this union with your love and understanding. Help them to keep their hearts open and ever tender, full of forgiveness and compassion, of happiness and light. Help Taylor and Stephanie see that through the love they've discovered in one another, they will no doubt find their way in the world together.

"Before we continue on to the recitation of the vows, Taylor and Stephanie have each prepared a song that they wish to present to one another," Elizabeth said. "Stephanie, if you will?"

"It would be my pleasure," Stephanie replied. She gave me a small, shy smile, before nodding to Ebony. Within seconds a song began to play, not long after which Stephanie began to sing.

"Somethin' in your eyes...makes me wanna lose myself...makes me wanna lose myself in your arms...there's somethin' in your voice...makes my heart beat fast...hope this feeling lasts the rest of my life...

"If you knew how lonely my life has been...and how long I've been so alone...if you knew I wanted someone to come along...and change my life the way you've done...

"It feels like home to me...it feels like home to me...it feels like I'm all the way back where I come from...it feels like home to me...it feels like home to me...it feels like I'm all the way back where I belong...

"A window breaks...down a long, dark street...and a siren wails in the night...but I'm all right...'cause I have you here with me...and I can almost see...through the dark there is light...

"Well if you knew how much this moment means to me...and how long I've waited for your touch...and if you knew how happy you are making me...I never thought that I'd love anyone so much...

"It feels like home to me...it feels like home to me...it feels like I'm all the way back where I come from...it feels like home to me...it feels like home to me...it feels like I'm all the way back where I belong...it feels like I'm all the way back where I belong..."

As the music died away, Stephanie gave me a watery smile, and I knew she had just shared something intensely personal with me – something I gladly accepted. *Thank you*, I mouthed. There was no more time after that to say a word, as I heard the familiar opening notes of the song I had written for Stephanie more than a year earlier.

"You feel like liberation...you give me new sensation...you show me what I need and...you are my life completed..."

"Can't stop, can't break, who's driving...sometimes there's no denying...till today I feel I can't lose...I'm letting go of what I knew..."

"I want you for always...I hear your name in every word I say...I'm a fool and I don't care...I hear your name in every word I say..."

"Before you I was only...what I let control me...you are a revolution...against my own conclusions...till today I feel I can't lose...I'm letting go of what I knew..."

"I want you for always...I hear your name in every word I say...I'm a fool and I don't care...I hear your name in every word I say..."

"And now I say goodbye to the way I used to be...there is no room for question...`cause your name it sets me free...yesterday's troubles harm me...today's are creeping in...so let go of the world around me...`cause your love is all I need..."

"I want you for always...I hear your name in every word I say...I'm a fool and that's okay...I hear your name in every word I say...I want you for always...I hear your name in every word I say...I'm a fool and I don't care...I hear your name in every word I say..."

"Every word I say...every word I say...in every word I say...I hear your name in every word I say...I hear your name in every word I say...I hear your name well all I hear is your name...all I hear is your name...all I hear is your name...and no one can take it away..."

As the final notes died away, Stephanie just looked at me. "Did you write that?" she asked in a whisper.

"Yeah," I replied. "I love you Stephanie Woodcroft, and nothing will ever change that."

All through this little exchange, Elizabeth was studying us very carefully with one eyebrow raised. "If you're *quite* finished," she said dryly, and a ripple of laughter coursed through the gathered crowd. Stephanie and I nodded. "Taylor and Stephanie will now recite the vows they each have written." Elizabeth turned to Stephanie. "Stephanie, if you will?"

Stephanie nodded and took in a deep breath before speaking. "Taylor, you are my one true love, my best friend, my soul mate. You complete my spirit and complement my soul. Today, before our family, our friends and the heavens I pledge my love to you, and promise to share the rest of my life with you," she said, before looking at me expectantly. I cocked an eyebrow at her before reciting my vows, almost identical to Stephanie's own. The sole difference was that I switched my name for hers.

"Stephanie, you are my one true love, my best friend, my soul mate. You complete my spirit and complement my soul. Today, before our family, our friends and the heavens I pledge my love to you, and promise to share the rest of my life with you."

"Taylor and Stephanie, do you promise to trust, respect and celebrate each other?" Elizabeth asked us. "Do you promise to grow together by unselfishly encouraging, appreciating, nurturing and supporting each other? Do you promise to laugh, play and enjoy the simple pleasures together? Do you promise to help each other stay focused on the important things in life? Will

you be there and comfort each other always? Will you be faithful to each other? And will you begin and end each day with the words 'I love you?'"

"I, Stephanie Anne Woodcroft, will honour these promises until the end of time, because when two souls believe their love is forever, the heavens make it so," Stephanie replied.

"I, Jordan Taylor Hanson, will honour these promises until the end of time, because when two souls believe their love is forever, the heavens make it so," I answered. The next part was said in unison between us.

"We swear by peace and love to stand, heart to heart and hand in hand. Mark, O Spirit, and hear us now, confirming this our sacred vow."

What I felt to be the most pivotal part of the ceremony came next, that part being the ring exchange. Ebony and Aidan switched places for this – Ebony came to stand beside me, and Aidan went to stand beside Stephanie. They each held a small ring box.

"Taylor and Stephanie have chosen rings as outward symbols of the commitment they make today," Elizabeth said, addressing the gathered crowd. "From earliest times, the ring has been a symbol of love. An unbroken and never-ending circle symbolises a commitment to love that is also never ending." Having said this, she addressed me by saying, "Taylor, take the ring which you have selected, place it on Stephanie's finger, and say to her these words: this ring, a gift for you, symbolises my desire that you be my partner from this day forward."

I nodded quickly and took the ring from Ebony, sliding it onto Stephanie's left ring finger as I recited, "This ring, a gift for you, symbolises my desire that you be my partner from this day forward."

"Stephanie, take the ring which you have selected," Elizabeth continued, now addressing her niece, "place it on Taylor's finger, and say to him these words: this ring, a gift for you, symbolises

my desire that you be my partner from this day forward." This Stephanie did, speaking the words I had spoken myself as she placed the band on my left ring finger.

"Let these rings serve not as locks binding you together," Elizabeth said as Ebony and Aidan resumed their previous positions, "but as keys, unlocking the secrets of your hearts for each other to know, and thus bringing you closer together forever."

To conclude the ceremony, Elizabeth said, "Taylor and Stephanie, let me express the feeling of all here in the words of an Indian marriage poem: 'Now you will feel no rain, for each of you will be shelter to the other. Now you will feel no cold, for each of you will be warmth to the other. Now there is no more loneliness. Now you are two persons, but there is only one life before you. Go now to your dwelling place, to enter into the days of your life together. And may your days be good and long upon the earth.'"

"So can I kiss him now?" Stephanie asked, and a wave of laughter erupted.

"Yes, Stephanie, you can kiss him now," Elizabeth replied, sounding very amused.

"Excellent." Stephanie gave me a very feral grin and pulled me close to her. My hands automatically went to rest on her lower back, and we kissed as if our very lives depended on it.

"So does this make me a Hanson now?" she asked as we broke apart.

"Steph, as far as I'm concerned," I replied as we turned to walk back down the aisle together, hand in hand, "you always *were* a Hanson. This just cements it."

Stephanie looked up at me and gave me a very sweet smile. "Have I ever told you how much I love you?"

"Every day, Steph. Every day."

Chapter 21

Aidan

At the very beginning of August, my whole world came crashing down once more. Nearly eight months had passed since we'd received the news that had changed our lives forever, and nearly four since the failed attempt at saving Taylor's life. Between April and August the sole high point had been the fourteenth of July, the day that my brother and his girlfriend had stood up before the Hanson and Woodcroft families to publicly swear their love for one another. Their union had no legal backing or standing, but it hadn't stopped them acting as if they were married. Not by any means. With Dr. Beckett's full blessing, they had spent the last week of July away together up in Surfers Paradise, and both of them wore a ring on their left ring fingers to signify their commitment to one another. They were now in the middle of trying to figure out their living situation, which involved a great deal of discussion.

By some stroke of luck, both Mum and Dad were home that day. Ebony and I spent our weekends at home nowadays, and during the week we were careful to make sure at least one of the older members of the family stayed at home. This was not only so Taylor was never alone, but so we could keep an eye on him in case something happened. If he had been the only one home at the time, I dread to think what might have happened.

He had been sitting on the lounge watching a DVD with Zoë right before everything pretty much went to hell. Over the last week he had been feeling more worn out and rundown than usual, which of course worried us all – how could it not? Mum was the most worried, and had been completely prepared to take Taylor to see Dr. Beckett if he got any worse. It would only have been as a precaution, but these days there was no such thing as being too careful.

As I came downstairs from the bedroom I shared with Taylor, I saw him get up off the lounge and start heading toward the kitchen. He moved as if he were drunk, swaying slightly from side to

side as he walked, his movements unsure. With each step he took I saw him wince – he looked as if he were in pain, which I knew wasn't a good sign.

"Tay," I called out. He didn't answer or give any sign that he had even heard me, so I tried again. This time my tone took on a sense of warning. "Taylor, what the hell are you doing?"

"Aidan, I can hear you all the way in the kitchen," Ebony said as she came into the lounge room. She was wiping her hands on a tea towel as she walked. "What are you bitching about now?"

I ignored her in favour of continuing to track Taylor's movements. He was now leaning against the wall nearest the kitchen entrance, holding himself up with his left hand. He had his right arm wrapped around himself, and was bent over slightly with his eyes tightly closed. "Make it stop," he was whispering, almost as if he were pleading. "Oh God please make it *stop...*"

Those were the last words he spoke before he pitched forward and collapsed.

I darted forward the instant I saw him fall, managing to catch him seconds before he hit the floor. "Ebony, get on the phone and call triple-zero," I ordered my sister. "Tell 'em we need an ambulance." I then yelled out to my parents. "*Mum! Dad! Get in here!*"

What scared me the most wasn't that he'd collapsed – it was that he was completely unconscious. "Wake up Tay," I whispered, trying to get him to wake up. "C'mon mate, you gotta wake up..."

I felt hands on my shoulders after what seemed an eternity, and looked up into my mother's eyes. "Your dad will look after him until the ambulance gets here," she said quietly as she helped me to stand up and led me across to the lounge. I could hear the fear and worry in her voice as she spoke. "I want you to tell me what happened before he collapsed."

"He was watching a DVD with Zoë," I started, "and he got up to go somewhere. I-I think he was going to the kitchen." I tried to take in a deep breath. "He looked like he was in a lot of pain." I shook my head almost violently. "I don't even know why this happened -"

"We'll find out at the hospital, Aidan. I promise."

I looked over to where he lay on the floor, Dad at his side. Ebony had now joined them – she was still on the phone, her tone frantic. A little voice in the back of my head whispered that this was the worst possible thing that could happen right now. I had no idea what was going on, but one thing was for certain – this was going to land him back in hospital for God only knew how long. I only hoped it wouldn't be for the rest of his life.

* * *

I put the receiver of the payphone back in its cradle and collected the change that had been dispensed. It had been a good four or five hours since we had arrived, close behind the ambulance that had transported Taylor to hospital, and Ebony and I hadn't been told a thing. We didn't know if he was still alive, if he had died...nothing. Dr. Beckett had come out a couple of hours earlier to escort our parents into the emergency room itself, leaving Ebony and I alone in the waiting area.

I pocketed my change, a jumble of ten and twenty cent pieces, and walked back over to where Ebony sat. She looked up from studying her fingernails. "What did everyone say?" she asked quietly.

"Aunt Karen and Uncle Wayne asked me to keep them updated," I said. "They told me that Jess and Zac went straight there after they got out of school. Jess is freaking out, and Zac's not much better. Karen said that Zoë doesn't have a clue what's going on." I let out a weary sigh. "I still think someone should tell her."

"Mum'll go off at you if you do," Ebony reminded me. "She's not old enough-"

"She's old enough to understand that Taylor's sick. That's all they need to tell her."

"Leave it alone. I'm sure Mum had her reasons." She raised her right hand to her mouth and started nibbling on her thumbnail. "What about Steph?" she asked around her thumb.

"I talked to her mum – her dad's not home – and she said Steph's going out of her mind with worry. Said she was this close" I held my thumb and index finger at a tiny interval "to getting in her car and driving down here. I told Mrs. Woodcroft that I'll ring Steph on her mobile as soon as we've found out anything."

"I don't blame her," Ebony said softly. "I hope they tell us something soon..."

Almost as soon as these words left Ebony's mouth, the doors to the emergency room swung open, and our parents walked through the doorway. I could tell just by Mum's expression that whatever they had to say, it was far from good. She was looking at the floor as she walked, Dad supporting her with an arm around her shoulders.

"Is he okay?" I asked.

"He's throwing up," Dad replied. He didn't meet my gaze as he said this.

"But you've seen him throw up before," Ebony pointed out. "They never kicked you out when it happened, so what's so different now?"

"Not helping, Nee," I muttered.

In response to Ebony's words, Mum shook her head. She raised her head and looked at us, her eyes frightened. "He's throwing up blood," she said quietly. She sounded so scared.

Ebony and I both took in sharp, quick breaths. "Blood?" Ebony echoed. "Wh-why?"

"We don't know," Dad answered. He drew Mum closer and rubbed her back in small circles. I knew she had to be hurting so badly, and I could hardly fault her for it – she had been watching her son, my brother, go through what was most likely utter hell for two long hours. "But it's not looking good."

Almost two and a half hours passed before Dr. Beckett came to see us. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting for so long," she apologised as she seated herself in the row of seats before us, sounding weary.

"How is he?" I asked.

"He's stable," Dr. Beckett replied. I didn't miss the unspoken 'for now' in her tone. "I will be transferring him to Intensive Care in approximately fifteen minutes, as a precaution in case his condition deteriorates. I can't guarantee that it won't, but if it does he will be in the best possible place."

"What will happen after that?" Dad asked.

"I'll most likely transfer him to the palliative care ward."

"Does that mean that he's dying?" Ebony asked.

"No, not necessarily," Dr. Beckett said to reassure her. "The oncology ward is also an option, but I believe that he would receive the best care and the closest attention in palliative care." She seemed to study us for a little while. "I really shouldn't do this, as it's past visiting hours, but I'll allow you to see him before he goes up to Intensive Care. He's very sick and weak, so he may not be up to talking, but I think he would appreciate seeing you all." She rose from her seat. "Follow me, please."

What Dr. Beckett had just said could never have prepared me for the sight that greeted us beyond the emergency room doors. A section was curtained off, and it was here that she led us. She slipped past the curtains as we approached, and I could hear voices trading back and forth for about half a minute. One of them was easily recognisable as belonging to Dr. Beckett, but as for the other...it sounded so weak and weary that I couldn't quite put my finger on who owned it. It was Ebony who made the connection.

"That...that's not Taylor, is it?" she asked unsurely. "It *can't* be..."

Before I could say a word, the curtains were drawn back, and I nearly collapsed. Beside me I heard Ebony let out a quiet sob, and I drew her close to me.

He looked awful. He was so pale as to be nearly white, and had dark shadows beneath his closed eyes. One of his bandannas, a red one this time, covered his head. An IV had been placed in his right arm, with the thin tubing that carried his chemotherapy hooked up to his left. Snaking their way from beneath his hospital gown were a set of wires that led to a heart monitor, which filled my ears with a steady, incessant beeping. Far from being annoying, it reassured me that my brother was still alive. For that, I was truly grateful.

I knew he had to have sensed our presence, because none of us had said a word or moved an inch, for moments later he opened his eyes and looked at us. The instant that his eyes opened I could tell that something was missing – they were duller, somehow faded. I'd never seen him looking so sick and so weak before. He closed his eyes again and swallowed hard.

"Tay?" I asked quietly. He opened his eyes again, and present now was an intense sadness.

"I can't do it anymore," he whispered.

"Do what, Tay?" Ebony asked. I could hear disbelief in her voice, as if she couldn't quite believe what she was hearing.

"It...this is too much for me," he answered. It seemed to take so much of his strength from him just to speak.

I shook my head. "Don't," I said quietly. "Tay, please...don't." A well of tears was beginning to build up deep inside of me, and I tried desperately to hold it back.

Taylor's focus shifted to Mum and Dad, and then back to Ebony and I. "I can't fight it," he said, nearly whispering.

"Yes you can," Ebony told him. Her voice was shaking as she spoke. "You can fight it – you *have* to."

"I can't fight it anymore," he said quietly. As he spoke those five words, I knew – he was giving up.

Ebony looked at our parents, and then at me. *Don't let him give up*, she seemed to be saying. *Make him fight – he **has** to fight!* We all remained silent, and Ebony scowled at me before going to Taylor's side. She knelt on the linoleum and carefully took his left hand in both of hers. "I'm so *tired* of fighting," he whispered.

"Tay, please," my sister begged. "Don't say that. You *have* to fight it. You have to."

"I can't do it, Ebby. I can't beat this," he said. I could see tears brimming in his eyes now. He looked at our parents, and out of the corner of my eye I saw them nod once – I knew they were nods of approval, but for what? I went to my sister's side and knelt beside her, and put my left hand over those of my triplets. My other hand went to Ebony's right shoulder.

"You have to try, Tay," I said. "For us, yeah?"

He didn't say a word at first. Instead, he looked away from us and closed his eyes again.

"I'm not getting better," he said quietly. "Th-the chemo's not working as well as it should anymore." As soon as he spoke these words I felt my heart begin to beat faster, and a rushing sound started up in my ears. My hand tightened over Ebony's and Taylor's.

"What are you saying?" Ebony asked in a whisper.

"It's getting worse," he said to her. More tears were building up, and at any moment they were going to spill over... "I...I'm dying," he whispered as his tears fell. As he spoke those words I felt cold all over, as if a frigid wave had washed over me, and an ache formed deep in my chest.

"Take it back," Ebony said in a low voice. "You are *not* dying."

"Ebony," Mum said, "sweethea-"

"You're *not* dying," Ebony insisted. "You're not..."

"I don't have much longer," Taylor said. I could tell that he was trying not to cry more than he already had. "I've got a few months at the very most-" He broke off as Ebony wrenched her hand out from underneath mine and stood up.

"You take it back!" she yelled at Taylor. "Don't you dare say that! You're *not* dying!" She clenched her hands into fists. "You made me a promise, Jordan," she said, her voice hardened. "You promised me that you wouldn't stop fighting this. You *promised!*" With those words she bolted out of the emergency room.

"Ebony!" Taylor called after her, his voice barely loud enough to be heard. He looked at me, a plea in his eyes, and I stood up.

"I'll go and find her," I said. "She won't have gone far." I gave my brother's hand a quick squeeze before running after Ebony.

I found her standing outside of the paediatric oncology ward one floor up, staring through the window set into the corridor wall with one hand pressed against the glass. She didn't move or look at me as I came up beside her and tucked her hair behind her ears. "Are you all right?" I asked softly.

She looked at me then, and I saw something in her eyes that I'd hoped I would never see.

Defeat.

"He's really dying, isn't he," she whispered. It wasn't a question. When I nodded, she shook her head. "I don't want to believe it, Ayd," she said, her voice trembling. "He can't be..."

"Nee, he's been dying since April," I reminded her gently. "Dr. Beckett said it herself – the chemotherapy was never going to cure him. All it was going to do was stop the leukaemia from

killing him so fast. It's only now that things are coming to a head." I sighed softly. "And the only thing that will have any real chance at curing him, he won't go through with again."

She was quiet for a little while. "My whole life, it's been the three of us. You, me and Taylor. And next year..." She squeezed her eyes closed. "How could he just...give up?" she asked. "Aidan, he's a Hanson...we don't give up that easily..."

