

Defying Gravity

Something has changed within me

Something is not the same

I'm through with playing by

The rules of someone else's game

Too late for second-guessing

Too late to go back to sleep

It's time to trust my instincts

Close my eyes and leap

It's time to try defying gravity

I think I'll try defying gravity

And you can't pull me down

Defying Gravity – Idina Menzel, Kristin Chenoweth and Company

From the musical Wicked

Chapter 1

...the most unbelievable blue eyes I've ever seen

Isobel

Isobel,

I realise that this is short notice, but everyone else is unavailable – and to be honest, you are the only person who I know I can trust to be completely professional with this.

I have secured an interview with the band Hanson for this Wednesday, the thirty-first of January, at four-thirty in the afternoon. They have a concert scheduled for next Saturday evening at Radio City Music Hall, and have agreed to take time out from their rehearsal schedule to speak with you. They're

allowing one hour at the absolute most for the interview, plus an additional half hour for photography, and will be providing their own photographer.

There are, essentially, four reasons for me asking you to take this assignment. One – of everyone in Editorial, you are least likely to lose your cool when you meet with them. Two – as I wrote earlier, I trust you to conduct yourself professionally. Three – I know that I can count on you to conduct the interview, and to have an article written and in my inbox by Thursday afternoon, in preparation for inclusion in next Monday's edition. Four – I would like to give you a second chance at doing fieldwork.

Let me know by nine tomorrow morning if you can do this, and I'll have an advance copy of Hanson's newest album, The Walk, in your mailbox on Tuesday for you to have a listen to before the interview.

Regards,

Stephen

The email from my editor had come through at seven that morning, a time on a Sunday when most people are still in bed. Not me, though. When seven o'clock on Sunday morning rolls around, I've already been up for half an hour. The main reason for this is that Schuyler, my dearest friend and my roommate, makes such a racket as she gets ready for work that I find it nearly impossible to sleep beyond half-past six.

This is not to say, however, that I am in any way coherent so early in the morning.

"Skya?" I called out cautiously as I finished reading through Stephen's email. I wasn't sure if she'd already left – for all her clattering and banging around the apartment as she gets ready to head out, Schuyler tends to be as quiet as a mouse when she actually *leaves*.

"Yeah?" she called back. Her voice echoed, so I knew that she was in the bathroom and in all likelihood halfway through doing her makeup.

"Can you come here, please?"

"I'm sure I *can*, Bel," she replied. "It's a matter of whether or not I actually *want* to."

I sighed and briefly closed my eyes. "*Could* you come here, please?" I called, choosing to rephrase my question. It was my own stupid fault for forgetting that Schuyler could be very particular about how she chose to interpret certain words and turns of phrase. I blamed it on being up at what I considered to be an unholy hour.

"That's more like it." Within a minute she had come out to where I sat in the kitchen of our apartment, in my usual spot at our kitchen table. My laptop was set up on the table in front of me, with Outlook Express open on the screen and a mug of coffee close at hand. "What's up?" she asked.

"There should be a law against being awake so damn early on a weekend," I grumbled. "Read that." I indicated the screen of my laptop and scooted backward so that Schuyler didn't have to bend down over my shoulder.

She had the email read in ten seconds flat. "You get to do an interview. So what?" she asked as she straightened up.

I gave Schuyler the mother of all evil eyes. "And that in itself is proof that you didn't read the whole email. *Who* is Stephen asking me to interview, Skya?"

"Hanson. I don't see why that's such a big-" It didn't take long for it to dawn on her. "Oh."

"Exactly." I pushed the sleeves of my dressing gown up around my elbows and started counting off on my fingers. "First problem – I'm not a Hanson fan. I've never heard any of their music, and what little I *do* know of them is what I've heard from you. Second problem – I've only ever done one interview, and it was an utter disaster. Third problem – how the *hell* am I supposed to get to the middle of Manhattan from here on a Wednesday afternoon? Because there is no way in hell that I'm driving."

"Bel, first of all, you need to calm the fuck down." Schuyler pulled out one of the other kitchen chairs and sat down on it. "Let's look at this rationally."

"Wishful thinking, that."

She ignored this. "One, I'm guessing that you not being a fan is the *exact* reason why your editor asked you to do this interview – you don't have any preconceived ideas about them, so that allows you to be completely unbiased. Two, the last time you did an interview for *High Fidelity* you'd only just started your internship there – you didn't have any real experience with doing interviews. And three, you're a New Yorker – you can take the subway, can't you? Either that, or you can come to work with me that morning and walk to Radio City from there. It's only a couple of miles away from the museum so it shouldn't take you very long." She gave me a smile. "You've got nothing to worry about, Bel. I mean it. They're really nice guys. I'll come along for moral support if you like. It gives me a reason to ditch work early." She shrugged. "Plus it gives me a chance to see my boyfriend."

"Your boyfriend?" I asked, puzzled. It clicked after about half a second. "Oh, you're talking about *Mark*. Is *that* who Mark is?"

"Yes, that's who Mark is. I'd have thought you'd worked that out by now." She smirked at me. "Mark has an identical twin brother, by the way. And said brother is very much unattached. You might just get lucky." She gave me a wink and stood up. "If you're so worried about never having heard any of their music, I've got all of their albums on my external hard drive. You should probably listen to *Middle Of Nowhere* and *This Time Around* before you listen to anything else – not that their other music isn't good, because it's excellent, but those two albums will give you the best possible idea of who they are as musicians." She turned to leave the kitchen, but obviously thought better of it. "And I know it's going to hurt, but *please* try to keep an open mind. You'll probably surprise yourself."

Schuyler left for work about ten minutes later, leaving me by myself in our apartment. The very first thing I did before going into my room to get dressed was reply to Stephen's email.

Stephen,

Of course I'll do the interview. I hope you realise, though, that I'm not going to know Hanson from a bar of soap. I really don't know what was going through your head when you asked me. But really, work is work, so I'll be there on Wednesday.

Isobel

Once I'd dressed, I went into Schuyler's bedroom in search of her external hard drive. It sat on her desk next to her laptop, hooked up to one of the computer's USB ports and the power outlet under the desk. I unplugged the drive from both the outlet and the USB port, tucked the drive under my arm and coiled its cords up in my hands, in preparation for carting it all out into the kitchen.

Before I left the room, I spotted a Polaroid that had been taped to Schuyler's bedroom mirror. The photograph was of two blonde guys, one of whom sat in a wheelchair and had an expensive-looking Canon camera, judging from the stitching on the neckstrap, in his lap. The other was crouched next to the wheelchair. The two of them looked identical, carbon copies of one another, right down to their smiles. Schuyler had labelled the photograph in her flowing cursive.

Mark and Taylor

Underneath Electric Tour

Enmore Theatre, Sydney, Australia

May 28 2005

Deciding not to puzzle over which of the Hanson brothers was which, I left Schuyler's room and went back out into the kitchen. As soon as I'd hooked the drive up to the power and my laptop, had loaded all of her Hanson MP3s into my iTunes library, and was playing *Middle Of Nowhere* as loudly as I dared, I did what any journalist worth their paycheque did.

I researched.

As I researched, I learned a fair bit about my newest interview subjects. I knew that what I found out was most likely old news to someone like Schuyler, but to me it was like discovering a whole new world. According to Wikipedia and the various fansites I'd found on Google, there were eight children in the Hanson family – five sons and three daughters – and Hanson had been formed from the two oldest and the fourth-oldest sons, their names being Isaac, Marcus (Mark for short) and Zachary (otherwise known as Zac). They had been signed to a recording contract in 1996, and had since gone on to break musical records worldwide. Three world tours, three studio albums, one Christmas album and two live records had garnered the trio a veritable legion of intensely passionate and extremely devoted fans from all walks of life. They had their own record label, with a fourth studio album due for release this year, and were involved in a fair amount of charity work.

When Schuyler returned home from work that afternoon, I was still researching.

"What have you been *doing* all day?" she asked as she set her handbag down on the kitchen bench.

"Stalking your boyfriend," I replied, completely straight-faced.

"Very funny." She indicated the screen of my laptop, which was currently open to an unofficial fan forum by the name of Hansonliners. "I see you've been doing your homework. Find out anything interesting?"

"Well, nothing that *you'd* find particularly interesting or noteworthy. There is something I've been wondering about, though."

"Oh really?" Schuyler sat down in the chair on the opposite side of our kitchen table and propped her chin up in her hands. "Well, fire away. Just keep in mind that I may not be able to tell you much – there are some matters that are considered very much confidential, so I have to keep them to myself."

"You said this morning that your boyfriend has an identical twin brother." Schuyler nodded as if to confirm this. "How the *fuck* do you tell them apart?"

"I'm going to assume that you saw that photo on my bedroom mirror. Would I be right?" When I nodded, Schuyler got up and left the kitchen. She came back with the Polaroid I'd seen taped to her mirror. "This is the easiest way to tell Mark from his twin," she said, and indicated the watch that one of them wore on his wrist. "Mark always wears a watch – he's never seen in public without one. Taylor doesn't, because according to him the clock on his phone is just as good as any watch, though it doesn't much help him if he leaves his phone at home or if the battery runs out of juice in the middle of the day. His mom's been on at him for years to start wearing a watch, but he won't listen to her."

"I see." I studied the photograph closely. Now that I knew how to tell the two of them apart, I had even more questions. "So why exactly is Taylor in a wheelchair?"

Schuyler smiled wryly. "You just *had* to ask me that, didn't you?"

"Could you try *not* being cryptic for once?" I asked.

"That's one of the confidential matters I mentioned. I'd love to tell you why, but Mark would kill me if I did. He didn't even tell *me* until we'd been dating for about six months – he had to make sure I wasn't going to get onto Hanson.net and tell the world. They're very private people, and they have their reasons for being that way."

"You know I'd never tell a soul, Skya," I said as I stood up. "I know how to keep a secret as well as you do."

"I know you can keep them, Bel." Schuyler put the Polaroid on our fridge, attaching it with a bright pink flamingo magnet. "But I *also* know how you get after a few drinks. I think it's probably in both our best interests if I keep it to myself for the time being. I'd rather not betray Mark's trust."

"Oh, fine," I said, very reluctantly giving in. "So what do you want for dinner?"

* * *

At around four on Wednesday afternoon, Schuyler and I left the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where she worked in Visitor Services, and walked the two miles to Radio City Music Hall. The night before, I'd sat down in the living room with my notebook and had written out a ten-page list of questions I thought I might be able to ask my subjects during the interview. During lunch Schuyler had gone through that list, ruthlessly vetoing most of the questions before helping me organise the leftovers into a list of twenty dot points that I could use to conduct my interview. That list had been safely tucked away in a pocket of my handbag, behind my voice recorder. Schuyler had also taken it upon herself to give me a few pointers when it came to dealing with Hanson and their 'entourage' (the latter of which, according to Schuyler, usually consisted of Mark's twin and the oldest of their sisters), in particular when it came to making a good impression.

As we walked down Park Avenue, Schuyler decided it would be a good idea to test me on what I should and shouldn't do during my hour with the Hanson brothers. As if I wasn't already nervous enough.

"Don't act like a teenage girl – not that I even *do* that," I began.

"It happens, Bel," Schuyler said. "Even to the best of us. Next point?"

I skirted around a fire hydrant as I reeled off the next few points. "Act professional, limit my questions to their music and charity work, don't focus on anything before the current album release, don't get frustrated if any of them go off on a tangent, and most importantly don't speak to either Taylor or Jessica beyond a greeting unless they speak to me first." I eyed Schuyler with one eyebrow raised. "Is that last point really necessary?"

"You'd be surprised," Schuyler replied. "I've been present for a lot of interviews, and I've lost count of how many interviewers talk to their siblings more than they do the guys themselves. It

makes you look bad, for one. Basically, if Taylor or Jess want to talk to you, they will. If either of them even show up, Taylor will be there to work, and it's highly likely that Jess and I will spend the hour hanging out, so you won't have much of a chance to talk to them. A quick hello should do the trick."

Almost before I realised it, we had arrived at our destination. While Schuyler made a quick call on her phone, I took the printout of Stephen's most recent email from my handbag and read it through once more.

Isobel,

I can't thank you enough for taking this assignment. I am confident that you will uphold the good name of the magazine, and thus I am counting on you to not let me down.

A few pointers to keep in mind:

1. I have been in further contact with the band, and they have indicated that they would prefer for the interview to take place on the performance stage or in the general area. They have agreed to notify the box office that you will be there to interview them, and will organise an access pass for you. Your driver's licence or passport should be sufficient ID.

*2. You have one hour, and one hour **only**, to conduct your interview. They cannot allow more time than this, as they are required to leave the venue by six o'clock. If needed they are willing to allow for any necessary photography to take place after five-thirty. I need not remind you that this does **not** give you the right to prolong the interview.*

3. The questions you ask should relate as closely as possible to the upcoming release of The Walk and the band's charity work. Please try not to deviate too far from this, as our readers are not particularly interested in their private lives.

I don't want you to stress out too much about this. I realise it's been a few years since you went out on assignment, so I know you're somewhat out of practice, but the main thing to remember here is

*that above all else, you should enjoy yourself. Make a good impression by all means, just so long as you don't try **too** hard. I look forward to seeing your article in my inbox on Thursday afternoon.*

Stephen

Once Schuyler had finished her call and had stowed her phone back in her bag, we went inside. I took a quick detour to the box office to collect my access pass, leaving my passport as security, and Schuyler led me through to the concert hall.

Not surprisingly, especially for this time of day, the hall was mostly empty. The stage was set up to accommodate a full band – a full drum kit with an unusual-looking symbol on the front of the bass drum, a grand piano with an electric keyboard situated atop the closed lid, and a few guitars set up in a rack. The only occupants of the hall aside from Schuyler and I were a girl who was working through what looked like a dance routine on the stage, and a guy walking around the floor with a light meter. He had a camera hanging around his neck on a neckstrap. The girl onstage stopped dancing as Schuyler and I descended through the rows of seats.

"Skya!" she called out, waving. As if in response Schuyler moved faster, almost skipping down the stairs until we reached the floor. In one fluid movement Schuyler had hoisted herself up onto the stage, and had extended a hand down to help me up.

"Hey Jess," Schuyler said as soon as I had planted both feet on the stage. "Bel, this is Mark's sister Jessica," she said by way of an introduction. "Jess, meet my roommate Isobel Reynolds."

"Good to meet you, Isobel," Jessica said, and she extended a hand for me to shake. "You're here to interview my brothers, I assume?"

"I am," I confirmed as I shook her hand. "You're a dancer?" I asked, referring to the routine I'd seen her dancing.

"Sophomore at Juilliard," Jessica replied.

"She's freaking good, too," Schuyler said. "You should see her onstage, Bel. This girl is *phenomenal*. I've honestly never seen anything like it."

"I'm not *that* good," Jessica said, sounding very modest.

"Oh, come on. How many dancers audition each year?"

"I don't know exactly," Jessica said with a shrug. "About four hundred, I think."

"And how many actually get in?" And here Jessica flushed a deep crimson. She ducked her head as she mumbled something. "Jessica Grace," Schuyler seemed to admonish. "Come on, tell us."

"Twenty-four," Jessica replied at last. "Twelve guys, twelve girls."

"And you say you're 'not that good'," Schuyler said with a chuckle. "You need to give yourself more credit, Jess. *Much* more credit. Especially considering you got in two years earlier than usual."

"That makes me sound abnormal, though," Jessica said. She glanced down at her watch. "They should be here by now. I swear to God, if they're not here within the next five minutes-"

"Sorry we're late!"

My head snapped up from foraging through my handbag at the sound of the newest voice. Coming down through the rows of seats were, I assumed, the subjects of my interview. I heard Schuyler's voice fast in my ear as she explained who was who to kickstart my memory.

"Isaac's the oldest – electric and acoustic guitar, some bass guitar, bit of piano, occasional vocals," she whispered. "Mark's in the middle – piano, guitar, harmonica, percussion, the odd bit of drumming, primary vocalist. Zac's the youngest – drums, some guitar and piano, secondary vocalist."

"Thanks," I whispered back.

Once Schuyler had greeted her boyfriend she and Jessica disappeared into the uppermost row of seats, leaving me to do my job. All of a sudden I was very nervous – a feeling I recognised from when I had made a disastrous attempt at my very first interview for *High Fidelity*. I couldn't even remember *who* I had interviewed, which was a good indicator of how much I had screwed things up. Well, that and Stephen's very obvious reluctance to send me out on any more assignments before now.

"Okay, well, my name's Isobel Reynolds," I said to kick things off, sitting down on the drum riser as I spoke. "I work for *High Fidelity*." As I spoke, I took my voice recorder and page of dot points from my handbag. I clicked my voice recorder on as soon as I had it out in the open. "Just for identification, we have – and I *really* hope I have this right – Isaac, Mark and Zac, right?" I pointed my recorder at each of the brothers as I said their names, and received a series of nods in return. I breathed a mental sigh of relief – the first hurdle was over with, and now I could relax and do my job.

Thankfully the interview went off completely without a hitch, and was wrapped up not long after five-fifteen. Schuyler came up to sit on the riser beside me as I clicked my recorder off and slipped it back into my bag. It was followed in short order by my list of dot points. "So what's the verdict?" she asked *sotto voce*.

"They're all right," I replied quietly. "I hope you don't think that this has turned me into a *fan*, though." The word 'fan' was given an inflection of distaste. "I'm still not completely impressed. It's going to take much more than just the one interview."

"Hey, it's a good start though." She gave me a grin, before looking up. "Oh, hey Taylor."

At Schuyler's words, I too looked up. Standing before us was Mark's twin, judging from the lack of a watch around either of his wrists. "Oh wow," I breathed. He towered over Schuyler and I, and wore his long, caramel-coloured hair loose over his shoulders. Peering down at us in what looked

like amusement, over a pair of rectangular-framed glasses, was a set of bright blue eyes. "Hey Skya-" I started, only to be rewarded with a well-placed elbow to the ribs.

"Bel and I need to get going," Schuyler said smoothly as she stood up, "so unless you need us for anything we're gonna get out of your hair and let you work."

"I think I have everything under control," Taylor replied. He looked at me. "Bel, was it?"

"Isobel," I corrected as I got to my feet. "But yes, that's me."

"Isobel, then. I'll probably be able to get these photographs on my computer by tonight, tomorrow morning at the latest, so could I have your email address so I can pass them on to you?"

"Yeah, of course." I pulled the small spiral-bound notebook I kept for taking notes and my favourite pen from my handbag, flipped to a new page and jotted down my email address. Taylor took the page from me once it had been ripped out of my notebook and pocketed it.

"Thanks, Isobel," he said with a smile. "I should have the photos emailed to you by about ten tonight."

I nodded my thanks, and a split second later Schuyler proceeded to drag me off the stage and up out of the hall.

"Why didn't you tell me he was so good-looking?" I asked Schuyler when we had emerged from the building, out into the chill January air. I pulled my coat closer around myself as a buffer against the cold. "I felt like I could stare into his eyes *forever...*"

"He's unbelievable, isn't he?" Schuyler said. She sounded very amused. "Looks to me like Taylor Hanson has found himself an admirer."

"Perhaps," I said airily. "And anyway, why'd you elbow me? All I wanted to know is why he wasn't in a wheelchair. I thought he needed to use one."

"He has his good days and he has his bad days," Schuyler explained. "He only needs to use it on his bad days, so I can only assume that today's a good day for him." She took her phone out of her handbag. "I will say that he is looking much better than I've seen in a long time, though."

"What, is he sick or something?"

"In a manner of speaking. Look, I know you're curious about him, but Taylor guards his privacy even more fiercely than his brothers do theirs. You're not going to get a lot out of him unless he sees fit to let you in. So until he *does* give you an opening, don't push the matter."

I let out a sigh of frustration. "Okay, fine." I quickly glanced at my watch. "Come on, let's go home. I'm *starving*."

Chapter 2

You still stand out while you're wearing black

Taylor

"Taylor."

I rolled over in bed, in the opposite direction from the voice calling my name. If its owner thought I was getting up anytime soon, they were sorely mistaken.

"Wake up, Taylor."

This time, a sharp poke in the region of my side accompanied the call for me to wake up. I shifted away from it as far as I could without falling out of bed.

"Jordan Taylor Hanson, if you don't wake up *right now* I'm letting Ratchet up on your bed so she can *lick* you awake!"

"I'm awake," I mumbled.

"Your eyes are still closed, Taylor. There's no way you're awake if you haven't opened your eyes yet."

I rolled back toward the voice and opened my eyes, squinting as everything slowly drifted into focus. Jessica stood at my bedside, eyeing me with her hands on her hips and one eyebrow raised.

"About time you woke up," she said.

"What time is it?" I asked as I eased myself upright.

"Eight-thirty."

"Oh for..." I let out a quiet groan and ran my fingers through my hair. "You've gotta be kidding me," I muttered. "What the hell did you get me up this early for?"

"It's not *that* early." Jessica sat down on my bed, adjacent to my knees. "And I got you up because one, you have to take your medication. Two, Ratchet needs to be walked. And three, I *distinctly* remember you asking me to wake you up before I went out to class."

"You don't have class until nine-thirty," I pointed out. I reached back and pulled one of my elastic bands off of the nearest bedpost, and gathered my hair back into a ponytail. "I would think that an hour is more than long enough to get there. It doesn't take *that* long on the subway."

"I need to go to the library first thing this morning, though. So the earlier I get there, the better." She smoothed the wrinkles and creases out of my bedspread. "Mom called about ten minutes ago," she said idly. "Her and Dad are going to be coming up here in a few weeks."

"They got somewhere to stay?"

"Probably a hotel or something, unless either of our other brothers is feeling charitable." Here she shrugged. "Which as we both know is very doubtful."

"Hmm," I said noncommittally. "Anything else I should know?"

"Well, I won't be home until past six this evening – I've got a late dance class. And Mark's left already, he's got practice over at Zac's all today. Just order in pizza for dinner or something, and I'll eat when I get home. Unless you're feeling up to cooking." She studied me inquisitively. "And it looks to me like you *don't* feel much up to it."

"Well, what do you expect? I did a full day's work yesterday, and-" I broke off, listening hard. "Is it *raining*?"

"Uh huh. Started about half an hour ago. I don't think it's cold enough to snow yet, but you never know – it might later on."

"Well, that explains why I'm aching all over," I grumbled, and flexed my fingers experimentally.

"You know what'll fix that? A long, hot shower. Always works for me after dance." She reached over and put her left hand on top of mine, and gave my hand a slight squeeze. "Take it easy today, all right? The concert's next Saturday, and you need to be up for that. I'll see you tonight." She went to stand up, but seemed to think better of it. "Oh, speaking of the concert, Mark wanted me to ask if you were planning on bringing a friend with you. He needs to know by tomorrow afternoon, otherwise he won't be able to set aside any tickets."

"I wasn't even planning on going, Jess."

"Oh, come on. It'll be fun. And hey, if you're stuck for ideas, why don't you ask Schuyler's friend? She seems really nice." She grinned at me. "Plus she seemed to be very taken with you, and not for the reason most of them are either."

"I'll think about it."

"Good. There's coffee in the kitchen if you want some. Mark brewed a pot before he left." She stood up and headed for my bedroom door, turning back at the very last minute. "And don't you dare go back to sleep!"

I hid a smile as Jessica left my bedroom, closing the door behind her. While nobody in the world was like my mother, Jessica happened to be an excellent substitute. She'd only been living with Mark and I for the last five months, as housing regulations at Juilliard required first-year students to live on-campus, but in that time she had more than proved that we had made the right decision in asking her to come and live with us. She didn't mind the odd bit of cooking or cleaning (though she made sure that Mark and I did our fair share too), she was more than able to calm Mark down when he was in one of his moods, and she ensured I stayed on track with my medication. Keeping me on track with my medication wasn't exactly difficult, but it was nice to know that someone was looking out for me and my wellbeing.

I padded barefoot out into the kitchen at around ten minutes past nine with my laptop under one arm and the pill bottles containing my morning medication in my free hand, scratching Ratchet with my toes as I passed by her basket. Ratchet – Ratch for short – was a beagle and my assistance dog, and had been a companion of mine since just before I had joined Mark in New York back in 2005. Her tail thumped against the sides of her basket as I hit the sweet spot at the base of her right ear, and I smiled before continuing on into the kitchen, leaving my computer on the kitchen table.

While I waited for my computer to fire up, I poured myself a mug of coffee and sipped it while I watched the rain fall outside the kitchen window. In my mind, there was nothing worse than a rainy day – it wreaked havoc on my joints and made me ache all over, it was bad for business, and it generally just made me feel horrible. Unless I wanted my camera and other gear to get soaked I couldn't work when it rained, being as a lot of the time I worked outside, and so it resulted in a loss of a day's pay at the very least.

I became so caught up in watching the rain that when the small alarm clock we kept on the shelf next to the refrigerator started beeping, it startled me. Only my fingers tightening around the handle of my mug kept me from dropping it in the kitchen sink.

"You idiot," I muttered. I finished my coffee and set my mug down in the sink, before fetching a clean glass from the draining rack and filling it with water from the tap. It didn't take me long to take my medication, and I drained my glass before sitting down at my laptop. After I'd gone through all the new emails that had come through overnight, directed most into their respective folders and trashed almost all the rest, there was one left. It had been sent by Schuyler's roommate.

Before reading the email, I clicked my Sent Items folder and read the most recent email I had sent out, at around eleven the night before.

Isobel,

The photographs I agreed to send to you are attached as a zip archive. Please let me know if you would prefer smaller versions of any of them, as it's no trouble at all to resize them.

Your editor is most likely aware of what I charge for the use of my work. If he isn't, please inform him that I charge a base rate of \$200, with an additional \$80 per image used. I'll pass on my bank account details when I have a rough idea of how many shots will be used in conjunction with your article.

At the risk of sounding completely unprofessional, it was a pleasure to meet you today. I hope to have the opportunity to work with you again sometime in the near future.

Regards,

Taylor Hanson

78th Street Productions

From there, I clicked back to my inbox and read the email that Isobel had sent to me, at ten minutes after midnight.

Taylor,

Thanks for sending the photographs over – they're fantastic! I think Stephen (my editor) will be very pleased. I have forwarded your email to the Design department at the magazine, and I'll inform Stephen as to your rates when I go into work in the morning. The next email you receive from me will most likely be accompanied by a list of the images that have been chosen for use with the article.

I apologise for the shortness of this email, as it's very late, but be assured that it was a pleasure to meet you too.

Isobel

The email was shifted into my Freelance folder once I'd finished reading it. "Ratch," I called as I stood up and stretched. "Time to go for a walk, girl." I heard Ratchet's tail start thumping against her basket again, and I grinned before heading into my bedroom to get dressed.

When Ratchet and I returned from our walk, there was another email waiting for me in my inbox. Deciding it could probably wait until I'd had a warm shower, I unleashed Ratchet and gave her a quick rubdown with the old towel I kept in the bathroom, before stepping back into the bathroom and turning the shower on. I sang quietly to myself as I adjusted the taps, trying to get the water temperature the way I liked it. "Well I never been to Heaven...but I been to Oklahoma...well they tell me I was born there...but I really don't remember...in Oklahoma, not Arizona...what does it matter..."

Sure enough, Jessica had been right – by the time I finished in the shower, all my aches had vanished down the drain. I changed back into my jeans and T-shirt and headed back into the kitchen, drying my hair off with a towel as I walked. The email that had come through during my walk, I discovered, was from Isobel.

Taylor,

As I promised, the list of shots the design department has chosen for use with the article is attached. Normally it would take longer, but for some reason Stephen put a rush on it. I've also informed Stephen as to what you charge for the use of your work, and I'll ask Schuyler to drop by sometime soon to get your bank details from you. I would come around myself, but I don't really know you very well yet – I'd feel as if I were imposing on you.

I hope I get the chance to speak with you again soon. I think you're a very intriguing person.

Isobel

Well now. That was interesting.

I spent the rest of the morning lying on the couch, eyes shut and listening to an audiobook of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* that I'd downloaded from iTunes, the earphones of my iPod feeding the words directly into my brain. Ratchet was curled up on my stomach once again, as was her habit whenever I chose to spend a day resting at home. The doorbell rang just as I got completely

engrossed in my listening, and I opened one eye very slowly to see Ratchet looking at me. "Yeah, I know Ratch," I said as I hit the pause button on my iPod. "C'mon girl, down you get."

Once I was free to move, I got up off the couch and headed to the front door. A glance through the peephole revealed that Schuyler was standing in the corridor.

"And what brings you down from the lofty heights of Queens?" I asked as Schuyler stepped over the threshold. Her dark red hair was damp, and rivulets of water trickled down the sleeves of her green raincoat.

"Isobel called me and asked me to drop in to see you," she replied as she unbuttoned and unzipped her coat, and hung it up on the hooks next to the door. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay."

Schuyler eyed me with one eyebrow raised. "Why do I not believe you?"

I scowled at her and went back to the couch. "You never do. If anyone is going to know how I'm feeling, it's me. I was a bit sore when I first woke up, but I took Jess' advice and had a hot shower after I came back from walking Ratchet." I rolled my shoulders and stretched my arms out above my head. "It did the trick. Haven't needed any painkillers yet today."

"Well, that's something at least." She perched on the armrest of the couch. "Have you eaten yet?"

"My God Schuyler, one would think you were my mother," I muttered.

"Well, have you?"

"No, I haven't. I'm not really that hungry."

"You idiot." She held up a white paper bag I hadn't seen before now and shook it slightly. "If you jot down your bank details for me so that I can pass them on to Isobel, you can have this. We got a deal?"

"That depends on what 'this' is."

"Toasted sandwich – chicken, tomato and Swiss cheese on wholewheat. I bought it in the Museum cafeteria if that has any bearing on whether or not you want it."

"I don't even know why you have to ask." I got back to my feet and headed to my bedroom. "You zap that in the microwave, and I'll find my last bank statement."

Once I'd copied out the pertinent details from my bank statement and handed them to Schuyler, and she had tucked the notebook page into her handbag, I took my lunch from the microwave and joined Schuyler at the kitchen table. It wasn't long before our conversation turned to the topic of next Saturday's concert.

"So who are you taking?"

I put my sandwich back on the plate in front of me and eyed Schuyler. "That assumes that I'm even planning on *going*, Skya. Because really, I have absolutely no interest in sitting in a concert hall surrounded by hundreds of screaming girls and women just so I can see my brothers perform. I'd rather stay home and catch up on my reading."

"Oh, come on Tay. It'll do you some good to get out of the house for something other than work or to see your doctor." She reached over to pinch a slice of tomato from my plate, and I batted her hand away. "It's just that I was thinking you could ask Isobel to go with you. She knows a little about your brothers, though it's mostly a combination of what she's heard from me and what she researched for the interview yesterday. So it's not exactly unbiased. I mean, I'm a fan *and* I'm dating your brother, so how could it be? She really needs to experience the madness for herself."

"And by madness, you mean subjecting her to a Hanson concert. I don't think I need to remind you that my brothers' fans are, for the most part, completely batshit insane. Including you for dating Mark."

Schuyler grinned. "Oh, I know. Which is why you need to take her."

"Here we go," I muttered. "You want me to ask her out, don't you?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't need to. You forget that we've been friends for, what, at least five years now. I know you too well."

"Well, will you? All she ever *does* is work. She was exactly the same in high school and in college – so completely focused on her studies that she never let herself have any fun. There is a whole world out there, and *you* are the perfect person to show it to her."

I sighed. "Okay, fine." I got up from my seat and fetched the cordless phone from its wall cradle.

"I hope you realise that you're the second person today to tell me that I should ask her. Jess was the first."

"Well, you know what they say about great minds." Schuyler took the phone from me and punched in what I supposed was Isobel's work number. "She's at work right now," she said as she handed the phone back to me, "so I'd make it quick."

"Yes, *Mother*."

A voice I didn't recognise answered the phone after a couple of rings. "*High Fidelity* editorial department, this is Anna speaking."

I swallowed hard before speaking, suddenly nervous. "Hi, would I be able to speak with Isobel Reynolds, please?"

"May I ask who is calling?"

"Taylor Hanson."

The next voice I heard was one I definitely recognised, even though I'd only heard it once.

"Taylor?"

I couldn't help myself. The instant I heard Isobel's voice, I grinned. Schuyler snickered, and I gave her the finger. "Hey Isobel," I said. "I know you're probably busy so I'll make this quick, but I was wondering if you were free next Saturday evening."

"I'm pretty sure I am."

I traced a waxy ring on the tabletop with my left index finger. "Well, my brothers' concert is next Saturday, and I was wondering if you'd like to come to the show with me."

Isobel was quiet for a little while. The next words she spoke were slightly quizzical.

"Why are you asking *me*? I'm not a fan, Taylor – I'd be out of place there."

"Well, no, you really wouldn't be. You'd be amazed at the number of people who come to Hanson concerts and drag their siblings, boyfriends or girlfriends along. Most of the time, those people aren't fans either." I met Schuyler's gaze briefly. "Mostly I was thinking you'd like to experience the madness first-hand. I know that Schuyler's a fan, and I figure that what you've heard from her is a bit biased."

Isobel chuckled. "Oh, it's biased all right. Schuyler wouldn't know what objectivity was if it bit her on the backside."

I let out a chuckle of my own. "So will you come? It's just that I have to tell Mark pretty soon if I'm inviting anyone – he handles ticket requests within the family, and the deadline's tomorrow. After that, he can't set any tickets aside."

"What time?"

"Well..." I caught Schuyler's eye and mouthed "*Get Mark's schedule book for me*" at her. She got up and dashed into Mark's bedroom, returning with a thick red-leather bound book. I took it from her and quickly flipped it open to February 10. Written there in Mark's left-slanting print was *Concert at Radio City – doors open 6:45pm for 7:30pm start – Hanson takes stage at 8:45pm*. "The

concert starts at seven-thirty, but I can pick you up at six. I'm supposed to be there when my brothers arrive, just in case they want me to work during the show. I doubt they'll ask me to do anything, but I really don't know what they'll decide."

For about half a minute, I thought Isobel would say no. I was about to give it up as a bad joke when she spoke again. "Six it is. Do you need my address?"

"I can get it from Schuyler. She's here anyway." I tapped the tabletop with my fingertips. "I'll see you next Saturday, then."

"Indeed. See you then, Taylor."

"See you."

I hung up and looked over at Schuyler. She was grinning fit to rival Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat.

"Get that grin off your face Schuyler, it's just a date," I said as I closed Mark's schedule book and stood up.

"'Just a date?'" Schuyler echoed, sounding incredulous. "Taylor, *when* exactly was the last time you went on a date?"

"Senior year of high school, not that it's any of your business."

"So it's been, what, nearly six years?"

"Eight," I corrected absently.

"Eight, then. That is a fucking *eternity*." I turned back from the kitchen sink, where I'd been rinsing my lunch plate off so it could be placed in the dishwasher, to see Schuyler getting up out of her seat. She went over to the refrigerator and unclipped the marker from the whiteboard that Mark and I kept on the freezer door. "You and Isobel are going to be good for one another," she said as she scribbled out something. "Trust me. I need to head back to work – if I don't see you before, I'll see you next Saturday night."

Once I had closed and locked the front door behind Schuyler, I looked at what she had written on the whiteboard. It was directions to her apartment building, written on the assumption that I would be taking the subway out to Queens. It was as if she had read my mind – I'd been planning to leave my car at home on Saturday night, because I knew the traffic was bound to be insane. It usually was on the weekends.

For once, one thing was definitely certain – next Saturday night was bound to be very interesting.

* * *

Concert day, as far as bad days went, was one of the worst I'd had for a very long time. What woke me up late that afternoon wasn't my alarm, Ratchet scratching at my bedroom door, or even Jessica yelling at me to get out of bed. It was the fact that I was so stiff and sore that I could barely move.

"Tay, time to get up." I felt my mattress dip down as someone sat beside me on my bed, and a hand tucked my hair behind my ears. "It's four-thirty. You need to get ready to pick Isobel up."

I turned my head toward the voice and opened my eyes. "Jess?" I croaked out.

"Mmm-hmm."

"I don't feel so good," I mumbled. "And I can barely move."

"You don't *look* so good, either." Jessica put the back of her right hand against my forehead.

"Well, you're not running a fever, so that's something to be thankful for." I felt her thumbs start to knead my shoulders. "If you don't think you can make it to the show tonight, I can call Isobel and let her know you're not feeling well. I'm sure she'd understand."

"I'm not dying, Jess, as much as I feel like I am. I'll survive."

"You're sure?" Jessica asked, sounding unsure, and I nodded a little. "Okay. But I want you to promise me a few things."

"Anything."

"Take your wheelchair with you. I really think you're going to need it tonight. And don't take the subway, please – I know the traffic's going to be murder, but you need to conserve as much energy as possible. And that means driving." She paused. "And if you really start to feel like shit, go backstage straight away. I'm going to see about reserving one of the couches so you've got somewhere to lie down if you need to."

"Sure thing," I agreed. "I can do that."

"Good." She gave me a smile. "Come on. Once you've taken your meds you'll probably feel a lot better. And then you can hop in the shower." She took a few locks of my hair in her fingers. "You really need to wash this rat's nest, Tay. There's so much grease in it, I could probably use it to cook with if I really wanted to."

"Oh, *that's* nice."

"It's true, though." She snickered quietly. "Come on, up you get and take your meds. I'll find you something to wear while you're in the shower. Mark should have some coffee made by the time you're finished."

"You sound like Mom," I informed my sister.

"I fail to see how that's a bad thing."

After I'd taken my medication and a steaming hot shower, I was beginning to feel considerably more human. I padded back to my bedroom with a bath towel wrapped around my waist, rubbing my hair dry with another towel as I walked. Laid out on my bed, I could see from the doorway, were my favourite jeans, a plain white T-shirt, and a black button-down short-sleeved shirt.

"Jess," I called out as I studied the outfit my sister had put together.

"Yeah?" her voice floated back.

"Whose shirt is that? The black one, I mean."

Jessica didn't answer me for a while. I looked back over my shoulder to see her coming up behind me. "That would be Mark's," she replied. "I stole it out of his closet."

"Jess, there's a reason I don't wear black," I said, trying not to sound too exasperated. "It makes me look washed out."

"That's where you're completely wrong, brother mine," Jessica replied. "You and Mark have exactly the same colouring, and he looks fantastic in black." She pushed at my shoulder. "Go get dressed. You'll be late picking Isobel up at this rate."

"How is Schuyler getting there?" I asked.

"Mark's going to drop by her place at about six-thirty."

"Ah." I stepped into my room. "Give me fifteen minutes."

It took me slightly longer than fifteen minutes to get dressed. By this time it was almost half-past five, and time for me to head over to Queens. As I was lacing up my boots I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror on the back of my bedroom door, and I realised that Jessica had been right – I did look good in black. I straightened up and ran my fingers through my hair, and picked an elastic band up off my desk so I could tie it back. From there it was a matter of grabbing my wallet, phone, iPod, messenger bag and my car keys, and heading out into the living room. My wheelchair was already in my car, which made it one less thing I had to drag downstairs with me.

"Untuck your shirt," Jessica called from where she sat on the couch. "And unbutton it – it looks better. Your coat's over there." She nodded toward the coat hooks next to the front door. "Tell Skya I'll see her when she gets there."

"What about my coffee?"

"Schuyler'll probably have the kettle going by the time you get there. Now go – you're going to be late the way you're going. I'll see you when you get to the show."

I snapped off a mock salute, and Jessica laughed before waving me off out the door.

