

Many The Miles

There's too many things I haven't done yet
There's too many sunsets I haven't seen
You can't waste the day wishing it'd slow down
You would've thought by now
I'd have learned something
I made up my mind when I was a young girl
I've been given this one world
I won't worry it away, no
But now and again I lose sight of the good life
I get stuck in a low light
But then love comes in

Sara Bareilles – *Many The Miles*

Prologue

...a different shade of blue

Isobel

"Issie?"

I looked away from my video screen and over to my left, and found myself face to face with my fiancé. We had been lucky enough to get three seats on the right side of the plane all to ourselves, something that had worked in our favour. Not only was Taylor able to get up and stretch his legs if he needed to, having claimed the aisle seat, but he could lie down without disturbing anyone. Qantas allowed service animals to travel in the plane cabin with their handlers, and so Ratchet lay curled up on a mat in front of the seat between Taylor and I with her leash clipped to the back of the seat in front.

"Hey," I said softly. "You feeling okay?"

He shook his head. "I'm so *tired*," he whispered.

"Shh, I know." I reached over and gently squeezed his nearest hand. "Why don't you try and get some sleep? I've got some valerian tablets in my backpack, and I'm sure one of the flight attendants won't mind getting you some water."

He pulled a face. "D'you have any idea what that shit *does* to me? I've only ever taken it once, and it made me feel even worse than I already did."

"It's not shit. And I'm betting you had a cold or something when you took it – it does that to me too when I'm feeling lousy." I unbuckled my seatbelt and stood up, taking care not to bash my head on the underside of the overhead locker. "Watch your feet."

It didn't take me long to find the ziplock bag in my backpack that held all the medications I'd brought with me. I tossed my bottle of valerian tablets onto my seat and hoisted my backpack back into its locker, and headed through to the galley.

Taylor was lying down on his back across our seats when I returned, carrying a bottle of water in one hand and a blanket draped over one shoulder. The two middle armrests had been raised up, he had his feet propped up on the aisle-side armrest with his knees in the air, and he was examining the pill bottle with one eye closed. I pushed on his left foot to get his attention, and he looked up at me.

"Did you take your medication?" I asked as he sat up.

He nodded. "Yeah. Hasn't kicked in yet though." He rubbed his eyes. "Hopefully it does soon, because I really need to sleep."

I passed him the water bottle. "Two of those should about do it," I said. He uncapped the pill bottle and shook two of the tablets out into his hand. While he was taking them, I settled myself back in my seat and shifted around until I was comfortable. I knew there would be no chance of moving once Taylor was sleeping, at least not until we were close to Sydney. And he needed all the rest he could get, so the thought of disturbing him didn't even cross my mind.

In almost no time at all he was lying down on his side with his head in my lap, the blanket I'd brought back from the galley spread over him from his shoulders to his toes. His eyes were still open, but each time he blinked they stayed closed for longer and longer, as he got ever closer to sleep. I'd draped my left arm over his side, my hand resting in the region of his stomach, and was threading the fingers of my right hand through his hair.

There was so much I had learned about him in the time that we'd known each other. I'd learned that he didn't like milk or sugar in his coffee, but he did in his tea. I knew that there were only three people alive who ever used his first name – his mother, his sister Jessica, and me. The rest of his family, even his grandfather, always called him by his middle name. I'd discovered that his eyes changed colour based on his moods and his overall wellbeing – they lightened from their usual bright blue to a washed-out grey when he was unhappy, upset or feeling particularly unwell, and darkened nearly to black when he was angry. The latter happened very rarely, even despite his rather formidable temper. I had even managed to memorise his Subway and Starbucks orders.

And not only that, but I'd discovered that he was absolutely fucking amazing in bed.

Soon, he had fallen asleep, his breathing settling into a steady rhythm. The two flights we'd taken that day had really taken their toll on him. It was bad enough when you were completely healthy, as I had quickly discovered, but Taylor had the added complication of chronic illness to deal with. This had to be hell for him. There was absolutely no doubt in my mind that he would take a while to recover from this particular journey.

I shifted the position of my left hand and moved it beneath the blanket, resting my palm over his heart and splaying my fingers out over his chest. I could feel his ribs beneath my fingertips, even through his shirt, and I bit down hard on my bottom lip. I knew that the medication he took to keep his seasonal affective disorder in check worked, and that genetics played a part as well, but as far as I was concerned it didn't matter. He was really far too thin, and I could only hope that whatever doctor he ended up seeing in Australia took that into account when prescribing his next

course of medication. I smiled wryly as one of my grandmother's favourite sayings came to mind – it would take little more than a stiff breeze to topple him over.

My right hand moved to the remote set into my right armrest, and I changed the channel on my video screen to the flight path. We had only just passed over Hawaii, and we still had many thousands of miles and approximately eight hours left to our flight. Around me most of my fellow passengers were either sleeping, reading or watching their own video screens – in my mind, the sleepers had the right idea. And really, I was beginning to feel a little sleepy.

I ran my right hand through Taylor's hair one last time, twisting some of the strands between the pads of my index finger and thumb, before reclining my seat, tipping my head back and closing my eyes.

When I awoke there was no reassuring weight on my lap, and the airplane cabin was filled with bright sunlight. I blinked in an attempt to focus, and my gaze landed on my video screen. It reported that our arrival in Sydney was more or less imminent – there was just one hour left to go, and I couldn't help but smile. I was now officially the furthest west (and east, for that matter) I had ever been in all of my life, and we hadn't even landed yet.

I shifted slightly in my seat and looked out of my window. A wide expanse of sky stretched for miles and miles, unbroken by even just one cloud. I didn't know if it was because I was looking through a thick pane of toughened glass or if it was just my eyes, but the sky looked a lot different to what I was used to – a deeper, darker blue.

"Good morning Sleeping Beauty."

It was Taylor who had spoken – he sounded much more awake now, and when I looked at him I could see that he looked much better than he had hours earlier. He was smiling slightly, one eyebrow raised in what I instantly recognised as amusement.

"How long've you been up?" I asked as I set my seat upright once more.

"Half an hour, I think." He raked a hand back through his messy hair. "I took my medication as soon as I woke up, so I'm set for the day." He leaned forward to his seat pocket and took out his own ziplock bag of medication. "I've got a couple weeks' worth of meds left, so I'm going to need to get myself registered with a doctor pretty soon. I can't let myself get caught short – it'd be a disaster."

We were both quiet for some time, listening to the sounds of the cabin crew and our fellow passengers as they prepared for the upcoming descent, content to be in one another's presence. Deep down inside I felt incredibly nervous – in all my twenty-three years, soon to be twenty-four, I'd never been even one inch south of the Equator. I'd never been any further west than Los Angeles. And yet here I was, about to arrive in my new home halfway across the world with the love of my life at my side.

"You ready for this?" Taylor asked as the seatbelt light came on over my head.

I didn't answer him at first, focusing instead on getting my seatbelt buckled before the final approach into Sydney. "In all honesty?" I replied, choosing to answer his question with one of my own.

"In all honesty."

"I'm more nervous than anything," I admitted. "I've never been this far from home before."

There was the tell-tale dull *click* of Taylor buckling his seatbelt. "Which is completely understandable, and I don't blame you in the least," he said. He looked over at me. "But you're not doing this on your own. We're doing this together, remember?"

"Yeah, I know. Doesn't mean I can't be a *little* freaked out, right?"

He gave me a smile, before leaning close to me and putting his head down on my shoulder. I reached over with my right hand and gently stroked his hair, separating the caramel waves with my thumbnail. "That feels really good," he murmured, and I smiled.

In that moment, I knew everything was going to be okay. It didn't matter where in the world the two of us were – as long as Taylor was with me, anywhere was home.

Chapter 1

...get me through the night

Taylor

I rubbed my forehead with the heel of my left hand and squinted at the lines of black text that filled the screen of my laptop in orderly rows. My head and face had been aching on and off for the last two weeks, though the pain was worst when I bent down to pick something up off the floor – Ratchet’s water dish, for example – or lay down flat on my back. When I was sitting up, it was manageable and could be knocked on the head easily with a bit of Panadol.

I cast a longing glance at the cupboard above the microwave. Behind its doors was a cane basket containing various medications – my antidepressants and anxiety medication, Isobel’s birth control pills, over-the-counter allergy medication, a few packets of Sudafed, and painkillers of various descriptions. Somewhere in there was an almost-full packet of Panadeine that belonged to me, and me alone. My allergy to ibuprofen meant that I couldn’t take Nurofen when I was in more pain than could be handled with something less potent, so Panadeine worked in that respect rather well. The only problem was that codeine had the potential for being highly addictive, and so Isobel tended to watch my intake like a hawk.

I pushed my glasses up on top of my head and pinched the bridge of my nose between my right thumb and index finger, squeezing my eyes shut. Entirely aside from all of my aches and pains, I wasn’t feeling well overall – it was just a general feeling, nothing specific, but it didn’t make it any less annoying.

“Tay?”

I opened my eyes and looked up at Isobel. She was looking at me with her bottom lip drawn in between her teeth and concern in her eyes. “Hey,” I said, cracking a small smile. “How was practice?”

She returned my smile. “It was good. How’re you feeling?”

"Like shit," I replied. "Same as I do when the SAD kicks in."

"Except that it's almost summer," she reminded me. "Plus it didn't kick in when winter got here like it normally would have." She frowned a little. "Is your face still hurting?"

"A bit." I touched my right cheekbone. "Mostly here, but only when I bend over or lie down. Otherwise I can put up with it."

"You're sure?" she asked, and I nodded. "Okay. But if it gets any worse, even if it's the middle of the night, you tell me. All right?"

"Yeah, all right."

Seemingly satisfied by this, she came and sat down at the table next to me. "So what're you working on?"

"Mark heard about that song I wrote last year," I replied. I lifted my glasses off of my head and put them back on my face where they belonged. "He emailed me and asked if they could use it for the album."

"Are you going to let them use it?"

I cast a sidelong glance at her. "You think I should? It's just going to waste otherwise."

"Well, I wouldn't say it's going to *waste*. But I definitely think you should let them record it. It's a great song – even if they don't credit it to you, it's at least out there for the world to hear. Though I would hope that they do name you as one of its writers, if they end up using it – you deserve *some* kind of recognition for your work." She turned my laptop slightly to face her. "So you're typing up the lyrics, I take it."

"As much of them as I can remember, yeah. I didn't exactly write them down."

"You twit." She picked up my laptop and set it down in front of her. "Why don't you sing it for me, and I'll type it up. That might make it a little easier for you to remember."

"It can't hurt." I got up from the table and walked into the kitchen, hoisting myself up onto the kitchen island once I reached it. While I hummed the basic melody, trying to recall the lyrics I'd written more than a year earlier, I swung my feet back and forth.

"You're going to mark up the cupboards if you're not careful," Isobel said.

"Bit hard to do that with bare feet," I replied.

Over the next twenty minutes, working in tandem, we got the lyrics of the only song I had ever written typed out and saved to the hard drive of my laptop. "What do you feel like for dinner?" Isobel asked as she closed my laptop.

"I found a recipe online this morning that I want to try out – we just don't have all the ingredients yet." I eased myself down off the bench and went over to the refrigerator. Stuck to the door of the freezer compartment, under a magnet advertising a local pizzeria, was a sheet of notebook paper that was littered with my handwriting. "I know that we've got butter, plenty of spices, onions and a couple tins of apricots, but we need frozen peas, chicken and rice."

"So a trip to the shops is in order?"

"Looks like it." I folded up and pocketed the recipe, and walked over to where I'd toed my sneakers off after my walk that morning.

It had been eight months since Isobel and I had moved Down Under. There had been a great deal that we'd both had to get used to – hearing a different accent every day, driving on the left rather than the right, dealing with reversed seasons, and learning different words for familiar objects. Even so, I had welcomed quite a few of the changes. I loved my new job, even though it meant that half the time the music I produced belonged to divas-in-training and so-called musicians that gave me a headache from all their caterwauling. Winter was a lot milder here too, which meant that for the first time in many years my seasonal affective disorder had lain dormant rather than rearing its ugly head.

I'd also discovered that small town life well and truly agreed with me. I had lived in the city for virtually my entire life, something that ever since I'd fallen ill had been exhausting almost in the extreme. Where we now lived wasn't exactly *small*, but when compared to what I was used to it could almost be considered a village. It was much quieter and slower-paced here, and that in itself was a relief.

It didn't take us long to gather the fixings for dinner, and we were soon back in the kitchen at home. Along with everything we'd needed to cook tonight's curry, we'd also bought an apple and blackberry crumble for dessert that would be going in the oven once dinner was on the stove. I'd set myself the task of chopping up onions, with Isobel busying herself with cutting up chicken while the frypan heated up on its burner.

Just as I finished with the onions, it hit me. The dull ache I'd been doing my best to ignore since I'd woken up that morning flared up so sharply that I slammed my knife down on the chopping board. I braced myself against the bench with my left hand and pressed the palm of my right hand to my face, and squeezed my eyes shut.

"Whoa, easy does it," I heard Isobel caution. She gently lifted my hand off the bench and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "I think you need to lie down for a bit. Dinner can wait a little while."

"I'm fine," I mumbled.

"Open your eyes and look at me," she ordered. I half-complied, easing my left eye open and squinting at her. "You are *not* fine," she informed me. "Go lie down and watch TV for a bit, and I'll see if I can get hold of your doctor – maybe she'll have an idea of what the hell is going on with you."

"It's a quarter to six, Issie," I informed her as she led me into the living room. "She's not going to be in."

"I'm going to try anyway. She probably won't be able to see you until tomorrow, I get that, but if I can get hold of her she might be able to give us a rough idea of what's going on."

The five o'clock news was just winding up when Isobel came into the lounge room. She had a glass of orange juice in one hand, a packet of Sudafed and my Panadeine in her other hand, and the aerial of the cordless handset between her teeth. I sat up and took the glass from her so that her hand was freed up, and she took the aerial out of her mouth.

"Dr. Sommers said that she would want to get a look at you," Isobel said as she sat down on the couch next to me. "But she said that it sounds like you've got a sinus infection." Here she held up the Sudafed and Panadeine packets. "She wants you to take some Sudafed and a couple of Panadeine now, and again before you go to bed tonight. And if you end up having another flare-up before tomorrow morning, she told me to give the Wollongong Radio Doctor a call." She showed me the palm of her left hand, which had a phone number written on it. "Otherwise, she wants to see you first thing tomorrow morning."

"Yeah, okay." I gave Isobel a small smile and busied myself with taking my medication.

The first doses I took of the Sudafed and the Panadeine worked perfectly – the pain and pressure in my sinuses and my head dulled enough that I was able to finish cooking dinner, and to sit down to eat with Isobel. Before heading to bed just before eleven I took my evening medication as usual, pairing it with another dose apiece of Sudafed and Panadeine, and fell asleep almost as soon as my head landed on my pillow.

Somehow, it wasn't enough this time. The medication I took at bedtime usually knocked me out until the next morning, but it seemed that it was no match for my sinuses this time. It was a combination of a sharp, unrelenting ache on the right side of my face and being shaken by the shoulder that broke through the hold the Endep had on me, and I opened my eyes to see Isobel crouched at my side of the bed. A quick glance at the clock radio I kept on my bedside table revealed that it was barely midnight.

"I just got off the phone with a Dr. Tucker – he's on his way here right now," she told me quietly.

"Let's get you downstairs, okay? It'll save him having to come up here."

"I'm fine, Issie," I said through gritted teeth as she helped me to sit up. "I don't need to see a doctor yet."

Almost in response, Isobel gripped my hands tightly. "Yes, Taylor, you do," she whispered. "You're sick and you're in pain – that's enough of a reason. The absolute last thing I want to see is you hurting that much. It hurts me too, okay?" She let go of my right hand and tucked my hair behind my ears. "I know you're used to pain, Tay, as much as I wish you weren't, but it's okay to admit that you can't handle it. It doesn't mean you're weak – it means you're human."

Isobel had just got me settled on the couch downstairs when the doorbell rang. She gave my hand a quick squeeze before going to answer it, and returned with someone I figured had to be Dr. Tucker. He looked to be about the same age as my father, with closely-cropped dark brown hair and a warm smile.

"You'd be Taylor Hanson, then?" he asked, and I nodded jerkily. "What can I do for you tonight?"

"I-" I started, before a sharp jolt of pain caused me to squeeze my eyes shut. "Ow," I whispered.

"It's his sinuses," Isobel put in. "His head too, but mostly his sinuses. Primarily on his right side." I felt her arm snake around my shoulders. "Plus he's been feeling unwell for a couple of weeks now. I called his doctor yesterday evening, and she said it sounds like a sinus infection."

"Well, it certainly sounds that way to me," Dr. Tucker said, "but let's get a look at you before we jump to any conclusions." He opened his bag and took out a digital ear thermometer, and Isobel gently tilted my head toward my left shoulder so that my temperature could be taken.

I spent the next twenty or so minutes being poked and prodded, with Dr. Tucker confirming the suspicions of Dr. Sommers – I had one hell of a sinus infection.

"I'm going to write you a prescription for an antibiotic called Augmentin," Dr. Tucker said as he took a prescription pad and a pen from his bag, and started writing. "I want you to take one tablet twice a day for the next two weeks, all right? If it hasn't cleared up by then, make an appointment to see your usual GP." He tore the top sheet off the pad, folded it and handed it to Isobel. "Keep

taking Panadeine to keep the pain in check, and if you're able I'd like you to consider taking the next week off work." He gave me a smile that I did my best to return, and he stood up. "I'll be in touch with your usual GP in the morning – Dr. Sommers, was it?"

"That's the one," Isobel confirmed. "Thank you so much, Dr. Tucker – we really appreciate this."

"No trouble at all, Ms. Reynolds. Have a good night."

Once Isobel had seen Dr. Tucker out, she came back into the lounge room. "Well, at least it's not anything more serious," I said quietly as she sat back down next to me.

"You're just very lucky it got caught before it could get much worse," Isobel informed me. "You're already unwell – this is the last thing you need right now." She gave me a small smile and eased me to my feet. "Come on, back to bed. I'll duck out to the chemist in the morning and get your prescription filled."

"That's the best idea you've had all night," I mumbled as I allowed her to lead me back upstairs.

* * *

Two weeks later, at the beginning of December, everything shifted into high gear. The third saw the arrival of my parents and siblings from Los Angeles – Isobel's own family was due to arrive on the fifth, while our other respective relatives and friends would be trickling into the country over the remaining two weeks. December twenty-first was going to be a rather busy day, on all counts – not only would it be one hell of a family reunion, but it was also the day that Isobel and I had set for our wedding.

The first members of my family to set foot in Arrivals at Sydney International Airport were my mother and Zoë. Zoë had been clinging limpet-like to my mother's side as they'd left Customs, but as soon as she saw me she detached herself and ran full-tilt through the crowd. I dropped to my knees and opened my arms wide, and she hurled herself straight at me.

"Miss me, did you?" I asked, laughter in my voice. I felt her nod against my shoulder, and I grinned.

"Aw Zo, I missed you too." I gave her a tight hug and kissed the crown of her head before releasing her, and stood up to face my mother. "Hey Ma."

"Hello Taylor," Mom replied with a smile. She studied me briefly. "Well, I can say one thing for your move down here – it's definitely agreed with you."

"It has," I agreed. "I didn't have any issues with my SAD this winter just gone, for one thing. You have no idea how much of a relief that was."

"That's wonderful, Tay." Mom brushed my hair off my face and behind my ears. "You're looking much better as well. You're not as thin as you used to be."

"S'my medication," I replied with a one-shouldered shrug. "One of its side-effects, anyway. Doesn't bother me all that much – it's better than feeling like I'm going to be blown away when a gale hits."

It wasn't much longer before the rest of my family joined us. As I caught sight of Mark, I gave him a cursory glance over the rims of my glasses. "You look like something the cat dragged in," I commented.

Mark scowled at me. "That's what happens when you have to spend fourteen hours crammed into Economy," he grumbled. "Why do you have to live so fucking far away?" Here Dad smacked him hard across the back of his head. "Ow!"

"We are in *public*, Matthew," Dad scolded my brother as Mark rubbed the back of his head. "Watch the mouth."

"Jesus, I'm *sorry*," my twin muttered, just loud enough so that only I could hear him. He raised his voice and asked, "So can we get going or what?"

A couple of hours after leaving Sydney, we arrived in Albion Park. A quick glance in the rear view mirror as I flicked the left blinker on revealed that Mark was looking at the street sign on the corner with one eyebrow raised.

"You weren't kidding."

"I wasn't kidding about what?" I asked as I turned into my street.

"You really do live on Taylor Road. I thought you were joking."

"Well, you can think all you want," I replied as I pulled the van up alongside the kerb outside mine and Isobel's house, "but we really do live here."

Almost as soon as we were all inside the house, we all split off. My mother, Isobel and my sisters disappeared upstairs, and I figured I could safely assume they were off on some sort of secret women's wedding business. Isaac, Mark and Zac had crowded around the kitchen table, heads together and deep in discussion about their nearly-completed album. Dad and Mac were in the lounge room, playing a game on Isobel's Wii console. None of it was anything I was interested in or felt welcome to, so I headed out to the backyard.

I had spent around twenty minutes tossing a much-abused tennis ball back and forth for Ratchet when I heard the back door slide open, and I looked back over my shoulder to see Mark coming outside. He gave me a small smile as he walked down the porch steps.

"How's recording going?" I asked as I bent down to collect Ratchet's ball.

"We're just about done," he replied. "Only got one more song to get down – yours, as it happens."

"So you're definitely using it?" I asked, and he nodded. "Can I ask you to do something for me, then?"

"So long as it's not illegal."

I eyed my brother with one eyebrow raised. "Mark, when have you ever known me to break the law? It's not illegal, don't worry." I tossed Ratchet's ball between my hands. "Credit me as one of

the writers? That's all I want – I don't want any royalties or whatever from it, just my name attached to the song."

"I think we can do that, considering you wrote half of it." He gave me a smile. "So how've you been?"

I shrugged. "I've been all right. It's a lot easier for me here. It's quieter, things go a lot more slowly, and I've got a bit more room to breathe. That sort of thing." Almost unconsciously, I pulled down on my right ear. "I was sick for a little while, though. Had a killer sinus infection for pretty much all of November, but that's cleared up now. What about you?"

"Way too busy. The album's nearly done at least – we're trying to get everything recorded at the very least by New Year's Eve. We're not planning to release it until the middle of next year, but as far as we're concerned the sooner the recording's done the better."

"How's that going to work? Seeing as you're here until just before Christmas and all that."

"Way ahead of you, bro. We booked a bit of studio time up in Sydney so we can get some of it done while we're here." As he played with the charms on his necklaces, I could see a wicked smile inch its way onto his face. "I also got engaged, but I'm *pretty* sure you wouldn't be interested in that."

"You *didn't*." When he nodded, I dropped the ball on the ground and wiped my hands off on my jeans before high-fiving him. "When did this happen?"

"Bit more than a month ago, on Halloween. She's going to be moving in with me after we get back to the States." He crouched down and scratched Ratchet behind her ears. "Jess moved back to the dorms for her senior year, so I've been on my own the last couple of months."

I let out a low whistle and shook my head. Mark and Schuyler had been dating for so long that there had been a running bet between Dad, Isaac, Zac and I as to when Mark would actually get around to popping the all-important question. It had taken him seven years, so it looked as if Zac was the winner. "So does our arrangement still stand?" I asked.

"And what arrangement would that be?" When I raised my eyebrows at him, he let out a laugh.

"Yes, the arrangement still stands. There isn't anyone else I'd want as my best man."

"Good answer."

I dug my hands into my pockets and stared up into the cloudless sky. In just eighteen days, on the Solstice, I was due to marry Isobel – my best friend and confidante, the love of my life. The literal other half to my soul. So why the hell did I feel so fucking nervous?

"It's normal, you know."

I looked over at Mark. "What's normal?"

"I can tell that you're freaking out, Tay." He smirked at me. "Partly because it's written all over your face, and partly because I know you." He stepped up beside me. "I freaked out when I asked Skya," he confessed. "I could barely get the words out, and I even dropped the ring a couple of times. She had the grace to see the funny side of it, thank God. I think she might have been a little relieved that I finally asked her."

"Well, seven years *is* a long time to be dating someone," I replied.

"So says he who can't make relationships work for longer than eighteen months," Mark shot back.

"It's *twenty-one* months, I'll have you know. And this is going to be forever – I can't imagine spending the rest of my life with anyone else. Hell, I don't know if I *could*."

"You're starting to sound like a woman."

"And *you're* starting to piss me off."

Mark snickered, and I let out a chuckle of my own. If there was one thing he was good at, it was making me come to my senses. In the grand scheme of things, what I faced was insignificant. Countless others had done it before me, and countless others would do it after. I had every right to be nervous, true, but in the end it was essentially a celebration of the love shared by Isobel and I. And that, more than anything else, made it all worth it.

Chapter 2

...my heart and my soul to keep

Isobel

"I think I'm going to throw up."

That was all it took. Those seven little words had Katherine dashing across the kitchen to where I sat on a barstool at the kitchen bench, poking disinterestedly at my cornflakes. My favourite coffee mug, filled this morning not with coffee but with of all things *tea*, sat within reach of my right hand. Not that I intended to drink it.

"Don't you *dare*," my sister told me, in the tone of voice she reserved for scolding my niece and nephews. "You are *not* going to throw up." She pointed to my mug. "Drink your tea – I put ginger and honey in it. It'll stop you feeling like you're going to hurl."

"I *hate* tea, as you damn well know," I said, feeling mutinous. "I want coffee."

"Isobel, trust me, the absolute last thing you need on today of all days is the jitters. And that's what you're going to end up with if you load up on caffeine."

I looked at Katherine. "Tea's got more caffeine in it than coffee does," I reminded her.

"For God's sake, just *drink* your damn tea will you? It won't kill you." She pulled out the barstool next to mine and hopped up on it, and put her right hand on top of my left. "I know you're nervous, Bel," she said gently. "Most women are on their wedding day, and *you* are certainly no exception."

"I just want this to be *over* with already," I mumbled. I gave my breakfast one last prod with my spoon before pushing the bowl away. "I want to see my fiancé, damn it!"

"You know how Ma gets about tradition. And I know you miss him-"

"That isn't even the word for it," I interjected. "I'm fucking *desperate* here."

Katherine granted me a small, tight smile. "Six hours, Bel. Six hours, and he'll be yours forever. Just keep that in mind."

"Six hours until I'm officially a Hanson," I concluded, finally beginning to feel a little better.

"That's the spirit." She gave me another smile. "Come on, finish your breakfast. I'll help you start getting ready once you're done eating."

My only response as I started eating again was a nod.

Once I had managed to choke down half of my cereal and my tea, Katherine was seemingly satisfied enough to allow me to escape upstairs. The room and bed that I shared with Taylor had been mine alone for the last few nights, owing to my mother's sheer obsession with upholding wedding traditions. She had taken it to such an extreme that the last time I had seen Taylor had been at our final rehearsal on Wednesday. As far as I was aware, he was crashing with his brothers in their hotel suite.

Choosing to ignore what was currently draped over the rail in my side of our built-in wardrobe, I sat down on my side of the bed and picked up my laptop from its hiding place between the bed and my bedside table. Even if I couldn't see my husband-to-be thanks to what I considered to be wholly outdated traditions, I could at least *talk* to him. In this regard, the internet and instant messaging were amazing inventions.

I turned my laptop on and waited for it to pick up our wireless connection before signing into Windows Live Messenger. Just as I'd hoped he would be, Taylor was online and available, with his personal message making me bite down hard on my bottom lip. It read *Missing my Issie like crazy – only five and a half hours to go.*

"I miss you too," I murmured as I double-clicked his screen name and started up an audio chat.

"Tay?" I asked tentatively once he had accepted the chat invitation, hoping my computer microphone was picking up my voice.

"God I miss you," were the first words I heard him speak, and I almost sobbed out of relief.

"I never want us to be separated for this long ever again," I told him. "This has been absolute fucking *torture*." I let out a mirthless chuckle. "If I knew where my webcam was, I'd tell tradition to fuck off."

Taylor barked out a laugh. "You and me both, Issie. My mother's of the same mindset as yours, believe it or not."

"I wondered why they got along so well," I remarked, and he laughed again. "So how're you feeling? And don't you dare lie to me mister, I know what you sound like when you're feeling like shit."

"I've felt better," he admitted. "I think Ike put about five or six shots of espresso in my coffee this morning just so I could actually be awake for this."

"You lucky bastard," I said affectionately. "Kath made me drink fucking *tea* this morning – she wouldn't let me have coffee. Seemed to think I'd get the jitters."

"You poor baby," Taylor teased me.

I snorted. "Did you take your medication?"

"Yes, *Mother*," he replied. "Today is the one day of my life that I *don't* want to feel like a zombie, so of course I've taken it."

"Okay, okay, I'm just making sure." I looked at the digital alarm clock that sat on my bedside table, next to a framed photograph of Taylor and I. Its digits read 6:30. "Kat will probably be upstairs soon," I said reluctantly. "And the girls will be over in about half an hour to get me all dolled up. I'd better go."

"All right," he said, sounding almost sad. "I'll see you at twelve, yeah?" He sounded hopeful now.

"It's a date," I replied. "Love you, Tay."

"Love you, Issie." And with those words he signed out of Messenger, severing the connection between us. I quickly followed his lead, checking my email before turning my computer off and stowing it away in its case.

A quiet knock sounded at the door just as I was sliding open my side of the wardrobe. "Come in," I called out as I carefully eased the garment bag that contained my wedding dress off of the rail, carrying it across to the bed as gently as if it were crafted from spun glass. I looked over at the door to see Katherine easing her way inside the room. "Hey Kat."

"The girls will be here in about twenty minutes – they're just about to leave the hotel," she said. "Why don't you go and have a bath? I'll get your dress and shoes sorted out while you're relaxing."

"All right," I agreed, knowing full well that once all the girls arrived from where they had been staying at North Wollongong's Novotel Northbeach I'd never get a moment's peace. "Give me a yell when they're all here."

Before I went into the ensuite bathroom, I picked one of the spare wedding invitations up off my dressing table and read it over one last time.

Together with their families

Isobel Lynn Reynolds and Jordan Taylor Hanson

request the pleasure of the company of

Schuyler Hannaford

as they celebrate their marriage

on Sunday December 21st 2008 at 12 noon

to be held at the Temple Garden, Wollongong Botanic Gardens

Northfields Avenue, Keiraville, New South Wales, Australia

Reception to follow at Gleniffer Brae

It was really happening. This afternoon, in front of my friends and family, I would officially become Isobel Hanson. I couldn't remember the last time I'd wanted something so badly.

One long and very relaxing bubble bath later, and after I had brushed my teeth, I dressed in a pair of shorts and a sleeveless top. I didn't want to get dressed up just yet – my hair and makeup were yet to be done, and I couldn't risk staining my dress. My hair, which I'd managed to wash during my bath, was wound up in a towel that I'd piled atop my head.

"I will warn you right now – all the girls are downstairs," Katherine informed me as she unwound the towel from around my hair and started towelling it dry. "Sami has her hairdressing gear with her, and Ellie brought her full makeup kit."

"Oh *wonderful*," I muttered. "I swear to God, if Ellie makes me look like a whore I'll never forgive her."

"She won't make you look like a *whore*. Have *some* faith in her, will you?" I felt Katherine tugging gently at the ends of my hair. "You have a lot of split ends, Bel. Sami will probably want to give you a bit of a trim before she does your hair."

I followed Katherine downstairs from the back of the house, a clean and dry towel draped over one shoulder, directly into a maelstrom of noise and activity. I could hear Schuyler along with mine and Taylor's sisters talking and laughing, and what I knew to be songs from the album that Hanson were almost done with recording playing on the lounge room stereo. It was one of the good things about having an 'in' with the band – I heard their new music before most of the world did.

"Here comes the bride!" Katherine proclaimed.

"She's not the bride until she's all dressed up!" Jessica yelled back.

"Hey, don't / get a say in this?" I asked as I walked into the dining room, where Samantha and Penelope had their respective kits set up on the dining table. Jessica and Avery were seated on the barstools at the kitchen bench, each with a bowl of cereal in front of them. The carton of soy

milk that Taylor had bought the last time we'd gone grocery shopping was on the bench before Avery. "And who said you two could go poking around in my cupboards?" I teased them.

"Hotel restaurant didn't have any soy milk," Avery replied as she sliced up a banana with her spoon. "I'm fucking *starving*." She indicated her bowl of cereal with a thumb. "You're out of cornflakes now, by the way. Thought I should let you know."

"Don't worry about it, Ave. It was only going to waste anyway."

"All right you, enough chit-chat," Samantha said, and I felt myself being steered toward the kitchen table. "Hair up," she directed. I bunched my hair up into a ponytail so that she could drape the towel around my shoulders, releasing it once the towel had been pinned into place at the back of my neck.

And so began two hours of being fussed over by my nearest and dearest. I had my hair trimmed, blow-dried, curled and pinned, eyebrows tweezed, face made up, and all my nails filed and polished. For the first time since my college graduation, I truly felt like a princess.

Once the crowning touch had been placed, the tiara that my veil would be attached to once I was dressed, I was released to return to my bedroom. It was now a quarter past nine, giving me just half an hour to finish getting ready.

I had fallen in love with my wedding dress the instant I'd seen it for the first time. It was white with satin spaghetti straps and had two layers, one of satin and the other of chiffon, that overlapped in an inverted V at mid-calf in the front and formed a short train at the back. Swarovski crystal beads had been sewn onto the bodice in the place of the sequins that had formed part of the original design, something that I'd had to pay extra for. It hadn't mattered a bit to me – it had been a small price to pay to be able to call it mine.

"I *really* shouldn't be wearing white," I said as Katherine unzipped the dress and held it out for me to step into.

"And why is that?" she asked as I settled the straps on my shoulders, and my sister zipped me up the back.

"Because I'm not a virgin," I replied. "Pretty sure only virgins are supposed to wear white on their wedding day."

Katherine snorted at this. "Bel, trust me – nobody gives a shit about any of that anymore. Our sisters both wore white on *their* wedding days, but do you think *they* were virgins? Please." I felt her fingers doing up the tiny hook at the top of the zipper. "Turn around so I can get a look at you." I complied, and Katherine smiled. "Absolutely gorgeous," she decided. "It really suits you." Here she frowned. "All right, so that we keep Mum happy – do you have something old?"

I raised my right hand. Around that wrist was a silver bracelet that my paternal grandmother had worn when she'd married my grandfather, and had left to me in her will. The exact condition attached to my ownership of this particular piece of jewellery was that I wear it for the first time on my own wedding day. I had faithfully adhered to that condition, choosing not to wear it until today.

"Something new is the dress," Katherine said, and I knew she was mentally ticking items off on her checklist. "Something borrowed?"

I walked across to my dressing table and opened my jewellery box, taking out a blue velvet pouch. I loosened the drawstring and drew out a silver necklace that had a diamond pendant threaded onto it. "Diana lent this to me," I said as I put the pouch back into my jewellery box. "Help me put it on?"

"And lastly, something blue?"

I felt my face flush as Katherine did up the clasp of my borrowed necklace. "My garter," I said quietly. "It's got a blue ribbon sewn into it."

"That should appease Mum, then," she said, sounding very satisfied. She turned me to face her.

"Now, you stay up here for a little while longer while I go and get myself dressed and made up. It

won't take me very long – Sami and Ellie will have finished with the girls and each other by now.”

She bent down and picked up my shoes from where they sat in front of my bedside table – white satin sandals with a low heel. “Put your shoes on while you’re waiting.”

“Okay,” I murmured.

Katherine studied me for a little while. “Not much longer now,” she said softly before giving my shoulder a gentle squeeze and leaving the room.

We left for Wollongong at eleven-thirty following a photography session in the front yard, travelling in a white stretch limousine. My bridesmaids all wore strapless empire-style gowns in a deep cherry red, each of them carrying a small bouquet of red tulips and white rosebuds. Katherine, as my maid of honour, had a fully-opened white rose as the focal point of her bouquet. My own bouquet was a riot of tulips and rosebuds, with a Stargazer lily, my favourite flower, right in the centre.