I stepped closer to her and drew her into an embrace. It wasn't cold in this corridor, and yet she was shivering. I was fully willing to bet that if she wasn't wearing a jumper, her arms would be peppered with goosebumps. "I know that, Nee. Believe me, I know. And I don't want him to give up either." I tipped Ebony's chin up, and she opened her eyes. "But you've seen how hard he's fought this year alone, not to mention last year. He's given it all he's got, but this was so unexpected that he barely had a chance to catch his breath, so to speak. It's not enough anymore. I know he'd keep fighting if he could, but he can't."

"Aidan?"

I looked back over my shoulder to see Mum standing behind me. "How is he?" I asked.

"He's asleep," Mum replied. "I have no idea how long it'll last, but at least he's sleeping. Lord only knows he needs it." She shook her head slowly. "My poor baby," she said softly.

"Has he gone up to the ICU yet?" I asked as Ebony disengaged herself from me.

Mum nodded. "Dr. Beckett took him up there a couple of minutes ago. The two of you can go in to see him before we go home, but only for a minute. He needs to rest and rebuild his strength before he can be transferred to the palliative care ward, and the only way that will happen is if he gets some sleep."

We followed Mum upstairs to the ICU. Dad was waiting in the corridor outside, and I gave him a small smile when he looked at Ebony and I. "Just give us a minute," I said quietly, before leading Ebony through the nearby doors.

It didn't take us long to locate Taylor's bed. He lay on his right side, and still wore his red bandanna. An oxygen tube was now under his nose, the presence of which spoke volumes – he had never been so sick before that he needed one. It well and truly drove home just how serious this was now.

Ebony stepped up to our brother's bedside and crouched down. Using her left hand for balance, she reached out with her right hand and ran it over his head, smoothing out the wrinkles in his bandanna. "Get better soon, Tay," she whispered. "Okay? We need you home with us..."

At Ebony's words Taylor's eyes opened, and he looked at us. "Hey mate," I said quietly. "Hang in there, okay? You'll be out of here soon."

He didn't say a word in response to this – I knew it was taking enough out of him just to keep his eyes open. Instead, he blinked once, before closing his eyes again.

"Come on, Nee," I said. "We should go – he needs to sleep, and so do we. It's been a long day."

"Too long," Ebony agreed. She reached for Taylor's nearest hand and gave it a quick squeeze before standing up. "Let's go home."

Chapter 22

Ebony

September and in turn spring arrived with little fanfare. All it meant to us was that it had been a month since Taylor had gone back into hospital. None of us knew when he'd be coming home, if it happened at all – we could only hope that he was able to rebuild his strength and get well enough so that Dr. Beckett would turn him loose.

Around the middle of the month, Zac decided to resume the routine he had started back in August – he would follow either of our parents, but usually Mum, around the house and ask if he could go into Coffs Harbour the next time they went to visit our brother. During the week he went to school, but come the weekend he was usually saddled with babysitting Zoë, often with Jessica's help, while Mum and Dad went into town. As a result, he hadn't been to see our brother for a few weeks. He would talk to Taylor on the phone every couple of days or so, but it didn't take a genius to figure out that it was nowhere near enough.

"Mum," he whined as he followed our mother downstairs. Mum carried the dark green laundry basket that usually resided in the upstairs bathroom – it was full with a week's worth of clothes that mostly belonged to Aidan, Zac and I. I got up from my seat on the lounge and walked across to take the basket from her.

"I already said no, Zac," Mum said, sounding weary. I hid a smile as I rested the hamper against my right hip and started to head through into the laundry. "I don't want you to see him right now."

"Why can't I? I'm almost eighteen – that makes me old enough to visit him on my own. Hell, I could drive myself over there if you'd let me borrow Dad's car..."

He kept up with his whining for the rest of the morning and the majority of the afternoon. By the time Mum became fed up with it, the clothes from upstairs had been washed and dried, and I was in the middle of folding them.

"All right Zac, *fine* – you can go and see him tomorrow," Mum said, relenting. "Ebony will take you with her. Now please, stop asking me about it – I need to get dinner started, and I am very sure you have some homework that needs to be done."

I bit back a laugh as Zac came into the lounge room and sat himself down next to me. "You really know how to make people bend to your will, don't you?" I asked as I folded one of my T-shirts and placed it onto the already teetering pile of my clothes.

"Are you kidding me? I just made her see sense," Zac shot back.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Hey, if you're going to be sitting in here, you're going to damn well do some work," I said as he switched the TV on. "I don't care that they've been washed, I am not touching your underwear. Now get cracking." I pointed at the laundry basket. "It's either that or homework."

He scowled at me, but switched the TV back off and got back to his feet. "You sound like Mum, you know that don't you?" he called as he headed for the stairs.

"Hey, that's just fine by me!" I yelled back as he disappeared upstairs.

* * *

The next afternoon, just after lunch, Zac and I drove into Coffs Harbour. Mum had already gone to the hospital that morning, and I had agreed to meet her there. Before we did, though, I decided to warn Zac of what to expect.

"I just want to warn you before we head inside," I said. We had parked in the carpark of St. Elizabeth's Hospital, close to the visitor's entrance. "It's a little frightening – he's pretty sick. I know you visited him last month, but he's gotten worse since then. I won't blame you in the slightest if you don't think you can handle it."

"I'll be all right," he assured me.

"I'm serious, Zac. It scares *me*, and I'm two years older than you. Hell, it even scares our parents. It's nothing to be taken lightly. If you want to go home, tell me and we'll go." He shook his head, and I sighed. "All right. But you can't say I didn't warn you."

Less than five minutes later, we had made it upstairs to the palliative care ward. I knocked quietly on the door to room number three before pushing down on the handle. Inside, clustered around Taylor's bed, were a small group of doctors that I didn't recognise. Mum was seated right next to the head of the bed, well within Taylor's reach. Beside me, I heard Zac take in a sharp, quiet breath, and from that alone I knew my warning hadn't been enough. It didn't matter how old he was – this was one hell of a shock.

I moved further into the room and up next to Mum, Zac following close behind. As I reached the bedside Taylor stifled a cry of what sounded like pain, and looking down I saw that his usually flat stomach was now slightly swollen. It puzzled me, but for the moment I filed it away in the section of my head reserved for questions to ask my mother. He was far paler than usual, and was sweating, his bandanna darkened along where his hairline would normally be. His breathing came in short, shallow bursts, and he still had an oxygen tube under his nose. Something was quite obviously happening, it just wasn't clear what that something *was*.

As I watched, one of the doctors reached out and touched her fingertips to my brother's stomach. She pressed down very gently, eliciting a rather violent reaction – Taylor screamed out and grabbed for one of Mum's hands, holding on for dear life.

"Tay?" Zac asked, his voice shaking. I looked at him and wasn't surprised to see that he was scared witless. "Ar-are you okay?"

Taylor didn't say a word for a couple of minutes – to me, it looked as if he was trying to catch his breath. "Hey Zac," he said at last, as he disengaged his hand from Mum's. Mum pulled his blankets back up where they belonged, all the while listening attentively to what one of the doctors was

saying. Once they had finished the doctors left one by one, leaving the four of us alone in the room.

"Uh..." Zac started, his tone uncertain. "How's it going? I mean, h-how are you? Are...are you doing okay?"

"Mum?" I asked, wanting to know what the hell was going on. She shifted her focus to me momentarily and shook her head quickly, before refocusing on my brother. That tiny gesture said it all – whatever was happening, it wasn't something she wanted to talk about in front of Zac. That in itself meant that however bad things looked, in reality they were far worse.

"I think...I think I've been better," Taylor said weakly. He didn't even try to smile, not even a little, something completely unlike him. It was evident by now that he was in a great deal of pain. The worst thing about it was that no matter what Dr. Beckett did, no matter what painkillers she had him taking or how much, she couldn't alleviate it completely. So even though it was far from fair, he suffered from his pain daily.

"Zac, I think we should come back later on," I said quietly. I wanted to add 'You're too young to be seeing this' but I held my tongue – saying that would earn me a clip around the ear from any number of sources.

"When are they coming back?" Taylor asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"They'll be back in a little while," Mum answered. "Try to relax, okay?" As soon as she had spoken Taylor's breathing became strained once more. "Easy, Tay," Mum said softly. "Take it easy, please..."

It was in that instant that I truly felt sorry for Zac – today was the first time in weeks that Mum had allowed him to come and visit Taylor, and this was what he was faced with. I half-wished Mum hadn't backed down, because Zac didn't need to see this.

"Come on," I said quietly, putting a hand on Zac's shoulder. "We shouldn't be here – let's go, okay?"

Zac shook his head. "No," he answered. "I want to stay here." To be honest, though, I don't think he could have moved even if he had wanted to – he was frozen where he stood.

"Zac-" I started, only to find myself interrupted.

"Oh God..." Taylor's voice was barely audible, little more than a hoarse whisper. He squeezed his eyes tightly closed, and his hands tensed on his bedclothes.

"What's happening to him?" Zac asked me quietly.

"I have no idea," I replied with a slight shrug. I spoke the truth – I'd never seen him looking so sick. I was almost positive that he was crying, but it was difficult to tell – his strained breaths had started to sound more like gasps for air, and he cried out so weakly I could hardly hear it. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Zac grab hold of my left hand, and I gave it a gentle squeeze of reassurance.

"G-get 'em out," Taylor mumbled. He was trying to sit himself up – Mum spotted this barely a second after I did, and eased my brother upright. That one movement looked as if it had caused him even more pain, and I was suddenly scared. "Please, get 'em out..."

Mum looked at me. "Ebony, please go and find a doctor," she pleaded. "Take Zac with you."

"No, I'm staying," Zac insisted.

"This is *not* the time to be arguing about this, Zac," Mum said in a low voice. "Taylor doesn't want you seeing this, and neither do I. Now go."

"C'mon, Zac," I said as I stepped around behind him. I kept my gaze fixed on Taylor as I guided Zac away from the bed, half in a daze. Taylor was leaning forward, arms wrapped around his stomach, and he cried out so faintly I wasn't sure I'd even heard it. As Zac and I stepped into the

corridor I heard a cry filled with so much pain and anguish it hurt, and I made the mistake of turning back for just a second. He was throwing up...and all I could see was blood.

"Ebony?"

I looked up from where I sat on the linoleum, backed up against the corridor wall. I didn't know how long it had been since Zac and I had left our brother's room, but judging from the ache in my backside and my legs, it had been a while.

"Yeah?"

"What was that back there?" Zac asked. There was fear in his eyes now.

I took in a shaky breath and got to my feet. "*That*, Zac, is the precise reason why Mum and Dad don't want you coming here to see Taylor. I told you it was frightening, didn't I?" My brother nodded mutely.

Not a word was said between us until we were back in my car and heading home. It was Zac who broke the silence just as I drove out of Coffs Harbour.

"He isn't getting better, is he?"

To be honest, I had been expecting it. The truth hurt more than I ever thought it could, but I didn't want to lie to my brother. He deserved better than that.

Our gazes met in the rear view mirror, and I shook my head wordlessly. He didn't say a word in response – all he did was nod and return to looking out his car window.

* * *

"Ebony, sit down a moment."

I looked back over my shoulder upon hearing my mother's voice. I was on my way out to a friend's place, having decided that I needed to get out of the house. The atmosphere of worry that had

descended on our family was beginning to become stifling, and I needed to escape for a few hours so I could clear my head.

"What's this about?" I asked, a measure of suspicion in my tone.

"Ebony Jade," Mum warned. She didn't often call me by my first and my middle names, but I knew she meant business when both names came out of her mouth. Opting to err on the side of caution, I walked over to the kitchen table and sat down.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" I asked, keeping the suspicion out of my voice this time.

"I promised you that we would talk about what was happening with your brother," Mum replied.

"There's a very good reason for why I didn't want Zac to hear it." She smoothed out a crease in the tablecloth with her thumb. "I've been in regular contact with Dr. Beckett regarding Taylor's condition since he was readmitted to hospital last month. The reason for his collapse is partly because the leukaemia has become much worse, but also because at the time he was severely anaemic. He..." Her voice faltered slightly. "Dr. Beckett says that he is bleeding internally – his stomach keeps filling with blood, and he keeps throwing it up."

"How is that happening?" I asked. I was now very worried, even more than I had been.

"Dr. Beckett doesn't know, and none of his test results or scans indicate any possible cause. She won't risk having him undergo any sort of surgery to find out – he couldn't survive it." Mum let out a quiet sigh. "With his consent, she's going to have a drain implanted in his stomach so that the blood can be drained out. It'll likely stay there until such a time as the cause resolves itself."

"Okay," I said to indicate that I understood. "Is there anything else I need to know?"

Mum was silent a little while. "What I am about to tell you, you do not repeat to Aidan until your father and I have had a chance to talk to him. Taylor already knows – Dr. Beckett told him this morning. Under no circumstances whatsoever are Zac, Jessica and Zoë to be told."

"I won't tell them," I promised immediately. "You have my word."

"Good." There was another silence. I knew Mum was trying to decide how to articulate whatever it was she had to tell me. "His condition is now terminal," she said quietly. "The chemotherapy is no longer working, and so Dr. Beckett is going to take him off it within the next few weeks. Her focus now will be making him as comfortable as she possibly can until..." Here she broke off – she wanted to discuss that particular topic as much as any of us did. "As you can likely guess, he took it pretty hard. Nobody likes to be told that they're going to die."

"How long does she think he has left?" I asked, dreading her response.

"She doesn't believe he will make it to the end of this year. Not without a transplant. Even if he did choose to take that route, and we both know that he won't, there's a high possibility that he wouldn't survive the chemotherapy itself. He's just too sick."

I bit down hard on my bottom lip. Mum had just laid out all the facts before me. That she had attempted to soften their impact didn't make the reality of it all hurt any less. It was official now – my brother was going to die before the year was out. Our birthday back in March had been his last.

"Mum?" I asked tentatively once I'd made an attempt at taking everything in. She looked at me, and I continued. "I know it's a probably a long shot, but..." I twisted the bead bracelet I wore around one wrist in my fingers. "The three of us discussed this a few years ago, before any of this shit happened." I spotted Mum's frown as I swore, but she made no objection to the language I had chosen to use. "And Taylor...he told Aidan and I that there were two things he never wanted to happen to him. The first was that he didn't want to be kept on life support if there was no chance of him waking up again. The second was that if it all came down to it, he didn't want to die in a hospital bed." I locked gazes with my mother. "He wants to die *here*, Mum. He wants to die in his own room, in his own bed."

"I'll discuss it with Dr. Beckett," Mum assured me. "But I hope you understand that I can't promise anything."

I nodded quickly. "I understand."

Our discussion over, I made for the front door and left the house.

My destination that evening was the home of a casual acquaintance, a few blocks over from my house. Her name was Cassandra Siemens, and we had been in the same year in high school. We'd even taken a few subjects together over the years. Not only that, but she was the person who, near the end of Year 10, had 'introduced' me to marijuana for the first time. For all that, however, we'd never been close friends. She did have my email address on her contact list, though, which was how she had contacted me.

Upon reaching her house and stepping up onto the front porch, I rang the doorbell and took a few paces backward. While I waited for someone to answer the door, I took out the folded printout of the email Cassandra had sent to me the night before and read it through again.

Ebony,

I'm having a party tomorrow night (the 21st of September, if you haven't been keeping track of the calendar). I know you've never been that interested before, but I heard from a few people that you're going through a tough time at the moment – I figured you might want a bit of a distraction from it. So how about it? If you're interested, rock on up to my place anytime after eight-thirty, and I'll see if I can take your mind off of things. You know where to find me.

Cass

It was Cassandra's habit to email me twice a month at least in a concerted effort to talk me into coming around to her place. Her parties were notably infamous in the greater Coffs Harbour area, though more so in Sapphire Cove, for being the perfect opportunity to get utterly wasted. It was also general knowledge that many of her party guests accepted invitations with the sole intent of

a quick fuck. It was the general consensus, particularly with Sapphire Cove High alumni, that Cassandra's parties were solely for the desperate. In the past I had elected to stay well clear of Cassandra's crowd, but it was clear that by coming around to her house, I was now one of the desperate ones.

The front door opened, and I quickly refolded the printout before shoving it back in my pocket. Cassandra stood framed in the doorway, backlit by the hall light. The grin on her face was one of triumph.

"Would you look who finally showed up," she said, her tone only slightly mocking as she stepped aside so that I could enter the house. "It only took you, what, four years?"

"Yeah, well, I wasn't exactly desperate until now," I retorted as I strode past her, fumbling in the pockets of my coat as I went. I found the ziplock bag of pot that I'd brought with me, my packet of rolling papers, and my favourite lighter stashed away in an inside pocket and held them up for Cassandra to see. "So where can I smoke this?" In response, Cassandra jerked her head toward the stairs and led me up to the second level of the house.

When we came out on the upstairs landing I saw about ten or so people, all of them looking to be around my age or a little older, clustered around a low table. They were seated on a mismatched assortment of furniture – a rickety old sofa, dark pink and dark blue plastic milk crates, squashed footstools, tattered cushions, and the occasional wooden fruit crate. A dense cloud of smoke floated above their heads.

"Hey you lot, listen up!" Cassandra shouted, and the group stopped their discussion to look over at where Cassandra and I stood. She clapped a hand on my right shoulder. "This here is Ebony Hanson," she told them. "She's going through a hard time at the moment, so I'm leaving it up to you lot to help her forget her troubles. I'll be downstairs if anyone needs me."

I rounded on Cassandra as she said that final sentence. "You're just going to *leave* me here?" I hissed furiously.

"You can relax, Ebony. I've been with them all when they're off their collective nut, and they are all harmless in that state. You have nothing to worry about. And anyway, didn't you come here to get wasted?" She grinned and gave me a little push. "You need me, you give me a yell." With a toss of her jet black hair she was gone, traipsing her way back downstairs.

I stood there watching the group of Cassandra's friends, watching the cloud of smoke grow even denser, for more than a minute. Was this truly what I wanted? Did I truly want to resort to drugs to forget the hell my family was going through? And most importantly, did I want to face Taylor when he found out, from whatever source, that I had started using again?

"He's going to kill me," I muttered as I joined the circle before me, set out my personal paraphernalia, and began rolling my first joint of the evening.

Interlude

Ebony

The last couple of weeks haven't been kind to us, not in the least. Ever since Mum broke the news we had all been dreading, Taylor's condition has been steadily declining. He gets a little weaker every day, and every day he looks sicker. Dr. Beckett discontinued his treatment at the beginning of October, so even though he's recovering from his chemotherapy, at the same time he's getting worse. I visit him all the time, of course – I know he suspects something's up with me, no matter how hard I try to hide it. Still, I maintain the pretence that I'm coping just as well as anyone else. Which is to say, not well at all.

He dragged his eyes open as I entered his hospital room and closed the door behind me, the door hinges squeaking softly. I couldn't help but notice how worn out he looked, and I knew that it wasn't just physical. He was exhausted in more ways than just one. We all were.

"Where's Aidan?" he asked quietly, that ever-present hope in his tone.

I truly felt sorry for my brother. The number of times that Aidan had chosen to come to the hospital of his own accord since Taylor had been readmitted could be counted on the fingers of one hand. It wasn't that he didn't *want* to see our brother, because I knew he did. The key was that even though we were two-thirds of a whole, we chose very different coping mechanisms. While I had taken up my old habits once more, he had chosen avoidance of the situation. He could be full of hopeful and occasionally reassuring words out in the corridor, but as soon as I actually coaxed him into the room, he would automatically clam up. His sole blind spot is that he doesn't realise who he's hurting the most.