A few minutes before six, I arrived at Schuyler and Isobel's apartment. I'd opted to leave my wheelchair in my car, reasoning that I'd need it more when we got to the concert. Entirely aside from that, Schuyler's apartment building didn't have a lift. I kept an eye on the time on my phone, and as soon as six o'clock rolled around I rang the doorbell. Schuyler opened the door barely a minute later, and frowned when she saw me standing on her doorstep.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" she asked in a low voice as she let me into her apartment. "Pardon my French, but you look like shit."

"Yeah, I know I do," I said with a quiet sigh. "Believe me, I looked a *lot* worse an hour and a half ago." I gave Schuyler a small smile. "And yeah, I probably should be in bed, but I did invite Isobel out tonight. I'm not dying, even though I feel like I am, so I see no point in breaking our date."

Schuyler seemed to be satisfied with this. "See if you can find somewhere to sit," she said, waving me toward the living area of the apartment. "I'll make you some coffee and see what's keeping Isobel. She should be ready soon."

"Thanks Skya," I said gratefully, and headed over to the couch. As Schuyler busied herself in the kitchen, I could hear a voice singing part of a song I knew rather well, thanks to Jessica's obsession with a certain rock opera.

"The heart may freeze, or it can burn...the pain will ease if I can learn...there is no future, there is no past...I live this moment as my last...there's only us, there's only this...forget regret, or life is yours to miss...no other road, no other way...no day but today..."

I knew Schuyler couldn't sing, as she had demonstrated on more than one occasion, so I knew it could only be one other person – Isobel. She was perfectly on pitch, her voice rising and falling with the notes.

"I take it that Isobel is a *Rent* fan," I said as Schuyler handed me a large mug of black-as-pitch coffee.

"A *fan*? Tay, she is fucking *obsessed*. She watches that damn movie at least once a day. I'm surprised that she hasn't worn the DVD out by now." She chuckled softly.

Isobel came out into the living room just as I finished off my coffee. I didn't miss the look on her face as she caught sight of me. "Holy shit," she said softly. She came over and sat down beside me. "Are you all right?"

I nodded. "For now, yeah. I'm just having a bad day."

"I think that's an understatement," Schuyler commented as she took my empty mug back to the kitchen. "Please tell me you've taken your meds at least."

I nodded. "Jess made me take them before I hopped in the shower." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Isobel looking at me inquisitively. "I'm all right, Isobel. I promise. It's just one of those days."

"We don't have to do this tonight," Isobel ventured, sounding tentative. "It's okay if you just want to head home – there'll be other concerts. You really look like you need to rest."

"Isobel, trust me – this is nothing. I've had far worse days than this. I'll be fine for the next few hours at least." I eased myself to my feet, wincing as my knees complained. "Look, about last Thursday...I'm sorry if you got in trouble with your boss. Blame Skya if you like."

Isobel shook her head. "It's okay, Taylor. He doesn't mind if it's quick, like yours was."

"I still feel bad about it. How about I take you out to dinner before the show? It'll be my treat."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely positive." I thought quickly. "Do you like Thai food?"

Isobel went a little pink. "I've never tried it," she admitted.

I grinned. "First time for everything, right? I know a little place not far from Radio City that we can go to." I extended a hand down to Isobel to help her up. "The owner and I are friends – I go there for dinner a lot when my brothers are working and Jess has a late class. It beats cooking."

Isobel grinned at this last remark. "Well, lead the way then. I'm starving."

Chapter 3

Day in, day out accumulating

Isobel

Immediately upon leaving the apartment building that Schuyler and I called home, Taylor headed straight for a silver BMW. I let out a low whistle of awe when I realised that the car was his.

"Nice," I commented as Taylor unlocked the car.

"Thanks," he said with a smile. "Had my eye on it all the way through college – my parents gave it to me as a graduation present." He got into the driver's seat, and after a few seconds I hopped into the front passenger seat and closed the door behind me.

About twenty-five minutes after leaving my place, Taylor parked the car outside a cheerful-looking storefront on the corner of East 42nd Street and 6th Avenue. What I assumed to be the name of the restaurant was written in what looked like Thai script on the window.

"What does that say?" I asked as we got out of the car. I pointed to the writing on the window.

"*Sà-nòok-sà-naan*," Taylor replied. "Basically translates as 'delicious'." He popped the boot of the car open and lifted out a folded-up wheelchair.

"You speak Thai?"

"A little bit, yeah. Enough to order my dinner whenever I eat here. My friend Tam, he owns this place – he's been teaching me to speak it." He'd unfolded his wheelchair and set it down on the footpath while he'd been speaking, and now settled himself into it. "Can you grab the bag that's on the backseat? It's got my photography gear in it, and I don't really want to leave it in the car in case my brothers want me to take a few shots during their set. I'd have to come back for it if that's the case." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "Plus I'd really rather not risk someone stealing it."

"Yeah, sure." I climbed into the backseat and picked up a somewhat battered leather messenger bag by its shoulder strap. "This it?" I called, and held it up to the back windscreen. I saw him give me a thumbs-up when I peeked over the backseat, and I climbed back out of the car.

It was close to freezing outside, so when we entered the restaurant I welcomed the warmth that settled over me like a blanket. I shed my coat and draped it over my arm as I followed Taylor up to the counter. "Hey Tam!" Taylor yelled out, and a tall, lanky guy wearing chef's whites came out of the kitchen. This, I supposed, was the friend Taylor had been talking about.

"Evening," Taylor's friend greeted us. "That'll be the usual, then?"

"Not quite. I have a friend with me tonight." Taylor nodded to me. "Tam, this is my friend Isobel Reynolds – Isobel, meet Tam Srisai."

"Nice to meet you," I said as I shook the hand that Tam extended over the counter.

"Likewise. Why don't you two take a seat, and I'll be with you in just a moment."

Taylor raised a hand in acknowledgement, and we headed for a table right in the back of the restaurant. "I will warn you," Taylor said as we settled ourselves at our chosen table, opposite one another. "Thai food has a *lot* of heat to it. It could be a bit of a shock if you aren't used to it."

I studied the menu that had been set on our table. "I might have some pineapple fried rice," I decided. "Hey, what's Massaman curry like?"

"It's *really* good. I usually get that and some *pàt kêe mao*." At my raised eyebrow, he translated, "Drunken noodles – it's got brandy in it, hence the name, but I usually ask Tam to leave the brandy out. Don't like it much."

Tam came by just at that moment and took our orders. As soon as he had disappeared back into the kitchen, Taylor reached back to his bag and pulled out a notebook, a pen and a black iPod. He

switched the iPod on and clicked through to his playlists, scrolling halfway down the list. “The Impossible Playlist,” I read upside down. “What’s that?”

“It’s a very, very long list of songs that my brothers’ fans most want to hear as covers during shows, but for one reason or another they don’t think will ever be played,” he explained. “It got started back in 2000. I suggested to my brothers that they cover a couple of the songs from the list in the first concert of that year’s tour, which they did, and it’s been a tradition ever since. The best part of it is that I’m the one that gets to choose the covers for each show.” He was scrolling down the playlist as he spoke. “What bands do you like?”

“Anything, really,” I replied with a shrug. “But I listen to Fall Out Boy, Pearl Jam and Scissor Sisters the most.”

He looked at me with an eyebrow raised. “Interesting.” He wrote these band names down in his notebook.

“What, so you’re letting *me* pick the songs they cover?” I asked.

“I am.”

“And they won’t complain?”

“Not if they want me to keep updating the list.”

I grinned. This was going to be fun.

“Put Semisonic and Hawthorne Heights down as well,” I told him. These two names joined the first three Taylor had written down. “They’re on the list, right?”

“I think so.” He quickly scrolled through the list. “I’ve got *Singing In My Sleep* and *The Transition* on here.” He jotted the two song titles down. “Right, I need three more.”

"*Dance, Dance* by Fall Out Boy," I decided. "*Alive* by Pearl Jam, and *I Don't Feel Like Dancin'* by Scissor Sisters." After he had checked that my chosen songs were in his playlist, Taylor quickly jotted down their titles.

"Excellent," Taylor said. He had an almost evil grin on his face. "I'd better call Mark before I forget and tell him what they're going to have to play tonight."

"They do know how to play them, right?" I asked, suddenly worried.

"Yeah, of course. They'll have to practice them a few times, but they shouldn't have any trouble playing them live." He took his phone from his pocket, flipped it open and dialled what I assumed was his brother's number. "Mark? It's Tay. I've got the list if you want it...*Dance, Dance* by Fall Out Boy, *Alive* by Pearl Jam, *The Transition* by Hawthorne Heights, *Singing In My Sleep* by Semisonic, and *I Don't Feel Like Dancin'* by Scissor Sisters. Got that?...great. Isobel and I are having dinner at Tam's restaurant before we come out to the show, so I'll probably see you in about an hour or so. Do you guys want me to do some shooting during the set?...okay, sweet. I'll see you when we get there. Bye." He hung up and closed his phone, before sliding it back into his pocket. "Well, that's a relief," he said. "I don't have to work tonight."

Taylor had just packed his notebook, pen and iPod away when our meals arrived. A large plate of fried rice that had pineapple, fried egg, onion, tomato and shallots stirred through it was placed before me, and before Taylor was set a bowl of noodles, chicken and bean sprouts. Right in the centre of the table was a round tray that had two plates of curry and rice set on it. It all looked almost too good to eat.

"I don't know much about you," Taylor said as he inspected his dinner, "so I want to know everything you can think of to tell me. Schuyler's only told me the bare minimum. All I know is that you're a workaholic and that you never let yourself have any fun."

I sent a mock glare his way for that last remark. "There isn't a lot to tell, really," I said as I picked all the fried egg and shallots out of my rice. "I'm nearly twenty-three – my birthday's in the middle of April. I'm originally from a fairly large town in Kent, England called Maidstone – I lived there until I was four years old. I've got one older and one younger brother, and three older sisters. Their names are Martin, Penelope, Samantha, Katherine and Jack. All of us except Jack were born in England – my parents uprooted us and brought us all the way out here not long after my fourth birthday, and we moved to upstate Maine. I lived there until I started college."

"Where did you and Schuyler meet?"

"At high school. She was my history tutor during my freshman and sophomore years. We hit it off straight away, even though she was two grades ahead of me. When she graduated she moved here to go to Columbia University. Two years later I was accepted to New York University, and I followed her here."

"You did journalism at college, right?"

I nodded. "Right." I ate a few forkfuls of rice before continuing. "I graduated from NYU in 2006, and started working at *High Fidelity* full-time almost right away. I was working there part-time during college after I finished my internship, mostly as a runner but occasionally getting the chance to write short articles or album reviews. I love it there – I get to indulge one of my greatest passions, my co-workers are some of the most amazing people in the world, and my editor gives me free rein to do almost as I please. It's the best job ever."

"There has to be more than that."

I shook my head. "Nope. What you see is basically what you get." I ate some more of my dinner.

"So what about you?"

"Well, I'm the third of eight kids. I have two older brothers, two younger brothers, and three younger sisters. Isaac and Mark come before me, and and Zac, Jess, Avery, Mackenzie and Zoë come after."

"So Mark's the older twin?"

Taylor nodded. "Yeah. He's older by seven minutes." He ate some of his noodles before continuing. "I was born in Tulsa, in Oklahoma, though when Mark and I were six months old we moved to Virginia. We lived there until my dad got sent to South America for work in late 1987. A year or so later we came back to the US and moved back to Tulsa, didn't leave again until until my brothers landed their record deal in 1996. After that we went to LA for six months, and pretty much just kept on going." He was quiet for a little while as he ate. "I hated it sometimes, because we were away from home so often and for so long, but to be honest I'd never trade it for anything."

"What did you do about school?"

"My mom's mostly homeschooled us all. Isaac, Mark, Zac and I went to private school for a few years when we were younger, but aside from that she's always taught us herself. It worked in my favour, actually, because I finished high school two years early. I started college a few months after that."

"So you started college when you were sixteen?" I asked, impressed.

"Yep." He grinned. "I went to the School of Visual Arts here in New York for six years. I'd have done it over the usual four, but I got sick right in the middle of my first year. Had to switch to doing my degree part-time."

"What did you study?"

"Photography. Graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts under my belt in 2005, and I moved out here permanently that summer." He finished his noodles, shifted his bowl aside, and moved one of the plates of curry before him. "I've also taken a few courses in music production. Figured that

if I wasn't going to be a musician, I might as well do *something* that was related to music in some way. Production ended up being it. And to be honest, I think the production side of things is a whole lot more interesting than being a musician."

By the time seven o'clock rolled around, we had both finished eating. And as I stood up from the table and picked my handbag up off the floor, I realised something.

I liked Taylor – a lot.

He was intelligent, creative, down to earth, and he had a wicked sense of humour – everything I'd ever wanted in a partner. It didn't much hurt that he was quite good looking.

As we left the restaurant, I pulled my coat back on and buttoned it up. Taylor, meanwhile, was rummaging around in his bag. "Here," he said as he handed me a plastic card on a black lanyard. "You'll need this so you can get backstage. You won't get past security without it."

I studied the card closely. On the front it had the symbol I had seen on the drum kit during the interview, with the words *The Walk – New York Showcase 2007 – Access All Areas* printed below in black. Flipping it over, I saw that my name had been written on the back in black marker. Taylor had slipped his over his head while I was looking mine over.

"Come on," he said, and started to roll down the street. I slipped my pass over my head and followed him.

We arrived at the venue about twenty minutes later. The security team waved us backstage after checking our passes, and Taylor immediately headed for one of the couches that had been set up around the main area. He got out of his wheelchair and stretched before sitting down on the couch.

"Don't get *too* comfortable," a voice called out, and I looked back over my shoulder to see Taylor's double coming up behind me. Well, not *quite* his double. Where his twin's hair was somewhere between dark blonde and dark brown, Mark's was closer to ash blonde. He also wore his hair much

shorter than Taylor did his. Aside from those two small cosmetic differences, though, the fact that they were identical twins was undeniable. They were both tall, both had blue eyes, and they sounded more or less alike, though Mark's voice was slightly lower in pitch. "Hey Isobel," he said easily, giving me a smile.

"Hi Mark," I replied, returning his smile.

"Why shouldn't I get comfortable?" Taylor asked. "It's not like I'm going to be up onstage."

"No, but if you *do* get comfortable you'll fall asleep." Mark raised an eyebrow at his twin. "And don't even think about denying it because we both know it's true."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. It's not like *you're* any different," Taylor retorted.

"Touché," Mark replied. He raised an eyebrow before grinning. "Anyway, I gotta find Zac and Ike so we can do a bit of practicing and some warm-ups before we hit the stage. I'll see you both after."

"Break a leg," Taylor called out as Mark left the way he'd come in. Mark's reply was a wave over his shoulder. "We should probably go too," he said as he got to his feet, walked across to his wheelchair and found our tickets in a side pocket of his bag. "Find our seats before it gets too crazy out there." He eyed me. "Unless you want to wait until the *real* show begins?"

"Why?"

"Because the opening act isn't all that memorable. I mean, they can play, but..." He trailed off and started rummaging around for his iPod. "Here, you can listen for yourself if you like."

I took the iPod from him and clicked through to the list of artists. "What're they called?"

"The Mockingbirds." He found a set of earphones and handed them to me. I plugged the jack into its slot, shoved the earphones into my ears and started scrolling again. Having found what I was after, I clicked through to a random song and hit the play button. Soft, mellow music filled my

ears, and I allowed my eyes to fall closed as I listened. As the song ended I sensed eyes on me, and I opened my eyes to find Taylor studying me.

"What?" I asked once I'd hit pause.

"You looked like you were really getting into that," he commented as he took his iPod back. He switched it off and wound the earphone cord around it before stowing it back in his bag. "So what's the verdict?"

"I think I'd rather wait," I replied. "It's okay music, but it's not really my thing."

"I'd have thought that was obvious," Taylor replied dryly. "Considering that my brothers are going to be playing a *Fall Out Boy* song tonight." He placed particular emphasis on the name of the band.

I pointed at him. "Watch it, mister."

We ended up spending the entire half-hour of The Mockingbirds' set backstage, getting to know one another a little better. I ended up discovering that Taylor was not only addicted to Thai food (which I had already guessed), but he was a sucker for classic literature, the TV show *Doctor Who*, and rock music. One of his aunts had sparked his interest in photography when he was a kid, giving him his first camera for his eighth birthday, and he had been a shutterbug ever since. From me, he learned that I was absolutely addicted to the TV show *Supernatural*, obsessed with the musical *Rent*, and that I loved punk music, Green Day being my favourite punk band.

All too soon, it was time to head through to the concert hall to find our seats. According to our tickets, we were to be seated right in the middle of Row LL in the orchestra, in seats A407 and A408, giving us a perfect view of the stage. As we took our seats Taylor unearthed a digital camera from the depths of his bag. "These are just for my personal collection," he said when he saw me eyeing it.

"Won't you get in trouble from security?" I asked. I'd read quite a few horror stories about Hanson's fans having their cameras confiscated during shows, and I would have hated it if that happened to Taylor – he was a fantastic photographer.

"Nah. They usually don't bug me about it – any of them do, I flash this at them." He indicated his access pass. "Makes them back off quick smart."

"Well, make sure you share them with me," I said as I settled back into my seat. "I'll want a reminder of this night – not that I'll probably *forget*, but it'll be nice to have something to jog my memory."

At precisely a quarter past eight the house lights went down, and I sat up straighter. And then I heard it – the familiar bass guitar, drums and tambourine that kicked off the first song of Hanson's set, followed by Mark's vocals.

"She says she's no good with words but I'm worse...what started out 'A joke of a romantic' got stuck to my tongue...weighed down with words too over-dramatic...tonight it's 'It can't get much worse' vs. 'No one should ever feel like'...I'm two quarters and a heart down...and I don't want to forget how your voice sounds...these words are all I have so I'll write them...so you need them just to get by..."

As the chorus kicked off, the audience *exploded* in cheers and yells of excitement.

"Dance, dance...we're falling apart to half time...dance, dance...and these are the lives you'd love to lead...dance...this is the way they'd love if they knew...how misery loved me..."

"You always fold just before you're found out...drink up it's last call, last resort...but only the first mistake...I'm two quarters and a heart down...and I don't want to forget how your voice sounds...these words are all I have so I'll write them...so you need them just to get by...why don't you show me the little bit of spine...you've been saving for his mattress, love..."

"Dance, dance...we're falling apart to half time...dance, dance...and these are the lives you'd love to lead...dance...this is the way they'd love if they knew...how misery loved me...

"Why don't you show me the little bit of spine...you've been saving for his mattress...I only want sympathy in the form of you...crawling into bed with me...

"Dance, dance...we're falling apart to half time...dance, dance...and these are the lives you'd love to lead...dance...this is the way they'd love...way they'd love...dance...this is the way they'd love...way they'd love...dance...this is the way they'd love if they knew...how misery loved me...dance, dance...dance, dance...dance, dance...dance, dance..."

As *Dance, Dance* ended, the music segued straight into what I recognised as the second track from *The Walk, Great Divide*. And as soon as Mark began singing the first verse, I was instantly converted.

They were *good*. No, good wasn't the word for it – they were *phenomenal*. I had always maintained that the indicator of a truly good musician was not only how they sounded on a studio recording, but how they sounded live in comparison to how they sounded in the studio. The truly excellent musicians sounded just as good in either setting. And Hanson, I had now discovered, not only sounded incredible on record, but they sounded absolutely fantastic live. I was very glad that I had discovered them now, in 2007, rather than a decade earlier – I had thankfully escaped the hype of 1997 and 1998, which according to Schuyler had been utterly insane, and could appreciate the music in my own time and at my own pace.

And as the show progressed, I found myself joining in with the other audience members in cheering and singing along. I didn't really know most of the words, but that had never stopped me before and it certainly didn't stop me now.

"This next song, like the first one of the show, comes from what some have christened The Impossible Playlist," Mark said as the final notes of *One More* faded away. "It was released in 1991 on the album *Ten*, and was the debut single by Seattle rock band Pearl Jam. It's called *Alive*."

As the opening notes of *Alive* played, I glanced across at Taylor. He had slid halfway down in his seat and was watching the action onstage through half-closed eyes. I was certain he looked much worse than he had when he'd come to pick me up earlier that evening. I poked him gently, and he turned his head to look at me. "Are you okay?" I mouthed, and he nodded slowly before returning his attention to the stage. After a few more seconds I chose to follow his lead. Zac had the lead on this particular song, and so I was curious to see if he could pull it off.

"Son, she said...have I got a little story for you...what you thought was your daddy...was nothin' but a...while you were sittin'...home alone at age thirteen...your real daddy was dyin'...sorry you didn't see him...but I'm glad we talked..."

"Oh I, oh, I'm still alive...hey I, oh, I'm still alive...hey I, oh, I'm still alive...hey, oh..."

"Oh, she walks slowly...across a young man's room...she said I'm ready for you...I can't remember anything to this very day... 'cept the look, the look...oh, you know where...now I can't see, I just stare..."

"I, I'm still alive...hey I, but I'm still alive...hey I, boy I'm still alive...hey I, I'm still alive, yeah...oooh yeah...yeah, yeah, yeah...oh, oh..."

"Is something wrong, she said...well of course there is...you're still alive, she said...oh, and do I deserve to be...is that the question...and if so, if so...who answers...who answers..."

"I, oh, I'm still alive...hey I, oh I'm still alive...hey I, but I'm still alive...yeah I, ooh, I'm still alive...yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah..."

I grinned happily as the song ended. *Alive* was my favourite Pearl Jam song, and I was pleased with what I heard – it sounded different, of course, but it didn't make it any less fantastic.

I was snapped back to reality by movement to my right, and I looked to see Taylor slowly easing himself to his feet. Through the dark I could see him wincing with each movement he made. He looked truly exhausted, and I found myself wondering not for the first time just how sick he really was.

"I need to go lie down," he mouthed when I tugged on his shirtsleeve. *"You can stay if you want – I've seen them perform hundreds of times. I'm not going to be missing anything."* His gaze met mine, and I swallowed hard before nodding uncertainly. He bent down to pick his bag up off the floor, and set off slowly down through the rows of seats, tensing with each step he took.

I didn't manage to last out the rest of the show – I was much too worried about Taylor to really enjoy it. I ended up getting up from my seat halfway through *Singing In My Sleep*, and took the stairs down to the floor of the arena two at a time. Once I had stepped off the stairs I broke into a run, dashing to the side of the stage. I slowed down just enough to show my pass to the security team, and slipped through the stage door. What I saw as the door closed behind me made me stop short.

Taylor was lying on his back on one of the couches, the same one that the two of us had been sitting on earlier that evening, his eyes closed. Beside him was Jessica, and as I got closer I could see that she was carefully stroking her brother's hair and shoulder.

"Hey Jessica," I said quietly as I knelt on the floor beside her, not wanting to disturb Taylor.

"Hi Isobel," Jessica replied. Her voice was as quiet as mine, but at the same time I could hear a little sadness in her tone.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She didn't answer me for a little while. "I wish things were different," she said at last.

"What do you mean?"

"Taylor..." Her voice faltered for just a second. "He hasn't told you much, has he?"

"Nothing past the basics, no."

"I suppose it's not my place to tell you, then, if he hasn't. It's just...I worry about him, you know? He's been sick for a long time, and I don't know if he'll ever get better. And today..." She closed her eyes for a moment. "He's been running himself ragged the last few days, even though he knows what it does to him in the end, and now he's just crashed."

I ended up spending the rest of the show at the side of the stage, having used the excuse that I wanted to see the rest of the concert to let Jessica look after her brother. Just as the concert ended I ducked backstage again, and hung back as people began streaming in.

"Bel?" I turned to see Schuyler standing a couple of feet away. "What happened? You just bolted off right in the middle of the set..."

"I was worried about Taylor," I explained. "He had to go and lie down, and I couldn't enjoy the show if I had my mind on him. Jessica said he isn't well right now."

"He hasn't been for the last seven years," Schuyler said softly. She eyed me. "You like him, don't you?"

"No?"

She chuckled softly. "Yes, you do. I can tell. And I'm pretty sure he feels the same about you."

I raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Yes, really." She grinned at me.

It was almost ten-thirty by the time the crowd backstage dispersed. Soon, only Jessica, Taylor, Mark, Schuyler, Isaac, Zac and I remained.

"We should probably figure out how the girls are going to get home," Mark said. He had perched on an armrest of the couch his twin slept on. "I drove Schuyler, and I know Tay drove Isobel. Only problem is that he's going to be somewhat indisposed for at least the next few days, so he won't be able to do any driving." Mark looked at me. "Where did Taylor park his car?"

"Outside that Thai restaurant his friend owns," I replied.

"Okay. That makes things a little easier." Mark hopped down from his perch. "Zac, can you and Isaac take Taylor home?"

Zac nodded. "We can do that."

"Thanks." Mark turned to his sister. "Jess, are you in any way opposed to driving Taylor's car?"

"I don't know," Jessica said unsurely. "He doesn't usually let me anywhere near it."

"What he doesn't know won't hurt him. And really, right now he's not in any sort of condition to protest. If he finds out and doesn't like it, tell him to take it up with me." Lastly, Mark turned to Schuyler and I. "Come on you two. I'll drive you home."

And so the process of getting everyone home started. Isaac and Zac left first, taking with them a very sleepy, stiff and sore Taylor. Jessica followed them not long afterward – she carried Taylor's bag and his folded-up wheelchair. Finally, Mark, Schuyler and I left the arena, heading out through a back entrance.

"So did you enjoy the show?" Mark asked me as he led us to his car, a dark green Nissan Pathfinder.

I nodded. "I loved it. You guys are absolutely fantastic."

Mark grinned. "Thank you." He unlocked his car so that we could all get in. "What song was your favourite? If you have one, that is."

"Well..." I thought for a little while. "*Blue Sky*," I decided. "It just made me smile, you know?"

"It has that effect on a lot of people, I've found." Mark tapped the steering wheel. "I actually wrote that one for Taylor. It's mostly about him, anyway." He broke into song briefly. "I'm blind with eyes wide open...my body's tired and broken...I want a taste of something...that doesn't leave me dry..."

"You have a really good voice," I told him.

"Thanks, Isobel." He started the car up. "Well, let's get this show on the road."

I settled into the backseat of Mark's car as he navigated the streets of New York, heading out to Queens. All told, it had actually been a really good night out – I'd been treated to dinner, gotten to know my new friend, and had come to love the music I had once been so ignorant of. It all made me very glad, for the first time, that Stephen had chosen me to interview the Hanson brothers. And I had a distinct feeling that I'd be glad of it for a long time yet.

Chapter 4

If you wanted honesty, that's all you had to say

Taylor

February was turning out to be a complete lost cause. Winter had never agreed with me, especially New York winters, but for some reason this winter was a lot worse than usual. Even though we had the heat cranked up in the apartment when Jessica, Mark or I were home I felt frozen, and an intense chill had settled in my bones and joints. It was painful, but no more than I was already used to. More than anything else it was annoying, mostly because it made walking and moving about somewhat difficult. As a direct result my wheelchair was seeing more use than it had in some time.

There was one bright spot in all of this, though. Isobel. We'd taken to spending a good deal of time together – we met for lunch a few times a week, and we alternated evenings at one another's apartments. I had succeeded in getting her addicted to watching *Doctor Who*, and had lent her my copies of the first and second series DVDs. In turn, she had turned my casual liking of *Supernatural* into something of an obsession. Jessica was addicted to it, and the two of us occasionally watched it together, but other than that I had never really been all that interested in it. Isobel had appealed to my intellectual side by showing me that there was far more to the show than hunting down what lurked in the darkness. I'd always had a fascination with urban legends, and *Supernatural* was full of them.

"*Taylor!* Get the fuck up!"

I yanked my pillow out from under my head and slammed it down on my face. All this week certain people had dragged me out of bed far earlier than I really should have been up, which had me running on adrenaline a lot of the time, and I had finally cracked. There was absolutely no way I

was getting out of bed until I was good and ready, and that didn't look as if it would be happening anytime within the next few hours.

"Matthew, did I just hear you swear?"

I snickered as I heard my mother reprimand my brother. Calling him by his first name was just one of the ways that my twin could be yanked down a few pegs, but it happened to be the most effective. Particularly if it was Mom doing the naming.

I lifted my pillow off of my face as I heard my bedroom door open, and smiled a little when I saw my mother stepping through the doorway. She returned my smile and came to sit down on the edge of my bed.

"I hear you've got a new friend," she said idly as I sat up and pushed my hair out of my face.

"Mark opened his big mouth, did he?" I grumbled.

"Don't talk about your brother like that," she scolded. "And no, he didn't. It was Jessica, if you must know."

"Same difference. They both have big mouths."

"Jordan," she said sharply, and I fell silent. She seemed to study me for a little while. "You're looking much better than you did the last time I saw you," she said.

"Define 'better'."

"Happier, then. You look a lot happier." She grinned mischievously. "Might that new friend of yours have something to do with it?"

"Who, Isobel?"

"Oh, so she *does* have a name."

"Course she has a name." Here I shrugged. "Dr. Hewitt started me on medication again at the end of November," I said. "That's probably why – Schuyler said the same thing a few weeks ago. I've got an appointment to see him on the fifteenth of March to see if I need to keep taking it." The significance of that date wasn't lost on me – Mark and I would be turning twenty-four the day before.

"I wish you didn't feel you needed to take it on top of everything else," Mom said softly.

"I don't think any of us want a repeat of what happened a couple of years ago. So it's better this way, at least until the weather warms up."

"You have a point," Mom said, seeming to concede. She reached over and patted my left hand. "When you're ready, come out into the kitchen. I want to talk to you." She gave me a smile before standing up and leaving my room. As she closed the door behind her, I pushed the left sleeve of my shirt up around my elbow and ran my right thumb over the two long scars that had a home on the underside of my left wrist.

Mom was sitting at the kitchen table when I emerged from my room about half an hour later, carrying two of my pill bottles in my right hand. She had what looked like Jessica's favourite mug in front of her, and set in the place opposite was my own mug – the latter had been a present from Jessica the Christmas after I'd started college, and was dark blue with *World's Best Photographer* on one side in bright yellow. The other side was home to the image of an old-fashioned camera. As far as I could tell, apart from my mother and I the apartment was deserted.

"So where's everyone else?" I asked as I sat down at the table. As soon as I was settled I began counting out my medication.

"Well, Jess has class today, and Mark has a meeting with Isaac and Zac – they'll be leaving on tour to promote the album this weekend. Your dad went with Mark."

"Oh, okay." I swallowed each of my pills with a mouthful of steaming hot coffee, inhaling sharply through my nose as the liquid scorched my throat. "What was it that you wanted to talk to me about?"

For some time, there was no answer forthcoming, so I continued to drink my coffee, sipping it more carefully than I had previously.

"I worry about you sometimes."

I paused mid-sip and raised my gaze to look at my mother. She was studying me, blue eyes identical to my own currently focused on my left wrist. I drew my hand closer to the edge of the table in response.

"If you want to worry about someone, worry about Mark," I said. "The way he's going, he'll work himself into an early grave. The other two will as well if they aren't careful. They're being somewhat neurotic over the whole thing."

"Well, this album is important to them," Mom reminded me. "Possibly more so than *Middle Of Nowhere*, *This Time Around* and *Underneath* combined."

"As if I needed reminding of the fact," I muttered. "Tenth anniversary and all that."

"Exactly. So cut them a little slack, okay?"

"Yeah, all right." I kept quiet for a little while. "So why do you worry about me, anyway?"

"Because you're sick, maybe?" Mom asked, arching one eyebrow as she spoke.

I snorted quietly. "I've been sick since the end of 1999," I reminded her. "I don't need any sort of reminder." I put my mug down on the table and reached across to place my hands atop my mother's. "I'm *fine*, Mom. Really, I am. I feel better than I have in a long time. Even despite Mark dragging me out of bed at some unholy hour every morning for the last week."

"And what do you call an unholy hour?" Mom asked. There was a slight undercurrent of mischief in her tone.

"Anytime before eleven," I replied. "I'm barely coherent before that. At least, not without a lot of caffeine in my system." I took my hands off of my mother's and tapped the rim of my mug. "I think Isobel has a lot to do with how I've been feeling lately."

"Ah, I see." From the way Mom said this, I could tell that this was what she had been wanting to talk to me about. "And what makes Isobel so special?"

"It's just...well, most girls are usually only interested in me because of *what* I am – Mark Hanson's twin brother. They don't give a damn that I'm more than that. They don't care that I'm my own person, and that even though Mark and I are identical twins I'm mostly completely different to him."

"And I assume Isobel's different."

I nodded. "The complete opposite. She knows that Mark is famous, but for some reason she just doesn't *care*." I drained the remainder of my coffee and set my mug back down on the table. "She doesn't see me as just Mark's twin – she sees *me*. She sees me for who I am. Well, she hasn't seen the real me yet," I amended, "because I haven't figured out the right way to tell her, but I've shown her enough. She's seen the part of me that I show most people once I decide that I can trust them."

"But you don't completely trust her yet."

"Not with everything, no. I mean, there's no doubt in my mind that she wouldn't plaster it all over the Web, but I just..." My voice faltered, and I let the sentence trail away into nothingness.

"You don't know how she would react."

I nodded. "To either." I rubbed my thumb along the underside of my wrist again. It was an unconscious movement, mostly – I often didn't realise I was doing it.

"Well, there's only one way you'll find out. And that's to tell her."

I snapped my gaze up to meet my mother's. "Tell her?" I asked. "But you said-"

"I never said that you *shouldn't* tell anyone, Taylor," she chided gently. "I only said that you should be cautious about *who* you chose to share it with."

"Yeah, because *everybody* wants to hear about how Mark Hanson's freak of a brother tried to kill himself at Christmas," I muttered, not even bothering to keep the sarcasm out of my tone.

"You aren't a freak," Mom said. "Far from it. And the sooner that you realise that, the better." She leaned forward slightly. "Be honest with me here – how does she make you feel?"

"She..." I bit down on my bottom lip, thinking. "She makes me happy. And to be honest, I can't remember the last time I felt that way."

"Do you like her?"

"Somehow, I don't think I should be discussing my love life with my mother."

"Humour me, please."

I drew in a deep breath. "Yeah," I admitted at last. "I do like her. A lot."

"Then that's all I need to know." She gathered our mugs into her hands and stood up. "How about you go and hop in the shower? I'll take you out to lunch once you're done."

"Sounds good to me." I stood up and stretched. "I need to get out anyway. I'm starting to get some serious cabin fever." And with those words I wandered into the bathroom, closing the door behind me.

* * *

"Tell me something that hardly anybody outside your family knows about you."

My gaze slid sideways toward Isobel. She was sitting on the floor with her back against the coffee table. For the last ten minutes she had been working my hair into a series of thin braids, a box of what looked like the rubber bands that Isaac had once worn on his braces at her side. The braids were much like the rat-tail Mark had had when he was younger. I was lying on my back on her and Schuyler's living room couch, relishing in the feeling of my hair being played with. We had just finished watching a particularly exciting episode of *Doctor Who* from my series two DVDs, our usual Thursday night fare being on a month's hiatus.

"Anything?" I asked, my tone measured.

"Anything."

"Okay then." I was quiet as I thought it over. "There are a few things, actually. A few of my friends know about a couple of them, and so does my doctor. The other thing, though...it's just my doctor who knows. I've never even told Schuyler. So I hope you feel special."

"Well, come on then. Spill." I stuck my tongue out at her briefly. "Oh, that's mature. How old are you again?"

"Hush you." I shifted my gaze to the ceiling. "Do you remember I told you that I got sick halfway through my very first year of college?"

"Yeah." I glanced back at Isobel to see that she had furrowed her brow in seeming concentration. "Schuyler said something about that the night of the concert, actually. She told me that you've been sick for seven years."

"It'd be about that long, yeah." I tried to think of the best way to tell her. "Have you ever heard of something called chronic fatigue syndrome?"

"Very vaguely."

“How do I explain this...” I sat myself up and started to stare at the framed painting that was hung on the wall next to the front door. “Okay, well, it’s a lot like having the flu, except without all the sneezing and coughing. The major difference between CFS and the flu is that if you have the flu, then you only feel like shit for one week, maybe two.” I swallowed hard. “If you’ve got CFS, then that’s how you feel every day.”

“And you have it.”

It wasn’t a question, just a very matter-of-fact statement. “Yeah,” I said, nodding. “I first got sick just before Christmas 1999, but it wasn’t until August the next year that I found out why I was so damn sick. Entirely aside from the fact that I didn’t get a chance to see a doctor until then, because as soon as I finished my freshman year of college I went straight on tour with my brothers, there’s a very lengthy elimination process when it comes to making a formal diagnosis. My doctor had to rule out every other possibility first.”

“I’ll bet it was a relief when you finally knew what you had.”

I let out a bark of laughter. “You really have no idea. I knew that there was something seriously wrong with me, but I could never put my finger on what it was exactly. Most people were very adamant that it was all in my head. And when my doctor told me that he had a name for it...it was like this incredible weight had been lifted off my shoulders.” I rubbed my left thumb over the back of my right hand. “My tutors and the professors at college were fantastic about it all – they made an incredible amount of allowances for me so that I could study for my degree and still rest when I needed it. I’m grateful to them for that. Even now it doesn’t really interfere with my life that much, mostly because I freelance. I decide my own hours, and if I need to take a few days off then I’m able to. I really don’t think I’d be able to work otherwise.”

“That explains why you use a wheelchair sometimes.” Isobel nodded toward the kitchen.

“Schuyler showed me a photo of you and Mark from the last Australian tour.”

"It's definitely a huge help. Sometimes I'm too exhausted or in too much pain to even move, let alone get up and walk. At least with my wheelchair, I'm not stuck in bed all the time." I glanced down at Isobel. "That's the one from the Enmore Theatre, right?" I asked, and she nodded. I let out a quiet chuckle. "Those few weeks Down Under were an absolute *disaster*. It was the first time that the four of us had left the US for a tour by ourselves – usually when there's a tour happening our whole family tags along, which means my mom is able to keep an eye on me. She knows my limits almost better than I do. But everyone decided that my brothers were old enough to look after themselves and so could handle going on tour without having our parents along for the ride."

"And let me guess," Isobel said. "They made you tag along too."

I nodded. "Right in one. I'd just graduated from college, so I was exhausted and quite looking forward to crashing out for a few months at home, but they decided I *had* to come along for the ride. And, well..." Here I shrugged a little. "I just never got over the jet lag. I remember very little about that tour because of it. I still wish Mom at least had come with us, because then she would have been able to stop those idiots from dragging me to every single bar that was within a mile radius of whatever hotel it was that we were staying in."

Isobel let out a snort of laughter. "So I take it that you don't get along with them."

"Oh, Mark and I get along well enough. Zac and Isaac, not so much. It was a lot different when we were younger, but these days..." I shrugged. "Mark and I have to get along, anyway. It would make sharing an apartment very uncomfortable if we didn't."

"That's true." Isobel studied me for a little while. "So apart from the wheelchair, how do you manage it?"

"I have an assistance dog – her name's Ratchet. I also take medication." I got up and went over to the front door of the apartment, where I'd left my messenger bag earlier in the evening. A quick dig around unearthed the three pill bottles I'd brought with me, and I went back to the couch.

"Most of the time I'm on these two," I continued, and held the two pill bottles in question out so Isobel could see them. "Elavil for chronic pain and dysthymia, and Lexapro for anxiety. One in the morning with breakfast, the other at night before I go to bed."

"Damn," Isobel said softly.

"Yeah." I set the pill bottles down on the coffee table. "This one, though..." I held the third pill bottle a little gingerly, as if it was going to explode if I shook it. My eyes drifted shut as I tried to figure out how to tell Isobel what she needed to know. "Can you promise me something?"