Dad was waiting in the carpark of the Temple Garden when we arrived a few minutes before twelve, with my niece Amy and Taylor’s cousin Oliver in attendance. Samantha and my brother-in-law Neil had given permission for their daughter to be my flower girl, while Taylor had gained the consent of his Aunt Gloria and Uncle Nathan so that Oliver could take part in the ceremony as page boy.

“Hi Dad,” I said once I had exited the limousine. He gave me a warm smile as I came to stand before him.

“Look at you Isobel, all grown up,” he said, sounding wistful. “Now, I want to know something – are you happy?”

I nodded. “I’m marrying one of my best friends today, Dad. I couldn’t be happier.”

“Good. That’s what I wanted to hear.” And with those words, he lowered my veil over my face.

“We’ve kept him waiting long enough, I think. Are you ready, Isobel?”

"As I'll ever be," I replied. As I spoke the processional music began – Johann Pachelbel's *Canon in D* – and I took in a deep breath. It was time.

Dad and I were the last to walk down the aisle. Amy and Oliver were first, followed by my bridesmaids. I kept my gaze fixed on the end of the aisle, not daring to look to either side even for a moment. I didn't want anything to wreck today's ceremony, and I certainly didn't need to be distracted by anything that lay to my right or my left. The only distraction I could want or need was at the very end of the aisle, waiting for me with our respective sets of brothers at his side.

"Hey beautiful."

Until I heard Taylor's voice, I hadn't even realised that Dad and I had reached the end of the aisle. I looked up into his bright blue eyes, the same shade as the sky above, and gave him a shaky smile. "Hey gorgeous," I whispered. "I have to say, you can look quite dashing when you truly want to." He was dressed in solid black, with just a red silk tie to break the monotony. His hair was pulled back in a low ponytail at the back of his head, and he wore his brand new half-rim glasses.

He grinned. "I thought you might like it." He reached for my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze, before turning to face the celebrant. The music died away as she began to speak.

"We have been invited here on this important day to celebrate the very special love between Taylor and Isobel, by joining them in marriage," the celebrant said to begin the ceremony. "My name is Melinda Jessup, and as a civil marriage celebrant I am authorised by law to solemnise marriages according to the Marriage Act 1961. Before you, Isobel and Taylor, are joined together in marriage in my presence and in the presence of your family and friends, I am bound to remind you publicly of the solemn, serious and binding nature of the relationship into which you are about to enter. Marriage, as most of us understand it, is voluntary and is a full commitment of a man to a woman and a woman to a man. It is made in the deepest sense to the exclusion of all others and is entered into with the desire, hope and firm intention that it will last for life.

"The covenant of marriage can only be entered into by those persons who are legally and spiritually free to offer their hand to another. Taylor and Isobel, is it your intention to marry your beloved on this day?" was the question asked of Taylor and I.

"Yes," the two of us responded as one.

Seemingly satisfied by our affirmation, Melinda spoke again. "Taylor, will you pledge to love Isobel, and throughout your years together to be honest, faithful and kind to her? Do you pledge to give her the same happiness she gives to you, to be honest with her, and to respect her for who she is and not for who you want her to be?"

Taylor's voice was shaking slightly when he responded to Melinda's question. "T-today I vow to always be honest with and faithful to you, to share in your happiness, and to help you achieve your hopes and desires and reach your fullest potential. I will be there when you cry to dry your tears, and when you are scared to soothe your fears. I will be there through all your tomorrows, loving you at all times in our joys and sorrows. I truly love you and respect you, and freely share with you all that I am. You are everything to me."

"And you, Isobel – will you pledge to love Taylor, and throughout your years together to be honest, faithful and kind to him? Do you pledge to give him the same happiness he gives to you, to be honest with him, and to respect him for who he is and not for who you want him to be?"

I swallowed hard before answering, my voice a little stronger than Taylor's had been. "Today I vow to always be honest with and faithful to you, to share in your happiness, and to help you achieve your hopes and desires and reach your fullest potential. I will be there when you cry to dry your tears, and when you are scared to soothe your fears. I will be there through all your tomorrows, loving you at all times in our joys and sorrows. I truly love you and respect you, and freely share with you all that I am. You are everything to me."

Our vows came next – aside from the exchange of our wedding rings, it was possibly one of the most important parts of the ceremony, and therefore I was determined not to screw it up. As we had agreed with Melinda, Taylor spoke his vows first.

"I call upon everyone here today to witness that I, Jordan Taylor Hanson, take thee, Isobel Lynn Reynolds, to be my lawful wedded wife. I promise to love you, believe in you as you are, be honest with you, encourage and support you, care for you, and above all else I promise to respect you – in sickness as in health, for better or for worse, throughout all our life together here on Earth." His hands found mine, and he gave them a small, quick squeeze that I knew was meant to be reassuring. I gave him a small smile before I spoke my own vows.

"I call upon everyone here today to witness that I, Isobel Lynn Reynolds, take thee, Jordan Taylor Hanson, to be my lawful wedded husband. I promise to honour, encourage and support you throughout our life together. When our way becomes difficult I promise to stand by you, so that through our union we can accomplish more than we could alone. I promise to work at our love and always make you my priority in life."

Mark, as Taylor's best man, now stepped forward. In his right hand he carried our wedding bands, and handed us one each – mine to Taylor, and Taylor's to me.

"Marriage is a state in which two people come together and create a union which is greater than the sum of its parts," Melinda said as we prepared to exchange rings. "It is difficult to express in words the profound relationship that is love. The ring has long been a symbol of the sincerity and permanence of a couple's love for one another and regard for their marriage. As the circle can begin anew at any point, so a good marriage can pick any point to renew itself. These rings are symbols of your eternal love."

"Taylor, please repeat after me – with this ring I thee wed, and I make you a promise that from this day forward, you shall not walk alone. My heart will be your shelter and my arms will be your home."

Taylor took my left hand in both of his and slid my newest ring onto my left ring finger, where it would join my engagement ring, speaking as he did so. "With this ring I thee wed, and I make you a promise that from this day forward, you shall not walk alone. My heart will be your shelter and my arms will be your home."

"Isobel, please repeat after me – with this ring I thee wed, and I make you a promise that from this day forward, you shall not walk alone. My heart will be your shelter and my arms will be your home."

I took Taylor's left hand in mine and mirrored his actions as I spoke, my words identical to his own. "With this ring I thee wed, and I make you a promise that from this day forward, you shall not walk alone. My heart will be your shelter and my arms will be your home."

With those words, I knew that the ceremony was almost over. Melinda only had to speak the words that would make it official, and so Taylor and I both turned to face her once more.

"We recognise with full awareness that only a couple can truly administer marriage to each other, and only a couple can truly sanctify it," Melinda said. "Only two hearts pledged to love for life can truly join together."

"Isobel and Taylor, on behalf of the family and friends who love you, and on behalf of the larger family of humankind to which we all belong, and under the law of the Commonwealth of Australia I recognise and honour you as husband and wife. We celebrate your union which you have shared with us on this day. May the glory which rests upon all who love, bless you and keep you, filling you with happiness and a gracious spirit. Despite all changes of fortune and time, may that which is noble, lovely and true remain abundantly in your hearts, giving you strength for all that lies ahead." She smiled at us. "Taylor, you may now kiss your bride."

He grinned at these words and raised my veil up over my face. "I've wanted to do this for almost a whole week," he whispered before bending down and kissing me. I closed my eyes and put my

hands on his shoulders, putting my all into the kiss. "Whoa," he breathed as we broke apart and I opened my eyes. "That was something else..."

Melinda chuckled softly, before addressing our friends and family one last time. "It is my great pleasure and honour to present to you all Isobel and Taylor Hanson."

"Those are the best words I've heard all year," I whispered as Taylor and I hugged each other so tightly I thought my ribs would break. As he released me from the embrace and straightened up, I could see something new in his stance. He was no longer my fiancé, but now my beloved husband and the person who I would spend the rest of my life with. And he had just given me, no longer his fiancée but now his wife, the best gift I could have ever hoped to receive – the guarantee of his love and support for the rest of our lives.

Chapter 3

City on a rainy day down in the harbour

Taylor

They call Australia the Lucky Country. Whether in reference to the weather, the Australian lifestyle or the two-and-a-bit centuries of its history, it's supposed to be a fantastic place to call home.

Almost one year since moving Down Under, I'm starting to seriously question that epithet.

"Tay?"

I didn't answer, instead keeping my focus squarely on the homepage of the *Daily Telegraph* website. The bushfires currently raging down in Victoria, the state to the south of where Isobel and I lived, had been the subject of almost every news story for the last few days. Somehow, knowing that I lived more than four hundred kilometres north of the New South Wales-Victoria border didn't help me to distance myself from it all.

"Some people have no sense whatsoever," I muttered as I closed my laptop, in reference to the fires that were the work of arsonists, and finally looked up at Isobel. "Hmm?"

She raised a slender blonde eyebrow at me. "Shouldn't you be at work or something?"

"Nope," I replied. "Have you *looked* out the window lately?" I jerked my head toward the windows of our living room, which were slick with the rain that had been pelting them for the last couple of hours. "It's raining."

"You aren't the Wicked Witch of the West, Taylor – you aren't going to *melt*." She pointed to the front door. "If we're going to eat this week, you need to put in a few hours of work. Now go."

"Slavedriver."

Isobel smiled sweetly at me. "You still love me, though. Why else would you have married me?"

"Because you used your feminine wiles on me?" I let out a laugh as I ducked the cushion she threw at me. "Okay, okay, I'm going. You want me to pick up something for dinner on my way home?"

"Some chicken would be great," Isobel replied. "And some noodles if you can get them – brown rice if you can't."

I nodded, filing away Isobel's request in my head, and headed upstairs to change into something a little more work-appropriate.

Fifteen minutes later I was on my way, blasting the most recent addition to my iTunes library as I drove east along Taylor Road, heading for the intersection that would lead me to Terry Street and in turn to the Illawarra Highway. *Secret Life* was the current track, and I belted it out at the very top of my voice, tapping my fingers against the steering wheel in time with the beat.

"Been ripped, been burned, been kicked to hell and back again...and I feel all right...I've got my cloak of independence back again...and I feel all right..."

"Did you think that I was gonna be there...knowing everything about your secret life...tomorrow's got a new beginning... 'cause now you've finally opened up my eyes...all those times you slipped away...now you're begging me to stay...did you think that I was gonna be there...not this time, yeah, yeah..."

"You think we're cool but you're a fool to think that way...I won't break this time...I've had my cross to bear, been living in this shame...do you feel like cryin'..."

"Did you think that I was gonna be there...knowing everything about your secret life...tomorrow's got a new beginning... 'cause now you've finally opened up my eyes...all those times you slipped away...now you're begging me to stay...did you think that I was gonna be there...not this time..."

"Time shows everything...this time it ends..."

"Did you think that I was gonna be there...knowing everything about your secret life...tomorrow's got a new beginning...'cause now you've finally opened up my eyes...all those times you slipped away...now you're begging me to stay...did you think that I was gonna be there...not this time..."

That was one of the good things about being Mark Hanson's twin, I decided as the next song started playing – I got Hanson's CDs long before the rest of the world did. The new Hanson album, *Through The Crossroads*, was scheduled for release in the United States in the middle of the year, with the rest of the world to follow soon after. Most of 2008 had been given over to songwriting and recording, and I had received a CD copy of the final mix in the mail from Mark three weeks earlier. It was a good album, on par with *The Walk*, and I had told Mark as much.

"Oh, *hell*," I muttered as my phone's ringtone cut through the music that blasted from my iPod. Without taking my eyes off the road or my right hand off the wheel, I reached across to my iPod and hit pause, and picked up my phone from the front passenger seat. I didn't even glance at the tiny screen on the front as I flipped it open one-handed and answered. "Hello?"

"Hey Tay, it's Mark," my twin replied, a near-echo of my own voice resonating against my eardrums. The sole difference between our voices was that his was a couple of tones lower in pitch.

"Oh, hey Mark – *hey, watch where you're going!*" I yelled as a Land Rover cut me off. I leaned down hard on the horn, now completely annoyed. "*Fucking asshole!*"

"Please don't tell me you're *driving*," Mark said.

"Well, yeah, of course I am. What else would I be doing at" I squinted at the digital clock on the dashboard "eleven-thirty in the morning?"

"You'd be in bed?" Mark guessed, sounding hopeful. "Possibly doing unspeakable things to and with Isobel?"

"You, Matthew Marcus Hanson, are a pervert."

"Yeah, tell me something I *don't* know." I could almost see him grinning wickedly as he spoke.

"So what's possessed you to make an international call, and to my cell of all phones? It has to be, what, seven-thirty in the evening?"

"Six-thirty. We're in Tulsa at the moment." He was silent for a little while, and I could hear him rustling papers and tapping away at what sounded like a computer keyboard. "Look, we heard about the fires down that way – you guys are okay, right?"

"We're fine, Mark. The fires are nearly eight hours away from us. You don't need to worry."

"That's good to hear. Mom was worrying something fierce." He went quiet again. "Anyway, with all that's happening there, we're tossing our original plans for the release of the new album out the window and putting it out in Australia first. We're thinking a release date of March sixteenth."

"That's only a month away."

"Yeah, we know. But Zac has his contacts down there – he's in the middle of calling them up to see if they can expedite the process for us. *Follow Your Lead* will be the first single released, most likely on March second, and we're going to film a video for it this weekend. And we've decided to donate all the Australian proceeds from the sale of the single to charity."

"Well, it's nice to know that you're feeling *somewhat* charitable for once in your lives," I said.

"What about a tour?"

"That'll start in April, most likely. We want to do something along the lines of what we did for the last North American tour, though not to the same scale. There won't be as many concerts, for one."

"You do realise that Australia is huge, don't you? The mainland alone is almost the same size as the USA, if you don't count Alaska or Hawaii."

"Yeah, we know that. That's why we're allowing at *least* three months. Isaac and I have been haunting Google Maps for the last few days so we can plot out the tour route, and we've got it

pretty much worked out by now. We're figuring we'll kick things off near where you and Bel are, in Wollongong, then go around the country via Nowra and Canberra. We're planning on hitting at least one city in every state and territory."

"How many shows are you planning on?"

"Two in just about every city – one all-ages and one 18-plus. Sydney we're going to do two all-ages and one 18-plus show. So that'll give us twenty-seven shows all up."

I let out a low whistle. They were truly outdoing themselves this time. There weren't many bands that were so ambitious in their Down Under tour plans.

"And...we're hoping you can do us a small favour."

Mark sounded unusually hesitant as he said this, and I was immediately on my guard. "What *sort* of favour?" I asked warily.

"Well, we've been poking around MySpace, having a listen to the musicians on there that are based in Australia, and we've chosen our opening band. We just need to get in contact with them to make the offer." There was yet another pause. By this time I was on the Southern Freeway.

"How well do you know Sincerity?"

"Well, considering I'm sleeping with the lead singer, I'd say I know them intimately," I replied, a split second before I made the connection. "*Mark!*"

"What?"

"Sincerity is Isobel's band, if you *must* know."

"Yeah, and your point is? They're *good*, Tay – we want them to open for us on the tour."

"I know they're good. I'm producing the EP they've been working on for the last few months." I flicked my right blinker on and moved across into the right lane so I could overtake the car I'd been tailing for the last couple of kilometres. "It's just that, well...some people would call that nepotism."

"Oh, come on. You're pulling my leg, right?"

"I wish. Hanson isn't a very common surname around here. I had a look through our phone directory when we first got it, after we moved into our place. In the local White Pages there are exactly eighteen listings for that name. I should know, because I counted 'em. People are going to notice that kind of thing. Hell, they already do."

"They can call it nepotism, then. We don't care. You think you could ask Isobel about it, and get her to email us once she's talked to her bandmates?"

I let out a quiet, almost resigned sigh. "All right, I'll ask her. But I'm not promising a thing."

I could almost see Mark grinning when he next spoke. "Thanks man. We owe you one."

"Yeah, no shit you do," I replied. On went the left blinker, and I merged back into the left lane. A glance in my rearview mirror revealed a police car was coming up behind me and preparing to overtake. "As much as I've loved talking to you though, there's a police car sitting on my tail. I'm kinda breaking the law here."

"Oh, okay. I'll talk to you later on, then?"

"Yeah, sure. Say hi to everyone for us."

"I will. See ya Tay."

"See ya Mark."

I closed my phone and tossed it onto the front passenger seat, putting my left hand back on the wheel just as the police car overtook me. Once it was past me I breathed a sigh of utter relief and turned my iPod back on.

Noon saw me arriving at Belmore Basin. After I had ducked into LeVendi to pick up a dollar's worth of hot chips and a bottle of water, I drove up to the lighthouse and pulled into a parking spot, killing the engine. It had stopped raining by this point, but the sky overhead was still a very forbidding grey. Usually I ate my lunch sitting on the bonnet of my car, looking out over

Wollongong Harbour, but with the sky looking like it was threatening to start pelting down again at any moment I'd decided it was better to stay behind the wheel.

The month since the wedding had been an interesting one. Isobel and I had spent our honeymoon and our first Christmas as a married couple in the Whitsunday Islands, and hadn't returned home until the middle of January. Those few weeks had been spent lying around on the beach, swimming in the resort pool and in the ocean, taking daytrips to the mainland (to Townsville and Mackay in particular), and generally just making the most of our break from our respective jobs. Isobel had found employment as a reviewer with the *Illawarra Mercury*, a local newspaper, while I worked at Endeavour Studios as head studio producer. I had also transferred my freelance photography business Down Under. I had quite a bit of competition, as there were more than a few already established studios in the area, but I always welcomed the extra work when I could get it.

Here I glanced at my left hand, home to my wedding ring. I couldn't imagine spending the rest of my life with anyone other than Isobel – in one word, she was incredible. She had a very quirky and extremely sarcastic sense of humour, she could hold her own against my brothers, she was more than able to stand up for herself when she needed to, and she had a good head on her shoulders. That she was absolutely gorgeous was just a fringe benefit.

I finished my lunch, set my half-filled bottle of water down in the centre console, and put my car into reverse. It was time to hit the studio and actually do some work for once.

Endeavour Studios, located on a side street just off Endeavour Drive, had been my workplace for close on a year. After I'd written my name and arrival time in the reception logbook, I propped myself against the reception desk and rested my chin on my crossed arms. The front desk receptionist was clicking her mouse almost frantically, with a sneaky peek at the monitor of her computer revealing her to be playing *Fairy Godmother Tycoon*. I straightened myself up and cleared my throat to get her attention.

"I don't believe you were hired to sit on your ass playing computer games all day," I said. Her head snapped up and she stared at me, almost looking like she was a rabbit caught in headlights. "That's your first and only warning, Ms. Rothery. The next time I catch you doing something other than actual *work*, I'll be forced to advertise for your replacement."

"S-sorry, Mr. Hanson," she said softly. "It won't happen again."

"I'm glad to hear that. Were there any phone calls or mail for me this morning?" I asked, and she shook her head mutely. Satisfied that there wasn't anything I needed to immediately deal with, I straightened up and headed down the corridor that led through to my office. That was one of the things I liked about being head studio producer for both Endeavour Studios and the Illawarra regional division of Expatriate Productions – I was the only person who worked for Endeavour who had their own office. Nobody else needed them, as they only came in as was necessary and tended to work in the practice rooms upstairs or in either of the three studios that was housed in the building.

I closed my office door behind me, dropped my messenger bag next to the couch, and went across to my desk. It faced a large window that had a spectacular view of Wollongong Harbour and the Lighthouse – or at least it was a spectacular view when the weather was actually good. So much for summer. As soon as I was sitting down I picked up the handset of my phone and dialled the number of the Manly office from memory. An idea had been brewing in my head ever since I'd got off the phone with Mark, but I couldn't act on it until I got the go-ahead from the higher-ups.

"Expatriate Productions Manly, this is Marta speaking."

"Hi Marta, this is Taylor Hanson calling from Endeavour Studios in Wollongong," I said. "Would it be possible to speak with Bradley Whittingham?"

"Yes, of course. I'll put you straight through."

"Thank you."

The next voice I heard was Brad's.

"Hey Taylor," he said once the call had been transferred.

"Hey Brad. If I'm out of bounds here then I apologise, but I was wondering if I could propose something to you."

"Fire away."

"My brother Mark called me this morning. His band is preparing to release their newest album – they'd originally planned for a mid-year release at home first, with the rest of the world to follow soon after." I ran a finger along the edge of my desk. "The bushfires in Victoria changed their minds. They've now decided to release it here first, in support of the relief efforts, and are currently aiming for a mid-March release date."

"So they'll be touring soon, I take it?"

"That's the plan, yeah. What I was thinking was that we at Expatriate could possibly lend our support to the tour – it gets the name out there, for one."

I was greeted with silence after I finished speaking, and for half a minute I was positive that my proposal would be rejected out of hand.

"It'll need official approval of course, but I'm all for it," Brad said at last. "I think it's a fantastic idea."

I let out a shaky sigh of relief. "Thank God for that. For a moment there I thought you were going to shoot me down in flames or something like that."

Brad chuckled quietly. "How soon can you get in contact with your brothers?"

"Tonight, probably."

"Excellent. I'm going to get straight on the phone to Craig and Mike for their official approval. If they approve, I want you to make the same suggestion to your brothers as you just did to me – if they're interested, tell them that we're willing to manage and produce their tour, with you as our official tour liaison."

We spent the next ten or so minutes hammering out the more important details. Once we had ended the call I immediately dialled Isobel's cell – I knew that she had band practice today, so it was likely that she wouldn't pick up straight away. Luckily for me I wasn't waiting long, and after about two or three rings I heard her voice.

"Hello?"

"Hey Issie. You busy?"

Her voice when next she spoke was brighter, as if I had made her entire day by calling her. "No, not too busy. We're taking a break for lunch. Why do you ask?"

I decided to get straight to the point. "How soon can the five of you be ready to go on tour?" I asked.

"We'd probably need about two or three weeks." Her tone turned quizzical. "What's this about, anyway?"

"Mark called me. They've been searching for an opening act for the Australian tour they're planning to do in April, and they found one on MySpace." I paused briefly. "Issie, they want you guys to be their opening act."

There was a shocked silence on Isobel's end of the line for around thirty seconds.

"A-are you serious?" Isobel asked, her voice trembling. "Jordan, if this is your idea of an early April Fool's joke-"

"I am completely serious," I replied, cutting her off before she got too worked up. "They heard the songs you have posted on your MySpace, and they loved them. It's up to you guys now – I'm not going to force the issue. Just make sure you let Mark know as soon as you decide either way, so they can get things going."

"We will. God Tay, this is just..." She let out a slightly hysterical laugh. "Do you realise just how *amazing* this is?"

"I think I have *some* idea, going by your reaction." My tone was very amused. "They'll probably be here in around a month's time for the album release, so I'd make with the discussing if I were you."

"Yes sir," Isobel replied. "I'm hanging up now."

"You do that. I'll see you tonight."

"Yes you will. Love you Tay."

"Love you Issie."

We both hung up at the same moment, and I leaned back in my chair. Today was turning out quite well so far – my suggestion for an Expatriate-supported Hanson tour had met with approval from at least one person, and I'd gotten Isobel more than a little excited about the offer Mark had made this morning. If things continued in this fashion, it was going to be a very good year indeed.

Chapter 4

...get lost in your rock and roll

Isobel

I stared at the screen of my phone for what felt like an eternity, at the photograph of Taylor and I that I used as my wallpaper, before folding it closed and sliding it into a pocket. My hands were shaking a little as I considered the implications of what had just been offered to me and the girls. This was massive – the chance of a lifetime. I could only hope they chose to take advantage of it.

“So who was that on the phone, then?”

I looked up at Ayesha. She stood in front of me with a plate that had a sandwich on it in one hand, and a can of lemonade in her other.

“My husband,” I replied quietly as I got up from my seat on the couch in Ayesha’s enclosed back porch, which doubled as our practice space. I stretched and rolled my shoulders before I continued. “Can you ask the others to come in here? We need to talk.”

“Yeah, of course,” Ayesha agreed. Her tone was uncertain. “Is everything okay?”

“They could be better than okay, depending on what we decide to do.” My response was cryptic, but it had to be for now – I didn’t want this to become one giant game of Chinese whispers.

I had joined Sincerity just six weeks after Taylor and I had arrived in the Illawarra, after responding to an advertisement they’d placed in the *Illawarra Mercury*. Their last lead singer had moved interstate, and they were in need of a new voice to make their quintet whole once more. Plenty of other vocalists had auditioned, but they’d chosen me over everyone else. Ayesha had told me not long after I had joined the band that the performances of the other potential members had been completely lacklustre – it had taken my rendition of Tori Amos’ *Cornflake Girl* to truly blow them away. We met for practice three times a week, on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, and

played the odd gig on Thursday nights at local clubs, pubs and bars. Our most recent performance had been three Thursdays prior, at the University of Wollongong's UniBar.

My bandmates wandered back into our practice space about ten minutes later and took up their places on an assortment of seats, makeshift or otherwise – Ayesha on a low three-legged wooden stool, Melayna and Emmanuelle on a dark blue plastic milk crate apiece, and Pania on the stool that usually accompanied her drum kit. The four of them looked up at me attentively, waiting to hear what I had to say.

"I just got off the phone with Taylor," I said to start off. "You all know who his brothers are, I take it?"

"Unfortunately," Pania replied. I didn't miss the distaste in her voice as she spoke, but chose to ignore it – I had a tendency to get fired up if anyone insulted Taylor's brothers.

"Well, according to him, they're going to be touring here sometime during the next couple of months. They've been looking for an opening act to accompany them around the country. And, um...they found one on MySpace." I shifted to my left just slightly. "It's us. They want Sincerity as their opening band."

"Holy *shit*," Emmanuelle whispered. "*Us*?"

I nodded. "They heard the songs we put up on our profile last week, and it seems that they really liked them. We need to decide as soon as possible if we want to do this – I have a feeling that he'll be calling them sometime tonight, so if we can make some sort of decision today it'd probably be a huge help to them."

"I reckon we should give it a go," Ayesha said. "In all honesty, I'm never going to be a Hanson fan, but I do have a lot of respect for them. Besides, this means we all get out of work for however long the tour goes for, and I definitely can't pass up a legitimate excuse to take some time off."

"Well, there's the downside right there," Pania countered. "We make very little money out of this – after all our other expenses it's \$500 a gig, and that's before we split it between us. Anything

else we earn comes from our jobs. If we do take off from work for this, then we won't have any money coming in."

"I'm quite sure we'll be able to work out *something* with our bosses," Melayna said, the voice of reason as always. "It's not as if they're all *totally* unreasonable." She nodded to me. "Bel's boss for one won't mind in the least. I know that for an absolute fact."

"That might change when he finds out how long the tour could last for," I said. "I'm figuring anywhere between three weeks to three months."

Emmanuelle raised an eyebrow at me. "Three months is a bit long for a tour, isn't it?"

"Not when you're driving everywhere," I replied. "The guys' last North American tour lasted for four months. That was quite the experience."

We ended up discussing the matter for almost two hours, our instruments lying forgotten. For each positive that was raised at least one of us came up with a negative. I supposed one of us had to crack sooner or later.

"Look, why don't we just put this to a *vote* already?" Emmanuelle asked, sounding weary. She'd lit up at some point and was sitting forward over her knees, her right hand keeping the glowing and smouldering tip of her cigarette away from her tumbling curly hair. "Fact of the matter is, this could be really good for us. Touring with Hanson means more exposure for our music, it means we get touring experience, *and* it puts the Illawarra on the musical map." She raised her left hand. "I'm in."

Soon, all of us except for Pania had raised our hands.

"You guys can't be serious," she muttered.

"You know we're going to end up doing it whether you like it or not, Nia," Ayesha reminded her.

"Majority rules, remember? We may as well make it unanimous."

"Oh, *fine*," Pania sighed, and put her hand up.

"That settles it then," Emmanuelle said, sounding very satisfied. She stood up and dug around in her pockets with her free hand, coming up with her pocket ashtray. "I figure we probably have enough time left to practice one more song," she said as she flipped the ashtray open, dropped her cigarette butt into it, and closed it up again. "Come on you lot."

We took up our usual positions, and Emmanuelle played the first notes on her keyboard. She was followed by Melayna on bass, and Pania on drums. Ayesha and I were last to come in, the guitar starting up as I began to sing. The song was one that I had downloaded as part of one of the podcasts I subscribed to – we usually played it to kick off our gigs.

"A pushed patience will finally take its toll...burn away lost hours, burn another hole...follow trails of fingertips...live through your breath...leaving you will be like the burden of death...

"Do we turn to logic or...follow love blindly...release all we instilled or...let it guide us to the end...

"It's coming back to haunt us...all the things we fought...words fall from your lips but never from my thoughts...let the numbered days lead...live through your breath...leaving you will be like...the burden of death...

"Do we turn to logic or...follow love blindly...release all we instilled or...let it guide us to the end...

"Do we turn to logic or...follow love blindly...release all we instilled or...let it guide us to the end..."

I switched my microphone off as the last notes faded out. Melayna and Ayesha in their turn switched off their amps and unplugged their instruments.

"I'll let you guys know what's going on with the tour and everything," I said as I gathered up my things. "They probably won't have all of the details figured out just yet, but they should be able to tell me enough."

It didn't take me very long to get home. Parked in the driveway of the house when I arrived was Taylor's car – he drove a bright red Holden VT Commodore, while I drove the same car I had in New York, only this time it was a deep blue instead of red. Though even if I hadn't seen his car, I

would have known he was home anyway – Ratchet was barking loudly and excitedly in the backyard, which meant that Taylor was working her into a complete frenzy. That in itself was a good thing – she would be so tired out by the level of activity that after dinner, she would settle down for the night.

“Having fun, are we?” I called out as I unlatched the side gate and slipped into the yard, pulling the gate closed behind me. Taylor was playing fetch with Ratchet, using a tennis ball as bait, and he looked over at me as he tossed the ball. The instant our gazes met, he gave me a smile.

“No more Ratch,” he called as he wiped his hands off on his jeans. “Go on, inside with you.”

“You are one of the most amazing human beings in the world,” I informed him as we embraced.

“You do know that, right?”

“Way to inflate my ego,” Taylor laughed. “What did I do this time?”

“What did you do?” I pulled back slightly and looked up into his eyes. “You gave us the opportunity of a lifetime this morning – and we’re taking it. Provided we can all get the time off work, we’re going on tour.”

His smile now became a grin. “I was hoping you would decide that.”

“And why is that?” I asked as we headed inside the house through the back door. As soon as the sliding door was closed behind us I set my bag down on one of the kitchen chairs and went straight to the refrigerator.

“Because if everything goes the way I’m planning it will, I’m coming on tour as well.” He edged past me and opened the cupboard beneath the stove, taking out the wok and a small saucepan.

“I had an idea come to me after I got off the phone with Mark this morning.”

“Didn’t hurt, did it?” I teased.

“No, but if it ever does I’ll let you know.” He set the wok and the saucepan down on the stove.

“Should my brothers agree to it, Expatriate will be producing and managing the Australian tour,

with me as the liaison between the two parties. I got official approval to make the offer just before I finished work."

"You are amazing," I said as I opened the refrigerator and took out the chicken and noodles I had asked Taylor to buy that morning. From the crisper I took out a bunch of green onions and a plastic bag of carrots. "Absolutely and completely amazing."

It wasn't long until dinner was on the table. "So when did you want to call them?" I asked as I picked a strip of chicken up with my chopsticks.

"As late as possible," Taylor replied as he twirled noodles around his own chopsticks. "Right now, we're seventeen hours ahead of Tulsa, being as we're on daylight savings and they're not." He frowned. "Around midnight should do it. I don't plan to go into work tomorrow, and you don't have work or band practice, so we'll be able to get away with having a late night."

It was just after midnight when we made what was probably the most important phone call in recent memory. We had the downstairs cordless on speaker, and I was lying on our couch with my head in Taylor's lap. He was playing with my hair as he dialled his parents' phone number one-handed.

"Hanson residence."

We both knew that voice. "Hey Avery!" I said cheerfully.

"Oh, hey you guys! What's up?"

"D'you think we can talk to Mark and that lot?" Taylor asked.

"What, don't you love me?" Avery asked. She snickered. "Yeah, 'course you can. Hang on." There was a quiet *thud*, and then we heard her yelling, "*Hey Mark! Taylor and Isobel are on the phone, they want to talk to you three!*"

Soon, Mark's voice was echoing around our living room. "Hey, what's up you guys?" he asked, sounding a lot more awake than had to be normal.

"You guys have yourselves an opening act," I informed him before Taylor had a chance to speak.

"Tay rang me during my lunch break to let me know that you wanted Sincerity for the tour, and I talked it over with my bandmates after I got off the phone. If we're able to work something out with our bosses, we're definitely coming."

I could hear the sheer relief in Mark's voice when he next spoke. "That's really good to hear, Bel," he said. "You guys were the only band we were even close to considering – if you weren't interested we were completely prepared to go on tour without an opening act."

"You aren't serious," Taylor said.

"As a heart attack," Mark replied. "We've done it before, remember? Our first-ever tour?"

"Right, when you lot weren't old enough to know better."

Mark seemed to ignore this. "We've picked the tour kick-off date, if you two want to put it in your schedules – April sixth. That could change at any moment, but we'll let you know well in advance if it does."

"So when will you three be arriving in Sydney?" Taylor asked.

"We aren't *entirely* sure yet, because we're still figuring out what flights are available, but we're thinking sometime in early March. It'll give us time to do a little bit of promotion for the album before the tour starts – interviews, TV appearances and so on. Mom, Ave and Zoë will arrive a little earlier than us, probably at the end of this month."

"Jess and Mac aren't coming?"

"Mac says he isn't. Which is understandable – he started public school last September and doesn't want to skip any of his classes. Dad's staying at home as well, because nobody in their right mind would allow a fifteen-year-old to be home alone for three months."

"Especially seeing as said fifteen-year-old is a little shithead."

"Exactly. And Jess isn't coming because she's right at the end of her senior year, and she can't afford to miss even one day. We've also decided that we're going to donate \$25 from the sale of each ticket to the Australian Red Cross, pretty much the same as what we're going to do with the sales of *Follow Your Lead*."

"That's very generous of you," I said. "There's something else you could possibly do as well – a lot of the newscasters and TV presenters here have been wearing yellow ribbons in support of the bushfire appeal and the emergency services that are helping out. Maybe you guys could have ribbons or wristbands for sale with the usual merchandise at the shows, either that or ask everyone to wear something yellow. It's just a thought, of course."

"Well, I think it's a fantastic idea," Zac said, cutting into the conversation. "We were talking about doing something along those lines anyway."

"Great minds think alike," I said with a shrug. "Tay, wasn't there something you wanted to ask them?"

By the time we got off the phone at around a quarter to three in the morning, the five of us had worked out as many details as we possibly could without meeting face-to-face – something that would have to wait until we were all in the same country. But some things were official, at least – Expatriate Productions was set to produce and manage the tour, Hanson had their opening act, and by the time April sixth rolled around the city of Wollongong (and by extension, the whole of Australia) wasn't going to know what had hit it.

* * *

The morning of February twenty-sixth saw Taylor and I sitting in Arrivals at Sydney International Airport, waiting for Qantas flight 108 to touch down. His mother and sisters had caught a late-night flight direct from Los Angeles, the same one that Isaac, Mark and Zac would be likely to catch themselves. Their flight was due to arrive at twenty minutes past eight, and we both knew

from experience that it would take them up to an hour to clear Customs and Immigration. Even despite this we'd left home bright and early, arriving at the airport just after a quarter past eight.

I stretched my arms up above my head and rolled my shoulders, looking over at where Taylor sat slouched in his seat with his headphones jammed over his ears. His eyes were closed, and he was tapping his fingers on his knees to the beat of music that I couldn't hear. A quick peek at the screen of his iPod, after I had touched a finger to the click wheel, revealed the song to be *Valhalla* by 30 Seconds To Mars. I hid a smile, knowing that I had been the one to sneak that particular song into his iTunes library. It was a game we often played with each others' music collections. The last song he had added to mine was *Sanctify* by Calla.