"He...he's sitting out there," I said. I watched him sit himself up a little straighter so that he could see out into the corridor. "And he wants to see you, but..."

He seemed to grow smaller as I said this. "It's okay," he said softly as he slid back down into his original position, half-sitting up in bed. I could see the sheer hurt in his eyes as he spoke. "I-I understand."

"Tay, it's not that he doesn't *want* to see you," I said as I sank down into the chair beside his bed and caught his left hand up in both of my own. "It's just...he isn't dealing with this that well right now."

"From what I understand, neither are you," Taylor retorted. His eyes had turned stormy, and in an instant I knew he was less than happy with me.

My sole response was a shrug. Inside, however, I was seething. Nobody had the right to tell Taylor about what I chose to do in my own time. If I wanted him to know, I would have told him myself – and I didn't want him to know. He didn't need to worry about it, and he certainly didn't need to worry about me – he had more important things to be worried about.

"Ebony..." I looked at him, and he met my gaze steadily. "You're only going to hurt yourself in the long run. Isn't that why you gave that shit up in the first place?"

"You don't underst-"

"I understand plenty," he said, cutting me off. "I know it hurts, Nee, more than you realise. How do you think *I* feel, knowing that all of you – my *family* – have to watch me die?" I tore my gaze from his – the pain in his voice was just too much. "Why would you *do* that?"

I knew I had to be honest with him now. I owed him that much.

"Because when I do it," I started, "I can forget about all of this. Even if it's only for a little while. I can forget about the pain you're in, and how much it hurts me inside to see you going through it." My vision blurred, and I knew I was crying. I didn't want him to see me cry – Taylor couldn't be strong on his own, and so we all needed to be strong for him. And yet, here I was, breaking down again.

"What are you going to do when I'm gone?"

I could hardly believe he had even said those words. What gave him the right to even *ask* me that? It was hard enough for me to imagine a life without him in it, and yet here he was, asking it of me anyway.

"How can you ask me that?" I asked in a low voice.

For some reason, he chose to ignore my question. "Are you just going to get completely wasted?" he asked, continuing in his previous thread. "That's not the way to deal with things..."

"How *else* am I supposed to deal with it?" I asked. "Tell me how else I'm supposed to forget the ache I've got in here." I pressed one hand to my chest, directly over my heart. "Because if you've got any other ideas, I'll gladly consider them." I dropped my hand back to my lap. "I've always been a *triplet*, Tay," I whispered. "I don't want to be a twin. I don't know how to *be* one – this is all I've ever known."

"Nee, you'll always *be* a triplet," he said, his tone of voice faintly chiding. "The only difference is that I'm not going to be around anymore. Not physically, anyway." His eyes started to drift closed as he said this, and I knew that he was well and truly exhausted. I no longer wanted to talk about this subject, anyhow – it hurt far too much.

"Get some sleep," I told him as I leaned down and planted a kiss on his forehead. "I'll come back to see you tomorrow."

"Love you, sis," he murmured as his eyes closed and his breathing evened out.

"I love you too, Tay," I whispered in reply.

I closed the door behind me as I left the room. Aidan was sitting where I'd left him not ten minutes earlier, and he looked up at me as soon as he registered I was standing in front of him. We held eye contact for a few moments before he spoke.

"How is he?" Aidan asked.

"He just fell asleep. He's sick, in case you've forgotten," I informed him. "You're really hurting him, you know."

"I'm not *trying* to hurt him," Aidan said. He dropped his gaze and began studying his hands. "I just...I can't handle seeing him like that. That's all."

"He needs to see you, Ayd," I said. Now, more than ever before, Taylor needed Aidan and I to be there for him – he needed us to be his strength. He couldn't do it alone anymore. What time he had left was trickling away swiftly. "How about you pull your head out of your arse, and think about your brother for once in your life?" My words were harsh, but they had to be if I wanted to get my message across. As far as I was concerned, right now nothing was more important than what Taylor felt or needed – not even Aidan's feelings. I basically didn't give a shit if I hurt my oldest brother right now – if it got him to see sense, then my job was done.

"I don't think I can do it, Nee," he said quietly. "If I walk in there, and I see him like that..." He shook his head. "I just...I'm scared, Ebby," he whispered, using Taylor's nickname for me.

"I'll go in with you," I told him. He seemed to consider this for a little while. After what seemed like an eternity he at last nodded and stood. It had been many weeks since Aidan had actually entered Taylor's room, so I knew that he was going to get something of a shock.

Taylor was still fast asleep when Aidan and I entered his room – sleep he desperately needed, so I didn't even think to wake him. I heard Aidan inhale sharply at the sight, and when he looked back over his shoulder at me I bit my bottom lip and nodded. I knew for an absolute fact that he'd never seen anyone looking so sick in his entire life.

I guided him around to the seat I'd vacated barely five minutes before, and he sat down hard. His left hand found my right, and I gave it a slight squeeze. We stayed there like that for I don't know how long, watching our brother sleep. And I started to wonder...how many more times would

Aidan and I be able to do this? How long would it be before our trio, our unbreakable circle, became a severed chain? How long would it be before Aidan and I were, for all intents and purposes, alone in the world?

Aidan let go of my hand after what felt like an eternity, and I looked at him. He'd taken Taylor's left hand in both of his own, and he had a look on his face that I recognised all too well. I had seen it on the faces of the rest of my family more times in the last nine months than I had my entire life.

Now, here is something that needs to be understood about Aidan. He is not a crier. That at least is one thing Taylor and I have in common, aside from other things, but Aidan doesn't often outwardly show his emotions. It's a once-in-a-great-while kind of thing – he might get tears in his eyes every so often, but it's rare that he actually allows those tears to fall.

I dropped to my knees beside his chair and turned him toward me. *It's all right*, I mouthed. *You can cry – you need it*. The floodgates opened then, and he slipped out of his seat onto his knees in front of me. I wrapped my arms around him, he put his head on my shoulder, and he cried for all that he was worth.

* * *

Taylor

I've always hated hospitals. I especially hate the way they have of making me feel completely helpless. Which is how I feel right now. Aidan's been sitting with me for a while – he did it all of his own accord, and that surprises me more than I'm willing to admit. I suppose Ebony finally talked a bit of sense into him. Normally I'd be happy, even relieved, that he's come to visit, but he's barely said a word. I know Aidan almost better than I know myself, and there's one thing about him that differs from Ebony and I. When either Ebony or I are scared or upset, we yell and

we cry. But not Aidan. He goes very quiet – *too* quiet, if my opinion were asked. And right now, he's quieter than he's been in a very long time.

"You think she's all right?" I asked Aidan. There was only one person I could be talking about – Ebony. I knew now how she had chosen to deal with all of this, and I had started to worry about her.

"You're dying, Tay," he said, as if the rest of his answer were self-explanatory. It was, so I looked away this time. I was well aware that he still didn't want to believe it. "Why the hell did you have to tell us that?" This was said in almost a whisper.

"Because it's the truth, Ayd," I replied wearily. "I like it as much as you do." My brother shook his head. "Aidan, please, listen to me. Dr. Beckett and I made the decision together. She told me that it's spreading far too quickly for it to be stopped. It's in my bones, my brain...even in here." I touched my chest with the fingers of my right hand. "At the level I was having it, it wasn't working." I looked down at my hands. "So I let her take me off it. I...I couldn't put myself through it when I knew there was no point."

"That has to be a mistake."

"There was no mistake," I said. Our discussion was beginning to drain what little strength I had.

"Dr. Beckett is damn good at what she does. She said I need a stem cell transplant if I want to have any hope of getting better." I picked at my blankets. "Even with that, she doesn't know if it'll be enough."

"I'll be a donor if you want me to," Aidan said. "I was a match, wasn't I?"

"It's not going to do any good, Aidan--"

"But it *could*, right? Even if it was enough to get you back home with us."

"Aidan, it's not going to happen," I said quietly.

"Why not?"

"Because..." I let out a weary sigh. "It's too late. There's nothing that Dr. Beckett can do for me anymore, other than try to keep me from being in too much pain. *Nothing*. It's spread too fast, and there's too much of it. All I can do now is wait for the end -"

"*Stop it!*" Aidan cried out suddenly, and I started in surprise. He had tears in his eyes. "Tay, please, just *stop...*" The tears overflowed at that moment, and I just stared. My brother was crying. I was able to count on the fingers of one hand the number of times I'd seen him cry. I hated what all of this was doing to him, to my whole family, but it wasn't my fault – I would never have asked for this to happen. Not in a million years.

"Is it really that they can't do it?" he asked softly. "Or that you *won't* do it?"

I wasn't expecting him to ask that. The reality was that Dr. Beckett could easily set those particular wheels in motion, but there really was no point to it anymore. It was months too late. Dr. Beckett had mentioned the possibility once, during the discussion we'd had a couple of weeks earlier, and I had rather emphatically turned it down. She hadn't spoken of it again.

"I won't," I answered quietly.

"Tay -"

"Aidan, for once in your life, *listen to me!*" I interrupted. "I'm not doing it. Dr. Beckett even told me there wasn't any point to it." I looked down at my hands. "Besides which, the sheer intensity of the induction chemotherapy would probably kill me – I'm not strong enough to handle it. And it would just cause a whole lot of unnecessary pain for the both of us. I can't handle much more pain than I'm in already." My eyes began to drift closed. "Look, see if you can find Ebony – you guys should go home and get some rest," I said. Our argument had completely drained me – I was exhausted.

"I don't want to leave you alone."

"I'll be fine, Ayd," I said wearily. "I just need some sleep." He didn't move. "Aidan, please. Ebony won't be too far away."

"You're probably right about that," he said as he got to his feet. "Is there anything you want me to bring you from home?"

I involuntarily bit down hard on my bottom lip at Aidan's mention of home – I hadn't been home in almost two months, and I wanted to be there so badly it hurt.

"Nothing I can think of," I answered. "But there is something I want you to do for me, if you can. My journal is in the top drawer of my night table. In the back there are a couple of pages from my notebook – take them home with you, and type them up for me."

"What is it?" Aidan asked as he picked up my journal from my night table and took the notebook pages from the back.

"It's a letter for Zoë. When you're done typing it, put it with the DVD you made. It's not for her to read until she turns eighteen. Hopefully by then she'll understand why I had to leave her." *If she ever does*, I thought.

Aidan nodded and slipped the letter into one of his pockets. "I can do that."

"Thank you," I murmured as I slipped into sleep.

When next I awoke, Dr. Beckett was standing at the end of my bed, going through my charts. I watched through half-closed eyes as she flipped through the numerous pages, scribbling on some and making various marks on others. She noticed that I was awake when I shifted positions slightly, trying to get comfortable.

"How have you been today?" she asked as she came up on my right side. I was half-tempted to tell her that since she'd been poking around in my charts she should know already, but I knew what she meant.

"Well, Aidan and I have already had an argument," I said with a slight sigh. "He doesn't understand why I don't want to go through with a transplant."

"Mmm," Dr. Beckett said noncommittally. "Wrist, please." I raised my right hand wordlessly, and soon felt a slight pressure on the underside of my wrist that lasted no more than a minute.

"I told you that I would consider your request to be discharged so that you can spend your last few months at home with your family," Dr. Beckett said as she completed the quick physical examination. "Your mother also contacted me with the same request, on behalf of your sister."

"Great minds think alike," I said with a shrug.

"Indeed they do," my doctor agreed. She went around to the other side of my bed and sat down in the ever-present chair. "I would very much like to grant your request, but I'm not able to do so. My primary concern is your health – it has been declining more rapidly than I would otherwise have expected it to. I would much prefer it if you remained here where I can monitor your condition. Additionally to this, the bleeding still has not resolved itself. Until it does, I cannot approve your release." When she next spoke, her tone was softer. "I truly would like you to go home – I know how miserable you are, and I know that being at home would improve your wellbeing immensely. But I can't in good conscience allow it. If your condition wasn't so serious, I would likely discharge you without hesitation."

I had been expecting this. Somehow I had known that Dr. Beckett wouldn't let me go home, but the hope had been there nonetheless. "I was hoping you wouldn't say that," I said, trying to keep as much of my disappointment out of my voice as possible.

Dr. Beckett studied me for a little while. "Hope can be a good thing, Taylor," she said gently. "You still have some of it left – don't lose it."

"I'll try," I promised.

"And that's all anyone can ask of you."

Well, anyone aside from Aidan, I thought darkly as Dr. Beckett exited my room. Not for the first time, I wished he wasn't so damn stubborn – but that would be akin to wishing away a part of myself, for stubbornness was a trait I shared with both Aidan and Ebony.

There had to be a way to make him understand – a way to make him realise that I wasn't doing this to hurt him. As my gaze drifted across to my night table, I saw my notebook sitting just within reach, and the answer hit me like a bolt of lightning.

A letter.

I immediately reached for my notebook and the nearest pen, opened my book to the next clean page, and began to write.

* * *

Aidan

For all my intent of typing out the letter for my youngest sister as soon as I'd arrived home from visiting my brother, I didn't end up getting around to it until the next afternoon.

I sat down in front of my computer and unfolded the notebook pages, immediately understanding why Taylor had asked me to type it. His usually neat print was shaky and littered with crossed-out mistakes, and here and there I saw splashes of what were unmistakably dried teardrops. From that alone, I could tell that he had written this letter with the full knowledge that he likely would never see Zoë again – something I knew hurt him intensely.

Once I'd read the letter through a few times, I opened up Microsoft Word and began to type.

October 6 2006

Dear Zoë,

There are so many things I want to say to you, but to say them all would take me a lifetime. Unfortunately for me I never had what most people would consider a normal lifespan. By the time you get to read this, nearly twelve years from now, I won't be around any longer. Mum and Dad will no doubt have talked to you about what our family has gone through this year alone, never mind last year (which is a whole different story entirely), so I won't...well, 'bore' isn't the right word, so let's just say that I don't want to make you relive it. I'm hoping that I can get across exactly what I want to tell you, and at the same time I hope you can understand what I'm saying.

*I know you probably don't have many memories of me, but I won't hold that against you. What I hope is that what memories you do have, they're happy ones. God knows that the last couple of years have been the cause of enough bad memories to last a lifetime. And I also hope that you know that I love you so much, probably more than you'll ever know. I loved you from the moment I saw you for the first time, not long after you were born – you're my baby sister, so I can't help it. And I always **will** love you. Just because I'm not around anymore doesn't mean I'll ever stop. Especially when you share a bond that's as strong as the one that I share with Ebony and Aidan (though it's stronger between Ebony and I, for reasons I'll never understand).*

I'm sorry I wasn't around to see you grow up. I know I've missed out on so much of your life, and for that I apologise. But I suppose that's the way things go – you never get everything you want. I never imagined that I'd only be around for the first six years of your life. And I wanted to be there for you so badly – I truly did. I missed out on your first day of kindergarten and of high school, and your Year 10 Formal, and I know I'm going to miss out on your Year 12 Formal too. I'm going to say it again – I am truly, honestly sorry.

We'll be together again one day, Zo – I promise. Until that day comes (and I truly hope it's not too soon), I'll never be too far away. I'll always be your big brother, just like you'll always be my little sister. Don't ever forget that.

Love always,

Taylor

As I read through the letter's finished copy, I understood why Taylor had cried writing it. I couldn't even pretend to understand what he was going through, but I understood enough – he was going through hell, on more than just one level. I only needed to look at him to realise it.

I decided to wait until later to print it out, and saved it to my hard drive so that I didn't have to type it out again. In lieu of anything else to do, I decided to do something I hadn't done in a very long time.

I decided to talk to my mother.

After a fruitless search of the office, backyard, front garden and the bedroom she shared with Dad, I found her in the sunroom. She was sitting at Taylor's piano, looking at a set of photographs of my brother. I counted twenty-one in total, ranging from not long after the three of us had been born to just a few months ago. I understood immediately why Mum had set out twenty-one, and not just twenty – there was one photo for each year of Taylor's life. It was really quite sobering – when Ebony and I turned twenty-one and began our twenty-second year of life, we wouldn't have him at our side. He was forever going to be twenty years old.

"Mum?" I asked softly, and she looked over at me.

"Oh, Aidan," she said. "I thought I heard you come in." She started to pack the photographs away in a shoebox, leaving one photograph out. I noticed that it was one of the very first photographs ever taken of Ebony, Taylor and I.

"Do you know, Aidan," Mum began as she shifted across on the piano bench, "that your father and I never expected triplets?"

I raised an eyebrow at my mother as I seated myself next to her. "I find that hard to believe."

"Aidan, trust me – I gave birth to all three of you. Therefore if anyone is going to be surprised, it's going to be me." She took some of my dreadlocks in her hands. "Your father and I had names picked out for you and for Ebony, but not for Taylor – it took us about a week to decide on his name, we were so surprised." Mum smiled a little. "Don't you ever tell him that, by the way."

"So how did you decide on his name?" I asked. "And for that matter, what about Ebony and I?"

"Well...we chose 'Evan' first of all because it has Celtic roots – it's the Welsh form of 'John'. 'Aidan' was chosen because of my Irish heritage." I felt a slight tugging on my dreadlocks. "And as it turned out, we named you well – you can be rather fiery when you get worked up, and the name 'Aidan' means 'little fire'. We chose the name 'Ebony' because we knew either one of you would be a brunette, thanks to your father, and also because it's a lovely name to begin with. As for 'Jade'...we felt that 'Ebony' and 'Jade' went well together." She was quiet for a little while after this. "Your brother...well, we named him for two of the lecturers your father and I had while we were at university in Dublin – Dr. Jordan and Professor Taylor. They were some of the best lecturers at the university, and we felt very privileged to be taught by them. It was our way of honouring them."

"I guess that explains why his first initial isn't 'E'," I mused.

"It does indeed." Her tone then turned serious. "Aidan, I heard from Taylor via Dr. Beckett that you've been...well, hassling your brother about his decision not to undergo a second attempt at a transplant."

"I wasn't *hassling* him. I just wanted to know why he wouldn't do it."

"And you promptly got into an argument with him about it. Now, while I do appreciate that you're making an effort to spend time with him, I don't want you to speak to him about the matter again. Your father and I don't like it ourselves, but we know and understand why he doesn't want to try again."

"He said it'd probably kill him," I said quietly.

"And he's most likely correct." Mum turned me slightly to face her. "I know you hate it, Aidan," she said softly. "I do too. I'm having to watch one of my sons lose his fight for life. No mother should ever have to outlive her children. And yet, that's exactly what is going to happen before this year is out...and there isn't a thing I can do to stop it happening." She placed her hands on either side of my face. "Aidan, I want you to do something for me."

"Anything."

"Pray for your brother. Pray that he survives this. Pray for a miracle if you think it's needed – I trust your judgement."

"I will," I promised. I would definitely pray that Taylor survived – because I wasn't sure our family would survive if we lost him.

Chapter 23

Aidan

At the beginning of November, Mum and Dad gathered us all in the lounge room for a family discussion. We hadn't had one of these in a long time, and all-family discussions were only ever called when the matter to be spoken about was serious. It wasn't difficult to figure out what this particular discussion would be about.

"Dr. Beckett called your father and I earlier this morning," Mum said to open the discussion. "She's been keeping us updated on your brother's condition every couple of days."

"What did she say?" I asked.

"She said..." Mum trailed off and looked at Dad. He nodded quickly and took up the thread.