"Of course."

"What I'm going to tell you, it can't leave this apartment. I'm not kidding when I said only one other person outside of my family knows about it." I opened my eyes and looked straight at Isobel.

"Do I have your word that it'll stay between us?"

Isobel nodded. "I swear it. I value our friendship far too much to tell anyone else."

"Thank you." Here I pushed the left sleeve of my shirt up around my elbow and turned my hand palm up so that Isobel could see the underside of my wrist. "Do you see these scars?"

"Y-yeah," Isobel replied, her voice shaking a little.

"I got them on Christmas Day 2004. It's the only time I've ever deliberately cut myself."

Isobel covered her mouth with a hand. "Please tell me you didn't."

I nodded once. "I tried to kill myself that day. And, well...I very nearly succeeded."

"Is it okay if I ask why?"

"Yeah, it's okay." I shook my sleeve back down where it belonged. "I've had dysthymia since I was almost sixteen – it's a type of mild depression that hangs around for a fucking long time. And for some reason that nobody could work out, it tended to get worse when winter rolled around. My

doctor and I both figured that as long as I kept up with my medication and got plenty of sunlight whenever I could, there wasn't much point to adding any other meds to what I was already taking."

"Except that there was."

"Yeah." I rubbed the back of my neck with my left hand. "That Christmas, we'd all gathered back at home. Being at home with my family usually brought my mood up considerably, but that year was different. I'd hit my lowest point, basically – being sick was wearing on me physically and mentally to the point that I just wanted it to be over and done with." I looked down at my feet. "So while my dad was carving up the turkey I went up to my parents' bathroom and stole one of Dad's razors, then I sneaked down into the garage and found one of the ropes that had been used to tie the Christmas tree to the roof of Isaac's truck a few days earlier. I tied a hangman's knot in one end, tied the other end to one of the beams in the roof of the garage, slit my wrist, and..." I trailed off and swallowed hard.

"And you tried to hang yourself," Isobel finished quietly, and I nodded.

"Mark found me. I lost consciousness just as he managed to cut me down." I toyed with a few stray threads on the hem of my shirt. "I was involuntarily committed for thirty-four days – three to make sure I wasn't going to try and kill myself again, and a further thirty-one while I started taking another antidepressant. Turned out the reason I get more depressed in winter is because I have seasonal affective disorder on top of the dysthymia."

"Bloody hell," Isobel breathed.

"Yep." I managed a small smile. "The last few winters my doctor's added a third medication called Wellbutrin to what I already take year-round, and I stay on it until the middle of March. I don't know if I'll ever be able to make it through winter without being so heavily medicated, because I don't like it much, but it's keeping me alive."

"I never realised," Isobel said softly. She looked at me. "Is that why you live with Mark?"

"It's part of the reason. Both he and Jess keep me safe, because I don't trust myself to. Neither of them keeps a razor in the bathroom at home, and we keep all knives and scissors locked away – I have to ask either Mark or Jess to get a knife out for me if I want to cut something up for dinner. I try not to own anything that I could potentially cut or hang myself with unless it's an absolute necessity. All three of us know that if I go off my meds for any reason there's a good chance I'll try again, and none of us want that to happen."

"So you've never told anyone else up until now?" she asked, and I shook my head. "Why not?"

"Because I'm never sure how anyone will react to the fact that I tried to take my own life," I replied quietly. "One of my greatest fears is that if I *do* tell someone, they'll hate me for it. Most people I've talked to see suicide as the coward's way out, so I don't dare tell them." I felt my hands beginning to shake. "I-I'm not a coward. I was just incredibly desperate for a way out, and that was mine."

"I don't think you're a coward." She put her hands on my knees. "But I really think you should have told someone about this earlier. Keeping it all bottled up inside can't have been easy."

"It hasn't been," I admitted. I rubbed my wrist through my sleeve. "My scars are most of the reason why I don't wear a watch. Keeping them covered with my shirtsleeve is enough – if I kept them hidden under a watch strap I'd be able to ignore them."

"You could wear it on your right wrist."

I shook my head. "I'm right-handed. If I wore a watch on that wrist, I wouldn't be able to write properly. It'd get in the way all the time." I met Isobel's gaze. "You don't hate me, do you?"

"Of course not," she assured me, before studying me for a little while. "Promise me that you'll at least tell Schuyler. If I know her as well as I should by now, she won't judge you."

"I will," I promised. "I just need to figure out the right way to do it."

"Just tell her the same way that you told me. Only you should *probably* make her swear not to go spreading it all over Hanson.net."

"She wouldn't do something like that. Besides, I don't think she even goes on there anymore. She's told me a few times that most Hanson fans annoy the absolute shit out of her, so the less she has to do with them the better. And that means steering well clear of certain websites. Even / I won't touch Hanson.net with a ten foot pole." Isobel snickered at this. "I'm serious. I deal with the fans enough at concerts. I've got no desire whatsoever to deal with them online."

We were both quiet for a little while. Isobel broke the silence that had settled over us like a blanket not long after the clock on the living room wall ticked over to ten-thirty.

"Why don't you stay here tonight?" she asked. "You look all done in, and I don't feel right making you head home this late. I don't mind, and I know Schuyler won't either. I can make you up a bed out here – the couch folds out. It's not the most comfortable bed in the world, but at least you won't be sleeping on the floor."

"You're absolutely sure?" She nodded. "I suppose it can't hurt. I don't have anything I can change into, though. And I can't really sleep in what I'm wearing." I glanced down at what I wore – jeans, long-sleeved shirt with a T-shirt over the top, and socks. My beat-up Airwalk sneakers, which I knew had the laces stitched into place in at least one spot so that I couldn't remove them, sat next to the front door with my messenger bag.

Isobel frowned, before getting to her feet. "Stand up and lift up your shirt for me." I eyed her suspiciously but did as I was told. "My *God* you're skinny," she murmured as she crouched down in front of me. "I think Jack left some clothes here the last time he stayed here," she said, straightening up. "The two of you would be about the same size. I'll go grab them from my room."

"Is there somewhere I can leave my medication?" I asked.

"Next to the kettle in the kitchen. They should be all right there." She gave me a smile and disappeared into her room.

I had just taken my evening medication when Isobel emerged from her bedroom. She tossed a pair of cargo pants at me. "Bathroom's just through there," she informed me as I caught them, nodding back toward a narrow hallway. "I'll make up the couch while you're changing."

I nodded my thanks and went through to the bathroom, shutting the door behind me. As I changed out of my jeans and into my borrowed cargo pants and shucked my T-shirt, I took a quick look around the small, narrow room. The walls above the wall tiles were painted a pale purple, the ceiling, cupboards, shelves and other fixtures were cream, and the tiles on the floor and walls were dark purple. A cream bathmat covered the floor, and a light purple lampshade hid the lightbulb on the ceiling. I hid a small smile – evidently someone in this apartment loved the colour purple.

"Nice bathroom," I said as I re-entered the living room, crossing over to my bag so I could stow my jeans and shirt away.

"Yeah, it's nice enough," Isobel replied. She was sitting on the folded-out couch, and was putting a pillowcase on a pillow as she spoke. "I think Schuyler picked this apartment based on the paint job in there alone. Purple's not my favourite colour, but it's only the one room so it doesn't bother me so much." She gave the pillow a couple of good hard shakes. "But anyway, couch's made up, so whenever you're ready..."

I gave Isobel a tired smile. "Thanks Bel," I said, and she gave me a smile of her own. "...I guess I'll see you in the morning, then."

Isobel nodded. "I will warn you – I get up pretty early, because I have to be at work by eight-thirty. So you know, if you hear someone rattling around in the kitchen at some ungodly hour, it's

probably me. I'll wake you about an hour before I leave so you've got time to get yourself ready to go."

Just before Isobel headed off to bed, I found myself on the receiving end of a tight hug. "I'm glad you're still here, Taylor," she whispered, and kissed me on the cheek. "Good night."

"Night, Bel."

After Isobel had gone to bed, the sound of her bedroom door closing echoing slightly through the quiet, I switched the lights off and climbed into bed, drawing the covers up over myself. I smiled as my eyes drifted closed, with my last thought as I gave myself over to sleep being that, just maybe, February hadn't been so bad after all.

Chapter 5

...another piece of chocolate cake

Isobel

"Hey Jess?"

"Hmm?"

"What were you planning on getting your brothers for their birthday?"

March had seemed to come along far quicker than in earlier years. There were now only ten days left until Mark and Taylor's birthday, and as usual I'd left my shopping until the last minute. This year, however, I had the added complication of not knowing what the hell I was going to buy for my two newest friends.

"Well..." Jessica leaned back in her seat and looked up at the awning above our heads. The two of us were sitting outside a coffee shop on West 59th, having met up for morning tea. Stephen had given me the morning off work, though I had to be at my desk by one-thirty sharp, and Jessica had no classes scheduled until the late afternoon. "Usually I get them each a \$50 iTunes card. If either of them has been eyeing off something in particular in the weeks leading up, then I'll get them that as well. I've bought both of Taylor's presents" here she nudged a plastic bag at her feet "but I still need to get something else for Mark." She eyed me. "Looking for inspiration, I take it."

"You could say that."

"I see. Well, I'll give you a few hints – they're both bookworms. Mark's into crime and historical fiction. John Grisham, for example. Taylor reads a lot of fantasy and science fiction, or at least he does when he can drag himself away from his 'classic literature'." Jessica made air-quotes as she spoke the last two words. "He's a huge Douglas Adams fan, and I think he's read a couple of the

Artemis Fowl books as well. Aside from that...well, Mark is something of a human clotheshorse" I let out a snort of laughter "and Taylor loves anything to do with photography."

I sat back in my seat and picked up my coffee mug. Jessica's words had planted a seed of an idea in my head. "Does Mark like Ian Rankin?" I asked.

"I think he does, yeah."

"Does he have a copy of *The Naming of the Dead*?"

"Not so far as I know." She eyed me. "Why do you want to know?"

"Because I know exactly what I'm getting your brothers for their birthday." I finished my coffee and dug around in my bag for my wallet, taking out a few dollars to leave as a tip. "Come on. We're going to Borders."

Jessica laughed. "Of course we are. Where else?"

It wasn't long before we found ourselves standing in the middle of Borders Columbus Circle, located a few minutes' walk from where we'd had morning tea. "I'm going to go and have a poke around in the CDs," Jessica said, nodding toward the media section of the bookstore. "Meet you outside?"

"Yeah, sure. It shouldn't take me too long to find what I'm after."

I located Mark's present and the first half of Taylor's fairly quickly, tucking my intended purchases under my arm as I headed toward the photography section, whereupon I was met by a veritable wall of books. I let out a small groan – it was going to take me forever to find even just one book that Taylor might have liked. A quick glance at my watch informed me that it was almost eleven-thirty – I had exactly ninety minutes to finish my shopping, get home, have a shower and dress for work. This wasn't even taking into account travel time from home to the *High Fidelity* offices.

I wanted to stay in Stephen's good graces, and so to save myself from spending the rest of the day staring at books I caught the attention of a passing sales assistant.

"I was wondering if you had any recommendations," I said. "A friend of mine is a photographer, and he has a birthday coming up. And, well..." I trailed off, shrugging.

"You have no idea what to get him?" the sales assistant asked. The nametag pinned to her shirt read *Eliza*.

I nodded. "Yeah. Well, not from this section anyway. I'm going to be here all day at this rate." I smiled a little sheepishly.

"Well, let's see now..." Eliza stepped up beside me and studied the rows of books on the shelf before us. "Ah, here we go." She picked out a rather thick hardcover book from halfway along the shelf. "This is one of our best sellers," she said as she handed me the book. The book was titled *New York: 365 Days*. I tried to think of whether or not Taylor already had a copy – a focal point of the twins' apartment was a massive bookshelf that took up an entire wall of their living room and was absolutely crammed with books and magazines of all descriptions. I had perused it a few times, but not often enough to memorise its contents. Not for the first time, I wished I had an eidetic memory – at least then I would have been able to remember if he already had it.

"I'll take it," I decided. "Thanks for your help."

"Anytime," Eliza said with a smile. "Enjoy the rest of your day."

My gifts decided on, I headed up to the sales counter.

Jessica was waiting outside the bookstore when I exited. She looked up from studying the back of a CD case as I sat down next to her. "What'd you get Mark?" I asked.

"Snow Patrol's newest CD," she replied. She showed me the front cover of the CD case, the title of which read *Eyes Open*. "He's sort of obsessed with them." She grinned and slipped the CD into

her bag. "Anyway, I should head home – I need to shower and do at least *part* of my essay before class. I'll see you this weekend, yeah?"

"Oh, definitely."

Jessica went to stand up, but obviously thought better of it. "Bel, do you know a good recipe for Black Forest cake?" she asked. "It's sort of a tradition in our family for my mom to make one for Mark and Taylor's birthday, but I wanted to do it this year. Only problem is my mom won't share her recipe with me."

I chuckled. "I do, actually," I replied. "My mum makes one for my dad's birthday every year. She gave me the recipe she uses before I moved down here. I'll email it to you tonight."

"Thanks, Bel." Jessica gave me a big smile before standing up and heading off.

One-fifteen saw me entering the foyer of the *High Fidelity* offices, a quarter of an hour early. I hadn't been lying when I'd told Taylor that working there was the best job in the world – it truly was. The magazine had a small staff when compared to many publications, with just twenty people on the books, but thanks to that we were a very tightly-knit bunch, almost akin to a family. And because of this, things tended to get done far quicker and more efficiently when compared to a lot of the larger magazines.

"Stephen wanted to see you in his office when you got in," the front desk receptionist, Amaya, informed me as I got within earshot. She looked up from her computer at me. "Seemed to be pretty urgent."

"Was he pissed?" I asked, now slightly worried. Stephen almost never asked to see me in his office – in fact, it was rare that he asked this of any of the magazine's staff. Usually he came to see us at our desks.

"He actually seemed pretty happy," Amaya said with a shrug. "Though with him, pissed and happy can be somewhat the same."

"Yeah, it means that at least one of us has fucked up severely," I said. "Oh well. Best not keep him waiting. I like being in his good books."

I found Stephen's office quickly and rapped on the frosted glass window set into the upper half of the door. The window had *Stephen Schmidt – Editor-In-Chief* on it in large black block letters. "Come in!" he called, and I let myself into the office. "Oh, Isobel, there you are," he said as he looked up from leafing through a thick stack of papers. "Take a seat."

"Amaya said you wanted to see me?" I asked as I seated myself before Stephen's desk.

"I did, yes." He set the papers aside. "Now, I have to say that I was very impressed with your interview and article," he said. "And so were our readers, as it happens – the issue your article was published in was our best-selling this year to date. So to that end, I would like to offer you a new assignment."

"Oh?" Now I was intrigued.

Stephen nodded. "I've been in contact with Hanson again, and as I understand it they will be touring the US and Canada this summer to promote their newest album. They were very happy with your work, and would like to know if you would be interested in joining them on tour."

I sat back slightly in my seat. "Me?" I asked. "Why *me*?"

"You more than proved yourself ready when you took on your most recent assignment, and I believe that you are the best person for the job," Stephen replied. "Your role would be to document the daily goings-on of the tour, and come the end of the tour to turn your tour journal into a travelogue for publication in the magazine."

"That's one hell of an assignment," I commented. "Though honestly, I'd have thought you'd have picked someone like Hayden for this one – he's done travelogues before."

"Hanson didn't request Hayden for this particular travelogue, however. They *specifically* asked for you." Stephen leaned forward slightly. "This would make a fantastic addition to your portfolio," he said. "Should you choose to work for another publication one day, they would likely look very favourably on your work here."

"Can I take some time to think about it?" I asked.

"Yes, of course. Oh, and before you head to work, I have a small request to ask of you." He picked up a white envelope that had *Taylor Hanson – 78th Street Productions* typed on the front. "Are you by any chance in contact with Hanson's photographer?"

I nodded. "We're friends. I'll probably be seeing him later this week."

"Excellent. Would you be able to pass this on to him?" He handed me the envelope. "I don't normally do this, but we will soon be short a photographer."

"So Cate took the job, then?" I asked. The buzz around the offices lately was that Lonely Planet had offered one of our photographers quite a bit of money to leave *High Fidelity* and join the world-renowned travel company. It seemed that she had accepted the new position.

"She did," Stephen confirmed. "I was extremely impressed with his work, and I'd like to offer him the position before I place an advertisement."

I nodded and rose from my seat. "I'll see that he gets it," I said.

The four hours I spent at work that afternoon were nothing short of torture. My attention, which was supposed to be focused on writing a feature article about New York City's independent music scene, kept drifting toward the envelope that Stephen had given me. I had propped it against a jar of pens that I kept on my desk so that I didn't forget it when I left for home, and it took all of my self-control not to go ripping it open.

When five-thirty rolled around, I saved my work and shut down my computer, snatching up the envelope containing Taylor's job offer and slipping it into my bag as I left my desk. My phone rang just as I stepped up to the lift just outside the foyer and punched the down button. Checking the screen just before I answered, I saw that it was Schuyler calling.

"Hey Skya," I answered, keeping one eye on the floor indicator above the lift doors as I spoke.

"Hey Bel. Where are you?"

"I just finished work," I replied. The lift doors opened and I stepped into the car, pressing the button for the ground floor. "I need to make a detour to Mark and Taylor's apartment before I come home, though."

"Any reason in particular?" Schuyler asked.

"Stephen asked me to give something to Taylor. Figured I might as well do it on my way home."

"Ah, okay. You feel like Chinese takeout for dinner?"

"Yeah, sounds good to me."

"Sweet. I'll grab some on my way home."

"Okay. See you soon." We hung up, and I slipped my phone back into my pocket.

From work it took me about twenty minutes to walk uptown to the Upper West Side, and from there to the street that Mark, Taylor and Jessica called home. The three of them lived about halfway along West 72nd, on the eighth floor of an apartment complex. I had no idea if anyone would even be home or awake – I knew that Mark was currently in Europe and that Jessica was probably still in class, so I had decided during my walk that rather than knocking and potentially waking Taylor up, I would slip the envelope through the gap beneath the front door. This I did just as soon as I had arrived at the apartment and scribbled out a quick note in my notebook.

Hi Taylor,

Didn't want to wake you if you were sleeping, so I thought it'd be better to just slip this under your front door. :) Stephen asked me to pass it along to you. I'll see you this weekend.

Isobel

My message written, I tore the page from my notebook and folded it around the envelope, scrawled Taylor's name on the page, and slipped it beneath the door. All I could really do now was wait.

* * *

Good Charlotte played at maximum volume assaulted my eardrums as Jessica let Schuyler and I into the apartment on the afternoon of the fourteenth. She had a liberal dusting of what looked like flour from head to toe. "Mark and Taylor got into a flour fight," she explained when Schuyler raised an eyebrow at her. "And as usual, I got caught in the middle." She grinned. "I got Mark something good with the whipped cream, though. You should've seen his hair – it looked a fright."

"So they're home, then?" I asked as I shed my jacket and hung it up on the coat hooks next to the front door. Schuyler followed my lead, and we both dropped our bags beneath our jackets.

"Yeah, they got back about five hours ago," Jessica replied. "Gave Taylor the fright of the century when Mark leapt on top of him. That's what started the whole flour fight in the first place – Taylor was still asleep. He doesn't take kindly to being woken up by annoying twin brothers, especially on his birthday."

"So where's everyone else?" Schuyler asked.

"Out," Jessica replied. "Picking up dinner because there's hardly anything in the kitchen, getting the alcohol for tonight, that sort of thing." She looked down at herself. "I need to have a shower. Hopefully Taylor didn't use up the rest of the hot water." She flicked her gaze to me. "Speaking

of, Taylor wanted to talk to you. He didn't say what about, but I figured you'd have some sort of idea. He's in his room."

"Yeah, my editor offered him a job with *High Fidelity*," I replied. "I think he went to an interview on Monday for it – he was going to let me know today how things went."

I went across to what I knew to be Taylor's bedroom door – a large black-and-white U2 poster had pride of place, one that advertised their album *How To Dismantle An Atomic Bomb*, and a sign reading *WHEELCHAIR PARKING ONLY: ALL OTHER VEHICLES WILL BE TOWED* had been tacked up just above the doorhandle. I let out a quiet chuckle before knocking quietly on the door. When I heard no answering voice, I pushed down on the doorhandle and eased the door inwards.

Taylor's bedroom looked much like the rest of the apartment – light and airy, with a hardwood floor, pale blue walls and a white ceiling. A large window that provided a breathtaking view of Central Park took up most of the opposite wall. The blind on the window had been rolled halfway up, and a set of low shelves painted bright blue sat against the wall beneath. Much like the shelves out in the living room, these ones were crammed with books, magazines and photo albums. The top of the shelves held various objects – his SLR camera, a stack of *Artemis Fowl* books, and a framed photo of Taylor with an older woman I guessed to be his mother. A guitar with a dark brown woven leather strap was propped against the left side of the shelves.

I looked to my right. Taking up a good half of that wall was a desk that had a laptop computer, a glass jar filled with pens and pencils, a leather-bound book that looked like a journal and another framed photograph, this one of a teenaged Taylor holding a bundle of pink blankets in his arms, set atop it. In a large frame on the wall above the desk were four pages from a magazine, and as I stepped closer I saw that the pages were my article and Taylor's photographs. I felt my face heat up a little at the sight – I wasn't used to seeing my work on display. Next to the desk was a wooden chest of drawers that had a lamp and a mini stereo system on top, with what I recognised as Taylor's wheelchair folded and propped against the wall alongside.

I then looked to my left to see Taylor sprawled out on his front on his unmade bed, clad only in jeans and a pair of socks, face turned toward his left. I could clearly hear him snoring softly, his back rising and falling as he breathed, hair splayed around his head. If this had been anyone else who had fallen asleep halfway through getting dressed I would have pounced on them and shaken them awake, but he had a valid excuse. Instead, I stepped a little closer to his bed and took a look at what was on his night table, which sat to the left of his bed – a small lamp, digital clock radio, a small spiral notepad with a black ballpoint pen sitting on top, his iPod and a set of earphones, a glass half-filled with water, three pill bottles, his cell phone and a hard-shelled glasses case. Next to his night table was a set of shelves that were packed with CDs. I stepped closer to the shelves and inspected his collection – he had CDs by AC/DC, Muse, U2, Eve 6, 3 Doors Down, Snow Patrol, Gin Blossoms, The Black Crowes, Billy Joel and Rufus Wainwright, along with quite a few artists I had never heard of before. His messenger bag was hanging by its shoulder strap from the right bedpost of his bed.

I crouched down at the side of Taylor's bed and ran a finger down his bare back. It was my favourite way to wake up my relatives and friends, providing they weren't sleeping too deeply. I bit my bottom lip as I felt each of the vertebrae in his spine standing out in sharp relief.

"Issie?" he mumbled.

I froze, my hand hovering just above the waistband of Taylor's jeans. "What did you call me?" I asked in a low voice.

He opened his eyes and squinted at me. "I called you 'Issie'," he said, sounding slightly more awake. He frowned. "You don't like it?"

"It's not that I don't *like* it," I replied. "It's just...that's what my grandmother used to call me when I was little. She died about thirteen years ago now, so I haven't been called 'Issie' in a very long time. You just shocked me, that's all."

"Oh, okay." He pushed himself upright and started running his fingers through his hair, letting out an occasional hiss of what seemed like frustration as he hit a knot or tangle. "I know what you're thinking," he said as he worked at untangling a particularly dense snarl. He looked at me through a curtain of hair. "I know I'm a little..." He trailed off and shrugged.

"Skinny?"

"Yeah, that. I blame genetics, personally – I've pretty much always been this way." He let out another hiss as his fingers hit yet another tangle of hair. "It's also a side-effect of one of my meds. Pain in the ass, but that particular medication works so I just put up with it."

"So how did the interview go?" I asked, deciding to change the subject.

"I think it went all right. He seemed to be impressed with my portfolio, so I'm taking that as a good sign. He told me he'd call sometime today to let me know if I had the job."

As he finished speaking, his cell phone rang. I recognised the ringtone as the intro of *Thunderstruck* by AC/DC. "That's probably him now." He reached across to his night table and snatched his phone up. "78th Street Productions, this is Taylor Hanson speaking," he said to answer the call. "Oh, hi Stephen...uh-huh...y-you what?" His gaze slid across to me, and I held up a hand to show that I had my fingers crossed. "Well, yeah, of course I accept!...yeah, I can definitely be there." He reached over and grabbed his notepad and pen, flipped the notepad open to an empty page, uncapped the pen and started scribbling fast. "Uh-huh...uh-huh...yep, I got it. I'll see you then. I look forward to working with you. Bye."

He hung up and looked at me, his eyes filled with something akin to wonder. "I got the job," he said, a mile-wide smile on his face. "I have to go in next Thursday to fill in and sign a few forms, but once that's done I'll officially be on the books. This is just..." He laughed. "It's amazing."

"It is," I agreed. "Not a bad birthday present, I must say."

"I know what would be an even better present," he said.

"Oh?" I raised an eyebrow. "And what would that be?"

"Well, the thing is..." He raked a hand through his hair. "I like you, Isobel. I like you a lot. You...well, you make me happy, and I haven't felt like that in a long time. Meeting you was probably the best thing to happen to me in years. And I was wondering if you'd like to make things official."

I sat down next to Taylor. "You're asking me to be your girlfriend?" I asked, barely daring to believe what he was saying.

He nodded. "If you'll have me."

If you'll have me. Those four little words said so much, possibly more than he meant them to. "Of course I'll have you," I told him. By saying that I knew I was accepting him for who he was, all of his flaws, scars and illnesses included, but I didn't care. I liked him the way he was – in my eyes, they were what made him perfect.

I knew this was the right answer when Taylor pulled me closer and wrapped his arms around me. I responded in kind, feeling tiny shivers race up and down my back and the hairs on the nape of my neck stand on end as we kissed, my eyes drifting closed as I lost myself in the moment. *This is what love feels like*, I thought in wonder.

I left the room while Taylor finished getting dressed, stepping right into a maelstrom of noise. Good Charlotte had faded out, replaced by The Rasmus. Over the music I could hear Schuyler and Jessica talking in the kitchen, the sound of racecars drifting out of the speakers of the living room TV set, and loud cursing that sounded as if it came from Zac – evidently his game was frustrating him.

The apartment door opened just as The Rasmus segued straight into Coldplay, and in walked Isaac, Mark and four people that I didn't know – three women, and a man that looked very much like an older version of Mark and Taylor. I recognised one of them, an older woman with incredibly

long blonde hair, from one of the photographs in Taylor's room. Isaac and Mark each carried a stack of pizza boxes.

"Mom! Dad!" I heard Taylor call out, and I looked back over my shoulder. He had emerged from his room at last, having pulled on a black T-shirt with an intricate silver design on the front. I felt his hand on my back as he guided me through the living room toward the front door. The other two women of the group had gone off into the kitchen to join Jessica and Schuyler, Isaac and Mark following them. "Issie, I want you to meet my parents, Diana and Walker," Taylor said. "Mom, Dad, this is my girlfriend Isobel Reynolds."

"It's nice to meet you both," I said, suddenly shy.

"So you're the girl that has stolen my son's heart," Diana said. I felt a blush creep across my face as she said this.

"I guess I am," I said quietly. I swallowed hard. "If I can be honest...he's stolen mine too."

The party went into high gear not long afterward. After we'd all demolished the pizzas that Isaac and Mark had brought with them, Mark and Taylor set about opening their birthday presents. I was rewarded with grins and simultaneous kisses on the cheek when they unwrapped my gifts to them, and I knew I'd picked well. Taylor in particular seemed to be very pleased – along with the book of New York photographs, I'd given him a copy of the newest instalment in the *Artemis Fowl* series, *The Lost Colony*.

Once the reams of wrapping paper had been tidied away the lights were dimmed, heralding the entrance into the living room of Jessica and Schuyler. Between them they carried a Black Forest cake that looked large enough to feed a small army. Twenty-four candles were dotted around the cake, their flickering flames casting fluttering shadows across the living room walls. Mark took the first turn at blowing out the candles, after which Taylor had a shot. After Taylor had blown the candles out, the lights were raised again and the cake was cut, with Schuyler and Jessica

distributing the pieces. I let out a small groan of pleasure as I bit into my piece of cake – it tasted divine, possibly on par with my mother's.

"Mark and I are going to head out," Schuyler told me as she gathered up her things. The party had wound down at around ten-thirty, with Isaac, Zac and their girlfriends – they had been introduced to me as Alli and Isla – leaving first. Their parents weren't too far behind. "We thought you and Tay might want some privacy to get to know each other a bit better." She cocked an eyebrow at me and grinned. "And before you ask, Jess is heading out too. She's going to stay the night at her boyfriend's apartment."

It wasn't long before Taylor and I were alone. He was lying on the living room couch, his head in my lap and eyes closed, the ghost of a smile on his lips as I played with his hair. Just after March fourteenth became the fifteenth, he broke the comfortable silence that we had fallen into.

"You know, I've been thinking..." He opened his eyes and looked right up at me. "With this new job, and my freelancing on the side, I'm actually going to have enough money to get my own place." His hand found mine. "Issie, after this summer, would you like to move in with me?"

I didn't even have to think about my answer. The fact of the matter was, we practically lived together already. We were both in the habit of leaving various belongings at one another's apartments – we each kept a toothbrush in the other's bathroom, a set of pyjamas and a change of clothes in each other's bedrooms, and recently each of our crockery cupboards had gained a new addition in the form of each other's coffee mugs. Taylor kept a bright green mug with frogs all over it in my kitchen, and I had left a blue-and-yellow striped mug in his. Getting an apartment together would make it official.

"I'd love to," I replied.

My answer produced a wide grin, and he sat himself up before kissing me for the second time that night. He tasted of the chocolate, cherries and cream from his and Mark's birthday cake, and I decided I wanted another piece.

"I'm going to get myself some more cake," I said, standing up. "You want some?"

"I'd rather have you," he replied cheekily. I pulled a face at him and headed into the kitchen.

We headed to bed at around one in the morning. Taylor had a doctor's appointment at ten-thirty, so staying up until all hours was completely out of the question. I changed into the pyjamas I kept at his place in the bathroom, still not quite ready for him to see me in my underwear – long, pale blue pyjama pants with dark blue polka dots, and a black T-shirt. And for the first time I fell asleep in Taylor's embrace, the sound of his heartbeat in my ear sending me off to the Land of Nod almost as soon as my eyes drifted closed.

Chapter 6

...a simple man with a heart of gold

Taylor

I've never been much of a morning person. This is just one way of many in which Mark and I are nothing alike – my twin lives for them, which has served him well in his career. Being a musician inevitably means a lot of early mornings.

On the morning of April second, I knew I was going to have to learn to like them.

I burrowed even further beneath my bedspread as my alarm clock went off, the harsh and discordant beeping reverberating around my bedroom. It was too early by far for any decent person to be awake. I snaked a hand out into the open and felt around for the snooze button, jabbing it when I had located it. Satisfied that I'd headed off fully waking up for at least another ten minutes, I settled back down to sleep.

At least, that was the plan. As soon as I felt myself drifting off, something about the size and weight of Ratchet landed on my back and started pawing at my shoulders. Seconds later my bedspread was torn off of me, and I sucked in a sharp breath as the cold air hit my bare back.

"Please tell me you don't sleep naked," pleaded a pained voice that sounded suspiciously like Jessica's.

"I can if you'd like me to," I mumbled, still half-asleep. It hit me barely half a second later that this was my *sister* who I'd said that to.

"No thanks," my sister replied, sounding vaguely disgusted. "Come on, you need to get up. Bel's out in the living room."

That woke me up. "What?" I asked, twisting around so that I could see my sister. "She's *here*?"

"Yes, she is," Jessica said, now sounding very irritated. "You have work today in case you had forgotten – she's here to pick you up."

"Oh Jesus Christ," I mumbled. "It's too early for this..."

"It is not. It's only half past seven. Now come on, get up or you'll be late. There's coffee in the kitchen if you want it."

I kicked Jessica out so I could get dressed, settling on the clothes I'd worn to my interview – black pants, light blue long-sleeved shirt, and black shoes. It was a far cry from my usual work attire of jeans, sneakers and the first T-shirt that I pulled out of my hamper of clean laundry of a morning. I felt my mouth twist into a wry smile – I'd never thought I'd actually *have* a steady job, not when I was sick most of the time. I was fairly sure that most employers didn't look very kindly on people who had to take a few days off at the drop of a hat. Stephen, evidently, wasn't most employers.

I looked back over at my bed as I buttoned my shirt and tucked it into my pants. Ratchet lay curled up in my blankets, looking expectantly over at me. "Sorry Ratch," I said apologetically. "I have to go to work – Jess'll probably take you for a walk, though." I quickly zipped and buttoned up, and started rummaging around in my top drawer for a belt.

Once I had a belt on, had quickly run my brush through my hair and tied it back, and had grabbed everything I was sure I'd need, it was almost a quarter to eight. I still wasn't completely awake and was essentially operating on autopilot. I wouldn't feel at all like myself until I had my medication and approximately half of Colombia's yearly coffee exports circulating through my system.

Isobel and Jessica were sitting on the living room couch when I emerged from my room and headed to the kitchen, Ratchet at my heels. There were five things that needed to be done before I left for work, in no particular order – Ratchet needed to be fed and watered, I needed to take my medication, I needed to have my breakfast, and I needed to find something to put my morning

coffee in. Feeding Ratchet, refilling her water bowl and taking my medication was simple enough – I dropped a handful of leftover chicken into her bowl, and while she was eating I picked up her water bowl and filled it from the tap. I followed this in short order with a glass from the draining rack, filling it while the tap was still running.

“*Taylor!* Move your ass! You’re going to be late!”

Jessica’s yell of what sounded like annoyance almost made me choke on my mouthful of water. Rather than yell back, I flipped her the bird with one hand while I drained my glass, having already taken my medication. She couldn’t see me making that particular little gesture through the wall, but it made me smile anyway.

Isobel looked up from her conversation with Jessica as I walked into the living room, carrying my travel mug by its lid. It was full of piping hot black-as-pitch coffee, having just filled it from the pot that I could only assume had been brewed by Jessica. Mark had been back home in Tulsa for a couple of weeks now – with little more than a month left until May sixth, preparations for the tenth anniversary acoustic recording of *Middle Of Nowhere* had well and truly shifted into high gear. Sometimes I couldn’t believe it had already been ten years since the lives of everyone in my family had been changed so drastically. I was thankful for it, though – even though I was mistaken for Mark on a disconcertingly regular basis, I knew that otherwise Isobel and I would likely never have met.

“Ready to go?” Isobel asked as she stood up. She smoothed creases out of her black skirt once she was on her feet, and straightened the sleeves of her pale pink blouse.

“Ready as anyone can be for their first day of work,” I replied.

“Indeed.” Isobel gave me a smile. “Well, come on then.”

As Isobel drove us to work in her bright red Volkswagen Beetle, she gave me a quick rundown of who she worked with.

"There are twenty of us, basically. We have three departments – Editorial, Advertising, and Design. I work in Editorial, and you'll likely be part of the Design department." She pulled to a stop at a red light. "Each department except for Advertising has six of us working in it – advertising has five. We have a receptionist, Amaya – you'll meet her when we get there – Stephen's our editor, and he also has a personal assistant." The light turned green, and she drove forward. "Stephen will probably introduce you to everyone once we get there, but don't worry if you can't remember their names right off the bat. Everyone'll understand, and they'll probably go out of their way to help you out."

We arrived at *High Fidelity* at about twenty past eight, Isobel parking her car in the underground car park beneath the building that the magazine's offices were housed in before we headed upstairs. "I don't usually drive to work, mostly because it's such a pain in the arse," she told me as we took the lift up to the sixth floor. "Usually I take the subway out from Queens – I can make the trip from my stop a few blocks away in about five minutes if I run for it."

"Doesn't that cost you a lot of money in fares?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I buy a 30-day MetroCard at the beginning of every month. It ends up paying for itself in the end. This way at least, I don't have to make sure I have change for my fare every morning, and I don't have to worry more than once a month about whether the vending machine's going to eat my debit card." I snickered at this last bit, and she gave me something of a dirty look. "It happens. Mum had hers eaten by an ATM once. So you'll have to excuse me for being cautious."

"You're excused," I said. This time she eyed me, as if I were a specimen underneath her magnifying glass, before turning her attention back to the row of numbers above the lift doors.

Almost as soon as we stepped out of the lift, I saw a young red-haired woman get up from behind a desk and dash out into the foyer. "Excuse me, are you-" she started to say, before stopping short. "I'm sorry, I thought you were someone else," she finished.

"Mark Hanson, right?" Isobel asked, and the woman nodded. Isobel chuckled. "Might've known. Taylor, this is Amaya Forbes, our receptionist and resident Mark Hanson stalker." Here Amaya scowled at Isobel. "Amaya, this is Taylor Hanson, our new photographer."

Amaya tilted her head to one side. "Taylor Hanson, of 78th Street Productions?" she asked.

"That's me," I replied.

"*Oh!*" she exclaimed, sounding excited again. "I have to say, I love your work – I have one of your prints on the wall of my living room."

"Which one?" I asked.

"*Saturday In The Park*, I think."

I couldn't help but grin as Amaya named the very first print I had ever sold, barely two months after starting out as a freelancer. I'd taken it on a sunny Saturday morning in Central Park, during the middle of summer. That first sale had been conclusive proof that spending more than half a decade at college, even despite my health issues, had been well worth the time, money and effort.

"We should get in there before Stephen fires both of us," Isobel said.

"Yeah, I should get back to work too," Amaya agreed. "It was great to meet you, Taylor."

"Likewise," I agreed. Almost as an afterthought, I added, "There's a pretty good reason why you mistook me for Mark, by the way."

Amaya raised one eyebrow. "Oh really?"

I nodded. "Mark and I are brothers. He's my identical twin." And with that parting shot, I followed Isobel into the offices proper. Isobel arrowed off to the left almost immediately, leaving me to head through to Stephen's office. It was easy enough to find, as I knew he was the only person working here who actually *had* an office, and within minutes I was knocking on his door.

"Come in," he called, and I let myself in. He looked up from his computer and motioned for me to close the door. "Excellent, you're here early."

"I am?"

Stephen nodded. "About five minutes early. I assume that Isobel is already at her desk?"

"I think that's where she was headed when we got here."

"Good, good." He gestured to the chair before his desk. "Take a seat – I'd like to discuss your first assignment."

I already had an assignment? That had to be a first. "What would this assignment entail?" I asked as I seated myself, immediately putting on a professional demeanour.

"As I understand it, you travel with your brothers during their summer tours. Would I be right?"

"I do, yes." That was the truth – during touring cycles, at the beginning of May I cleared my calendar and didn't take any new freelance jobs until September at the earliest. Normally that would be a financial disaster, as not taking on any new work meant that I didn't have money coming in, but I did get paid while I was on tour – my brothers budgeted it into their expenses. "I'm their official tour photographer."

"What I propose is this." He leaned forward slightly. "Isobel has already signed on to go on tour and to keep a tour diary that, upon her return, she will turn into a travelogue of sorts. I would like you to team up with her and act as not only Hanson's tour photographer, but also as tour photographer for the magazine. I will pay you your freelance rates along with what you would normally earn working here day-to-day, and I am prepared to reimburse you for any expenses you might incur along the way."

"Would I be able to think it over for a few days?"

"Oh, of course. But I will need an answer by next Wednesday."

I nodded. "I'll let you know by Friday, definitely."