I waited until he had pressed pause and taken his headphones off before I spoke to him. "Looking forward to seeing your mum and sisters?" I asked as he rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"Mmm-hmm," he mumbled, sounding sleepy. "Going to be nice to spend some time with 'em, at least until my brothers get here. Things'll get really fucking crazy after that."

"At least you get to spend your birthday with them."

"That's true," he agreed. He yawned widely, closing his eyes long enough for me to think he had fallen asleep. Half a minute later his eyes opened once more. "D'you feel like driving back home?" he asked. "I think I might fall asleep at the wheel if I even tried."

"Yeah, of course I can."

"Thanks, Issie."

It was almost nine-thirty when we saw three very familiar faces leading the pack of travellers coming down the ramp from Exit A. Taylor was on his feet almost immediately, his tiredness seeming to have disappeared as he walked quickly through the milling crowd toward them. I hid a smile before gathering up his iPod and my handbag, and going after him.

"Issie!" called a very familiar voice, seconds before something vaguely human-shaped slammed into my stomach. I looked down to see my youngest sister-in-law, Zoë, grinning up at me.

"Hey Zo!" I said happily, and bent down to her eye level. "What are you doing here?"

"Visiting my big brother," she replied.

"Oh I *see*. So you're not interested in visiting *me*, then?" I asked, and she nodded emphatically, her blonde plaits bouncing on her shoulders. I snickered and gave her a hug. "It's good to see you, Zoë."

"Don't I get a hug?"

I released Zoë and straightened up, coming face-to-face with a younger, more feminine version of Taylor – his second-oldest sister, Avery. At eighteen she was nearly as tall as the twins and looked almost as if she could pass for their triplet, if not for the facts that her eyes were brown and she was a little more solidly built than her brothers.

"Oh, I don't *know*," I teased her. This was a game we had played before, and so her response was completely expected.

"I see how it is." She tossed her long, caramel-coloured ponytail over one shoulder. "I fly fourteen *freaking* hours to see my family, losing a whole day in the process, and Zoë's the one who gets all the affection lavished upon her?" And here she cocked an eyebrow. "What's it worth to you?"

"You make those banana pancakes of yours for dessert tonight, and you can have all the hugs you can handle," I replied.

"You, Isobel, have yourself one hell of a deal," Avery replied, before promptly launching herself at me. "God I missed you guys," I heard her whisper as we hugged tightly. Even though we were six-and-a-half years apart in age, the two of us got along very well – she was both a wonderful younger sister and an amazing friend.

And soon, I found myself faced with one of my favourite people in the world, second only to my husband – my mother-in-law, Diana. She gave me a warm smile seconds before we embraced.

"It's wonderful to see you again, Isobel," she said once we had broken apart.

"You too," I agreed. "How was your flight?"

"Too freaking long!" Avery called, obviously having overheard my question. I heard Taylor laughing in response, and I had to bite down hard on my bottom lip to keep myself from laughing.

"Mouth, Avery," Diana chided. "We're in public – keep the volume down."

"Sorry Mom!"

"Well, at least you all got here safely," I said. "That's the main thing, I think."

As we left the terminal building, heading out to where we were parked, I noticed that Avery was hanging back to walk with me. Taylor had gone on ahead with his mother and Zoë.

"He got engaged," Avery informed me quietly as we walked out into the bright summer sunlight. She was fishing her sunglasses one-handed from a pocket in her cargo pants as she spoke, her other hand occupied with the handle of her suitcase.

"Who did?"

"Isaac," she replied. As she spoke, she slipped her sunglasses onto her face. "He asked Alli on New Year's Eve. Obviously she said yes."

I let out a low whistle. "Is Taylor aware of this?"

"Nope, not yet. I'm fairly sure the bombshell's going to be dropped in a couple of weeks." I watched as her mouth twisted into a wry smile. "I can't wait to see his reaction to *that* news."

In almost no time at all we had arrived at Taylor's car, and had everyone's gear loaded into the boot in short order. Avery was digging around in her backpack as she got into the backseat, finally

unearthing a silver iPod. "I found a song on one of the unofficial Hanson forums that I think you guys might be interested in," she said as she handed me the iPod.

"Why the hell would you want to go poking around on those places for?" Taylor asked as I slid the hold switch across, unlocking it and switching it on.

"Because unlike *some* people I could name, I actually like to take an interest in what other people are saying about our brothers," Avery replied. To me she said, "Song's called *Kind Of A Girl*, it's in my Recently Added playlist right at the top."

"Now why does that sound familiar?" I heard Taylor mutter to himself as I settled Avery's iPod in the cradle that Taylor had rigged up to his car's stereo and set about figuring how to connect it up. It didn't take me long to work it out, and soon I had the song playing through the stereo's speakers. It started out with some rather loud guitars and drums – and then I heard a *very* familiar voice on lead vocals.

"She's the kind of a girl you can't get enough of...she's the kind of a girl you need to feel the touch of...she's the kind of a girl that can really shake up your whole world...the kind of a girl...the kind I never want to let go..."

I looked over at Taylor, only to see that he was staring straight ahead out of the windscreen, one hand gripping the doorhandle so tightly his knuckles were white. He didn't look very happy at all. I immediately shut the song off, knowing instantly that he didn't want to hear any more of it.

"Tay?" I asked quietly.

"Mark *swore* that would never get out," he said.

"That's *you* singing?" Avery asked, sounding shocked.

"That's me," Taylor replied. "And he told me that he'd keep that one to himself. I didn't want the world hearing it until I was long gone."

"It's a good song, though," Avery said, sounding unsure. "Everyone I've talked to loves it. They all thought it was Mark on vocals – the two of you sound very similar."

"Don't remind me." He sighed and put his hands over his eyes. "I'll talk to him about it when they get here. If I try calling him I'll probably get pissed off."

"There's no 'probably' about it," I remarked. "You *will* get pissed off."

"I thought you were supposed to defend me, not incriminate me," he said, and I glanced at his reflection in the rearview mirror to see that he was smiling. I returned his smile and began the drive home.

Chapter 5

...mission in the destination unknown

Taylor

Mark and I didn't get a chance to talk face-to-face until the middle of March. My brothers had arrived in Australia on March second, choosing to base themselves in Sydney for the first ten days of their visit. So far their time Down Under had been taken up by promotional work – TV appearances on *Today*, *Sunrise*, *The Morning Show* and Channel V's *Breakfast Jam*, radio spots on 2Day FM and Nova 96.9, a completely impromptu concert in Hyde Park, and the official release of the *Follow Your Lead* single to record stores nationwide. It had been doing the radio rounds for a few weeks already, following its addition to station playlists in the middle of February.

Not only this, but they were busy online as well – Mark updated the band's official Twitter account every fifteen minutes during waking hours from his BlackBerry, and the official site blog was posted to every evening. The increased rate of activity had sent the forum at Hanson.net that had been devoted to the Australian and New Zealand fans into a complete frenzy of excitement and anticipation, the likes of which hadn't been seen since the 2007 tour. I considered it to be a very good thing – it potentially meant that a sizeable donation would be made to the Australian Red Cross at the tour's conclusion. They had relocated to Wollongong on the twelfth, in preparation for the beginning of the tour.

On the morning of the fourteenth, what woke me wasn't my alarm clock, traffic on Calderwood Road and Taylor Road, or even Isobel poking me rather insistently in the ribs. It was someone – or quite possibly *something* – making one hell of a racket in the kitchen.

"Mark, what the hell are you doing?" I asked hazily as I stumbled into the kitchen, narrowly escaping banging into the end of the bench. I'd recognised Mark's voice as I'd come downstairs, not that it was easy to mistake it for anyone else's. We sounded far too alike for that.

"I'm cooking breakfast," he replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. As he spoke I could hear the pop and crackle of oil in one of the frypans, and through sleep-fogged eyes I could see him stirring something in the biggest mixing bowl that Isobel and I owned. "What's it look like I'm doing?"

"Well, when you consider that I can barely see an inch in front of my own face, you could be giving Ratchet a bath in the kitchen sink for all I know." I closed my eyes and dug at them with the heels of my hands, in an attempt to wake up a little. "Not that you should. Issie would murder us both – you for doing it, and me for giving you the idea in the first place." I took my hands away from my face and opened my eyes, now able to see more clearly, and looked over at the microwave. The glowing blue digits that formed the time caused me to let out a loud groan – it was, apparently, 8:36 in the morning. "It is way too early for this."

"You call *this* early?" Mark asked as I went over to the cupboard above the microwave, opened it and took down the basket inside. "I've been up for two hours already."

"It's Saturday, Mark," I replied as I dug around in the basket for my medication. The doctor I now saw, Dr. Sommers, had kept me on almost the same medication regimen that I'd been taking before the move overseas, but with one crucial difference – I was no longer taking Wellbutrin to keep my seasonal affective disorder in check, purely because I no longer needed to. "I sleep in on Saturdays." I found the packet that held my Lexapro tablets and put it down on the bench, and returned the basket to its cupboard. "So what are you cooking?" I asked. "And how did you get here, anyway?" This was said as I grabbed a glass out of the draining rack, filled it from the tap, and popped one of my tablets from their packet.

"Walked to Wollongong station, caught a train, then hopped on a bus," Mark replied. To answer my first question, he pointed at a cardboard box that was sitting on the bench – it had a photograph of three pancakes drenched in syrup with a scoop of ice cream atop the stack on its front, and the logo for the restaurant Pancakes On The Rocks in the top left corner. "I got here

right as Mom, Bel, Ave and Zo were leaving. Bel let me come in on the condition that I didn't wake you up." He shot me a sheepish look. "I figure I owe you an apology."

"Nah, don't worry about it." I took my medication and finished my glass of water in one go, without stopping to breathe. "I had to get up anyway," I continued once I was done. "Besides, it's our birthday – we shouldn't need to apologise to each other."

"Oh yeah, it is too," Mark said. He peered at me. "You don't *look* any older."

"Ten thirty-five at night," I reminded him. "That was when you blighted the world with your presence. Took *me* until ten forty-two, and the world's a much better place for it."

"Dare I ask what delusion has led you to this particular belief?" Mark asked as he poured some batter into the frypan. As the batter landed in the oil the pop and crackle that had filled the kitchen turned into a sizzle.

"I'm better looking," I replied, knowing that there was absolutely no basis in fact for that particular remark.

I was rewarded with a spoonful of batter to the face.

It wasn't long before Mark's plan of cooking breakfast degenerated into a complete free-for-all. The frypan on the stove was soon forgotten as Mark and I sent pancake batter flying at each other, the floor, the ceiling and the walls. Not even the kitchen fixtures and appliances escaped unscathed. In the end, it took two things to stop our impromptu fight – a cloud of thick, dark smoke that billowed out into our makeshift battleground from beneath the rangehood above the stove, and a loud, harsh beeping that sounded from the ceiling above our heads. Or more specifically, from the smoke alarm.

"*Shit!*" I swore loudly and darted over to the stove, waving the smoke away from my face with one hand as I switched the burner off and turned on the extractor fan, coughing hard the whole time.

"You all right?" Mark asked as I picked up the frypan and eyed the blackened mess that at some point had been a pancake.

"I'm fine," I rasped out, still coughing even as the extractor fan sucked all the smoke out of the kitchen. "Just need some more water."

Almost as if in response, Mark took the frypan out of my hand and dropped it in the sink, before steering me toward the kitchen table. "If this is your definition of 'fine', then you need to have your eyesight tested," he informed me as I sat down in one of the chairs. "You sit there for a bit, and I'll clean the kitchen up. It's my fault it's such a mess in the first place."

Once Mark had the kitchen clean, we proceeded to clean ourselves up. Mark took over the shower in the laundry, while I commandeered the upstairs bathroom. After I had showered and dressed, I dried my hair and pulled it back into a ponytail. My wallet and phone went into the pockets of my jeans, and I checked the clasps and knots of my necklaces and bracelets before heading back downstairs.

"We don't have any cereal," I said as I re-entered the kitchen with my pyjamas in hand. "I was going to go out later on today and do some shopping, and pick some up while I was there. You in the mood for McDonald's?"

Mark shrugged. "It's better than going hungry, I suppose." He was pulling his hair back into a ponytail as he spoke.

"You could at least sound a *little* enthusiastic." I glanced at the clock on the microwave. "I'm going to put these in the laundry so I can start the machine up when we get back. Reckon you can get Ratchet into her jacket for me?"

It didn't take us long to drive out to the McDonald's in Albion Park Rail, the next suburb over. I pulled into one of the disabled parking spaces near the restaurant entrance, double-checking that my parking permit was in its place before switching off the engine. We headed inside once I had let Ratchet out of the backseat.

"Is it okay if I pay you back later?" Mark asked in a low voice as we joined the end of one of the lines at the sales counter. "I literally only had enough money on me this morning for my train ticket and my bus fare."

"They do take credit cards, you know," I replied. "And anyway, since when do you only have twelve dollars on you?"

"Since I spent most of my cash on *your* birthday present," he replied. "And no, I'm not telling you what it is. You can find out when everyone else does."

"I wasn't even going to ask." Having decided what I wanted for breakfast, I took my wallet out of my pocket and quickly checked how much money I had. "You might want to figure out what you're going to eat, we're nearly at the counter."

I ended up ordering for myself a bacon and egg roll and a large orange juice, with Mark deciding on a sausage and bacon McMuffin and coffee. After that morning's fiasco, neither of us had been in the mood for anything that featured pancake batter as its primary ingredient.

"So what's it like to live here?" Mark asked once we had found a table. "Obviously it's done you some good – you seem a lot happier."

"I definitely am," I replied. I unwrapped my roll, tore a piece off, and dropped it down to Ratchet.

"It helps that I haven't had to spend any time in hospital the last couple of years."

"That would probably help a lot, yeah."

Mark finished his breakfast before I did, leaning down to his messenger bag and pulling out his laptop once he had trashed his rubbish. "What're you working on?" I asked as I finished off my own breakfast and crumpled the wrapper into a ball.

"Just finalising the itinerary," he replied as he fired up his computer. "We got all the dates worked out last night. We're doing two shows in each city, all except for Sydney – the plan is to put on a concert in one of the parks at the end of the tour, probably at Hyde Park again, and ask for a small

donation in place of an entry fee." I heard him beginning to tap away at his laptop's keyboard. "We've scheduled two days between concerts for interviews in most places, all except for Wollongong, Nowra, Canberra, Hobart and Sydney. We have three days in Hobart and in Sydney, and one in each of Wollongong, Nowra and Canberra. Though our fourth day in Hobart is a national holiday, so we won't be doing any interviews or concerts that day anyway."

"What dates are we going to be in Hobart?"

"Between April twenty-second and twenty-eighth."

"Well, there you go. Twenty-fifth of April's Anzac Day, and that's a really important day here. Sort of like Veterans Day back home. You'd probably get called disrespectful if you put on a concert or interview that day." I popped the lid off of my juice and eyed its contents. "Anything else you think I should know about?"

"We've talked about renting a few buses for the tour – we did see about flying between cities, but that's going to send our expenses through the roof. It's going to take us a few months to get around, but this way we'll get to see the whole country." He looked at me over the lid of his laptop, one eyebrow raised. "Not to mention that you get to indulge your photography habit."

"When I'm not working, you mean." I put the lid and straw from my drink on the tray that had held our breakfast, and drained the rest of my juice. "Let's see now – I have to get accommodation organised, rebook venues in the event of a postponement or cancellation, liaise with Expatriate, and set up interviews. That doesn't even include the myriad little issues that are inevitably going to pop up along the way and that I'll have to deal with. I'm going to be very surprised if I don't end up having a complete meltdown along the way."

"We're going to take things as they come, Tay. Don't worry. If you do end up having a meltdown or whatever, then we'll deal with it. We have before, and if we have to then we will again." He raised his left hand, and I high-fived him with my right. "Well, here's to us and the last twenty-six years. Happy birthday, Tay."

"Happy birthday, Mark."

* * *

On a Monday morning a week before the tour kicked off, the Regent Theatre in Wollongong played host to a combined band meeting. The members of Hanson and Sincerity were meeting for the first time (Isobel being the exception, of course), and I had tagged along with my newest camera – a Canon EOS 5D Mark II that had been a birthday gift from my parents, and was also my first digital SLR camera. Mom had brought it all the way across the Pacific with her. Isobel and Mark, I knew, had to have been in on the surprise – along with the usual gift of books, Mark had shelled out for a set of polarising filters, and one of Isobel's presents had been a couple of extra lenses. From me, he'd received a Wacom Intuos graphics tablet and the latest instalment in Ian Rankin's Inspector Rebus series, *Exit Music*.

The day of the meeting also marked a week since the official release of *Through The Crossroads*. It had been released on the sixteenth, and had already made its mark on the ARIA albums chart with a debut at number fifteen. The fan response had been overwhelmingly positive, as had been most of the reviews from magazines and newspapers, which I took as a very good sign.

Once all introductions were out of the way, the discussion portion of the meeting began in earnest.

"The first two concerts of the tour are on April sixth and eighth, right here at the Regent," Isaac said to kick off the proceedings. "Each night's show starts at half-past seven, with you five taking the stage first." He indicated Isobel and her bandmates with the nib of his pen. "The three of us, unless circumstances beyond our control prevent it, will most likely begin performing at nine, though that depends entirely on how long you guys plan to spend onstage."

As if in response Melayna walked to the edge of the stage, jumped down to the theatre floor, and picked up her backpack from the front row of seats, where we'd all put our gear upon arrival. From its back pocket she took out what I recognised as her laptop, and climbed back up on the stage.

"We put together a playlist in iTunes just to get a rough idea of how long we'll be performing," she said as she waited for her laptop to start up. Once her desktop had loaded, I watched as she loaded up iTunes and clicked on a playlist that had been named *Regent Theatre 060409 – Sincerity – Clean*. "Just one question, because I've got two potential playlists worked up – do you guys have any objection to us swearing during our set?"

"It really depends on the crowd," Mark replied. "We've designated roughly half the dates as all-ages shows, so basically for the first show in each city along with the first and third Sydney shows, we ask that you keep it clean. The remaining shows are for 18 and overs only, so pretty much anything goes for those ones."

Melayna nodded. "Gotcha. In that case, then, our set for the first Wollongong show will be forty-five minutes – half original songs, and half covers of songs that we each like. What about you guys?"

"We experimented during our last tour with longer set lists than in the past, and it averaged out to around one hour and forty-five minutes per show," Zac replied. "We've decided to do the same for this tour, though because we have another album's worth of songs to work with it's likely we'll be onstage a little while longer than that." He nodded to me. "Taylor here pitches in with building the set lists for each show – he keeps half the tour master on his iPod, and the morning of each show he goes through that playlist and picks out the cover songs for that night. That pretty much forms the basis for each set list. It keeps things interesting, mostly because whatever songs he does pick, we *have* to play them."

"Even if you think they suck?" Ayesha asked. She sounded slightly incredulous.

"Even then," Mark replied. "Mostly he picks good songs for us to play, but sometimes he gets in a bit of a mood and puts something...well, let's say *questionable* on the the list."

"They're only questionable from *your* perspective," I interjected. "If the fans didn't want to hear them they wouldn't have been suggested."

"So it starts with your fans?" Emmanuelle asked. "Isn't that *asking* for trouble?"

"Sometimes, yeah," Mark answered. "But they're pretty much on the same wavelength as us when it comes to music." He tucked a few locks of hair that had escaped from their ponytail behind his ears. "Basically there's a thread on the official forums that's been going for about nine years now – it's a listing of all the songs our fans would love to hear us cover in concert. Taylor has all of them on his laptop and iPod, and before each tour he uses that thread to build the master list of covers."

There was more talk for around another hour or so, pretty much just going over the itinerary, the venues and the slightly modified tour rules. At about eleven o'clock, the girls stood up and went over to their instruments.

"We thought we might play a couple songs you might not have heard before," Pania explained as the five of them settled themselves. "They're on our EP, but we haven't got them up on our MySpace. First song's called *State Of Mind*."

Pania started out the song by tapping out the ticking of a clock on her drums. This was followed by Ayesha on her guitar, Emmanuelle on her keyboard, and Melayna on bass. Isobel was the last to come in, her vocals low and haunting.

"Where do I go from here...or am I just like a clock spinning round...everything seems unclear...confusion is raising its head and I can't make a sound...I feel it, tearing at my soul while I'm asleep...I feel it, driving me to something I'll regret..."

The drumbeat changed going into the second verse, and Isobel changed the key of her vocals up a couple of tones.

"What if I make the change...what if I lose all my courage this time...everything seems so strange...try but I can't seem to make a decision that's right...I feel it, pounding like a drum inside my brain...I feel it, if it doesn't stop I'll go insane..."

"I feel it, tearing at my soul while I'm asleep...I feel it, driving me to something I'll regret...I feel it...I feel it...if it doesn't stop I'll go insane..."

"I feel...I feel...I feel...I feel...I feel..."

The second song was, I felt, one of the stronger songs on the EP. It had been fully completed just days earlier, and would be sold during intermission at all of the shows on the tour. This particular song had come from Pania's pen, and had the title of *Falling Down*.

"Now she'll be sitting in her room...it always seems like it's late night there...oh, you'll never be enough...to bring her back in daylight, yeah...we got a little, got a little bitty problem here...we got a little bitty problem here...and I won't tell her where you go..."

"You're falling down...this time's forever...don't make a sound, just take it in...do you wanna be alive...do you wanna be a liar...your secret's safe with me for now..."

"Oh, she didn't know you were looking away...I saw you thinking where you'd rather be...she'll say you're gonna be the one...so you give her what she wants...even though you know it's make believe...we got a little, got a little bitty problem here...we got a little bitty problem here...and I won't tell her where you go..."

"You're falling down...this time's forever...don't make a sound, just take it in...do you wanna be alive...do you wanna be a liar...your secret's safe with me..."

"We got a little bitty problem here...you're falling down...this time's forever...don't make a sound, just take it in...do you wanna be alive...do you wanna be a liar...your secret's safe with me...you're falling down..."

I frowned a little as Isobel finished singing. For both songs, her vocals had been just slightly off, and her voice had been shaking a little – as had her hands. I knew she wasn't nervous, because like my brothers she was a born performer, but I knew that it was entirely possible something had upset her severely.

I went up beside her and put a hand on her shoulder. "Issie?" I asked quietly. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, not looking up from switching off her microphone. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just feeling a bit off, that's all."

I raised an eyebrow, but said nothing in response to this. Instead I gave her shoulder a squeeze and planted a quick kiss on her forehead. "Feel like doing a lunch run with me?" I asked her. "Seeing as it's close to midday and all."

"It's better than hanging around with those losers that call themselves your brothers," she replied. She let out a quiet snicker, and I knew she was kidding.

After gathering everyone's requests for lunch – McDonald's and Wendy's featured very highly on the list – and enough cash from everyone to cover each order, Isobel and I left the Regent and headed south along Keira Street. Less than a minute later we were turning left into the Crown Street Mall and walking right into the lunchtime crowd.

"So are you looking forward to the tour?" I asked as we neared the entrance to Crown Central.

She didn't answer me at first. "Yes and no," she replied finally. By this time we had stepped onto the escalator that led up to the first floor of Crown Central. "It's going to be great to get our music out there, and I'm looking forward to seeing the rest of the country, but at the same time I'm kind of freaking out." She worried at the hem of her T-shirt. "People are going to see my name on the Sincerity EP, realise that I'm a Hanson, and straight away assume that the sole reason that we got to tour with your brothers is because of my surname. And that pisses me off."

"Trust me Issie, you aren't the only one." We stepped off the escalator, turned right, and started walking toward the food court. "It annoys me too, but they'll probably get over it the second they hear you guys perform for the first time. If they don't, then they're idiots."

Isobel let out a short, sharp bark of laughter. "That's lovely, Taylor."

"Well, they are. Most Hanson fans are idiots – I know this from experience. And seeing as most of the reason why people are going to be coming to these concerts is *because* they're Hanson fans..."

I let out a laugh of my own. "Well, I never said logic was my strong point."

"That's because you're *blonde*," Isobel informed me, completely straight-faced.

We just looked at each other, blue meeting hazel, before we both burst out laughing.

This was just one of the reasons why I loved Isobel as much as I did. Her ability to make me laugh, no matter my mood or how I was feeling, was second-to-none. Not even Mark was able to drag the slightest chuckle out of me if I wasn't up to it.

I didn't know much about what was in store for us over the next few months. What I *did* know, though, was that it was set to be one hell of a ride – and I couldn't wait for it to begin.

Chapter 6

...get on down the road

Isobel

I stared at my reflection in the mirrored doors of my wardrobe, ignoring the movement of my hands as they smoothed imaginary creases out of my T-shirt. I had been standing alone in mine and Taylor's room for what felt like hours, even though I knew I was more than likely needed downstairs. Today was a very important day – April sixth, the official kick-off for the Australian leg of the Through The Crossroads Tour. Most of today, up until around four o'clock, had been devoted to sound check and rehearsal at the Regent Theatre. After that was all said and done all twelve of us – Hanson, my bandmates, Taylor, his mother and his sisters, and I – had relocated to Albion Park for dinner. The last I had seen, Taylor had been cooking up a storm in the kitchen while Mark held court over the barbecue on the back porch.

A quiet knock sounded at the door just as I turned toward the bed, where my concert outfit was laid out on my side – three-quarter-length cargo pants, navy blue and white striped sleeveless dress, and a pair of white socks. My navy blue Converse sneakers were on the floor nearby. "Yeah, come in," I called out as I pulled my T-shirt off over my head, balled it up and pitched it into the laundry hamper next to the chest of drawers. A glance back over my shoulder revealed Taylor slipping in through a gap in the doorway.

"You're worse than my sisters," he remarked as he went to the wardrobe and slid it open, and started sorting through his clothes.

"I'm *nervous*," I informed him. "We've never played to the kind of crowd that we're performing for tonight. Not only will most of them be there to see your brothers, but the UniBar doesn't have the capacity of the Regent."

I dressed quickly and started digging through my jewellery box so that I could complete my usual performance 'look' – wristfuls of bangles and bracelets, earrings for all of my piercings, and long

beaded necklaces. I wore only two rings onstage – my engagement ring, and my wedding band. I didn't need any others.

"There's something bothering you," I heard Taylor say as I closed my jewellery box. He came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my shoulders. "I know you Issie, and I can tell that you're worried. Feel like spilling the beans?"

I closed my eyes briefly and sighed quietly. "I've been trying to figure out how to tell you this ever since we started dating," I replied. "Schuyler doesn't even know, and she's one of my best friends in the whole world. That's how difficult this is for me."

"It didn't take me two years for me to tell you about all the bullshit I have going on with me," Taylor said as I shrugged his arms off my shoulders and went over to our bed. I picked up my laptop case from its hiding place as I sat down. "So what gives?"

I gave him a small smile. "The CFS and the anxiety never almost killed you, though." I took my laptop from its case, opened its lid and switched it on, and balanced it on my knees. "Come and sit down. I need to show you something."

The first thing I did once my computer had fired up and loaded my desktop was open up a folder that I had titled *Secrets*. It was full of pictures of me that had been taken between the ages of four and eleven-and-a-half.

"I didn't always have hair like this," I said as Taylor sat down next to me. I pulled gently on one of my curls. "Until I was around four years old my hair was straight, just like the rest of my family's. The curls didn't come in until I was six-and-a-half." I bit my bottom lip so hard that I almost drew blood. "After I'd gone through hell on earth."

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"I..." My voice faltered. "I had cancer, Tay. Just after my fourth birthday and after the move from England, I was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukaemia. I went through chemotherapy and radiotherapy for two-and-a-half years." I started to slowly click through the photographs. "I

nearly died because it was just so intense. Once I was in remission I had to repeat a grade of school, and when I hit high school I had to be tutored in most of my subjects just to be able to graduate on time with the rest of my class." I twisted the hem of my dress in my fingers. "I've been considered cured since Halloween 1995."

"Oh Issie," he said softly. "I wish you'd told me before." I felt his hand on my back, his fingertips rubbing in small circles. "But I definitely understand why you didn't. It's a hard subject to talk about." I looked at him quizzically, and watched as he gave me a small smile. "Nan," he explained, that one small word holding so much meaning. "It's the whole reason why my brothers never really talked about it during interviews back then, unless they were asked outright. It still hurt a lot."

"There's something you need to understand, Tay," I said. "Because of what happened to me, I'm at high risk for another form of leukaemia that has a high mortality rate. It doesn't matter that I've made it long past five years, it could strike at any moment." I took a shaky breath. "And I might not survive it, no matter how hard I fight." I closed my laptop and put it aside, and twisted around to face him. "You have to be prepared for the fact that we might not get to grow old together," I said. "As much as I hate the idea of it, it could very well happen a lot sooner than we'd like." I put my hands on his shoulders, fingers and thumbs curling around to press into his skin. "I don't want to leave you all alone," I whispered desperately. "I *don't*..."

"And you won't," he whispered as his arms enveloped me, and he began to slowly rock me. "You *won't*, Issie. I'd die without you, okay? And nobody wants that."

And with those words, the lyrics of my favourite song from *Rent* went spinning through my head, repeating one line over and over like a broken record. *I die without you...I die without you...I die without you...*

He *would* die without me – and I without him. After two years together, and three-and-a-half months as a married couple, we were now so closely bonded that we *needed* each other to survive. He was my entire world, and I was his.

That evening I stood backstage at the Regent, a microphone clutched in my right hand so tightly my fingernails were almost digging into my palm. Tonight was one hell of a milestone – Sincerity's first concert as the opening act for one of the most successful indie bands of my generation. I was well aware that most of the audience consisted of Hanson fans, people who had only shown up because my band wasn't the only one on tonight's bill. But coming into the theatre tonight, I had seen dotted throughout the crowd milling around in the foyer and on the footpath outside people I recognised from shows the girls and I had played. Most of them wore yellow wristbands around their wrists or ribbons pinned to their shirts, and a few were even dressed top-to-toe in the colour. That had been enough for me to know that this was all more than worth it.

I turned around and surveyed the scene laid out before me. Two very different groups had taken refuge backstage – the girls of Sincerity, and the Hanson brothers. Isaac, Ayesha and Melayna were tuning their respective instruments. Emmanuelle was seated at the keyboard she used for practices with Mark bent over her shoulder, the two of them working through chords. Zac and Pania were holding a drum battle, competing to see who could bash out the longest and most complicated solo. I couldn't see Taylor, but I knew where he was – front row centre in the audience, my camcorder in one hand and his digital SLR in the other.

Ayesha and I took the stage slightly before eight o'clock, a lone spotlight highlighting the place where we were both to stand. Our version of the first song on our set list required only guitar and vocals – while the two of us played, the remaining members of Sincerity would make their way through the dark to their respective instruments. I counted the seconds as Ayesha played the opening notes on her guitar, waiting for the right moment to begin singing. When it came I flicked on my microphone with my right thumbnail, raised it to my mouth, and lifted my voice to the heavens.

"You hold me like a puppet in your clammy hands...breathing your soft innuendoes...I can feel the music through your eyes...so much pain it hurts my soul...take me where oleander grow...show

me all the things that I don't know...I'm outside, let me in...I'm still shedding my original skin...show me where I've never been...I'm still shedding my original skin...

"I am not afraid...all I have to fear is myself, me or I...my curls have twisted themselves into knots...twist and turn me inside out...show me what bliss is about...I'm outside, let me in...I'm still shedding my original skin...show me where I've never been...I'm still shedding my original skin...

"If I wait to run away...I'll be trapped another day...

"Take me where oleander grow...show me all the things that I don't know...I'm outside, let me in...I'm still shedding my original skin...show me where I've never been...I'm still shedding my original skin..."

The cheer that went up as the song finished was nearly deafening. Ayesha and I high-fived just as the stage lights came on to reveal the other girls, and we moved into our usual places to continue with our performance.

We continued to play for a further three-quarters of an hour, working the yellow-clad crowd into a complete frenzy of anticipation. The rest of the night was going to be absolutely amazing – I could feel it in the air.

"This is our last song for tonight," I said as the five of us readied ourselves to play our final song.

"We'll be back on Wednesday night for a special 18-and-over show, and we hope to see those of you who have tickets to that performance back here in a couple of days." I glanced quickly down at where Taylor sat, only to see the lens of my camcorder pointed straight at me. I stuck my tongue out at him, and he flipped the bird at me in response. "If you've seen us play at the UniBar before, you'll know this one. It's called *Look Who's Perfect Now*."

This song had always been one of my favourites. Getting to perform it live had only served to heighten my love for it, and so I had no trouble putting as much passion as I could into my singing.

"You, mister wearing a crown...push me around, draggin' me down...you, mister head of the class...never come last, pain in the ass..."

"Look who's perfect now...got my head in the clouds...look who's perfect now...got my feet on the ground...look who's perfect now...got my head in the clouds, got my feet on the ground...look who's perfect now...

"You, mister never to fall...standing so tall, knowing it all...you, mister living a lie...flying so high, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye...

"Look who's perfect now...got my head in the clouds...look who's perfect now...got my feet on the ground...look who's perfect now...got my head in the clouds, got my feet on the ground...look who's perfect now...

"Look who's perfect now...look who's perfect now...got my feet on the ground...look who's perfect now...got my head in the clouds, got my feet on the ground...look who's perfect now...look who's perfect now...look who's perfect now...got my head in the clouds...look who's perfect now...got my head in the clouds, got my feet on the ground...look who's perfect now..."

I let out a cheer of my own as the audience applauded and cheered. One show down, twenty-six to go.

* * *

April ninth saw the tour contingent depart the Illawarra for the Shoalhaven, and in turn the next destination on the tour itinerary – Nowra. The third concert of the tour wasn't until the tenth, but arriving a day early would give us a chance to 'learn the lay of the land', or as much as was necessary for a three-day stay. That morning, I was woken up by my cell phone vibrating under my pillow and belting out the very muffled chorus of *Good Intentions* by Toad The Wet Sprocket. Beside me I could feel Taylor shifting around, and I knew he was either awake or very close to it. "I don' care who it is, tell 'em t'fuck off," he mumbled.

"Sorry Tay," I whispered, and started fumbling around for my phone. I eventually found it wedged between the mattress and the headboard, and I rolled onto my back before flipping it open. "H'lo?"

"You're not up *yet*?"

I resisted the very strong temptation to start screaming down the phone at Taylor's brother. "Mark, unless this is a life or death situation, kindly fuck off until Taylor and I are both awake *and* coherent," I told him sleepily. I risked a glance at my clock radio. "It's ten minutes past five for crying out loud."

"Oh, I know what time it is," Mark replied. I could almost see him grinning evilly. "And I'll have you know I haven't been to bed yet."

I worked myself upright and braced my left hand against the mattress. "You are *insane*," I informed my brother-in-law. "I still haven't worked out how you and Taylor could possibly be related, aside from the obvious. You're complete polar opposites."

"Well, you're stuck with me for the foreseeable future, so I'd get used to it if I were you."

"Don't remind me." I looked over at Taylor, and was relieved to see that he had fallen back to sleep. "I know you're wide awake, but Tay and I didn't get home until well after two. And we didn't make it to bed until at least half an hour after that." I let my eyes drift closed. "So is it all right with you if I go back to sleep for a few more hours? We're both honestly exhausted."

"You do drive a hard bargain," Mark seemed to muse. "All right. But I expect to see you both in Nowra before dinner."

"You will, Mark. Don't worry yourself."

"And it's the Riverhaven Motel, don't forget."

"I won't forget," I sighed. "I'm the one who picked it, you know."

Mark mercifully ended the call a few moments later, and I turned my phone to silent with the vibrate function switched off before settling back down to sleep.

It was a far more respectable hour when Taylor and I woke up. My clock radio's display read 10:07, and bright sunlight streamed in through our bedroom window. It illuminated the four objects that

sat next to the door – two very large and undoubtedly heavy suitcases, Taylor’s photography gear, and the hard case that held Taylor’s acoustic guitar. Everything else, all save Ratchet and our backpacks, had been loaded into the back of Taylor’s car the evening before, just before we’d gone to Wollongong for the first adults-only show of the tour.