"He's not doing well," Dad said. "She isn't sure he'll make it to the end of this month. If he does, he'll be very lucky."

"What?" Ebony whispered. "Dad, n-no – she can't have said that. She told Mum he'd make it to the end of this year at least..."

"Ebony, please," Mum said softly. "This only happened very suddenly – he took a turn for the worse overnight. He's stable for now, but that could change at any moment." She raised her voice slightly. "Which is why after lunch, we're all going into Coffs Harbour to visit him. And I *do* mean all of us. Normally Dr. Beckett wouldn't allow it, but this is an exception that she is willing to make for Taylor's sake. He needs this right now, more than anything he's ever needed before."

"He needs to know he's not alone," Jessica said quietly, and Mum nodded before speaking again.

"The four of you" she indicated Jessica, Zac, Ebony and I "can fix what you like for lunch, but I want everyone to have finished eating and the kitchen clean by one-thirty. We'll head into town at around two."

True to Mum's word, not long after two o'clock we headed out to Coffs Harbour. Ebony and I were the first to arrive at the hospital, and had been waiting in the corridor outside the palliative care ward for about five minutes when our parents and the rest of our siblings showed up. It sounded horrible, but I was dreading going in to see my brother. I knew it was quite possible that this would be one of the last times I'd ever see him, and deep down inside it hurt.

"You know why Dr. Beckett is letting them see him, don't you?" Ebony asked while Mum and Dad spoke with the nurses at the reception desk.

"How should I know?" I asked.

"Think about it, Aidan," she said, in a tone of voice that suggested I was being particularly thick-headed. "I know for a fact that Dr. Beckett has advised all year against letting either of our sisters visit Taylor. The only reason Jess was allowed to see him, even just that once, was because she was his donor. She's letting them see him now because..." She trailed off and swallowed hard.

It took me maybe a few seconds to pick up on what she was saying. "It's so they can say goodbye," I realised. "Before it's too late."

Ebony nodded. "This is just..." She covered her face with her hands. "It's so unbelievably fucked up," she continued, her voice muffled.

"Tell me about it," I agreed.

It wasn't long before Mum and Dad came to call us into the ward. We were all quiet as we headed through to Taylor's room, forming a sort of procession – Mum and Dad, with Mum carrying Zoë, took the lead, with Jessica and Zac following close behind. Ebony and I brought up the rear.

He was fast asleep when we entered his room. We had all been warned about what to expect when we saw him, but it was a shock nevertheless. He was much paler now than he had been the last time I had visited, with the blue bandanna he wore on his head looking almost black in contrast. Even darker shadows had formed beneath his closed eyes. In the background the ever-present

heart monitor beeped softly, but at a slower pace than I remembered. Jessica started to sob as soon as she saw him, and Dad pulled her close by his side.

What I noticed most of all, though, wasn't his physical appearance. It was the look on his face. Most people, when they sleep, look calm and at peace with the world, but Taylor's expression was anything but. He looked as if he were in a world of pain, which we all knew he was, but he also looked incredibly sad. I could hardly blame him for that – none of us could.

Ebony broke away from my side and went up to sit on the edge of Taylor's bed, and as soon as she took his right hand in hers his eyes opened. I watched him squeeze her hand, his hand shaking as he did so.

"I have my own entourage," he whispered, forcing a weak smile. Ebony and I both smiled a little at this. I watched his focus shift across to Jessica. "I'm okay, Jess," he said, which I knew was a barefaced lie. "Y'don't have to cry – I'm going to be all right."

Jessica shook her head. "No you're not," she said. "You're sick, and you're never coming home again..." She started to sob even harder as she said this. Mum and Dad had sat Zac and Jessica down earlier in the week and told them the truth, what Ebony and I had been told months earlier, so that at least they knew what was going on. The only one of us still in the dark was Zoë, and I knew that neither Mum nor Dad had the heart to tell her that her big brother was dying.

Mum let Zoë down at that moment, and she scurried across the floor to where Ebony sat. Ebony lifted our sister up into her lap, keeping an arm around her while still holding Taylor's hand.

"Hi Tay," Zoë said.

Taylor smiled a little. "Hey Zo."

"I missed you lots," Zoë said.

"How much, Zo?" Ebony prompted with a smile, and Zoë flung her arms wide open.

Taylor laughed a little at this. "I missed you too, Zo. Probably as much as you missed me."

"I brought you a present," Zoë said. "Mama let me pick it out – it was pretty, an' she said you'd like it."

"Well, why don't you show it to me?" Taylor asked, and Zoë started fishing around in her pockets. At last she drew out a tiny ball of pink tissue paper and pulled it apart.

"It's an angel," Zoë replied as she drew out a small guardian angel pin. "Mama taught me a prayer to go with it, an' I 'member it all. Can I say it to you?" She spoke the truth – Mum had sat with her for hours teaching her the prayer, and she had memorised every word of it.

"Of course you can, Zo," Taylor said quietly.

Zoë sat up a little straighter at this and began to recite the prayer. Ebony took the pin from our sister's hands and carefully fastened it to Taylor's shirt as Zoë spoke. "Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom his love commits me here. Ever this day, be at my side, to light and guard, to rule and guide. Amen."

As Zoë finished her prayer, I could see tears in Taylor's eyes. "Zo, that was beautiful," he whispered. "Thank you."

"Good," Zoë said, sounding pleased. "I wanted you to like it." She shifted down off of Ebony's lap and up closer to Taylor, and he gave her a one-armed hug. "I love you Tay."

"I love you too, Zo," Taylor whispered. He shifted his focus over to me and held my gaze for just a few seconds, before refocusing on Ebony. He didn't need to say a word to tell us how he was feeling or what he was thinking – we both knew. He was in pain both physically and psychologically – we knew he was glad that we'd all come to see him, but at the same time he wasn't. He knew that it would be the last time he'd ever see either Jessica or Zoë, and it hurt him intensely. Ebony set Zoë back down onto the floor, and she went back over to our parents.

"How're you holding up?" Ebony asked softly.

"N-not so good," Taylor answered; he was close to tears as he said this.

"Come on you three," Mum said to my younger siblings, taking charge. "How about we go down to the canteen for a little while – if Taylor's feeling any better later on, you can come back in and see him." Mum and Dad came over to give Taylor a quick hug before leading Zac, Jessica and Zoë out into the ward. They closed the door behind them, leaving just the three of us in the room together. I left my spot at the end of the bed and walked up to sit in the chair at Taylor's bedside.

"I miss home," he said quietly. "I miss it like you wouldn't *believe*..." Ebony let out a quiet sob at this, tears beginning to stream down her face, and I reached over to give his hand a gentle squeeze.

"We miss having you there," I told him. "It's too quiet – we can't make any sort of trouble without you there to mastermind it all." Even though I was trying to lighten the mood even just a little, my heart just wasn't in it – it came out sounding so sullen.

"I don't have much time left," Taylor said quietly.

"How long?" I asked, a split second before I realised what I was saying.

"Aidan, don't," Ebony said quietly to let me know I shouldn't have said it. But I wanted to know, and I wanted him to be honest with me. There was no time for lies and secrets anymore.

"How long?" I repeated.

"A few days, maybe a week," Taylor replied. I noticed that he wouldn't look at me as he said this.

"I just..." He shut his eyes tightly. "I can't keep holding on." It hurt so much to hear him say that.

"I can't eat anymore – I can't even keep down water. I keep throwing it up." A tear ran down his cheek, and he took in a shuddering breath. "And I hurt all over..."

"Shh," Ebony said softly, and she carefully wiped the tear away with the pad of her thumb. "It's okay, Tay – we know."

Mum came back in a minute or so after Taylor had fallen asleep. "Why don't you two go home," she said softly. "Take your brother and sisters with you."

"What about you and Dad?" I asked, speaking quietly so I didn't wake my brother up.

"We're going to stay here. Dr. Beckett wants to speak with your dad and I, and we both want to sit with Taylor for a little while."

"Okay," I said. "Do you want me to grab something for dinner on the way home?"

Mum shook her head. "There's an unopened packet of fettuccine in the pantry, and there should also be a jar of pasta sauce in one of the cupboards. If we're not home by dinnertime, cook that for your dinner. We'll probably eat here."

"All right," I said. "Tell Taylor we love him, okay?"

"I think he knows already, Aidan," Mum said, smiling a little. "But okay. I'll let him know."

Dinner that night was a lot quieter than usual – Mum and Dad weren't home yet, and so I made pasta for our dinner as I'd been asked to. I ate mechanically, barely tasting anything that I put into my mouth – I was far too worried. Zoë was put to bed at her usual bedtime, and not long afterward Zac and Jessica both drifted upstairs to their rooms. Ebony and I stayed downstairs, waiting for our parents to come home.

It was well past midnight when the front door finally opened. Ebony and I had taken up positions in the lounge room – my sister had fallen asleep on the lounge, and I was sitting in Dad's armchair with my knees drawn up against my chest. I could hear voices drifting in from the front foyer – one choked with tears, the other comforting. I got up out of my seat and headed through to the foyer to see what was going on.

Mum and Dad stood just in front of the wide-open door, with Dad holding Mum close. It was plainly obvious that Mum had been crying, and a sinking feeling formed in the pit of my stomach. "Oh no," I whispered. "Please, no..."

"Aidan, is your sister awake?" Dad asked.

"No, she fell asleep about" I checked my watch "half an hour ago."

"Wake her up," Dad said. "We need to talk to you both."

"Dad, what happened?" I asked. "Is he okay?"

Dad didn't answer me, but led Mum away from the front door. I pulled it closed and locked it behind them, and went back into the lounge room to wake Ebony up. "Nee, Mum and Dad just got home," I told her as she drifted into consciousness. "They need to talk to us."

"What about?" Ebony asked through a yawn.

"Dad didn't say, but Mum's been crying so it can't be good." I bit my bottom lip. "I think something's happened to Taylor, but Dad won't tell me what."

We soon found out what our parents needed to tell us, and none of it could be considered in any way good.

"We nearly lost your brother a few hours ago," Dad said quietly. He and Mum were sitting on the lounge together, where Ebony had been sleeping before I'd woken her. Ebony and I had seated ourselves on the coffee table.

"What happened?" Ebony asked. She sounded frightened now, and I couldn't blame her. I felt pretty much the same way.

"He went into cardiac arrest," Mum said. "Dr. Beckett doesn't think he has much longer – a week, if that." Dad gave her left shoulder a squeeze.

"They can bring him back if it happens again," Ebony said, sounding more confident than I knew she felt. "They managed it this time, didn't they?" As Ebony said this, neither of our parents were looking in our direction. I immediately knew that there was something they weren't telling us.

"Ebony, he's signed an NFR order," Dad said.

"A what?" I asked.

"It's short for 'Not For Resuscitation'," Mum replied.

"Wait a minute," Ebony said, frowning. "Do you mean that the next time this happens, they're just going to stand there and let him *die*?" When Dad nodded, Ebony stood up so fast the coffee table shook. "What the *fuck* did you let him do that for?" she asked angrily.

"Watch your mouth, Ebony," Dad said sharply.

She ignored the reprimand. "How could you let him go ahead and sign his life away?" she asked.

"Y-you can't let him *do* that to us!" With those words she ran out of the lounge room and up the kitchen corridor. I heard the back door slam closed as she left the house.

When I went after her a few minutes later, I found her sitting on the porch swing with tears streaming down her face. She knew he was dying, and like the rest of us was doing her best to come to terms with it, but every time that she was confronted with the truth she couldn't handle it. Her focus didn't waver as I sat down next to her.

"How could he do that to us, Aidan?" she asked. Most of the heat had disappeared from her tone, but I could tell that she was still angry. My first impulse was to comfort her, but I pushed it down in favour of forcing her to see sense.

"Listen to yourself, Ebony," I said. "You have no idea how *selfish* you're being, do you?"

"I'm not being selfish."

"You are," I informed her. "Everything you've said tonight...it's as if you're the only one who this is having any sort of impact on. The fact of the matter is that *all* of us are affected by this, whether we like it or not."

She looked at me sideways. "You don't think Taylor is the one being selfish here? Because I sure as hell do."

"No, I don't." I put a hand on her shoulder. "He's suffering so much, Nee. If he hadn't signed that order, every time he would have gone into arrest they would have had to try to bring him back, and that would have made his suffering so much worse. That affects us almost as much as it does him – he doesn't want us to see him in pain, so by signing that order he's looking out for us as well as himself." I blinked back tears. "And entirely aside from that, to keep bringing him back, when he could finally be at peace and out of pain...it's just so *cruel*, Ebony."

"I don't want him to die, Aidan," she said so quietly I wasn't sure I'd heard her at first.

"I don't either," I agreed. "But we can't always have what we want."

Chapter 24

Ebony

I looked up when I heard the quiet knock on the half-open door, smiling when I saw who had come to visit. Stephanie stood framed in the doorway, and I nodded for her to come in. I was sitting by Taylor's bedside, as I'd been doing for a few hours every day, holding his hand as he slept. The last week had been particularly bad – ever since he had been brought back from the brink, he had been drifting in and out of consciousness.

"How're you holding up?" Stephanie asked quietly as she pulled up a chair and seated herself next to me.

I shrugged. "Considering I'm losing my best friend, I suppose I'm doing okay." I ran my right thumb down the back of Taylor's left hand, and he flexed his fingers slightly as he stirred a little. "I still don't want to believe that he's dying, but it's a bit hard not to when I have proof right here in front of me."

Stephanie didn't say anything for a little while. "Ebony, I really hate to ask you this," she said at last, "but can I talk to him? Just so he knows I'm here. You don't have to wake him up or anything."

"I kind of have to. He won't be able to hear you otherwise – he's pretty out of it." Without disengaging my hand from Taylor's I cautiously and gently shook him by the shoulder – I didn't want to cause him any more pain. "Tay, wake up," I said softly, and he shifted slightly. By that alone, I knew he was waking up. "Stephanie's here, and she wants to talk to you."

It wasn't long before he opened his eyes, and he blinked slowly. He looked incredibly exhausted, and I began to feel the first twinges of guilt. "I know you're tired," I said apologetically as he turned his gaze to me, mild accusation in his tired eyes. "I know, and I'm sorry." I looked to Stephanie and nodded.

"Hi Tay," Stephanie said, smiling a little. Taylor smiled back, but it faded just as quickly as it appeared.

"Hey Steph," he whispered weakly.

"You hang in there, all right?" Stephanie said, her voice shaking slightly. "For me, yeah?" She smiled again, but this time Taylor didn't smile back.

"I'm hangin'," he replied, before laughing weakly and closing his eyes.

Stephanie shrugged and gave me a small smile. "It was worth a shot," she said quietly.

"He's been like that since last Saturday," I said softly and apologetically.

I released Taylor's hand and stood up, stretching and working my joints to ease some of the stiffness, and nodded at the door. Stephanie and I left the room together, moving out into the corridor, and I leaned up against the wall. "This is so hard, Steph," I whispered, closing my eyes. "My brother is going to spend the rest of his *life* in that room. He's never coming home, and I want him home again so much it hurts." I opened my eyes again and looked straight at Stephanie. "It hurts like *hell*."

Stephanie didn't say a word. Instead, she stepped forward and took me into an embrace. Words weren't needed right now – we were two friends, sisters in everything but the law and blood, supporting one another through an incredibly tough time, and all we needed was one another.

Stephanie left not long afterward, and I resumed my seat at my brother's side. I had been sitting there for maybe five minutes when he reawakened, and I smiled. "Hey sleepyhead," I teased.

"Hey Nee," he said quietly. He knew that around me, he was free to drop whatever act it was that he was putting on for Stephanie, and for any of his friends who came to visit him, and so now he sounded a little melancholy. It was actually somewhat startling.

"You okay? I mean, aside from the obvious."

He nodded. "I'm just so tired," he whispered. "I want all of this to just be *over*..."

"I know you do." I carefully smoothed his bandanna back over his head. "I know." My gaze shifted momentarily to my watch. "I should let you get some sleep – you really need it. Is there anything you want before I go?"

Taylor seemed to think for a little while. "Can you sing to me? Please?"

His request took me somewhat aback. There was only one person he had ever asked to sing to him, and it wasn't me – it was our mother. That he wanted me to do it this time spoke volumes.

"Any special requests?" I asked, and he shook his head. "Okay then. Just don't blame me if you don't like it, because you'll have brought it on yourself." He smiled weakly at this, and I quickly decided on a song to sing to him.

"The sky now divides...to bring you back into the fold...welcome home...still my need to recognise...any comfort you might show...only grows...guess I'll learn to accommodate...while my heart just sits and waits...maybe God you found...maybe is all that you can offer now...offer now...

"Where am I to take refuge...when the storms of pain release...shelter me...this blessedness of life...sometimes brings me to my knees...I call on thee...I have not the words to write...a farewell to you tonight...maybe God you found...maybe is all that you can offer now...offer now...

"I know hearts are weeping...while your voice is now singing on high...angel on high...I have not the words to write...a farewell to you tonight...maybe God you found...maybe is all that you can offer now...offer now...maybe God you found...maybe is all that you can offer now...offer now..."

Taylor had closed his eyes right after I'd started singing, and for a moment or two I was sure he'd fallen asleep. As the last notes trailed off into silence he opened his eyes again and looked up at me. "Thank you," he whispered, and his eyes dropped closed once more. "I'm so scared, Ebby..."

"I know, Tay," I said softly, and I carefully and gently squeezed his hand. He returned the squeeze, but weakly, his hand trembling. "I'm scared too."

That night, before I went to bed, I prayed.

"I know that I haven't been the world's best Christian, so I shouldn't be asking something like this, but...please don't take Taylor away from us. He's fought so hard. If anyone deserves to live through this, it's him. And...I have no idea how I'll be able to go on without him. For my entire life it's been the three of us, and I'm positive that losing either Aidan or Taylor would kill me. I don't know if I could force myself to keep going if that ever happened. It's hard enough already.

"I know there's a time for everything, and I know that when your number's up then it's up, but he really needs a miracle to live through this. He's too young to die – he's got his entire life in front of him. H-he doesn't deserve this punishment, because as much as I'd love to believe otherwise that's exactly what all of this is. It's not right. I can't think of a single thing that he ought to be punished for."

I paused briefly. "Please send him a miracle," I pleaded in a tearful whisper. "*Please*. Don't take him away from us. He doesn't deserve to die."

* * *

Early the next morning, I was jolted out of a very sound sleep. It was so early that my room was still dark, with only the faintest hint of moonlight managing to pierce through the gap between the curtains at my window. One glance sideways at my clock radio had me groaning – the glowing red digits informed me that it was a quarter past four in the morning. I'd only been asleep for a few hours at the very most.

It was at that moment that I realised what had woken me. "Taylor," I whispered. "Oh *shit*...it's happening." I had no idea how, but I knew he needed me.

I kicked my covers off and got out of bed, switching on my lamp so that I could see what I was doing. A scramble for the jeans and T-shirt I'd discarded the evening before ensued, and once I had them on I shoved my phone into a pocket. I didn't bother to put my shoes on, or to tie my hair back, and nor did I even try to find my wallet or my keys. There just wasn't any time for it – I'd already wasted enough time getting dressed.

I crept from my room on tiptoe, down the hallway to my brothers' room. Aidan stood in the open doorway, pulling his still-tied sneakers on one-handed and swearing quietly. Even through the dark I could see that his eyes were filled with unshed tears. I reached out and put a hand on his shoulder, and he looked at me.