"Excellent." Stephen stood up. "Come with me, and I'll introduce you to your fellow photographers and the rest of the Design department. They've been looking forward to meeting you."

I think I could get used to this, I thought as Stephen introduced me to Wayne and Rhian, my fellow photographers, and to the other three members of the design department. Upon spotting the espresso machine that sat on the counter in the kitchenette that took up a corner of our third of the premises, I grinned happily. Scratch 'think' – I *knew* I could get used to it. Getting paid an incredible amount of money to do what I loved, working in the same place as my girlfriend, and free coffee? Isobel was right. This really *was* the best job in the world.

* * *

Isobel's birthday, the seventeenth of April, fell on a Tuesday that year. The sensible thing to do here would probably have been to wait until the following weekend to celebrate, but nobody ever said I was a sensible person. So it was that afternoon after work that I drove out to Queens, a cooler bag and a brown paper shopping bag of supplies for the evening sitting on the front passenger seat of my BMW.

Isobel opened the door to her apartment barely a minute after I had rung the doorbell, still dressed in her work clothes. Her hazel eyes lit up as soon as she registered that I stood on her doorstep, and she grinned when I lifted the bottle of red wine I had brought with me to the level of my shoulder.

"You are so good to me," she said happily. "I knew there was a reason I was dating you." As soon as I was inside she took the bottle from my hand and dashed off into the kitchen. "What's in there?" she asked as she returned to the living room, indicating the shopping bag that I held in my left hand.

"It's a surprise," I replied. She tried to peek inside the bag, but I snatched it away. "Ah ah ah," I scolded. "I said it was a surprise!"

"I saw pasta in there," she said, sounding suspicious. She frowned. "You're not cooking tonight, are you?"

I let out a sigh of mock disappointment. "You don't like my cooking?"

"When have I ever tried your cooking?"

"Last Monday, when I brought chicken cacciatore for my lunch – you sneaked a bit of it when you thought I wasn't looking, and I *distinctly* recall that you liked it. I'd cooked that the night before for mine and Jess' dinner."

"Oh!" She seemed to brighten at this. "Now see, that's something else I love about you. You can cook, *and* you actually pitch in around the kitchen. My dad and my brothers can cook, but they refuse to help my mum when she's fixing dinner. Or in the case of Martin, his wife." She snorted. "Lazy bastards."

"Yeah, well, Jess would go on strike if I didn't do either." I shook my shopping bag slightly, before nodding toward the cooler bag I'd slung the strap of over one shoulder. "So can I put this in the kitchen?" I asked. "It's just that I need to put some of it in the refrigerator – it's not going to stay cold forever."

"Yeah, sure." As I headed through into the kitchen, Isobel followed along close behind. "So Mark's still in Tulsa?" she asked as I set the shopping bag on the kitchen bench. The cooler bag followed it in short order.

"Yeah, all three of them are." I unzipped the cooler bag and took out a Tupperware container that was filled with meatballs. "They're doing the acoustic recording two weeks from Sunday, so they're having to do some serious work to get ready for it."

"Why May 6?" Isobel asked as I kept taking items from the cooler bag.

"Tenth anniversary of the release of *Middle Of Nowhere*," I replied.

"Oh, I see. That makes sense, actually." She came up beside me. "Are you heading down there for it?"

"I was planning on it, yeah." I gave her a smile and took a block of Parmesan cheese out of the cooler bag. "And before you ask, yes you're invited – if you think you can handle a couple hundred screaming women, that is."

"Course I can handle them. I'm not helpless. And it's not as if I'm dating either of your brothers anyway – they're not going to go after me."

"True," I conceded. "Here's the thing though." I put the empty cooler bag down on the floor and started unpacking the shopping bag. "It doesn't matter that it's been a decade already, and therefore they should know better, but people are always confusing Mark and I for each other. Therefore, they often think that Schuyler is my girlfriend. And Hanson fans...well, they can be vicious. Some of them don't like the fact that my brothers have girlfriends that aren't *them*, for want of a better word. Isla and Alli have both received their fair share of abuse. Schuyler's escaped it so far, but it's really only a matter of time." I took out a block of dark chocolate from the shopping bag. "All I'm saying is that you need to be on your guard – it's a dangerous business, dating any of us."

"I'll keep that in mind." She surveyed the food that I'd set out on the bench. "So you want me to clear out?"

"If you want it all to be a surprise, yeah. I just need to know something before I kick you out – are you allergic to anything?"

"Garlic," she replied. "It's not a life-threatening allergy or anything, like I won't go into anaphylactic shock if I eat it, but I break out in one hell of a rash."

"I don't cook with garlic anyway – Jess is allergic as well. Any other allergies?"

"Nothing food-related."

"Good." I waved her off out of the kitchen and set about the important task of cooking dinner.

At exactly six-thirty, I had dinner on the table. I'd whipped up two huge bowls of spaghetti and meatballs, each bowl topped off with a liberal handful of Parmesan cheese. Beside each bowl was a glass of the wine I'd brought with me. I had a heatproof glass bowl of cream and dark chocolate on a low heat on the kitchen stove, nestled inside a large saucepan of boiling water. In the refrigerator I'd stowed a bowl of strawberries, banana slices, blueberries and pitted cherries, and had left an unopened bag of marshmallows on the kitchen bench. And next to what I intended as Isobel's place at the table was a neatly-wrapped parcel and a white envelope.

"Where did you learn to cook like this?" Isobel asked as we seated ourselves at the table. "It looks amazing."

"From my mom," I replied with a smile. "When it became clear to her that I had very little interest in teaming up with my brothers to make music, she decided to teach me to cook. It more than paid off in the end, because it meant I didn't starve when I was at college." I indicated the parcel.

"But open that before you start eating."

"Okay..." Isobel put her fork down and started removing the wrapping paper. "Holy shit," she whispered when the paper revealed a dark grey cardboard box that had a picture of a white iPod on the lid. "You got me an iPod?"

I nodded. "I figured that seeing as you're coming on tour this summer, you might want something to listen to your music with. It can get pretty boring on the bus when you've got nothing to do except look out the windows."

She gave me a wide smile. "Thanks, Tay," she said. "I love it."

"You're welcome, Issie." I reached across the table and tapped the envelope. "Open that next."

She did so, and her mouth dropped open when she extracted two tickets from the envelope. "Oh my God..." She looked up at me. "Tickets to *Rent*?" she asked, sounding a little stunned.

"It's not at the Nederlander," I said, "but I thought that you and me could go out one night during the tour and see it together. Schuyler told me that you've never actually seen the stage show, so..." I shrugged.

"You are incredible," Isobel said softly. "How the hell did I get so lucky?"

"You were in the right place at the right time, I suppose," I replied. "Isn't that how these things usually happen?"

"Oh, I suppose you're right," Isobel agreed. She slipped the tickets back into their envelope, got up from her seat, and came around to where I sat. "I'll say it again – you are incredible," she said, seconds before she kissed me.

"And what about my cooking?" I asked as we broke apart.

"Hush, I'm getting to that." She resumed her seat and speared a meatball with her fork. "And so's your cooking," she informed me once she had eaten it. "I'll have to thank your mum – she taught you well."

Once we had finished eating I took our silverware, glasses and empty bowls into the kitchen, rinsing them out before placing them in the dishwasher. As I worked I sang part of a song I'd heard on the radio a few nights earlier.

"He's a stranger to some and a vision to none...he can never get enough, get enough of the one... for a fortune he'd quit but it's hard to admit...how it ends and begins...on his face is a map of the world...a map of the world...on his face is a map of the world...a map of the world..."

I broke off singing as I heard footsteps coming up behind me. "I didn't know you could sing," Isobel said as I closed the dishwasher and switched it on.

"Most people don't," I said with a shrug. "I don't exactly advertise it."

"Well, you should." She leaned against my back, wrapped her arms around me and rested her chin on my right shoulder. "You have a very good voice. I swear I had a chill run down my spine when I heard it just then." She hummed tunelessly for a few moments. "You sound very much like Mark when you sing, but your voice is a lot more powerful. Like you put your all into it, if you get where I'm coming from. When you sing, you sound as if it's the last thing you'll ever do, so you put an incredible amount of passion into it. I can honestly say I've never heard anything like it before."

Almost in response, I drew Isobel around to stand in front of me and started to sing again, spinning her around the kitchen while I did so. "So raise your candles high...'cause if you don't we could stay black against the night...oh raise them higher again...'cause if you do we could stay dry against the rain..."

"I didn't know you liked that song," Isobel said as I turned to check on what was to be our dessert.

"I don't," I replied. I picked up the wooden spoon I'd used earlier and stirred the contents of the bowl. "That's actually all I know of it." I tapped the spoon against the rim of the bowl and then held it out to Isobel. "Taste this for me, will you?"

She did so, and let out a quiet groan of what sounded like delight. "Oh God, that is so *good*," she murmured. "What is it?"

"Ever had chocolate fondue?" I asked, and she shook her head. "Well, actually, you just did." I dropped the spoon in the sink. "I think it's ready, judging by your reaction." I turned the burner

off and grabbed a nearby teatowel, wrapping it around my hands so I could lift the bowl out of the saucepan without burning my fingers. "There's a bowl of fruit on the middle shelf in the refrigerator, if you could grab it for me," I said as I placed the bowl of chocolate sauce on a chopping board and started hunting around in the kitchen drawers for a couple of metal skewers. "I'll take the chocolate and the marshmallows into the living room if you take the fruit."

We spent the rest of the evening enjoying one another's company, telling stories and listening to classical music on Isobel and Schuyler's stereo. The fruit, marshmallows and chocolate sauce slowly dwindled until there were only a few blueberries left, along with a small handful of marshmallows.

"So tell me," I said as the clock on the living room wall ticked over to ten-thirty. "Have you had a good birthday?"

She looked up at me from where she lay on her back, her head in my lap. "The best," she replied with a smile. "And it's all thanks to you." She fished around for a marshmallow and reached up to put it in my mouth.

"Well, I wanted to make it special," I said once I'd finished my marshmallow. "Especially considering that Saturday marked a month since we started dating. And before you say a word, I didn't forget. It just made sense in my head to combine our one-month anniversary and your birthday." I leaned down and kissed her nose. "Happy anniversary, Issie."

Isobel smiled, and she sat herself up, twisting around to face me. I automatically pulled her into a tight embrace. "Happy anniversary, Taylor," she whispered.

Chapter 7

I just wanna keep my promises to you

Isobel

The next four weeks passed by almost in a blur. By the time I could slow down long enough to look at a calendar, it was the middle of May. The beginning of the month had seen Taylor and I travelling down to Oklahoma so that we could be present at the recording of *Middle Of Nowhere Acoustic* – taking into account the popularity of the February 2 issue of *High Fidelity*, Stephen had seen it as the perfect opportunity to get a retrospective written about the ten-year journey Hanson had taken from 1997 to get to where they were now, in 2007. So it hadn't all been fun and games – we'd had to work as well. The retrospective was due to be published in the May 18 issue of the magazine.

And now, it was late in the morning of the fifteenth of May. If it were a normal Tuesday, I would have been at my desk at work – but to be honest, the day before the tour was due to kick off was anything but normal. So rather than tapping away at the keyboard of my work computer and sneaking onto Facebook when I was sure Stephen wasn't looking, I was staring at my wide open and near-to-overflowing suitcase.

The tour was to last slightly more than four months, from the sixteenth of May until the twenty-first of September. In those four months we would be visiting every state in the United States except for Alaska and Hawaii, before traversing the lower Canadian provinces. While most of us would be returning to New York City after the North American tour concluded, Taylor's brothers would be continuing directly on to Australia and New Zealand for a month-long tour. *The Walk* was due for simultaneous release in both countries on October first, with *Blue Sky* set to be released three weeks beforehand as the first single. They were due to return to the States five days before the planned Halloween concert, their last for the year.

My BlackBerry rang just as I started to make an attempt at zipping up my suitcase. I sighed and reached back to my night table, picked it up and glanced at the screen, which revealed the caller to be *Sami* – my oldest sister, Samantha.

“Hey Sami,” I said to answer the call.

“Hey Bel!” Samantha said. I could practically hear her smiling. “How’s life in the Big Apple?”

“Oh, same old, same old,” I replied, affecting a tone of complete nonchalance. And Samantha being Samantha, she saw straight through it.

“Uh-huh. *Right*. You found yourself a boyfriend, didn’t you?”

I scoffed and started to sort one-handed through my suitcase. “That’s old news, Sami. I found myself a boyfriend two months ago.”

“Not to me it’s not! Come on, spill. What’s his name?”

I abandoned my packing and went across to my desk, sitting down in my desk chair. “Taylor,” I replied. I couldn’t help the smile that broke out on my face as I said his name. “You know that band Hanson?”

“Oh for Christ’s sake, don’t tell me he’s one of *them*.” The scorn in Samantha’s tone was unmistakable – unlike my parents and the rest of my siblings, who had never heard even a bar of *MMMBop*, Samantha knew exactly who Hanson were, owing to her college roommate being an unrepentant Hanson fan. And according to Samantha’s regular missives home, said roommate had played Hanson’s music at window-rattling volume during every waking hour. As a direct result, Samantha now possessed an utterly unbridled hatred for all things even remotely connected to the brotherly trio.

“Well, no, not exactly,” I replied with an evil smirk, even though Samantha couldn’t see it.

“Thank the Lord for that.”

My evil smirk turned into a positively maniacal grin. "Taylor's the lead singer's twin brother."

There was what seemed to be a shocked silence on Samantha's end of the line for approximately thirty seconds. "You are fucking *kidding* me!" she exploded.

"Sami, come on, they're not that bad-"

"But he's one of *them!*" Samantha said, interrupting me. "You've gone and contaminated yourself now..."

"Sami, really, Hanson aren't all that bad. I'm serious. They're good musicians. Their music just..."

I paused, trying to put what I wanted to say diplomatically. "It just takes some getting used to."

She snorted. "Keeping in mind that for four fucking years I was subjected to their shit every hour of practically every day."

"Okay, good point." I brought up the tour itinerary in Adobe Reader on my laptop and scrolled almost to the end. "Look, I'm going to be in Portland at the beginning of September for a few days. Why don't we meet up for lunch while I'm there?"

When next Samantha spoke, her tone was slightly suspicious. "Why are you coming to Portland? And why in September?"

"Because I have a really important assignment for work over the next four months," I replied. "I'm joining Hanson on their tour this summer and keeping a tour diary, so that I can write it up for the magazine when I get home. And with the route we're taking, we won't get to Maine until then." I decided it was time to lay it on as thick as possible, and I adopted a wheedling tone. "C'mon Sami, I haven't seen you since Christmas. And I really want you to meet Taylor and the guys. I think you'll be surprised. They're not little kids anymore."

Samantha was quiet a little while. "I'll pencil it in," she said at last, sounding strangely reluctant.

"And just so you know, when Martin hears about this he's going to kill you."

"Sami, he already knows."

"What, that you're dating a Hanson?"

"Well, no. I left that bit out. And stop exaggerating. I very much doubt Martin would do something as drastic as offing his baby sister."

"You never know. I hear he's been in a homicidal frame of mind lately." A muffled shriek sounded in my ear. "Shit, there goes Amy again. I'd better go before she tears the house apart."

"Okay." I glanced back at my suitcase. "I need to finish packing, anyway."

"You have fun with that. And send me a couple of postcards along the way, yeah?"

"I will," I promised. "Say hi to everyone for me."

"Will do. Look after yourself, all right? And for God's sake, be careful this summer. I don't want to get a phone call from Seattle or wherever telling me that you've broken your neck."

"I'll be careful, Sami. I swear." And with that we both said our farewells and hung up.

I set my BlackBerry down on my desk and turned back to my suitcase. "This is ridiculous," I muttered, and began the process of dumping my suitcase's contents onto my bedroom floor. Schuyler came in just as I hurled a pair of boots at my open closet.

"Whoa Bel, what the fuck did those boots ever do to you?" she asked as the boots hit the back wall of my closet with a loud *thump*.

"They exist," I snapped.

"I know what this is about," Schuyler said. She crossed over to my bed and cleared away some of my shirts. "The tour, right?"

"Want a medal, do you?" I said sarcastically.

"Isobel, really, you need to calm the hell down. How long do you need to pack for?"

"Three months. We're coming back here on the way to Bridgeport so we can pick up our passports and anything else we need before we hit Canada. I'll pick up extra clothes and stuff then."

"Okay then. How much are you allowed to take with you?"

"One suitcase, a backpack and my handbag."

"Did you make up a packing list?" Schuyler asked, and I very slowly shook my head. She reached out and smacked me. "Bel, what the hell has gotten into you? You used to be so organised that you put *me* to shame."

"Taylor did," I replied, a split second before realising that those two words could be taken in a number of different ways, only one of which would have been my intention.

A wicked grin appeared on Schuyler's face as soon as I spoke. "You little minx," she laughed. "Is he any good?"

"I didn't mean it like that!" I protested.

"*Sure* you didn't. Now give me your notebook and a pen – I'll make you up a packing list, and I want you to follow it exactly. You'll be able to buy anything else you need while you're away. It's not as if you're going to Antarctica for the summer."

And for the next hour and a half, that's exactly what Schuyler did. She parked herself in my beanbag, propped my hardcover notebook on her knees and scribbled furiously, looking up occasionally to glance around my room before dropping her gaze back to her self-appointed task.

"I'm done," Schuyler announced at around twelve-thirty, and she got to her feet. "Now get packing. I'm pretty sure the guys wanted you over at Mark and Taylor's place this afternoon for a meeting, so I'd get cracking sooner rather than later."

"Yes, *Mother*," I shot at her before taking back my notebook. I quickly flipped through the list, which ran to four numbered pages, before moving to get everything packed. While I did so, Schuyler sat herself on my bed and watched me almost like a hawk, shaking her head whenever I tried to deviate from the list.

I was finished with my packing by three-thirty, with some of my new toys the last items to be stowed away – my camcorder in my backpack, and my BlackBerry and iPod in separate pockets of my handbag. I'd received the camcorder and BlackBerry from my parents for my birthday, both gifts having come at the perfect time – the camcorder would let me document the tour without having to resort to digging through my memories, and the BlackBerry would not only let me make calls and send text messages, but I would be able to check my email, go online and organise my life without having to drag out my laptop.

"I still can't believe you're passing this up," I said as I sorted through the remaining clothes in my closet in search of something to wear to the meeting.

"That's what I get for working where I do," Schuyler said, shrugging. "Besides, I've done the big summer tour before. I'm not missing much."

"When was that?"

"In 2000, after *This Time Around* came out. I figured I might as well have some fun before college."

"You didn't know the guys then, did you?" I asked. I backed away from my closet, having found my one pair of jeans that hadn't yet been packed away to make way for my summer clothes, a black singlet and a black lace blouse, and looked at Schuyler.

"Not yet. I didn't meet them until 2001. It was Miles who got me in with them, actually."

"What, your brother?"

"I only know one Miles, Bel. He introduced me to Isaac first, but we didn't really hit it off. I mean, he's nice and all that, but..." She held her right hand out, fingers spread wide, before rocking it side to side from her wrist. "Not my type, y'know? Of course, when I met Mark, that was it. I knew straight away that he was the one."

"Isn't that sweet," I said, my voice taking on a sugary, sickly-sweet tone.

"Hey, you were the same when you laid eyes on Taylor for the first time," she retorted.

"Speaking of, how long was it before you got to meet him?" I asked as I shucked my T-shirt.

And here Schuyler laughed. "A whole year," she replied, chuckling. "One fucking *year*."

"*What?*"

She nodded. "Mark and I were long-distance most of the time because they were all still back in Tulsa. He'd fly up a couple weekends a month to see me, but that was pretty much it. Usually we talked on the phone or on Messenger. I did go down there for a month or so in the summer of 2002 to see him, to make up for lost time as it were, and that was when I met Taylor." She went quiet. "I remember that he was really sick that summer. I'm talking the evening of the concert back in February multiplied by a hundred percent at the very least. That's how bad it was."

"Jesus," I breathed, and Schuyler nodded. "What caused it?"

"What was it that Mark said?" Schuyler frowned momentarily. "He said that it was put down to 'a stress-related exacerbation of a pre-existing illness'. Or in other words, college stress making the chronic fatigue far worse. He'd just finished school for the year when it happened, so I don't think anyone was too surprised by that. It was just one crash after another – he'd manage to get back on his feet only to be slammed again." She picked at my bedspread. "I didn't really see much of him, to be honest – for the first couple of weeks I was there he was in hospital, and the rest of the time he was sleeping a lot. But somewhere along the line he got hold of my email address and after I came back to New York, he started to email me. We've been friends ever since."

"And he's never tried to hit on you?" I asked. While Schuyler had been speaking I'd changed out of my shorts into my jeans, and was beginning to work on my hair.

"Never," Schuyler replied. "I think he hasn't tried first and foremost because he knows I'm spoken for, and he doesn't want Mark to get pissed at him. But also because we're such good friends that if we *did* start to date and we ended up breaking things off, it would potentially ruin our friendship." Here she shrugged. "Of course, there's also the fact that I'm a fan of his brothers, and he doesn't date Hanson fans as a general rule." She arched an eyebrow at me. "You seem to be the exception, of course. But then again you *did* meet him before you joined the masses, so..."

By now, I had finished with my hair, having decided simple was best – I'd pulled it back into a ponytail. Socks and shoes came next – I found a pair of socks in my underwear drawer and paired them with my Converse sneakers. "So what're you doing tonight?" I asked as I took my BlackBerry back out of my handbag and punched in the number that would allow me to access my voicemail.

"I'm probably just going to catch a movie. I have to work tomorrow so I can't stay out too late."

"You're coming to the show tomorrow night, right?"

"Of course I am! I wouldn't miss it for the world."

I nodded and hit dial. The electronic voice sounded in my ear almost immediately. "*You have one saved message, received yesterday at eight-fourteen pm,*" it relayed, before the message played.

"Hey Isobel, it's Mark. I'm just calling to let you know that we're having a meeting at mine and Taylor's place tomorrow afternoon at four-thirty. I told Isaac that you being there wasn't necessary, but he sort of insisted – apparently you're part of the road crew this tour, so he's not about to back down. It shouldn't take too long – we'll just be going over the itinerary and the tour rules for the most part. If you want you can bring your gear over as well and just crash here tomorrow night, it'll save you going back home and then having to come back out here on

Wednesday." There was a short pause. "So yeah, we'll see you tomorrow." The recording ended, and I pressed 7 on my BlackBerry's keypad to keep it.

I arrived at the twins' apartment just before four o'clock with my gear in tow, having let myself in with the key that Taylor had given to me, to find the living room in utter disarray. Instruments and audio equipment lay everywhere, clothes were piled untidily on the couch, a portable projector that had been hooked up to what I recognised as Zac's MacBook was set up on the coffee table, a pair of Doc Martens was hanging by their laces from one of the ceiling light fixtures, Taylor's laptop lay upside down on the floor beneath the coffee table, and a collection of shot glasses sat on one of the end tables. Loud and very off-key singing came from the direction of the bathroom, music was drifting out of the kitchen, and I could hear swearing coming from behind Taylor's bedroom door. At least one person in this apartment was less than happy, and I had a fairly good idea who it was.

The swearing grew louder as I approached Taylor's bedroom door, stopping when I knocked. "Mark, I fucking swear to God-" Taylor snapped, stopping short as the door was wrenched open. "Isobel?"

"Trouble in paradise?" I asked, one eyebrow raised.

He scowled at me. "Mark's been pissing me off all day," he replied. "I've been trying to pack for hours and he won't leave me the fuck alone. I'm not getting a thing done." He raked a hand through his hair and let out a sigh of what sounded like frustration, before turning around and heading across to his desk. "And what's making it even harder is that I'm not just packing for the tour. I'm also trying to pack for when I move out."

"We haven't even found a place yet," I reminded him as I settled myself on the end of his bed. Most of it was taken up by a large black suitcase that was currently wide open and half full of clothes. His messenger bag sat on the floor at the foot of his bed.

"I know that. Doesn't mean I can't plan for it." He was quiet for a little while. "I still haven't told Mark or Jess what I'm planning," he admitted.

"But you *will* tell them, won't you?" I tilted my head to one side and studied him. "This isn't going to be like you've been with Schuyler, is it?"

"Yes, I'll tell them. Don't worry. It's not just me who's being affected by it, after all. Me moving out means they'll probably need to find a way to cover my third of the rent, so the earlier I tell them the better." He shrugged. "They'll probably do what we do every tour – let out my room to one of Mark's friends and get them to pay rent."

"Sounds like a plan to me." I quickly glanced at my watch. "You want some help getting all this packed?" I asked. "It's just that it's already five past four, and the meeting's supposed to start at half-past."

"You don't mind?"

"Trust me, if I minded I wouldn't have offered. And besides, if we split up the work between us it'll get done twice as fast. I did all of my packing in one hit this afternoon, and it took me almost three hours. And that was with a list."

Taylor raised an eyebrow. "Three *hours*?"

"I'm a chick, Tay," I reminded him. "We always take longer." I stood up and stretched. "Anyway, if we don't finish in the next twenty-five minutes, we can always finish off after the meeting."

By the time the meeting was due to start, we'd finished packing Taylor's suitcase. It now stood next to the door, a bright red streak of what looked suspiciously like nail polish painted on its handle to distinguish it from Mark's. His guitar case was propped up against it, its latches secured and a green bungee cord tied around it to keep it shut. The backpack he would be taking with him and the case for his photography equipment still hadn't been packed, but we had both agreed they could wait until after the meeting.

"First of all, I want to thank you all for taking time out from your undoubtedly busy schedules to come here this afternoon," Zac said to kick off the meeting. One of the stage technicians snorted at the word 'busy', and everyone else laughed. "All right, settle down you lot. We've got a lot to get through this afternoon, and the sooner everyone at least *pretends* to be serious, the quicker we can get things done and the sooner you can all get lost until tomorrow." There was more laughter. "I'm going to hand off to Mark so you can find out how the tour will work this year – it's somewhat different to usual, but I'll let Mark bore you all with those details." He sketched a small bow and, once Mark had risen from his spot on the couch, took his brother's seat.

The first thing Mark did when he was standing before us was bend down to his brother's computer and tap away at the keyboard. The result of this tapping was that a large map of the United States popped up on the makeshift screen that had been tacked up on one of the apartment walls. This particular map had a route traced on it in four different colours – those colours being red, blue, green and orange – with the route taking the form of an elongated spiral.

"This year's tour is set to be the most extensive we have ever undertaken within the United States," Mark said. "We'll be visiting more than one hundred cities in forty-eight states over the next three-and-a-half months, that is between tomorrow and September third, before continuing on to Canada for a further two weeks." He took a laser pointer from his pocket, flicked it on, and trained the beam of red light on our starting point, New York City. "The official kick-off of the tour is tomorrow night, at the Beacon Theatre. On Thursday we'll be hitting the road, and between then and June fifteenth we'll be travelling down to Florida." As he spoke, he trailed the beam along the eastern coast of the map and down through Florida, stopping at Tallahassee. "From there we'll be heading to Montana, and will be arriving in Great Falls on the thirteenth of July." The beam now moved west to California, north to Washington, and then east to Montana. "And so on around the country" he started moving the laser around the map, following the route that had been drawn out "until August twenty-seventh, which is when we'll arrive back in New

York. When we get back here, you'll all be able to grab anything you think you might need for the Canadian tour. This includes passports, extra clothes, et cetera."

With these words he clicked off the pointer and stowed it back in his pocket. "While the tour is different from usual, the way we're getting around isn't."

"Not the fucking buses *again!*" one of the backup musicians complained. Whether it was in jest or a real complaint, I couldn't tell. It was evidently the former, because just about everyone cracked up laughing.

"Yes Brent, the fucking buses again," Mark replied with a grin once the laughter had died down. "There will be three as usual – the band bus, which as we all should know by now has been modified for wheelchair access." At these words Taylor raised a hand and waved. "Which means that yes, even though he now has an actual job, my esteemed twin brother will be joining us once again, as the official tour photographer. Backup musicians have the second bus, and the stage techs and stagehands have bus number three. We will also be playing host to one of Taylor's workmates, Isobel Reynolds – Isobel is a journalist, and will be documenting the tour for us." When Mark introduced me, I too waved. "There will be six drivers in total, two per bus – if you're nice enough to them, they may be inclined to make a pitstop in the middle of the night for the occasional munchie run. Emphasis on the word 'occasional' – we will be on a very tight schedule, and so please try to limit your requests to once every couple of weeks if you possibly can."

Here Mark looked down at his watch. "Which leads me to what is probably the most important part of this little gathering, so I will now hand over to my oldest brother so that you can all get up to speed on the tour rules." Muted grumbling started up, and Mark held up a hand. "I know it's a pain in the ass, but it's a necessary evil. And anyway, the sooner we get the rules out of the way, the sooner you can all get the hell out of here." The grumbling turned to laughter, and Mark grinned. "Isaac, you have the floor," he said as he stepped out of the way.

"Dear *God*, here we go," I heard Taylor groan, and I elbowed him. "Issie, he's like the fucking Energizer Bunny – he keeps going and going and going and" I pressed a finger to his lips to hush him "going." This last word was mumbled, mostly because he couldn't open his mouth to speak.

"Well I've never been on a tour before, so I'd like to hear this," I informed him.

While Isaac detailed the tour rules, I tapped away in my own specialised form of shorthand at the keypad of my BlackBerry, making sure to get them all down. I could easily type them up properly later, but shorthand was the way to go right now. I quickly scanned my notes as Isaac finished speaking, and from what I could tell the rules were based in common sense – be at the gigs on time, stick to the tour schedule as closely as possible, don't get too wasted the night before a show, and most importantly be considerate of one another.

"Well, I guess this is it," I said quietly. The meeting had ended by now – half the crew had left and the other half had migrated into the kitchen, leaving Taylor and I sitting together on the couch.

"This is it'?" Taylor echoed, sounding incredulous. "Issie, believe me, you ain't seen *nothing* yet."

I poked him. "Your grammar is atrocious," I scolded him.

"You haven't seen anything yet, then. How's that?"

"Better."

"Thank you." He stretched his arms out above his head. "Issie, believe me, this is only the beginning. You, my dear, are going to have the time of your life this summer. We get to spend four uninterrupted months together – we get to plan our future together, we get to go and see *Rent* when we get to D.C., you get to try my mom's cooking our first night in Tulsa, *and* you get to see the inner workings of the Hanson machine. I'm going to do everything in my power to make this summer the best yet."

"Is that a promise, Mr. Hanson?" I asked.

“That’s a promise, Ms. Reynolds,” he replied. “And you can be damn sure that this is one promise I’m going to keep.”

Chapter 8

Been through it a thousand times before

Taylor

"Wallet?"

"Check."

"Keys?"

I held up my key ring, laden with keys to the apartment, my car, the garage back in Tulsa, and my two old sets of house keys, and shook it. "Check."

"Meds?"

I dropped my keys into my backpack and hunted around for the ziplock bag that held all of my medication and my various prescriptions. "Check," I replied as I unearthed it and held it up in Isobel's line of sight.

Isobel looked back down at the list she held. "iPod?"

"Stupid question." I held up my iPod, my brand-new set of noise-cancelling earphones, and my iPod's USB cord and charger. I'd had my iPod for less than six months, it having been a Christmas present from my parents the year before, and it was already beginning to look very battered. The lower corners were scratched and dented, thanks to my unfortunate habit of dropping it on hard and rough surfaces, the aluminium back was marred with fingerprints, scratches and smudges, and the Apple symbol on the back had all but disappeared. Isobel frowned at its condition.

"You need to take better care of that," she said as she made a mark on her list. "People will think you don't give a shit about it."

"It's well-loved," I replied as I stowed my iPod away in a Velcroed section of the very front pocket of my backpack. My earphones, the USB cord and the charger went into the middle pocket. "But I do need to clean it up before we hit my parents' place. They'll think I haven't taken very good care of it."

"Getting back to the task at hand...got your phone?"

I took my phone out of its designated pocket, next to that which held my iPod. "Got it."

The rest of Isobel's list was fairly routine – notebooks, guitar tuner, sketchbooks, pens and pencils, journal, books to read, my summer-weight hoodie, my laptop and its power cord, my travel surge protector, the charger for my phone, and any number of other bits and pieces that were necessary when it came to spending an entire summer on the road.

I glanced at my desk calendar as I zipped my backpack up. Today was the sixteenth of May – the first concert of the tour was to be held tonight, and I had already submitted my cover songs to Mark so that he had a basis for the set list. One of the covers I'd picked called for a female lead, something that had only happened a few times before, so it was going to be interesting to see not only how performing that particular song worked out, but also how the audience reacted. I had a reasonably good idea of who would be asked to fill that role, but one thing I'd learned in my twenty-four years as a Hanson was that my brothers could be very unpredictable.

"So what are we supposed to be doing this morning?" Isobel asked as I carried my backpack and camera case out into the living room. My suitcase, wheelchair and guitar case had been put with everyone else's gear the night before, in preparation for getting the buses loaded this afternoon.

"I think they wanted us both over at the venue for a few hours during sound check," I replied.

"Just to do a bit of filming and photography. And Mark said something about getting our opinion on the set list as they build it, I think."

"How many songs are they aiming for?"

I frowned and quickly counted off in my head. “Mark said four songs from each studio album they’ve released so far, four non-album tracks, and five covers. So twenty-five all up. Which makes for a very long show.”

“I’ll say,” Isobel commented.

At around eleven, we headed downtown to the concert venue. The Beacon Theatre was two blocks away from where Mark, Jessica and I lived, so there really was no point in driving. I had Ratchet on her leash and wearing her jacket, as I usually did when I went out into Manhattan for anything other than work – this would be the last chance I had to walk her before we hit the road, so I wanted to make it count.

“Sorry, no dogs allowed,” the woman in the box office said as Isobel and I entered the theatre lobby. The badge she wore on her shirt gave her name as *Linda*.

“I have a permit,” I informed her, and started digging around in my messenger bag for my wallet. Once I’d located it I showed her my ID card, which stated that I was legally entitled to take Ratchet wherever I went. From a pocket of my jeans I took my Access All Areas pass and handed it over so that Linda could see that I wasn’t there to look around. Isobel handed hers over as well to show that we were both here for the same purpose.

“My apologies,” Linda said as she handed our passes back. “Go straight on through.”

“Thank you,” I said as I pocketed my pass and stowed my wallet back in my bag.

As we neared the doors of the theatre itself, I could hear Mark singing *One Headlight* by The Wallflowers as he played the melody of the song on his piano. It was one of the songs I’d taken from The Impossible Playlist to build the list of covers that would be played over the course of the tour. Isaac’s guitar and Zac’s drums filled in the other two parts of the song. I closed my eyes briefly and allowed the song to wash over me.

"I take it that you like that song," Isobel said as we opened the theatre doors and walked inside. I picked Ratchet up as the doors closed behind us and followed Isobel through the rows of seats.

"Of course I like it," I replied. "Happens with most of the songs on the Playlist – I listen to them enough, so I sort of have to like them." We'd reached the stage by this point – Isobel climbed up first, and I passed Ratchet and my bag up to her before climbing up myself. Right as I planted my knees on the stage my phone rang, *Thunderstruck* blaring out from its speaker. I waved at my brothers to indicate that I needed quiet, and started to dig around in my messenger bag for my notebook and pen, pulling my phone from my pocket as I worked. I didn't recognise the number when I glanced at the screen, meaning it was a work call. My first instinct was to let it go to voicemail, but I still hadn't recorded my summer voicemail message so that would have been a monumentally bad idea.

"78th Street Productions, this is Taylor Hanson speaking," I said in answer.

"Hi, my name is Helen Cartwright – I saw your advertisement in the *Village Voice*," the caller said.

"I was wondering if I would be able to engage your services for a two-week assignment in July."

I let out a mental groan. It was just my luck – it was a week after I had cleared my calendar for the summer, and I already had someone offering me work.

"Helen, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I won't be in New York for the next four months," I said, truly regretting it. Every little cent helped, especially seeing as my move-out date was drawing ever nearer. Isobel and I had decided that our moving-out day would be October fifteenth, and therefore we were going to be spending quite a bit of time over the summer trawling through property listings. "I resume work on September twenty-fifth – I can pencil you in any day after that."

"Oh no, that's all right," Helen said, in a tone I recognised all too well. "I'm sorry to have troubled you."

"No trouble at all," I assured her.

Once I'd hung up and slid my notebook and pen back into my messenger bag, I dialled the number that would connect me to my voicemail and quickly recorded a new message, informing anyone who called that I was unavailable between today and September twenty-fourth, and would be reopening my schedule on the twenty-fifth.

"There's something I've been wondering for a little while," Isobel said as I slid my phone back into my pocket.

"Hmm?"

"Why did you call your freelancing business '78th Street Productions'? Last time I checked, you lived on West 72nd."

I'd been expecting this particular question for a while, so I was prepared with an answer. "You remember how I told you that I was born in Tulsa?" When she nodded, I continued, "When we came back to the States from Trinidad in '88, we moved to a house on 78th Street. We lived there until the beginning of 1999. I grew up there, so most of my memories are attached to that house. When I decided to start freelancing and needed a name to publish my work under, '78th Street Productions' seemed like the perfect name." I scratched Ratchet behind her ears. "Whenever I'm back home I like going for walks around my old neighbourhood – I talk to my old neighbours, poke around my old haunts and hiding places, see how much things have changed."

"You'll have to give me the grand tour when we get there."

"Oh, I can definitely do that. I still have my old house keys and everything."

Late that afternoon, Isobel and I returned to the apartment for dinner and to do some last minute tidying up. We also needed to make sure that everything that was to be taken on tour was ready to be loaded onto the buses, so that we could leave straight after the concert. Not only that, because neither of us had any intention of seeing the tour's opening act, Serendipity, perform

(like *The Mockingbirds*, they were passable, but that didn't necessarily mean I enjoyed their music) it was our responsibility to lock the apartment and hand the keys over to Jessica – she wouldn't be joining us on tour straight away, as Juilliard was still in session for a few more days. When she finished school for the year she had agreed to pass the keys onto Mark's friend James, who would be keeping an eye on the place for us over the summer, after which she would be joining us on the road and bringing Ratchet along with her.

"I think we need to talk about where things are going," Isobel said as we sat on the living room couch with our dinner. I had cooked up a small batch of lemon chicken and rice the night before, with the full knowledge that I wouldn't have time to cook on the day of the show, and had reheated it while Isobel did a quick inspection of the apartment. "I don't think it's fair on either of us if we have completely different viewpoints on..." She trailed off and toyed with her chicken. "Certain subjects."

"Like what?" I asked, seconds before I skewered a carrot with the tines of my fork.

"Well, let's see." She put her plate down on the coffee table and counted off on her fingers. "Religion, kids, sex before marriage. Those are the major ones, I think."

"Religion," I decided.

"Nothing like getting the *really* sticky subject out of the way first," Isobel said. "I've never been religious – Mum and Dad apparently decided very early on that, even though they're both nominally Christian, they wanted us kids to make our own decisions about religion and what path we wanted to take. They saw no point in bringing us into it until we were old enough to know what we were getting ourselves in for. All my brothers and sisters chose to join our parents, but I ultimately decided it just wasn't my thing. To be honest, I've never trusted it."