“You know, we don’t have to be in Nowra until at least two o’clock,” I said as I stretched, pointing my toes toward the footboard of our bed. I glanced sideways at him – he was lying on his side facing me with head propped up on his hand. “Feel like hopping in the shower?”

“And what would this shower involve, exactly?” he asked.

“Well, let’s see now.” I raised myself up on my elbows and looked up at the ceiling light fixture.

“We both need to wash our hair, I could do with a backrub...oh, and I *suppose* we could fit in a quickie if you’re in the mood.”

He raised an eyebrow at me. “And when have I ever *not* been in the mood?”

“Every time you miss a dose of your meds, maybe?” I reminded him. I kicked the covers off and rolled out of bed. “Come on. Shower, meds, late breakfast, then we can hit the road. We’ll take the scenic route to give you a chance to warm up your camera.”

One long, leisurely shower and late breakfast later, the dishes had been done for the final time (until we arrived home in June, at least), Ratchet had been coaxed and buckled into the backseat, the house had been locked and the rest of our gear loaded into the car, and we were on the road. The trip to Nowra wouldn’t take us all day, so there was no point in rushing things.

“So what did your brothers say about this again?” I asked as Taylor drove down Tongarra Road, past the RSL. “I mean, didn’t they think it was strange that we were driving ourselves, rather than piling into the buses with everyone else?”

“Well, considering that we’re the only couple on this tour, married or otherwise,” Taylor replied as he pulled up at the lights outside the primary school, “they didn’t really think it was that unusual.” He shrugged a little. “Besides, this means that if we want to go on a date, or if we want

to deviate from the schedule a little, we won't be disrupting anyone else's plans." The light turned green, and he drove forward through the intersection. "Anyway, do you *really* want to be stuck on the same bus as my brothers for the next two-and-a-half months? It'd be the 2007 tour all over again."

"Good point," I conceded, before leaning forward to scroll through the current playlist on his iPod. The two of us had opted to alternate with our music collections for the tour's duration, which meant that for the drive between home and Nowra it was Taylor's music that we would be listening to. My turn would come when we headed off to Canberra in a few days' time.

Around half an hour later we arrived in Berry, a small town on the Princes Highway that was something of a tourist trap. Being as we had chosen to follow the railway line down the coast, we would have ended up there at some point. In any case, we'd figured it would be a good place to waste a few hours. Not only that, but Ratchet would be able to have a bit of a run around.

"Who was on the phone this morning, anyway?" Taylor asked as we wandered down Queen Street, hand in hand.

"Mark," I replied. "Why he felt he had to wake us up before the sun was even over the horizon, I really don't know."

"He's a night owl," Taylor replied. "I used to be as well, but that was before all of this. We were both born late at night, so that's a possible explanation for it."

"That's something I've been wondering about, actually," I said as we walked past Global Contact Bookstore. "How exactly did you get sick in the first place?"

He was quiet for a little while. It wasn't until we stepped into Apex Park on Prince Alfred Street and he'd let Ratchet off her leash that he spoke.

"The end of my first semester of college, there was a case of the flu being passed around the dorms." He led me over to the rotunda in the middle of the park so that we could sit down. "Most of us caught a dose. My roommate, our two neighbours and I got slammed with the worst of it."

He fiddled with the beads on the bracelet he wore around his right wrist. "I got over the virus within about a week, but I never *completely* recovered. My doctor at the time agreed that it was catching the flu that set the whole chronic fatigue thing off."

"Do you think you still would have gotten sick if you hadn't caught the flu?"

He nodded. "Eventually, yeah. I've pretty much been a ticking time bomb my whole life. If it hadn't been the flu, it would have been something else entirely." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him shift backwards on the low wall that surrounded the rotunda and tip his head back so that he could look up at the clear blue sky. "I'm kind of shocked it took that long, actually. Every time I have surgery, it always takes me a fucking age to shake off the anaesthesia and get back to what I consider normal. It was the worst when I had my wisdom teeth out, a couple of months before we met. I had them out in October 2006, and it took me nearly two and a half months to get back on my feet. I think it's a combination of my CFS, the anaesthesia and my medication that lays me low for so long afterward. It's so fucking frustrating – I always feel like I'm in the middle of a fog."

"So *that's* why Schuyler said you were looking better," I realised.

"I beg your pardon?"

I shifted around so that I could see Taylor's face. "The day we met, as Skya and I were leaving, she said that you were looking a lot better than she'd seen in ages. And I'm betting that was why."

"I'd believe it," he said, a slight chuckle in his voice. "Though at that point she hadn't seen me for a few months anyway." Here he let out a shrill whistle. "Ratchet, heel!" he called out, and stood up. "C'mon. I want to see if I can find you something nice for your birthday."

Taylor ended up ducking into just about every shop in Berry during the couple of hours we spent there. I played dog-sitter while he did his shopping, giving Ratchet some well-deserved attention in the process. When he was finished we walked to Just Delicious, a café on Albert Street, and seated ourselves at one of the empty tables under the awning out front.

"You know where we'll be on your birthday, don't you?" Taylor asked while we were waiting for our lunch to arrive. I considered it a stroke of good luck that Taylor had had the foresight to put Ratchet's jacket on that morning, as the waitress who had taken down our orders had glanced down at where Ratchet lay curled up between Taylor's feet but hadn't said one word.

I nodded. "We'll be in Melbourne," I answered. "I've always wanted to go there." I raised an eyebrow at Taylor. "Please don't tell me you told your brothers to make sure we'd be there on that specific day."

He shook his head. "No way. But I do have something special planned for the night before." I saw a secretive smile sneak its way onto his face. "Didn't you say you liked Danny Bhoy?"

"Yeah, he's my favourite comedian." And that was right when it clicked. "You *didn't*."

"Oh, I did." The smile now became a fully-fledged grin. "We'll be in Melbourne during this year's Melbourne International Comedy Festival. I scored us tickets to see him at the Athenaeum Theatre on the sixteenth, seeing as there's a concert on your birthday."

I just stared at him. "H-how did you manage that?"

"Mark told me on our birthday what the itinerary was, and I knew that the Comedy Festival this year kicked off on the first of April. I bought our tickets as soon as I knew when we'd be getting there."

I had to laugh. Every time I thought I knew Taylor, he turned around and showed me a new and completely unexpected side of himself. I would never have asked or even expected him to take me out on the town for my birthday – I would have been completely content to just hole up in our hotel room and spend the evening watching movies on pay TV, especially because we would have spent the vast majority of the day in question on the road. I knew that the two of us would need to leave Canberra much earlier than everyone else, but it was going to be completely worth it. Twelve and a half hours on the road was a small price to pay for a night out with the love of my life, and I fully intended to make every second of that night count.

Chapter 7

Didn't know that I was goin' down

Taylor

The day after our arrival in Canberra, I was reminded of one of the many reasons why I loved Isobel so much. That morning, what brought me out of sleep was a pair of hands working at my shoulders, easing away the dull ache that had been present since the end of the first Nowra concert. I let out a soft, sleepy groan and buried my head deeper into my pillow.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," I heard Isobel say very sweetly from somewhere to my left.

"Morning," I mumbled. "What time is it?"

"A bit after eight-thirty," Isobel replied as I shifted onto my back, keeping my eyes closed until I was good and ready to open them. "Nice and sunny today, or so the weather report on *Today* said. Shame we're going to be cooped up inside for most of it." She didn't say anything for almost a full minute. "You'd better not have gone back to sleep."

I finally opened my left eye to look up at her. She was sitting somewhere in the region of my knees, still in her pyjamas and with her hair pulled back off her face in a messy ponytail, a faint smile turning the corners of her mouth slightly upward. "Trust me, you'd know if I'd gone back to sleep," I informed her as I sat up. "I'd be ignoring you."

"Very funny," Isobel said. "Come on, up you get – Mark texted me and said that we're due at sound check in one hour."

I let out a groan and buried my face in my hands. "You're kidding me, right?"

"Nope." I felt the mattress shift beneath me as she stood up. "Now get up."

After a shower and a quick breakfast in the hotel's Promenade Café, Isobel and I were in my car and driving out to the Australian National University. Llewellyn Hall, the venue for the two Canberra shows, was part of the university's School of Music and just a five-minute drive from our

hotel, the Hyatt – it was a distance we could have easily walked, but we would have arrived late to sound check. I was quite willing to bet that turning up late would have put me on my brothers' collective bad side so fast my head would be spinning.

While my brothers were warming up, I slotted my mobile broadband stick into one of the USB ports on my laptop, got online and logged into YouTube. Part of my role as tour liaison was to check in with the YouTube accounts for both Sincerity and Hanson each morning – it was my responsibility to read any messages that had been sent by fans, approve comments posted to the videos and each respective channel, and upload new videos that had been captured by the camcorders owned by Isobel and Avery. If nothing else, it kept me busy.

I was so focused on my work that I didn't see someone sitting down next to me until a finger prodded my shoulder. As I looked over to my left I saw Melayna settling herself next to me on the carpet.

"Have you seen the set list yet?" she asked, and I shook my head. "I think you need to." She opened her backpack and took out her notebook, flipping to a page near the middle before setting it on the keyboard of my laptop. On that page, Isobel had written Sincerity's set list for that evening's show out in her distinctive cursive. The fourth line from the top bore the the name of the song we had designated as ours and had danced to at our wedding reception – *Broken* by Seether and Evanescence's Amy Lee.

And in an unfamiliar hand at the end of that line, immediately following the names of *Broken's* original performers, was my own name.

"Oh *hell* no." I shook my head so hard that it started spinning. "I am *not* getting up onstage. I don't give a shit what the song is. It's not happening."

Melayna closed her notebook and slipped it back into her bag. "Taylor, believe me, I know all about your hatred of public performance. Your sister told me that it's pretty much legendary in your family."

"She'd be right about that," I muttered.

"But you know what?" she asked, as if I hadn't even spoken. "Legendary or not, I've seen you perform." She shrugged a little. "Someone posted video on YouTube of the first New York concert from the last tour. You're *good*, Taylor. It's not just me saying that, either. I emailed a link to the video to my dad a couple nights ago – he's a producer like you, and he's worked with some of the biggest names in the business. And he told me that he was completely blown away by your duet with Mark – yes, it *was* a duet, so don't even think about contradicting me," she said sharply when I opened my mouth. "Dad doesn't sugarcoat his opinions to make you feel better – if he tells you that you're shite, then you're shite. So for him to say that you're fucking good, that means a lot coming from him." Her left hand reached over and carefully lowered the lid of my laptop. "I know it would mean a lot to Bel if you performed the song with her. Just think about it, okay?"

I let out a quiet sigh of frustration. "All right. But I'm not promising a thing."

"Never said I wanted you to," Melayna said, and she stood up, dusting off the back of her jeans before wandering off.

I was pretty much left to my own devices for about the next two hours, and was about to wander outside in search of some lunch when someone else decided to grace me with their presence – Avery.

"Hey Ave," I said absently as I logged into my email.

"You've been quiet," she said without any sort of preamble.

"I've been busy," I replied, not looking up from my inbox. "I might borrow your camcorder later if you don't mind – I still need to get the videos of Saturday's concert up on YouTube."

"Yeah, I don't mind at all. Just don't forget to give it back before tonight."

"I won't forget." I hibernated my laptop and slid it into my backpack. "You feel like coming to get some lunch with me? I need to get out of here for a bit." I looked over at my sister and gave her a small smile. "And I want to spend some time with my favourite sister."

The two of us ended up walking to the university's Civic Centre to find something for lunch. Almost on impulse we decided on Japanese and ducked into the Sizzle Café, putting in our lunch orders before seating ourselves outside under the awning.

"We haven't had much of a chance to talk," Avery said idly as she toyed with the menu that was on our table. "What with you being busy with the production side of things, and me being dragged all over Creation by Mom. She took Zo and I to Questacon yesterday, did I tell you that?"

"What the hell's Questacon?" I asked.

"Science museum. Said that we might as well learn *something* while we're here." She pulled a face. "Never mind that I've been done with school for two years already, *and* I got myself accepted to UCLA." She grinned as she said this last bit.

"I didn't know that! How come you didn't say anything?"

She raised an eyebrow at me. "You didn't ask, did you?"

"I had no idea you were even *planning* on college, Ave. Last I heard you were going to spend your twenties wandering around Europe and Asia."

"Yeah, well, I came to my senses. Grandpa had a bit of a chat to me and talked me round to it. I start classes in September."

I reached across the table and took hold of Avery's hands. "I'm proud of you," I told her, and was rewarded with a smile. "Though I hope you realise that Mom's going to be completely insufferable now. *All* of us except for Mac and Zo work or study away from home now."

"Why do you think I'm going to college out of state?" She laughed quietly. "I love Oklahoma, don't get me wrong, but I need to be near the ocean. That's most of the reason why I wanted to come on tour."

"So it wasn't to come and spend time with *me*, then?" I asked, one eyebrow raised.

"Of course it was. I don't get to spend nearly enough time with you anymore. I know it was the opportunity of a lifetime and all that shit, but I kinda wish you'd stayed in the US."

"I do too. But I am glad I decided to come here – it's done me a world of good. I'm finally getting better – my doctor told me that I'll likely never *completely* recover, but it's something at least. That wouldn't have happened back home."

Our lunches arrived a few minutes later – Avery had decided on teriyaki chicken, while I'd opted for *gyōza*. I would always prefer Thai food over any other Asian cuisine, but Japanese ran a very close second. We were both quiet as we ate.

"There's something bothering you."

I looked up from my lunch at Avery. She was toying with her chopsticks, twisting them around in her long fingers. Her long hair formed a curtain around her face.

"One of the girls wants me to sing a duet with Issie tonight," I said. "I told Melayna that I'd think about it, but I really don't know if I want to do it."

"What song is it?"

"*Broken*."

Avery frowned slightly. "That's your song, isn't it?"

I nodded. "Yeah. That's most of the reason why I don't want to perform it – I don't want to fuck it up. It means a lot to us."

"You could never fuck it up. Trust me on that one. You're too good for that to happen." She put her chopsticks in her bowl and leaned forward over the table. "I know you probably better than

the rest of them do, except maybe for Mark,” she said, in reference to our brothers and sisters. “And even though I know you’re scared to death of getting up onstage, whenever you *do* get talked around to it...it’s almost as if you were born to be up there. I really wish you’d give it a go more often – you might surprise yourself sometimes.”

“So what you’re saying is that I *should* perform the song with Issie?” I asked reluctantly.

Avery nodded. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. And anyway, it’s only for one song. You’ve given the American fans a taste of what you’re capable of, so why not show the Aussies? I think they’d get a kick out of it.”

I took in a deep breath and raked my hands through my hair. She was right – it *was* only for one song. “All right,” I relented at last. “I’ll do it.”

That night I sat backstage for the first few songs of Sincerity’s set, listening for my cue. Isobel and I would be performing right after the girls finished *Little By Little*, and we had agreed that my cue would be hearing Isobel saying my name.

Almost before I realised it, Ayesha’s guitar and Isobel’s vocals were fading out, and the crowd was cheering and applauding. I could almost see Isobel holding her hands up for quiet before she spoke.

“Our next song is one that is very special to my husband and I,” I heard her tell the audience. “I’m guessing that many of you will have seen his performance with my brothers-in-law on YouTube, from the encore of the first show on Hanson’s last US tour, so you’ll know who I’m talking about.” A few squeals and shrieks sounded, and Isobel laughed. “Yeah, you’ve definitely seen him. Everyone, would you please welcome Taylor Hanson onstage.”

As soon as the final syllable of my name was spoken, I got up from my seat and walked straight over to the side of the stage. A stagehand passed me a microphone, and another guided me out into the darkness to stand at Isobel’s side. I found her hand and grasped hold, already feeling my heart beginning to race. I didn’t like this one bit, but I couldn’t back out now. A spotlight went up,

Ayesha began to play the opening notes of the song, and I counted fifteen seconds before beginning to sing.

"I wanted you to know that I love the way you laugh...I wanna hold you high and steal your pain away...I keep your photograph and I know it serves me well...I wanna hold you high and steal your pain...'cause I'm broken when I'm lonesome...and I don't feel right when you're gone away...you've gone away...you don't feel me here anymore..."

Here Pania came in on the drums, and the other spotlight came on as Isobel sang her verse. We would be singing together for the remainder of the song.

"The worst is over now and we can breathe again...I wanna hold you high, you steal my pain away...there's so much left to learn, and no one left to fight...I wanna hold you high and steal your pain..."

"'Cause I'm broken when I'm open...and I don't feel like I am strong enough...'cause I'm broken when I'm lonesome...and I don't feel right when you're gone away..."

"'Cause I'm broken when I'm open...and I don't feel like I am strong enough...'cause I'm broken when I'm lonesome...and I don't feel right when you're gone away...'cause I'm broken when I'm lonesome...and I don't feel right when you're gone...you've gone away...you don't feel me here anymore..."

The audience's reaction was almost deafening. I let out a laugh of sheer relief and caught Isobel up in a tight embrace. It was done, and if I had my way I would be able to remain behind the scenes for the rest of the tour. Though knowing my luck, my brothers would find *some* way of dragging me back onstage.

"I love you Mrs. Hanson," I whispered before releasing Isobel.

"I love you too, Mr. Hanson," Isobel replied sweetly.

* * *

Isobel's birthday that year, her twenty-fifth, fell on the same day as the first of the two Melbourne concerts. The two of us had left Canberra bright and early the morning before so that we could get to Melbourne in time to see Danny Bhoy performing at the Athenaeum, being as the next evening's concert would prevent us from celebrating in true Hanson fashion. I did have it on good authority, however, that my brothers had a few surprises planned. I even had one of my own in store.

Before the show, we all went out to an early dinner at a Chinese restaurant in Melbourne's Docklands. I'd made reservations the same night that I'd booked the tickets for Isobel's main birthday present. The Docklands were two tram rides and almost one hour away from the Palais Theatre, but I had figured that providing we arrived back at the Palais at least an hour before the venue's doors opened we wouldn't run into any trouble.

Once we had placed our orders for dinner the gift-giving began in earnest, and soon the table directly in front of Isobel was piled with wrapped gifts. Hidden in the pile were presents from Isobel's parents, brothers and sisters, which I'd asked to be mailed to me a couple of months earlier. Unlike everyone else at the table, I stayed quiet while Isobel tore through the pile, twisting my medical ID bracelet around my right wrist with my left thumb and index finger as I watched. I'd been feeling a bit under the weather all day, which I put down to all my late nights and subsisting mostly on coffee and junk food at last catching up with me. It was just one of the many reasons why I disliked touring as much as I did – among other things, it played havoc with my sleep patterns. The next two days were to be given over to interviews, but I had no plans other than catching up on desperately-needed sleep.

The almost-compulsive movement of my finger and thumb were stilled by a different set of fingers over my own, and I looked over at my mother. She raised her eyebrows at me. "You're going to wear the chain out if you keep that up," she said in a low voice.

"Sorry," I said quietly, dropping my hands into my lap.

She studied me for a little while. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Honestly?" I asked to clarify, and she nodded. "I don't know. I've been feeling off all day, and it's just..." I raked my hands through my hair and took in a slow, deep breath. "I almost feel like something's going to go wrong after the show tonight. It's scaring the hell out of me."

Mom's response to this was to stand up, gesturing for me to follow her. "Excuse us, everyone," she said as I stood, feeling a bit shaky. "I need to have a quick word with my son."

The second we stepped outside the restaurant a wave of dizziness swept over me, and I felt my mother's hand on my shoulder steadying me as I came very close to pitching forward. "Easy," she cautioned. "Have you eaten today?"

Deciding that honesty was the best policy, I shook my head. "I had some toast for breakfast, but that's all I've had to eat all day." I sensed her disapproval and quickly added, "Mom, to be honest, there is no point in eating when I'm not even hungry."

"Promise me that you'll eat dinner tonight at least."

I nodded. "I will. I'm going to need it if I want to put on a decent performance during the concert."

The Victorian fans (and those from interstate and overseas who had travelled to see tonight's show) were to get a very rare treat tonight – for the first and possibly only time, Hanson would have four members for the full set instead of the usual three. Mark had succeeded in talking me around to it, and we had decided that we'd alternate vocals on his usual leads. I would also have two covers to my credit. Being as it was Isobel's birthday – and also the only reason I'd agreed to go onstage tonight – I had kept her favourite bands in mind when picking my covers. In keeping with the unofficial Down Under touring tradition of only playing covers by Australian musicians, the songs I had chosen were by Powderfinger and Things Of Stone And Wood.

Dinner was being served just as Mom and I resumed our seats at the table. For the first time in almost twelve hours I was actually hungry, and had been looking forward to dinner almost from the second I'd stepped on the tram from the Palais. Though when I caught sight of *what* I had ordered, I wasn't exactly impressed.

"Fucking sesame seeds," I muttered as I did my best to scrape off the sesame seeds that topped each of the pieces of chicken on my plate.

"What the hell are you doing?" Pania asked over her plate of noodles, chicken and vegetables.

"I don't like sesame seeds," I replied.

"Just *eat* the bloody things, for crying out loud," she told me. "They're not going to kill you."

"You never know, they just might," I muttered, but I stopped picking at my dinner and set about eating it.

After everyone's plates had been cleared away, Isobel's birthday cake was brought to the table. It was one of the biggest chocolate cakes I had ever seen, and I could almost feel my teeth aching just looking at it. I could tell that its appearance had made Isobel's night completely – her eyes had lit up the second it had been set before her.

Upon our return to the Palais, everything shifted up a couple of gears. I was drawn into my brothers' usual warm-up routine, with Zac drumming on the back of a chair as we did a quick run-through of the set list. It had been decided that Sincerity wouldn't be opening the show, so that Isobel could have a break for her birthday, so I'd loaned my camera to her so that she could play photographer. Avery would be documenting the concert on video as usual.

Seven-thirty saw the four of us taking up our positions onstage. Through the darkness I could see Isobel in the very first row of seats with her bandmates, my sisters and my mother. I felt somewhat out of place, like I was an intruder, but it had been made clear to me countless times that I was always welcome to perform with them. It was time to put that affirmation to the test.

The by-now-familiar guitar-and-drums introduction of *Pick You Up* began to play, and I counted out the seconds before flicking on my microphone and kicking off the show.

"When you are set to throw in your hand...when you are far from home...when what you believe is buried in your hands...when you feel outgrown..."

"I'll be the one to pick you up again...when you decide you've had enough of it...I'll be the one...I'll be the one..."

"When your speech is slow...when your eyes are closed...when you feel betrayed...when your heart is frayed...when your feet are cold...when your sights are low..."

"I'll be the one to pick you up again...when you decide you've had enough of it...I'll be the one...I'll be the one...I'll be the one...I'll be the one..."

"When you are set to throw it in your hand...when you are far from home...when what you believe...is buried in your hands...when you feel outgrown...by those you know..."

"I'll be the one to pick you up again...when you decide you've had enough of it...I'll be the one...I'll be the one...I'll be the one...I'll be the one...I'll be the one...when you decide you've had enough...when you decide you've had enough...when you are set to throw it in...when you've had enough...when you're set to throw it in...when you're set to throw it in...when you're set to throw it in..."

I resisted the very strong temptation to jam my fingers in my ears as the audience let loose with one of the loudest cheers I had ever heard, instead sketching a bow and grinning. I was gradually getting used to being onstage – I still didn't like it much, but it was a start at least.

Until that night, I had never truly realised just how hard my brothers worked to make each concert as enjoyable and memorable as the last. Being onstage for over an hour without anything that could be considered a break was exhausting to say the least. I was positive now that I'd picked the right career – how Mark was able to do this almost every night and not be exhausted at the end was unbelievable.

"This is our final song tonight," Mark told the crowd as I prepared to sing for the last time. "Thank you all for coming out tonight, and special thanks goes to our brother Taylor for giving us a hand with everything." I looked back over my shoulder at Mark, and he snapped off a salute in my direction. "Taylor, you have the stage."

I took in a deep breath. "This song is dedicated to my wife, who is one of the most amazing and beautiful women in the world," I said. "Her name's Isobel Hanson, and it's her birthday today." I hid a small smile. "Issie, this one's for you – it's called *Happy Birthday Helen*."

"Nothing like sucking up to the missus," Zac said, and a wave of laughter erupted.

"Shut up, Zac," I shot back before turning my focus to my final song.

"Let's not forget last night...yeah, how we drove along the Yarra...how we sang harmonies to Carole King...these three years now just gone...they are the legends of my mind...we both kneel at these rocks to drink of the mem'ry...

"You are the tunes in my head, the fire in my ribs...you are the voice in my heart that whispers compassion...happy birthday Helen...

"We kissed on that bridge that fell down...while we held hands at the Taj...we've been stuck in a cave with that bloke who says Oi Am...and when I cried for my cruel heart...you rubbed my back till I felt better...we ate bread on the lake and yearned for the seasons...

"You are the tunes in my head, the fire in my ribs...you are the voice in my heart that whispers compassion...happy birthday Helen...

"You are the tunes in my head, the fire in my ribs...you are the voice in my heart that whispers compassion...you are the storm on the ocean, poem in the trees...the smell of the winter that haunts me each autumn...you're my everything...you are my everything...you are my everything...happy birthday Helen...happy birthday Helen..."

I let out a slightly hysterical laugh as more applause and cheers erupted. I was completely exhausted and looking forward to crawling into bed, but I'd done it – I had made it through an entire concert as a performer, and I hadn't fucked things up. I still doubted I could get completely used to it, but I could see why my brothers loved it so much.

We were met backstage by Isobel and company, with Isobel's mood immediately apparent as soon as I laid eyes on her. She was positively glowing with pride and happiness.

"I am so proud of you," she whispered as we embraced tightly. "So, so proud." She drew back slightly and studied me. "And that song..." She grinned and quickly kissed me. "I should figure out some way of thanking you for that."

"Not in public, please," Zac requested.

"You're just jealous," I informed him.

"Jealous or not, I'm about ready to go crawl into bed," Avery informed us all. "It's been a long day." She yawned widely, covering her mouth with her hand.

"Long day my ass! You've only been up since seven-thirty," Mark informed our sister. "If anyone should be tired, it's us."

"That's enough from you two," Mom said sharply. "I'm going to take Zoë back to the hotel – it's far past her bedtime. Are you coming, Avery?"

My sister shrugged. "I might as well. Nothing better to do with the rest of my evening." She stepped forward and hugged me tightly. "You did so well," she said, sounding proud. "I'll see you when you surface tomorrow, yeah?"

"Definitely," I agreed.

Soon, it was only Isobel, Mark, Zac and I left at the venue, everyone else having headed back to the hotel. "So, who feels like going out and getting wasted?" Mark asked. "We have to celebrate Bel's birthday somehow."

"Don't you have interviews tomorrow?" Isobel asked as we wandered out of the backstage area and made our way out of the theatre.

"Okay, maybe we won't get wasted then," Mark amended.

We had just stepped out onto the footpath outside the theatre when everything pretty much went to hell. A tidal wave of dizziness and nausea crashed into me, nearly forcing me to my knees. The world pitched to one side, and I squeezed my eyes shut against the onslaught. *N-no, not tonight*, I pleaded silently. *Please don't do this to me tonight...*

"Tay?" Isobel asked, sounding worried. "Are you all right?"

It took every last energy reserve I had to be able to drag my eyes open, and I looked at her. "I-I don't feel so good," I mumbled – the last words I spoke before pitching forward onto the concrete.

The very last sound I heard before sinking into unconsciousness was Isobel, by now completely panicked, screaming out my name.

Chapter 8

...and in the morning

Isobel

"Isobel."

The Royal Melbourne Hospital's emergency room was extraordinarily quiet that evening. I had always believed that Friday nights were when hospitals were at their busiest, but obviously tonight that wasn't the case.

"Isobel."

It took all my mental energies not to respond to the voice calling my name. Instead I kept my focus locked on the TV set that was bolted high up on the opposite wall. My nerves were already shot to hell – the last thing I needed was to look at the voice's owner. Watching TV, even though I didn't really care what was on, was infinitely better than wearing a track in the linoleum with my pacing.

"Isobel."

I finally snapped my gaze away from the TV and looked at Mark. "*What?*" I asked sharply.

To his credit Mark seemed to ignore my tone, instead giving me a very weak but relieved smile.

"Away with the fairies much?" he joked.

I scowled at him before leaning forward, my elbows on my knees. "What a fucking wonderful night *this* is. I never thought I'd be sitting in hospital on my *birthday* of all days."

"I know it sucks, Bel," Mark told me gently. "Believe me, I know. And I know you're worried – we all are." He carefully pushed my hair behind my ears. "If there's one thing I know about him for sure, though, it's that he's a fighter. Stubborn as all get out, too." He lowered his voice a few notches. "He'll come through this, Issie," he told me softly, using Taylor's nickname for me. "I know he will."

Heavy footsteps sounded on the floor, and I looked up to see Zac walking up to where Mark and I sat. "You guys heard anything yet?" he asked.

"Nope," Mark replied. "Did you call Mom?"

Zac nodded and held up his phone. "Just got off the phone with her – I told her that we'd take care of things. They're going to try to get here in the morning." He walked in front of me and sat down on my other side. "Mom's worried sick, of course."

"How could she *not* be? Taylor's gone and landed himself back in hospital, and she can't get over here." I felt Mark's hand rubbing my back. "At least one of the most important people to him is here. That's the main thing right now."

At some point I figured I must have fallen asleep, for the next thing I was aware of was a hand shaking me by the shoulder, and Mark's voice in my ear.

"Doc wants to talk to you," he said quietly as I opened my eyes. He nodded over at the doctor who was sitting in the row of seats across from me.

"Oh right," I said, and lifted my head up off Mark's shoulder. "Sorry about that."

The doctor gave me a smile. "That's quite all right. You're Isobel Hanson?"

"That's me," I replied.

"I'm Dr. Markham," the doctor said to introduce herself. "I understand that your husband was admitted around an hour and a half ago?"

I nodded. "Is he all right?" I asked, trying not to sound as worried as I felt.

"He's fine. He woke up about fifteen minutes ago." I could have started crying out of sheer relief at those words. "Would you be able to tell me what happened tonight?"

"Yeah, of course." I ran my hands back through my hair and started to tell Dr. Markham everything I could think of, leaving nothing out. Frustratingly enough, it was the moments *after* Taylor had

collapsed that were the clearest, but my brothers-in-law came to the rescue on any detail I was unsure on. And for that, I was thankful.

"I know you're anxious to see him, so I won't keep you much longer," Dr. Markham said. "I can't say absolutely for certain, but I believe he may have had a delayed allergic reaction to something he ate earlier. Do you know if he's allergic to anything?"

"He's not allergic to any foods, as far as I know," I replied. "The only ones I know of are aspirin and all other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, and wasp venom. He carries an EpiPen as a precaution against the latter."

"Is there anything he might have eaten tonight that could have caused an allergic reaction?"

"He had honey chicken for dinner, and it had sesame seeds on it," Mark volunteered. "He scraped as much of them off as he could because he doesn't like them." I felt him shrug next to me. "Maybe he didn't get all of them off, I don't know."

"It's entirely possible that might have been what caused it," Dr. Markham said. "Food allergies don't necessarily have to be present from birth – they can occur at any time." She stood up. "I'm going to keep him in overnight for observation, just as a precaution, but I see no reason why he can't be released in the morning. He'll need to make an appointment with his usual GP as soon as possible after he returns home." She gave me a smile that I quickly returned. "If you'll all follow me, I'll allow you to see him for a little while."

Dr. Markham led Mark, Zac and I to a private room a few corridors away from Emergency. One peek through the small square window set into the door was all it took for my worries to completely evaporate, and I breathed a quiet sigh of relief. He was lying on his right side in bed, his eyes wide open and staring at something only he could see.

"You guys should go in first," I said. "He's your brother, you need to see him more than I do right now."

"You could come in with us," Zac offered.

I shook my head. "What I want to say to him, I can't exactly say in the presence of family." To punctuate my supposed point, because I intended to do nothing of the sort, I raised an eyebrow at Mark and Zac.

"Come on Zac," Mark said pointedly. "We'll talk to him for a few minutes, then we'll let Isobel have her wicked way with him."

Mark and Zac exited their brother's hospital room around five minutes after they had gone in, with Mark catching me by the shoulder just before I headed inside. "We're going to call a taxi and head back to the hotel," he said. "You want us to wait for you?"

"You're sure you don't mind?"

Mark shook his head. "Of course not. No way I'm going to make you walk all the way back to the hotel this late." He nudged me gently. "Text me when you're ready to head out."

"Will do."

I waited until Mark and Zac had disappeared down the corridor before pushing down on the handle and easing the door open. He didn't move an inch as I closed the door behind me and walked around the end of the bed, settling myself down in the chair that had been placed a foot or so away from the window. He was still lying on his side, though now he had shifted onto his left, and though I could tell he wasn't asleep his eyes were closed. On the nearby nightstand, just within reach, were his glasses. I picked them up, unfolded the arms, and carefully slid them onto his face. His eyes popped open the moment his glasses were settled into place.

"Hey you," I whispered.

"Hey yourself," he whispered back. "You okay?"

"I should be asking you that, not the other way around." I felt tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. "I was so worried," I told him. "You scared me half to death – I was so sure I was going to lose you."

Almost in response, he rolled onto his back and eased himself upright. "You won't lose me, Issie," he told me as he shifted around to face me. "Not that easily. There's a reason I've got an EpiPen – in case something like that happens." He reached out to touch my face, pressing the palm and fingers of his left hand to my right cheek, and I automatically lifted my right hand to cover it. "But I'm sorry I worried you. I didn't mean to."

"I know you didn't," I assured him. "I know." We both lowered our hands at almost the same moment. "Dr. Markham said she'll be discharging you in the morning," I told him.

"Thank goodness for that," he said in what was very obviously relief. "I fucking hate hospitals." He let out a strained laugh.

"I never would have guessed, going by the amount of time you spend in them," I remarked dryly, and he gave me a very half-hearted smirk. "Did you have any idea this would happen?"

"I had some idea," he admitted quietly. "Though I will tell you right now that I didn't know it would go so far. At worst I thought I'd be holed up in the bathroom all night. I honestly never thought that my life would be in danger."

His hands found mine, and he interlaced our fingers. "Mark told me that you saved my life," he said.

I nodded silently. In all the panic and confusion, I had managed to remain clear-headed just long enough to tell Zac to dial triple-zero and tell the operator that we needed an ambulance. Only the sound of the ambulance dispatcher's calm, soothing voice in my ear telling me what to do had kept me from completely losing my mind.

I knew that when he put his right hand down on the bed, he understood why I couldn't answer out loud. He knew me well enough by now to be able to guess that if I tried to open my mouth I'd start crying. I sat down next to him and he drew me close, wrapping his arms around me. "Thank you," he whispered in my ear.

Those two small words, filled with an incredible amount of gratitude, were all it took to open the floodgates. I turned my head in toward his shoulder and started sobbing out of sheer relief, thankful beyond belief that he was still here and still breathing.

We sat there for what felt like an eternity in complete silence, content merely to share each other's company. A quick glance at my watch was all the prompting I needed to disengage myself from our embrace. "I should probably let you get some sleep," I said. "It's pretty late, and you've been through a lot today."

"Yeah, you're probably right," he agreed, sounding only a tiny bit reluctant. "So I'll see you in the morning, then?"

I nodded and leaned in for a quick goodnight kiss. "Definitely. I'll bring your medication and some clothes to change into."

He smiled right then, and for just half a second I saw the *real* Taylor Hanson, the side of himself he only showed to his family. "Night, Issie," he said as he lay back down, taking off his glasses and replacing them on his nightstand before closing his eyes and settling down to sleep.

Before I left the room, I pulled the hospital blankets up over his shoulders, gently tucking his hair behind his right ear. A ghost of a smile played across his face, tugging the corners of his mouth upwards just slightly, before disappearing back from whence it came.