"I felt it too," he told me. "It's time, isn't it?" My silence was evidently all the reply that Aidan needed. "Shit," he muttered, and he grabbed his keys and his wallet off his desk.

A glance passed between us, and I knew that Aidan had as much intention as I did of telling our parents where we were going. That is to say, none whatsoever. To wake our parents, or even to leave a note, would be wasting precious seconds – and that was time neither of us had. We needed to leave right now. Our brother needed us.

The drive into Coffs Harbour was quiet, with only the sound of the engine of Aidan's car to break the silence. Aidan was busy concentrating on staying on the road while clocking speeds of over one hundred and twenty kilometres an hour, and I was trying to sort and sift through the mass of thoughts in my head. It was far easier said than done – I had so many thoughts coming at me from all angles that I could barely think at all.

It was nearly four-thirty when we arrived at the hospital. "Do you think they'll try to kick us out?" Aidan asked as we entered the building via the emergency entrance and headed straight for the nearest set of stairs.

"I doubt it," I replied. "We're family, so they'd need a very good reason to stop us seeing him. Plus I think Mum said at some point that the ward's open around the clock anyway."

Taylor was asleep when we reached his room, and I choked down a sob when I heard him whisper first my name and then Aidan's. Aidan put an arm around my shoulders and led me up to the side of our brother's bed. Almost as soon as we were at his side, Taylor slowly opened his eyes and looked up at us – eyes filled with tears and so much exhaustion, pain and misery that I wanted to look away.

"Ebony?" he asked, his voice quiet but at the same time so sad.

I nodded. "Yeah, it's me," I whispered, my voice nearly breaking. "Aidan's here too." I saw Taylor smile at this. "Aidan, help me sit him up," I said as I stepped away from Aidan and closer to the head of the bed. For once Aidan chose not to argue with me, and working in tandem we eased Taylor up into a sitting position.

I then did something that normally I never would have done, something I knew had to be against hospital rules – I climbed up on the bed, and I settled myself behind Taylor. Aidan then eased our brother back down so that he was leaning up against me, before getting up on the bed himself and propping his feet up on the chair I'd been sitting in only sixteen hours earlier.

"Ebby," Taylor whispered, the smallest whimper of pain in his voice. "It hurts..." He squeezed his eyes shut, and a tear trickled down his face.

"Shh," I whispered. "I know, Tay. I know." For half a heartbeat I wondered if we should call one of the nurses in.

"You don't have to hold on for us," Aidan said quietly. "You let go if you want to."

"I don't want to let go," Taylor said. "N-not yet."

Soon, a tense silence descended upon the three of us, broken only by the sound of our breathing and the steady beeping of Taylor's heart monitor. We didn't need to speak – we needed to be together right now, just the three of us, and we didn't need words for that.

It was around half-past five when I noticed that Taylor was fighting to stay awake – his eyes would slowly drift closed, only to pop straight back open seconds later. He was so utterly exhausted...

"Go to sleep, Tay," I whispered. "Please. You're tired."

"I don't want to," he replied, his voice heavy with exhaustion, and he looked up at me. "If I go to sleep...I'm not going to wake up ever again."

I looked over at the window. The grey light that always preceded daybreak was beginning to creep through the blinds – the sun would be rising soon. I nearly started to cry all over again when I realised that this was the last dawn Taylor would ever see. The two of us had stayed awake until sunrise so many times that I had lost count, and the realisation that after this morning it would never happen again cut me right to my core.

"I c-can't hold on anymore," Taylor whispered, and I grasped hold of his right hand. Aidan took hold of his left. "I-I tried so hard..."

"We know you did, Tay," Aidan assured him.

"You let go when you need to," I said softly, almost echoing Aidan's earlier words. To say that took every last bit of strength I could muster. I didn't want him to let go, and nor did I want to let him go, but this wasn't about me and what I wanted. In the grand scheme of things, it no longer mattered.

"I'm so *tired*," Taylor whispered. He looked up at me, right into my eyes. "It's happening, Ebby..."

I didn't know what to say to him – really, what *could* I say? There weren't enough words in the world. More tears fell from his eyes, and I carefully wiped them away. He was squeezing our hands, as if we were his life support.

"Close your eyes, Tay," Aidan whispered.

"I'm not ready to say goodbye," I whispered tearfully. He looked up at me again as I said this, and I was sure I could see his soul. "I c-can't..."

"You'll be okay," he whispered. Aidan took hold of my free hand and squeezed tightly. "I'll never leave you, I promise." He was growing weaker and weaker by the second, and the beeping of his heart monitor got slower...and slower.

"Sleep," I whispered as he closed his eyes briefly.

"It hurts so *much*..." His voice was heavy with pain and an intense sadness, and choked with tears, but so quiet.

"Shh," I whispered. Aidan released my hand, and I wrapped that arm around Taylor. "It's almost over now."

"I have to let go," Taylor whispered. This was it. This was the end, and I was dying inside – I could feel my soul being ripped in two, and pain radiating off of Aidan in waves. "I love you Aidan," he said quietly.

"I love you too Tay," Aidan whispered back. Taylor then looked at me again, and I looked right into his eyes. Tears were streaming down his face by this point. I knew that he had to be so scared.

"I-I love you Ebby," he whispered, his voice shaking. "I'm s-so sorry..."

"I love you so much, Taylor," I whispered back. As I spoke, his hand slackened on mine, and his heart monitor began to whine. His chest stopped rising and falling, and he stopped blinking. I sat there for what felt like an eternity, holding him close to me and gazing into his eyes.

The life in them had faded away. He was gone from this life, from this world...and away from me.

"And it feels, and it feels like...Heaven's so far away...and it feels, yeah it feels like...the world has grown cold...now that you've gone away," I whispered brokenly. "S-sweet dreams, Tay." I leaned down and kissed his forehead before sliding his eyes closed for the final time.

I eased myself out carefully from behind Taylor and climbed down off of the bed, and Aidan helped me to ease our brother onto his back. I straightened his bandanna and smoothed the wrinkles and creases out of it before stepping away from his bedside. Aidan walked around the end of the bed and up in front of me, and we stood there face to face for a moment that seemed to last forever. I looked down at Taylor, and then met Aidan's gaze once more. "I can't believe he's gone," I whispered.

Aidan pulled me close to him and wrapped his arms around me, and we both broke down and cried.

* * *

I scrolled one-handed through my mobile's phone directory in search of my mother's number. I had no idea if she would even answer, being so early in the morning, but I had to try anyway. She needed to know what had happened, what Aidan and I had been through this morning, and she deserved to hear it from us.

"D'you think she'll be up?" Aidan asked quietly. He was holding my left hand as I worked the keypad of my phone with my right thumb. "It's not even six o'clock yet."

"I really don't know, Aidan," I answered. "Only one way to find out." I found the number I was looking for and hit dial. "I hope it's on speaker..."

Mum picked up on the second ring. "Ebony?" she asked, sounding absolutely frantic – and I could hardly fault her for it. After all, we'd left home without telling anyone where we were going.

"Yeah, it's me," I said quietly. "Aidan's here too."

"Oh, thank God," Mum said in obvious relief. "We were so worried when we realised you and Aidan had gone – we thought the worst had happened."

"She *wishes* it was just a thought," Aidan muttered.

I hushed him. "I'm sorry Mum, but we had to," I said. *You will not cry*, I ordered myself. *You will not cry...* "We're at the hospital – we got here about an hour and a half ago."

"The hospital?" Mum asked. "Ebony, why are you at the hospital? Is Taylor okay?"

Hearing my best friend's name caused the floodgates to burst wide open, and I started sobbing all over again. Aidan took my phone from me, and I heard him break the news to our mother.

"Mum, he's gone," he said softly.

"What?" I heard Mum ask – she sounded as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Aidan, what are you saying?"

Aidan started to cry all over again. "Taylor's gone," he repeated. In a quieter voice he added, "He died in Ebony's arms, Mum..."

"Oh God...stay where you are Aidan, and don't let your sister out of your sight." I could hear Mum crying over my own sobs. "Your dad and I will be right there."

I don't remember Aidan giving my phone back to me, and I don't know how long I stood there afterward at Taylor's bedside, just looking at him. He looked as if he were sleeping, and I wished more than anything that he *was* only asleep. I could only hope that wherever he was now, he wasn't in pain any longer, and that he'd finally found the peace he deserved. And I hoped that if angels dreamed, his dreams were sweet.

It took me a little while to truly take everything in. Instinct took over in an instant, and I did the only thing that made sense.

I ran.

I ran like the hounds of Hades were snapping at my heels, completely ignoring Aidan's call for me to come back. I pelted out of that room, out of the ward, so fast that even if Aidan had tried to chase after me he never would have caught me.

The next thing I was aware of was a hand tucking my hair behind my ears. There really was no telling how long I had been sitting there outside the hospital entrance, staring at the overcast sky above me, but I knew it had to have been for a while. I tore my gaze away from the sky to see Aidan crouched in front of me, concern in his eyes.

"Aidan?" I asked, my voice trembling. He nodded and extended a hand to help me to my feet. Almost as soon as I was standing I collapsed against him and started to sob all over again. "Bring him back," I begged. "Please, bring him *back*..."

"I wish I could, Nee," he said softly. He put a finger beneath my chin and lifted my head so he could look at me. "Mum and Dad got here about ten minutes ago," he informed me. "Dad asked me to come and find you, and to bring you back upstairs – he wants to make sure you're okay. We don't even have to go back in the room if you don't want to."

"You promise?" I asked, and Aidan nodded before leading me back inside.

When we got back upstairs, Dad was sitting where Aidan and I had been when we'd called home, and Mum was nowhere to be seen. He looked up from contemplating his shoelaces as Aidan and I approached.

"Ebony, are you all right?" he asked as he stood.

I decided that it would be best to be honest, and so I shook my head. "My brother died, Dad," I said quietly. "Do you *really* think I'm all right?"

Rather wisely I thought, Dad didn't respond to this. "I wish the two of you had left a note," he said, changing the subject, "but I understand why you didn't. And your mum and I are both very thankful that you were here for your brother when he needed you the most."

"Where's Mum?" I asked quietly.

Dad nodded toward Taylor's room. "With your brother."

I nodded in acknowledgement and stepped across to the doorway, knowing I shouldn't go inside. Mum was sitting on the bed with Taylor cradled in her arms, and she was crying so hard that I knew her heart had to be breaking. And really, how could it not be? She'd just lost one of her children. A nurse kept watch at a respectful distance.

"I just realised something," Aidan said quietly.

I tore my gaze away from the scene playing out before me and looked over at Aidan. He stood beside me with his hands in his pockets. "And what would that be?" I asked.

"It's November eleventh today." He reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone so he could show me the date – Saturday, November 11, 2006. And I very nearly laughed at the sheer irony of it all.

Our brother had died on Remembrance Day.

Chapter 25

Aidan

It was almost eight-thirty when we arrived back in Sapphire Cove. I'd insisted on driving Ebony and myself – the absolute last thing we needed right now was to be separated, even if it was only for the drive home. During the drive I kept sneaking sidelong glances across at my sister, biting my lip at what I saw. She had wrapped her arms around herself and had dropped her head forward, eyes at half-mast. Every so often she sniffled quietly and let out a small hiccup. Just from that, I could tell that she was hurting badly.

The first thing I saw as I entered the house was Zac sitting at the bottom of the staircase, staring down at the polished wooden floor. He looked up as the front door closed behind Ebony, getting to his feet barely a second later.

"Mum?" he asked as he took a few steps toward us. "What's going on? Where did you and Dad go?" His gaze snapped to me, then shifted to over my shoulder. "Where did *they* go?"

"Not right now, Zac," Mum said. "Go and wake your sisters up, please. It's best that you all hear this at the same time."

As Mum finished speaking, Zac's whole demeanour changed, and he stared at us for the better part of a minute. His next words tore right through me.

"Is Taylor okay?"

Behind me, I could hear Ebony start to cry all over again. "Zac, just go," I said, deciding to take charge. "If there was one thing we ever needed you to do, it's this. Go and get Jess and Zo, and bring 'em down here. Please."

"Thank you, Aidan," Dad said quietly as Zac took off upstairs.

"No worries," I said. "It's about time he listened to me."

It wasn't long before we had all gathered in the lounge room. Zac had woken our sisters and had dragged them downstairs so quickly the two of them were still half-asleep. Ebony and I sat together on the smaller of the two lounges, directly across from our parents who were seated on the sofa. Zac, Jessica and Zoë sat in front of the TV, their backs to the screen.

"So what happened?" Zac asked. He looked over at Ebony and I, and I knew he had to be taking in the sheer heartbreak that had been present in Ebony's eyes for the last few hours, and the pain that I knew had to be in my own. "It's bad, isn't it?"

"I wish we had better news," Mum replied quietly. "Aidan and Ebony went to the hospital about three and a half hours ago to see your brother. While they were there..." Mum trailed off, and she looked to Dad. I could tell that she didn't want to say those words, the words that had changed all of our lives forever. Dad seemed to realise this, and he continued Mum's sentence.

"Taylor died just before sunrise," he said softly. "Aidan and Ebony were with him when it happened."

"You're kidding," Zac said. He sounded as if he couldn't believe Dad's words. "If this is a joke, it's not funny." He shook his head. "He *can't* be gone..."

"He is, Zac," I said. "This is no joke, and I really wish it was." I gave Ebony's left shoulder a small squeeze. "At least he isn't suffering anymore. That's the only good thing about this."

"He's really gone?" Jessica asked. I could hear the tears in her voice.

This time, it was Ebony who spoke. "He...I was holding him, Jess," she said quietly. With those words she shrugged my arm off her shoulders and got up, heading toward the kitchen. Moments later hinges squeaked as the back door opened, before it slammed closed.

"Let her go, Aidan," Mum said wearily as I went to go after her. "She needs to be alone right now."

I nodded, but reluctantly. "I'm gonna go up to our – my room," I said quietly, correcting myself at the last minute.

"Could you do something for us first?" Dad asked.

"Yeah, of course."

"Call Stephanie. She needs to know."

Stephanie. In all of the confusion and the daze of the last few hours, I had completely forgotten about her. If there was one person who deserved to know what had happened, it was Taylor's partner. And it looked as if it fell to me to break the news.

Deciding in a split second that calling her was completely inappropriate, I headed for the front door. I only hoped that she was home, and that she was awake.

I reached Stephanie's house after about five minutes of walking. The front door opened about thirty seconds after I rang the doorbell, and I looked up from my scrutiny of my shoelaces to see Stephanie's mother standing in the doorway. "Hi Mrs. Woodcroft," I said quietly. "Could I talk to Stephanie, please?"

"Yes, of course," Mrs. Woodcroft said as she ushered me inside and closed the door. "Stephanie!" she called. "Aidan's here to see you!"

"I'll be down in a bit!" she called back. Less than a minute later she appeared in the lounge room, holding her hair back in a ponytail as she wrapped an elastic band around it. "Hi Aidan," she said.

"What's up?"

"I'll leave the two of you to talk," Stephanie's mother said, and she headed upstairs.

"Steph, I have some bad news," I said quietly. "I think you might want to sit down."

"Okay," Stephanie said unsurely. She sat down in the nearest armchair, while I took a seat on the sofa. This was going to break her heart. I bowed my head as I tried to figure out how to tell her, knowing all the while that no matter how much I tried to soften the blow, it was going to hurt like hell.

"Steph...oh fucking *hell* this is so hard." I ran my hands through my dreadlocks. "H-he died, Steph – my brother died this morning."

I looked up just in time to see Stephanie press a hand to her mouth, her eyes wide in what I instantly recognised as shock. "Taylor's gone?" she asked quietly, and I nodded. "Oh shit...Jesus *Christ*," she whispered. "W-when?"

"A bit more than three and a half hours ago," I said quietly. "Just before sunrise. He wasn't alone – Ebony and I were with him when he passed." I noticed right then that my hands had started to shake. "He was so scared – he didn't want to die, Steph. I know he didn't."

"I can't believe this," Stephanie whispered. "I only saw him yesterday...if I'd known what was going to happen I'd have said goodbye..." With those words the first tears fell, and she buried her face in her hands. "I never got to say goodbye..."

I had no idea what to say in response to that. Instead, I stood up and walked across to where Stephanie sat, kneeling down before her and gently prying her hands away from her face.

"I'm not going to say that I know how you feel," I said softly, "because I truly don't." That at least was the truth. We'd both lost him, but somehow Stephanie's loss was far greater than my own. I had lost a brother and a best friend, but Stephanie had lost her partner, the man she was going to spend the rest of her life with. He had been ripped away from her barely four months after they'd said their vows. In that instant, I was grateful for the bond that I had shared with my brother, grateful that at least I'd been able to say goodbye.

Stephanie cried for a full half hour. I stayed knelt on the floor at her feet for that whole time, ignoring the protests of my knees and my back as she sobbed.

"Aidan, tell me something," Stephanie said as her crying tapered off. "I know you probably don't want to think or talk about it very much, but I need to know."

"Know what?"

Her green-eyed gaze met my own. "Was he in pain before he...before it happened?"

I knew I owed her the truth, and so I nodded.

I left for home about ten minutes later, after assuring Stephanie that I'd call her when I knew arrangements had been made. It had started to rain while I'd been inside with her – it was only a light drizzle for the time being. I ended up running home through the mist, arriving back at the house as the drizzle became slightly less than a downpour.

The house was still and silent as I let myself in through the front door. I really couldn't remember the last time it had been so quiet. For a split second I was tempted to call out and ask who had died, but I ignored it and went upstairs to the room that for twenty years I had shared with my brother, walking across to the window and sitting down on the sill. For the rest of the day that was where I sat, in nothing more than a daze. I didn't speak to anyone, I didn't eat lunch or dinner, and I didn't turn on the radio. My only company was the sound of the rain falling outside my bedroom window.

Night had well and truly fallen by the time my bedroom door opened. I tore my gaze away from the window to see my mother standing in the doorway, backlit in the light from the hallway. "Aidan, you should get some sleep," she said quietly as she entered the room. "It's very late."

"I don't think I can sleep tonight," I said. "Not when things are like this."

Mum came up to me and placed a hand on my shoulder. "Aidan, I know you're hurting, but you've been awake since at least four this morning. Just try to get some rest, okay? The next few days are going to be pretty hectic."

"I know," I sighed. I looked out at the falling rain for a little while before I spoke again. "How's Ebony?"

"She's hurting pretty badly. I think she might appreciate it if you sat with her for a little while. She needs her brother right now."

And it's ironic that the one brother she truly needs, she can't have, I thought wryly.

Mum took her hand off my shoulder after what seemed an eternity. "Get some sleep," she said quietly before leaving the room.

I knew she was right – I did need to sleep. The absolute last thing that any of us needed right now was to get sick or to collapse from exhaustion. But as I stood up, stiff from my day spent sitting at the window, I realised something.

I didn't want to sleep in my bed tonight.

Before now, I had always held close a small kernel of hope that by some stroke of luck, Taylor would get well enough to come home. And while that hope had been mostly dashed in the months leading up to this point, I still prayed and wished for a miracle, for things to turn out differently. They hadn't, and now my life would never be the same. As much as I wanted my life to go back to the way it had been two years ago, I knew it would never happen. This was the way things had to be from this day forward, and I hated it.

Ebony lay curled up in her bed, eyes wide open and tears streaming down her face, when I slipped into her bedroom. She didn't move as I dropped to my knees at her bedside and wiped her tears away with my fingertips.

"Why did this happen to us?" she asked in a whisper. "What the fuck did we do to deserve this?"