I ate for a little while before I answered. "I was raised an Evangelical Christian," I said. "I ended up leaving when I was sixteen, shortly after I started college. It just never made sense to me. I

think the only reason I stayed with it so long was because I didn't *know* anything else. That changed when we went to Bali in 1997 – we visited a Hindu temple while we were there. I thought it was fascinating, and it just started an avalanche. I spent most of the next couple of years questioning everything I had ever been taught, and eventually came to the conclusion that it was, well, a load of bullshit." Isobel laughed at this. "Managed to work up the nerve to tell my parents that I no longer believed not long after I turned eighteen. I was all prepared for them to lecture me, maybe even disown me, but I think they were actually relieved that I'd chosen to strike out on my own, so to speak. I was a lot more open with them after that."

Isobel gave me a smile. "Right, next topic – kids."

"I like them," I said, shrugging. "But I definitely don't want any of my own. I put up with my younger brothers and sisters for long enough that I eventually realised that it wasn't for me. By the time Zoë came along, I knew for sure."

"So it took you, what..." She frowned slightly. "Fourteen years to figure it out?"

"Well, almost fifteen – her birthday is two months before mine and Mark's – but close enough."

"Interesting. I knew when I was seven."

"That you didn't want kids?"

"Mmm-hmm. I had my first inklings when I was five-and-a-half, which is when Jack was born, but by the time he was eighteen months old I knew for sure." She ate a few bites of rice. "And unlike you, I intensely dislike the little shits."

I snickered at this. Trust Isobel to come up with something like that. "This one's probably a bit of a sensitive subject," I said, trying not to sound too hesitant, "but..." I swallowed hard. "Sex before marriage."

"If I love the other person enough, then I'm definitely open to it," Isobel replied without even a bit of hesitation. "Doesn't mean I've actually gone and done it, because I haven't yet. I'm waiting for the right person to come along."

"And would I be that right person?" I asked.

She seemed to study me for a little while. "There's a high possibility of it," she allowed, before cocking an eyebrow. "And what about you?"

"I'd be a complete and utter hypocrite if I said I *didn't* believe in it," I replied. I finished off the last few bites of chicken and put my plate aside. "Before we started dating, I was in two relationships, one after the other. I had my first girlfriend when I was thirteen – it lasted about a year and a half. Second was when I was fifteen – that one lasted a year, it ended when I started college. I've never been able to make long-distance relationships work for very long. And, um..." I shifted slightly, feeling suddenly uncomfortable. "My last relationship, it was with a guy."

Isobel was silent for a little while. Even without looking at her, I could tell she was shocked. "So you're bi?" she asked.

I nodded. "I am," I replied. "I'm still friends with my ex-boyfriend – he's a good guy."

"So when you say that you would be a hypocrite..." Isobel said, to prompt me to finish the sentence.

"I lost my virginity when I was fourteen," I admitted.

"Damn."

"You said it."

We returned to the concert venue at around eight-thirty – Hanson were scheduled to take the stage at around nine, so we had a little bit of time to kill before we had to take our seats. And as with the last Hanson concert we had attended in New York, we spent that half-hour backstage,

listening to the opening act going through their paces. Isobel spent most of the time writing in her notebook and testing out her camcorder, while I checked over my cameras (both my film SLR and my digital), inspected my rolls of film and formatted my media cards. All too soon it was time for us to take our seats – I felt a curious sense of anticipation as Isobel and I picked our way through the crowd, muttering apologies to anyone whose feet we stepped on. Moments before the house lights went down I realised why.

This was officially the first Hanson concert since 2005. The show back in February had only been a showcase of the new music, so in terms of touring it didn't really count. Not only that, but at nearly two hours in length it would be one of the longest Hanson concerts on record. I didn't envy my brothers in the slightest – I knew there was no way in the world that I would be able to do it. In another life, maybe, where I'd never fallen ill, but not in this one.

"So who's singing on *Candy*?" Isobel asked in almost a whisper, directly in my ear, as the crowd volume dropped to almost nothing. She indicated her copy of the set list, which in Mark's handwriting beneath *Candy* was written *Isaac + special guest*.

"It's a surprise," I replied. "Even I don't know who it is." That was a half-truth – I knew that either Isla or Alli would be performing tonight, but that was all I knew.

Silence blanketed the darkened auditorium for maybe a minute, before the drums and bass guitar of the first song sounded, followed in short order by Isaac's vocals. I knew they were modifying the song slightly, having decided to omit the spoken-word portions of the lyrics. The stage lit up right as my brother started singing.

"Beautiful, beautiful girl from the north...you burned my heart with a flickering torch...I had a dream that no one else could see...you gave me love for free..."

"Candy, Candy, Candy I can't let you go...all my life you're haunting me, I loved you so...Candy, Candy, Candy I can't let you go...life is crazy, Candy baby..."

The next voice we heard belonged to Isaac's long-time girlfriend, Alli. I couldn't help grinning as I heard her sing for the first time – were I asked to choose between Isla and Alli as to who I got along best with, I would always pick Alli. We hadn't got along so well in the beginning – she was five years my senior and had at first had tended to treat me like a little brother, but over the last few years I had earned her respect. As she sang she walked out of the wings and across the stage to where Isaac stood behind his microphone.

"I've had a hole in my heart for so long...I've learned to fake it and just smile along...down on the street, those men are all the same...I need love, not games, not games..."

The rest of the song was basically nothing more than a duet between Isaac and Alli.

"Candy, Candy, Candy I can't let you go...all my life you're haunting me, I loved you so...Candy, Candy, Candy I can't let you go...life is crazy, I know baby...Candy baby..."

"Candy, Candy, Candy I can't let you go...all my life you're haunting me, I loved you so...Candy, Candy, Candy...life is crazy...Candy baby, Candy baby...Candy, Candy..."

"Candy, Candy, Candy I can't let you go...all my life I'm waiting for you...Candy, Candy, Candy I can't let you go..."

The cheering and applause that followed the song was absolutely thunderous. "Alli Delacroix, everyone!" Isaac said as Alli sketched a bow. The two of them kissed briefly before Alli left the stage, waving to the crowd as she melted into the shadows.

The concert progressed in much the same fashion as many of the previous concerts, except for the fact that the set list was longer than ever before. At least it did, right up until I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket as *In The City* ended. I pulled it out into the open, unlocked the keypad and opened the message, which was from Jessica.

"Oh *hell* no," I mumbled as I scanned the lines of text. *Tay, Mark wants you backstage – they want you to perform 'Pride' w/them tonight as the encore. You can kill him later if you want.*

Oh, I would definitely kill him later. That much was a given. I felt Isobel's eyes on me as I switched my digital camera off and packed both cameras away in their case, and I passed my phone across to her in response.

"*Are they mad?*" Isobel mouthed as she handed my phone back to me. I shrugged and closed the message, and shoved my phone back into my pocket. Before I headed backstage I pointed to her camcorder, indicating without words that I wanted this on film, and she nodded in response.

"You three are fucking *crazy*," I said to my brothers as soon as they came offstage after performing *Blue Sky*, the 'official' last song on the set list. I had been fitted with a set of ear monitors and a receiver during the last few songs, and was waiting to be dragged out onstage for the first time in years. And if I had my way, it would be the last time it ever happened. "I'm supposed to be working tonight."

"Jord, you need to live a little," Mark informed me. "All you ever *do* is work."

"It's better than sitting around the house all day, *Matt*," I shot back. Two could play at that game – if he wanted to use the shortened version of my first name, then so would I.

We both fell silent, listening to the audience chanting "Hanson" over and over again. I could feel the excitement and anticipation radiating off of my twin in waves, but at the same time I felt a growing unease deep inside. For all the ways that Mark and I were similar, in many we were completely different – and this was just one of those ways. Mark was a born performer – he lived for the stage. I, on the other hand, loved nothing more than to be behind the viewfinder of my camera. I had been onstage just once before, back when Hanson was just a local indie group playing Mayfest every year, and that had been more than enough. And now, thirteen years later, here I was again.

"We'd better get back out there," Zac said suddenly, and I looked over at him. He was twirling his drumsticks around in his fingers. "The natives are getting restless – they'll start a riot any second now."

"They're Hanson fans," I reminded him. "What d'you expect?"

The four of us headed toward the side of the stage, and I had a microphone pressed into my left hand as I stopped just behind Mark. "You owe me," I informed my brother.

"Oh, I'm *scared*," Mark shot back. I opened my mouth to retort, only to find myself being pushed out onto the stage. A hand on my back guided me through the darkness to stand next to Mark – I knew it was my twin who I stood next to, because I could feel the cool, smooth keys of Mark's piano beneath my fingers when I put my left hand out.

Before I even realised what had happened, the familiar guitar-and-drums introduction of *Pride (In The Name Of Love)* kicked off and the lights went up again, accompanied by a wall of noise from the gathered crowd. Mark was the first to sing, which meant that I would be next. The two of us would share vocals for the third verse and the final chorus, just to even things up.

"One man come in the name of love...one man come and go...one come here to justify...one man to overthrow..."

"In the name of love...one more in the name of love...in the name of love...what more in the name of love..."

At my cue I stepped forward slightly, closed my eyes and sang like I never had before, my voice soaring to the heavens.

"One man caught on a barbed wire fence...one man he resist...one man washed on an empty beach...one man betrayed with a kiss..."

"In the name of love...one more in the name of love...in the name of love...what more in the name of love..."

An instrumental section followed my chorus, after which Mark and I sang together for the first time in over a decade.

"Early morning, April four...shot rings out in the Memphis sky...free at last, they took your life... they could not take your pride..."

"In the name of love...one more in the name of love...in the name of love...what more in the name of love...in the name of love...one more in the name of love...in the name of love...what more in the name of love..."

As we finished the song, I felt a surge of something unfamiliar – it felt almost like adrenaline, but I knew better. It felt nothing like that. Bare minutes after I followed my brothers offstage once more, and caught Isobel up in a tight embrace, I realised exactly what it was.

It was pride.

Chapter 9

Because tomorrow might be good for something

Isobel

It didn't take long for me to settle into my new routine. By the time we arrived in Atlanta, about two weeks after the tour kicked off, I was accustomed to life on tour. It helped that I had always been very adaptable, something I'd inherited from my mother – my maternal grandfather had been a missionary in Asia, and so Mum had spent a good deal of her childhood and teens living out of a suitcase.

The tour routine was straightforward and completely idiot-proof. Concert days started at around six-thirty in the morning, with Mark playing at being a human alarm clock – he was in the habit of bashing on the door of each of our hotel rooms with Zac's drumsticks to ensure that nobody overslept. The next few hours were given over to preparing for each new day – showering, brushing teeth, dressing, having breakfast, and packing away anything that had escaped from our suitcases and backpacks the night before. Interviews often took up a great deal of each morning, followed by sound check and rehearsal just after lunch. While the band was out doing press and the tour manager checked everyone out from the hotel, all of our gear would be loaded onto the buses in preparation for heading out to the concert venue. Sound check usually ended at around five-thirty, at which point everyone would head out for dinner for about an hour. Once everyone returned from dinner the rate of activity would ratchet up a few notches – the support act would typically take the stage at seven-thirty and play for 40 minutes, which gave Taylor's brothers one hour to hold the evening's meet-and-greet session and to get themselves ready to perform. Eight-thirty heralded Hanson's arrival onstage, whereupon they would play for just over an hour and a half. At the concert's conclusion the stage would be stripped and loaded into the truck that followed the tour buses, everyone would hop onto their respective buses, and the journey to the next city would begin.

Of course, it was idiot-proof in theory only. In practice it tended to be a very different story.

For the sixteenth morning in a row I was jolted out of a very sound sleep, during which I had dreamed about Taylor, a bottle of chocolate body paint, lots of whipped cream and my sister Penelope's handcuffs, by a loud hammering on the door of my hotel room. Our stay in Atlanta, just as our stay in Washington, D.C. had been, was two days long – we had arrived just after midnight on the fifth of June, and today was the sixth. To the crew these occasional extended stays were given over to sightseeing and restocking the alcohol and junk food supplies, but the inner circle (in other words Taylor's brothers, Taylor himself, Jessica, Alli, Isla and I) knew better. Apparently their parents had put their foot down very early on after Taylor had been officially diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome, and now every month at the very least a two-day break was worked into the itinerary so that he could rest if he needed it. I had spent the night in my boyfriend's arms once again, one of my favourite places in the world.

"Fucking hell," I mumbled as I slowly opened my eyes, squinting them against the bright summer sunlight that streamed into the room through a gap in the curtains. How in the world could Taylor *sleep* through that? "I'm up, I'm up..."

I eased my way out of Taylor's embrace and slipped out of our bed, fumbling around for my dressing gown as I tried to wake up a little. Once I had pulled it over my pyjamas I wandered over to the door of the room and peered through the peephole to see who had dragged me out of bed.

"Mark, what the fuck is your problem?" I asked once I had the door open. Taylor's twin stood there in the corridor, fully dressed and twirling a set of Zac's drumsticks around in his fingers. "It's not even six o'clock yet." This last part was said once my vision had cleared enough for me to be able to check my watch. Its display read 5:49. "You're not supposed to do wake-up calls until six-thirty." I yawned, not even bothering to cover my mouth. "And I was having such a wonderful dream too."

"What about?" Mark asked, sounding very curious – a little *too* curious I thought, considering what my dream had been about.

"I'll give you four clues." I held up my right hand, and folded each finger down as I spoke.

"Handcuffs, chocolate body paint, whipped cream, and your dear twin brother." I smirked at him.

"I'm sure you can figure out the rest."

"I'd rather not." He sounded vaguely disgusted. "I have enough trouble ignoring the fact that I could hear what was going on in both Zac and Isaac's hotel rooms last night without wondering what you two were getting up to in yours."

"Aww, feeling lonely are we?"

He scowled at me. "Shut up."

I gave him a very sweet, sleepy smile. "So what was it that you wanted?"

He shrugged. "I figured that seeing as it takes Taylor ages to get going in the mornings, I should wake you guys up a bit earlier than usual." He cocked an eyebrow at me. "Give you a bit of extra time to get it all out of your systems."

Now it was *my* turn to scowl. "For your information, unlike *some* people we're managing to control ourselves," I told him. Taylor and I had decided to wait until we had been dating for at least six months before we even *considered* the possibility of going further than third base. I did know that I wanted him to be my first, though I hadn't told him that yet. "Now, if you're *quite* finished..."

"I'll see you both at breakfast, then." He looked past me into the hotel room. "Make sure you don't tire him out *too* much, yeah?"

He received a slap for this little comment. "Fuck off, Mark," I said, only half-joking. "Go ring your girlfriend and bother *her*."

Once Mark had wandered back down the corridor, I closed the door and headed back to bed. I didn't go back to sleep, though – I was far too awake now for that. Instead I took my dressing gown off, draped it over the room's desk chair, and climbed onto the bed. From there I crawled across to Taylor's side of the bed and straddled him, settling myself on his hips.

One of my favourite activities was watching him sleep. During his waking hours he looked every inch his twenty-four years, which I put down to the guard he kept up around anyone he didn't know very well. Around those he did know well – a very short list of people that included his family, Alli, Isla, Schuyler and I – but also while he slept, he looked at least five years younger. I knew that he dropped his guard around me because he trusted me implicitly – and that outside of the immediate Hanson family, I was one of the only people alive who was able to command that level of trust.

He drifted awake about five minutes after I'd told Mark to piss off, right as I started to study the scar on the right side of his stomach. "What're you doin'?" he asked, sounding hazy.

I touched a fingertip to his scar, which was about two-and-a-half inches long. "Just looking at this scar you've got," I replied. "What's it from?"

"Had my appendix out when I was sixteen." He raised himself up on his elbows. "You want to see the rest?"

"You mean you've got more?"

"Mmm-hmm." I felt him raise his right knee. "You see the one on that ankle?" he asked, and I twisted around slightly. Running from just above the sole of his right foot up to where his shin met his ankle was a long scar. I reached back and traced it with a finger. "I pretty much shattered it about three years ago. Had to have a bunch of screws and plates put in there."

I returned my focus to his face as he lowered his foot back down. Next he balanced himself on his right elbow as he pointed to his left eye, where I could see a small, hairline scar just below his

lower eyelid. "I was chasing Mark through the house when we were ten, and he'd slammed the back door closed right as I came up to it. I went straight through the glass." I sucked in a sharp breath, and he nodded. "Doctor said if the glass had cut me even a hair higher, I'd have lost that eye."

Next he ran a finger along his hairline, from above his right eyebrow down to the tip of his right ear. "And this one's from when I was riding my bike and went over the handlebars, when I was eleven. I broke my left arm pretty badly, and because I wasn't wearing my helmet I damn near split my head open. Spent the weekend in hospital, and when I came home my parents grounded me for a month because I'd gone out riding without my helmet on."

"Jeez, you've been through the wars."

He granted me a small, tight smile. "I still have one more." With these words he raised his chin and pointed to his throat, where he had a vertical scar that was about half the length of my thumb. "Last summer, I found out the hard way that I'm severely allergic to wasp stings. Got stung by one and went into anaphylactic shock. I would have died if my dad hadn't called an ambulance in time. I had to have a cricothyrotomy done so that I could breathe until they got me to the hospital – the paramedics cut a hole in my throat and stuck a tube down into my airway." He rubbed his scar a little. "It...it was fucking terrifying. I never want to go through that again. I have to keep an EpiPen with me now in case it happens again."

"Fucking *hell*," I whispered. "You haven't had it easy, have you?"

"I think that's the understatement of the year," he replied dryly. He eyed me. "So are you going to get off of me anytime soon? Only I need to take my medication if I'm going to have any hope of functioning properly today."

"You know, I kind of like it where I am," I replied. I reached down and tweaked his nose.

"So do I, but unless you want me to feel like a zombie all day I'd suggest that you get up." He raised an eyebrow and gave me a lopsided grin, one that reached all the way up to his eyes. I leaned down and kissed him quickly before getting off of him, and in turn off the bed.

While Taylor took his medication and fed Ratchet, who typically slept in her basket under the writing desk of whatever hotel room it was that we stayed in, I went through my suitcase in search of something to wear. According to the weather report on *Good Morning America*, which I'd changed the channel to immediately after turning the TV on, it was set to be rather warm today, peaking at eighty-six degrees. Taking this into account, I decided on my three-quarter pants, a bright red sleeveless top, and my sandals. A rummage around in my lingerie bag produced a bra and knickers, and I headed off to take a shower.

I'd just drenched my hair when the bathroom door opened. A quick peek around the edge of the shower curtain revealed Taylor to be the interloper, and I smiled. "Hey, feel like washing my hair for me?" I asked, and held my bottle of shampoo out to him.

"Jesus, what did your last slave die of?" he asked, but he took the bottle from me and opened it. "Oh, that's nice," he commented after he'd quickly sniffed it. "Cucumber and green tea," he read off of the label. "Didn't know this was yours."

"You did so, you liar." I pulled the shower curtain across and splashed him. "You're the one who used up my last bottle."

"You want me to wash your hair or not?" He waved the bottle at me. I stuck my tongue out at him and took the bottle back, and pulled the shower curtain back into place so I didn't get water on the bathroom floor.

Moments later the curtain opened again, and he stepped into the shower behind me. I passed my shampoo bottle back to him, and soon I felt his fingers combing shampoo through my hair. I usually hated it when other people touched my hair, but Taylor was the one and only exception.

He knew what I liked and what I didn't, and acted accordingly – and this included playing with my hair. A shiver raced down my back as I felt his fingernails scratch my scalp a little, and I closed my eyes.

I decided to skip the conditioner this morning, reasoning that because I'd already done that the last time I'd washed my hair it didn't need it, and stepped out of the shower so Taylor could wash his own hair. I was slightly too short to return the favour unless he felt like having his hair washed in the bathroom sink. Once I'd dressed myself and had dried my hair, finger-combing my curls out as I did so, I took my pyjamas back into the room and started my packing. My pyjamas, dressing gown, and the clothes and shoes I had worn yesterday went into my suitcase, followed by my toiletries kit once I'd put my shampoo bottle back inside. I opted not to lock my suitcase just yet, as I knew I would need to get back into it when we came back upstairs after breakfast. Into my backpack went my laptop and power cord, surge protector, my notebook and pen, my DS Lite and the case of game cartridges I always carried with me. My iPod and earphones were returned to my handbag, my BlackBerry went into one of my pockets, and I buckled my watch securely around my left wrist.

Taylor exited the bathroom, Ratchet at his heels, just as I set my backpack and suitcase on the floor next to my side of the bed. He had one bath towel around his waist, and was rubbing his hair dry with another as he walked. I sat down on the bed and watched as he went through his own suitcase, drawing out a pair of cargo pants and one of the shirts I'd seen for sale in the Hanson.net online store, the red *Great Divide* T-shirt. He dressed quickly and took the towels he had used back into the bathroom, and soon I heard the hotel bathroom's hairdryer switch on. Over the roar of the hairdryer I could hear him singing, though I didn't recognise the lyrics.

"Pick up your shoulders, you are not a child...don't need no natural born soldiers, it's not that kind of fight...there is no water that can wash off this disease...if you'll just stand up, then I'll follow your lead...so get up and make it known...you'll never take a chance alone...I'll be there whatever your crossroads, oh...I know it will take some time...I know it's gonna take its toll...but all you

gotta do is show me...and I'll follow your lead, oh...I follow your lead, oh...I follow your lead, you know...I follow through the crossroads..."

Just as I really started to enjoy hearing him sing, a phone started ringing. I instantly recognised the ringtone as Taylor's, and I set about locating his phone. After searching through his backpack, guitar case and the pockets of the jeans he had worn the day before, I found it sitting on the writing desk, hooked up to its charger.

"You idiot," I scolded myself, before picking it up and checking the screen. The caller ID read *Zac – Cell*, so I decided it was in my best interests to answer. "Hey Zac."

"Why are you answering my brother's phone?" Zac asked.

"He's a little, um..." I glanced over at the bathroom. "Indisposed right now."

"Oh, please tell me I didn't interrupt you guys." He sounded very apologetic as he said this.

"Relax, it's not what you think. He's in the bathroom drying his hair." I paused, hesitating to mention what else he was doing. "He's also singing."

I couldn't see Zac's face, but I would have bet anything that he'd just raised an eyebrow. "He must be in a good mood, then."

"Meaning?"

"Taylor only ever sings when he's in a good mood. That doesn't happen very often. At least, it never used to." After a pause, he asked. "What's he singing?"

"No idea. I thought it might've been one of yours, but I don't recognise the lyrics." Taylor's phone was fully charged, so I unplugged it from its charger and walked across to the bathroom. The hairdryer had been switched off by now, but Taylor was still singing. I took the phone away from my ear and held it up to the doorway so Zac could hear his brother, just outside of Taylor's field

of vision. Half a minute later I backed away and returned my focus to the phone call. "So what's the verdict?"

"It's definitely not one of ours. I'd know if it was. He must have written that one himself."

"You sound surprised."

"I *am* surprised – he's never written a song before, at least not that I know of. Something's definitely inspired him."

"Who're you talking to?"

I looked back over my shoulder. Taylor stood there behind me, arms crossed over his chest and both eyebrows raised. He'd pulled his hair back into a ponytail.

"Zac's on the phone," I replied. "You wanna talk to him?"

"No shit," Taylor replied, and I handed him his phone. He quickly glanced at the screen before speaking to his brother. "What's up?...uh-huh...oh, you have to be kidding me." He shifted his focus to me for the barest of seconds. "Look, I'm gonna put you on speaker, okay? Isobel needs to hear this too." He lowered his phone from his ear and pressed a couple of buttons. "Okay, what was it that you said?"

"The opening act's pulled out of the tour," Zac replied. "Something about a family emergency. Their lead singer rang Mark about fifteen minutes ago to let him know. They're making preparations to head back to Albany as of this moment."

"So now there's no opening act at all?" Taylor asked.

"Nope. We have The Veronicas booked for the Australian tour and Goodnight Nurse to open for us in New Zealand, but we're not comfortable with asking either band to fly out here for the US tour *and* still open Down Under. It wouldn't be fair on them."

"Good point," Taylor agreed. "So what options do you have?"

"We really only have one, to be honest. We didn't exactly plan for this."

"Well, *that's* obvious," Taylor said.

Zac sounded very hesitant as he spoke. "We were wondering if you and Isobel would be able to open for us. Not right away, of course," he tacked on, somewhat hurriedly I thought. "We can probably manage for a few shows without an opening act, it just means fiddling around with the daily schedule a bit. But we *will* need someone to open for us by the time we hit Dallas."

"Jesus, Zac..." Taylor scrubbed a hand over his face. "There's nobody else you could ask to see if they could open?" he asked. He actually sounded somewhat desperate. I knew he didn't want to be onstage unless there really was no other option. To him, it was akin to having teeth pulled.

"Not at the moment, no. Serendipity was the only band during the planning stage who was free for the full summer. Everyone else was either making plans to record, looking to go on break, or preparing to tour themselves. We're going to keep our eyes and ears open for anyone who might be available to tour with us, but until we do find someone this is the only choice we have." He was quiet for a little while. "Tay, really, I wouldn't be asking if we had any other option. I am well aware of how much you hate being onstage. We all are. I swear to you that if you do this for us, I won't ask you for a thing ever again. You'll be off the hook for the rest of your life."

"You swear it as a Hanson?"

"On my name, I do so swear," Zac replied.

Taylor looked at me again. "Let me talk to Isobel." With those words he crossed to the desk and set his phone down on it. "So what do you think?" he asked as he sat down on the bed.

"He sounded genuine enough," I said with a shrug. "They must be pretty desperate if they're asking us to open." I sat down next to him. "But I think we should give it a shot anyway. You have

a killer voice, and at the New York concert the audience loved you. I heard a few of the stragglers who were leaving afterwards say how much they liked hearing you sing, when they weren't wondering who the hell you were, of course." He smiled a little at this. "And I've heard them wondering if you were ever going to show your face again. They love you Tay, and they want to see and hear more of you."

"So we feed their enthusiasm?" he asked, sounding dubious.

"We feed it," I replied. "We can do covers, and we can ask your brothers if they have any songs that they're not planning to use for anything. It can't hurt to try."

He seemed to think this over for a little while, before picking his phone back up. "We'll do it, Zac. But I hope you realise that you owe me."

"Definitely," Zac said in relief. "Thanks, man. See you downstairs, yeah?"

"See you down there," Taylor said, and hung up. He looked at me. "What the fuck have we gotten ourselves in for?"

"I have no idea," I admitted. "But it had better be fucking worth it." I clapped him on the shoulder. "C'mon. Let's go get some breakfast. I could eat a horse right now."

I cast a look back at him as we left our hotel room, heading down to grab some breakfast while we still could. "It won't be so bad, Tay," I tried to assure him. "I promise. And anyway, it'll only be until they find someone more permanent. It probably won't be for very long." I stopped walking, turned around and gathered him into a tight embrace. "It'll be better tomorrow," I told him. "You'll see."

"This is fucking hell on earth," he mumbled as I rubbed his back slowly. "I swear I didn't sign up for this shit..."

"I know, babe," I whispered. "I know."

Chapter 10

Got a lot of life to live

Taylor

As it turned out, opening for my brothers wasn't as harrowing as Isobel and I thought it might be. And thankfully, our role as the opening act lasted just two weeks. Out of what I knew had to be nothing more than pure desperation, Mark had placed an advertisement on the Dallas Craigslist a few days after Serendipity had pulled out of the tour, and had netted an act that we all quickly decided was a keeper – a three-piece group consisting of two guys and a girl that went by the name of Mungojerrie. And more so than Serendipity had, they fit in well with not only the band, but the rest of us as well.

The beginning of August heralded our arrival in the one place that my brothers and I could always call home, the city where we'd grown up. Tulsa. And as usual, I had spent the four-hour drive from Little Rock to Tulsa fast asleep in my bunk on the bus.

"Tay?"

I opened one eye and squinted out at the owner of the voice. Jessica stood in the narrow corridor that ran down the centre of the bus, the dim lighting overhead casting her in silhouette. She'd pulled my curtain across just far enough for me to see her face and not much else. Everyone else's curtains were closed, from what I could see.

"Yeah?" I asked quietly.

"We're nearly there." She gave me a smile. "You and Bel are going to be spending our break at home, right?"

Home. I couldn't help but smile when Jessica said that word. While everyone else had decided to hole up in a hotel for the five days that we would be in Tulsa, Isobel and I had chosen to spend the

time at my parents' house. It was the perfect temporary base – while it wasn't in Tulsa itself (more like a suburb on the outskirts of the metropolitan area), it was still close enough to the city that everything was within either walking or a short driving distance.

"I'd better get changed, then," I said as I stretched as much as the narrow bunk would allow. I was already stiff from sleeping in the one position – the bunks didn't afford much space for shifting around, unless one wanted to find themselves rather unceremoniously dumped on the floor, so I had learned very early on not to go thrashing around in bed while on the bus. The summer of 1998 had seen me breaking my left arm for the second time after I'd fallen from my bunk, and after spending most of that tour in plaster it wasn't something I wanted to experience a second time.

Isobel was sitting out in the main lounge area when I emerged from the tiny bathroom, having changed out of my pyjamas into jeans and a T-shirt. She looked over from the DVD she was watching as I sat down next to her and started putting on my socks and sneakers.

"Your parents don't mind that we'll be rocking up on their doorstep at" she quickly glanced at her watch "four-thirty in the morning?" she asked.

"Hell no," I replied. I finished tying the laces of my left shoe and started on my right. This particular pair had been one of my birthday presents from Jessica – they were black Converse Chuck Taylors, and as with all of my sneakers had the laces stitched into place so that they couldn't be easily removed. "Mom's probably up already, and if I know her as well as I should she'll have the coffee maker going even before we walk in the door. Dad probably won't make an appearance until much later on in the morning, unless of course Mom goes and drags him out of bed." Isobel hid a grin at this. "With a lot of grumbling, mind you. Dad isn't much of a morning person. Never has been."

The lights at the front of the house were blazing when the bus rolled to a stop just outside the gates, and I grinned. At least one person was wide awake, and I had a reasonably good idea who it was. It was still dark, so while the driver unloaded the suitcases and other gear belonging to

Isobel and I, I clipped Ratchet's leash onto her collar and led the way off the bus, the penlight torch I kept on my key ring lighting the way.

"Your parents' house is freaking huge," Isobel whispered as I started to sort through our gear.

"Well, there are ten of us when we're all at home," I said with a shrug. "It has to be." I propped my wheelchair against my suitcase, before rising up out of my crouch and looking up at the bus.

"Hey Mark!" I yelled, and whacked the side of the bus to make sure I got my twin's attention. He appeared at the bus door and squinted down at us. "Feel like helping us drag all this inside?"

"In your dreams," he scoffed.

"You can have my last bag of almond M&M's if you do," I told him, deciding to appeal to his sweet tooth. I conveniently neglected to mention that I still had two full bags of the peanut butter variety stashed away in my suitcase, well away from Mark's grabbing hands.

"If you've already gone through it and picked out all the green ones, I'll never forgive you," Mark informed me as he came down the stairs.

"I swear as a Hanson that I haven't so much as touched it since I bought it," I promised.

My promise seemed to appease Mark, and he picked up my camera case, suitcase and wheelchair. I followed suit with my backpack, carrying my guitar case in my left hand and holding onto Ratchet's leash with my right. Isobel brought up the rear with her suitcase, backpack and handbag.

"What's the security code again?" Mark asked as we walked up to the front gates.

"Three one four eight three," I replied.

"Hang on," Isobel said a few seconds later, as Mark punched the code into the keypad set into the right gatepost. "Isn't that your birthday?"

"Yep," Mark replied, a split-second before the gates swung open. "Funny thing is that it was the default code when we had the gates installed, and it just made sense not to change it."

The back door was unlocked and slightly ajar when the three of us stepped up onto the brightly-lit back porch, and just by that I knew that Mom had to have seen the gates opening. "Ratchet, sit," I commanded as I let go of the leash and pushed the door open. "Mom?" I called out quietly, not wanting to wake the sleeping occupants of the house. "Mom, we're home..."

And then I saw her. Coming up the back corridor of the house was Mom, and I couldn't help the smile that had started creeping across my face. I could be anywhere in the world, and yet as soon as I saw my mother I knew I was home. She was one of the few people who understood me, and was right at the top of a very short list of people who I knew I could count on for anything.

"It is so good to have you home," she said with a smile as she pulled me into a close embrace.

"It's good to be home," I replied. "I missed you like crazy."

"Well, we all missed you." She released me from the embrace and held me at arm's length. "Let me get a look at you." Her smile disappeared as she eyed me critically, and a look of disappointment entered her blue eyes. "Oh Taylor, *what* am I going to do with you?" she asked, shaking her head.

"What?"

"I can tell just by looking at you that you haven't been sleeping as much as you know that you need to, and you've barely been eating. I thought we discussed this."

"I've been taking my medication, though," I told her, content in the knowledge that I'd done at least *one* thing right.

"Which is obvious, because you're still walking around," Mom said dryly. "Come on, inside with you while I say hello to your brother."

I sighed and nodded, before letting out a quiet but shrill whistle. Ratchet reacted immediately, darting into the house as Mom stepped to one side. Isobel and I exchanged glances before stepping inside ourselves.

I'd been wrong, I decided as we entered the kitchen. The coffee maker *wasn't* going, and I wasn't about to go ahead and switch it on. This house would always be my home, but I didn't live here anymore.

Mark and Mom came inside a few moments later, Mark dragging the rest of my gear along with him. "I should get going," he said as he set my suitcase down against the back wall of the kitchen. "I'll be back later on, when the sun's actually up." He grinned. "See you later, Tay." I raised a hand in acknowledgment, and he headed toward the back door.

"Isobel, would you like something to drink?" Mom asked as she went behind the kitchen bench and flicked the coffee maker on, before going to the cupboards above the kitchen stove.

"I'd love some orange juice if you have any," Isobel replied.

"Can I have some coffee?" I asked hopefully.

"Taylor, the absolute last thing you need right now is more caffeine," Mom informed me as she took down a canister and a coffee mug. "You're having some tea, then you're going to bed. I'm not going to argue with you about this."

"Tea's got more caffeine in it than coffee does," I told her.

"*Chamomile* tea, Taylor. You need to catch up on whatever sleep it is that you've missed so far this tour. And I'm willing to bet that it's quite a lot. *Especially* during the last three or four weeks."

"Actually, Mrs. Hanson-" Isobel started.

"Isobel, honey, call me Diana," Mom interrupted as she filled the electric kettle. "I get 'Mrs.' quite enough from the kids' friends."

"Diana, then," Isobel corrected, sounding somewhat uneasy. "It was only for two weeks. And only because the guys were desperate – they wouldn't have asked otherwise. Otherwise he's been good with getting his rest." She gently poked me in the ribs. "We've been sharing a hotel" I quickly squeezed her hand under the table "room this whole tour, so I should know."

"Nice save," I murmured. I knew that she'd been about to say 'hotel bed' before I'd somewhat unsubtly caused her to say otherwise.

Mom sent me upstairs a few minutes later, telling me to get ready for bed while she talked to Isobel. Not wanting to incur her rather considerable wrath so soon after my arrival back home I did as I was told, taking my suitcase and Ratchet with me. Even though it had been two years since I had left home for good I still knew my way to my old bedroom, and could easily make the journey with my eyes closed.

One of the 'benefits' of my brothers' celebrity status was that we had been able to afford to leave the house on 78th Street, which by the time Mackenzie had come along was far too small for a family of nine to inhabit comfortably. The house was still owned by my parents, but was now used mostly for storage. Our 'new' house was more than large enough to house us all, with enough space that for the first time in my life I'd had my own bedroom. When I closed my eyes I could still picture it. Pale blue walls on which I'd hung posters, each year's calendar, framed photographs and the occasional pinup. Soft, dark blue carpet beneath my feet, instead of the hardwood floors and slate tiling that featured in the rest of the house. The window that looked out onto the backyard and that of the house behind ours. My old desk, cluttered with old notebooks, school work, pens that had run out of ink, magazines and photography books. The second-hand cedar bookshelves that had, at one point, been bursting at the joins with every book I had ever owned. My built-in wardrobe that, with its mirrored doors, doubled as a bedroom mirror. And lastly my old bed, the one that had seen me through six summers' worth of the ups and downs of my illness.

Thankfully, my parents hadn't cleaned my room out, and so its contents remained intact. It wasn't until I sank down onto my bed that I realised how tired I truly was – my excitement over being home had worn off, and now I was just exhausted. I needed to sleep, and I knew it.

A quiet knock sounded at the door just after I had changed back into my pyjamas. "Come in," I said, not bothering to get up from where I sat on my bed, looking out the window with my back to the door. Soon I felt the mattress dip down as someone sat down next to me, and I cast a glance sideways to see that it was my mother. "Hey."

"Isobel will be up in a little while," she told me. I felt her fingers removing the elastic band from around my ponytail as she spoke. "Tay, you need a haircut."

"S'only way people can tell us apart without hearing either of us talk, or looking at our wrists," I told her, referring to Mark.

"There is one other way," Mom said, and I felt her touch the left side of my chin, just below my mouth. "You have a small mole right here. Mark doesn't."

"Yeah, but unless anyone knows to look for it, they're not going to know it's there." I looked down at my bare feet. "And anyway, I like having long hair. It's a pain in the ass to look after, but it's the one thing that I have control over."

Mom didn't say anything in response to this. Instead she guided me down onto my back so that I was lying with my head in her lap. My eyes drifted closed as she ran her fingers through my hair.

"So what are you and Isobel planning to do during the next few days?" she asked after a little while.

"I'm going to give her the grand tour later on today, once I've woken up." I opened one eye and squinted up at Mom. "And we both have to work on Friday, so odds are we'll probably just hang around here tomorrow – I'll be too worn out otherwise. Don't know what's planned for Saturday, but I do know that we're heading off to Oklahoma City on Sunday." I drew in a deep breath and

let it out as a sigh, and closed my eye again. "We're also going to be doing a bit of house-hunting while we're here."

"So are you coming back here for good, then?" Mom asked. I could hear a faint sense of hope in her tone.

"Unless the *Tulsa World* is hiring photographers right about now, I doubt it." I laughed quietly. "We're looking for a place in Brooklyn, actually. I'm sick of Manhattan, she's sick of Queens, plus it's still close enough to work that we're not having to spend ages on the subway each day." I yawned quietly. "We still haven't told Mark and Jess that we're moving in together, but once we've got a shortlist of places to check out we'll tell them. We've picked October fifteenth as our moving day, so we need to find our new place soon."

"I'd say so." I felt her hand start tracing the two scars on my face. "Just promise me that I'm not going to become a grandmother anytime soon."

"I swear it. Issie and I, neither of us want kids. She hates them, and the whole thing would just exhaust me too much. I'd be a rotten father."

"Well, I would beg to differ on that, but I suppose you'd know better than I would." I opened my eyes and looked up at her. She gave me a smile. "Come on, off to bed with you. I left your tea on your night table. Make sure you drink all of it before you go to sleep."

Isobel came in just as I'd settled myself in bed, my mug of tea held in both hands so that my fingers didn't cramp up. Ratchet was curled up at my feet, fast asleep.

"So how's it feel to be home?" Isobel asked as she folded her jeans and T-shirt, setting them on my desk before climbing into bed beside me.

"It feels pretty good," I replied. "New York is wonderful, but it'll never really be home. Here, though...I feel alive. There are no expectations of me, so I can just be myself." I sipped my tea carefully. "Nobody gives a damn who I am, which suits me just fine."

My eyes were beginning to drift closed even before I finished half my tea, and I knew there was no way I'd be able to finish it all. Isobel rescued the mug from my hands and set it back down on my night table.

"You really need to sleep, Tay," she said softly as I lay down and rolled onto my left side.

"I know," I mumbled, half a second before sleep overtook me.