* * *

Our visit to Hobart, the capital city of the island state of Tasmania, coincided with a day that Australians considered to be particularly important – April twenty-fifth, otherwise known as Anzac Day. Taylor's mother and sisters had chosen to remain in Melbourne for the week, and so Isaac, Mark, Taylor, Zac and I, along with the Sincerity girls and the road crew, had travelled to Hobart alone. We had arrived in Devonport from Melbourne on the morning of the twenty-second, crossing Bass Strait overnight on the *Spirit of Tasmania*, and had driven down to Hobart that same day. Once we had settled in for our stay in the city, we'd been kept busy – there had been an all-

ages concert at the Federation Concert Hall and Convention Centre the evening after our arrival, with the twenty-fourth of April taken up by interviews with *The Mercury* newspaper and radio station 100.9 SEA FM.

As for Taylor and I, when I wasn't rehearsing with Sincerity we had spent quite a bit of time exploring the city – there was a great deal of history to take in, Hobart being Australia's second-oldest state capital. Even Ratchet had had a bit of fun chasing pigeons in the Queens Domain during lunch on our second full day in the city. He was still a bit shaky after the scare he'd had in Melbourne, so we were doing our best to take it easy.

Bright and early on the twenty-fifth, before the first rays of sunlight had even peeked over the eastern horizon, the alarm on my cell phone went off. My eyes snapped open seconds before Maroon 5's Adam Levine had even belted out the first line of the chorus to *Harder To Breathe*, and I fought back a groan. Beside me Taylor was still very much asleep, my alarm not having the slightest effect on him. I prodded him in the ribs repeatedly until his eyes opened.

"Issie, the sun's not even up yet," he mumbled as he rubbed his eyes with the back of his right hand. "What gives?"

"It's April twenty-fifth, Tay," I reminded him as I worked to sit up. "Watch your eyes, I'm going to turn the light on." He quickly covered his eyes with his hand as I flicked the switch of the lamp on my nightstand and flooded the room with light. "I'll go and wake your brothers while you're getting dressed."

"I still can't believe they agreed to come," Taylor said as he sat up, a slight chuckle in his voice. "They're insane."

"When in Rome, do as the Romans do," I replied with a shrug. "In other words, if they're going to be in Australia on one of the most important days of the year, they may as well take part in something Australian."

I dressed quickly in my jeans, a long-sleeved shirt, socks and my hiking boots, deciding that grabbing my coat could wait until we were all ready to head out, and ventured out into the dimly-lit corridor. Isaac, Mark and Zac had taken up residence in a suite two floors up, so once I had stepped into an elevator I jabbed the button for the seventh floor. The doors slid closed quietly, and the elevator moved upward.

It didn't take me long to locate my brothers-in-law's suite once I had stepped out of the elevator, and I banged loudly on the door. "Room service!" I hollered through the paper-thin gap between the door and the jamb.

Moments later the door was wrenched open to reveal Zac standing in the doorway, still in his pyjamas and with a supremely pissed-off look on his face.

"Isobel, it's not even five-thirty in the morning," he informed me. "Unless someone's died or something like that, I don't want to know about it."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "I seem to recall a certain trio of brothers telling Taylor and I that they wanted to go to the Anzac Day dawn service while they were here," I reminded him.

The pissed-off look melted away in an instant. "Shit, we did too," he realised. "Sorry, Bel. C'mon in while I drag Tweedledee and Tweedledum out of bed."

"I thought that was what you and Ike called Tay and Mark," I said as I stepped into the darkened suite.

"How did you know about that?" Zac asked. He was closing the door as he spoke. As soon as the door was shut he flicked on a light.

I shrugged. "Overheard Jess talking about it at the wedding reception. How's she doing, anyway?"

"Stressed out like you would not *believe*. She's got her final solo performance coming up in two weeks."

"Is she still coming down for the Domain concert?" I asked. I'd sat down on the couch in the suite's main room, next to Mark's electric guitar.

"As far as I know, yeah." He raked his hair back off his face. "Anything I should tell them about this?"

"Yeah, make sure that they wear something warm. It's not exactly summer out there."

Zac snapped off a salute and headed through to the bedrooms, and I settled back into the couch's cushions to wait for the trio to make their grand entrance. A glance at my watch revealed the time to be five-fifteen in the morning. The dawn service, I knew from my reading of the newspaper the afternoon before, would begin at six o'clock on the button. Our hotel was a good twenty-minute walk from the Hobart Cenotaph, itself located within the Queens Domain, so we needed to leave soon if we wanted a good spot at the service.

The five of us left the hotel at five-thirty, heading north toward the Derwent River. It was still pitch black outside – the sun wasn't due to rise until just before five to seven. Not only this, but with Tasmania being the most southern state the early hour meant that it was pretty chilly outside. I had pulled my heavy leather coat, a birthday present from Taylor the previous year, on over my jeans and shirt, buttoning it up as far as it would go, and I was still cold. As we turned the corner into Macquarie Street, I realised I wasn't the only one who felt that way.

"Why is it so cold out here?" Mark mumbled through the scarf he had wound around his neck and the lower half of his face. The coat he wore looked even heavier than mine, and he'd jammed his hands in his pockets.

"Because the sun's not up yet, Einstein," Taylor reminded his twin. "See how dark the sky is? That's what we call *night-time*."

"Oh, shut *up* Taylor," Mark retorted. "It's way too early for your bullshit."

As we neared the halfway point of Carriage Drive, I could see a decent amount of people already gathered at the floodlit Cenotaph. The focal point of the Cenotaph, which took the shape of an

Egyptian obelisk much like Cleopatra's Needle, rose high above the Domain. From my vantage point I could see a large brightly-lit red cross near the top of the memorial. There was a tall flagpole either side of the Cenotaph, with an Australian flag at half mast upon each. It was almost ten to six by now, and close to the starting time for the dawn service.

"It's not very impressive," I could hear Mark saying quietly.

"It's not meant to be," Taylor informed his brother just as quietly. "Have some respect, will you?"

We managed to get within a couple of rows of the front of the crowd. I ended up right in front of Taylor, which suited me perfectly – he had draped his long arms over my shoulders, and his hands were clasped just above the top button of my coat. I covered his hands with my smaller pair and leaned back a little more, relishing in his warmth against my back. Now that I was close enough I could clearly see what was inscribed on the Cenotaph's north face, beneath a wreath of laurel worked from bronze.

THE

GREAT

WAR

1914-1919

1939-1945

LEST WE FORGET

THE KOREAN WAR

THE MALAYAN EMERGENCY

THE INDONESIAN CONFRONTATION

THE VIETNAM WAR

PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS

Just as the second hand on my watch swept past the twelve, marking six o'clock, the dawn service began.

"We are gathered here this morning to commemorate the ninety-fourth anniversary of the Gallipoli landings, and to honour the sacrifices made by Australian and New Zealand soldiers in not only World War One, but in all subsequent military engagements," the service officiant said to begin the proceedings. "On this day I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners and original inhabitants of the land upon which we are assembled, the Mouheneener people, and ask that their spirits look favourably upon this morning's memorial service.

"On this day, above all days, we remember those Australian men and women who died or suffered in the great tragedy of war. On the morning of April 25th 1915, Australian and New Zealand troops landed under fire at Gallipoli, and it was then and in the violent campaign which followed that the ANZAC tradition was forged. The elements of that tradition have inspired and offered an enduring example to later generations of Australians.

"Each year we pay homage not only to those original ANZACs, but to all who died or were disabled in their service to this country. They enrich our nation's history. Their hope was for the freedom of mankind and we remember with pride their courage, their compassion and their comradeship. They served on land, at sea and in the air, in many places throughout the world.

"Not only do we honour the memory of those Australians who have fallen in battle, but we share the sorrow of those who have mourned them and of all who have been the victims of armed conflict. On this day we remember with sympathy those Australians who have suffered as prisoners of war, and those who, because of war, have had their lives shortened or handicapped. We recall staunch friends and allies, and especially those of the first Anzac Day. May we and our successors prove worthy of their sacrifice."

Before that morning, the closest that I had gotten to attending an Anzac Day service was watching highlights on the evening news from those held around the country on Anzac Day the year before. It was during this year's dawn service, standing there with a couple thousand others, that I learned more about the ANZAC legend and the birth of the Australian spirit that I ever could

have from reading about it online or in books. For the first time since moving Down Under, I truly felt that I belonged in my adopted home.

After all of the wreaths had been laid at the base of the memorial, what I knew to be the *Ode of Remembrance* was recited.

"They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old," the officiant said. "Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them."

"We will remember them," the crowd echoed in response.

And with those four words, the Last Post was played by a lone bugler, who stood at a corner of the Cenotaph. As soon as the echoes of the final notes had died away into nothingness, there was a minute's silence that was broken only by early morning birdcalls in the trees dotting the Domain, and by distant traffic wending its way through the awakening city. I let my eyes drop closed and bowed my head a little as I reflected on the history of this day, and on all of the servicemen and servicewomen who had given their lives in defence of their home.

My silent reflection was broken by the sounding of the Rouse. I kept my eyes closed for a few moments more, opening them just in time to see the flags being raised to full mast. The service concluded after the national anthem.

"Well, there you have it," I heard Taylor saying from directly above my head. The autumn sun was now above the horizon, the blue sky above us stretching for miles and unbroken by clouds. Just from that, I knew it was going to be a beautiful day. I broke free from Taylor's embrace and unbuttoned my coat, leaving it to sit open over my shirt. All around us the crowd was dispersing, heading off in various directions.

"That wasn't as much of a waste of time as I thought it'd be," Mark said thoughtfully as we walked away from the Cenotaph, heading up through the Domain. "It'd probably mean a lot more if I'd always lived here though."

“Probably, yeah,” I agreed. I pushed the left sleeve of my coat up my arm and checked the time on my watch. “Well, I’m starving. Who wants breakfast?”

Chapter 9

I don't blame you for being you

Taylor

Our next stop on the tour after leaving Hobart was the city of Adelaide, South Australia. It was my second visit to The City of Churches, and I planned to just take it easy for the entirety of the four days we would be there. My brothers, Isobel and the other Sincerity girls would be busy with interviews, rehearsals and concerts during our stay, which would give me the opportunity to explore on my own.

At least, that was the plan – right up until the morning of the thirtieth of April.

I was still very much half-asleep when I heard Isobel's phone ring that morning. "Hello?" I heard her saying to answer it. "Mark, it's four-thirty in the morning, what gives?...oh for fuck's sake, hang on." She started poking me in the ribs. "Tay, wake up, Mark's on the phone and he wants to talk to you."

"G'way," I mumbled, trying to shift away from her poking. I finally managed to drag my eyes open a minute or so later. "For Christ's sake Issie, what is so important that Mark wants to talk to me about it this early?" I asked once I was awake enough to talk without running my words together. Her response was to hold her phone out to me. "Hello Mark," I said into it as soon as I had it in my hand.

"You know we've got that interview on Nova this morning, right?" he asked without any preamble whatsoever.

"What about it?"

"We want you to come with us."

That was all it took for me to wake up completely. “You have *got* to be kidding me,” I said. “Don’t you remember what happened to me the last time I did something you asked me to do? I ended up in hospital!”

“Only because it was your own stupid fault for eating sesame seeds,” Mark reminded me.

“I didn’t know I was allergic, did I? And anyway, that’s beside the point.” I rubbed my eyes a little.

“There is almost nothing in this world that could get me to come with you this morning. I want to sleep in for the first time since we left Wollongong, and I want to explore the city. Last time I was here I barely left the hotel because I was so exhausted.”

The moment I ended my mini-tirade, I knew that by saying ‘almost nothing’ I had given Mark an opening – something he evidently noted and took advantage of. “‘Almost nothing’?” he repeated.

“Shit,” I muttered, and Mark laughed.

“Look, tell you what – you come with us and bring your camera, and I’ll buy you coffee afterward,” he said. “And I swear I won’t drag you into it – our brothers and the DJs might have other ideas in mind, but I promise that I’ll do everything I can to stop it.”

“You’d better, because if you don’t I’m walking out right then and there,” I warned him. “What time do we have to be there?”

“The interview’s at seven-twenty, so I reckon ten past.”

“So I can sleep a couple more hours, then?”

Mark laughed again. “Yeah Tay, you can. I’ll see you when you surface.”

“Awesome,” I mumbled, already beginning to feel tired again. Isobel rescued her phone from me seconds before I fell asleep.

I was woken again at the much more civilised time of six-forty-five, not by Isobel’s phone this time but by what sounded like her hair dryer. I could feel Ratchet curled up against my back, and

I managed a very sleepy smile before shifting onto my right side and reaching down to give her a scratch behind the ears.

"Issie?" I called out as I kicked off my covers and got out of bed. The hair dryer shut off, and she stuck her head out of the bathroom door.

"Good morning sleepyhead," she said with a smile.

"I'm crazy for doing this, aren't I?" I asked as I hunted through my suitcase for something to wear.

"I could be sleeping in right now, and going out to explore the city with my camera later on, but instead I'm going to be sitting in on a radio interview. Only reason I'm even doing it is because Mark promised to buy me coffee."

Isobel laughed at this. "So that's how I should start bribing you to do things, then?"

I gave her a tired grin and kept poking through my suitcase. I finally dug up my favourite jeans, a dark green T-shirt and my summer-weight hoodie, figuring that it was too early in the year to switch to something a little heavier, and slipped into the bathroom past Isobel so that I could have a quick shower.

"I'll see you downstairs," Isobel called out to me. "I want to grab some breakfast before we head out for the interview." Without waiting for me to answer her, the bathroom door closed again, and I was left to take my shower.

Isobel and I met up with my brothers and the rest of Sincerity at the studios of Nova 91.9 just before seven-fifteen. Annie, my brothers' publicist, was talking to them as Isobel and I sneaked into the foyer through the glass doors.

"...interview is scheduled to go for about fifteen minutes, including your two performances," Annie said without looking up from her clipboard. "We have Sincerity performing *All We Can Do*, correct?"

"That's right," Pania replied, evidently having taken on the spokesperson role in Isobel's absence.

"And you three," Annie continued, in reference to my brothers, "are set to perform *Run*. Would I be right?"

"That's what we decided, yeah," Zac replied.

"Good, good." I saw Annie check her watch. "Well, it's seven-fifteen, so you all should head in there now. Just keep in mind that your mother and sisters will more than likely be listening."

"So watch the language, right," Mark said with a nod, before catching sight of Isobel and I. "And would you look what the cat dragged in?"

"At least we're here," I said as the nine of us headed through to reception.

It wasn't long before we were being led through to the broadcast studio. The corridor outside had a window set into it, through which we could see the three DJs at work – according to Nova 91.9's Wikipedia article, their names were Ryan Fitzgerald, Claire Murphy and Julian Schiller, otherwise known as Fitzy, Claire and Jules. Beside the studio door was a lit-up sign alerting us that the DJs were on the air.

"They'll go to a song in a minute or so, so you'll be able to go in and set yourselves up soon," the DJs' assistant said while we all waited. "Anything I can get you all?"

"Some coffee would be fantastic," Mark said. "Though could you wait until we're done? At least one of us gets somewhat hyper if we get caffeine into us too early."

"I can do that, definitely." The light switched off, and the assistant opened the door. "I'll be in reception with your coffees when you're finished."

The door closed behind us as we were all ushered into the studio, and we started setting ourselves up with our respective bits of equipment. I had Avery's camcorder set up on the tripod she had borrowed from Dad, with my DSLR hanging from its strap around my neck. Isaac and Mark had their guitars, and Zac had his djembe. Isobel and the girls had opted to perform completely *a capella*, but had the option of Mark accompanying them if they decided it was needed.

"Thanks for coming in today," Claire said as pairs of headphones were handed around. "We'll be back on the air in around two minutes, so grab a mic and make yourselves comfortable." She gave us all a wide smile. "We've been looking forward to having you on the show since you announced the tour, if you want the truth."

At seven-twenty exactly, the fun began.

"You're here with Fitzy, Claire and Jules on Nova nine-one-nine on this sunny April morning," Julian said into his microphone. "It's twenty minutes past seven in the AM, and if you've just tuned in that was Rob Thomas' brand new single *Her Diamonds*, from his forthcoming album *Cradlesong*."

"And here in the Nova studio this morning we have some very special guests," Claire said, taking up the thread. "They'll be performing at the Thebarton Theatre tonight and on Saturday night – tickets are still available from Ticketek for Saturday's 18-plus show, but they're selling fast. Five of them are a very talented all-girl indie band from the Illawarra region of New South Wales, and three are twelve-year veterans of the music industry who are Down Under for their third Australian tour, and who have recently released their fifth studio album. Sincerity and Hanson, welcome to Nova – it's great to have you in the studio."

"It's great to be here," Mark said.

"Now, as we understand it you picked Sincerity just on the basis of the music on their MySpace page?" Ryan said to kick off the interview.

"We did, yeah," Zac replied. "Sincerity have the kind of sound we like, and we figured that by having them open for us, it would give them an incredible amount of exposure. We've played ten shows so far this tour, and just from those ten shows they've not only had our fans buying their EP, but they've got a little bit of radio airplay as well."

"Not only that, but we're getting to see the country in a way none of us thought could be possible," Ayesha said. "It's been an absolutely amazing experience, and the tour isn't even half

done yet. We still have another fifteen shows to go, in Perth, Darwin, Alice Springs, Brisbane, the Gold Coast, Newcastle and Sydney, and that means even more exposure for us and for our music.”

“And according to your website, Hanson.net, you’re touring for a good cause,” Julian said. “The Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria, right?”

“That’s right,” Isaac replied. “When we heard about the fires and how much devastation they caused just in that first weekend alone, we knew we had to help in some way. One of our brothers and his wife live here in Australia, so that really brought it home for us.”

“So rather than following our usual pattern of releasing at home first,” Mark continued, “we scrapped our intended release schedule and chose Australia as the first country to get the album. It was released on March sixteenth, and we’ve chosen to donate a portion of the proceeds from album sales to the Australian Red Cross. We’re also donating \$25 from the sale of each ticket for the tour to the Victorian Bushfire Appeal.”

“And on the suggestion of one of Sincerity’s members, we’ve asked our audiences to wear something yellow to each show,” Zac added.

“On the subject of Sincerity, we understand that there’s actually a family connection at work here,” Claire said, changing the subject just slightly.

“My twin brother is married to Sincerity’s lead singer,” Mark replied.

“Which would be me,” Isobel said, speaking for the first time. “We met in New York City nearly two-and-a-half years ago, and we’ve been inseparable ever since.” Her left hand found my right as she spoke, and she leaned a little closer to me.

“What about you three?” Claire asked my brothers, taking the spotlight off of me. “Are there wedding bells on the horizon any time soon?”

“Not just yet,” Zac replied. “We are all engaged, but there’s no talk yet of tying the knot from any of us.”

"And thousands of women just had their hearts broken," Ryan joked. "Leaving the relationships topic aside now, you have a new single coming out in early June?"

"That's the plan, yeah," Mark replied. "We'll be filming a live video at the show tonight, and will be making the proper video after our return to the States in July. It's called *Run*."

"You have your instruments here, so I think we can safely assume that you're going to give Adelaide a special sneak preview," Julian said. "Take it away, guys."

And with that, Isaac and Mark took up their guitars. Mark had the lead on this song, though all three of them sang in the choruses. It was easily one of my favourite songs from *Through The Crossroads*, and a perfect choice for the album's second single.

"Sometimes you gotta run into the arms of danger...sometimes you gotta be the sacrifice...sometimes you gotta say things that don't come easy...they say just follow your heart...yeah but what if it lies...well God only knows...how to play this game called life and living...

"So hold me...light a candle in the window pane tonight...stop me, yeah...running from the things that could save my life...

"Well you know I tried...I tried to make you love me...and I really should have known it'd make you run...some people always want just a little more than they're given...but when it's finally caught, well it loses its life...well God only knows...how to play this game called life and living...

"So hold me, yeah...light a candle in the window pane tonight...stop me, yeah...running from the things that could save my life...

"Well God only knows...God only knows...well God only knows...God only knows...well God only knows...how to play this game called life and living...

"So hold me, yeah...light a candle in the window pane tonight...stop me, yeah...running from the things that could save my life...you gotta hold me, yeah...light a candle in the window pane tonight...stop me, yeah...running from the things that could save my life...

"You better run, run, run...you better run...you better run, run, run...you better run...run, run, run...stop me, stop me...stop me running from the things that could save my life...stop me, stop me...running from the things that could save my life..."

Applause rang throughout the studio at the conclusion of my brothers' performance, and Mark even sketched a little bow as he resumed his seat.

"You've been doing something unusual over the last couple of tours, we've heard," Claire said as the interview resumed. "At your New York City concert that kicked off the 2009 tour, and also during the first Melbourne show of this tour, you've had an extra member joining you onstage."

"Oh dear God, here we go," I mumbled. Isobel gave my hand a quick squeeze of reassurance.

"We have, but that's sort of a private matter," Mark said, before he was interrupted.

"Well, it's kind of pointless to keep it private, everyone knows who he is anyway," Zac interjected, and Mark shot me a very apologetic look. "Mark's twin has joined us onstage a couple of times during each tour." As Zac finished speaking I fixed him with a glare, and he covered his microphone with his hand. "What?" he asked in an undertone.

"Keep me the fuck out of it," I snapped in a whisper.

"I'm getting the impression that this is something of a touchy subject, so we'll leave it there," Julian said. "Isobel, how long have Sincerity been performing together?"

"In this current incarnation, about a year now," Isobel replied. "I joined six weeks after I moved to the Illawarra from New York City."

"Before that, though, we'd been a band since about 2006," Pania said. "Unfortunately we haven't had the best luck when it comes to lead vocalists, but we're hoping Isobel remains with us for a good while. We all click really well, which I hope is a good sign."

"And we've been told that you have a song to play for us this morning," Ryan said.

"We do, yep," Melayna answered. "It's called *All We Can Do*, and it's a cover of the song by The Mercy Bell." She counted in, and Isobel began singing. Just like with my brothers' performance of *Run*, the other Sincerity girls would join in on the choruses.

"We've been through all this before...only dwelling on the facts...pocketfuls of words clearing out the mind...whispers of fear tangled up inside...we've tried...we've tried and now...all we can do is wait and see...all we can do now is see..."

"Who are we to think we can work this craziness out...all on our own...we need to give it all away, take away the pain...hear our cries...`cause we've tried...we've tried and now...all we can do is wait and see...all we can do now is see..."

"Look at us...just look at us...look at us...just look at us..."

"Over and over it'll never end...it's going to happen all over again...fill us up with wisdom for our ways...fill us with strong and faithful hearts...`cause we've tried...we've tried and now...all we can do is wait and see...all we can do now is see...all we can do now is see...all we can do now is see..."

There was more applause as the girls resumed their seats. "I think that's all the time we have for now," Claire said. "Hanson and Sincerity, thanks so much for joining us this morning. Just to remind everyone, Hanson and Sincerity will be playing the Thebarton Theatre tonight, April thirtieth, and again on May second – the May second concert is an adults-only gig, so have your ID handy if you're hitting up that show. To take us out to the break, here's the first single from *Through The Crossroads*, Hanson's fifth and most-recently released studio album – this is *Follow Your Lead*."

I was seething the whole way back to the hotel after the interview. It had been a rule from the very beginning that unless our parents gave permission, neither Jessica, Avery, Mackenzie, Zoë nor I were to be mentioned in interviews or anything that could be made public. In the last few years, as Jessica, Avery and I had each turned eighteen, that rule had been relaxed somewhat, but I still preferred to have my name kept private as much as possible. And unlike my sisters, I

hated the circus that followed my brothers around. Mark had always been respectful of my wishes as far as possible, but not so much Isaac or Zac – and I was finally fed up with it.

"I tried, Tay," Mark said to me when Isobel and I arrived back at the hotel. He was sitting on one of the couches in the hotel lobby, playing with the zipper of his hoodie. "I've been telling them all along that you don't like any of the attention they've been getting for the last thirteen years, and that you hate being dragged into things. They just don't listen to me."

"I'm not pissed at you, Mark," I reassured him. "They're the ones I'm pissed off at. And it's not just because of this whole making me go onstage thing the last couple of years, either. Remember the '05 tour?"

"Unfortunately," Mark replied, distaste in his tone. "That wasn't any fun for you, I know, and it wasn't my idea. Trust me on that."

"I know it wasn't. I know." I sat down next to my brother and dropped my head into my hands. "This is a nightmare," I mumbled as Isobel sat down on my other side. She slipped an arm around my shoulders and started tracing circles on my shoulder with her thumb.

"So what are you going to do now?" Mark asked.

I shrugged and let my eyes drop closed. "To be completely honest, I really have no idea. Right now what I need most is a bit of time to myself. And if that means I have to make my own way to Perth, then so be it. I just..." I dug at my closed eyes with the heels of my hands. "I'm so *tired*," I whispered.

"Whatever you decide to do, I'm behind you one hundred percent," Mark assured me. I opened my eyes again and looked over at him. "I'd come with you if we weren't here for work."

"I know you would," I told him quietly.

Isobel eased me up onto my feet, steadying me as I nearly overbalanced. "Come on, let's get you back to bed," she said.

Back upstairs in our hotel room, I changed out of my jeans and into my cargo pants, and got straight back into bed. Ratchet curled herself up in my lap, and I absentmindedly rubbed her ears while I waited for Isobel to finish making a phone call.

"Your mum said she'll be right up," Isobel told me once she was off the phone. "Do you know what you're going to do yet?"

"Not yet," I admitted.

"Well, let's look at your options." Isobel climbed up on the bed and settled herself next to me, and started counting off on her fingers. "You can stay here, but that means you run the risk of being dragged into another interview by that lot. You can drive yourself to Perth, but that'd take you a couple of days and I'd have to hitch a ride with the girls. And I don't know exactly how much extra room Pania has in her van, what with all our instruments and their suitcases." I felt her fingers start combing my hair. "Or you can spend a couple hundred dollars on a plane ticket, and fly to Perth by yourself. You'll get there much sooner than the rest of us will, and you'll be able to get a few days of rest before the circus starts agin."

"You'd be okay driving to Perth on your own?" I asked.

"Well, I wouldn't drive there by myself," she said. "I'd ask Mark to come with me."

"That makes me feel a bit better."

"I thought it might." She gave me a smile, one I tried to return. "It's entirely up to you, but I think you should book a flight tonight for either tomorrow afternoon or the morning after."

I was just about to speak when a knock sounded at the door of the room. Isobel got back off the bed and went to the door, opening it after she had squinted through the peephole. In walked my mother, much to my relief – I wasn't exactly in the mood to deal with either Isaac or Zac.

"I'm going to head off to rehearsal," Isobel told me as she gathered up a few bits and pieces and stowed them in her backpack. "I have my phone with me, so if you need me send me a text. I'll get the first taxi back here."

"I'll be okay, Issie," I reassured her. "I'll have a nap for a few hours – I should be good for the rest of the day after that." Isobel sat down on the bed next to me, and gave me a tight hug. "Good luck with rehearsal."

Mom took Isobel's place on the bed almost as soon as the hotel room door had closed. "I'm going to have a long-overdue talk with those brothers of yours in the morning," she said as she smoothed my hair down over my head. "They should know better by now."

"Mark tried to stop them," I said. "But you know what those two are like when they make their minds up about something."

"I do, yes." She carefully tucked my hair behind my ears. "Why don't you take that nap now? I'll wake you up in time for lunch. Just make sure you have your phone where you can hear it."

Before I settled down for my nap, I asked my mother about something that had been on my mind for some time.

"Do you wish I was more like Mark?"

She raised an eyebrow at me. "And why would I wish for something like that?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I just...we're so different. Sometimes it feels like we're not even twins."

"Well, this is the way I see it." She sat back down next to me. "You are who you are. You should never wish you were someone else – you're the person you are for a reason." She gave me a somewhat wicked smirk. "Do you really think the world could handle two Mark Hansons, or even two Taylor Hansons? It's a good thing that you're not entirely identical. And it doesn't mean I love you each any less than the other. You're both my sons, and I'm very proud of you both."

"Even though I'm your favourite," I said with an equally-wicked grin.

"Oh, be quiet and go to sleep."

"Yes'm," I replied, snapping off a salute before doing as I was told.

Chapter 10

...this whole world gets too much for me

Isobel

Taylor left for Perth early the next afternoon with Ratchet and all of his gear in tow, on Virgin Blue's one-thirty flight. During the drive from our hotel to Adelaide Airport I had briefly considered taking a leaf out of his book and flying to Perth myself. The only issue would have been finding someone else to drive Taylor's car across the Nullarbor to Perth – and that was something I was fairly certain would have landed me squarely on Taylor's bad side.

When I arrived back at the hotel, I went straight up to the suite that was the temporary home of Isaac, Mark and Zac. A series of sharp, quick knocks had Mark answering the door, much to my relief.

"Taylor get on his flight okay?" Mark asked as he let me in.

"Yeah," I replied, stepping away from the doorway so that Mark could close the door behind me.

"I couldn't go past the gate with him, though." I picked at the hem of my T-shirt. "I miss him like crazy already."

Mark gave me a sympathetic smile. "Sounds a bit like me and Sky. Only I think you two are a lot closer than Sky and I are."

I gave Mark a smile of my own. "Could you drive to Perth with me?" I asked him. "It's a long drive and I think I could use the company."

"Yeah, of course I can. I need to get away from those idiots, anyway."

"Your mum's going to give them the talk later on, isn't she?"

Mark nodded. "If she hasn't already. They were off doing interviews this morning. I don't deal well with fuckwits so I stayed here."

"That's lovely, Mark," I said, receiving a grin in return.

At two o'clock on the dot, Isaac and Zac returned from wherever it was they had been that morning. Their mother was very close behind them. Just from that, I knew that they were about to be lectured.

"Go see if you can find some popcorn," I said to Mark as his brothers settled themselves on the couch. "I think I'm going to enjoy this immensely."

No sooner had the door closed that the lecture began.

"I am very disappointed in the two of you," were the first words that Diana spoke. "Your brother is on a plane to Perth as of half an hour ago. Everything you have subjected him to during the last four years has pushed him to the point that he felt leaving early for Perth was his only option."

"We didn't *make* him do all of that," Zac protested. "We asked, but we didn't tell him he *had* to do it."

"You know what he's like, though," Mark interjected. "He hates saying no – so do I, for that matter, but I can at least say it and not feel guilty."

"And do you know what he called it after you asked the two of us to open during the last US tour?" I asked, deciding that as Taylor's wife I had every right to put in my two cents' worth, and they shook their heads. "He called it hell on earth. And that was *before* we set foot on stage. He *hates* performing. I know he would be in the band if he loved it as much as the three of you do, but he doesn't. I know that for him, it's almost as bad as having teeth pulled. And yet you keep asking him to do it anyway. You're his *brothers* – you should be respecting that he doesn't want any part of this." I pushed my hair back off my face. "And before you say anything, the one and only reason he's performed at any time during this tour is for me. It's the only reason Pania managed to talk him onstage for that one song in Canberra, and it was why he performed on my birthday. He'd do anything for me – that's just how he is. I like hearing him sing, and he knows that. He's known it since we started dating and I found out he *could*."

"The two of you also seem to keep forgetting that your brother is sick," Diana added. "He has spent the last nine-and-a-half years fighting against a chronic illness that there is no cure for, and that he will likely never recover completely from."

"We know that, Mom," Isaac said. "We haven't forgotten."

"It doesn't seem that way sometimes. Do I need to remind you of what happened in 2005?" Here Isaac and Zac both shook their heads. "I'm not saying that you shouldn't include him in anything you're doing. But you need to let *him* decide what he wants to do, not the other way around. If he wants to perform with you at any time in the future, he'll let you know."

"He won't want to," Mark said. "I can tell you that right now."

"Certainly not if you try pressuring him into it. I think Isobel will get very upset with you if you try doing that, anyway."

"I think that's an understatement," I said.

Diana gave me a smile before continuing. "He is well aware of his limitations and the restrictions that his illness has placed on him. Let him work within those as much as possible, don't push him to do anything that he doesn't feel up to or comfortable doing, and you'll probably get along better than you have in years."

"Okay, okay, we'll leave him be," Isaac said, though I suspected it was just to get his mother off his back.

"Your father and I are going to hold you both to that. The *second* we hear anything about something like the first show on the last US tour happening again, the two of you will be in deep trouble."

"What about Mark?" Zac asked, sounding very indignant. "He's in this band too!"

"Mark at least has enough sense to know when to let his brother be. Neither of you seem to know when to do the same."

It was almost three hours later that my phone rang, for the first time all day. Its speaker blasted Sublime's *Santeria*, one of Taylor's favourite songs – and just by that, I knew exactly who was calling. I had just returned from an afternoon of shopping with Avery, and was taking a few minutes to pack my purchases away in my suitcase before heading back downstairs for dinner in the hotel restaurant.

"Hey gorgeous," I said once I had answered.

"Hey Issie," he said quietly.

"Did you get to Perth okay?"

"Yeah. Flight landed about fifteen minutes ago."

In my mind's eye I could see him quite clearly – he was sitting on a seat in some nameless airport terminal with all his gear and Ratchet at his feet, eyes downcast and hair falling over his face like a curtain, with his right elbow (as that was the hand he always held his phone with) braced against his right knee. I knew he had to be so tired.

"You sound absolutely exhausted," I said sympathetically. "Are you heading to the hotel now?"

"That's the plan, yeah. It's the same hotel that I booked for everyone before the tour, so when you all get here let them know you're with me."

"I will." I sat down on the bed and traced the bedspread's pattern with the index finger of my free hand. "I miss you so much already. I don't know how I'm going to sleep tonight without you here."

"I miss you too, Issie. It's weird being here by myself. I'm so used to having people with me."

"It'll only be for a few days," I reminded him gently. "I'll be there sometime on the fifth." I got up from the bed and crossed the room to where I had stowed my backpack, and took out a pen and my tour notebook. On the first few pages I had written out the tour itinerary, both as a reminder and as a record of my first trip around Australia. I found the entry for Adelaide and traced down the ruled columns with the point of my pen. "After we leave Adelaide we're going to Port Augusta

and Ceduna, then on the fourth we're heading across the Nullarbor to Norseman and Kalgoorlie. We'll probably be in Perth sometime in the afternoon on the fifth if we manage to leave Kalgoorlie early enough that morning." I closed my notebook and put it back in my bag. "I'll let you head out now. Text me when you get to the hotel, okay?"

"I will." He was quiet for a little while, and through the speaker of my cell I could very faintly hear the hum and din of activity that filled what I figured was Arrivals at Perth Airport. "I love you, Issie."

"I love you too, Tay."

We both hung up at the same time. I slipped my phone into my pocket before grabbing my room key from my night table and heading out into the corridor.

I was the last of the tour group to make it to dinner that evening. A place had been left at the table that my bandmates sat at, between Pania and Melayna.

"You took your time," Pania said as I took my seat. I reached for the jug of ice water that sat in the middle of the table and poured myself a glass.

"I was on the phone with my husband," I said as I replaced the jug back in its spot.

"Did he get to Perth all right?" Emmanuelle asked.

"Yeah. He's exhausted though – not that I'm surprised, he hates flying. It tires him out badly."

"I've been wondering about that, actually," Ayesha said. "He's got a chronic illness, right?"

"Yeah," I replied. "He has chronic fatigue syndrome, among other things. And you know, he actually doesn't mind people asking him, so long as he's had a bit of time to get to know them."

"I did try to ask him once, not long after you joined the band. He nearly bit my head off."

"He barely knew you back then so I'm not really surprised." I shrugged and got out of my seat. "It took him two weeks to tell me why he was sick, but with most people he waits at least six months. He doesn't trust people easily."

"And he trusted you that early?" Ayesha asked from behind me.

"Yep. He trusted me with a lot of things early on. I've never betrayed that trust, and I don't intend to."

"You really do love him, don't you?"

I paused in filling my plate from the restaurant buffet and looked back over my shoulder at Ayesha. "Of course I love him. I would never have married him if I didn't, Esh."

"True," Ayesha conceded. "How long were you engaged for before you got married?"

"Nearly a year. He asked me to marry him on Christmas Day in 2007. We'd only known each other for less than a year at that point." I tucked my hair behind my left ear. "The day I met him, I felt an immediate connection with him. I looked into his eyes for just a moment and wanted to stay there forever."

"That is incredible. It's like the two of you were just..." She trailed off, as if she was thinking.