For the first time in my life, I had no answer to give her. "I don't know, Nee," I said quietly. "I don't understand it either." And really, how *could* I understand? All I knew was that eighteen hours earlier, I had been at my brother's side as he had lost his fight for life. And Ebony...her voice, telling our brother that she loved him, had been the last he had ever heard. We'd both lost so much that it was unfathomable.

"Is it okay if I crash in here tonight?" I asked. "I don't really want to sleep in my room." She nodded and started to sit herself up. "Thanks, sis."

I settled myself down on Ebony's bed when she was sitting, and she curled up against me. "Every time I hear someone coming down the hallway, I keep thinking that he's home," she said at last, "and I keep waiting for him to come in to say goodnight, or to sit down and watch TV with me, or even to just sit with me while I read or something. And I have to keep telling myself that it's just wishful thinking." She hiccupped quietly. "It doesn't seem *real*, Ayd..."

She had no idea how right she was. Nothing that had happened today had sunk in yet – and I wasn't sure that it ever would.

* * *

Hours later, I sat on the lounge in the family room with my knees drawn up against my chest, staring blankly at the TV without registering what show was being broadcast. It had been one full day since it had happened, and yet I was still unable to comprehend that my entire world was slowly falling to pieces around me. Even despite the day's heat I felt cold, and I couldn't seem to get warm no matter how hard I tried. Out of the corner of my eye I could see into my father's office, the door being wide open – Dad was sitting at his desk crying with his head down, the cordless phone hanging by its aerial from the fingers of one hand.

Mum came downstairs a couple of minutes later, at about the same time that Dad exited his office. In my daze I'd never noticed her going upstairs, and I figured she'd gone to look in on Ebony and Jessica. I shifted my focus and watched as my parents embraced tightly.

"I made the funeral arrangements," Dad said quietly. *I am **not** listening to this*, I told myself. "The service is at the Coffs Harbour Memorial Gardens, at eleven o'clock in the morning on the sixteenth – I still need to call Reverend Armitage to ask if he would be able to conduct the service." *I can't hear him*, I insisted. "The burial will be at a quarter past twelve that afternoon, at St. Andrew's." Mum buried her face in Dad's shirt at that moment, and I felt my eyes burn with unshed tears. "And..." Dad closed his eyes tightly. "David and Karen have offered to hold the wake at their house after the burial." *I'm not listening, I'm not listening, I'm not listening*, I repeated over and over again in my head, as a sort of mantra. Couldn't they talk about this somewhere else? I had absolutely no desire to listen to any details of the upcoming funeral, the burial or even the wake – I was barely aware that my brother was even gone. And yet, my parents spoke of it as if they'd already accepted it.

"Aid'n?"

I tore my gaze away from my parents and looked down over my knees. Standing there before me, the purple dragon that Taylor had given to her for her third birthday dangling by its tail from her right hand, was Zoë. She had spoken quietly and uncertainly.

"Yeah?"

"Why're you crying?"

I disengaged my right hand from where it gripped my left leg and swiped at my face. I'd barely even noticed that I *had* started to cry, and I hated myself for it – I was twenty years old and I was crying like a baby. But really, wasn't it my right? I'd lost my brother and my best friend. For a little while I had no answer to give my sister.

"I..." My voice faltered for just a few seconds. "I miss Taylor," I finished quietly. I could feel my parents looking at me in what I knew had to be sympathy – something I didn't want right now, but knew I was going to get anyway.

"Jess said he went to Heaven," Zoë said, sounding very sure of herself. "When's he coming home?"

It was such an innocent question. I knew that she didn't yet understand the ultimate finality of death yet – she was only five years old, and wouldn't be turning six for another two months. She hadn't been born when our grandmother, whom Taylor had inherited his piano from, had died, so she really had no idea what 'going to Heaven' actually meant. Anger began to bubble up from deep inside me, anger that I had been keeping bottled up inside for two long years – and Zoë ended up bearing the full force of it.

"He isn't coming home, Zoë," I snapped.

"Aidan," Dad said quietly, a warning in his tone.

I immediately fixed my gaze onto him. "What?" I shot back. "She's been kept in the dark for too long, Dad. Nobody is telling her the truth, and she deserves to know. And really, I don't give a shit what you or Mum think, because she's hearing it from me." I returned my focus to my baby sister. "Taylor *died*, Zoë. When you die, you *never* come back. He won't be coming home ever again."

And then I saw the tears beginning to form in Zoë's blue eyes, so much like Taylor's had been. I knew that my words had hurt her badly, and it tore me up inside even more, but I was too angry to even give a damn.

"Aidan-" Mum started, but Zoë interrupted her. The tears in her voice cut deep to my core.

"He's never coming back? Ever?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Mama? Daddy?" she asked as she turned to our parents. "He's lying," she said tearfully. "He's *lying...*"

"Oh Zoë," Mum said softly, and she came across to crouch down before my sister. "Zoë, sweetheart, you don't come home when you go to Heaven," she explained softly, and this seemed to drive it home.

"But I'll never see Tay again," Zoë said quietly. "Why won't he come home?"

Now Dad came over, and he picked Zoë up and held her close. She buried her face in his shoulder and cried, her small shoulders shaking. Her dragon fell to the floor, forgotten. Mum stroked her plaits and whispered something to my sister that I couldn't hear. Shame replaced my anger, but I couldn't say anything that resembled an apology – I just couldn't find the words.

"Aidan, where are you going?" Mum asked as I uncurled myself and pushed myself up off the lounge. With those words, the anger returned and almost exploded from me.

"I'm leaving," I said angrily. "Do you know how *hard* it is for me to sit here and listen to you and Dad talking about my brother as if you've already accepted that he's gone?" I curled my hands into fists. I couldn't stay here, and I couldn't deal with everything right now. I just needed to leave, and so I was going to be like Ebony – I was going to run from it.

"Aidan, that's enough," Mum said sharply.

"I've had enough of hearing about funerals, and...and wakes, and goddamn fucking *burials!*" I yelled. "My brother – your *son* – died, and that's all you can talk about!" I shook my head in disbelief and anger. "I'm outta here."

"*Evan!*" Dad yelled, the use of my first name and his tone almost making me stop in my tracks. At any other time it would have scared the shit out of me, but I was too upset, too hurt and too angry to care. He made a grab at me, still holding Zoë, but I pushed his hand away.

"Don't fucking *touch* me!" I screamed at him. "Just leave me the hell alone!" I ran out the front door, slamming it behind me. As soon as I reached my car I wrenched open the driver's side door and got behind the wheel, yanking it closed so hard the window rattled in its frame. Without so much as putting on my seatbelt I shoved the key into the ignition and turned it, the engine roaring to life.

"Aidan!" I heard Mum call, her voice slightly panicked, but I ignored her. Instead, I slammed my bare right foot down on the accelerator and reversed down the driveway without so much as looking in my rear view mirror. I had no idea where I was even going, but the destination didn't matter. All that mattered was that I was away from the house. It wasn't just my home – it had been Taylor's as well. Every single memory I had of that house included him – we had grown up there, made plans for our futures, and had created memories that I couldn't get out of my head. I just couldn't deal with it yet.

Somehow, I ended up at the park near the cove halfway across town, though I didn't remember driving there. I sat on one of the swings by myself, staring out at the horizon, as the rain started to fall once more. Leaving the house didn't help a bit – I still couldn't stop thinking about him. Every thought in my head was a memory, and every single image was of my brother's face. I had never known you could miss someone so much, and yet I did. I missed my brother so much it was painful. I sat there in the rain and cried my heart out, releasing all the pain and misery that had been building up all year.

I knew now how Ebony felt. It just hit me a day late – and it slammed into me like a tonne of bricks.

"Aidan!"

Through a haze of misery I could hear my sister calling my name, but I showed no sign I had even heard it. I could see her drop to her knees in the wet sand beneath the swings, and I felt her take my hands in hers. "Aidan, look at me," she said so softly I wasn't sure I had even heard her. "Please, Aidan...I need to know that you're okay – I can't lose you too..."

Something deep inside clicked into place, and I finally met my sister's gaze. The relief in her eyes was clear when she saw me looking at her.

"What happened?" she asked softly.

"I think I broke Zoë's heart," I whispered miserably. "I got so angry when she asked me when T-Taylor was coming home, and I just came right out with it. I hurt her so badly." I let out a shuddering breath. "Mum's gonna kill me when we get home. She didn't want Zo to find out until she was older."

"She won't kill you," Ebony said softly. "She's already lost one of her sons. I know she couldn't bear to lose another." She raised her gaze to meet mine. "I think we should get out of the rain – we're both getting soaked. Your dreads are going to end up all frizzy." I couldn't help but smile a little at this, and Ebony reached up to put her left hand on my right shoulder. "Everything will be okay, Aidan. You'll see. We'll make it through this eventually."

Eventually. That really was the key word here. While the pain of our loss was still so raw and close to the surface, burning like a hot ember, in time things would get better. But the pain would never go away completely – I wasn't so naïve that I believed that it would.

We'd barely reached my car, parked crookedly by the side of the road, when I fell to my hands and my knees on the wet grass and started crying all over again. It was truly a vicious circle – whenever I managed to stem the flow of tears, the dam would just burst all over again. I felt one of Ebony's arms encircle my shoulders, and heard her voice soft in my ear.

"We'll get through this, Aidan," she whispered, and I could tell that she was fighting back her own tears. "We'll be okay..."

At that moment, I wasn't sure who she was trying to reassure – me, or herself.

Chapter 26

Ebony

How do you say goodbye to someone you've known for your entire life?

On the morning of the sixteenth of November, those branches of the Hanson and Lawyer families that were based in Australia, along with Stephanie and her parents, and a veritable army of my brother's friends, gathered in Coffs Harbour. I had known, from the moment I had very reluctantly dragged myself out of bed at around seven-thirty, that today was going to be the hardest day of my life – and really, how could it *not* be? Saturday had been bad enough, but today...today was going to be so much worse.

And as the service progressed, Reverend Armitage's opening words kept spinning around in my head. *We are gathered here this morning to farewell and to celebrate the life of Jordan Taylor Hanson – beloved son of Walker and Diana, brother of Aidan, Ebony, Zachary, Jessica and Zoë, and partner of Stephanie*, he had said. I found his presence at the service ironic – it had been Reverend Armitage who had christened all of we Hanson children, and it would be Reverend Armitage who would farewell our brother from this life.

I'd always hated funerals. True, until now the only one I had ever attended had been for my grandmother, but that didn't mean I hated them any less. It had taken a good deal of coaxing and subtle prodding from Aidan to get me to set even one foot inside of the doors. Today was all about farewelling my brother, and for that alone I knew I had to stick it out.

Right before Aidan and I were called forward to speak about our brother, the feeling of loneliness that had been building up since Saturday morning finally came to a head. I was surrounded by my family and by those who Taylor had considered his friends, but I felt more alone than I ever had before. Deep down inside I felt as if there was a piece missing, which was true in a sense. For my entire life it had been the three of us together – triplets, best friends...soulmates. We were never

meant to be separated, and yet that was exactly what had happened. The chain linking the three of us had been broken, and it could never be repaired.

At around twenty minutes to twelve, Aidan and I were called forward. Aidan carried our brother's guitar over his shoulder by its woven leather strap, and I held Taylor's scratched and scuffed skates and worn hockey stick. The handle of the hockey stick was marked in thick black letters with Taylor's full name in capital letters, written in a thirteen-year-old's hand. In smaller writing were the number 13 and the date 14-3-1999, signifying the date and age at which he had received it. We propped the treasures up against the flower-laden casket and moved across to the lectern that had been set up, standing side by side.

"We never thought we would ever be separated," Aidan said to begin. "It was completely incomprehensible to us – we all had different plans for our lives, sure, but those plans included each other. And now...Taylor's gone, and we've got no idea what will happen. We don't know if we'll stick to our plans, or if we'll make new ones – we don't know *anything* yet."

"They say things come in threes," I continued. "That was certainly true for us. Taylor fell seriously ill three times in his life – it's just such a shame that the saying 'third time's the charm' doesn't hold true in this case. He got incredibly lucky twice, and after that his luck just...it just ran out." I blinked back tears. "This time was easily the worst – we'd known since April that he wouldn't make it, but it didn't make it any less of a shock when it happened."

"We knew when it was time for him to go," Aidan said. "The three of us...we weren't just siblings, and we weren't just triplets. It was more like we were each a third of the same person. We felt each other's happiness and sorrow, we knew what each other was thinking, and we could usually finish one another's sentences. And when the time came...well, we both *felt* it. It was strong enough to wake us both up. I don't know exactly what it was – I'm still trying to figure it out. What I *do* know is that it allowed us to be there with him when he finally lost his fight for life."

"He died in my arms," I said softly. "I was holding him as he took his final breaths, and my voice was the last sound that he ever heard." I took in a shaky breath. "H-his final words were that he loved me, and that he was sorry...and I told him that I loved him. He was gone barely a second later." I scrubbed at my eyes with the heel of my right hand. "We couldn't leave him alone to die. Aidan and I, we promised him years ago that he would never die alone, that both of us would be there when his time came. And we kept that promise. I don't think either of us could have forgiven ourselves if we hadn't – it would have been too cruel. He'd been through so much already, more than any one person should have to deal with, and for us to leave him alone right when he needed us the most...that would have been the final straw."

"You can't choose your family," Aidan said. "But in all truth...if Ebony and I had the choice, we would have chosen Taylor to be ours, and in a heartbeat. And we both feel incredibly privileged to have had Taylor as our brother. He was a truly amazing person – there really was nobody like him, and it's highly likely that there never will be again. He was so generous, so giving, and he always put others before himself."

"He never had anything negative to say against anyone," I said to continue the thread, conveniently neglecting to mention his lifelong animosity toward and sheer dislike -bordering-on- hatred of at least one of our cousins. "And if any of us was upset, or scared, or whatever we were feeling, he was always there with a smile or an ear to listen to us bitch and complain. He never dismissed anything we had to say."

Aidan then stepped back and picked up Taylor's guitar, slinging its strap over his head to rest on his shoulder. "One of Taylor's gifts was that of music," he said as he quickly tuned the instrument. "In 2004, not long after we took our final high school exams, he travelled down to Wollongong to audition for a place in the University of Wollongong's Creative Arts degree program. He received an offer of study at Wollongong one day before he was diagnosed for the second time." Out of the corner of my eye I saw Aidan swipe at his face. "That one day made all the difference in the

end. He had to reject that offer to save his life, and he never had another chance to make his dream come true.

"While I don't have any of his music here, I do have his guitar and one of his favourite songs. Taylor was, well...he was somewhat obsessed with Paul Kelly." A small wave of appreciative laughter rippled through the congregation. "His favourite Paul Kelly song was *Meet Me In The Middle Of The Air*, and it's that song that Ebony and I are going to perform." He began to play the basic melody of the song, and when I heard my cue I opened my mouth to sing, my voice falling and rising with the notes. More than it ever had before, that song held an incredible amount of meaning – it wasn't hard to figure out why Taylor had loved it so much.

"I am your true shepherd...I will lead you there...beside still waters...come and meet me in the middle of the air...I will meet you in the middle of the air..."

"I will lay you down...in pastures green and fair...every soul shall be restored...I will meet them in the middle of the air...come and meet me in the middle of the air..."

"Through the lonesome valley...my rod and staff you'll bear...fear not death's dark shadow...I will meet you in the middle of the air...come and meet me in the middle of the air..."

"With oil shall I anoint you...a table shall I prepare...your cup will runneth over...come and meet me in the middle of the air...I will meet you in the middle of the air..."

"In my house you'll dwell forever...you shall not want for care...surely goodness and mercy will follow you...come and meet me in the middle of the air...I will meet you in the middle of the air...come and meet me in the middle of the air...I will meet you in the middle of the air..."

As I finished the song, tears were streaming down my face. Aidan gave me a few moments to allow me to compose myself before he concluded our contribution to the service. During those few moments, I looked back at the casket behind me, at the framed photograph of Taylor that sat atop it – it had been taken on Christmas Day the year before, the last day of true happiness we'd

had before our world had fallen in on us all over again. From there, I snapped my focus back to the congregation before me – to my parents, my siblings, my aunts, uncles and cousins, Stephanie and her family, and the six young men and women who had formed the tight-knit inner circle of Taylor's group of friends. Kate and Rachel sat closest together, with Ben and Mark flanking them. Kieran was at Mark's left, with Chris seated next to Kieran. In the row behind them, I could see my brother's fellow patients from his time in Sydney, all of them looking whole and healthy.

"In the episode of the TV show *Firefly* called 'The Message', an old soldier's saying is recited. The saying goes, 'When you can't run, you crawl. And when you can't crawl, when you can't do that...'" Aidan stopped, swallowed hard and squeezed his eyes closed. A lone tear leaked from his left eye.

"When you can't crawl, you find someone to carry you," I finished, my voice shaking. I said nothing more after that, merely waited for Aidan to find the strength he needed to finish.

"We carried our brother through the final two years of his life," Aidan said when he was ready. "We gave him our strength when he had none of his own left. And we'll continue to carry him in our memories and our hearts until the day we see each other again."

The rest of the service was a complete blur. I sat there in a daze, not realising it had ended until I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I looked up to see Aidan standing in front of me.

"It's over, Nee," he said softly. He gave me a small, shaky smile and squeezed my shoulder, before going to join Dad, Zac, Uncle Wayne, Uncle Martin and Isaac at the front of the chapel.

"Ebony?" I heard my mother ask, and I turned toward her. "Come here," she said softly, and I shifted over so I could lean up against her. "I know it's hard, baby," she whispered as the tears started up again in full force. "I know." She lifted my head so she could look at my face. "Do you want to go home?" she asked, and I nodded – I wasn't sure I could trust my voice. "When Aidan's finished here, I'll ask him to make a detour to drop you off at home. Okay?" I nodded again, and soon felt my mother's hand on my back, rubbing in small circles, trying to soothe away my pain.

Mum and I were the last to leave, having waited for the chapel to empty before we exited the building. It had finally stopped raining, and so I chose that moment to make a beeline for Aidan's car. Once I was settled on the bonnet, I unzipped my handbag and fished around in it for a few seconds for my lighter and cigarettes; having found what I was after, it was a simple matter of lighting up and sneaking a quick smoke until such a time as Aidan was ready to drive me home.

I had managed to smoke my cigarette almost to the filter when Aidan came wandering over, head down as he walked. He had unknotted his black tie and left it hanging loose around his neck, and his pale green shirt had been unbuttoned partway. He carried his black suit jacket over a shoulder. I dropped the cigarette into a puddle just as he came within spitting distance of the car, where it went out with a quiet hiss and sent up a thin stream of smoke.

"You okay?" Aidan asked as I slid down off of the bonnet, landing with a small splash on the asphalt. I eyed him, one eyebrow quirked upwards, and he raised his hands almost as if in self-defence. "Okay, stupid question. Let me rephrase that – are you going to *be* okay?"

I shrugged and pulled the front passenger door open. "I honestly don't know, Aidan," I replied as I got into the passenger seat, pulling my skirt across my lap as I closed the door. "Try asking me sometime later, preferably on a day when we're *not* going to be burying our brother."

We drove home in silence. Part of it was out of a desire to just be alone with my own thoughts, but also because to have music playing would mean that this was a normal, ordinary drive home...and it wasn't.

Aidan dropped me off at the end of our driveway, doing a U-turn in the middle of the street so he could speak to me before he left for the cemetery. "Will you be okay?" he asked. "I can stay here if you want me to."