I ended up sleeping for ten hours straight, the time on my phone reading 14:45 when I was able to focus properly. Even though I was still tired, and as much as I would have loved to stay in bed all afternoon, I knew I had to get up. I'd already wasted most of the day, so there was no sense in wasting the rest of it.

Isobel was talking to Dad in the kitchen when I wandered in, shaking one of my pill bottles slightly in time with my footsteps. "Ah, it awakes," Dad joked as I sat down at the table next to Isobel and dropped my head into my hands.

"Need coffee," I mumbled in response. Isobel let out a quiet chuckle and got up from her seat. Less than a minute later a mug filled with piping hot black coffee was placed in front of me, and I looked up at her. "Thanks," I said gratefully, earning myself a smile.

"So what are you two planning to do today?" Dad asked as I picked one of my pills out of their bottle and popped it into my mouth, following it with a coffee chaser.

"Taylor promised to give me the grand tour while we were here," Isobel replied. "I didn't get much of a chance to look around back in May – we were here for literally one day. Flew in at seven-thirty that morning, left at ten that night."

"That's work for you," I said without looking up from my coffee.

"But since we have a bit of time on our hands," Isobel continued, as if I hadn't even said a word, "we're probably going to drive around and see where that takes us."

"She wants to see the old house too," I added. I finished my coffee and set my mug down on the table. "I should probably get dressed though. I don't think the whole of Tulsa wants to see me in my pyjamas."

Once I was dressed and had my shoes on, I dug my wallet, keys and phone out of my backpack, crammed them into my pockets, and headed back downstairs. Isobel was waiting in the kitchen, sitting on the scrubbed wooden table and swinging a key ring around her right index finger. I snatched it away and stuck my tongue out at her before leading the way outside.

My old Toyota, a sixteenth birthday present from my parents, was still parked in the garage, with its accompanying key on the key ring I'd taken from Isobel. "God, I haven't seen this in years," I said almost wistfully, grinning as I caught sight of the green sticker that had a home on the rear bumper. Emblazoned on the sticker in silver text were the words *Proud Slytherin Reject*. "Avery put that on there a few summers ago," I explained as I unlocked the driver's side door. "The irony is that on every single *Harry Potter* sorting test I've ever done, I've landed Slytherin House." I cocked an eyebrow at Isobel. "Must be the misanthrope in me."

"You, a misanthrope?" Isobel mock-snorted. "That'll be the day..."

Our drive into Tulsa took fifteen minutes – ten minutes to get into the city itself, and a further five minutes to reach 78th Street. The old house was about halfway along the street. As soon as I caught sight of it a wave of nostalgia washed over me.

"So this is where you grew up," Isobel commented as I swung my car into the driveway.

"Yep," I replied. I cut the engine and took my key out of the ignition. "We left not long after Zoë's first birthday."

It took a bit of fiddling with my keys as I tried to remember which key matched the doorknob and which one matched the deadbolt, but I eventually managed to let us into the house. I stopped just inside the front door and closed my eyes.

"Tay?" I heard Isobel say. She sounded worried. "Are you all right?"

"Do you remember how I told you that Christmas 1999 was when I first got sick?" I asked.

"I do."

"It was the sickest I'd been in my whole life. Up until that point, anyway. When my parents picked me up at the airport I could barely walk, I'd lost an incredible amount of weight that I honestly couldn't afford to lose, and I hadn't eaten in about a week. I couldn't stay awake long enough." I opened my eyes again. "They brought me here for my Christmas break so that I could rest and at least *try* to get better, away from everyone else at the other house. Dad ended up carrying me through the front door." I let out a quiet chuckle. "I was almost six feet tall by that time, so you can imagine what it must have looked like."

I lowered myself to the floor and started tracing patterns on the carpet. "Of course, I didn't end up getting better. It might happen someday, but I've had CFS for almost eight years now – it's not looking very likely to me. I've improved somewhat since then, mostly because I'm on medication, but I've pretty much come to accept that I may never recover completely. It's really a matter of waiting to see what happens." I picked at a few loose threads on my jeans. "The hardest lesson I ever had to learn was to slow down. I had to learn to pace myself, to decide what was most important, and to accept that this was how things had to be from now on." I gave Isobel a small smile. "Needless to say, between being sick and starting college at sixteen, I had to grow up *very* fast."

From there, I gave Isobel a quick tour of the house. "There were *four* of you in here?" she asked in what sounded like amazement when we reached my old bedroom.

"Mmm-hmm. We had two sets of bunk beds in here – Mark and I had one, and Isaac and Zac had the other. Just along those walls there." I gestured along the two side walls of the room. One of

the sets of bunk beds remained in there, the ones that Mark and I had shared. "It got very noisy in here. It was one hell of a relief to get my own room."

"I can believe that," Isobel said with a chuckle. "I had to share a room with Sami and Kat while we were growing up, and the amount of fights we got into was astounding." She looked sidelong at me. "Did you ever fight with your brothers?"

I shook my head. "Never. They fought with one another sometimes, but for some reason I could never find a reason to fight with them. I got hacked off at them sometimes, sure, but if it was Isaac or Zac who I was irked at I usually just gave them the silent treatment for about a week. That was long enough for them to realise that maybe I wasn't talking to them because I was extremely pissed off."

"What about Mark?"

I eyed Isobel. "Have you *met* Mark? Issie, he's my twin. There's probably no-one else in the world, aside from my mother, who knows me better than he does. It's literally impossible for me to ignore him for longer than about a few hours. He knows how to get me to talk, and he doesn't let up until I do. I might be the family expert at giving the cold shoulder, but he's the master at getting people to open up."

The tour ended in the basement, where my brothers had once had a practice space. Here and there I could see evidence of the area's former purpose – broken drumsticks, snapped and frayed guitar strings, scraps of sheet music and composition paper, and lyrics scrawled in permanent marker on the walls.

"So this is where the magic happened once upon a time," Isobel said as she walked around the basement. She trailed her fingers along the walls as she made a circuit.

"Once upon a time," I echoed. "Years ago, my brothers spent almost every waking moment down here. They only ever came upstairs for meals, showers, changing clothes, lessons and to sleep. Mark and Zac even blew off their soccer games and practices."

"It all paid off in the end, though."

"That it did," I agreed. I sat down on the bottom step and stretched my legs out. It wasn't long before Isobel finished her explorations and came to join me. "Do you know why I invited you to my brothers' concert that first time?" I asked her.

"Well, at the time, you said that it was because you thought I might like to...what were the words you used?"

"Experience the madness for yourself," I finished. "That wasn't the only reason, Issie." I twirled one of her curls around my right index finger. "I asked you because one, during your interview you really impressed me. Not many people act that professionally – I'm sure Schuyler's told you about how a lot of journalists attempt to include Jess and I, when we're not even part of the band. And two, I wanted to get to know you better. You...well, you really intrigued me. There was just something about you that made me want to find out more about you. And I'm glad I did."

"Me too," Isobel agreed. She gave me a sweet smile. "I honestly thought that after I finished the interview, that would be the end of it and I'd never see you again. Of course, it wasn't. And for that I'm thankful." She picked at the knee of her jeans. "I'm pretty sure I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Tay," she said softly.

"Really?"

She nodded. "Really."

I eyed her. "You want to get married?"

"What, now?" She raised an eyebrow at me. "And in your old basement?"

"Well, no, not in *here*, and not right now. But one day."

"You do realise that isn't much of a proposal, don't you?"

"Didn't mean it as one."

"I see." She put her left hand on top of my right and intertwined our fingers. "One day, then. I think I'd like that."

"I was hoping you would say that." I leaned down and hiked up the left leg of my jeans, and scratched my ankle. "I've realised something in the six months I've known you," I said as I straightened up.

"What's that?"

"I've cheated death twice already. And now I know that there was a reason for that. It was so we'd be able to meet and get to know one another. Because if Mark *hadn't* found me, or if the ambulance hadn't arrived in time last year..." I swallowed hard. "I wouldn't be here right now. And I am so incredibly thankful for whatever it was that spared my life both times. I have my entire life ahead of me now, and I know I want to spend it with you."

Chapter 11

Ridin' on a river of freeway lights

Isobel

As the convoy of buses crossed the border from Vermont into Maine, I could feel my spirits lifting considerably. While Maidstone would probably always be my home, in all my visits back to England I hadn't felt any sort of spark of excitement from seeing the place where I'd spent the first four years of my life. Like Tulsa was for Taylor, anytime I returned to Maine I felt a lot more alive. The city of Eastport was where I had grown up, and was where the rest of the United States branch of the Reynolds family still lived. I was the only member of my family who had struck out beyond the state line for anything other than a vacation.

But Eastport wasn't our destination this tour. Portland was to be our base for four days – a concert was scheduled for the evening of the fourth of September, as the final show for the United States leg of the tour, and we would be making the trek to New Brunswick on the sixth. From there we would be making a lightning run across Canada, taking in thirteen cities in just fifteen days. The final Canadian show was to be played in Vancouver on the twenty-first.

"So is this where you grew up?"

I looked over from checking my email on my BlackBerry at Taylor, who was staring out of the window of our bus with his nose just touching the glass. It was still very early, so what he hoped to see was beyond me.

"No, not quite," I replied as I returned to reading the most recent email from Samantha. It had landed in my inbox the night before.

Hey Bel,

Just thought I would let you know that I'll be at 51 Wharf from around 12 o'clock on the fourth of September onwards. There are a few errands that I need to run before that, so if I'm not there when you two arrive I probably won't be too far away.

Also, Mum showed me the photo of Taylor that you sent to her a couple of days ago, and I have to say that I definitely approve – he looks like quite the catch! Can't wait to meet him.

Love Sami

Once I was done reading I clicked out of my inbox and dialled up Google Maps, tapping *eastport maine* into the search field when the site had loaded. "This is where I grew up," I told Taylor, showing him the map with Eastport highlighted. "It's small, but it's always going to be home. Schuyler and I usually head back up that way for Thanksgiving and Christmas every year. It's about the only time I get to see my parents."

"Are you planning on it this year?"

I looked over at Taylor. "Well, yeah. I haven't seen anyone in my family since last New Year's, so I'd kind of like to spend a little time with them. Why do you ask?"

He dropped his gaze and seemed to study his shoelaces. "It's just that I was hoping you'd come back home with me for Thanksgiving," he replied with a shrug. "That's all." He looked back up at me and gave me a small smile. "You don't have to, of course."

I put my BlackBerry down to one side and shifted closer to him. "How about we talk it over when we're settled in our new place?" I suggested. "It'll be easier to make plans once we have a bit of time to ourselves." I took his hand in mine and squeezed it gently. "Okay?"

This time, his smile was much wider. "Yeah, okay," he agreed, before tipping his head slightly to the left. "You know, I think both of my grandmothers would have loved you," he said. "Same with my pop."

“Would have?” I asked, a split-second before the reason for that particular wording hit me. “Oh Jesus, I’m sorry,” I apologised.

Taylor’s smile had now vanished, and he nodded, answering my unspoken question. “Nan died in 1994,” he said quietly. “Grandma and Pop both passed last year.”

“You miss them, don’t you.”

It wasn’t a question, and yet Taylor responded anyhow. “Like crazy.”

We spoke no more of the subject after that. I went back to my email, while Taylor disappeared back to the bunks. He returned with a bottle of water and one of his pill bottles, and set about taking his medication.

At about five minutes past twelve, the two of us arrived at 51 Wharf, the restaurant where Samantha had arranged to meet us for lunch. We had left Ratchet back at our hotel under Jessica’s watchful eye, even though we knew Taylor’s dog would have been allowed inside with us. I spotted my sister standing just outside the restaurant’s doors as we stepped up onto the footpath.

“Sami!” I called out, and my sister looked in our direction almost straight away. The grin on her face when she spotted us was truly a sight for sore eyes.

“Damn I missed you,” she said as she hugged me tightly. I felt her looking back over my shoulder as she made to release me. “And who is this?”

I stepped back out of Samantha’s embrace and up next to Taylor, lacing his fingers with mine. “Sami, this is my boyfriend Taylor Hanson,” I said, making introductions. “Tay, this is my oldest sister Samantha Walkinshaw.”

Taylor extended his free hand, and Samantha grasped hold in almost an instant. “It’s good to meet you, Taylor,” Samantha said as the two of them shook hands. “Bel’s told me quite a bit about you.”

"All good, I hope," Taylor said.

I didn't miss the gleam in Samantha's eyes as she replied, "Oh yes, all good." She nodded toward the doors. "Well then, shall we? I'm sure you're both starving."

Almost as soon as we had been seated, Taylor excused himself from the table, and Samantha leaned across the table to me. "Now remind me, Bel – he's the one whose brothers I hate, right?" she asked, sounding slightly panicked.

"Yes, Sami," I reminded her. "His brothers are in Hanson. And for the love of God, *don't* confuse him with Mark. It annoys the shit out of him. Just keep in mind that that Taylor has long hair and doesn't wear a watch, and that should make things relatively easy for you."

Samantha nodded and settled herself back in her seat. "Gotcha." As she busied herself looking through her menu, she asked the one question I had been dreading. "And he doesn't wear a watch because...?"

I closed my eyes briefly. I took my promises seriously, and I knew that if I told Samantha the true reason why Taylor didn't wear a watch I'd be on my boyfriend's bad side faster than I could blink. So I did the only thing I *could* do.

I lied.

"He doesn't see the point," I replied with a shrug. "He always has his phone with him, and to him that's just as good as any watch. Doesn't much help him if the battery runs out of juice halfway through the day, of course."

Taylor returned to the table just as I had decided what I wanted for my lunch – I'd chosen a grilled chicken sandwich, and planned to ask for no lettuce when the time came to order. Samantha for her part had decided on bruschetta.

"So where are you all headed after you leave here?" Samantha asked as Taylor looked over his own menu.

"New Brunswick," Taylor replied without looking up. "There's going to be concerts in Saint John and Moncton on the sixth and the seventh."

"Looking forward to it?"

"Yeah, definitely." He put his menu down. "Though I'm looking forward to getting home more than anything else."

"I rather think you would be. You've been on the road for about three -and-a-half months, haven't you?"

"Thereabouts, yeah." He put his left hand atop my right and interlaced our fingers. "But I'm mostly looking forward to it because Bel and I are going to be moving into our own apartment in October." I caught his eye and he smiled before leaning across to kiss my forehead. "We signed the lease and paid a deposit last Monday."

"We'll give you our address and phone number before we leave," I promised. "We don't officially move in until the fifteenth of October, though, so you should probably call my cell or send me an email if you want to get in touch before then."

Samantha nodded. "Gotcha."

It wasn't long before we'd placed our lunch orders, Taylor having decided on Caesar salad, and soon talk turned to what I knew my sister considered to be a very important question.

"So how long have you two been dating?" she asked.

"It'll be six months on the fourteenth," Taylor replied. With laughter bubbling up in his voice, he added, "I asked her to be my girlfriend on my birthday, actually."

"We met at work, at the end of January," I added. "I was interviewing his brothers for the magazine, and Taylor was doing photography for them. He invited me to a concert the next day." I shifted a little closer to him and leaned my head on his shoulder. "We've been pretty much inseparable ever since."

"Very sweet," Samantha said, her tone devoid of even a hint of sarcasm. "Might there be a wedding on the horizon any time soon?"

"Not at the moment," Taylor replied. "We're going to see how living together goes first."

Samantha nodded. "That's smart. Good to know that you're covering all of your bases."

Twelve-twenty saw the arrival of our respective lunches, and soon we had busied ourselves with eating. I found it hard to suppress a groan of delight as I bit into my sandwich, and failed to notice until the last moment that Taylor was stealing the fries off of my plate while I devoured my lunch.

"You thief!" I accused him as I pushed his hand away. "You have your own lunch, stop eating mine!"

"I'm still hungry!" he protested. Out of the corner of my eye I noted that he'd finished eating his lunch.

"Hungry or not, they're mine and I'm paying for my lunch out of my own pocket." I poked his shoulder. "Next time we make a stop at McDonald's, *you* owe me a large fries."

"Spoilsport," Taylor muttered, but he left the last remaining fries on my plate for me to eat.

After lunch we parted ways – Samantha had to head back home, as she was due to collect Amy from preschool in a few hours' time, while Taylor and I had to get back to the hotel and relieve Jessica of her dog-sitting duties.

"Take care of yourselves," my sister said as she hugged me first, before turning her attentions to Taylor. "I'll see you at Thanksgiving, yeah?"

"Either that or Christmas," I confirmed.

"Well, she's interesting," Taylor commented as we walked back to the hotel. "Is that what the rest of your family is like?"

"Yeah, pretty much. Though Sami's more like Mum than the rest of us are. I mostly take after my dad."

"Which I can take to mean that I'll like your dad, then?"

"Well, considering you like *me* so much, I'd say so." I raised an eyebrow at him, before grinning.

"I think he'll like you too, come to think of it."

"Let's just hope he *does* like me," Taylor said, and for the first time I noted that he actually sounded nervous about the whole 'meeting the parents' thing.

"Relax," I said. "You still have a couple of months at least before you meet my parents. That's more than long enough to get yourself psyched up." I winked at him. "It'll be nothing like *Meet The Parents*, trust me. My dad's never seen a polygraph in his life."

"That doesn't exactly make me feel optimistic, you know."

"It should." I tugged on his hand. "Come on. I'm sure Ratchet is desperate for her master's company."

* * *

As the final notes of *Born In The U.S.A.* sounded, to conclude the last show of the North American tour, twin roars of excitement rang out. One of them came from the audience, whose enthusiasm was tempered by the knowledge that tonight's concert was officially the last for the year. While plans for the Halloween concert had been set in motion back in July, nobody in the Hanson camp had told the fans as of yet, and there were no plans to make an announcement until at least the

beginning of October. The other erupted backstage, where the tour crew celebrated a job well done on all fronts. This one was tinged with relief that home wasn't too far away.

I was the only one *not* celebrating.

I sat off to one side backstage, attention focused solely on my BlackBerry as I tapped out a text message to Taylor, who had chosen to stay back at the hotel tonight. Halfway through the Montreal concert ten days earlier he'd collapsed, the exhaustion that had been building up over the last few months having finally come to a head. An impromptu trip to the emergency room had ended in a doctor recommending strict bed rest as far as was possible. He now had a doctor's appointment scheduled for the end of September, a few days after our arrival back in New York.

Before I sent off the message, I read it through quickly. *Concert just finished, heading back soon – you feeling any better? Want me to get you anything on my way back?*

His response, while not immediate, was far more coherent than I knew he had to be. It landed in my inbox just as I was following Jessica, Isla and Alli out to the minibuses that had transported us to the concert venue that morning. ***Feeling a bit better, just v.tired mostly – can't sleep b/c i have a headache and my back & shoulders are killing me. :(Get me some skittles, please?***

"Can we make a quick pit stop on the way back to the hotel?" I asked as I waited for tonight's driver to unlock the band minibus. "Taylor's asked me to get him some Skittles."

"How's he feeling?" Isla asked.

"He's very tired," I replied. "Though he's having trouble sleeping. I might give him a bit of a massage when we get back to the hotel – I think I've still got some of the body lotion I bought before we left. Should help him get some sleep."

Taylor was sitting up in bed when I entered our room, bent over his laptop with his hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, and Ratchet curled up on the bed next to him. He looked up when I sat

down on the end of the bed and held up the bag of Skittles I'd bought on the way back to the hotel.

"You're a lifesaver," he rasped out, his voice roughened from exhaustion. "Thanks, Issie."

"How's the back?" I asked as he took the Skittles and set them down on the night table on his side of the bed.

"Still aching like a bitch." He rolled his shoulders. "So're my shoulders."

"Well, sitting like that wouldn't help much. Did you take anything for it?"

He nodded. "I took some Tylenol about a minute after I sent you that text message. Hasn't kicked in yet."

"You don't want anything stronger?" I nodded toward my shoulder bag, which I'd put down next to the writing desk. "I have some Advil in my bag."

Now he shook his head. "I'm allergic to ibuprofen. Tylenol's about the strongest painkiller I can take unless I can get a prescription for codeine or something like that. I can't even take aspirin."

I studied him for a little while. "I think I can help a little." I got to my feet and went into the bathroom. "Put your laptop away, take off your shirt and lie down on your stomach."

"What're you going to do?"

"You'll see," I called back. I unzipped my toiletries kit and rummaged around for my bottle of lotion – once I had unearthed it, I unscrewed the cap and peered inside. It was still two-thirds full. Satisfied, I screwed the cap back on, picked the washcloth up from the vanity, and went back into the room.

Just as I'd told him to, Taylor was lying down on his stomach with his shirt off, forehead resting on his crossed arms. His laptop was nowhere to be seen. He raised his head and looked back at

me as I settled myself over his knees, raising an eyebrow at me as I shook the bottle and squirted some of its contents into my left hand, rubbed my hands together, and started working at his shoulders. As soon as I began kneading out the knots and kinks that had developed he let out a low moan and dropped his head back down again.

“God that feels fucking *good*,” I heard him mumble, and I grinned. “Where did you learn to do that?”

“Martin taught me,” I replied. “He used to throw his back and shoulders out a lot when he was on the football team in high school.” I started to work my way down his back. “So I became the unofficial family physiotherapist pretty early on. Though I will admit that I tended to use something other than lavender and vanilla body lotion when I gave him a massage.” I took my left hand off of his back for the barest of moments and waved it near his face. “I figured you might want a bit of help falling asleep, and lavender is really good for that.”

“Well I think it’s working already,” he said. By the timbre of his voice I could tell that he was already very close to sleep. I smiled slightly and wiped my hands off with the washcloth, and set about rubbing in what was already on his back further into his skin. He was dead to the world by the time I’d finished.

The next morning, bright and early, we split up. One group, consisting of Hanson, their tour manager, Alli and Isla, along with their backing musicians and approximately a quarter of the road crew, was destined for Vancouver International Airport to catch an Air New Zealand flight to Auckland. The other, consisting of Taylor, Jessica, the remainder of the road crew and myself, was headed directly to New York, our route taking us through nine cities in just three days – we would be travelling through Seattle, Spokane, Missoula, Great Falls, Bismarck, Minneapolis, Chicago, Cleveland and Pittsburgh, making only the briefest of stops to refuel or to grab a bite to eat. It would be even more of a lightning run than our trip across Canada had been.

"Please be careful," Jessica said as she hugged each of her brothers in turn before they left for the airport. "I don't particularly want to get a phone call from Wellington or wherever telling me that one or all of you have been stupid enough as to break your own necks." I hid a smile as I realised she was unconsciously echoing Samantha's own warning to me before I'd joined the tour.

Once the group bound for New Zealand had departed to catch their flight, the rest of us boarded the buses. Now that only Taylor, Jessica and I were left on the band bus, aside from the drivers of course, we had a little more room to spread out. Jessica and I already had plans for that evening that involved popcorn and Jessica's DVD of *The Notebook*.

"Need any help?" I asked Taylor as he rolled up to the side of the bus and stood up very shakily, grabbing hold of the handrail just inside the door to steady himself.

"Just make sure I don't fall back and crack my head open," he replied, his exhaustion plain as day. With these words he started to pull himself up into the bus, pausing on each step to catch his breath. I bit my bottom lip, knowing that this was by far the sickest I'd ever seen him. And not for the first time, I didn't envy him one bit.

"I'm going to take a raincheck on tonight," I told Jessica as I folded Taylor's wheelchair up. "I don't think he should be alone right now."

"No problem," Jessica replied. "He could do with some company, I think – it's what he needs most when he's feeling like this. Aside from sleep, of course, and a tour bus isn't exactly the best place for that."

I found Taylor lying on one of the couches in the back lounge, his eyes closed. He opened his left eye as I sat down and carefully eased his head up into my lap. "Issie?" he asked, sounding hazy, and I nodded.

"Try and get some sleep," I said softly, running my fingers through his hair as I spoke. "You really need it."

"Not tired," he protested. Even as he spoke his eye was sliding closed once more.

"You're more than tired, I think. You're completely exhausted. So the sooner you go to sleep, the sooner you'll feel much better." I carefully smoothed down his eyebrows with the pad of my right thumb. "I'll still be here when you wake up."

"D'nt wan' t'sleep," he mumbled – the last words I heard from him as his breathing deepened and evened out and he slipped into a deep sleep, one I didn't even think to disturb. A few moments later I took my jacket off and zipped it up, folded it and eased myself out from under his head, replacing my lap with the makeshift pillow. A dig around in one of the cabinets turned up a thick fleece blanket that I unfolded and spread out over Taylor, making sure he was completely covered from his shoulders right down to his toes. It was one of the things that Mark had told me to do when his brother's energy levels hit rock bottom, with the others being to let him sleep, make sure he stayed as warm and as comfortable as was possible, and to stay close by so that he didn't freak out when he woke up.

I ended up staying by his side for the entire journey back to New York, leaving only to duck into the tiny bathroom and for meals. Anytime that he drifted into wakefulness I was quick to reassure him that I was still here and wouldn't leave his side, and soon his eyes would slide closed once again.

He finally woke up completely just as the bus was turning into West 72nd. "Where're we?" he asked as he sat up, pulling the blanket closer around his shoulders.

"New York," I replied as I eased myself to my feet and sat down next to him. "The Upper West Side of Manhattan, to be exact."

As soon as I spoke the name of the neighbourhood that he called home, he brightened up considerably. "So we're back, then?" he asked.

"We're back," I confirmed. I leaned in close and quickly kissed him on the lips. "Welcome home, Tay."

Chapter 12

Pumpkins scream in the dead of night

Taylor

As soon as we arrived back in New York, everything shifted into high gear. Three days afterward I kept my appointment with Dr. Hewitt – as with many of appointments with him, part of its intent was to make absolutely sure it was only exhaustion that had caused my collapse in Montreal. Thankfully, that was all it had been. Dr. Hewitt had also written a new prescription for the medication that kept my seasonal affective disorder under control – it didn't usually rear its ugly head until around late November, but that depended entirely on the weather and how miserable the CFS had been making me feel. It often made me wonder just why I lived in New York in the first place.

At the beginning of October, the official announcement about the Halloween concert was posted on the main page of Hanson.net, ensuring that nobody had any excuse for overlooking it. I could tell in an instant that it had been written and posted by Mark.

We are having a fantastic time here in New Zealand – it's our first visit to The Land of the Long White Cloud, and we have played for somewhere in the region of ten thousand people in the last week. In two days we will be heading across The Ditch, as we have heard it called, for our second tour of Australia in as many years. We can't wait to see all of our Australian fans again, and to see some of the sights that we haven't had the chance to before. Very high on our list is the city of Wollongong and surfing at Wollongong Beach, provided of course that it's warm enough for it!

We'll be arriving back in the States on October twenty-sixth, just in time for Halloween. Speaking of, we will be playing our final show for the year at Radio City Music Hall in New York on the thirty-first. The doors will open at eight-thirty in the evening, and the show itself will begin at nine. It will be for 18s and over only, for reasons that will be revealed on the night. IDs will be checked at the

*door, and anyone aged 17 or under will be refused entry. Costumes are optional, but those of you who do come dressed for the occasion will be in the running to win some pretty spectacular prizes. We'll be taking down the names and email addresses of all who attend the show in costume, along with photographs, and will announce the competition winners in mid-November. Entry to the show will cost \$15 on the night, and all proceeds will be donated to UNAIDS. Please note that all employees of 3CG Records and 10th Street Entertainment, along with any interested family members (that means **you**, Taylor and Jessica!), are ineligible to enter the competition on the night.*

With that all said, we look forward to seeing everyone in NYC for the Halloween show – we promise to show you all a good time.

Isaac, Mark and Zac

"So are you going?"

I looked up from my laptop at Isobel. She was halfway through packing most of her belongings into a series of boxes, despite the fact that we weren't due to move for another two weeks.

"To the Halloween concert?" I asked, so I could clarify what she meant, and she nodded. "I was considering it. Only problem is that I don't know what I could wear – I haven't dressed up for Halloween in years."

"Well, what have you dressed up as in the past?"

I leaned back in my seat and thought about it. "Well, one year, our parents dressed Mark and I up as Raggedy Ann and Raggedy Andy." I smirked. "Guess who had to wear the dress."

"Mark?"

I grinned and nodded. "Right in one. He lost the coin toss that year."

Isobel let loose a peal of laughter. "Oh, that is *priceless!* I hope your parents got photos."

"They did, but Mark torched them a few years ago. Mom did keep the negatives, though, so if I ask her nicely I *might* be able to borrow them and get prints run up. I'll just have to be careful Mark doesn't catch wind."

"And use them as blackmail material?" Isobel asked hopefully.

I let out a laugh of my own. "I like the way you think, Issie. Mark would do *anything* to make sure those photos never saw the light of day ever again."

Isobel grinned at this. "Look, I'll tell you what – I was going to keep this as a surprise, but I'll show you if you promise not to tell everyone else." When I nodded, she went to her closet and took out a coathanger. Whatever it was that was hanging off of it had been concealed with what looked like a bed sheet that had a hole cut in the middle. "Maybe this will give you a little bit of inspiration." And with those words, she lifted the front edge of the sheet.

My first reaction was a very low whistle. This, I had to assume, was Isobel's Halloween costume. It was essentially little more than a very short pleated red-and-green tartan skirt, red-and-green striped tie, white blouse, black blazer and a pair of fishnet stockings. "Wow," was all I could manage to say, my voice slightly strangled.

"I take it you like?" she asked, and I nodded emphatically. "Excellent. I have a pair of knee-high boots that I plan to wear as well – if I'm going to go as a naughty schoolgirl, then I'm going to go all out."

"Well, I definitely approve," I said. "I don't suppose you have an ulterior motive in mind?"

"*Moi?*" Isobel asked, sounding taken aback. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, it's just that..." I swallowed hard. "The thought of you wearing that...let's just say that it's lucky you're not wearing it right now."

It took a little while for the meaning behind my words to sink in.

"Oh," Isobel said, flushing bright red. "Well, no, that wasn't my intention, but if it gets you to react like that then I'm not complaining." She grinned wickedly before concealing her costume once more.

While Isobel worked at packing most of her clothes away, I opened up Outlook Express on my laptop and clicked the 'Send/Receive' button to check if I had any new mail. And sure enough, I did – it had been sent by one of my old college roommates.

Hey Taylor,

How's The Big Apple treating you? Been a while since we had a chance to talk, so I thought I'd drop you a line to see how things are going, but also because I have a business proposition for you.

*Basically, Expatriate Productions is expanding, and we're in need of a studio producer for the Wollongong branch of the company. The need isn't dire **just** yet, but give it about six months and we'll be getting pretty desperate. Craig dropped your name during a meeting last week, and we've decided that you would be the perfect person to fill that particular role. We would arrange everything – airfare to Sydney, your visa, housing, employment, you name it. All you have to do is say yes.*

We can hold the position open for you until April 30th next year. Once that date passes, we'll be opening the field to any and all comers. So whatever you decide, or if you have any questions, email me as soon as possible. Look forward to hearing from you soon.

Regards,

Bradley Whittingham

Expatriate Productions – Manly Branch

I sat back a little as I finished reading the email. This was truly the opportunity of a lifetime, one that I would be insane to pass up. It was the chance to use the skills I had learned during college for something other than working with my brothers' music – work for which I had always insisted I wanted to remain uncredited. Sometimes I did regret it, but I always reminded myself that some

of the more immature and critical members of the Hanson fan community would call favouritism were my name to be mentioned. Having my name kept out of it had suited me well enough so far, so I saw no point in changing things.

But then I looked over at Isobel, and reality came crashing in on me. To accept this job offer would mean I'd have to leave her behind – and there was no way in the world I was prepared to do that. No amount of money would be enough for me to agree to it.

“Well, this is just brilliant,” I muttered as I hibernated my laptop. Either way I went about it, there was no way both Isobel and I could benefit. If I accepted the offer, in all likelihood we would have to break up. But on the other hand, if I rejected it then I would lose this chance. It was a no-win situation if ever there was one.

That night, I dug my webcam out of my desk drawer and clipped it to the lid of my laptop, uncoiling the USB cord so I could plug it into the sole free port left out of the three I had on my computer. The other two were occupied by the receiver for my wireless mouse and the cooling pad I used to stop my laptop from overheating. As soon as my computer let me know that the webcam was connected, I opened up Windows Live Messenger and signed in. It was time for my weekly video chat with my mother.

“Ave, get off the computer,” I sighed when I saw who was signed into my mother’s account.

“What for?” Avery asked. “I’m trying to do my homework if you don’t mind.”

“I thought you had your own computer.”

My sister scowled. “Mac decided he was taking it over tonight,” she grumbled. “Won’t let me anywhere near it until he beats the campaign in *Shadows of Undrentide*.”

“He’s *still* obsessed with *Neverwinter Nights*?”

"Mmm-hmm. Mom won't let him install it on *his* computer, so he thinks it's his right to kick me off of mine. Never mind that it was *my* game to begin with."

I raised my hands, palms facing the camera. "Okay, hold up Ave. *How* old are you exactly?"

"You should know how old I am," she replied, sounding a little indignant. "Considering that you were almost eight when I was born."

"Humour me, okay?"

She sighed. "I'll be seventeen in a month."

"Right. And how old is Mac?"

"Thirteen." A calculating look appeared on Avery's face, and she grinned evilly. "Excuse me, Taylor. I need to tell our annoying little brother to get out of my bedroom."

"Send Mom in will you?"

She snapped a mock military salute and got up out of the chair. As she left what I knew was my parents' study I heard her yell, "Joshua Mackenzie Hanson, you had better get the *hell* off of my computer!"

I let out a quiet snicker and leaned back in my chair, and waited for my mother to make her appearance.

"Well Taylor, I don't know what you said to her," Mom said as she sat down before the computer back at home, "but she's back to her old self again."

I shrugged. "All I did was remind her that she's older than Mac. Nothing more, nothing less."

"It certainly worked. She still hasn't stopped ranting at him." I laughed at this, and Mom smiled.

"Enough about Avery for the moment, I think. How are you feeling?" I looked at her blankly, and she elaborated, "Isobel was kind enough to let me know what happened in Montreal."

"Oh." I looked down at the keyboard of my laptop momentarily. "I'm still feeling a bit out of sorts," I admitted.

"I thought you might be," Mom said, her tone sympathetic. "You're looking very pale."

"That, and I'm still exhausted almost all of the time." I tapped my fingers on the top of my desk.

"Stephen gave me the month off, though – he basically told me that he didn't want to see me anywhere *near* work until November." I shifted slightly in my seat. "Hopefully that'll be long enough to come back from this."

"Keep in mind what Dr. Horton told you," Mom reminded me. "It could get worse at any time. This just may be what he meant."

"Yeah, I know." I managed a very tight smile. "I've had close to eight good years, though – if it ends up that this is how things will be from now on, then that's something I'll have to learn to live with. I accept that."

"I'm glad to hear that."

I decided at that moment to bring up the job offer I had received. "Do you remember Brad Whittingham?" I asked.

"Very vaguely."

"He was one of my roommates at college." I paused. "He emailed me today with a job offer. Wants me to be the studio producer for a new branch of his production company."

"That's wonderful!" Mom said. "Oh Taylor, please tell me you said yes."

I decided to come straight out with it. "Mom...the job's in Australia. If I took the job, I'd have to move to the other side of the world." I dropped my gaze. "I'd have to leave Issie behind," I finished quietly.

"Oh honey," Mom said softly.

"I love her so much, Mom," I admitted. "And the thought of being away from her for even half a *day*...it actually *hurts*. I-I want to spend the rest of my life with her, but at the same time I want to take this job – it's the opportunity of a lifetime. I'll probably never get another chance like this. But no matter what I decide, we'll both get hurt."

"Not necessarily." I saw her gaze dip down to where I knew her left hand had to be – where I knew her wedding ring sat.

"You can't be serious," I muttered.

"I'm quite serious. This way, you're both happy. You can accept this new job offer, and the two of you won't have to be separated."

"I'm too young for that," I protested.

"You are two years older than your father and I were when *we* got married," was my mother's response. "If you were, say, nineteen, then I would be inclined to agree with you. But you're almost twenty-five – that's plenty old enough."

"There's also the fact that we haven't even been dating a *year*," I said stubbornly. "Six-and-a-half months – that's it. And I've only known her for eight."

"Plenty of couples get engaged when they've been dating for less than that."

I took in a deep breath. "Mom, believe me, I do want to marry her one day. B-but not yet. I'm not ready to take that step." My eyes dropped closed briefly. "I don't know *when* I'll be ready."

"I promise you, Tay – when you're ready, you'll know. That much I know is true."

* * *

"Good God Taylor, hold *still*..."

"You're going to poke my fucking eye out!"

Isobel scowled at me, brandishing the black eyeliner pencil that she had been trying to use on me for the last ten minutes. "If you don't hold still I just *might*," she growled. "Jesus H. Christ, haven't you ever worn makeup before?"

"I'm a *guy*, Isobel," I reminded her. "We don't wear makeup."

"You'd be very surprised. I know of plenty of guys who wear it. And besides, it's just for the one night. When we get home after the show I'll show you how to take it all off." And here she smirked. "You should be *very* fucking grateful I'm not making you wear mascara. That shit is a pain in the arse. Now come on, look up..."

I sighed and raised my gaze to the ceiling, trying not to shudder as Isobel ran the eyeliner just below each of my eyes, along the curve of my eyelashes. She did the same to my upper eyelids after I'd closed my eyes. "Next, eye shadow," she proclaimed.

I opened my right eye lazily. "Let me *guess*...black, right?"

Isobel peered at me. "Do you want to do this right or not?" she asked.

"Of course I do."

"Then black it is." She tapped my right eyebrow with one very long fingernail. "Close it."

"This is fucking *torture*," I muttered as I complied.

"You haven't got lipstick on yet," Isobel said. "Now *that* is torture. And I ought to know."

"But it's all part of the look," I sighed. "I know." I curled my hands into fists. "Do your worst."

"Oh, I intend to." I could almost hear the grin in her voice as she said these four words.

It felt almost an eternity before Isobel was completely done. "Right, you can open your eyes now," she said cheerfully. "Go put your costume on, then we can do your nails and hair."

"I hope you're not still planning on dyeing my hair," I said as I got to my feet. "I like my hair the way it is, thank you very much."

"No, I have a much better idea." She patted a white cardboard box that sat on the kitchen table. "By the time I get completely done with you, you'll be near unrecognisable."

"Wonderful," I said dryly as I headed into our bedroom.

Two full weeks had now passed since Isobel and I had moved into our own apartment in Brooklyn Heights. We'd chosen this particular apartment for a few reasons – the building was pet-friendly and wheelchair-accessible, and the rent was reasonably inexpensive. Not only that, but it had come already partially furnished – a refrigerator, stove, kitchen table and chairs, and a couch had been set up when we'd moved in. We'd had to provide everything else ourselves, but it had definitely made moving in a lot less expensive. It was strange not being around my brother and sister every day, though at the same time I loved having a little more freedom and independence.

Opting not to glance at my reflection until I was completely ready, I closed the bedroom door behind me and studied the two costumes laid out atop our neatly-made bed. Isobel's 'naughty schoolgirl' costume, as she had christened it, was set out on her side, with her black leather knee-high boots on the floor at the end of the bed. Part of my own costume, consisting of a long-sleeved shirt, Rolling Stones T-shirt, and cargo pants had been laid out on my side, with my army boots sitting next to Isobel's knee-highs. The trench coat I had bought from a secondhand store while we were in Canada was hanging from a hook on the back of our bedroom door. In keeping with my costume's theme, along with the makeup that Isobel had talked me into wearing, my entire outfit was black.

It was hilarious, really. I'd never even considered becoming part of the goth subculture, and yet here I was dressing up as one for Halloween.