"What?"

Ayesha grabbed a dinner roll out of the cane basket that sat on the end of the buffet table. "It's almost like you were both born to be together. Like it was predestined, if you believe in that sort of thing."

You have no idea how right you are, Esh, I thought as we headed back to our table. *You really have no idea.*

* * *

The morning after the second Adelaide show, during which both Sincerity and Hanson had played to a packed-to-capacity Thebarton Theatre, we left the city for Perth. It was to be a long journey to the next stop on the tour, one that spanned almost two thousand miles, and would by necessity be broken up by two overnight stops. The longest part of the trip would take us almost thirteen-

and-a-half hours to complete – the crossing of the Nullarbor Plain, during which we would cross the border between South Australia and Western Australia.

“We’re just leaving Adelaide now,” I said into my phone as Mark drove toward Victoria Square. We had agreed that he would drive for the first two hours, after which I would take over the wheel. “We’re stopping in Port Augusta for lunch and a bit of sightseeing, then heading to Ceduna after that.” I looked down at the map and directions I had printed out from Google Maps, so that I could play navigator. “Mark’s driving for the first couple of hours. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course I don’t mind,” was Taylor’s response in my ear. Two days by himself in Perth had done him a world of good – I knew he had to have gotten a good night’s sleep, for he sounded much more awake and alert, not to mention somewhat happier. “Unlike *some* people in my family, he knows how to look after my car.”

I let out a quiet chuckle. “That’s lovely, Taylor.”

“It’s true! I let Jess take her driving lessons in my car when she got her permit. She backed it into a telegraph pole her first time behind the wheel.”

This time I laughed properly, causing Mark to give me a sidelong glance with one eyebrow raised.

“So is that why you don’t like her driving your car?”

“Pretty much, yeah. She’s a much better driver now, but first impressions always last the longest.”

“What was your first impression of me?” I asked, now that the topic had raised itself. “I mean, beyond the journalist façade.”

“Well...” He was quiet for a little while, and I swore I could hear little gears and wheels turning in his head as he thought it over. “I thought you were beautiful, and that you were incredibly smart. I’ve been proved right on both counts, as it turns out.”

“Oh, you’re such a charmer.”

We spoke for a little while longer, hanging up after I had promised to call when Mark and I arrived in Port Augusta, and I folded my phone closed before bending down to my handbag. "So he's okay, then?" Mark asked as he flicked on the right blinker, ready to turn onto King William Street.

"Yeah, he's okay," I replied as I put my phone away. "Sounds like he's had a good night's sleep."

"Good." Mark turned the corner and drove down the street. "I'm always worrying about him, almost as much as our parents do. It isn't easy having a sick brother."

"My parents know all about that," I said. "When he was little, my brother Jack always seemed to be sick. He'd catch one cold after another. It drove my mother crazy." I did feel somewhat guilty in substituting my brother's name for my own, being as it had been me who was unwell as a child, but I wasn't ready for anyone outside of Taylor and I nor my immediate family to know what had happened to me so many years ago. I knew it would likely come up eventually, as much as I didn't want it to, but I planned to keep it a secret for as long as I possibly could.

"Story of my life," Mark said, laughter in his voice. "It's a pain in the neck being part of a big family. There's always viruses and various illnesses being passed around between us. It never stops, and it's nearly sent Mom round the twist a few times." I cracked a tiny smile at Mark's use of the British and Australian colloquialism. "Though for some reason, Taylor always managed to escape the worst of it all. At least, he did until he went off to college."

"He told me about that just after the tour started."

"Not the whole story, I'm betting." Another sidelong glance. "He nearly died, Bel. The flu he caught, it hit him so hard that he ended up in hospital for a week. Part of that week was spent in ICU after he ended up with pneumonia."

"Bloody hell," I whispered. "He never told me that."

"He probably didn't want to scare you."

"Probably, yeah."

Neither of us said much until Mark's BlackBerry rang, just as we reached the point where Main North Road became Port Wakefield Road. He swore quietly and pulled off the road alongside the kerb. "Hello?" he said once he had his phone out of his pocket. "Oh, hey Zac...what, *now*?" Mark's eyes dropped closed for the briefest of moments. "Can't this wait until we get to Port Augusta? I can't get at my guitar right now...look, just give me a couple minutes, okay? I'll call you back." He hung up and unbuckled his seatbelt. "Can you drive?" he asked. "At least until we hit Port Wakefield? Zac and Isaac just got bitten by the songwriting bug again."

"Oh, I *suppose*," I agreed, doing my best to sound completely put-upon. "But you owe me – you're taking over from there until Snowtown."

"Deal," Mark agreed.

We swapped seats quickly, Mark digging his notebook and a pen from his backpack before taking up residence in the front passenger seat. He dialled what I had to assume was Zac's number as I turned the key in the ignition and eased the car back out into the street.

For the next fifty-four-and-a-bit miles, the soundtrack to my driving was my brothers-in-law working up the beginnings of a brand-new song. Mark had put his BlackBerry on speaker at some point, and so instead of hearing just one side of the songwriting process I heard the whole thing. The song was very much only a skeleton at this point, little more than guitar chords and a handful of lyrics, but what I could hear I liked a lot.

As promised, as soon as we arrived in Port Wakefield I pulled the car off to the side of Catherine Street and cut the engine, and the two of us swapped seats again. Even though it had only just ticked over to ten o'clock I was beginning to feel tired, and I fetched my hoodie out of the backseat before resuming my place in the front passenger seat.

"You feeling okay?" Mark asked as I folded my hoodie up into a makeshift pillow and cranked the seat back.

"Yeah, I just need a bit of a nap," I replied. I buckled my seatbelt and put my head back onto my pillow. "Wake me when we get to Snowtown?"

Whether or not Mark woke me when I asked him to, I never found out. Instead, I didn't end up waking until we arrived in Port Augusta for lunch.

"I thought I asked you to wake me up when we hit Snowtown," I mumbled as I drifted into consciousness, the lack of movement being what had woken me. As I opened my eyes I could see that Mark had stopped the car in the car park of the local McDonald's.

"I tried," Mark said with a shrug. "But you were so completely dead to the world that I thought it'd be better to let you sleep."

I can't have been that tired, I thought, the barest hint of worry creeping into my mental tone. *I didn't even get up that early this morning.*

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Avery remarked as I joined my family and bandmates inside for lunch. When I raised an eyebrow at her, she bent down to her handbag and unzipped it, taking out a small mirror. "Here, see for yourself."

What I saw in the mirror shocked me a little. I had always been somewhat pale, a concession to my English and Irish heritage, but now I looked completely washed out. Even my eyes looked duller than usual, and had dark smudges beneath them. I looked as if I hadn't slept in a week.

"Issie?" Zoë asked as Mark went off to the sales counter with my request for lunch.

"Yeah Zo?"

"Are you okay?"

I had dropped my head into my hands by this point, and I looked at my youngest sister-in-law through the gaps between my fingers. "I think I just need a good night's sleep," I said. "I..."

"You miss Taylor," Zoë said decisively, taking the words I wanted to say right out of my mouth.

I nodded, not even remotely surprised at her perceptiveness. Zoë and Taylor were very close – I knew they had been since Zoë was born. And because of that closeness Zoë had the tendency to pick up on things about her brother, and even my relationship with him, that the rest of her family might not have. “Yeah, I do. I miss him a lot.”

Mark returned with lunch before anyone else could say a word – a Big Mac, fries and coffee for himself, and for me my usual order of a chicken and bacon burger, fries and a strawberry shake – and I busied myself with eating. It wasn’t long after I started eating that my phone’s message tone went off. It was very muffled, my phone being in my pocket, but I recognised it instantly – during the crossing of Bass Strait from Launceston back to Melbourne, as what I had suspected to be a joke, it had been set as the bridge from the *Middle Of Nowhere* album version of *MMMBop*. I put my burger down in its cardboard box and worked my phone from my pocket, flipping it open to read the message.

Just finished wandering around PICA, the message read. This place = amazing. You’d love it. Love/miss you, can’t wait to see you xo

I smiled when I realised it was from Taylor, and started to key in a return message.

Miss you too. Am in Pt. Augusta right now – having lunch @ McD’s before we head to Ceduna. Listened to I/M/Z writing new song over phone on way here – it sounds incredible. I love you – see you in 2 days xo

Before I could send the message, my phone rang. I got up from the table and quickly walked over to the automatic doors, stepping outside to take the call.

“Hey Tay,” I said quietly, knowing who was more than likely calling me.

“Hey Issie,” Taylor said, and I smiled again.

“I was just about to text you,” I told him as I hunted for somewhere to sit down.

“Oh really?”

"Yeah. I'm really glad you called though – I needed to hear your voice."

Something in my voice must have betrayed the feelings I was trying so hard to hide – and Taylor picked up on it instantly. "Isobel, are you okay?" he asked, using my full first name rather than his nickname for me. Just by that, I knew he meant business.

"I don't know," I admitted, not wanting to lie to him. "I just...I had a two-hour nap this morning, after your brothers finished off a songwriting session over the phone. I wasn't even tired until then. And then when we got to Port Augusta about twenty minutes ago, Ave told me I looked like I'd seen a ghost. She was right – I honestly look like death warmed over, Tay." I rubbed my free hand over my face. "I don't like this – what if it's come back?"

"Issie, shh," Taylor said, his tone soothing. "It just sounds like you're stressed out. How much sleep did you get last night?"

"You sound like my mother," I grumbled.

"Someone has to," he replied. "Are you worried enough to want to see a doctor about it?"

"Not really," I replied. "I feel pretty awful, yeah, but I don't think it's that bad just yet."

"Can you do something for me tonight, then?" he asked. When I didn't reply, he continued, "Get some sleep, okay? That's probably all you need right now."

"Okay," I agreed.

"Thank you. You said that my brothers have been writing a new song?"

"Yeah. It sounds amazing so far – it's only chords and a couple of lyrics, but I think it has the potential to be something incredible."

We talked for another few minutes, during which time everyone else started to wander outside to join me. Mark set my lunch down on the bench next to me, and I gave him a smile. "I'm not surprised that you're all stressed out," Taylor said as our conversation wound down. "It's your first

tour as a performer, and performing is seriously hard work. My brothers felt the same during *their* first tour back in '98, so you aren't alone by any means."

"I just feel like it's too much sometimes," I said. "I wish I was home right now."

"I do too. But we'll be home in six weeks, Issie."

"That's six weeks too fucking long," I mumbled, and Taylor let out a quiet laugh.

"Yeah, I know. I know that all too well."

I scuffed the toe of my right sneaker along the ground. "I should go, I think. We're going to head off soon."

"Okay. I'll see you in a couple days, yeah?"

"Yeah." I was quiet for a moment. "I love you, Tay."

I could hear the smile in Taylor's voice when next he spoke. "I love you too, Issie."

Chapter 11

...always knew that it'd work out right

Taylor

Isobel's voice on the other end of the line sounding so uncertain and scared had me worried enough to decide calling her parents was warranted, but I held back. I knew that it was very late at night there, and I didn't want to annoy my in-laws. It was something that I knew could wait until the evening at the very least. Instead I started heading back to where I'd parked the car I was renting until I got my own car back, fishing the keys out of my pocket as I walked.

It didn't take me long after leaving the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts to get back to the hotel, and I was soon letting myself into my hotel room. The DVDs that had been one of my birthday presents were calling my name – Avery had been quite the *Firefly* fan since she had discovered a fanmade video on YouTube a couple of years ago, one that used *Chasing Cars* by Snow Patrol as its soundtrack, and had evidently decided it was time to bring me into the fandom. An afternoon with my laptop and Avery's favourite TV show sounded like the perfect way to spend my time.

I was completely immersed in watching the pilot episode, 'Serenity', when my phone rang. "Damn it," I grumbled, and hit pause right as the hatch of the derelict that Mal Reynolds' crew was attempting to salvage popped open. I picked up my phone, flipped it open and answered it. "Hello?"

"Is this Taylor Hanson?"

"Speaking," I confirmed, all the while trying to place the voice I was hearing. At the same time I was wondering why someone whose voice I didn't recognise was calling me on this number. I had two phones nowadays – my personal phone, which I'd brought on tour with me, and a secondary phone that I used for my freelancing business that was currently switched off and stashed in my desk drawer at home. Only my family, my friends, the studio, Isobel, and Isobel's family had my

personal number, so I was very wary of getting calls on my personal phone from numbers I didn't recognise.

"It's Isobel's brother, Jack."

I instantly relaxed, finally able to identify the voice. "Hey Jack," I said. "What's up?"

"Is Isobel around?"

"Not at the moment, no. She's in Port Augusta at the moment. I decided to come to Perth early."

"So you two *aren't* joined at the hip then?" Jack asked, and I laughed. "She'll be there soon, though?"

"On the fifth, if nothing holds them up. You planning on coming down or something?"

"Well, don't tell her this, but yeah. I want it to be a surprise. When does the tour end?"

I frowned as I tried to remember the date of the second all-ages show in Sydney. "Last show's on the sixteenth of June, if I remember right."

"I'll probably try and make it there for the fourteenth, then. Give myself a bit of time to get over the jet lag."

"Sounds like a plan to me." I swept my right index finger over my laptop's trackpad, moving the cursor down to the bottom of the screen so that the taskbar popped up. The time according to my laptop was 10:48 – ten to eleven in the morning. "Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Issie told me what happened to her when she was a kid. D'you remember anything about that?"

"Not much more than what Mum and Dad told me when I was old enough to understand. I was born when Bel was something like halfway through her chemo and radiotherapy. Mum and Dad told me everything when I was about five or six, not long after she was done with it. I've never

asked her about it, to be honest – I always got the impression that she didn't like talking about it much."

"Oh, okay. It's just..." I picked at the stitching on one of the pockets of my jeans. "I called her about half an hour ago, and she sounded absolutely exhausted. She told me she felt pretty awful as well. And according to one of my sisters she looks like hell rolled over."

I could almost see Jack biting his bottom lip in concentration. "I might go grab my mum," he said finally. "She'd know more than me."

"Thanks Jack. I really appreciate it."

Soon enough, I heard Marian's voice in my ear. "Hello Taylor."

"Hi Marian. I hope I'm not keeping you up."

"Oh no, it's quite all right. Now what's bothering you?"

I gave Marian a quick summary of what I'd told Jack, a small kernel of worry beginning to form deep inside, and waited for her response.

"Did she tell you exactly what type of leukaemia she's at risk for?" Marian asked.

"Not exactly. All she told me was that the one she could get, she might not survive it."

"All right. I think you've done the right thing in telling me – I appreciate it. And I know you're worried, but all I can tell you to do right now is to keep an eye on her. I would tell you to try and get her to see a doctor, but that might not be feasible until you're home."

"I did ask her if she wanted to see a doctor, but she didn't think it was needed."

"She'll let you know if she thinks she needs to. Just make sure she gets enough sleep and eats properly, and when you're back home see if you can get her to make an appointment to see her doctor. It could be nothing at all, but with Isobel there's no such thing as being too cautious. And I know you don't want to lose her if you can help it."

"I don't," I agreed, secretly pleased that my mother-in-law had noticed the bond between Isobel and I. It wasn't something that many people tended to pick up on.

We spoke for a little while longer, ending the call after I had promised again to keep an eye on Isobel, and I added Jack's number to my phone directory before unpausing my DVD.

I managed to get through the whole of the first DVD before my phone sounded off again, my text message tone going off just as the credits rolled at the end of 'Bushwhacked'. I stopped the DVD and picked up my phone, flipping it open one-handed, and pressed the Read button on the keypad to bring the message up onscreen. As it turned out, it was from Isobel.

Just got to Ceduna. Mark's getting check-in organised for everyone. Am going to bed straight after dinner – i am so tired :(call me when you get this. I love you :) xo

As soon as I was done reading, I clicked back out of the message and into my phone directory, scrolling to find Isobel's number, and hit dial once I found it. She answered after two rings.

"Hey Tay," she said to answer her phone. I bit down hard on my bottom lip when I heard her voice. She sounded completely exhausted.

"Hey Issie. You feeling all right?"

The moment that I finished speaking she started crying, and I knew straight away that something wasn't right. "Issie, shh," I said. "It's okay Issie, it's okay..."

"No it isn't," she whispered. "I'm so tired, and I don't feel right..." She sniffled a little. "I wish you were here. I really need one of your hugs right now."

I closed my eyes for a moment, knowing one thing for certain – I needed to bring Isobel to Perth, and I needed to do it soon. She needed me right now, a lot more than I needed her.

"Isobel, I want you to listen to me very carefully. Okay?"

"Okay," she said.

"Do you still have credit on your modem?"

"I think so, yeah."

"Okay, good. I want you to hop online and book a plane ticket from Adelaide to Perth for tomorrow morning. Doesn't matter which airline. All right?"

"What about your car?"

"Mark can drive it to Perth. I trust him not to wreck it. Once you've booked your ticket get Mark to drive you back to Adelaide. I'll meet you at the airport here in Perth after your flight." She didn't respond for a little while. "Isobel?"

"Okay," she said softly.

"And when you get here, you're seeing a doctor. I'm really worried about you." I scrubbed my free hand over my face. "It's probably just touring stress, but I think we should find out for sure just in case. I'll try and make you a doctor's appointment as soon as I know what time your flight gets here."

Not long after we hung up, my phone lit up again with another text message from Isobel, one with her flight details – eleven-thirty in the morning from Adelaide on Qantas, arriving in Perth just before one-thirty in the afternoon local time. As soon as I had finished reading I had Firefox open on my laptop, and had pulled up the Yellow Pages in search of a doctor that would be able to see Isobel after her flight arrived. It didn't take me long to find one and to make an appointment, and I wrote the appointment details alongside Isobel's flight number and arrival time in my schedule book.

The next afternoon I got to Perth Airport well ahead of time, knowing that there was every possibility Isobel's flight could be delayed but not caring a bit. While I waited for her in the Arrivals hall in Terminal 2 I listened to my iPod on shuffle, occasionally hitting the skip button when a song I didn't particularly care for came up. The whole time I waited I kept an eye on the automatic doors that separated the gate area from the Arrivals hall, silently counting down the minutes until we would be reunited.

At around a quarter to two people began streaming into Arrivals, and I paused my iPod. I kept an eye out for her as I stood up and put my iPod and its earphones away in a pocket, finally spotting her near the back of the flood of passengers. She had her head down with her gaze focused on her shoes, and even from where I stood I could see that she looked completely exhausted.

"Isobel!" I called out when I figured she was within earshot. Only then did she finally look up. The second she spotted me, the exhaustion I could see on her face plain as day was replaced with what could only be described as relief.

"I missed you so much," she said quietly when she had reached me.

"Come here," I said, and pulled her into an embrace. She buried her face in my shoulder and took in a shuddering breath. "I missed you too," I told her. "How're you feeling?"

She didn't answer right away. "Not great," she admitted at last. "I didn't get a lot of sleep last night, and I couldn't sleep on the plane."

I drew back a little so I could look into Isobel's eyes. Their amber tint had faded, and she had deep purple smudges beneath both eyes – both clear signs that she was absolutely exhausted. I ran my thumbs under her eyes, as if I was trying to wipe the smudges away.

"I think we'll stay in tonight," I decided. "Order in room service, catch a movie or two on Austar, and hit the hay early. How's that sound?"

"That sounds amazing," Isobel replied.

"I thought it might." As I spoke one of the baggage carousels jolted into life, and I wrapped Ratchet's leash a little tighter around my hand. "Come on. We'll hit the road once we've grabbed your things."

"Can you promise me something?" Isobel asked as we left the airport terminal.

"Yeah, of course."

"Can we never be separated again?"

I laughed quietly. "That sounds good to me."

* * *

"Okay, let's take it from the top one more time, then we'll take a break," Pania said during sound check. "Let the guys do their thing after lunch."

Preparations for the first of the two concerts in Perth were now well underway. My brothers, mother and sisters, the other Sincerity girls, and the road crew had arrived from Kalgoorlie the afternoon before, with everyone worried about Isobel and how she was feeling. Thankfully, the doctor she had seen the morning after we'd been reunited had assured Isobel that she was just very stressed out from her first full-time tour as a performer, and that she had absolutely nothing to worry about. It had taken a couple of good nights' worth of sleep, but that morning she had woken up back to her old self once more. And nobody was more relieved by this than her.

The concert that night, to be held at the Perth Concert Hall, would be a special one, almost more so than any other on the tour to date. Today, the sixth of May, was Hanson Day. Because of this I knew that the concert was going to be something of a party, but it would also serve as a test run of sorts for the final concert of the tour. Everything for that show was still being worked out, but two details were set in stone already – it would be held at The Domain in Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens on the twentieth of June, as the tour's final show, and just like the Halloween show in 2007 it would be a charity concert.

"Issie told me that you wrote a song during the drive from Adelaide," I said to Mark as we watched the girls finish off their rehearsal.

"Most of one, yeah," he replied. "I don't think we'll be ready to play it until we hit Sydney, but we're going to spend the drive from here to Darwin fine-tuning it."

"Do you think it'll make it onto the next album?"

Mark let out a chuckle. "Tay, we've got the tours of New Zealand, Asia, North America and Europe to worry about before we even get around to thinking about the next album. We probably won't

get around to it for another couple of years. 2011 at the absolute earliest.” Here he shrugged. “But yeah, I think once it’s finished it might make it onto the next album. It definitely has the potential for it.”

“Can I hear it sometime?”

“Sure. Isobel likes it just based on the bare skeleton of, what, tabs and lyrics, so I think you’ll probably like it as well.”

I leaned down and scratched Ratchet behind her right ear. “Yeah, we’ll see.”

Right as I finished speaking, there was a discordant noise from the stage that set my teeth on edge and raised the hairs on the back of my neck. Ayesha started cursing up a storm seconds later. I got up from my seat and walked over to the front of the stage, leaning forward and propping myself up on my crossed arms. “What happened?” I asked.

“The fucking E string on my guitar snapped!” Ayesha replied. She sounded very frustrated, and I could hardly blame her. “And I don’t think I have a spare with me. I *knew* I should have bought some before we left home.”

I uncrossed my arms and held up my hands, palms out. “Esh, calm down. You’re not the only guitarist around here. Isaac or Mark probably have one they can spare. I can always try digging one up if they don’t.” With those words I turned around and let out a shrill whistle, the sort I used to bring Ratchet to heel. “Hey you two!”

“We do have names, Taylor,” Isaac reminded me. He didn’t look up from his laptop as he spoke.

“Yeah, but that’s far too much work,” I snarked. “And I’m lazy. Either of you got a spare E string that you’re not using? Ayesha’s just snapped on her.”

Mark immediately got up from his seat and went over to where he’d propped his guitar case that morning, against the front of the stage not far from where I was standing. He moved the case down onto the floor, popped open the latches and eased the case open, and rummaged around in

the pocket that was set into the lid. "Got 'em," he announced, sounding triumphant, and climbed up onstage to give the paper packet of strings to Ayesha.

"Thanks Mark," Ayesha said, sounding quite grateful. "Appreciate it." When I turned back around to face the stage she was hard at work replacing the broken string. She had the new string in place quickly, retuned her guitar fast, and tapped her microphone as soon as she was standing once more. "C'mon, I want to run through *Faded* before lunch!"

I returned to my seat in the front row just as Isobel and her bandmates took the stage for the final time, at least during that day's rehearsal. There were a few moments of quiet discussion, and Emmanuelle began playing her keyboard at the same moment that Isobel began to sing. The rest of the girls, I knew, would come in gradually over the course of the first verse and the chorus.

"You never take...take the time to really look...look at the one...the one I really am...you try to fit...to fit me in your perfect box...you let me slip between the cracks...

"Now I've faded...into someone else...made me someone I don't wanna be...yeah I'm faded...my true colour's gone...like a picture nobody sees...

"I'll bet you don't...don't even know my favourite song...you tell me how...how I should wear my hair...you wanna change everything I ever was...try to erase me till I'm not there...

"Now I'm faded...into someone else...made me someone I don't wanna be...yeah I'm faded...my true colour's gone...like a picture nobody sees...now I've faded...like I never was...till I don't even know myself...yeah I'm faded...into what you want...but I'm not takin' it too well...

"I don't wanna be your little picture perfect pretty girl...who's got nothing to say...I'm not gonna wait around...let you run my whole life down...so you can watch me fade away...

"Faded, faded...you try to fit...fit me in your perfect box...faded, faded...you try to fit...fit me in your perfect box...

"You try to fit...fit me in your perfect box...you let me slip between the cracks..."

"Now I've faded...into someone else...made me someone I don't wanna be...yeah I'm faded...my true colour's gone...like a picture nobody sees...now I've faded...like I never was...till I don't even know myself...yeah I'm faded...into what you want...but I'm not takin' it too well...

"I faded...faded, hated, slippin' away as I disappear in the dark...I faded...faded, hated, so far away from who I was at the start...faded, hated, slippin' away as I disappear in the dark...faded, hated, so far away from who I was at the start..."

As the last notes died away, applause broke out in the hall. The girls sketched a bow or dipped a curtsy each before they left the stage, with Ayesha and Melayna taking their instruments with them.

"That sounded fantastic," I told Isobel once she had sat down next to me. She beamed at me and uncapped her water bottle. "Think you guys are ready for the show?"

"We should be," she replied. "What exactly are your brothers doing tonight? I mean, seeing as it's a special day and everything."

"As far as I know, the usual tradition's going out the window," I replied.

"The Australian cover songs tradition, right?"

I nodded. "That's the one. I think they've gone through their iPods and picked out three favourite songs each, and they're going to be mixing those songs into the set list. Should be interesting."

"That's one word for it." Isobel got back to her feet and stretched. "Well, I need to go get some lunch. You coming?"

"That's a stupid question." I got to my feet, grabbing hold of Ratchet's leash with my left hand as I moved, and checked my pockets for my phone and wallet. "Anyone up for some lunch?" I called out.

In the end it was just Isobel, Mark, Ayesha, Pania and I who headed out to grab a bite to eat. The concert hall's café wasn't scheduled to open until two hours before that evening's show, so

instead we decided to head out to Hay Street Mall. As Mark, Ayesha and Pania started heading down St Georges Terrace toward the mall, Isobel and I stayed at the foot of the stairs leading up to the hall's doors.

"How are you feeling, really?" I asked her quietly.

"I'm fine," she said. "Honestly." When I raised an eyebrow at her, she let out a quiet sigh and sat down on the bottom step. "I'm not going to pretend that it's not in the back of my mind," she admitted. "Because it always is. And the possibility that this could all be over tomorrow...it scares me, Tay. It really does."

"I know, Issie. It scares me too." I sat down beside her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "But you know what? If that does end up happening, you won't go through it alone. I promise you that I'll be there every step of the way."

After lunch, and just as the five of us got back to the venue, my phone started ringing. I stopped just inside the auditorium doors and worked my phone from my pocket, and quickly checked the screen. I couldn't help the smile that broke out on my face when I saw who was calling.

"Hey Jess!" I said to answer my phone.

"Hey Taylor!" my oldest sister replied. She sounded quite pleased with herself. "How's the tour going?"

"It's going well. We're in Perth for the next four days – we'll be heading up to Darwin on the tenth. What about you – how's school?"

"School's good. My final performance is on Saturday night, and my final exams are next week. I've been studying and practicing so much that I think I could do both my performance and my exams in my sleep."

I chuckled. "And then you graduate, yeah?"

"On the twentieth. Soon as I've graduated I'm flying back to Tulsa with Dad and Mac, and then I'll be on my way over there not long after that. Where will you guys be on the thirtieth?"

I quickly ran through my mental copy of the tour itinerary. "If I remember right, we'll be one day's drive away from Brisbane."

"Awesome. That works out really well. I haven't booked my flight yet, but I'm looking at May thirtieth until June twentieth. Odds are I'll fly into Sydney then get another flight up to Brisbane."

"That sounds like a good plan to me."

The two of us talked for a little while longer, before I handed my phone off to Mark so that he could talk to our sister. Knowing that I would be waiting a fair while to get my phone back, I bent down to my backpack and rummaged around for my iPod. I found it right at the bottom, underneath my hoodie. A few scrolls and presses of the click wheel later I had loaded up my list of albums, and I shoved my earphones into my ears. Soon enough, I had matchbox twenty's *Mad Season* album blasting against my eardrums at top volume and I settled back into my seat, closing my eyes.

All things considered, except for a couple of small disasters, the tour was going well so far. Shows were selling out left right and centre, a great deal of money was being raised for the bushfire relief efforts, Sincerity were getting their name and their music out there, and I was getting to spend some much-needed time with my family. All was right with the world.

Chapter 12

...the beating of our hearts

Isobel

I hummed quietly to myself as I ran my comb through my hair after my shower. On the bathroom vanity, as far from the sink as possible, was my iPod – I'd hooked it up to a little speaker that I had bought for it in Melbourne, and had set it to shuffle through my library. At that moment it was playing *Rooftops* by Lostprophets, and I was finding it hard not to grab my hairbrush to use as a microphone so I could belt it out at the very top of my voice. The temptation was definitely there, but I held back – I needed to be in full voice for tonight.

Tonight's concert was set to be a little different from those on the tour to date. As a practice run for the final show of the tour, Sincerity and Hanson would be taking the stage together. It was a decision that had been made right before rehearsal had recommenced after lunch. The set list, which had been finalised only two hours earlier, was a mixture of both bands' songs, along with a handful of songs that we all liked and had always wanted to perform live. Sincerity had contributed two songs, while each member of Hanson had picked one song to add to the set list.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the door open, and smiled as I watched Taylor slip into the bathroom. "Hey gorgeous," I said as I put my comb down on the vanity.

"Hey yourself," he replied. He stepped up behind me and drew me into an embrace, and I felt him kiss the crown of my head. "Ready for the show tonight?"

"Definitely," I replied. I pulled back a little and looked up at his face, into his eyes. "You look happy."

"Why wouldn't I be? I get to go to a concert tonight, I get to hear some of my favourite songs performed live, and-" He broke off and frowned. "Why can I smell coconut?"

"It's my shampoo," I replied.

"Oh, that would explain it." He let out a quiet chuckle and turned me around to face him, and proceeded to look me up and down. "You know, if you didn't need all your energy for the show tonight, I'd be tearing all your clothes off and jumping you right now."

"So you like it then?" I asked as I struck a pose. I wore red and black for this show – my new black jeans, and a bright red peasant-style top that bared my shoulders. I still needed to put my shoes and jewellery on, but I knew that could wait until we were ready to head out.

"I *love* it," he replied.

I grinned. "Right answer," I said, and picked up the elastic band that lay next to my comb. "Can you braid my hair for me?"

"Oh, if I *must*," Taylor replied, his tone sounding very put-upon. I'd turned back around by this point, and I looked back over my shoulder and stuck my tongue out at him. "You want a French braid?" he asked.

"No, not this time. I just want something that'll keep my hair out of my face."

"Gotcha." He twirled his right index finger at me, and I faced forward again so that he could start working with my hair.

At six o'clock Taylor and I met everyone else backstage at the Perth Concert Hall for dinner, which was to be followed by one last pre-show group warm-up. I was secretly hoping that dinner would be pizza – I had been craving it almost all tour. Unfortunately I had been outvoted every time we'd had dinner as one combined group, and I hadn't been able to find the time to have it at any other point.

"So how is this going to work, anyway?" Pania asked as two of the guys on the road crew headed out with our dinner order and enough money to cover what would inevitably be one hell of a bill.

"I mean, between us we have two drummers, two piano players, two guitarists, and four vocalists – we don't need that many, really."

"We've never done this for a full show before," Mark admitted. "So to be completely honest, we don't really know how we're going to split the instruments." He let out a nervous-sounding chuckle. "We probably should have thought about that *before* we decided to do this."

"Well, I have an idea of how you could do it," Taylor said. "First we need to work out everyone's other instruments – we'll figure things out from there." He pointed to Mark. "Mark, you can start."

It wasn't long before we had a rough idea of the other instruments we all played. There were the conventional instruments such as piano, drums, percussion, bass and guitar, but we also had Pania with her flute, Mark on harmonica, Emmanuelle with her double bass, and Ayesha on violin.

"I think there's room in a lot of the songs for strings," Zac said. He was drumming on the floor with a couple of pencils that he had brought along with him as he spoke. His sticks were stowed away in their quiver, ready for the show. "Emmy and Esha, can you guys play strings just for tonight?"

Ayesha and Emmanuelle looked at each other briefly. "Sure, we can do that," Emmanuelle agreed. "We know those parts pretty well, I think."

"And I don't mind switching to flute for tonight," Pania added. Being on tour had mellowed her out a lot – after meeting and hanging out with them after the first pre-tour meeting, she hadn't taken long at all to warm up to Taylor's brothers. She had taken a shine to Zac in particular – the two of them got along like a house on fire.

"Well, that's sorted then," Mark decided. He then broke into song briefly, one that I recognised as being from *This Time Around*. "As I walked into this old forgotten hall...just one look and I began to fall...wish I could frame you and this feeling on the wall...to stare at till there is no time..."

Our dinner arrived at just that moment, and Mark stopped singing. My mood brightened the moment I saw that the two roadies carried a stack of Dominos pizza boxes each. Getting to have pizza for dinner always made me happy.

"So what are we doing for a final warm-up?" Ayesha asked as she extracted a slice of vegetarian pizza from its box.

"Something easy, I think," Mark replied. He didn't look up from dissecting his own slice of pepperoni. "I don't think any of us want to wear out our voices so close to showtime."

In the end, after we had all finished eating, we chose the first song that came up in shuffle on Taylor's iPod – *Ain't Too Proud To Beg* by The Temptations. The guys sang the main vocals, while my bandmates and I sang backing vocals in the choruses.

Before I even realised it, the time had come for the eight of us to take the stage. There was a flurry of hugs and high-fives all around, and out of the corner of my eye I could see my brothers-in-law standing together in a tight circle, heads bowed and hands clasped. I knew they were praying, something that I knew had been a pre-show tradition of theirs for more than a decade, and so I held off going in for my hugs until they were done.

Bare minutes before I went onstage, and after I had received a series of very tight hugs from my brothers-in-law, Taylor came up to me. We stood there face to face without speaking for the space of a couple of heartbeats, and then he enveloped me in one of the tightest embraces I had ever received from him.

"I love you so much," he murmured in my ear. "And I'm so proud of you."

"I love you too," I replied. "I'll see you after the show, yeah?"

"Definitely." He leaned in for a kiss. "You go and show them what you're made of."

And I did just that. Somehow all eight of us managed to fit onto the auditorium stage, and we started in on our first song of the night almost straight away. As usual with the songs for Sincerity's sets I was on lead vocals, with the other girls joining in for the choruses.

"She's an angel, but she sins sometimes...dressed in white, gets drunk on red wine...everyone loves her...but a child plays for pleasure and she'll play with your heart until she...breaks down your defences one by one...

"So line up your soldiers and she'll shoot them all down...'cause Alisha rules the world...you think you found a dream, then it shatters and it seems...that Alisha rules the world...for her love of power, and she's as fragile as a flower...but you better line up your soldiers and she'll shoot them all down...'cause Alisha rules the world...

"Alisha always walks where angels fear to fly...perfection baby, you know you're qualified...everyone loves her...but a child plays for pleasure and she'll play with your heart until she...breaks down your defences one by one...

"So line up your soldiers, and she'll shoot them all down...'cause Alisha rules the world...you think you found a dream, then it shatters and it seems...that Alisha rules the world...for her love of power, and she's as fragile as a flower...but you better line up your soldiers and she'll shoot them all down...'cause Alisha rules the world...

"And when it all comes down you realise...it's just her playful heart inside your mind...

"So line up your soldiers and she'll shoot them all down...'cause Alisha rules the world...so line up your soldiers and she'll shoot them all down...'cause Alisha rules the world...

"Alisha rules the world...you think you've found a dream...Alisha rules the world...

"Line up your soldiers and she'll shoot them all down...'cause Alisha rules the world...you think you found a dream, then it shatters and it seems...that Alisha rules the world...so line up your soldiers and she'll shoot them all down...'cause Alisha rules the world...you think you found a dream, then it shatters and it seems...that Alisha rules the world...so line up your soldiers and she'll shoot them all down...'cause Alisha rules the world...you think you found a dream..."