"I'll be fine, Aidan. Besides, one of us has to be there anyway." I took my house keys from my handbag and shook them slightly so that they jangled. "I just..." My voice trailed off, and I sighed softly. "I just need to be alone right now."

"Okay," Aidan said, sounding uncertain. "You will call me if you need me, won't you?"

"I promise." I gave my brother a small smile and turned around, walking up to the front porch so that I could let myself inside. As I closed the door behind me, I heard Aidan pull away from the kerb and drive down the street.

It was unbelievably quiet inside the house. I stood there in the front foyer for a few moments with my eyes closed and head bowed, wishing not for the first time that I had my brother back. I would have given anything right at that moment to see him coming down the stairs, whole and healthy and happy, the way he'd been so many years ago.

"I wish you were here, Tay," I whispered sadly.

I took a quick detour into the laundry to grab my cargo pants from the clothes dryer, before heading upstairs. Instead of going up the hallway to my room, I took the first left into what was now Aidan's bedroom and walked straight over to what had been Taylor's bed. It had barely been touched in the months since Taylor had gone back to the hospital. And for that I was actually somewhat grateful, because I knew that what I was looking for would be still under his pillow – the shirt he had slept in at home, an old black Led Zeppelin T-shirt that had seen better days.

I changed out of my skirt and blouse into my cargo pants and Taylor's T-shirt, which I'd found exactly where I'd expected it to be, toed my shoes off and crawled into his bed, drawing the covers up over myself. I was desperate to be close to my brother, but unless I wanted to go and throw myself into his grave this was all I had. It wasn't long before I drifted off to sleep, wishing not for the first time that things had turned out differently.

The next couple of weeks passed by in a haze of grief, unbearable pain and undeniable sorrow. I spent most of my time shut away in my room, avoiding my parents, my brothers and my sisters – I was barely coping with my own grief, and so I didn't see how I'd be able to cope with that of the rest of my family. What time I didn't spend in my room was spent over at Cassandra's house getting wasted in a desperate effort to numb myself to the pain I was in. In the interim I slept, trying desperately to forget the sheer hell I was going through. My sleep was no longer peaceful as it once had been, for I now dreamed of that night every time I closed my eyes. Most nights I woke up in the dark, sobbing – other nights, I woke up screaming. I knew that we were all hurting, that we were all having to deal with our loss, but I was positive that I'd been chosen to bear most of it.

Near the end of November, I took my handwritten journal from a drawer in my night table and wrote my first entry in months – most of my entries had been made online, but I didn't want the whole world to see this one. It was to be for my eyes only.

The house seems so quiet and empty without Taylor around – his hospital bed and room are empty now, too. I still haven't been to the cemetery – I can't seem to bring myself to go. Seeing his name etched on that stone would give me some sort of closure, true, but that's not what I want. I want my brother back.

*I have no idea how I've managed to make it this long without him. It's only been two weeks, and yet it feels like it's been two **years**. Why does the grieving process hurt so much? I know it's supposed to hurt when people you love die, but it's not supposed to hurt **this** much. And I know that getting wasted isn't the best way to deal with all of this, but it helps me forget the pain. Aidan worries about me, I know that much, and he's threatened to tell our parents more than once. But really, what are they going to do to me? **Ground me?** Give me a break. I'm almost twenty-one, and the last time I checked that makes me an adult. So really, if I want to drink and smoke my problems away, that's my choice. And it works, so I'd rather die than let anyone take it away from me. I don't give a shit that it's bad for me.*

*I wish he was here right now. There is this incredible sea of emotion raging inside of me, and my brother is the sole cause of it all. I loved him so much – there aren't enough words in the English language for it. Aidan, Taylor and I couldn't have been any closer – we were more than just siblings, even more than triplets. We were best friends, and we were soulmates. And now that Taylor's gone I'm terrified that I'm going to lose Aidan too – I think part of me is afraid to stay close to him, so I've resorted to keeping him at an arm's length. I don't want to lose him too – I'm positive that if I do lose him, it'll kill me. I was positive that I was going to die after Taylor passed, or at least it felt that way. I know that more than once I've wished that I **could** die so the sheer pain I'm in can't consume me whole, but getting drunk and high eases the pain a little, even if only temporarily. I refuse to see a counsellor to 'talk about my feelings', like Mum suggested I do at one point, because that's bullshit and a waste of time. And as for church? Ha. That'd be even more of a waste of time. I haven't believed in years, and now I have a damn good reason not to. Taylor didn't deserve what happened to him – he suffered more than any one person should ever have to, and if there was a higher power I very much doubt he would have gotten so sick. It was unfair and it was incredibly cruel.*

I want him to come home so badly it hurts. Waking up every morning hurts like hell, because it's a reminder that another day has gone by since we lost him. As horrible as it sounds, I wish I could forget him – I wish that there were some way of erasing an entire lifetime's worth of memories. I'm terrified of what's to come in the future. I don't think I could deal with losing another of my siblings. I think it might be the end of me.

Chapter 27

Aidan

I picked up the last cardboard box from just inside the garage door and carried it upstairs to my bedroom. It still felt strange to call it 'my' room, even despite the fact that I'd been the only person sleeping in it since August. And to tell the truth, I hated it. I'd always shared a room with at least one person, that person usually being Taylor. I'd always had someone to talk to at night just before falling asleep, and I'd always had someone to make plans with for the future. It wasn't that I didn't appreciate Ebony and her company, but it had always been different with Taylor. And now, it fell to me to pack away his belongings. I could have quite easily asked someone else to do it for me, but at least this way it allowed me to be close to my brother.

I started with our wardrobe. One of the good things about being nearly the same height as Taylor – he had been taller by only a few inches – was that we'd had the same clothing size, and so there was never a shortage of clothes to wear. Even so, there were some clothes in our shared wardrobe that had been his alone – I would never have dreamed of so much as touching them. At least, not until now. Those particular clothes were tucked away on the left-hand side of the wardrobe. I pushed my own clothes aside and brought them out into the open, spending a few moments just looking at them before folding and packing them away in one of the boxes I had brought upstairs. A couple of pairs of shoes joined the clothes in short order.

Next, I tackled his desk. It was fairly neat and tidy compared to my own, and so I assumed it would be a breeze to clean it out. How wrong I was.

The first thing I came across when I opened the top drawer was a thick white envelope that had come from the University of Wollongong's Creative Arts faculty, according to the return address. It was postmarked January 2005. I remembered how ecstatic he'd been when he'd been accepted as a Music student at the University of Wollongong, and then his heartbreak when he'd realised that he had to choose between making his dream come true and saving his life. I set the envelope

aside and continued to dig through the desk drawers, unearthing and clearing out old notebooks, sketchbooks, magazines and composition books. These were packed away in another of the boxes, though I had every intention of looking through them at a later point.

At last, when all the boxes had been filled with all that Taylor had owned, I picked up the box that had been sitting, sealed with packing tape, at the end of my bed for just over two weeks. I knew what was inside without even stripping off the tape – it contained everything that had been in Taylor's possession during his final hospital stay. I set the box down on my bed, pulled off the tape and opened it up. Lying atop everything else in the box was a book bound in black leather, one that I instantly recognised – his journal. I had seen him writing it in it often enough that I knew it on sight.

I hadn't intended to open it. The only reason I read Ebony's journal was because hers was online and available for the world to read – Taylor, on the other hand, kept his thoughts hidden away, and so for that reason I didn't pry into them. But as I picked it up it fell open, and as soon as I caught a glimpse of his handwriting a wall of memories slammed into me. I squeezed my eyes tightly closed against the onslaught and went to close the journal, only to feel something brushing against my hand. I opened my eyes to find a folded-over piece of notebook paper sticking out from between the pages. As I withdrew and unfolded it, I realised it was a letter – one that was addressed to me.

October 8 2006

Hey Aidan,

So as you've probably been able to guess, things aren't going so well for me lately. I've been off the chemo now for about a week, because it really wasn't doing anything. Dr. Beckett has suggested that I try for another stem cell transplant, but I've told her that I won't do it again. It was hard enough the first time, and it didn't work anyway. That's the whole reason I'm in this particular mess in the first place.

What I don't get, though, is why you don't understand my reasons for not continuing my treatment. The facts of the matter are that one, it's spread far too fast for it to be stopped without undergoing a few rounds of intense chemotherapy, two, I see no point in continuing the chemo if it's not doing anything, and three, to try for another transplant would in all likelihood kill me. I'm not strong enough for it. If it wasn't so late, then I would probably give it another shot.

I know you hate it, Ayd. I do too. But what you have to understand that I never wanted or asked for this to happen. I hate what it's done to me, and there's not a day that goes by that I don't wish things were different somehow. There are so many things that I want to do, but because of all this shit I'll never get to do them. I want to go to university and study music, I want to start a family with Steph, I want to travel the world...but most of all I just want to go home. Right now, being at home is all I want (well, that and getting well again). Anything else, that would be a bonus.

*To be honest, I've known for a long time that I'm not going to make it. I didn't need Dr. Beckett to tell me that I'm going to die before the end of this year. I won't make it to Christmas, and I won't make it to our 21st birthday. I'm not strong enough anymore. And believe me, it hurts like hell to admit that. I never thought I'd be fighting for my life at twenty – how **could** I think that? And yet, that's exactly what I'm doing.*

*I have no idea if I'll actually get to say this to you (because really, dying in my sleep is looking **very** attractive right now – no offence), so I guess this is where I say goodbye. Thank you for being the best brother and best friend I could ever have hoped to be blessed with – it was truly an honour and a privilege to have known you. Please look after everyone for me after I'm gone – I know I can count on you.*

Always,

Taylor

"Damn you, Taylor," I whispered. I nearly tore his letter up then and there, as I really had no desire to be faced with my brother's near-to-final words to me more than I had to be. Instead, I refolded the letter and slipped it back into his journal, and continued going through the box.

When I was done sorting through his belongings, I sat down at my computer and fired it up. As tempted as I was to go ahead with my usual routine, this wasn't the right time for that. It was time for me to fulfil a promise to my brother.

Before he had gone back into the hospital for what was to be the final time, Taylor had written down his email address and the associated password, along with a list of usernames and passwords for all the message boards that he had joined over the past couple of years. He had given these to me not only for safekeeping, but also so I could keep an eye on everything for him. Not only this, but he had managed to extract a promise from me that, should the unthinkable happen, I would tell his friends what had happened to him.

I let out a groan when I saw just how many new emails were in his inbox – the counter on the left-hand side of the page showed that he had close to one hundred and fifty new messages, which pretty much proved how long it had been since I'd checked it. To go through all of them individually would take me hours, and I didn't have time for it right at that moment. Instead, I copied the email address from each new message and Taylor's email address book into a blank Word document, signed into my own email and opened a blank message, and from there began to compose the hardest email I'd ever had to write.

Hi,

My name is Aidan Hanson, writing on behalf of my brother Taylor – he asked me to get in contact with you in the event of his passing, however unlikely that might have been.

I guess that you can figure out why I've sent this particular email. You're probably aware that my brother was diagnosed with acute monocytic leukaemia in January of this year. At the beginning of

August Taylor was readmitted to hospital, but unfortunately he lost his fight for life early in the morning of November eleventh. His sister Ebony and I were at his side when he passed away. I wish that I had some other way of breaking the news to you, but I don't have your phone number on file, so as impersonal as this email is it's my best option.

We – that is, the Hanson family – are organising a memorial service for Taylor, to be held on December eleventh in Coffs Harbour. The service is scheduled to begin at eleven-thirty in the morning. You're more than welcome to attend – I know that Taylor would have liked you to come. If you can come please reply to this email by the fourth of December, and I'll give you the address of the venue. If there is anything you'd like to contribute to the service, let me know and I'll see about including it. We hope to see you there.

Aidan Hanson

* * *

"I'm not going."

"Ebony, please don't make this harder than it is already."

"I'm not *trying* to, Mum. I just don't see the point in doing this."

Mum let out a quiet, somewhat exasperated sigh. "All right, Ebony. You don't have to go if you don't want to. All I ask is that you don't begrudge your brother's friends their chance to say goodbye." I heard the distinctive sound of china striking steel, before footsteps padded their way across the slate floor of the kitchen and out into the corridor. Only then did I deem it safe enough to look up from my coffee.

Ebony was backed up against the kitchen bench, her hands gripping the overhang of the granite bench top, looking down at her bare feet. Ragged locks of hair shielded her face from view, and I realised that she'd cut her hair short. Where before she'd almost been able to sit on it, her hair was now just past her shoulders, and possessed of curls that hadn't been evident before this point.

"Ebony?" I asked quietly. To my surprise she looked up, and did something that she hadn't done in nearly a month.

She looked at me.

"Why are we doing this, Aidan?" she asked quietly. "It's only been a month since we lost him. Please tell me why we have to go through this shit all over again."

I got up from my seat at the table and walked across to her. "Do you have any idea of how many friends he had that we never knew?" I asked her, and she shook her head. "More than two hundred, Nee. There were more than two hundred people who never got to meet him, and yet they considered our brother a friend. And pretty much all of them are going to be there today so that they can say goodbye."

I placed a tentative hand on Ebony's nearest shoulder, fully expecting that she would shy away, but to my relief and surprise she turned toward me. I pulled her into a close embrace, feeling her begin to shake.

"Why is this so hard?" she cried.

And not for the first time, I had no idea what to say. Instead, I held my sister as she cried, wishing I knew how to answer her.

"Nee, I need to get ready to go," I said softly as Ebony's tears tapered off. "The service starts at eleven-thirty sharp, and I have to be there even earlier than that to get things set up." I tipped her chin up so I could see into her eyes. "Could you please reconsider coming? I think Taylor would be proud of you if you did."

Ebony didn't respond for close to a minute, nodding at last. "I'll think about it," she said quietly.

"But I refuse to make any promises."

"That's all I can really ask of you," I said, and received a small and shaky smile in response. I gave my sister a quick hug before leaving the kitchen and heading upstairs.

When I'd realised the sheer number of people who would be attending the memorial, I had suggested to my parents that a change of venue might be in order. The original venue for the memorial was a small church in Coffs Harbour that had a seating capacity of about one hundred and fifty, but we'd chosen the Sapphire Cove Surf Life Saving Club as our second-choice venue in case the guest list grew beyond what the church could hold. We had decided a few days earlier that the surf club would be the best option. And so it was, half an hour after I'd comforted my sister in the kitchen at home, I found myself in the club's main function room, trying to figure out how the sound system worked. On the table beside me was a CD that Ebony had burned from an iTunes playlist that was full of 'angst music', according to the label on the case.

As a sort of experiment, I loaded Ebony's CD into the stereo and hit the play button. *The Ghost Of You* by My Chemical Romance was the first song to be played, and I grinned triumphantly. This was easier than it looked.

"Excuse me."

I looked back over my shoulder to see a dark-haired young woman standing behind me. She was dressed all in black, all save for her shirt – it was light pink and had a wide-eyed kitten and the words I've Seen You Naked printed on the front. Her voice was faintly Canadian, though her accent spoke of having lived for a long time in Australia.

"Yes?" I asked as I turned my back to the stereo.

"I..." Her voice faltered slightly. "I'm Sarah. Sarah Belmont. You're Aidan, right?" When I nodded, she gave me a small smile. "I thought so. I've heard a lot about you. And it's all good, I assure you."

"From who?"

"From your brother." She shrugged. "I was one of his friends on Linkin Park's message board. He told us all about you." She let out a quiet sigh and tugged on the waistband of her pants. "When you came online under his username and told us what'd happened to him...it devastated us all. We all thought of him as a friend. I still can't believe he's gone."

"If it's any consolation, neither can we," I said quietly. She gave me another smile and headed off to find somewhere to sit.

The room slowly filled over the course of the next half-hour. Once all the seats had been filled, I slowly turned down the volume of the current song – that song being *Disarm* by the Smashing Pumpkins – and pressed the stop button when no more sound could be heard. I then rose from my seat and walked up to the front of the room, took in hand the microphone that had been set up, and spoke to the audience.

"I just wanted to thank you all for coming here today," I said to begin. "That you've all come to farewell my brother speaks volumes – I think that if he were here today, he would be positively floored by the number of people that have come to say goodbye. I know that he appreciated each and every one of you.

"The floor is now open for you all to share your stories and memories of Taylor. There's no need to put a hand up to be called forward – anytime you're ready, step up to the mic and tell us your story." I replaced the microphone in its stand and headed over to the seat I'd set aside for myself.

I listened, fascinated, as my brother's friends stepped up to the microphone and told their stories of someone none of them had ever met, spoken to or even heard speak, and yet...they all knew him as well as I had. I knew that when Ebony and I hadn't been able to be there for our brother, these people – some of whom had come from as far afield as Vancouver, New York and London – had been there for him, helping him through his darkest days.

As the last of Taylor's friends resumed their seats, I stood up and headed for the stage once more. I was just about to conclude the proceedings when the doors at the back of the hall opened. Standing there in the doorway, hands in her pockets and hair falling in waves around her face, was Ebony. She looked up as I ran down the centre aisle and pulled her into a tight embrace. "I'm so proud of you," I whispered. "And I know Tay is too."

"I know you weren't planning on it," Ebony said quietly after we broke the embrace, "but I was wondering if I could sing something."

"Yeah, of course," I agreed. "Did you bring a CD or anything?"

She shook her head. "It's all up here," she informed me, pointing to her right temple, before walking up the centre aisle. She stood there in silence behind the microphone for about half a minute. Deciding it was in my best interests to keep my distance, I leaned against the doorframe and listened to what she had to say.

"One of..." Her voice faltered, but she recovered quickly. "One of Taylor's favourite bands was Powderfinger. They're on hiatus at the moment, and their lead singer Bernard Fanning is currently performing as a soloist. The most recent single to be released from his album was *Watch Over Me*." She went quiet for a little while. "This one's for you, Tay," she said so quietly I was surprised that the microphone even picked it up, before beginning her song.

"When trouble fills my world you bring me peace...you calm me down...you're my relief...when walls come crashing down around my feet...you light my way...you're my release...

"So say you'll watch over me...when I'm in too deep...tell me you'll always be...there to pull me free...

"When the sun is beating down upon my brow...you are my shade...you cool me down...every time I tried to turn away...you brought me 'round...your humble way..."

"So say you'll watch over me...when I'm in too deep...tell me you'll always be...there to pull me free...there to rescue me...

"For every time you sheltered me from harm...you showed me truth...you kept me warm...and every time you left me on the street...I found my way...I found my feet...

"So say you'll watch over me...when I'm in too deep...tell me you'll always be...there to pull me free...there to rescue me...there to pull me free...there to rescue me..."

I knew why Ebony had chosen this particular song. Perhaps more than anyone else alive, I knew how desperate she was to have our brother back home, or even just to know that he was with us. It was a thinly-veiled plea in the hopes that somehow, he might just hear it.

He heard you, Nee, I thought as I listened to her sing. *Somehow, I know he heard you.*

Epilogue

February 2007

Aidan

I frowned at the sight of the moving van sitting at the kerb outside of Stephanie's house. I knew that Stephanie was set to be leaving soon, but I was sure she wouldn't be moving until next week at least. There was only one way I was going to find out what was going on, and that was to ask her myself.

"Good morning Aidan," Mrs. Woodcroft said when she answered the door.

"Morning, Mrs. Woodcroft," I replied. I had yet to break myself of the habit of calling her that, even despite her repeated assurances that I could address her by her given name. "Could I talk to Stephanie please, if she's not too busy?"