Once I was dressed, being careful not to smear my makeup as I pulled my shirts on over my head, I went back out into the kitchen, carrying my boots and a pair of socks in one hand and my coat over a shoulder. Isobel had packed most of her makeup away by this time, with a bottle of nail polish – black, of course – set out on the table.

"You should probably put your boots on before I do your nails," Isobel said. She'd put her own makeup on by this time, already having done her nails the night before – bright red lipstick, smoky grey eye shadow and black eyeliner. "Don't want you wrecking my hard work."

"How long is it going to take to dry?" I asked, making note of the time that the clock on the wall above the sink displayed – three-thirty in the afternoon.

"Not very long – the bottle says go seconds. But I'll probably do three coats just to make sure it's as dark as possible. So give it about four-and-a-half minutes, five tops."

I nodded and set about pulling my socks and boots on, doing up the laces as tightly as I could without cutting off the circulation to my feet. As soon as I was done Isobel sat down next to me, opened the bottle of nail polish, and set to work.

Five-thirty saw us arriving at Mark and Jessica's apartment. We'd opted to leave Ratchet in the care of a neighbour for the evening. From behind the front door I could hear loud music, raucous laughter and the occasional swear word. Right as I went to knock Isobel caught my hand up, shaking her head, before nodding at a sign on the door that read *NO TRICK OR TREATERS*. With a very cheeky grin she drew in a deep breath and yelled, "*Trick or treat!*"

"Mark, I thought you put that sign up!" we both heard Jessica yell.

"I did!" Mark yelled back. "It probably fell down or something!"

"Well go tell them to piss off, and put it back up!"

I looked at Isobel. "Someone's in a bad mood," I muttered.

The door was wrenched open bare seconds later to reveal Mark in full Dracula regalia. The look on his face as he stared at Isobel and I could only be described as priceless.

"Holy *shit*," he whispered. "*Taylor?*"

"That's my name, don't wear it out," I replied. I peered over the rims of my glasses at my twin and noted that his eyes were red instead of their usual blue. "Nice contacts."

Mark stuck his tongue out at me, before turning his attention to Isobel. He let out a low whistle.

"Damn Tay, you definitely know how to pick 'em," he said.

"I'll thank you *not* to stare at my girlfriend's legs," I said as Mark stepped aside to allow Isobel and I entrance. "I'm sure Schuyler has a perfectly nice pair of her own that you can eye off."

"I can feel my ears burning!" Schuyler yelled out from the direction of the kitchen. I grinned and headed off to see what she was up to. As it turned out, she was working Jessica's hair into a very elaborate French braid, one that had ribbons of various colours woven into it. Zac for his part was seated on the kitchen bench, watching the proceedings from beneath the brim of what looked like Jack Sparrow's tricorne hat. "Planning on a bit of piracy, are we?" I asked him, noting that he had essentially copied Johnny Depp's entire *Pirates of the Caribbean* getup.

"Whoa," Schuyler said when she caught sight of me. "Tay, *please* tell me that you didn't dye your hair," she said, almost sounding as if she were pleading.

"Fuck no," I said. "I like my hair colour the way it is, thank you very much."

"Well, that's a relief." She squinted at me. "I should have known it was fake anyway," she laughed.

"Your hair is *not* that straight."

"Very *good* Einstein," I said sarcastically. I took my phone from a pocket of my coat, flipped it open and glanced at its screen – the time read six o'clock. "So when were you lot planning to head out?" I asked as I closed my phone again.

"About six-thirty or so," Zac replied. "Just as soon as Alli and Isaac decide they want to show up."

"So what're you supposed to be?" I asked Schuyler.

"Burlesque dancer," she replied, before nodding toward the living room. "And Mark's the one who turned me into a vampire." Almost as if emphasising this point, she bared her teeth at me to reveal a set of very convincing fangs. "Jess here is a gypsy, I heard something about Isla dressing as a can-can dancer, and if I recall correctly Alli and Isaac are coming as gangsters."

We ended up heading downtown just before six-thirty. I knew from experience that on foot it took slightly more than half an hour to get to where the concert would be held that evening, and because I knew my brothers would be wanting to rehearse tonight's set list we needed to get there as early as possible. Especially considering that we were walking instead of driving.

"This is going to be a very interesting show," Schuyler said as we headed down Broadway.

"Tell me about it," I replied. "Have you seen the set list for tonight?"

"Oh yeah," she replied. "I knew there had to be a reason they're restricting entry tonight. They should be grateful your parents aren't in town."

"Mmm," I replied noncommittally.

"So how've you been lately?"

I shrugged. "I've been better, honestly. The tour really did a number on me."

"Yeah, I heard about you freaking everyone out during the Montreal show. It wasn't anything serious?"

I shook my head. "No, thank goodness. It was just my CFS deciding it wanted to fuck with me again."

"So just like the summer we met, then?"

"Pretty much, yeah. Only without the constant peaks and valleys."

The time before the show practically flew by. As Isobel and I were heading to our seats, my phone's text message tone went off, and I pulled it out of my pocket. "What's it say?" Isobel asked.

"Hang on," I murmured as I scanned through the message, which was from Mark. *Show sold out, venue @ full capacity – about 89 grand raised, are we good or what?* "They've raised about \$89,000 from ticket sales," I told Isobel as I returned my phone to my pocket. "And not a cent of that is going in their pockets."

"Damn," Isobel commented. "That's amazing."

The house lights went down as we seated ourselves, and within moments the very familiar beginning of *Capricorn (A Brand New Name)* by 30 Seconds To Mars sounded, the stage lights going up right as Mark started to sing.

"So I run and hide and tear myself up...start again with a brand new name...and eyes that see into infinity..."

"I will disappear...I told you once and I'll say it again...I want my message read clear...I'll show you the way, the way I'm going..."

"So I run and hide and tear myself up...start again with a brand new name...and eyes that see into infinity..."

"I was almost there...just a moment away from becoming unclear...ever get the feeling you're gone...I'll show you the way, the way I'm going..."

"So I run and hide and tear myself up...start again with a brand new name...and eyes that see into infinity..."

"So I run, start again...with a brand new name...with a brand new name...so I run and hide and tear myself up...so I run...start again...I'll start again with a brand new name...with a brand new name...and eyes that see into infinity...with a brand new name...I will disappear..."

The cheer that went up as the song ended was close to deafening. I saw Mark grin as he held up his hands for quiet.

"Well, that was quite the welcome," he said once the noise level had dropped a few notches. "Just before we go on with the next song, I should warn you all that this is not your usual Hanson concert. Because all of you are aged 18 and over, we're letting ourselves go a little in terms of language and whatnot, and so many of the songs tonight are going to be a little..." He trailed off, as if he were searching for the right words. "*Risqué*, for want of a better word. So if you don't think you can handle that, I'd advise you to leave now."

I leaned in close to whisper in Isobel's ear, "If they can't handle the thought of Hanson swearing, they shouldn't have watched *Strong Enough To Break*." She snorted at this, but any other response she might have made was lost in the wall of noise that erupted as the second song on the set list, Buckcherry's *Crazy Bitch*, kicked off.

That night's show was probably one of the most rocking concerts I'd attended for any band. The audience seemed to know that a set list composed solely of covers – especially when they were songs that would never usually be covered by Hanson in *any* setting – was a true rarity with my brothers, and so to me they were enjoying the show a lot more than usual. Peppered throughout the show between songs were comments on costumes worn by individual audience members, sarcastic remarks courtesy of Zac, and the odd dirty joke on behalf of Mark.

When Mark announced the final song of the night, I could hardly believe that almost an hour-and-a-half had already passed. To me, that was the mark of a great concert – you enjoyed yourself so much that you didn't notice how fast time was passing.

"Before we play our last song, we want to thank you all for coming out tonight," Mark said. "And thank you all for your support over not only this last year, but the last decade – it has been absolutely invaluable to us." He adjusted the strap of his guitar on his shoulder. "This song was originally recorded by Queen, and goes by the name of *I Want It All*."

I sat up a little straighter in my seat. The three of them had shared out the songs between them tonight, so there really was no telling who would be singing lead on the final song. As soon as the first verse started, because for the first four lines all three of them sang together, I found out – Mark had drawn this one.

"I want it all...I want it all...I want it all...and I want it now..."

"Adventure seeker on an empty street...just an alley creeper, light on his feet...a young fighter screaming with no time for doubt...with the pain and anger, can't see a way out...it ain't much I'm asking, I heard him say...gotta find me a future, move out of my way..."

"I want it all...I want it all...I want it all...and I want it now...I want it all...I want it all...I want it all...and I want it now..."

"Listen all you people, come gather 'round...I gotta get me a game plan, gotta shake you to the ground...just give me what I know is mine...people do you hear me, just give me the sign...it ain't much I'm asking, if you want the truth...here's to the future for the dreams of youth..."

"I want it all...give it all...I want it all...I want it all...and I want it now...I want it all...yes I want it all...I want it all, hey...I want it all...and I want it now..."

"I'm a man with a one track mind, so much to do in one lifetime...people do you hear me...not a man for compromise and where's and why's and living lies...so I'm living it all...yes I'm living it all...and I'm giving it all...and I'm giving it all..."

"It ain't much I'm asking if you want the truth...here's to the future, hear the cry of youth...hear the cry, hear the cry of youth...I want it all...I want it all...I want it all...and I want it now...I want it all, yeah, yeah, yeah...I want it all...I want it all...and I want it now...I want it now...I want it...I want it..."

I smiled wryly as the song ended, knowing that the lyrics almost mirrored the situation I now found myself in. I wanted to be with Isobel, *and* I wanted to accept the job I had been offered. But unless I found a way to satisfy both desires, I would never be happy.

"We will see you all in 2008," Mark said as the three of them prepared to leave the stage.

"Whatever you'll be celebrating this holiday season, stay safe and enjoy yourselves."

"And don't do anything we wouldn't do," Zac said from behind his drums, eliciting a wave of laughter.

"Yeah, that too," Mark agreed.

I was quiet as Isobel and I left the hall – something that she noticed after I hadn't spoken for about five minutes. "Hey, are you okay?" she asked as she pulled her coat on over her costume.

"Yeah, I'm just tired," I replied softly.

"You guys coming back to Jess and Mark's?" Schuyler called out to us.

"No, we're going to head home," Isobel said. "It's getting late, and we don't want to impose Ratchet on our neighbours any longer than we need to." She nudged me with an elbow. "Plus Tay's tired."

"He's *always* tired," Jessica called back. "But we'll see you guys soon, yeah?"

“Yeah, no worries,” Isobel replied. She turned to me and gave me a smile. “Come on. Let’s get you home.”

Chapter 13

...never could have come this far without you

Isobel

After Halloween was all said and done, the issue of Thanksgiving raised itself. More to the point, the question was whose family would play host to the two of us over that weekend. We hadn't discussed it in any real depth since moving into our apartment, even though I'd said we would at some point. So when Taylor mentioned it one Thursday evening near the beginning of November, I wasn't surprised.

"I've been wondering something," he said after dinner that evening. Being as there was nothing remotely worth watching on TV until *Supernatural* started at nine, we'd muted the television after the six-thirty news and set Taylor's iPod (which was hooked up to our stereo) to shuffle through the music that was contained on its hard drive – at the moment, *All That You Are* by Econoline Crush was the song playing. I was nursing a bowl of mint chocolate chip ice cream that was slowly but surely melting into soup, and Taylor for his part was working his way through a particularly large piece of lemon cheesecake. "I mean, I know you're half-English and half-American."

"I'm also a quarter Irish," I reminded him. "Though I fail to see what my nationality has to do with anything."

He was quiet for a little while as he ate. "Thanksgiving," he said at last.

"I see," I said. "So can I take this to mean that you're coming to Maine with me?"

"I'm considering it."

"Uh-huh." I raised an eyebrow. "Admit it – the only reason you want to come with me is so you can try out my mum's cooking."

He scowled at me. "Come on, tell me – what's Thanksgiving like at your house?"

I settled back into the couch and thought about it. In all honesty, I had always considered the way that my family celebrated Thanksgiving to be the norm, how it was celebrated by everyone. But now that I was being asked to describe it to someone who was essentially an outsider, I realised something – my family's way of celebrating was, in all honesty, somewhat strange.

"The fact that my dad is American and my mum is English has a lot to do with it," I admitted. "The way Dad tells it, he had to make a *lot* of concessions to get Mum to agree to leave England, and one of those was an alteration to Thanksgiving." At Taylor's raised eyebrow, I added, "It's worth noting, though, that my dad is the king of bullshit and tall tales. It's best to take everything he says with one very large pinch of salt." I stirred my ice cream with my spoon. "But seriously though, the way we celebrate is basically combining Thanksgiving with what Mum considers to be the best parts of an English Christmas. Mum roasts up a turkey that's big enough for Dad, Mum, Jack and I, with enough left over to feed any of my older siblings who drop around in the evening after they've celebrated with their own families. She also does up a shitload of mashed potatoes, lots of peas, green beans and carrots, and plenty of cranberry sauce to go with the turkey." I finished my ice cream and leaned forward to set my bowl on the coffee table. "But we also have roast potatoes and pumpkin, and Mum roasts up a leg of pork. Dad'll do up some mashed pumpkin as well because the two of us will eat that shit like it's going out of fashion." Taylor snickered at this. "And for dessert we usually have apple pie with plenty of whipped cream or ice cream – none of us like pumpkin pie, so it doesn't even rate a mention."

"That sounds amazing," Taylor said.

"Oh, it is." I couldn't help but smile. "And Mum enforces the 'no television on Thanksgiving' rule with an iron fist – when I was growing up we didn't have a TV, so it wasn't much of a problem until we got our first set when I was sixteen. After Dad and Martin spent most of that Thanksgiving in front of the TV watching football, Mum put her foot down. The set gets shifted into the basement the afternoon before, and it doesn't go back into the lounge room until Friday morning. Jack has

to do the same with his TV, or he catches hell for it. We listen to music instead – Dad dusts off the record player, or Mum plays her Beatles or Elvis CDs. It depends on the year.”

I cast a sidelong glance at Taylor, and could almost see the wheels turning in his head. While he was thinking, I went into the kitchen with my bowl and deposited it in the sink, snagging the cordless from its cradle on the wall as I returned to the living room.

“I’m about to ring my mum,” I said, waving the handset at him. “Do I tell her to set an extra place at the table or what?”

He sighed. “All right, I’ll come. It’s better than watching Mark and Skya mooning at each other across the table.”

I grinned in satisfaction and punched in my parents’ number. When it was picked up at the other end of the line, I rolled my eyes at the greeting I heard.

“City Morgue, you kill ‘em we chill ‘em.”

“Jack, get off the phone,” I groaned. “What if that had been Grandpa calling?”

“He gets a kick out of it,” my little brother said. He sounded rather proud of himself. “What’s up, sis?”

“I need to talk to Mum. She around?”

“Yeah, hold on.” There was a sort of muffled scraping noise, before I heard Jack yell, “*Mum, Bella’s on the phone!*”

“It’s *Bel*, dickhead,” I muttered.

“Isobel?”

I couldn’t help smiling as I heard my mother’s voice. She had retained her English accent even after nineteen years of living in the United States, and to me it always sounded like home. My

own accent, like those belonging to my brothers and sisters, was a hodgepodge of New England American and Southern English. Depending on which of my parents I was speaking to, though, I tended to use one accent or the other. "Hi Mum!" I said brightly, slipping into my English accent as I spoke. "I just thought I should call you to let you know what my plans are for Thanksgiving."

"Oh? And what would those be?"

"I'll be coming home for the weekend, and I'll be bringing my boyfriend with me. If you and Dad don't mind, of course."

"Of course we don't mind," Mum said, her tone faintly chiding. "I've been looking forward to meeting Taylor, and so has your dad – Sami spoke very highly of him after she met the two of you for lunch back in September."

"Really?"

"Really. And it takes a lot to impress her, as you well know."

"Considering I'm almost exactly like her."

"Precisely. When were the two of you planning to come up?"

I looked over at Taylor, who was just finishing off his dessert. "I'm not sure. Let me ask him." I covered the microphone part of the handset and whistled to get Taylor's attention. "What time did you want to leave here on the Wednesday?"

As if in response, Taylor went to where his laptop sat on a shelf above the TV and picked it up one-handed. He sat back down on the couch and opened the lid of his computer, swiping the pad of his right index finger across the trackpad to bring it out of standby. I sat back down next to him, watching as he loaded up Google Maps and tapped *brooklyn heights, new york* and *eastport, maine* into their respective fields, before hitting 'Get Directions'.

"If we go straight to Eastport from here," he said as he studied the map that popped up, "it's going to take us almost ten-and-a-half hours driving non-stop. That's far longer than I'm willing to drive without a break. It'll take longer if the roads are packed, which they're bound to be."

"How much longer?"

"About forty-five minutes." He then proceeded to tap *boston, massachusetts* and *portland, maine* into two new fields, did a bit of field switching, and clicked 'Get Directions' again to bring up a new map. "I figure that if we leave here that morning at about eight or so, we can be in Boston for lunch. Then we can make a pit stop in Portland to let Ratchet have a bit of a run around, before heading up to Eastport. We can be at your parents' house in time for dinner." He looked at me.

"That sound good?"

"Suits me." I went back to my phone call. "We're planning to leave here around eight on the Wednesday morning – it's almost a ten-and-a-half hour drive, so we'll probably get there at about six-thirty that evening, maybe seven."

"Why don't you fly up?"

"Because we'd have to drive up from Portland anyway. It's going to cost us a fair bit in fuel, but we can afford it." I looked back at the screen of the laptop – Taylor had now opened up Outlook Express, and was looking through his new emails. "Also, I should probably tell you that we'll be bringing Taylor's dog with us."

"Why not leave the dog with one of your neighbours?"

"Because most of them are leaving the city for Thanksgiving too. You don't have to worry, Mum – Ratchet is extremely well-trained. Tay takes her everywhere with him, and he's had no problems with her whatsoever. Ratchet's an assistance dog," I added by way of an explanation.

"She has an unusual name."

"Yeah, that's Taylor's brother's fault. She got named for a character in the video game *Ratchet & Clank*."

Once I had finished my call and hung up, I handed the handset off to Taylor so he could make a call of his own – to his mother, as it turned out. While he spoke to her, I shifted his laptop onto my lap so that I could check my own email. I switched programs back to Firefox and scanned the tabs before opening a new one of my own. Open were his LiveJournal friends page, Google Maps, *The Onion*, I Can Has Cheezburger, *The New York Times*, a Wikipedia article about a city in Australia called Wollongong, and one reading *Zamel's Jewellery ~ Solitaire*. I nearly did a double take at that last tab, and moved the mouse cursor over it. Right as I went to click it, though, my finger froze above the trackpad. This was Taylor's computer, and I didn't pry into what was on it unless we were using it together – something that rarely happened. That tab was therefore private and not any of my concern, unless he chose to share it with me. And so I closed the laptop and flipped it over, setting it to one side before getting up to fetch my own computer.

"Well, Mom is a little disappointed that I'm not coming home for Thanksgiving," Taylor said as he came back to sit on the couch. "She did make me promise to go home for Christmas and New Year's though." I looked over at him, and saw that he was eyeing me. "Now there's an idea."

"Did it hurt?" I asked as I brought my email up on my laptop.

"Funny." Out of the corner of my eye I could see his fingers flying over the keyboard of his laptop.

"Why don't you come home with me for Christmas? You'll be able to meet the rest of my family."

"Wait, there are *more* of you?"

He grinned. "Oh yeah. I'm related to probably three-quarters of all the Hansons and Lawyers in Tulsa. Dad's the third of nine kids, and Mom's sixth of seven. I have lots of aunts and uncles and a shitload of cousins. No nieces or nephews yet, thank God. My parents would freak."

"Your parents won't mind me coming with you?"

"No way. They adore you, Issie – they'll be more than happy to have you stay over Christmas." He stretched. "Besides which, you're my family – and family shouldn't be apart at this time of year."

Family. I'm his family. That particular thought produced a feeling of warmth deep inside, and I smiled. Christmas with the Hanson family...now that I thought about it, it didn't sound too bad at all. Especially since Taylor would be there too.

"You have a deal," I agreed.

* * *

"Mum, I'm home!" I called as I entered the house through the front door, having used the key I still had on my key ring. Taylor's BMW was parked in the driveway, where Dad's car would usually be parked were he not at work, and we had left our gear in the car for the time being. I had warned Taylor just before we had arrived that if he didn't want to be parked in, he'd need to shift his car once Dad was on his way home. Taylor followed close on my heels, with Ratchet darting ahead as Taylor closed the door behind us. It was about six-thirty in the evening of the day before Thanksgiving.

"Not so loud, Isobel," Mum chided as she came into the foyer. "It's good to see you, sweetheart," she said as she hugged me tightly. "It's been too long."

"Definitely," I agreed as I was released. I then stepped back alongside Taylor. "Mum, this is my boyfriend Taylor Hanson," I said, making introductions. "Tay, this is Marian Reynolds, my mum." These last two words were spoken with just a hint of pride.

"It's a pleasure to meet you at last," Mum said as she shook Taylor's outstretched hand. "Isobel has told us so much about you – she's very taken with you."

"Likewise," Taylor agreed. "Ratchet, *heel!*" he commanded, clicking his fingers and pointing to a spot next to his feet. "Sorry about this Mrs. Reynolds – she tends to get excited when she's in a new place. I thought I'd trained that out of her."

"Taylor, please, it's Marian. And you needn't apologise. I completely understand. What breed is she?"

"Beagle," Taylor replied as he picked Ratchet up.

"She's so small," Mum commented. "How old is she?"

Taylor frowned. "Two-and-a-half," he replied after a few moments. "Apparently she was the runt of the litter – at least that's what I was told when I was learning to handle her." He scratched Ratchet behind her left ear. "She's *my* runt, though."

"Why don't you take her out into the yard?" I suggested. "Let her run off her energy before my dad gets home."

"Best idea I've heard all day," Taylor agreed. He flicked his gaze over to meet mine, and mouthed, "*If she asks, tell her.*" I nodded to show I had understood, and Taylor went out into the yard with Ratchet.

"I've been wondering, Isobel," Mum said as I followed her into the kitchen. While she went to the stove I hopped up on one of the stools that was usually stored beneath the overhang of the kitchen bench. "When you called to let me know you were coming home for Thanksgiving, you mentioned that Ratchet is an assistance dog."

"Uh-huh."

"What disability does Taylor have?"

"He doesn't *have* a disability per se," I replied. "He's got a bunch of illnesses, though. Chronic fatigue syndrome, generalised anxiety disorder, and two types of depression – dysthymia and seasonal affective disorder. The chronic fatigue is about as bad as a disability, though. It's gotten worse recently – he took a bit of a turn while we were in Montreal a couple of months ago, and he still hasn't managed to come back from it."

"Oh dear," Mum murmured. "He's so young..."

"Yeah," I agreed quietly. "He's been dealing with it all for a long time, though. He's had dysthymia and anxiety since he was fifteen, chronic fatigue since he was sixteen, and SAD since he was twenty-one." I glanced over at the back door. "I wish he didn't have to, though." I traced the outline of a faint bleach stain on the dark granite bench top. "He's on some pretty heavy-duty medication to handle everything, especially since the SAD just kicked in a few days ago. Hopefully it won't lay him *too* low while we're here."

Dad arrived home from work, Jack close behind, right as Mum got dinner on the table. Tomorrow was going to be such a huge production that dinner wasn't anything particularly elaborate or complicated – barbecued chicken, macaroni and cheese, and salad. I loaded up my plate with a couple of slices of chicken, tomato wedges, a generous handful of grated cheese, a few slices of pineapple and a heaping spoonful of pasta, and headed off to sit at the table. Taylor wasn't far behind me, his own plate loaded down with chicken, tomato and pasta, nibbling on a raw carrot stick as he walked.

"I should warn you right now," I said quietly as the two of us sat down at the table, side by side. "Dad likes to interrogate new boyfriends and girlfriends, and he is freaking *ruthless*. Odds are he'll start straight after grace."

And sure enough, I was right. Almost immediately after Mum had said grace, Dad launched forth into what was known to we Reynolds siblings as the Inquisition.

"Isobel has told us that you aren't originally from New York City," Dad said to begin, and Taylor nodded his confirmation. "Where did you live before moving there?"

"Oklahoma," Taylor replied. "My twin and I and our older brother were born there, but my family moved to Arlington in September 1983. We did eventually return to Oklahoma in the late 1980s. I've also lived in South America and the Caribbean – Venezuela, Ecuador and Trinidad to be

exact." He ate a forkful of macaroni. "Though originally, my family comes from Europe – my mom's family comes from The Netherlands via England, and my dad's is from Denmark. It goes back about six generations on each side."

"I see," Dad said, sounding thoughtful. "Where exactly in England?"

"I think my mom said something about Devon at some point."

"And what about work?"

"I'm a photographer for *High Fidelity*, but I also freelance on the side. I've also done production work on my brothers' last two albums."

"Your brothers are musicians?"

Taylor nodded. "They're in a reasonably successful indie band – had a few number one albums over the years." And here he clamped his mouth shut, lips twitching and shoulders shaking ever so slightly, indicating that he was attempting not to laugh. Evidently he hadn't believed me when I'd told him that aside from me, Samantha was the only member of my family who understood the correlation between his surname and one of the most famous and successful bands of Generation Y.

And then Dad asked the one question I had been dreading most of all – the one question I had never expected would come out of his mouth.

"What are your intentions toward my daughter?"

"*Dad!*" I objected loudly. "That is *completely* uncalled for!"

"I'm only looking out for your best interests, Issie," Dad said, in what he evidently considered a reasonable tone of voice.

"Like hell you are! I'm not a little girl anymore – I'm a grown adult. I'm old enough to make my own choices, and to learn from my own mistakes. I don't need you to fight my battles for me anymore." I pushed my plate away and stood up so fast my chair tipped over backwards. "And *don't call me Issie!*" I shouted before leaving the table and bolting out through the back sliding door, closing it so hard that it shifted off its track.

It seemed to be ages before somebody came to join me out on the back deck. I was sitting on the porch swing that had had a home on the deck for as long as I'd been able to remember, my knees drawn up to my chin and my arms wrapped around my shins. A glance to my right, and I could see Taylor sitting down next to me.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," I said quietly. "He's..." I swallowed hard. "He's not usually like that. At least, he's never asked *that* question before."

"I was sort of expecting it, to be honest," Taylor said, his voice just as quiet. "I just didn't think I'd be asked in front of your mom and brother." I felt his left arm wind around my shoulders, and his thumb begin rubbing a small circle on my arm. I leaned a little closer to him, resting my head on his chest and letting my eyes slide closed, the sound of his heartbeat filling my ears.

"I shouldn't have come home," I said quietly. "Worst idea I've ever had."

"You weren't to know that this was going to happen. It's not like you told your dad to give me the third degree, right?" I shook my head. "See? You don't have any control over what he says. *He* chose to ask that question, and *he* chose the time to ask it." His hand shifted from my arm to my hair, and he started running his fingers through my curls. "And besides which, your mom's giving him one hell of a dressing-down right now. I don't think he'll ever make that mistake again." His tone now turned quizzical. "And what's so wrong with him calling you 'Issie'?"

"Because you're the only person alive who's allowed to call me that. Before that it was only my grandmother who was allowed." I let out a quiet hiccup. "If I wasn't so set on not disappointing my mum, I'd want to go home tonight."

"I think the best thing to do here is to just avoid your dad as much as possible," Taylor suggested. "It won't work for very long tomorrow, but I figure you can just ignore him in that case."

I nodded. "Can we go back to New York after that? I feel a real need to just curl up on the couch with that tub of Cherry Garcia I saw you hiding in the freezer last week."

"I hid it because it's *mine*, and I knew you'd eat it otherwise," Taylor informed me, his tone mock-stern.

"Maybe you should have bought two, if that's the case," I replied, and received a playful swat in response.

The next day, as Thanksgiving is wont to be, was absolutely insane. I sent a mental thank-you to my mother when I realised that she had given Taylor and I the opportunity to have a bit of a sleep-in – when I finally prised my eyes open and was able to see straight, I noted that the time on my watch read eleven-thirty. I hadn't slept so late in who knew how long. Taylor for his part was still fast asleep.

"Hey sleepyhead," I whispered when his eyes opened at last. "How're you feeling?"

"Tired," he replied, his voice sleepy but with a slight undercurrent of what I had come to recognise by now as pain. I truly hated it – seeing and hearing him in pain hurt me almost as much as I knew it hurt him.

"Where does it hurt?" I asked.

"Shoulders," he replied. He tried to sit up and let out a soft groan.

"Right, roll over," I directed, and helped him shift onto his front. I had only to touch his shoulders to feel the knots that lay just beneath the surface, and I started kneading them with my thumbs.

The creak of hinges made me look over from working at a particularly stubborn knot, and I saw Mum coming in with a glass of water. She smiled when she saw me and set the glass atop the chest of drawers next to the door. "It's for Taylor," she whispered. "There's coffee in the kitchen, unless you'd rather have some tea."

"No, coffee's good," I assured Mum as I finally eased the last knot out of Taylor's right shoulder.

"All right. Come downstairs when you're ready – I want you to give me a hand with things before dinner."

"Okay," I agreed. Mum withdrew back into the hallway, and I cracked my knuckles before starting on Taylor's left shoulder.

The two of us finally made it downstairs at around twelve-fifteen to find Mum cooking up a storm in the kitchen, and Jack sitting at the kitchen bench eating a raw carrot stick leftover from dinner the night before. I went over to the cabinet above the stove, where I knew my parents kept the coffee and tea fixings, and took down two mugs and the sugar bowl, before going to the fridge and taking out the milk. A hunt around in the top drawer yielded a teaspoon, and I set about making up two mugs of coffee – black for Taylor, and white with three sugars for me. As much as I loved coffee, Mum tended to make it far too strong for my tastes.

"Medicine first," I said as I sat down across from Taylor at the table. I slid his coffee just out of his reach and started drinking my own, raising both eyebrows when he scowled at me. "*Then* you can have your coffee."

"Spoilsport," he muttered, half a heartbeat before downing his medication. Only once he had taken both pills did I pass him his coffee.

Thanks to the little disagreement the previous evening between my father and I, Thanksgiving dinner passed in an almost stony silence. I kept my mouth shut unless I was putting food into it, speaking only when Mum, Jack or Taylor spoke to me, and ignoring my father completely. Anytime he attempted to make eye contact, I glared at him until he looked away once more.

Once we had finished dessert, a long-standing Reynolds tradition was continued – going around the table and saying what we were each thankful for. My parents and Jack went with the usual standards – good health, job stability, and the opportunity for a good education. This year, I chose to go with something a little different.

“I’m thankful that my editor asked me to conduct that interview back in January,” I said. “If he hadn’t, Taylor and I wouldn’t be together right now.” I reached for Taylor’s nearest hand, and he grasped hold and interlaced our fingers.

“I...” Taylor’s voice faltered, and he closed his eyes briefly. “I’m thankful to be alive,” he finished quietly. And with those words he got up from his seat and left the table, heading out onto the back deck. After a few seconds I followed him, stopping just outside the sliding door, and bit my bottom lip at the sight before me. He was sitting backed up against the railing of the deck, hunched over with his arms wrapped around his knees and his head bowed, shoulders trembling. Just from that, I could tell that he was crying. My movements tentative so that I didn’t startle him, I walked over and knelt down before him, putting a hand on his shoulder. He looked up after a few seconds, his face streaked with tears.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “And don’t you dare say ‘nothing’ because something is definitely going on here.”

“I just...” He took in a deep breath and let it out shakily. “This is the first Thanksgiving since I was a kid that I’ve had any cause to be thankful that I’m still breathing.” He scrubbed at his face with the back of his right hand. “And it’s the first time in years that I haven’t felt like...you know, ending it all.” He gave me a small, sheepish smile. “That sounds ridiculous, I know.”

"It doesn't. I think it means that you're happy. Zac said it himself while we were in Atlanta and you were singing that song of yours – you never sing unless you're in a good mood."

"I suppose you're right," Taylor said quietly, seeming to concede.

"No supposing about it – you *know* I'm right." I tapped the side of my nose. "I know you pretty well – probably not as well as anyone in your family, but well enough for my liking. And I've learned to tell your moods apart." I squeezed his shoulder gently. "You're definitely happy."

"I'd be even happier if we were home," he murmured.

I shifted over to sit next to him and put my left arm around his shoulders, feeling him automatically lean closer. I knew he needed this, even if he didn't come right out and say it.

"We'll go inside when you're ready," I decided. "Pack our things, make our apologies to my parents, and just hit the road. I'll do the first half of the driving – you can sleep until we hit Boston. How's that sound?"

"Perfect," Taylor decided. "Absolutely perfect."

Chapter 14

Hang a shining star upon the highest bough

Taylor

A large cardboard box with the insignia of the Royal Mail emblazoned on it was dropped onto the kitchen table, and I looked up from my laptop to see Isobel grinning at me.

"What the *hell* is that?" I asked as I closed my laptop.

"Something I bought a couple of weeks ago," Isobel replied as she went to grab a sharp knife out of the draining rack. She came back to the table and used the knife to unseal the box, opening it to reveal another box. This second box was filled with something I recognised instantly.

Christmas crackers.

"Holy *shit*," I whispered. "Where did you *find* these? I haven't been able to get them anywhere in the States – I wanted to get some for Christmas this year."

"I had to order them from England," she replied as she opened the box of crackers and took one out to show me. They were silver and white with Christmas trees, wrapped presents and tiny stars dotted across them. "Got fifty of these little beauties for fifty-four pounds and ninety-nine pence."

"In dollars, please."

"A bit more than eighty-five bucks." She grinned. "Expensive, but it was fucking worth it." Here she eyed me. "And how the hell do you know about Christmas crackers, anyway?"

"My brothers recorded their Christmas album in England," I replied. "Specifically, we went to Reading for a month. When the album was finished we got treated to an early Christmas dinner." I tapped the cracker box. "And these were a part of it. My parents usually get a box of them every

Christmas, but this year I offered to buy them instead. I was going mad trying to find somewhere that sold them.”

“Well, problem solved.” She replaced the cracker and closed the box again. “I’m going to make sure I’ve got everything packed and ready to go. Don’t come in our room until I tell you it’s okay.”

“Going to wrap my presents, are you?” I asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Who says I even got you anything?” she retorted, before going into our room and closing the door behind her. As soon as I heard the lock click, I got up from my seat and went to the cabinet next to the refrigerator, lifting the small key I kept on a silver chain around my neck from under my shirt as I walked. Inside that cabinet was my lockbox, which held everything I couldn’t afford to lose – my current prescriptions, medical history, will, birth certificate, the MedicAlert bracelet I was supposed to wear at all times (but usually forgot about completely), and now something I planned to give to Isobel at some point in the near future.

Once my lockbox was open, I took out the small jewellery store box I had taken to keeping inside and cracked it open. Inside was a white gold ring set with a single, quarter-carat round brilliant diamond – an engagement ring. I’d convinced Schuyler to ask to borrow one of my girlfriend’s rings and then hand it off to me, enabling the jeweller I’d purchased the ring from to have it sized to fit Isobel from the outset. I could only hope she liked it once I worked up the nerve to pop the question – when that would be, I had no idea. I just hoped it would be sometime this decade.

It was hard to believe that 2007 was almost at its close, or that I’d known Isobel for almost eleven months. Our nine-month anniversary had passed one week earlier, which meant a few things – I would be turning twenty-five in slightly less than three months’ time, and our one-year anniversary was swiftly approaching. The first scared me a lot more than the second did.

It also meant that Christmas was on its way. Jessica, Isobel and I would be flying down to Tulsa the next morning, with my brothers, Schuyler, Isla and Alli already having left New York the week

before. Jessica had just completed the first-semester finals of her junior year and so hadn't been able to leave for home when everyone else did. Most of the presents I would be giving out had already been sent on ahead, and I planned to do the same in reverse with any presents I received myself.

I had just locked the ring away again when Isobel emerged from our room, and I dropped the key back through the collar of my shirt. "Well, I'm all packed," she said cheerfully as I closed the cabinet once more. I'd decided it was in my best interests to take my lockbox with me, and to that end I had also returned my bracelet to its rightful place. She looked at my right wrist. "Okay, that's new."

"No, not really. I just don't wear it that often, even though I'm meant to. Mom went off at me when I was last home because I didn't have it on." I undid the clasp and showed Isobel the back of the bracelet's tag, which among other things was engraved with my medical conditions and all of my allergies. "Lets people know what's up with me in case I'm unconscious or in a country where I don't speak the language." I put my bracelet back on and went through into our room, having decided to follow Isobel's lead in packing for two weeks at home with the Hanson clan. If nothing else, it was definitely going to be interesting.

The next afternoon, my parents met Isobel, Jessica and I at the airport in Tulsa as planned. Isobel had managed to get her Christmas crackers past airport security in New York, which had been something of a relief. It meant one less thing to worry about.

"The tree hasn't gone up yet," Mom informed me as we trailed behind Dad, Isobel and Jessica. "We all decided to wait until the three of you got here before we even considered it. But your brother and sisters have already started on the decorations."

"What's this about decorations?" Jessica asked as she fell back to walk with Mom and I.

Mom chuckled quietly. "When we left, Avery was making the snowflakes and hearts, Mac was stringing popcorn, and Zoë was untangling the lights."

"Better make more popcorn before Christmas Day, if past years are anything to go by," Jessica remarked, and looked straight at me. "Because I can almost guarantee that Taylor will eat the lot before anyone else gets a chance."

"Hey!" I protested.

"It's the truth, though," Jessica said with a smirk. "You're a freaking bottomless pit."

"Jess is right, Tay," Mom said, sounding almost apologetic. "I'm sorry, but I do have to take her side this time."

I scowled at my mother and sister. "I am *not* a bottomless pit," I said sourly.

"I would beg to differ on that," Dad said without turning around. "I seem to recall a certain son of mine managing to eat a full two-thirds of his mother's blackberry pie at Thanksgiving last year, all in the one sitting, and then following that up with half of his aunt's apple crumble."

I let out a long-suffering sigh. "Is this 'Pick On Taylor Hanson Day' or something?" I asked.

"Of course it is," Isobel said. I could hear the smirk in her voice as she spoke. "Haven't you checked your calendar lately?"

"Assholes," I muttered.

My three youngest siblings, the only ones now still living at home, were in the living room when we arrived at my parents' house. A long string of popcorn was curled up in a large plastic bowl at Mackenzie's feet, with another half-filled bowl at his right side. Zoë sat to his left, meticulously untangling long strands of clear and coloured lights. And on the floor almost at their feet, using the coffee table as a desk, sat Avery armed with a pair of what I knew to be extremely sharp

scissors. She had stacks of red and white paper to one side, and piles of white snowflakes and red hearts to the other.

"So how's the decorating coming along?" I asked without any sort of preamble whatsoever.

The reaction I got was just as I expected. All three of them jumped easily a foot in the air, with popcorn, snowflakes and hearts flying every which way. I started laughing as they scrambled to clean up the mess that had been produced, content that I'd managed to pull one over them again.

"What the hell was *that* for?" Avery asked as she restacked her decorations. "You're a fucking sadist, Taylor!"

"Mom, Avery swore!" Zoë yelled. I noted that she had taken advantage of the distraction to grab a handful of popcorn. "She said the H-word! *And* she said the F-word too!"

"Oh for fuck's *sake*," I heard Avery mumble. "Here we go *again*..."

"Zoë, nobody likes a tattletale," I heard Mom call back, her voice growing louder with each syllable.