Almost at the second that the girls and I finished our first song, the guys started in on the first of their three covers, with Zac on lead vocals – Mark's favourite Good Charlotte song.

"All these dreams and all these plans...I built them all with these two hands...everything, I've realized my dreams...the city lights shine down and they blind me sometimes...but through it all...I was lost but I found my way...

"So tell me what you want...'cause I would give you anything...tell me what you need and I'll go get it...I'd give up all these dreams...to have you in my arms right now...I'd give up everything and I'd forget it...

"I wasn't on a mountain...when it came to me...all my life's been wasted...chasing shallow dreams...so here we are...

"Let me lift you up and show you this world over me...and all these things, what I've gained and what I've seen...it can't compare to the love that you could give to me...

"So tell me what you want...'cause I would give you anything...tell me what you need and I'll go get it...I'd give up all these dreams...to have you in my arms right now...I'd give up everything and I'd forget it...

"I wasn't on a mountain...when it came to me...all my life's been wasted...chasing shallow dreams...

"Years go by and nothing's slowing down the time...years go by and then they're wasted...all this time I thought that I gained everything...but you're not mine and I'm so empty...

"I wasn't on a mountain...when it came, when it came to me...that all my life's been wasted...chasing shallow dreams...

"So please come back to me...I'm right here waiting...so please come back to me tonight..."

Cheers and thunderous applause rang throughout the hall at the end of the second song, and I resisted the very strong temptation to add my own cheers. Instead, I settled for a grin. Tonight was working out wonderfully so far, and I knew it could only get better.

"Good evening Perth!" Mark called out in welcome, sending the already-hyped crowd into a complete frenzy. "It is great to be here tonight, and we are looking forward to giving you all one hell of a show." He cast a questioning glance across to me, and I flicked the fingers of my right hand at him in a sort of wave – I was ready to go. He gave me a brief nod. "Let's do this!" he shouted, and we ripped into a rollicking version of the twelfth track from *Through The Crossroads*, which the guys had christened *Walking Away*.

For what felt like hours, song after song flowed from our instruments and mouths out to the gathered crowd. With each minute that passed the excitement built slowly but surely to a fever pitch, until we came to the very last song of our combined set.

"This is the very last song tonight," I said into my microphone. "Thank you to everyone for coming out to the show, and for celebrating Hanson Day 2009 with us. We hope to see you again on the ninth for the 18s-and-over show – until then, here's a song you all might know."

The last song was, quite surprisingly, one out of Zac's extensive iTunes library. As it turned out, he was quite the Evanescence fan. It was something I had discovered when I had gone poking through his laptop in search of new music for my iPod. His chosen song was one of Evanescence's rarer tracks, one that started off with Mark's keyboards, with Zac's drums and the combined vocals of Mark and I coming in after the first six or so seconds.

"I'd give anything to give me to you...can you forget the world that you thought you knew...if you want me, come and find me...nothing's stopping you so please release me...

"I'll believe all your lies...just pretend you love me...make believe, close your eyes...I'll be anything for you...

"Nothing left to make me feel anymore...there's only you, and every day I need more...if you want me, come and find me...I'll do anything you say, just tell me...

"I'll believe all your lies...just pretend you love me...make believe, close your eyes...I'll be anything for you...I'll believe all your lies...just pretend you love me...make believe, close your eyes...I'll be anything for you...anything for you..."

"I'll become your earth and sky...forever, never die...I'll be everything you need..."

"I'll believe all your lies...just pretend you love me...make believe, close your eyes...I'll be anything for you...I'll believe all your lies...just pretend you love me...make believe, close your eyes...I'll be anything for you..."

As the song ended a roar went up from the crowd, and I let out a loud cheer of pure happiness. This, more than almost anything else, was what I had been born to do – I loved being a journalist, but performing was what gave my life its most basic of meanings. And I knew that I wanted to keep doing it until I drew my very last breath.

Backstage after the show, I waited off to one side for Taylor to fight his way through the crowd that had packed the concert hall. My bandmates and brothers-in-law were celebrating the end of a fantastic show, but all I wanted to do right at that moment was go back to the hotel so I could sleep. Normally after a show I was completely wired, my excitement more than enough to extinguish even the small amount of exhaustion I tended to feel post-performance. Tonight, though, I just felt drained. There was no way I was up to going out for post-show drinks like we usually did – I knew I'd just end up falling asleep halfway through our celebrations.

I was seconds away from going to track Taylor down when a pair of long arms wrapped around my shoulders from behind, and I let my eyes drop closed. "Hey baby," he said softly into my ear. "You were wonderful out there tonight."

"Thank you," I whispered. I leaned my head back on his shoulder, completely content to just stay there for the rest of my life, but sleep was calling my name. Taylor seemed to sense this, and he began to guide me out into the main backstage area.

"Let's get you to bed, yeah?" he said, his voice pitched so that only I could hear his words, and I nodded wordlessly. My bed, however temporary it was, sounded like a small piece of paradise right at that moment. Sincerity had no interviews scheduled for the morning, so I had every intent of sleeping as late as possible.

We managed to beat everyone else back to the hotel, much to my relief. While Taylor downloaded the photographs he had taken that night from the media card of his camera to his laptop, I took a shower and washed my hair again. He came into the bathroom just as I was wrapping a towel around myself.

"You should come to bed like that," he informed me as I bent over the bathtub and carefully squeezed the excess water from my hair. I felt his fingertips skimming over my shoulders, feather-touching my skin. "Issie, what did you have on your pizza tonight?" he asked, his tone concerned.

"I had Hawaiian. Why?"

"I think they might have put a little bit of garlic on it as well. You've got a rash all over your shoulders." I felt his hand pull the towel away from my back. "Actually, scratch that. It's the whole way down your back."

I gave my hair a final squeeze and straightened up, turning my back to the bathroom mirror and looking back over my left shoulder. I felt my heart sink a little as I dropped the towel and saw that my back, all the way from my shoulders down to my hips, was covered in a bright red, angry-looking rash.

"Damn it," I muttered as I wrapped the towel back around myself. I closed my eyes for the briefest of moments. "Can you get my Claratyne out of my handbag for me? I think I'd better take some before I go to bed." I was fairly sure that this wasn't an allergic rash, but I didn't see any harm in being careful. My other, milder allergies were acting up anyhow, particularly my hay fever – this was nothing more than killing four or five birds with the one stone.

"Yeah, sure," Taylor agreed, and he slipped back out of the bathroom. He was back quickly with the blue packet that held my allergy medication and an empty glass, and I gave him a relieved smile.

Once I'd taken one of my allergy tablets and my birth control, I changed into my pyjamas and quickly dried and braided my hair. Taylor was lying on his back in bed when I joined him, reading one of the books he'd brought on tour. "What're you reading?" I asked him as I slipped beneath the quilt.

He didn't answer in words. Instead he stuck his left thumb between the pages of his book to mark his place, and turned it sideways so that I could read the spine. It proclaimed the title as *Jennifer Government*, and the author's name as Max Barry. "Is it good?" I asked.

"It's all right," he answered, shrugging as best he could without sitting up. He reached across to the night table at his side of the bed and picked up a bookmark, closing his book once his place was marked properly. "You look so tired," he said softly.

"I'm exhausted," I confessed, biting back a yawn as I spoke. I shifted down in bed far enough that I could rest my head on his bare chest. His heartbeat was strong and steady in my ear, and I could feel his chest rising and falling under my head as he breathed. "I can hear your heart beating," I told him.

Almost in response, Taylor swept my braid aside and briefly settled a couple of fingers just under my jaw. "And I can feel yours," he informed me.

"Good," I murmured absently. "Means it hasn't stopped yet."

"That's lovely, Issie," Taylor said dryly.

I lifted my head up just long enough to give him a sleepy smile. "It's true, though."

"Go to sleep, Issie," he said, and he switched his lamp off. He started to hum tunelessly, his humming soon shifting into soft singing.

"Whose eyes am I behind...I don't recognise anything that I see...whose skin is this design...I don't want this to be the way that you see me...I don't understand anything anymore...and this world that I'm tired of...is taking me right up these walls...that I climb up to get to your story...it's anything but ordinary...

"And when the world is on its knees with me it's fine...and when I come to the rescue I get nothing but left behind...everybody seems to be getting what they need, where's mine...'cause you're what I need so very but I'm anything but ordinary..."

Once again, Taylor had shown another reason why I loved him so completely. He knew that I loved to hear him sing, and that I considered it to be better than any lullaby when it came to putting me to sleep. I felt his fingers tuck a few stray locks of my hair behind my ear, and I smiled sleepily before closing my eyes.

If I had known right at that moment what I would be facing in just six weeks' time, I would never have gone to sleep so easily that night. My childhood battle with leukaemia was always on my mind – my memories of those years would never go away, and I never wanted them to. They were a reminder of how lucky I truly was. Once I had made remission Mum and Dad had sat down with my oncologist and talked over what I could potentially be at risk of later in life – and when the time had come for me to move to New York City so that I could attend college, they had made sure I knew what they did.

What I had conveniently neglected to tell Taylor was that there wasn't just one form of leukaemia that I was at risk of – there were two, and they both terrified the hell out of me. How could they not? They were very real reminders that no matter how I wanted my life to turn out, there was always the chance that the path I was on could branch off in a drastically different direction altogether. I wanted to grow old with Taylor, I wanted to travel the world, and I wanted to play my music for everyone who wanted to hear it. But I knew there was a chance, however small, that I would never get what I wanted – and more than almost anything else, I hated it.

I knew the symptoms and warning signs of both illnesses, almost better than I knew the back of my own hand. I had always been so careful to keep an eye out for them, but over the last month I hadn't been as vigilant as I should have been. I had already noticed symptoms for both illnesses, though I was fervently hoping that they weren't portents of a battle I knew I might not survive, that I was just stressed out from being on my first tour as a performer.

As I drifted into sleep that night, I had no idea that what awaited me over the distant horizon was my worst nightmare – and it was returning to haunt me all over again.

Chapter 13

Through the centre of the storm

Taylor

Early in the morning after the second Perth concert, a couple of hours before sunrise, we were on the road once more, headed for the next stop on the tour – Darwin. This particular part of our trip around Australia was so long, spanning nearly three thousand miles, that we were dividing it up into six sections. The first part of the journey would end in the Western Australian town of Carnarvon sometime in mid-afternoon. At least, that was the plan. Whether or not that actually ended up happening would be another story entirely.

"You sure you're okay to drive?" Mark asked as I loaded my suitcase into my car. Isobel was already settled in the front passenger seat, and Ratchet was harnessed up in the backseat.

I nodded as I closed the boot of the car, and turned to face Mark. He was eyeing me worriedly, his bottom lip drawn in slightly between his teeth. "I'm fine," I assured him. "I have to be – Issie's still exhausted after the show, so she's in no condition to drive."

"You didn't get much sleep, though," he pointed out.

I let out a quiet sigh. "I know I didn't. I'll manage, though – I always do."

Mark's response to this was to smack me across the back of my head. "Ow!" I said, and started rubbing the back of my head as he glared at me. "What the fuck was that for?"

"You are an *idiot*, Jordan," he informed me – and I knew that by using my first name, he well and truly meant business. "Sometimes I think you forget what's most important. Not to mention you seem to have forgotten what happened to you after you finished your third year of college."

I had just opened my mouth to protest when Mark mentioned *that* summer, and I closed it again.

"You just *had* to bring that up, didn't you," I mumbled.

"That was probably the second-worst summer of my life, Tay," Mark told me. We both knew what the worst summer was in his eyes, so I didn't say anything. "You were being slammed around so badly by it, and I couldn't do a thing to help. All I could do was watch you suffering, fighting so hard to get well again, and wishing I could take your place." He took a step closer to me and put his hands on my shoulders. "You need to take care of yourself before you look after anyone else. I'm serious. You're dangerously close to burning out again." He dropped his hands to his sides. "You're *sick*, Taylor, though sometimes I think you forget about that."

"I know I'm sick, Mark," I told my twin quietly. "I've known it for nearly ten years now. I just try not to think about it too much." I slowly sat down cross-legged on the concrete, wincing as my knees protested, and braced my hands on the ground behind me. "You think I like it, Mark? D'you think I *like* not being able to do everything I used to be able to do? I used to be able to ride my bike from 78th Street into the centre of town and back, and I'd be completely fine. These days I'm lucky if I can walk from home to the shops without having to stop and take a breather when I get there. I'm always tired, I'm always sore, and I hate it. This is no picnic for me, I can tell you that much."

Mark dropped into a crouch in front of me, balancing himself with a hand on the rear bumper of my car. "I realise that," he said gently. "And I know you hate it. Really, I do. But I can *also* tell when you're pushing yourself too hard. And right now, that is exactly what you're doing." He put his free hand on my left shoulder. "Does your boss know about it?" he asked, his tone turning serious.

"I don't really *have* a boss," I replied. "But the people in Expatriate who matter, yeah, they know about it."

"Good. When you get to Carnarvon I want you to give them a call or email them, and let them know you need to take a break from everything. How long will it take us to get to Darwin?"

"Almost a week." I squinted, trying to think. "It's the tenth today, and we get to Darwin on the fifteenth...so five days." I looked up at Mark. "Tell me again why we're not flying everywhere? We could be done and home by now."

"Because some of us wanted to make a road trip out of it," he reminded me, before straightening up again. "When I see you next, I want you to tell me that you've got a few weeks off. See if you can't get off until the tour's over."

"By that point I'll be able to crash and sleep as much as I like anyway," I pointed out.

"Right now is when you need to crash and sleep." Mark extended a hand down to help me up to my feet. "Not after the tour. I know you want the tour to go well, and I know you're worried about Bel. But you need to worry about yourself too."

"I know I do," I said reluctantly. I opened the front driver's side door and looked back at Mark.

"How long has it been since we were in Adelaide?"

"A week," Mark replied.

"It's only been a week?" I asked, a little shocked, and Mark nodded. "It feels like it's been so much longer than that."

"*And* we've only been on tour a month," he added helpfully. "Only another month until we get to Sydney. After that you and Isobel can go and sleep in your own bed if you want to, you lucky bastard."

I smiled a little. "I am lucky, aren't I?"

Mark stepped forward and drew me into a brotherly embrace. "I'll see you in Carnarvon," he said.

"Be careful, all right?"

"I will," I promised.

I waited until Mark was out of sight before I slid into the driver's seat and closed the door. Before I put my seatbelt on I gently tucked a stray lock of hair behind Isobel's ear, hoping she wouldn't stir, but her eyes opened just as I settled the lock into place. "Tay?" she asked hazily.

"Go back to sleep," I whispered. "I'll wake you when we get to Geraldton so you can take over the driving."

"Y'sure?" she asked. "Y'didn't get much sleep..."

"I got enough," I lied.

"But you're sick..."

"I'll survive." I leaned over and kissed her forehead. "And you're worse off than I am right now. You're the one who's onstage just about every night."

Isobel gave me a very sleepy smile before her eyes slid shut again, and I pulled my keys out of the right pocket of my hoodie. "I need coffee," I mumbled to myself as I stuck my car key in the ignition and turned it.

One visit to the drive-through of the McDonald's on William Street later I not only had my coffee, but also a Mini-M&M's McFlurry to go with it. Between the caffeine hit from the coffee and the sugar rush from the M&M's and the ice cream, I was good to go for at least the next few hours. A glance at the clock on the dashboard revealed the time as a quarter to five o'clock in the morning. Allowing for a couple of breaks along the way, I figured we'd arrive in Geraldton at around lunch time.

"Time to hit the road," I murmured, and eased my car back out onto the street.

Isobel woke up about half an hour before we arrived in Geraldton, and I gave her a quick, tight smile before refocusing on the road before me.

"You look utterly exhausted," she said sympathetically.

"I feel like shit," I told her quietly.

"Did you take your medication?"

"Didn't take any Endep last night because it knocks me out for hours, but yeah I took my Lexapro this morning." I took one hand off the wheel and swiped a hand over my eyes, knocking my glasses askew. "I can't remember the last time I felt this horrible."

"Not taking your meds last night wouldn't have helped."

"Skipping a dose or two doesn't make me feel like death warmed up." I blinked a few times. "This is something else, and I don't like it one bit."

"Pull over," she said suddenly.

"What?"

"Pull over," Isobel repeated. "You need to sleep. Soon as we get to Geraldton I'm going to make a couple of phone calls – one to Expatriate insisting that you need to take the rest of the tour off, and the other to Dr. Sommers."

"What are you going to call Dr. Sommers for?"

"Because I think you need to see her. And I don't mean after we get home. I'm talking sometime during the next couple of weeks." She held up a hand to forestall the protest she knew was about to come out of my mouth. "At best, she'll only recommend that you get some rest. And at worst, she'll either adjust your dosages or she'll change your medication entirely."

"I *really* hope she doesn't want to change my meds to something else. It was enough of a pain in the ass getting used to what I'm taking at the moment." I closed my eyes for just a moment. "I just hope it's not getting worse."

"See, that's another reason you need to see Dr. Sommers." Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Isobel shifting around in her seat so she was facing me side-on. "Look, all I know about CFS is what little I've been able to find online, and everything that you've told me. We both know it's

not really a lot. And I figure that it's like any chronic illness – it could get worse at any time. This might just be what's happening."

"I've known for years it could happen," I said quietly. "The doctor who originally diagnosed it said it could happen at any time. It's just...I thought after everything that happened in Canada, that was the last of it." I looked over at her again. "You do realise that when I do go back home, we'll be separated for a week at the very least?" I questioned her. "Potentially even two?"

Isobel gave me a sharp, quick nod. "I realise that. But we both have cell phones, we both have laptop computers, and we both have webcams. We won't be totally cut off from one another."

"The distance doesn't bother me so much as not being close to you does," I murmured.

I finally found a safe place to pull off the road and guided the car to stop there, cutting the engine before unbuckling my seat belt. We swapped seats quickly, Isobel immediately adjusting the driver's seat so that she could reach the pedals while I settled myself into the front passenger seat. "Get some sleep," she said as she tweaked the position of the rearview mirror slightly. "I don't want to see your eyes open again until we get to Carnarvon. And even then you'll be going straight to bed once we're checked into wherever it is we're going to be staying."

"You'd make a great mother," I told her as I buckled my seatbelt and cranked the seat back.

"Really, you would," I insisted when she raised an eyebrow at me.

"No I wouldn't. I hate kids Tay, why would I want any?"

"I'm not saying that we should have some. I know you don't want them, and I don't either. But look at the way you take care of me all the time. You're great at it."

"Still doesn't mean I want little copies of me running around. I'll put shoes on Ratchet if I want to hear the pitter-patter of little feet." I chuckled quietly at this. "You watch me, I totally would."

"Yeah, I know you would."

Isobel gave me a smile and reached over, and she brushed my hair back off my face. "Get some sleep," she repeated as she turned the key in the ignition, the engine roaring to life once again. "We still have a long drive ahead of us."

I didn't respond to this. Instead I pulled the hood of my jacket up over my head, settling it so that I couldn't see anything out of the corners of my eyes, and hooked my glasses into the collar of my T-shirt. The last thing I heard as I drifted off to sleep was Isobel flicking on the blinker as she pulled back out onto the road.

* * *

Darwin International Airport was busy, a hive of activity even at five to six in the morning. We had all arrived in Australia's northernmost capital city at around dinnertime the evening before, and I had gone straight to bed almost as soon as we had checked into our hotel. The way Isobel had told it that morning, just before my mother and I had left for the airport, I had been so dead to the world that not even her banging around our hotel room trying to get the air conditioner going had woken me.

"You have your ticket?"

I nodded mutely, still not quite awake. My mother and I were sitting in Departures at the airport, waiting for check-in to open for my flight. My suitcase, backpack and folded-up wheelchair were at my feet, and I had Ratchet's leash wrapped around my right hand.

"And Isobel wrote down your appointment time in your schedule book?"

I nodded again. "I have to see Dr. Sommers at eleven o'clock on Tuesday morning," I answered quietly, speaking for the first time that morning. I took off my glasses and rubbed a hand over my face. "I feel awful," I murmured.

Mom's response was to draw me closer to her side and wrap an arm around me, guiding my head to rest on her shoulder. "I know, Tay," she said sympathetically as she tucked my hair behind my ear. "I know you do. But you'll feel so much better once you've seen your doctor."

"And once I've slept for a week," I added wryly.

Mom chuckled quietly. "That too."

Lacking a watch of my own, I opted to keep an eye on the time using my mother's. My phone was in my backpack, and I couldn't be bothered trying to find it so I could find out the time for myself. At around five minutes past six I forced myself to my feet, and braced myself against the wall while I waited for the world to stop spinning around me. "I'm okay," I mumbled as I felt my mother's hands on my shoulders. "I'm *okay*, Mom..."

"Sit down," she told me firmly as she guided me to sit down in my wheelchair. "You are most definitely *not* okay." And with those words she started rooting around in my backpack, coming up with my medication. From her handbag she drew out a bottle of water. "You need to take your medication for starters," she said as I took the water bottle and my medication from her.

"I won't feel much better."

"You should still take it anyway. I doubt you want a lecture from your doctor."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," I conceded, and I took one of my tablets with a mouthful of water. The pill packet went back into my backpack, and Mom zipped it back up before hooking the shoulder straps over the handles of my wheelchair.

Hardly anyone was waiting in line to check in this early in the morning, so it didn't take me long to reach the check-in desk. My ticket, identification and suitcase were handed over to the attendant behind the counter, and I was issued with my boarding pass in return. "Your flight will leave from Gate 3 at seven-thirty, and you will need to surrender your wheelchair to the boarding staff," the check in attendant told me cheerfully – far too cheerfully I thought, for just after six in the morning. "Boarding will begin at ten past seven."

"Thank you," I said as I put my ID back in my wallet and tucked my boarding pass safely away in the one place where I knew I wouldn't lose it – my schedule book.

Rather than hang about downstairs waiting for my flight to begin boarding, we headed upstairs in search of breakfast. I had downloaded a couple of maps of Darwin Airport from the airport's website during our stay in Carnarvon, and I knew there were a couple of coffee shops located within the section of the terminal devoted to Domestic departures and arrivals. One of them was located close to the lift that had taken us up to the first floor.

After we had ordered breakfast we took up seats in a corner furthest from the café's entry, and I took out my schedule book once again. "Okay, so I'm leaving here at half-past seven," I said as I studied my travelling notes. "I get to Melbourne at ten past twelve local time, then I've got a five-hour layover before my flight to Sydney. I leave Melbourne at a quarter past five, and arrive in Sydney at twenty to seven."

"Is anyone going to meet you at the airport in Sydney?"

I nodded. "Mel called her brother and asked him if he could meet me there. He's going to pick me up once I'm off the plane and I've collected my suitcase, and he'll take me home." I pushed my glasses up onto the top of my head and rubbed at my eyes with the heels of my hands. "I plan to go to bed as soon as I get home – going out and picking up groceries for the week will have to wait until I don't feel so rotten."

"How long do you think you'll be at home?"

"No longer than a week, hopefully. That depends entirely on what Dr. Sommers says when I see her on Tuesday – she might want me to hang around at home for an extra week before I fly up to Brisbane. I won't know for sure until I've been to my appointment."

I didn't speak much until the time came to board my flight. My medication had kicked in by this time, and while I felt a little more awake and alert than I had earlier I still felt completely awful. It had been quite a while since I had felt this way, and I didn't like it one bit.

"Make sure you send both Isobel and I a text once you get to Melbourne," Mom said as we said goodbye. "And again when you get home."

"I will," I promised. "I'll try not to make it too incoherent."

Mom laughed softly. "Try to get some sleep on the plane, all right? I know it isn't a very long flight, but if you can sleep you'll probably feel a little better once you get to Melbourne."

"Probably," I agreed. I cast a sidelong glance across at the gate attendants. "I'd better get in line," I said as I stood up, and I gave Mom a goodbye hug. "I'll see you in Brisbane."

I was one of the first passengers to board the flight, something I considered to be an advantage – it meant I could get to my seat and settle myself and Ratchet in for the flight much more quickly than everyone else. After I'd had my boarding pass checked and had handed over my wheelchair to the gate staff, I took tighter hold of Ratchet's leash and headed through to the plane. The moment I was in my seat I took out my phone and sent a text to Isobel. *Just boarded flight to melb. Miss you tons already. Will call after flight lands. Love you xo*

Isobel's answering text came just a couple of minutes later. ***I miss you too. Wish i was coming w/ you, would be if i didn't have to work :(get some sleep ok? Love you too xo***

I smiled and closed the text, before switching my phone to flight mode, turning it off and folding it closed, and sliding it back into my pocket.

My flight departed Darwin at seven-thirty sharp, headed southeast toward Melbourne. As soon as the seatbelt light above my head blinked off I unbuckled my seatbelt and slipped past the knees of the passenger seated next to me. I took my backpack down from the overhead locker and started hunting through it for my iPod. I needed some music to listen to during the flight, and I was fairly certain the flight channels wouldn't have anything remotely close to what I wanted to listen to. If nothing else, listening to my iPod would help me sleep.

Back in my seat, I did up my seatbelt again and unwound the cord for my earphones from around my iPod, before hunting through it in search of the last playlist that Isobel had loaded onto it. I found it quickly and shoved my earphones into my ears, before hitting play and slipping my iPod

into a pocket so that it didn't get lost. In almost no time at all I had dozed off, Emerson Hart's vocals the last sound I heard as my early morning finally caught up with me.

Twelve-fifteen saw me rolling into T3 Arrivals at Tullamarine Airport in Melbourne, my backpack balanced rather precariously on my lap. Ratchet ran alongside my wheelchair, keeping close to my side as she had been trained to do when I didn't have hold of her leash. The whole time I was keeping an eye out for somewhere that I could park my wheelchair and call Isobel, finally finding a spot just near the doors leading outside. I took my phone out of my pocket and turned it back on, deactivating flight mode, and texted my mother.

Am in melbourne. Flight arrived at tullamarine safely. Going to call issie as soon as this is sent. I miss everyone already. See you in brisbane in a couple weeks. :)

Almost the second the text had gone out, I clicked through into my phone directory and scrolled through to Isobel's number. Usually I just keyed it in from memory, but I was feeling somewhat shaky and more than a bit out of sorts, even more than I usually did – the few hours of sleep I had managed to get on the plane hadn't helped a bit. I hit dial as soon as I had found the entry I was after, and closed my eyes as I waited for her to answer.

"Hey gorgeous."

I couldn't help smiling when I heard Isobel's voice. "Hey Issie," I said softly. "I'm not interrupting anything am I?"

"Of course not! And anyway, right now you're far more important than rehearsal. Did you get to Melbourne okay?"

"Yeah. I'm sitting in Arrivals at the moment." I ran my free hand back through my hair, fingers snagging on tangles and knots. "I'm going to head out into the city in a little while – I'm not about to hang around here for the next few hours."

"That sounds like a good idea to me." She paused briefly. "I want you to tell me the truth here – how are you feeling?"

I didn't answer right away. "I feel like death warmed up," I admitted finally. "It's like...there's this motherfucking huge hurricane all around me, and I've finally fought my way through into the eye of the storm. I'm in the calm bit, but I'm not out of its way yet."

"Did you get any sleep on the plane?"

"About four hours," I answered. "It wasn't nearly enough. I can barely think straight, I'm aching all over, and I just want to go home and sleep."

"I know you do," Isobel told me, her tone soothing. "I know. Can you get an earlier flight home?"

"I might be able to. Depends on if they can switch my suitcase onto my new flight."

"Let me know if you can, okay? And as soon as possible, so that Mel can call her brother and tell him there's been a change in plans."

"Issie, if that's going to inconvenience him-"

"It won't," she assured me. "He knows you aren't well right now, and he doesn't mind helping out. Trust me."

"As long as you're sure."

"I'm positive. You can ask Mel herself if you want to."

"No, I believe you. I just don't want anyone to feel put out."

"None of us do. We all know and we all understand that things aren't easy for you. I just want you to be selfish and look after yourself right now, okay? Sometimes you need to look out for number one and nobody else. Promise me you'll do that?"

As Isobel finished speaking, I realised that she was right. For years I had more often than not put myself last, even though I knew what the consequences of such an action were, and it had always come back to bite me. Right now I had to take care of myself and worry about my own health issues, instead of worrying about anyone else's.

"I promise," I replied.

Chapter 14

Worries in my worried corner

Isobel

I avoided looking at the screen of my phone as I folded it closed after I had spoken to Taylor. My phone's current wallpaper was a miniature version of one of our wedding portraits, and most of the time I was quite happy to look at it – it was one of my favourite shots of the two of us. Right now, though, it just made me want to be anywhere but where I was.

"Hey, are you okay?"

I looked up from sliding my phone into my pocket at Avery. She was crouched in front of me with her arms crossed on her knees, concern plainly evident in her eyes. I made a split-second decision to be honest with her.

"No, I'm not okay," I told her. "I just..." I trailed off, completely unable to put what I was feeling into words.

Avery seemed to understand what I couldn't say, and straightened up. She put a hand out to help me up. "Come on. Let's go outside and get some fresh air, yeah?"

I didn't say a word in response, and instead let her lead me down through the rows of seats.

The venue for the two Darwin shows, the Darwin Convention Centre, was right on the Darwin waterfront. As soon as we exited the building the tropical heat and the glare off the Timor Sea slammed right into me, and I immediately shoved my hand into my handbag in search of my sunglasses.

"Jesus Christ it's hot," I mumbled as I slid them onto my face. Not for the first time that day, I was grateful I'd packed some of my summer clothes for the tour. I knew I would have been very uncomfortable if I hadn't.

"I know, right?" Avery agreed. "It doesn't feel like the end of fall at all. It feels like we're back home again." She started to gather her hair back into a ponytail, and I handed her an elastic band from out of my pocket. "Thanks."

"No worries."

Avery seemed to have changed her mind about getting some fresh air, and we started walking toward where I'd parked Taylor's car that morning. She took her phone out of her pocket and called her mother just before we reached it.

"Isobel and I are probably going to go for a drive out to the mall or something," she told Diana. "We were just going to hang out in front but it's way too hot...yeah, I've got a little bit of cash on me. Not much but it'll be enough to get a drink or some ice cream, something like that. I've got my credit card too...yes, we'll be careful. I'll text you when we're on our way back. See ya."

She hung up, slid her phone closed and put it back in her pocket. "So shopping, then?" she asked, sounding hopeful.

"Not for long," I said as I unlocked the car. "The girls are expecting me back after lunch for rehearsal. We're planning to perform a new song in Brisbane and we really need to get on with practicing it."

"The one you wrote with Tay?"

I nodded. "That's the one." I smiled a little at the memory of Taylor and I on the *Spirit of Tasmania* during the crossing from Melbourne to Devonport. We had sat down on the floor in our cabin with my laptop and Taylor's guitar almost as soon as we'd boarded the ferry, and just four hours later had the full song nailed down and ready to show to my bandmates.

My phone's text message tone went off just as I got behind the wheel of Taylor's car and closed the driver's side door behind me. I thumbed my phone open and read the message, which as it turned out was from Taylor. *Resched flight to sydney. Am now leaving melb @ 1:15pm on virgin*

blue flight #833, gets to sydney @ 20 to 3. Will text when i get to sydney. See you and everyone else in brisbane. Love you :) xo

I committed the important parts of Taylor's text message to memory, and opened a blank message that I would be sending to Melayna. Once I had tapped out and sent that message, I took my car keys from my bag.

I ended up driving us to a part of Darwin we'd gone past on our way to our hotel the afternoon before, called The Mall. Once I had parked the car on Bennett Street and locked it behind us, we walked the short distance to the shopping strip's entrance.

"So how's Taylor doing?" Avery asked.

"Not so well," I replied quietly as we wandered down The Mall, keeping to the shade as much as possible. "He's due to see his doctor next week. I'm hoping it's just because he's all stressed out from tour, but I know well enough by now that it's not usually that simple with him." I raked my hair back off my face with my hands. "The next couple weeks are going to be hell for both of us."

"He'll be okay," Avery said. She sounded so self-assured that I had to believe her. "He's tough, and he's stubborn as all get out." Here she shrugged. "He kind of has to be. Between the CFS, the depression and the anxiety, never mind Isaac and Zac being assholes toward him a lot of the time, he puts up with a lot of bullshit." She gave me a bright smile. "When my mom and dad got home from New York after Mark and Tay's birthday a couple years ago, Mom told me that she'd never seen Taylor looking so happy. And she *knew* it was because he'd met you. Even Dad says that you're the best thing that's ever happened to him."

We spent the next fifteen or so minutes after that ducking in and out of shops, buying little bits and pieces that caught our eye. Most of what I ended up buying was for Taylor – a few new necklaces, a couple of CDs I knew he'd had his eye on, and a DVD copy of the movie *Serenity*.

"Did Taylor ever tell you the whole story of that first Christmas he was sick?" Avery asked once we had finished our shopping, and were heading back toward the car.

"Well..." I shifted half my shopping bags into my left hand so that I could push my hair back behind my ears with my right. "He told me that he was so sick that he couldn't walk, and that your dad had to carry him through the front door of your old house."

"Okay, so he told you a fair bit then." She looked down at the ground for a few seconds. "That Christmas, I'd just turned nine about six weeks earlier. I was only three when our nan died, nearly four, so while I knew what it meant when someone died it didn't have much of an impact on me. When Taylor got sick, though...that was the first time I was scared of losing someone I loved. I really, honestly thought he would die."

"Oh Ave," I said softly. She gave me a tiny smile and continued speaking.

"After my parents brought him home from the airport, there were pretty much only five people he would let near him until he went back to college a couple months later." She counted off on her fingers. "Mom, Dad, Mark, Zoë and I. Mark and I took it in turns – one day Mark would go over to the old house with Dad, and a day or so later Mom would take Zoë and I over there. Once or twice, after he started to feel a bit better and got a bit stronger, she let me stay the night with Taylor. We watched old movies and talked for hours. We got really close during that time – he's been close with Zo ever since she was born, but until then I guess he considered me to be just his bratty younger sister."

With the next words she spoke, I almost swore I could see tears in her eyes. "When...when he tried to hang himself on Christmas, and when he got stung by that wasp a couple of summers ago and he nearly died..." She swiped at her eyes. "Those were two of the worst days of my life. I knew both times that there was a very real chance we could lose him. I never want to go through that ever again."

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked. By now, we were nearly back at the car. "Just out of curiosity."

She stopped walking and stepped in front of me, meeting my gaze. "Because if he ever loses you, it will kill him," she replied. "There's no 'might' or 'could'. He *will* die if that happens. I can pretty much guarantee you he wouldn't last longer than a few months. Losing you would be it for him."

"He's not going to lose me, Ave. I love him far too much for that."

She raised an eyebrow at me. "You do know you have very little control over that, don't you?" she asked me, unintentionally echoing my own words to Taylor a few months before we had left New York. She sounded very sceptical.

"All right then, I'll never *intentionally* leave him. I know I have no control over the inevitable, whenever it is that it ends up happening." *I just hope that's not anytime soon*, I thought.

We drove back to the venue after that, arriving back in the auditorium just as Avery's brothers took the stage. I stayed by the door as they began going through their rehearsal paces. They started off with what I could only assume was a brand-new song, one that had Mark on vocals.

"I remember the time when I was searching my mind...just to find out if I'd ever define who I am...could I ever afford to consider being bought...I was sure that I saw all the world...but I keep wishing for more...so I keep checking my direction, watching my own reflection...am I still, still in connection with the way I wanna be...did I behave 'cause I've been stuck here for days...I'm in a daze...had a chance to be a saviour but I threw it away..."

"What if I dive off the edge of my life, and there's nothing beneath...what if I live like there's nothing to lose, just to die on my knees...at least I'll know...I walked the dark, I took the scars, I risked it all...and learned to love the fall..."

"I could never say how it hurts to feel the worst...I never make it even though I rehearse...but I won't that be type of guy that never tried...that never took a chance or took his moment to fly, to be free...you may be of the opinion that I'm making the wrong decision...that I'm giving up the chance to live my life with your vision...but I can't give up, no I won't give up...until you see that okay is never ever enough..."