"Of course you can. And how many times do I have to tell you to call me Annemarie?" These last words were said with a smile.

"At least a hundred more times," I replied.

Mrs. Woodcroft smiled again. "Come on inside, Aidan. I'll call Stephanie downstairs for you."

Barely a minute after Mrs. Woodcroft had called upstairs, Stephanie came down into the lounge room. She looked exhausted, and had what I instantly recognised as one of Taylor's bandannas tied over her hair. On a chain around her neck was threaded a circlet that I knew to be Taylor's commitment ring – I had given it to Stephanie for the Christmas just past, reasoning that as his partner, she deserved to have it more than anyone else.

"Hey Aidan," she said wearily, and blew a few stray strands of hair out of her face.

"You okay?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yeah, I'm all right. It's just this moving business, that's all." She was quiet for a little while. "Plus it's three months today, so..." Here she shrugged. "I guess I'm just missing him a little more than usual lately."

"I thought you weren't moving until next week," I said as we seated ourselves on the couch.

"That's what I thought too. But it seems that the place I *was* moving to has some structural issues, so the landlord's offered me a temporary place a bit down the street, just until my new place gets fixed up. Same rent as I'd be paying at the other place, and he's going to throw in my utilities for the first year to make up for the delay."

"Where are you moving to again?"

"Wollongong."

"Ah."

Stephanie looked at me inquisitively. "I get the feeling that this isn't a social call," she said. "So what's up?"

"You know that my brother was a songwriter, right?"

"Yeah." She smiled a little. "How could I forget something like that?"

At those words, I bent down to where my backpack sat between my feet and unzipped the back pocket. From inside that pocket I took out a CD and Taylor's lyrics book. These I handed to Stephanie, before zipping my backpack closed.

"I know that Taylor would have wanted you to have these," I said. "The CD is a recording he made a couple of years ago of the song he wrote for you, and the book is every song he wrote from the age of thirteen onwards."

"I can't take these," Stephanie said, shaking her head.

"Steph, trust me – he would have wanted this. I've got the songs typed up and printed out, and I made a copy of the music for the song." I indicated the CD I had given her. "And the recording is on my computer as an MP3. I'm not losing anything by giving them to you." I reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. "Steph, he loved you so much – I'm not about to deny that. That's why I gave you his ring, and that's why I'm giving you his songs. He deserves to be remembered this way – not for his short life, but for his gifts and the love he had for you." I lowered my voice. "Please take them, Steph. I'm not going to let up until you do."

She smiled a little at these words. "All right, if you insist."

"Definitely." I glanced at my watch. "I should let you get back to it," I said as I stood up. "I've only moved away from Sapphire Cove a few times in my life, but I know all too well how much work it is."

"I'll keep in touch," Stephanie promised as she walked with me to the front door. "And I'll probably be around at some point before I leave to bug your mum for all her recipes. I've always loved her spaghetti, and I want to see if I can replicate it."

I smiled a little at that – it was the scientist in her coming out. "You have my email address, right?" I asked.

"Yeah. I have Ebony's too."

I gave her a small smile. "Make sure you keep in touch once you have the Internet up and running. I want to hear all about your new place, and I'm sure Ebony will too."

"I'll email you as soon as I can."

I knew to take her at her word. She wouldn't be happy with me if I pestered her about the matter. "You stay safe, okay?" I said as we hugged.

"I will, Aidan. I promise."

Little more than one month later, Ebony and I turned twenty-one. It was bittersweet in more ways than just one – we both knew that if things had turned out differently, Taylor would still be alive, and the three of us would be celebrating the beginning of our twenty-second year of life. There would be no celebration this year – none of us were much up to it, not when we were all still hurting so badly.

Early that morning, I went out onto the back porch, carrying the memory book under one arm. The clock in the kitchen had just ticked over to seven-thirty, and I'd only just woken up ten minutes earlier. As far as I knew, nobody else was awake yet. My original plan for this morning had been to make myself a cup of coffee and to try and think of some way, however small, to dull the pain I still felt. It had been four months since Taylor had died, and yet it still hurt as much as if it had only happened yesterday.

When I saw the memory book sitting on the kitchen table, though, my plan went out the window. I knew that there was one detail that still needed to be filled in – the date that none of us wanted to remember, and yet would never be able to forget.

I closed the back door behind me and walked halfway down the steps leading down into the backyard, sitting down on the top step and settling the memory book on my lap. The first thing I wanted to do before writing that date in was look through it, and I started with the very first page. One of our Year 12 Formal photographs took up pride of place, and I touched the image of Taylor's face with a fingertip. That night seemed so long ago now, even though it had only been two years and a few months since the photograph had been taken. None of us could ever have guessed that Taylor would be gone two years later.

I heard the back door open a few minutes after I'd started to look through the book, and I looked back over my shoulder. Ebony stood there behind me, holding a blue china mug in her left hand. Just by looking at her, I could easily tell how much she had changed in the last four months. She

was much thinner and her face was pale, but her hair was beginning to grow out again. Her cheeks were streaked with tears, and her once-bright blue eyes were red-rimmed and dulled nearly to grey. I hadn't seen her smile in more than three months, and it had been even longer since I'd heard her laugh.

"Hey Nee," I said softly. For one fleeting second I was almost positive that she wouldn't answer me, that my greeting would be answered with nothing more than a nod.

"Hi," she said, sounding sad. She walked closer and held the mug out to me, and I took it from her. It contained coffee, just the way I liked it – black as pitch, with hopefully a lot of sugar to sweeten away the bitterness.

"Thanks, Nee," I said, offering her a smile that she didn't return. "So what brings you out here this morning?" I asked as I set the mug down on the step beside my feet.

"I..." She walked down to sit on the step below mine, her back to me. "I wanted to apologise."

"For what? You didn't do anything."

She laughed hollowly. "Oh, I did. I've been basically ignoring you for the last few months."

So *that* was why I'd barely seen her since December. "Why did you do that?" I asked gently.

There was a short silence. I half expected my sister to be angry at me for asking, but when she spoke her tone was one of regret. "I was scared, Aidan," she replied. "After it all happened, I was terrified that I was going to lose you too. If that ever happens, it'll kill me. That's why I've mostly been ignoring you – I figure that if I'm not close to you anymore, if something *does* happen then it won't hurt as much."

"Ebony..." I moved down to the step she was sitting on and gently turned her to face me. "Ebony, you are *not* going to lose me. All right? No matter what happens, and no matter where life takes us, I'm always going to be there for you."

"How the hell am I supposed to know that you're not just saying that?"

She had a valid point. "You aren't," I admitted. "I know I can't make that kind of promise. But we need to stick together, Nee – it's the only way that we'll be able to get through this mess. And I need you just as much as I'm guessing you need me."

Ebony let out a harsh bark of laughter. "You're stronger than I'll ever be, Aidan. You don't need anyone."

"I wish I could agree with you, Nee. I really do." I clasped my hands together, interlacing my fingers. "I know you don't want to hear a lecture, but...I lost him too. It hurts me just as much as it does everyone else. I feel a lot of guilt too, because I wasn't there when he really needed me, except right at the end. It was the worst thing I could have done to him, and there's no way I can make it up to him." I picked at the seam on the right leg of my jeans. "He probably hates me for that."

"You know that he doesn't," Ebony said. She was quiet for a little while. "I think I'm ready to go to the cemetery – I probably should anyway, seeing as it's his birthday today too. I just...I don't think I could do it alone." She looked at me. "Would you come with me?"

"Of course I will, Nee. You go and get dressed, and when you're ready we'll go." She nodded and stood up, heading back inside. I watched her go, before standing myself and taking my coffee and the memory book back inside.

I was halfway through my coffee when I heard quiet footsteps, and I looked over at the kitchen doorway to see Ebony standing there. She was pulling her hair back into a ponytail and looking at me expectantly. I quickly drained my mug and set it in the sink. "Let me write a note for Mum and Dad, and we can get going," I said as I scribbled out a note on the notepad we kept on the kitchen sideboard for that specific purpose. "How do you feel about walking over? It's a nice day today, and I don't really see much point in driving."

Ebony shrugged. "Either way's fine by me." She nodded toward the front of the house, and I followed her to the front door.

* * *

Ebony

We arrived at St. Andrew's Anglican Church at around nine-thirty. The walk across town from our house had been a quiet one – neither of us had felt much like talking, and so I'd spent most of the journey lost in my thoughts. I stood outside the cemetery with Aidan a few paces behind, my hands in my pockets, surveying the rows of gravestones laid out before me. They all faced east, toward the ocean.

"When you're *quite* ready," Aidan said dryly, and I gave him the finger before climbing over the low stone wall that encircled the cemetery. When we were both over the wall I turned to Aidan, expecting that he would know where to go. "I need to get my bearings," my brother explained. "It was raining the last time I was here, and you don't exactly see a lot when you're huddled beneath an umbrella." After a few moments he set off in a northerly direction.

Past countless rows of gravestones we walked, changing direction every few rows, until we at last reached one that was tucked away in a far corner of the cemetery. It had been placed beneath a spreading willow tree, and looked far newer than all of the surrounding markers put together.

"This is it," Aidan said quietly, and I nodded once before approaching the marker. I was shaking as I knelt on the grass and read the inscription.

Memoria in aeterna

Jordan Taylor Hanson

March 14 1986 – November 11 2006

Aged 20 years

Beloved brother, son, partner and friend

'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far

And grace will lead me home

As the last two lines registered it finally hit me, and I started to sob uncontrollably. It was all too real now. For four long months, a full third of a year, I had been hoping and wishing that all of this was just one long, horrible nightmare that I was going to wake up from soon. But this was no nightmare, and I knew that there was going to be no waking up from it. This was my life now, my present and my future...and it was one that didn't include Taylor.

I felt Aidan wrap his arms around me from behind, and I sank into his embrace. "I want to go home, Aidan," I sobbed. "Please, just take me home..."

* * *

That night, once I'd calmed down considerably, I ventured downstairs and retrieved the memory book from where Aidan had left it on the kitchen table. Once back in my room I sat down on my bed and opened the book to the very first page. Something was missing, and I knew that Aidan had been planning to fill that particular detail in when I'd interrupted him. As much as it would hurt me, it was something I needed to do.

I found a pen and uncapped it, and with a shaking hand I wrote down the date and the time that I knew none of us wanted to remember.

Evan Aidan Hanson

March 14 1986, 10:40 am

Ebony Jade Hanson

March 14 1986, 10:45 am

Jordan Taylor Hanson

March 14 1986, 11:07 am

November 11 2006 – 5:37 am

"Happy birthday Tay," I whispered as I capped my pen again and stared at the photograph that had pride of place on that particular page. It wasn't fair that he wasn't here to celebrate his birthday with us – it wasn't fair at all.

"My God Ebony, you're worse than me..."

I started in surprise. That voice had come from right behind me, and it sounded so familiar. But there was no way...

"It's just Aidan," I told myself. "He just thinks he's being funny. And I'm going to kick his arse from here to Kalgoorlie." Putting the full power that I was capable of into my voice, I yelled, "*Aidan Hanson, you get your arse in here right **now!***"

A minute or so later my bedroom door opened, and Aidan poked his head through the gap.

"What?"

"What d'you think you're playing at?" I asked.

He frowned. "I really have no idea what you're talking about."

"Wasn't that just you talking to me?" I nodded back over my shoulder. "I heard something."

"You sure you weren't hearing things?" I glared at him indignantly, and he raised his hands in seeming self-defence. "Okay, okay, you weren't hearing things. But it wasn't me, Nee. I've been in my room all night playing *Tekken 4*. And speaking of which, I'm right in the middle of the final stage, so if you'll excuse me..." I waved him off impatiently, and he withdrew back into the hallway.

"I'm going mad," I whispered. "I swear I just heard him..."

My back was beginning to ache from sitting in the one position for so long, so I started to shift backwards on my bed – and promptly backed into what felt like someone's knee. *Okay, this just*

got weirder and weirder, I thought as I chanced a look back over my shoulder. I let out a shriek of fright when I saw what was behind me.

Sitting cross-legged on my bed, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest, was Taylor, looking exactly as he had before he'd gotten sick two years ago. He smiled slightly. "Hey Nee," he said softly.

I started to shake, and tears filled my eyes. It was the first time I'd heard him speak in a full third of a year, and it was music to my ears. I'd been so desperate to hear his voice. "Oh God I missed you so *much*," I whispered. "You've got no idea..."

"I know, Ebby," he said. "Believe me, I know."

As soon as I heard his nickname for me, tears began streaming down my face. "Please don't call me that," I whispered, shaking my head.

"Why not?" Taylor asked. He sounded genuinely confused.

"Because that's what you called me right before you-" I broke off talking and started sobbing for the second time that day.

He said nothing in response to this, but instead drew me close to him and held me tightly. I buried my face in his shoulder, clinging to him – I didn't want to let him go. "Shh," he whispered. "It's okay, Nee...shh..."

"I think I owe Aidan an apology," I mumbled.

Taylor chuckled softly. "I'd say so, yeah." He lifted my head so that we were more or less eye to eye. "I'd ask you if you're okay, but I think I've got all the answers I need right in front of me."

"It's hell," I admitted. "For all of us. This is just...it's a nightmare, Tay. An absolute nightmare."

"I know, Nee." He let out a quiet sigh. "And I'm sorry. I want to make everything better, but I can't. It's not my place to, and I don't have that power anyway. I'd have done it already if I could."

I believed him. He'd always hated it when any of us were upset for any sort of reason, and I knew that having to watch all of us hurting had to cause him so much pain.

"Why did you break our promise?" I asked him.

Taylor sighed and closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose between his right thumb and index finger. "Ebony, I just want to make one thing clear here – when I made you that promise, I had every intention in the world of keeping it. But there are just some things that are out of our control, and that was one of them. I didn't know that I was going to get worse so quickly, and even if I had known I wouldn't have been able to stop it happening." He rubbed a hand across his face. "I wanted to fight it, Nee. I really did. It just ended up overpowering me in the end. And to be honest, by that time I was about ready to end it all. I just couldn't do it anymore."

"At least you weren't alone when it happened," I said quietly.

"That's true." He smiled. "I heard you, by the way."

"What did you hear?"

"I heard you say that you loved me. Your voice was the last one I ever heard. I'd have held on for as long as it took for you to say it."

"Really?"

He nodded. "I needed to hear it from you. I didn't want to die knowing that you hated me for leaving you and breaking our promise."

"I would never have hated you for that," I said softly. "Never in a million years."

He cocked an eyebrow. "You seemed to be pretty angry about it when I got myself landed back in hospital," he reminded me.

"Yeah, well," I muttered. I studied him for a little while. "You look amazing, by the way."

"Okay, now that could be taken in more than just one way," Taylor said. "Do you mean amazing as in I don't look like death warmed over, or amazing as in you'd do me if not for the fact that I'm your brother *and* I'm dead?"

"*Ew!*" I shrieked. "Definitely not the second one! That would be incest and necrophilia, and I'm not into either." I shuddered. "What do *you* think, Einstein?"

"Point taken." He smirked. "I will say that I'm not in pain any longer."

"Thank goodness," I murmured. "That especially was killing me – seeing you in pain all the time, and not being able to do a thing about it." I looked down at my quilt. "Can I ask you something?"

"You just did."

"Oh, you know what I mean." I picked at the hem of my T-shirt. "What's it like?"

"To die?" he asked to clarify what I meant, and I nodded. "Oh, you just *had* to ask me that one, didn't you." He closed his eyes briefly. "It's...it's a lot like falling asleep. The only difference was that I knew I wouldn't be waking up again the next morning. Well, that, and I was in an incredible amount of pain."

"Yeah, somehow I don't think that would have helped much."

We were quiet for a little while, content to just be close to one another. Somehow, in the back of my mind, I knew that this would be the last time I would ever see him anywhere other than photographs, home movies and my memories. I didn't want him to leave me again, but I knew I had no choice in the matter.

"I know you can't stay with me forever," I said quietly. "And I'm not going to ask you to. I just..."
My voice faltered, and I swallowed hard.

"Just until you've fallen asleep?" he asked gently, and I nodded. "Oh, I think I can manage that."

"Thank you," I whispered gratefully.

After I'd changed into my pyjamas and climbed into my bed, Taylor switched the ceiling light off and lay down beside me. He started to play with my hair as I stared up at the ceiling, listening to myself breathe and to Taylor's quiet, tuneless humming. In no time at all I felt sleep coming on, and I turned my head to look at my brother.

"Go to sleep," he said softly. "It's been a long day – you need it."

"I don't want to lose you," I whispered.

"You aren't," he told me. "I'm always going to be with you. You just won't be able to see me anymore." He paused briefly. "Happy birthday, Nee," he whispered.

"Happy birthday, Tay," I whispered in reply, right before I fell asleep.

* * *

It's been four months since my whole world was destroyed, four months since I had the figurative carpet yanked out from underneath my feet. Four months ago on the Sunday just gone my triplet brother died, and yesterday Aidan and I turned twenty-one without him.

I knew yesterday would be the hardest of all. Even harder than Christmas. I don't even have my birthday marked down on my calendar this year, save for with a little sad face. Anything else would hurt too much, and would be too morbid. My whole family has suffered in more ways than I care to mention – my parents because they lost one of their children, Stephanie because she lost her partner, my brothers and sisters because they lost a brother and a friend. And Aidan and I, because we lost a brother, a friend and a soulmate. I lost a lot of who I used to be that night, and I'm still not sure I'll

ever get it back.

*I'm never going to forget that night. I don't think any of us will. That particular memory has ingrained itself so deeply that I **can't** forget. A lot of it's fuzzy, like a TV channel that doesn't have a good signal, but the rest is crystal clear. I remember the moment that he died clearest of all – I remember the exact moment that he took his final breath, and the exact moment that his heart stopped beating. It all happened in a split second.*

Every day since he died, I've wished that he was still here. I miss him so much that sometimes it's unbearable. I didn't want to let him go, but I had no choice. For more than twenty years I had him at my side, and then one day...he wasn't there anymore. The part that hurts the most is that I'm never going to see him again. I have memories and photographs of him, but it's not the same as having him back. My memories can never replace who he was as a person.

As much as I hate to admit it, he's in a far better place now. The years he had in this world, when he wasn't sick that is, were some of the best that we ever lived, but I could never ask him to come back now that I know how much pain living caused him. I know that he's happy where he is, and I know that he's finally out of pain. More importantly, I know that he's finally found the peace he deserves. All that happened to him well and truly fucked him over. He didn't belong here.

Even though he's gone from sight, I know he's here in spirit. I suppose it's instinct. I know he'll never leave me, or any of us – he doesn't break his promises, not without a good reason. He never did, and so this is be one promise I know will be kept. I don't need to be psychic to know that. It's a triplet thing.

I took my pen off the page of my journal and looked out my bedroom window. Night had fallen hours ago, and stars dotted the endless expanse of black sky. I knew my brother was up there somewhere, watching over me. That knowledge gave me the inspiration I needed to complete what I was writing.

Taylor gave me this journal for our thirteenth birthday. It's truly amazing that it's lasted me eight years. I really thought that I'd have filled it long ago, but I haven't. I guess it's really only fitting that this entry, the last one for this journal, be my final farewell to him – a last goodbye to one of the most amazing human beings this world has ever seen.

In the arms of the angel

Fly away from here

From this dark cold hotel room

And the endlessness that you fear

You are pulled from the wreckage

Of your silent reverie

You're in the arms of the angel

May you find some comfort here

Angel – Sarah McLachlan

~ fin ~