"But Mom-"

Here Mom came into the living room and eyed Zoë with one eyebrow raised. "But *nothing*, young lady. Avery is old enough by now to decide what language is appropriate for the situation, and if she wants to swear then that's her choice."

"Yeah, I don't need my baby sister telling me what I can and can't say," Avery said.

"That's quite enough from you, Avery," Mom chided. She then looked to me. "Why don't you go and unpack, and then you can help your brothers and your dad bring the tree in."

I knew that from the way Mom worded it I had no say in the matter, and so I merely nodded and headed upstairs, snagging my suitcase and backpack along the way. Isobel was already up there,

halfway through unpacking her own suitcase. She looked up as I entered and closed the door behind me.

"If you value your sanity, don't go into the living room anytime within the next two hours," I said as I lifted my suitcase up onto the bed. "My mom'll drag you into decorating the tree. Skya, Isla and Alli have all probably been roped into it already."

"I like decorating Christmas trees," she said with a shrug as she took a small stack of T-shirts out of her suitcase. "Surely it can't be all *that* bad?"

"You've never decorated a Hanson Christmas tree, though. We don't have a lot of decorations because they keep getting lost or broken, so we make most of our own each year. And my younger siblings can be very particular about how the tree is done up. Zoë especially has very specific ideas about it all. She goes somewhat crazy if nothing goes the way she wants it to."

"So she throws a tantrum?"

"In the way that only a nine-year-old girl can," I replied.

Once I'd finished unpacking and had pulled a jacket on, I went downstairs to where my father and brothers were gathered in the dining room. All four of them wore gardening gloves on their hands.

"I don't think Taylor should help bring the tree in," Mark said as Dad tossed me a pair of gloves.

"It'd probably break him."

"I *am* here, you know," I said as I pulled the gloves onto my hands. "I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't talk about me as if I weren't." I glared at my twin. "And it would *not* break me! I'm not made of glass, for your information."

"That's enough," Dad said sharply. He seemed to study Mark and I for a little while. "Taylor, the tree stand is in the garage – go and find it, and bring it into the living room."

"All right," I agreed, and took my gloves off before heading into the garage.

Most of the time when I went into the garage at home I was careful to look straight ahead, my gaze slightly downcast. Emphasis on the word 'most' – sometimes, I was idiotic enough to look up. And both of the last times I had done the one thing I really shouldn't have had been on Christmas, or near enough to it.

I found the tree stand easily enough and started to head back into the house. As I neared the midpoint of the garage I accidentally flicked my gaze upwards and saw it – the bent and warped beam that I guessed nobody had been able to repair without removing the whole thing. A glance downwards, and I could see the stained patch of concrete that no amount of scrubbing had been able to get clean.

I had been the cause of both.

I sank to my knees on the hard concrete and started rocking back and forth in time with my heartbeat, my arms wrapped around myself and focus locked squarely on the beam I had attempted to hang myself from almost three years earlier.

Three years. Thirty-six months. One thousand and ninety-five days. That was how long it had been since I had managed to cheat death the first time...and how long it had been since Mark had saved my life, when all I had wanted was for it to end.

"Marcus, go and find your mother," I heard Dad saying as if from a great distance, his voice echoing in my ears. Through a haze I realised that he had used the full version of my twin's middle name – one that was only used when Mark was in deep trouble, or if the situation at hand was particularly serious. "She's the only one who can get him through this."

And soon, the only voice I could hear was my mother's as she spoke softly into my left ear, and all I could feel was her right hand on my back rubbing in a small circle over my spine. That was all it took for me to be able to look away from the garage roof and into her eyes, so much like my own.

"It will be all right, Taylor," she said in a low voice, pitched so that only the two of us could hear it. "You will be all right – you just need a little more time." She snapped her focus to the damaged beam. "Either that, or you need to stop looking up when you come in here."

"I didn't mean to," I mumbled. "I *swear* I didn't mean to..."

"Shh," Mom whispered. "I know you didn't. I know." She drew me into a tight embrace, stilling my rocking. "Let's get you upstairs – you need to lie down. The tree can wait for a few hours at least."

"I'm fine," I protested as Mom eased me to my feet.

"Don't you *dare* lie to me, Jordan Taylor. The last time you said that here at home, Mark found you ten minutes later hanging from the roof by your neck and bleeding out onto the floor." Her voice was shaking slightly as she said this. "Don't you *ever* frighten me like that again. Or any of us for that matter."

"I won't," I promised, my voice just as shaky as my mother's. "I promise."

* * *

A hand on my forehead was what woke me on Christmas morning, and I opened my eyes slowly to see my mother seated on the edge of the mattress. "Hey," I mumbled.

"Hey yourself," she said with a smile. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Not really," I replied without even needing to think about it. Ever since Montreal I had steadily been feeling worse and worse, with my energy levels close to rock bottom a good deal of the time. I'd also been getting headaches more often, though most of those could be attributed to the fact that I barely had enough energy to move, let alone eat. "My left knee's killing me and so's my head."

“Well, the sooner you get up, the sooner you can get that knee moving,” Mom said sagely. “And the sooner we can head back over to the house. Your brothers and sisters have already opened all their presents – they’re just waiting on you to open yours.”

“Wonderful,” I mumbled. “That’s all I need.”

In response, Mom gave me a smile and stood up. I curled up beneath my blankets, unwilling to face the day just yet. I couldn’t have cared less that it was Christmas – it was little more than a reminder that another year of frustration at being sick had ended, and the next had begun. Of course, today was also the third anniversary of the day that I’d been granted a second chance at life – a second chance that, until I had met Isobel, I hadn’t even come close to appreciating.

“I hate Christmas,” I mumbled as I worked to untangle myself from my blankets, hissing as the bare skin on my shoulders was exposed to the cold air. “Especially since it’s *so fucking cold!*” These last three words were said in almost a shout.

“Language, Taylor,” Mom chided, her voice floating back to me from somewhere else in the house. I rolled my eyes and eased myself upright, reaching for the long-sleeved shirt I knew was hanging from the nearest bedpost as I kicked my blankets off.

This wasn’t the first Christmas that I’d spent mostly at the old house since the move, well away from the noise and the constant movement that was Christmas Day in the Hanson family. The house on 78th Street had been my base every Christmas during college, my parents taking it in turns to look after me so that I wouldn’t be by myself on the one day when nobody should be alone.

Two of my pill bottles and a mug of what I knew to be coffee was set out on the kitchen bench when I emerged from my parents’ old bedroom, where I had slept the night before. I’d pulled my thick fleece hoodie on over my long-sleeved shirt and the thickest pair of socks I owned onto my feet, and yet even though I could feel that the heat was cranked up I was freezing.

"Good Lord Taylor," Mom said as I sat down at the bench and wrapped my hands around my coffee mug, letting out a sigh of relief as the heat radiated through my fingers. I could tell that she was shocked. It only intensified when she placed her fingers on mine and recoiled. "Your hands are freezing."

"Thank you Captain Obvious," I retorted. I unwrapped my hands from around my mug and uncapped my pill bottles, and shook out one pill from each of them. My hands were shaking as I took my medication. "It's not just my hands – I'm freezing all over. I can't get warm."

Just as I finished my coffee Mom led me through to the bathroom and started running water in the bathtub. I raised an eyebrow at her as she went to the cabinet beneath the sink. "What are you doing?" I asked, trying not to sound too suspicious.

"You need to warm up," Mom replied as she took out a bottle of bubble bath and turned back to the bathtub, uncapping the bottle and pouring a liberal amount into the stream of running water. "And I can't think of any better way to do that than to have a nice long bath." She looked back over her shoulder at me and smiled. "So you have your bath and get warm, I'll find you some clean clothes to change into, and we can have a chat before we go back home. I can tell that there's something you want to talk to me about."

"You know me too well," I said with a shrug.

"Well, I *am* your mother." She studied me for a little while. "Does it have something to do with Isobel, by any chance?"

I bit my bottom lip and nodded. "It has everything to do with her."

"I see. Well, I'm sure it's nothing that can't be solved by sitting down and talking things through."

After I'd taken my bath and had changed into the clothes Mom had collected from my backpack for me, I went back into the kitchen, tossing the box containing Isobel's engagement ring from hand to hand as I walked.

"I bought Isobel a ring," I said quietly as I resumed my seat at the kitchen bench. I placed the ring box on the bench between my mother and I, tapping the lid with the fingers of my right hand. "It'll fit her, I got Skya to borrow one of Issie's rings so I could get the sizing right."

"Is it an engagement ring?" Mom asked.

I dropped my gaze to my hands. "Yeah," I admitted. "It is." I slid the ring box closer to my mother so that she could have a look, and kept my focus lowered while I waited for her verdict.

"It's beautiful, Tay. Did you choose it yourself?" was the next question asked.

"Yes," I replied quietly. I raised my gaze slowly to meet my mother's, and was relieved to see approval in her eyes. "I think I'm ready," I said. "I..." I swallowed hard and tried again. "I wanted to wait until my birthday to ask her, because that's when we started dating, but if I wait that long then I'll never get around to it. It's now or never."

"So I take it that you'll be asking her today, then?"

I nodded. "After Christmas lunch, I'll take her out into the yard and pop the question. I'll tell her about my job offer too, and that I want her to come with me. I'm not leaving without her."

Not a word was said for at least ten minutes. It was my mother who finally broke the silence.

"I am so proud of you," she said softly.

"What for?" I asked, puzzled. There wasn't much I'd done that I could be proud of, so I had no idea where she might be going with this.

"Well, let's see now." She came around the end of the bench to stand next to me, and turned me to face her. "Not only are you the first of my children, and my only son to date, to complete your college education and gain your degree, but you're the first to ask your girlfriend to marry you." She put her hands on my shoulders. "And you haven't allowed your health problems to get in your way. For the most part, you've risen above them. That is why I am so proud of you. A lesser person

would have given in long ago, but you are strong enough to not have allowed them to bring you down." She tucked my hair behind my ears. "Just promise me that you'll do right by her. I've grown very attached to the idea of having Isobel for a daughter – she's a good match for you. I don't think I've seen a couple as much in love as the two of you are."

"I promise," I said. "I'd never intentionally do anything to hurt her. She's far too important to me."

"Good. I'm glad to hear it."

It was almost time for lunch by the time Mom and I rejoined the family. By this time everything was in full swing – Christmas music was playing in the background, something that sounded like one of the *Guitar Hero* games was frustrating the hell out of at least one of my siblings, and laughter was drifting out of the kitchen. Just your average Hanson family Christmas.

"Hey, are you feeling okay?"

Isobel's question caught me a little off-guard. I didn't look over at her until after I had taken off my hoodie and draped it over the back of the chair that sat in the front foyer. "I am now," I replied. I stepped across to where she stood and gathered her into an embrace. "I missed you," I whispered.

"I missed you too," she replied, seconds before glancing upwards. "Oh, would you look at that?"

"Look at what?" I asked – the only words I could get out before she kissed me hard on the lips.

"Mistletoe," she replied once we'd separated.

"Oh, like you needed a reason," I scoffed, before returning the kiss in kind.

"Taylor?"

I looked down to my right to see Zoë standing next to me. "Hey Zo," I said quietly.

Zoë tilted her head to one side and studied me. "Mom said you were sick last night," she said. "Is that why you didn't come to church?"

I closed my eyes briefly. "Zo, there's a lot of reasons why I don't go to church," I replied, trying not to sound too exasperated. "But yes, that was the main reason."

She seemed to think this over. "Why were you sick?" she asked.

"I'm still sick, Zo. I just manage to hide it really well." And with these words I proceeded to lead my little sister upstairs to her bedroom. "Sit down, Zoë," I said as I sat down on her bed, and she climbed up next to me. Of all my brothers and sisters, she was the only one who had no memory at all of me being completely well – to her, I had always been sick. And now that she was finally wondering why, it was time to explain everything.

"Do you remember how horrible you felt when you got sick last winter?" I asked, deciding to tie my explanation to Zoë's own memories. When she nodded, I continued. "That's how I feel almost all of the time. The only difference is that I don't sneeze and cough – I just feel tired and sore a lot." I looked down at my hands. "I got sick just before your second birthday."

"Are you going to get better?"

I looked sidelong at her and saw the sheer hope in her eyes – hope that I was about to destroy.

"I don't know," I said softly.

I was half-expecting her to merely nod, maybe even start crying. Instead she got up onto her knees and wrapped her arms around my shoulders, putting her head down against my neck. My eyes dropped closed as she hugged me, and I felt a sense of utter relief at the fact that my little sister didn't think any less of me all because I'd kept this from her for so long.

After lunch, I led Isobel out onto the back porch. I had the ring box in a pocket of my jeans, and no idea what I was going to say. I only knew that I was going to tell her about the job first, after

which I would ask the one question I had wanted to ask her for months. The key would be linking the two together.

"I got a job offer back in October," I said idly, as if I was just making conversation. We were sitting on my mother's porch swing, side by side. "Someone I knew in college has his own production company, and he's asked me to become the studio producer for one of the company's southern branches." I took Isobel's left hand into my right and laced our fingers. "It's the opportunity of a lifetime – I'm never going to get this sort of chance ever again."

"Where is it?"

I didn't look at her as I said the next part. "Australia."

She didn't say a word for what seemed like an eternity. When she finally did speak, it cut me deep to my core.

"Oh." The way she said that one small word tore me up inside – she sounded incredibly sad and almost heartbroken. "Wh-what did you tell them?"

"Well, now, here's the thing. I basically told my old classmate that if he wanted me to come and work for him, he would have to sweeten the deal considerably." I couldn't help smiling as I said the next part. "I told him that I would only accept his offer of employment if my wife was included in the deal."

"Your wife?" Now Isobel sounded completely disbelieving. "But you're not married..." And that was when it clicked. She clapped her hands over her mouth. "Oh my God," I heard her say from behind her hands, her voice muffled and eyes wide open.

"Issie..." I took a deep breath and prepared to ask her the one question that had the potential to change both of our lives – hopefully for the better. "You are my entire *world*, Issie. You are my reason for living – the reason why I'm still breathing, why my heart is still beating." My voice began shaking. "Y-you make me happy to be alive. Until I met you, I never appreciated the second

chance I got three years ago – I sure as hell do now. You make it all worth it.” I closed my eyes tightly for a few moments. “I-I love and adore you with all that I am, and I don’t want to live even another second without you.”

And with these words, I stood up off the swing and moved to stand in front of Isobel, getting down on one knee and taking the ring box from my pocket. “Isobel Lynn Reynolds...” I paused and took a breath, trying to stop my hands shaking. I’d never been so nervous in my whole life. “Will you come to Australia with me, and will you do me the honour one day soon of walking down the aisle to become my wife?” I opened the ring box as I finished speaking, and waited for her to respond.

“Holy shit,” she whispered after a few seconds. “You...you’re serious, aren’t you?”

I nodded. “I am completely serious. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Issie. I’ve never loved anyone as much as I love you.” I studied her for a little while. “So what d’you say?”

Her only response was an emphatic nod. Tears had started to stream down her face by this time, so I knew she couldn’t have spoken even if she had wanted to. I grinned half in relief and got back to my feet, sitting back down next to her and taking her ring from its box. “Now, are you *completely* sure?” I asked, my tone joking.

“Just get it on my finger already,” she whispered, voice choked with tears. I did as I was told, and only seconds later found myself on the receiving end of one very tight hug. “*Thank you,*” she murmured in my ear. “Thank you so much, Tay – this is the best Christmas present ever.”

Chapter 15

Nothing's gonna tear us apart

Isobel

*Engaged. I'm **engaged**.*

That was the sole thought on my mind as Taylor and I walked into work on our first day back after Christmas break. The two of us had been engaged for slightly longer than two weeks, and I still couldn't believe how lucky I was. This sort of thing only happened in movies, on TV and in books – it didn't happen in real life.

At least, that was what I had believed before I'd met Taylor almost a full year earlier.

"So did you two have a nice break?" Amaya asked as Taylor and I entered reception. She was leaning forward with her elbows propped up on her desk and hands clasped, and her chin resting on her knuckles. A knowing smile crept onto her face. "Oh yeah, you did. Something good's happened."

"And what might that be?" Taylor asked. I couldn't see his face, but I knew he'd cocked an eyebrow.

"Something to do with your relationship." She frowned. "Because Isobel has this kind of glow about her, and you look much happier than I've seen you in ages."

Here I looked up just slightly, right as Taylor grinned. "Show her your hand, Issie," he prompted. I did as I was told, rotating my wrist so that the back of my left hand was facing Amaya. Her mouth dropped open barely seconds later.

"I *knew* it!" she almost shrieked. She got up from her seat and dashed over to where Taylor and I were standing, and I lowered my hand so that Amaya could get a closer look at my ring. "When did this happen?" she asked without looking up from examining it.

“Christmas Day,” I replied. “At his parents’ house. We went out on the back porch after lunch, and after he told me how much he loved me and wanted to spend the rest of his life with me, he popped the question.” I leaned closer to Taylor, and he snaked an arm around my waist. “Obviously, I said yes.”

“Well, obviously,” Amaya said as she straightened up. “So when’s the big day, then?”

“We don’t know yet,” Taylor replied. “We’re still talking about it – all we know is that we want to be married by the end of this year.”

“That’s a quick engagement,” Amaya said. “Any reason in particular?”

Taylor and I locked gazes for just a moment. “There is, but we need to talk to Stephen about it before we can discuss the matter with anyone else,” he replied, sounding evasive. Which I knew he was – something that was a necessity until we’d had a chance to talk the matter over with the higher-ups. Namely, our editor. And I knew exactly what we needed to speak to Stephen about.

“You’re going to talk to him today?” Amaya asked, and I nodded. “Well, I won’t let you keep him waiting, then.” She gave us a bright smile. “Congratulations, both of you – I can already tell that you’ll both be very happy together.”

Stephen was hard at work when Taylor and I stepped up to his office door. Behind us our fellow journalists, photographers and artists were getting back into the rhythm of work, preparing for the upcoming deadline. The first issue of *High Fidelity* for 2008 was due out at the end of the month, and so everyone was hard at work getting everything ready for its release. I bit my lip when I realised that once Taylor and I left New York, Stephen would be short a journalist and a photographer. And for that I actually felt somewhat guilty. It wasn’t like I was in Taylor’s shoes and already had a job lined up ready to go. I was going to need to find one for myself.

"Come in!" Stephen called, and the two of us entered his office. He didn't look up from his computer as we seated ourselves before his desk. "And what can I do for the two of you today?" he asked at last, having finished his current task.

"I've been offered a job overseas," Taylor said without so much as a preamble, his voice wavering only slightly. "I've accepted it, but I'm not taking the position just yet – it won't be available until April." He fidgeted a little. "I thought I should give you as much warning as possible anyway, so you have time to locate a replacement."

"Well, I definitely appreciate the advance notice," Stephen said. "Though I will say that we will miss you around here. May I ask who has managed to draw you away from us?"

"Expatriate Productions – it's a production company in Australia." He didn't venture any more information than this.

Stephen seemed to know what Taylor was talking about, however, and nodded in a knowing way before turning his attentions to me. "And you, Isobel? Will you be joining Taylor in Australia?"

"I will be," I replied quietly. "I haven't found a new position yet, though, so I was hoping you could write me a reference."

"I'd be delighted to. I'll pull your old articles out of the archives as well, so that you can put a portfolio together."

"Thank you," I said. I hadn't even said anything about trying to get another job in the journalism field, even though I'd been seriously considering it. Besides which, I loved being a journalist and there was no sense in wasting my degree. "I really appreciate it."

Even though I knew it was idiotic of me, I did hardly any work that day. My attention was focused elsewhere – specifically on the tall, thin blonde in the design department whose ring I wore on my finger.

Five-thirty couldn't come quickly enough. As soon as the minute hand of the small clock on my desk swept past twelve I saved what little work I'd done that day, shut down my computer and packed up my things, swinging my bag over my shoulder as I left my desk. Taylor was waiting in the foyer for me, pacing back and forth with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Who are you, and what the hell have you done with my fiancé?" I asked jokingly as I watched him move restlessly. Almost as soon as I finished speaking he stopped moving and looked at me, and I dashed over to him.

"Damn I missed you," he whispered as he drew me into a tight embrace. I automatically leaned my head on his chest, pressing my ear close so that I could hear his heart beating. To me it was the most comforting sound in the world – it told me without words that he wasn't going to leave me, not without one hell of a fight. And I had known Taylor for long enough now to be aware of one fact in particular – except in his moments of extreme weakness, he was a fighter.

"You saw me at lunch," I admonished playfully.

"For all of an hour! You have no idea how torturous it is for me to be stuck in Design while you're all the way over in Editorial."

"Well, I do have *some* idea," I replied as we walked to the lift just outside of the foyer. "The number of times I wanted to come across and just *jump* you...it's no wonder I got barely any work done today." I looked up at his face just in time to see him grin wickedly. "Oh no you don't," I scolded. "If I can wait until we get home, then I think you can too."

"You fucking *tease*," he groaned. I snickered quietly and turned my attention to the rows of numbers on the wall above the lift.

The lift doors had barely slid closed behind us when he came at me, pinning me to the back wall as he kissed me harder than he had in a long time. Almost in response I brought my hands up and tangled them in his hair, my eyes sliding closed as he started working his way down my neck. His

free hand yanked my blouse out from where it was tucked into the waistband of my pants and started creeping up my back toward the hooks holding my bra closed.

"Don't even *think* about it," I murmured. "We're in public if you don't mind. It stays on." I lazily opened one eye and snickered inwardly at the look of utter desperation in his eyes. "Look, we'll be home in, what, an hour? I'm sure you can control yourself until then." I spotted his hand creeping back toward the emergency stop button. "*Don't*," I said sharply.

"You suck," he muttered, sounding almost mutinous.

"Yes, and I also swallow," I said with a smirk. "Still doesn't mean I'm going to let you take me here and now. The last time I checked, going at it in public was a criminal offence under the banner of indecent exposure. And I really do not want my entry to Australia to be jeopardised all because I let my fiancé fuck me in the lift."

"Crude much?" he asked, one eyebrow raised.

"Oh come on, you've heard much worse. I know you listened to your brothers' interview with Howard Stern last year. *And* I know you downloaded the MP3 of it later on."

"It's called blackmail," he replied. "They know I have it, and they are well aware that if they fuck me around, I'm sending the MP3 to our parents." He grinned at me. "We might all be grown adults, but even just the idea of our mom's punishments still have an effect." With these words he released me, and I took my hands out of his hair so that I could tuck my blouse back in. He was just tidying his hair, using the lift doors as a mirror, when the lift stopped on the ground floor, and we stepped out into the building's main foyer.

Our journey out to Brooklyn felt like it lasted an eternity. The first thing that Taylor did as soon as our apartment door had been closed and locked behind us was head straight for the stereo and start sorting through the teetering tower of CD cases that were kept on the shelf next to it.

"I thought you wanted to get right down to business," I said as I came up behind him. "Isn't that why you tried to jump me in the lift earlier?"

He looked back over his shoulder at me. "Oh I do, believe me." He found the CD he was looking for and opened its case. "But I have something else in mind for the time being." Lifting the lid that covered the CD turntable, he dropped the disc into an empty spot on the tray and closed the lid again. "See what you make of this."

And with these words he picked up the remote and drew me close to his side, walking me out into the middle of our living room. Once we were in a spot clear of any furniture, Ratchet's toys or anything that could be stepped on or banged into, he pointed the remote at the stereo and turned me around to face him. When the first piano chord of one of my favourite songs sounded, I looked up at him, wondering how he knew – as far as I was aware, I'd never told anyone other than Schuyler. The instant he started to sing, however, all conscious thought fled, and I closed my eyes as I listened to his voice.

"When it's love you give...I'll be your man of good faith...then in love you'll live...I'll make a stand, I won't break...I'll be the rock you can lean on...be there when you're old, to have and to hold...when there's love inside...I swear I'll always be strong...and there's a reason why...I'll prove to you we belong...I'll be the wall that protects you...from the wind and the rain, from the hurt and the pain...

"Let's make it all for one and all for love...let the one you hold be the one you want, the one you need...`cause when it's all for one it's one for all...when there's someone that you know...then just let your feelings show...and make it all for one and all for love...

"When it's love you make...I'll be the fire in your night...then it's love you take...I will defend, I will fight...I'll be there when you need me...when honour's at stake, this vow I will make...

"That it's all for one and all for love...let the one you hold be the one you want, the one you need...'cause when it's all for one it's one for all...when there's someone that you know...then just let your feelings show...and make it all for one and all for love..."

"Don't lay our love to rest...'cause we could stand up to the test...we got everything and more than we had planned...more than the rivers that run inland...we got it all in our hands..."

"Now it's all for one and all for love...let the one you hold be the one you want, the one you need...'cause when it's all for one it's one for all...when there's someone that you know...then just let your feelings show...when there's someone that you want...when there's someone that you need...let's make it all all for one...and all for love..."

As the song ended, he aimed the remote at the stereo again. "Schuyler told me," he said quietly, in answer to my unspoken question. "I asked her what your favourite songs were, and she gave me the full list."

"Any surprises?"

"Well no, not really, unless you count *NSYNC under that particular heading." He gave me a wicked grin, right as I felt my face heat up. "Aw Issie, did I embarrass you?"

I let out a slightly hysterical laugh. "Jordan Taylor Hanson, you are absolutely *incorrigible*," I mumbled as I grabbed hold of the collar of his shirt. "Which is why I fell in love with you in the first place."

"So it wasn't my charm and my good looks, then?"

"Good looks? Perhaps." I cocked an eyebrow. "Charm? You wish. The amount of charm you possess wouldn't even half-fill a thimble."

"That's a bit below the belt, isn't it?"

"Oh, shut up and kiss me already."

He grinned. "As you wish, milady."

* * *

As I woke up on the last day of January, it took me a few moments to realise why that particular date was so significant.

Taylor and I had met a year ago today – a year in which my life had been changed forever. And now, only ten-and-a-half months since we had started our relationship, we were engaged and preparing to embark on a new life together in Australia. March twenty-first had been set as the date of our departure from the United States, and we had already notified our landlord of our intention to vacate our apartment. All that needed to be done was to pack what belongings we had brought with us, get our deposit back, and hop on a one-way flight to Tulsa. We would be staying with Taylor's parents for the two weeks prior to leaving for Sydney.

"What're you thinking about?"

I slid my gaze to my right. Taylor lay on his back, looking up at the ceiling with his hands clasped over his stomach. He had been much quieter than usual during the last couple of weeks. I still hadn't worked out why, but I figured that if he needed to talk to someone he would let me know.

"Just about the day we met," I replied. "Do you know what it was that attracted me to you in the first place?" When he didn't respond, I took it as my cue to tell him. "It was your eyes."

"That's a new one," he said. He unclasped his hands and raised himself up on his elbows. "Well, do enlighten me." He raised an eyebrow at me. "And if it has something to do with the fact that they're *blue*, I won't be impressed."

"That was part of it. But it was also because...well, right after Schuyler dragged me outside after the interview, I told her that I felt like I could stare into your eyes forever. I never wanted to stop."

"And now you never have to," he said quietly.

"I never have to," I agreed. A thought drifted into my head at that moment. "Have you ever heard of Plato?"

"Sort of."

"He was a philosopher in Ancient Greece. I learned about him in high school. Anyway, he wrote a philosophy text called *Symposium* – it's about love, basically. Part of it was a discourse by the playwright Aristophanes about what's called a twin soul – they're sort of like soul mates, but where you might have many soul mates in one lifetime you only have one twin soul. It's essentially your other half. And when you find your twin soul, that's when you feel completely whole again – as if you'd had an abyss deep down inside, and finding them filled it in." I found his nearest hand and interlocked our fingers. "I've been thinking about it, and I've realised that before I met you, there was a gaping hole somewhere in here." I touched my fingers to my chest, somewhere in the region of my heart. "I think that's what we are – we're twin souls. We were always destined to meet. Neither of us would be the same otherwise."

Taylor was quiet for a while. I was completely prepared for him to laugh at me when he finally spoke.

"I think you're right."

"Y-you do?"

He nodded. "I never felt completely whole until we met, either. I..." I watched as he swallowed hard. "When I'm with you, I feel *safe*."

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"Think about what's in our kitchen."

I frowned. "Okay, well, there's the fridge, microwave, oven, sink, dish rack, cabinets, plates, bowls, cutlery, cutting boards, blender, pots and pans, the knife block-" I stopped short as it dawned on me. "Holy *shit*."

He nodded. "I told you a month before we started to date that we kept everything sharp locked up. I'm not kidding about that. Mark kept one key to the sharps cabinet on his key ring, and Jess kept the other on a chain around her neck. I was never allowed to touch either key." He twisted his MedicAlert bracelet around his right wrist. "We have been living here for four-and-a-half months, and that knife block has been sitting out in the open on our kitchen bench that whole time. I've missed a total of six doses of my medication since we moved in, and not once have I wanted to take one of those knives and do some sort of damage to myself."

I opened my mouth to speak, but he shook his head. "No, let me finish. Not only do you make me feel safe *physically*, but you make me feel safe psychologically." He tapped his left temple. "I trusted you with my deepest, darkest secrets far earlier than I would normally trust anyone. It only took me two weeks to tell you about not only all of my illnesses, but that I also tried to commit suicide." He shifted a little closer to me. "I meant it when I said that I had told nobody else about that. You were literally one of the only people outside of my family who knew about it. Schuyler knows now, but I won't be telling anyone else. There's nobody else I trust."

We were both quiet for a little while. "So what do you want to do today?" I asked. "We don't have to be anywhere in particular – hell, we could stay in bed all day if we really want to." I stretched, reaching for our bedroom ceiling. "But I kind of want to get out and do something."

"So do I. Tempting as it is to just laze around here all day, I need to get out of the house. Besides, Ratchet could do with the exercise."

One subway ride later we found ourselves at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and headed directly for the museum's collection of Egyptian art. Our mutual interest in and complete fascination with Ancient Egypt and its culture was just one of the many reasons why I loved him, and it was a

source of unending amusement for our respective families that part of each of our courses of study at college had focused on that particular civilisation – Taylor’s had been the art of the Amarna Period, and mine had been the military history of Ancient Egypt.

“We definitely need to spend some time in Sydney when we get to Australia,” Taylor said as I examined an iron and bronze bracelet. “You’d love it there.”

“Doing what?” I asked without looking up.

“Anything you want. We could go to a couple of concerts, poke around art galleries and museums, wander around the aquarium, take the ferry over to Taronga Zoo...it’s an amazing city.” I felt him lean up against my back and drape his long arms over my shoulders. “I think you’d really like one of the museums there – it’s called the Powerhouse Museum. The second-last time we all went to Australia when my brothers toured, Mom took Jess, Ave, Mac, Zo and I there for the day. That place is absolutely incredible.”

“It sounds like it.” I looked back over my shoulder at him. “Are you nervous?”

“Nervous about what?”

“Moving. I mean” I twisted around so that I was facing him “this is huge. For all intents and purposes, this move will be permanent. We won’t be coming back here for anything other than a vacation for a very long time. Doesn’t that freak you out?”

“Do you want the truth?” he asked, and I nodded. “It more than freaks me out. It fucking *terrifies* me. Put it this way – the longest I have spent away from the United States at any time in my life is slightly more than one year, when we were all down in South America. For this...we’ll be away for at least five. That’s how long my visa lasts for – after that, if I choose to, I can apply to become a citizen.” He smiled slightly. “You could too. I mean, if you wanted to that is.”

“How about we worry about that when the time comes?” I raised up on my tiptoes and kissed the tip of his nose. “At the moment, all we need to focus on is us. Well, that and your birthday.”

He let out a slightly hysterical chuckle. "God that's frightening. I'll be, what, twenty-five?" He shook his head. "That's one birthday I thought I'd never see."

I didn't say anything in response to this. I just looked at him, as if I were trying to memorise everything about his face. "We'll always be together, right?" I asked, cursing myself inwardly for sounding so unsure.

"Always," Taylor replied. "There is one, and *only* one thing that could ever separate us, and I'm not letting that happen for a very long time."

I knew exactly what he meant. It didn't take a genius to figure it out.

"You do know that's something we really have no control over, right?"

He nodded. "I'm well aware of that fact. How about this then – I'm *hoping* it doesn't happen for a very long time."

"That sounds much better."

"I thought it might." He drew me closer to him and wrapped his arms tightly around my shoulders, and I let out a contented sigh.

This was home to me. Safe in my fiancé's arms, listening to his heartbeat and feeling him breathe, knowing that he loved me more than anyone else in the entire universe. The two of us could be anywhere on Earth, but so long as he was by my side I knew I would never be alone. I would always be loved, and I would always have someone to love. He would never leave me to face the world on my own.

We were looking down the barrel of the wildest rollercoaster ride of our lives. Neither of us knew what lay in store for us, but there was one thing I knew to be true – with Taylor at my side, I could do anything.

Epilogue

...just want to let you know that I'm gonna be fine

Taylor

Mark and I turned twenty-five in the middle of March. Because it was such a significant birthday, almost as much as eighteen and twenty-one were, our parents had invited just about our entire family, both immediate and extended, along with as many of mine and Mark's friends as they'd been able to get in contact with. It was a real stroke of luck that both the house and yard were so large, otherwise the party would likely have spilled out into the street.

And yet instead of enjoying my own birthday party as I knew I probably should have been, I'd holed myself up in my old bedroom, and was lying on my bed staring at the ceiling.

This was it. In one week, at a quarter to twelve in the evening on the twenty-first, Isobel and I would be departing Los Angeles on a one-way Qantas flight to Sydney, Australia. We would be arriving in the Land Down Under at five to eight in the morning on the twenty-third. From there, once we had cleared Customs and Immigration, someone from Expatriate would pick us up from the airport and drive us to our new home. Even if I had wanted to, there was no backing out now. Our visas had been approved, plane tickets had been purchased by my new employer and mailed out to us, bank accounts had been closed and their balances transferred over to accounts that had been opened with one of the Australian banks, Ratchet's travel to Australia had been applied for and approved, enough funds to last us until we could access our new bank accounts had been exchanged, and our bags were packed and ready to go. The experience of a lifetime waited for us – all we had to do was take that first step into the unknown.

I heard the door open, and I looked to my right to see my father stepping into the room. "There you are," he said, sounding relieved. "Have you been up here this whole time?"

"Pretty much," I admitted quietly as I sat up. "I just..." I looked over at him. "Do you think I'm doing the right thing here?"

Thankfully, I didn't need to explain myself this time. "Well, this is the way I see it," Dad said as he came to sit down beside me. "This is what you've wanted for a very long time. So in that respect, I think you're definitely doing the right thing. Even if it's only by yourself. I just wish the opportunity of a lifetime had been here at home, rather than halfway around the world."

"You aren't the only one," I admitted. "I..." Swallowing hard, I cast a sidelong glance at Dad. "I'm fucking petrified," I said. "I keep having nightmares that I'm going to screw things up severely."

"In what way?"

I inwardly breathed a sigh of relief that either my curse hadn't been noticed, or it had been blatantly ignored. "Just...with my new job, with Isobel, with the wedding..." I shook my head. "Don't mind me. I'm being stupid."

"In all honesty, Taylor, it's completely normal. I felt much the same way before I married your mother."

"Except that you weren't moving halfway around the world."

"True. That doesn't matter, though. What *does* matter is that it's normal to have doubts and fears about the unknown. You wouldn't be human otherwise." He stood up and took a step toward the door. "Come on, downstairs with you. It's not every day that you turn twenty-five."

What greeted me as I descended the staircase could only be described as utter mayhem. My two youngest siblings and my younger cousins were streaking back and forth between the kitchen and the family room, yelling at the very tops of their voices as they ran. The older set, including three of my brothers and one of my sisters, were either crowded around the low, round table in the middle of the family room, squashed onto the couch while two of them played what looked like

one of the *Guitar Hero* games, or in all likelihood out in the yard, where I knew the adults of the family were more than likely to be found.

Well, with the exception of one.

My mother was exactly where I thought she would be – cooking up a storm in the kitchen. “Need any help?” I asked as I came up beside her. She looked away from the pot she was stirring for just long enough to smile at me.

“You should be enjoying your party, Tay,” she said as she refocused on her current task.

“I don’t feel like I can,” I admitted quietly. “I mean, I’m leaving in a week.”

“All the more reason to enjoy yourself. You deserve to have a *little* fun every now and again.” She turned one of the knobs on the front of the stove. “Well, come on then,” she said, nodding toward the dish rack. Without even needing to be told twice I reached across and grabbed a wooden spoon, and Mom shifted to the left so I could take my place next to her. “Where exactly is it that you and Isobel will be living?”

“It’s called Albion Park – it’s a bit less than sixty-five miles south of Sydney. Fourteen miles south of Wollongong, where I’ll be working. There’s only about eleven thousand people living there.”

“So it’s very small, then?”

“Smaller than what I’m used to at least.” I stirred the contents of the pot right in front of me with my wooden spoon. “And you know what the most hilarious thing about it is?”

“What’s that?”

“The street our house is on is called Taylor Road.”

Mom chuckled at this, and I cracked a smile. Not being the only person who was amused by the name of the street I’d soon be living on made me feel a little better.

"I am going to make you a promise," my mother said as she turned off all the burners. "No matter what, and no matter how many years pass by, this will *always* be your home. You and Isobel will always be welcome here." She stepped back and held me at arm's length. "I am so, so proud of you," she said softly. "I know that you're going to do so well. Isobel as well."

I nodded, barely able to find the words I wanted to say. "Thank you," I whispered.

The following Friday evening, my family came to Los Angeles to see Isobel and I off. Isobel's family hadn't been able to come, so she'd said her farewells just prior to departing New York. My parents and siblings couldn't join us at our gate, as only Isobel and I were in possession of airline tickets and passports, but that didn't seem to bother them.

At least, it didn't seem to bother my older siblings.

"I don't want you to go," Zoë whispered as I hugged her tightly. She drew back and fixed me with a blue-eyed stare. "Can't you stay here?"

"I wish I could, Zo," I said quietly. "But my job's overseas now. And you know, it isn't forever. You're coming over to see me and Issie in December, remember?"

She nodded. "When you get married," she said.

"That's right. You get another sister too."

"I know." She put her head back down on my shoulder. "And I can come and visit you anytime I like?"

Before I answered, I looked up at my parents, who both nodded. "Of course you can," I assured my sister. "In fact, I expect to see you at least once a year. I won't get to see you grow up otherwise."

"We should get going, Tay," I heard Isobel say from somewhere above my head. "They'll be calling our flight in a couple of hours, and we still need to get through security."

"Yeah, I know." Zoë detached herself as I went to straighten up. "We'll call when we get to Sydney," I promised as Mom and then Dad hugged me one last time. "Just so you know we got there safely. I'm sure there'll be a payphone in Arrivals somewhere."

"I'm going to hold you to that," Mom told me. "Just be careful, okay?"

"I will," I promised.

At the top of the escalator that had taken us up to the Departures level, I turned back to look down at my family for the last time. I knew I'd be seeing them all again in December, but that didn't make the upcoming separation any easier. Knowing that there was soon to be over seven and a half thousand miles of ocean between us made it all that more difficult.

"It'll be okay," Isobel said softly as I looked down at my family. "You're not doing this on your own, remember?" I felt her snake an arm around my shoulders. "We're in this together."

I nodded, knowing that she was right. So long as we were together, I could handle anything that life threw at us. We were each other's strength, and together we could do anything.

With that in mind, I waved down at my family one last time and turned away, and took Isobel's hand in mine. The unknown lay before us, and all we had to do was take that first step.

So if you care to find me

Look to the western sky

As someone told me lately

Ev'ryone deserves the chance to fly

~ fin ~