"What if I dive off the edge of my life, and there's nothing beneath...what if I live like there's nothing to lose, just to die on my knees...what if I live...at least I'll know...I walked the dark, I took the scars, I risked it all...and learned to love the fall..."

"I'm here...my hands are cold, my heart is racing...and the only fear is fear of failing..."

"What if I dive off the edge of my life, and there's nothing beneath...what if I live like there's nothing to lose, just to die on my knees...what if I live...at least I'll know...I walked the dark, I took the scars, I risked it all...and learned to love the fall...and learned to love the fall..."

Applause and cheering rang throughout the auditorium, and I found it hard to hold back a grin. They were sounding better than ever, something I considered a good omen for not only the remaining shows on the tour, but also for the charity concert that would be held at the tour's end.

"How long have you lot been sitting on that one?" Emmanuelle asked as Mark fiddled with his keyboard.

"Not very long," Zac answered. "We wrote it on the way up from Perth."

"Isn't there another one you wrote after we left Adelaide?" Ayesha asked. "I swear I heard something about that along the way."

"Yes, there is," Mark replied. "But that one isn't completely finished yet. We still need to figure out a title for it."

"You might want to hurry up with that if you want to perform it before the end of tour, there's only a month left," I reminded him as I walked up to the stage. "I think you should perform it at one of the Sydney concerts – maybe the 18s-and-over show, depending on what covers Taylor picks." As I spoke my husband's name I felt a small twinge of sadness – I really did miss him.

"It's going to be okay, Bel."

I looked over at Avery. We'd both sat down on the auditorium floor in front of the stage to watch the rest of rehearsal. She was leaning back with her legs stretched out in front of her, hands braced against the floor behind her so that she stayed more or less upright.

"I know you miss him, and I know it's hard to be away from someone you love," she continued, before letting out a chuckle. "You should have seen Taylor the first time we went around the world back in '97. It was the first time he'd been away from his girlfriend, and he ended up moping just about the whole time. The relationship didn't last, but still." She gave me a small smile. "So he's probably feeling the same way right now. In fact, scratch probably – he *is* feeling the same way."

"I'll call him as soon as I know his flight's landed in Sydney," I decided.

I drew my knees up beneath my chin and wrapped my arms around my legs, closing my eyes as I rested my forehead on my knees. We had only been separated for a few hours, and yet it felt like we had been apart for days. How I was going to survive the next two weeks without him, I really didn't know, but I knew I had to. My future as a performer and his health depended on it.

* * *

Somehow, I managed to survive the two weeks of separation. Taylor and I texted each other every day, spoke on the phone or video-chatted every evening, and emailed each other every couple of days. It was hard being without him every day, but the morning after he had left I reminded myself that we had spent more than twenty years apart before we'd met. That small reminder, and knowing I would see him again at the end of the month, was enough to keep me going.

After a successful run of concerts in Darwin and Alice Springs, we struck out for one of the last stops on the tour – the city of Brisbane. After the shows in Brisbane and the Gold Coast we would be returning to New South Wales, with stops in Newcastle and in Sydney. Once we all arrived in Sydney, Taylor and I planned to split off from the rest of the tour group to return home to the Illawarra. That was just one advantage of many when it came to living relatively close to the final

stop on the tour – not only did it cost us nothing in accommodation, but getting up there was merely a matter of hopping on the train or driving up Mount Ousley or Bulli Pass.

“So when are you flying up to Brisbane?” I asked as Mark and I arrived in Cairns. Taylor had called me just as we had all left Atherton that morning. My phone was still on hands-free from the last time he had called me, and so the three of us (being Mark, Taylor and I) had spent the hour and twenty-three minutes between Atherton and Cairns talking and making plans to meet up in Brisbane. That morning in particular, I had noticed Taylor was sounding a lot better than he had even the evening before, something I was greatly relieved by.

“Well, Jess, Dad and Mac are due to fly in tomorrow morning,” Taylor replied. “I’ve booked my ticket for the thirtieth, and I’m pretty sure they’ve done the same. So barring anything out of my control, we’ll be there that afternoon. You all get there on the thirty-first, right?”

“I think so, yeah,” Mark answered, before changing the subject. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m not totally one-hundred percent just yet,” was Taylor’s response. “But I’m getting there. Dr. Sommers upped the dosage of the Endep, so that’s still taking a bit of getting used to, but she’s pretty much given me the okay to rejoin the tour. How long are you going to be in Cairns for?”

In lieu of an immediate response, I leaned forward in my seat and bent down to my handbag, taking out my notebook. Inside was a printout of the schedule from the file I had on my laptop.

“Just for today and tomorrow,” I replied once I had found Cairns. “On the thirtieth we’ll be leaving for Mackay and staying there overnight before we strike out for Brisbane.”

We talked about the tour for a little while longer before we hung up, and I quickly switched my phone’s hands-free function off. He called back barely half a minute later.

“So what exactly did Dr. Sommers tell you?” I asked as Mark and I arrived at our hotel. We’d beaten everyone else, so far as we could tell.

"Well, she said it's deteriorated a little," Taylor replied, sounding resigned. I knew he had to be disappointed by that news – the move had truly been good for him to begin with. "The stress of being on tour and working at the same time hasn't helped."

"I didn't think it would have helped," I said. "How much did she put you on?"

"She upped my dosage to the full fifty milligrams. I've been taking twenty-five milligrams until now."

"Is it helping you?"

"Yeah, it is. It's going to take at least a month to kick in properly, though, so I won't know for sure until then if it's working at that dosage. I've already noticed a difference – I'm not as sore as I usually am, and I'm sleeping a lot better."

"Good," I said, trying not to sound too relieved. "What else did Dr. Sommers say?"

"She got me to have a bunch of tests done, just in case the CFS was hiding something more serious. They all came back negative, thank God, so basically it's just the CFS fucking with me even more than it does already."

"That's lovely, Taylor," I said. "But that's good though. Did she say anything about the SAD?"

"No, I didn't ask her about that. But I can give her a call and ask her if you want me to." He paused for a few moments. "Thinking about going back to the States for Christmas, are you?" he asked.

"I was considering it. We can probably talk about it after tour, though."

As we had been talking, Mark had gone inside the hotel and checked us in for our stay. I looked up as he came up to the passenger side of the car and waved a keycard at me. "Hold on Tay," I said before rolling the window down. "What?" I asked Mark.

"You're in with Avery for the next couple days, is that okay?"

"Yeah, of course it is," I assured him. Returning to my conversation with Taylor, I said, "Mark's gone and checked us all in, so I should probably go and set myself up in my room."

"Okay. Do you want me to call you when everyone gets here tomorrow?"

"Only if they're not too jet-lagged. I wouldn't want to deprive them of sleep."

"Well Jess will definitely want to talk to you, I know that much." From his tone of voice I could tell he was hiding something from me.

"Taylor, is there something you aren't telling me?" I asked.

"No?"

"Out with it, Jordan."

"I only know what Dad told me," he said, "but Jess apparently spent the few hours after graduation bouncing around her dorm room. So I'm guessing she did really well in her exams and performance."

"It sounds like it," I agreed.

We talked for a few minutes longer before we had to hang up – Taylor because he needed to go and take Ratchet for a walk, and me because my phone had started beeping rather insistently in my ear. A glance at the battery gauge on my phone's screen revealed why – the battery was very nearly tapped out. I folded my phone closed and slipped it back into my pocket.

The rest of the tour group arrived at the hotel around half an hour later, with Avery poking her head into the hotel room we were to share just as I'd finished sending an email to Schuyler.

"So what's the story with Taylor?" she asked as she hauled her suitcase up onto her bed and unzipped it.

"He's doing better," I replied. I set my laptop aside so that I could give Avery my full attention.

"His doctor increased the dosage of one of the meds he's on, so that seems to be helping him a fair bit. Said he's already sleeping a lot better."

"That's a relief," Avery said.

"Yeah, it is," I agreed.

Avery then started digging around in her suitcase, unearthing the bikini she had bought in Darwin, a beach towel and her sandals. "I'm going to go for a swim," she said. "And I think everyone else was planning on it as well, just so we can all cool down. It's nearly scorching out there. Want to come with?"

I almost said no, but I suppressed it. Instead I turned my modem off, hibernated my computer and got up from my bed. "Hell yeah," I said, and went in search of my own swimming costume.

That evening we went out to dinner in town at the Hog's Breath Café, one of my favourite restaurants back home – Taylor and I had got into the habit of going out to dinner at the one in Shellharbour whenever we wanted to go and see a movie. It wasn't exactly inexpensive, but it made for a good night out when neither of us was in the mood for cooking or takeaway.

"Are you looking forward to getting home?" Avery asked me once we had all placed our orders.

I nodded. "Yeah, definitely. It'll be good to sleep in my own bed for once." I leaned back in my seat a little and glanced up at the ceiling. "Though right now, I'm more concerned with reuniting with Taylor."

"I think we all are," Mark agreed, evidently having overheard my conversation with his sister.

"Plus I want to find out how Jess did in her exams and performance. She was being very secretive on the phone last night." He eyed me with one eyebrow raised. "She didn't tell you anything, did she?"

I shook my head. "I haven't talked to her since we were in Perth, and that was before she sat her exams. I have a feeling that she did really well, though. What does she want to do after Juilliard?"

"She wants to split her time between teaching and choreography, or so she told me last summer," was Mark's response. "That might have changed since then, but I know for sure her career plans lie in dance."

We all talked amongst ourselves for another fifteen or so minutes, breaking off conversation when our meals arrived. I'd ordered chicken parmigiana with a side of curly fries as I usually did back home, while around the table I could see tortellini, burgers, fish, steaks, more chicken, and lots of curly fries and salads to go with it all.

Just before I dug into my meal, I took my phone out and texted Taylor under the table.

Having dinner @ the hog's breath cafe in cairns – bet you're jealous :p Can't wait to see you in brisbane – give ratchet a scratch behind the ears for me :) Love you lots xo

Once the text was sent, I silenced my phone, slid it back into my handbag, and joined my family and bandmates in eating.

Chapter 15

...the end of the road...

Taylor

I leaned forward in my seat and crossed my arms on top of the balcony railing, and watched Isobel and her bandmates go through their paces in preparation for the show that night. Both Brisbane shows would be taking place at the Lyric Theatre at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre, just a stone's throw from the Brisbane River. As the tour had progressed the five of them had well and truly found their feet – while not quite professional, in the sense that my brothers were, they were definitely getting there.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

I looked over just in time to see Dad sitting down beside me. "Hey Dad," I said as I returned my attention to the stage. "They're good, aren't they?"

"They're very good," Dad agreed. "Isobel's on lead vocals, if I remember right?"

"Yeah, that's right." I started pointing out the other members of Sincerity, hoping I had the line-up right in my head – though after almost two months on tour, I would have been surprised if I didn't. "Emmanuelle's on keyboard, Melayna's on bass, Pania's on drums, and Ayesha rounds it out on guitar."

I went quiet after that, choosing to listen to Sincerity's rehearsal instead of speaking. I was still getting used to the new dosage of the Endep, and as much as it was a relief not to feel like death warmed over all the time it did mean I wasn't much up to talking. Once I was completely used to it I'd be back to my old self, but until then I chose to keep my mouth shut and my thoughts to myself.

"How are you and Isobel doing?"

The question had come almost out of the blue, and for a moment I was at a loss when it came to answering. "We're good," I said at last. "We've gone through the occasional rough patch, and we've been separated a couple times during the tour for various reasons, but overall we're good. No major arguments."

"Good," Dad said. I noted that he sounded almost relieved. "I'm very glad to hear that." There was a pause. "How are you doing?"

"I wish people wouldn't ask me that," I grumbled.

"They ask you that because they care about you, Taylor," Dad said, his tone stern. Even though Dad never used my first name to scold me – that was more Mom's prerogative – the way he said my middle name whenever I was in trouble was enough to make me sit up and take notice. "Now answer the question."

I let out a quiet sigh. "To be honest, I've been better," I admitted. I leaned back into my seat, tipping my head back so that I could see the ceiling. "My medication's helping a bit, but it's going to take a while for me to get used to the higher dosage of it. I'm already noticing a difference, though. I don't feel so much like a zombie all the time anymore."

As I'd been talking to Dad, I hadn't even noticed that Sincerity's rehearsal had ended. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Isobel picking her way along the row of seats to where Dad and I were seated, and she all but fell into the one on my right. I could tell straight away that she was exhausted. I reached over and put an arm around her shoulders. "Hey Issie," I said.

"Hey Tay," she whispered. "God, I am so fucking *tired*..."

With my free hand, I poked Isobel in the side. "Ix-nay on the swearing," I cautioned her in an undertone, and nodded toward Dad. "My dad's here."

That seemed to get her attention, and she sat up straight in her seat. "Sorry," she said quietly.

"Hi Walker."

"Hello Isobel," Dad said, his tone sounding almost amused.

"Can we go back to the hotel for a little while?" Isobel asked me. "I could do with a bit of a nap before dinner. I need to get some painkillers into my system as well. My knee's really hurting."

"Yeah, okay," I agreed.

Once we'd made sure that Ayesha at least knew that Isobel and I were heading off, we gathered up our things and left the theatre. I kept a tight hold on Ratchet's leash as we took the stairs down to the ground floor and headed toward the exit that opened onto Melbourne Street.

"D'you want me to call a taxi or something?" I asked as we left the building. Isobel was wincing noticeably with each step she took – I was well aware she could look after herself, as she had reminded me on more than one occasion, but I knew she wasn't well at the moment.

"I think you'd better," she answered almost straight away. "I'm not sure I can make it back to the hotel otherwise. I know it's only half a kilometre but I feel like my knee's going to give out on me at any second."

"All right." I helped Isobel limp over to a nearby bench so that she could sit down, and took my phone out of my pocket so that I could call Directory Assistance.

Less than fifteen minutes later a taxi dropped us off out the front of our Brisbane hotel, the Rydges South Bank. "Whoa, easy does it," I cautioned as Isobel's knee nearly gave out on her as we walked into the hotel lobby. I guided her toward a lounge area off to one side so that she could sit down. "I think you should take tonight off," I said. "And before you say anything, just hear me out. Please?"

"Okay," Isobel said, sounding only a tiny bit reluctant.

"Thank you." I sat down next to her. "You're really worrying me, Issie. I was watching you during rehearsal – you couldn't stay standing longer than about five minutes, and right now you're about to fall asleep on your feet. You need to rest, and I know you know that."

"You sound like my mum," Isobel said. "I need to perform tonight, Tay – and I have two days off after today, I can rest then." She shifted a little, and I watched her wince as she moved her right knee in what seemed to be the wrong direction. "And I *will* rest – I promise. I'll stay in bed all day unless I need to go to the bathroom."

"I'm going to hold you to that, you realise," I said, and she nodded. "I have a few conditions, though." I started counting off on my fingers. "One, you have a nap before we go out to the show. Two, you sit down while you're onstage. Three, you wear your knee brace. And four, as soon as the show ends we come back to the hotel and go straight to bed. Do we have a deal?"

"Deal," she agreed.

"Good." I helped her to stand up and quickly checked the time on her watch – it was half-past two. I had planned on having a nap as well, and figured that we could afford to sleep for a couple of hours. We would need to be back at the theatre at least half an hour before the show kicked off, but aside from that the afternoon was ours to do with as we pleased.

Unfortunately for the two of us, our nap was interrupted after about three-quarters of an hour. Isobel's phone started ringing loudly in my ear, and I started to silently curse up a storm. I reached under my pillow and grabbed it, opening one eye and squinting at the screen to see who was calling. As it turned out, Pania was on the phone.

"Isobel, where the fuck are you?" she screeched into my ear so loudly that I had to yank Isobel's phone away to a distance that was safer for my hearing.

"Pania, please shut the fuck up," I said into the phone once she had stopped yelling. "Isobel's sleeping." Right as those words left my mouth, I saw that Isobel had rolled onto her back and had her eyes open. "Or at least she *was*. We both were."

"Sorry, Taylor," Pania said apologetically. "Where are you two?"

"We're back at the hotel. I did tell Ayesha before we left, but I'm guessing she forgot to pass the message on."

"That's fucking typical," Pania groused, and I bit back a smile. "Is Isobel okay?"

I hesitated for a moment before answering. "She's pretty tired, and her knee's bothering her," I finally said. "I made her promise that she would take a nap before I would be happy with her performing tonight. She needs one hell of a break right now."

Somewhat to my surprise, Pania didn't argue with me.

"I know," she said, sounding almost resigned. "We all do. I can't wait until I'm back in my own bed." I heard her let out a sigh. "Three more *weeks* of this..."

"We'll be home soon," I reminded her. "Two more weeks until we're back in Sydney. I'm already thinking about just driving straight home after the second Newcastle show. It'll take us a few hours, but it'll be worth it to be able to sleep in my own bed again. I know Isobel's definitely looking forward to that."

"I sort of feel sorry for your brothers," Pania said. "They don't get home until July, right?"

"Something like that."

We talked for a few more minutes before we hung up, and I silenced the ringer and tossed Isobel's phone onto her handbag. "Go back to sleep," I whispered to Isobel. "We've still got a few hours before we have to be at the show." She nodded and shifted back onto her side, falling asleep within moments. I planted a quick kiss on her right temple before joining her in sleep once more.

I woke after my nap before Isobel did, the time on my own phone revealed to be 17:15. The first thing I did after getting out of bed was to go into our bathroom and run a bath. A quick rummage through Isobel's toiletries case produced something I had bought her for her birthday, among other things meant for pampering herself – a bottle of The Body Shop's Wild Cherry shower gel. I uncapped it and poured a generous amount into the stream of warm water that poured into the bathtub.

"Issie," I whispered in Isobel's ear once I was done in the bathroom. "Issie, up you get – we have to get ready."

"Don't wanna," Isobel mumbled, but she opened her eyes and looked up at me. "What time is it?"

"Twenty past five," I replied.

Her eyes went wide. "*Shit!*" she cursed. "Jesus Taylor, we're going to be late!"

"No we won't," I told her. "You don't have to be onstage until seven-thirty. You have enough time to have a bath, and while you're relaxing I'm going to have a shower. We can grab something for dinner at the theatre."

"You'd better be right," Isobel said as she got out of bed. "Why can I smell cherries?" she asked, frowning just slightly.

"I used some of your shower gel as bubble bath," I replied as I led her to the bathroom. "You didn't bring any with you, so..." I shrugged a little.

Much to my relief, she smiled and gave me a quick kiss. "You are so good to me. Can you wash my hair for me before you hop in the shower?"

"Of course I can."

She smiled again. "Thank you."

We decided to drive to the show rather than walking, so that we could get back to the hotel quickly afterward, and walked backstage just as everyone was beginning to warm up their voices.

"Are you feeling any better?" Melayna was asking as I gave Isobel a quick hug for good luck.

"I'm feeling much better," Isobel replied. "Had a nap and a bath, and Taylor treated me like a princess all afternoon."

"Good. I'm glad." As soon as Melayna had spoken those words, I found myself on the receiving end of one of her hugs. "Thank you for being so good to her," she whispered in my ear.

"It's my pleasure, as always," I answered.

Sincerity took the stage at seven-thirty on the dot, kicking off their set with a cover of *Words* by Kate Miller-Heidke. It was one of Isobel's favourite songs, I knew that much, and they performed it quite a bit at their hometown club shows. Almost before the final notes of the song had faded out, the first guitar chords of the song Isobel and I had written sounded out, and Isobel spoke into her microphone.

"This is a new song," she told the gathered crowd, seconds before she began to sing.

"Two AM, wasteland...talking to a lost man jingling his cup...he said 'Lady keep your head up'...told me 'bout his plan, says it's harder than it seems...says this city leaves you stranded with a pocket full of dreams...she's a one dance romance, knock you out with one glance...slow kill, cheap thrill, overdose and refill...but don't you worry honey, it'll all work out all right...just thank your lucky stars you're in Los Angeles tonight...but he said...

"California is a summer in the winter of your life...and LA is a lover that'll make you leave your wife...she'll kiss you like a virgin then she'll slice you like a knife...the city made of angels is a desert dressed in lights, all right...she's a desert dressed in lights...

"Darkness throws its cloak down, Sunset is a ghost town...it's almost been a year, I've forgotten how I got here...five fake friends in a black Mercedes Benz...and I'm feeling so alone, with them I can't even pretend...I tell white lies to nice guys, right into their bright eyes...gorgeous on the outside but hollow on the inside...something's trying to shake me and it makes me wanna stop... 'cause I just drove past an angel shakin' quarters in a cup...then I hear in my head...

"California is a summer in the winter of your life...and LA is a lover that'll make you leave your wife...she'll kiss you like a virgin then she'll slice you like a knife...the city made of angels is a desert dressed in lights, all right...

"Tell me why do you move so fast...where did you hide your past...tell me what does your true worth cost...and how did you get so lost...baby I know it's light outside...but don't let your daydreams die...

"California is a summer in the winter of your life...and LA is a lover that'll make you leave your wife...she'll kiss you like a virgin, she'll slice you like a knife...the city made of angels is a desert dressed in lights...California is a summer in the winter of your life...and LA is a lover that'll make you leave your wife...she'll kiss you like a virgin then she'll slice you like a knife...the city made of angels is a desert dressed in lights, all right...all right...all right..."

The crowd let loose with deafening cheers and applause, and I couldn't resist adding my own cheers. It was the first time that Sincerity had performed the song live, and it had gone off without a hitch. Not that I had doubted it would – it had sounded great in rehearsal earlier that day.

With a smile to myself, I settled back in my seat and let the music wash over me.

* * *

The second-last stop on the tour was the city of Newcastle. We were still hundreds of kilometres and slightly less than one week away from home, but it didn't matter – we were all back in New South Wales, and home was now just a few hours' drive down the coast. After the tour ended my brothers were scheduled to fly down to Melbourne to meet with representatives of the Australian Red Cross and Wildlife Victoria. The tour had raised quite a bit of money for the bushfire relief efforts, and I knew that the donation that was to be made would be greatly appreciated by both organisations.

The final show before our arrival in Sydney took place on the night of June fourteenth. Tonight my brothers would be debuting the song they had started to write over the phone during the drive between Adelaide and Port Augusta – they had put the finishing touches on it just a few days earlier, and had spent almost every spare moment learning and finetuning each of their individual

parts. Even just in sound check and rehearsal the song sounded fantastic, and I was absolutely confident that their fans would love it.

As much as I would have loved the day to go off without a hitch, though, it wasn't without its share of drama. It began so early that the sun wasn't yet out, and it only escalated from there. The first clue I had that something was up was when, through a haze of sleep, I felt Isobel getting out of bed and taking most of the quilt with her.

"Issie, what're y'doing?" I mumbled when I felt the cold air hit my bare feet, my eyes still closed. "C'mon back to bed, it's too fucking early to be up..."

"I need to go to the bathroom," she answered, sounding very much wide awake.

That was all it took for me to wake up completely. I forced my eyes open before squinting against the lamplight that lit up the room. She was standing by her side of the bed with the quilt clutched in her left hand, her hair tangled and sticking up all over her head. She looked as if she hadn't got a bit of sleep, which was worrying in itself. With the show that night, not to mention how under the weather I knew she had been for the last few weeks, she needed all the sleep she could get.

What worried me the most, though, was the handful of tissues she had balled up in her right hand, and the front of her pyjama top. They were stained bright red.

"Are you okay?" I asked. I flipped on my own lamp and sat up, and shifted closer to Isobel's side of the bed so I could see her a bit better.

"I feel like shit," she confessed. "I'm freezing cold, I'm aching all over, and my nose started bleeding about two hours ago." She gave the hand holding the tissues a little shake. "It's stopped now, but for a few minutes I thought it was just going to keep at it forever." She touched a couple of fingers to her top lip. "Oh for fuck's sake. It just started bleeding again."

I got out of bed and touched Isobel's forehead with the back of my right hand for the briefest of moments, jerking it back almost immediately. "You're burning up, Issie," I informed her. "That's

why you're so cold, you're running a fever." I disengaged her hand from around the quilt and led her into the bathroom. "Come on. We need to get you cooled down."

When my phone rang just after ten-thirty, we were still in the bathroom.

"Hello?" I said quietly to answer it, not wanting to wake Isobel. She had finally settled into a doze around eight o'clock, sleep I knew she desperately needed.

"Tay, it's Mark – where are you guys?" my twin asked. He sounded worried, and I could hardly blame him.

"We're still at the hotel," I answered. "Issie woke up at some ungodly hour, I don't know when, with the mother of all fevers and a bleeding nose." I glanced down at Isobel from where I sat cross-legged with my back against the bathtub. She lay on her back on the cold tiled floor with her head in my lap, stripped down to her pyjama pants and one of her bras. Other than wetting a washcloth with water from the sink and putting it on her forehead, I had no other way of keeping her temperature down. "She only just fell asleep again a couple hours ago and I really don't want to wake her." I rubbed my free hand over my face. "There's absolutely no way she'll be able to perform tonight."

"Do you want me to let the girls know?"

"If they're around, yeah. I'm just going to stay with Isobel for today, I think – I don't want to leave her by herself."

"What about the show tonight? You're still coming, right?"

I tipped my head back and looked up at the ceiling. "It's not looking very likely right now. It'll depend on how she's feeling by tonight, and if I can get Mom or Jess to sit with her and keep her company."

"Okay. Ring or text me if anything happens."

"I will," I promised, and we hung up. Just as I snapped my phone closed, Isobel stirred awake.

"Who was on the phone?" she asked as she tried to sit up.

"Mark," I replied as I eased her upright. "You're off the hook for tonight. I told him you're not feeling well."

"Oh good," she said, sounding very relieved, and started twisting around to try and see behind her back.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I asked.

"Trying to see if that damn rash is gone away yet," she replied as she contorted herself. "It came back yesterday afternoon."

"Nope, it's still there," I told her when I had spotted the angry-looking rash in the middle of her back.

"Damn it," she mumbled. "I swear to God, I'm about to start living on bread and water at this rate."

"You still haven't figured out what's causing it?" I asked as Isobel grabbed hold of the bathroom vanity and pulled herself upright.

"Nope," she said, her tone almost resigned. "I'm going to call Dr. Talbot when we get home tomorrow and see if she can fit me in for an appointment soon. The sooner I figure all this shit out, the better."

"Come on, back to bed," I said as I got up off the floor. "You need to rest right now."

"Just as soon as I can move again," she told me. "Jesus Christ, even my *bones* hurt right now..."

"Do you want me to ring around and see if you can get a doctor's appointment here?" I asked as I led her back to bed. I grabbed a clean T-shirt out of her suitcase once she was sitting on the edge of the bed and tossed it to her.

She shook her head. "I'll be okay. I'm going to take some Claratyne and Panadol, then I'm going to try and get some more sleep." She looked over at me just as her head popped out of the collar

of her T-shirt. "Are you still planning to go out to the show tonight? I know you were looking forward to it."

I didn't answer until I had her settled in bed, and had hunted down the packets of Claratyne and Panadol that she always kept with her. "I don't know, Issie," I replied finally. "It'll depend on how you're feeling by this afternoon."

"I can always ring Jess or your mum, see if they can keep me company for a few hours," Isobel said with a shrug as I handed her medication and painkillers to her.

There was a knock at the door of our hotel room just as I had finished filling a glass with water from the tap in the bathroom sink. I quickly took it to Isobel before going to answer the door.

"Speak of the devil," I said when I'd looked quickly through the peephole in the door, and opened it to find my mother and Jessica standing in the corridor. "We were just talking about you."

"Hello to you too, Taylor," Jessica said. I could tell that she was trying not to laugh. "Mark rang me a little while ago and told me that Bel wasn't feeling too good. So Mom and I decided we'd come keep her company for the day." She held up a plastic grocery bag, through which I could see DVDs, a family-sized bag of M&M's, and packets of marshmallows and jelly babies. "We'll have a girls' afternoon."

"You're probably going to miss the show tonight," I warned her as I stepped aside, closing the door once Jessica and Mom were inside. "There's no way she'll be up to performing, she just wants to sleep."

"Ave records everything anyway," she said. "I'm not missing much." She gave me a bright, sunny smile. "Besides, it means I don't have to put up with the teenies for hours on end."

"That's not very nice, Jessica," Mom chided, but I could tell she didn't really mean it.

"Want to go out for lunch?" Jessica said to me. "I want us to spend a least a little time together before I have to go back to the States."

I cast a glance over at Isobel and my mother. They were deep in conversation about something, and just from that I knew that going out with my sister for a couple of hours wouldn't be a problem.

"Yeah, let's go," I agreed.

That night, I found myself sandwiched between Dad and Avery at Newcastle Entertainment Centre, with Mackenzie and Zoë sitting in the two seats next to Dad. With Sincerity having the night off my brothers' set had started an hour earlier than usual, but I knew that they had decided to stretch the set list out a bit with some of their older songs and a few more covers than they usually played to make up for the early start. Isobel and I had been texting back and forth most of the evening, and I planned to call her just before the new song was due to be played – while it wasn't the same as hearing it in person, it really was the next best thing. I had seen the set list just before I'd gone to take my seat, and knew it was to be played between one of the covers and an *a capella* rendition of their song *Innocent*. Avery had her camcorder set up on its tripod as usual, and had spent the whole night watching the action onstage on her camera's little video screen.

As the final echoes of their cover of The John Butler Trio's *Better Man* died away and the cheers started up again, I quickly pulled my phone from my pocket, flipped it open and dialled Isobel's number. She answered straight away. "Hey Tay."

"Hey Issie. They're about to play it for the first time, you want to hear it?"

"Of course I do!"

"Stupid question, I know." I took my phone away from my ear and held it out toward the stage, right as Mark introduced the new song.

"We haven't performed this one before tonight," he said once the cheers had mostly died down.

"We got bitten by the songwriting bug something fierce on the drive between Adelaide and Perth,

and this is what came of it." He shook his hands out and put them on the keys of his piano. "Take it away, Zac."

The new song started out with just Zac's drums, Mark coming in on vocals after the first few seconds, with Isaac's guitar joining in not long after that. It didn't take very long for the audience to start clapping along with the beat, and pretty soon I found myself tapping my feet and singing quietly. I couldn't help myself – it was a damn catchy song.

"Well I gave you love, you know it...so when did you outgrow it...and decide that you would find another man...you've been out there shakin'...the tail the boys are chasing...when you get home you think I'll be the bigger man...

"I've been thinkin' 'bout somethin'...I've been thinkin' 'bout somethin' other than you...

"I ignored your reputation...'cause you send my heart racin'...you think I will always be the fool...well I've run out of patience for this sticky situation...you won't find me cryin' that we're through...

"I've been thinkin' 'bout somethin'...I've been thinkin' 'bout somethin' other than you...it's sad to say, but baby everyday...I've been thinkin' 'bout somethin'...I've been thinkin' 'bout somethin' other than you...it's sad to say, hey...

"Well if you're not too proud to beg...I can give you some respect...but the tune you're hummin's never gonna change...you didn't have to do what you did...but I thank you it ended like this...'cause the love I've got is better than what you gave...well I've got girls in line waiting for these arms of mine...listen up to what I say...

"I've been thinkin' 'bout somethin'...I've been thinkin' 'bout somethin' other than you...it's sad to say, but baby everyday...I've been thinkin' 'bout somethin'...I've been thinkin' 'bout somethin' other than you...

"Well I've had enough of your tainted love you give me every day...I tried doing right through the lonely nights, but I'm done getting played...I'm not gonna make that same mistake...

"You've been out there foolin', but I'm not thinkin' about you...I've been getting the love that moves me, while you've been getting around...you've been out there foolin', but I'm not thinkin' about you...I've been getting the love that moves me, while you've been getting around...you've been out there foolin', but I'm not thinkin' about you...I've been getting the love that moves me, while you've been getting around..."

The cheer that went up after the song ended was so loud that I nearly dropped my phone so that I could slam my hands over my ears. Instead I settled for talking to Isobel once the shrieking had died down again.

"So what did you think?" I asked as they stepped away from their instruments and out into the open area in the middle of the stage.

"Holy hell," she said, awestruck. "That was just..."

"Fucking amazing?" I prompted, and she laughed.

"Yeah, that. I'm trying to keep the swearing to a minimum seeing as your mum's more or less right next to me."

I snickered quietly. "There's only a few more songs to go," I told her. "I'm going to get out of here as soon as I can afterward. Do you feel up to going home tonight?"

"Oh God yes," Isobel replied, and I grinned to myself.

"You go have a shower, and get Jess and my mom to help you pack. I'll be there as soon as I can after the show finishes. Love you."

"Love you too."

The concert ended just after eleven with a rousing rendition of The Easybeats' *Friday On My Mind*. Less than fifteen minutes later I was back at the Crowne Plaza and letting myself into the hotel room I was sharing with Isobel. Isobel was sitting on our neatly-made bed, dressed in jeans and a

T-shirt, with her hair pulled back into a ponytail and her feet propped up on her suitcase. Ratchet was curled up next to her, and lifted her head to look at me as I closed the door.

"I'm going to hop in the shower really quick," I told Isobel. "Everything ready to go?"

She nodded. "Jess and your mum helped me get everything together." She nodded toward my own suitcase and my backpack, both of which sat next to the writing desk. "They went back upstairs a little while ago."

"Okay. You just sit tight for a bit."

After what was possibly the quickest shower on record, I changed into the jeans and long-sleeved shirt I'd taken from my suitcase, pulled on clean socks and my sneakers, and went back out into the room. I knew it was probably a very bad idea to get on the road at this late hour, but I was fairly sure there was a McDonald's or two around the city that were open outside of the usual operating hours – a couple cups of coffee would keep me awake long enough to get home.

We checked out of the hotel quickly, dropping our room keys off at reception before taking our suitcases and other gear down to the carpark. Before I even thought about loading everything into my car, I sent Mark a quick text message. *Issie and I are heading home. Going to drop in @ mcdonald's for coffee before starting the drive. Will txt when we've made it home safely. See you in a couple days.*

As soon as the message was sent, I popped open the boot of my car and started packing up.

The McDonald's in Newcastle West was still open, much to my relief. "D'you want anything?" I asked as I manoeuvred the car into the drive-through.

"Just some coffee," Isobel replied. "I'm not really hungry."

I ended up ordering a cheeseburger and fries for myself along with our coffees, eating my very late dinner as fast as I could before starting the long drive. "You sure you don't want any?" I asked, holding the cardboard box of fries out to Isobel. "We've got a hell of a drive in front of us, and I'm

not sure when I'll be able to stop somewhere." I shook the box a little. "C'mon, you know you want some..."

"Okay, just a few," she relented. I grinned triumphantly and handed her the box.

The hours during the drive between Newcastle and home seemed to fly past. Before I even realised where we were and what time it was I was driving down the Princes Highway, under the bridge that linked Haywards Bay to the stores and warehouses in Yallah. The bright lights of the industrial area of Albion Park Rail and the regional airport lay before me, and I let out a slightly hysterical laugh of sheer relief. We were almost home.

Isobel had fallen asleep just as we had driven through Waterfall. She drifted awake just as I turned onto the Illawarra Highway, rubbing at her eyes and yawning a little. "Where are we?" she asked.

"Albion Park Rail," I replied, not taking my eyes off the road. "We'll be home soon."

Less than five minutes later, it came into view – the two-story redbrick house with a green tile roof and a jacaranda tree in the front yard that Isobel and I had called home since March the year before. I flicked the right blinker on and turned into our driveway, coming to a stop just short of the garage door.

Two months. Seventeen-and-a-half thousand kilometres. Eleven cities. Twenty-four concerts, with three still left to go. It had been one hell of a tour – not the longest I'd ever been on, but definitely one of the more dramatic.

And as I guided Isobel inside and upstairs to our bedroom, I knew it had all been worth it in the end.

Chapter 16

A sea of faces...

Isobel

One week after Taylor and I arrived home from Newcastle, the tour came to an end. Hanson and Sincerity had played two sold-out concerts at Sydney's Enmore Theatre, the same venue they had played at in 2005 and 2007, on the fifteenth and the nineteenth of June. I was shocked that the century-old theatre was still standing after both shows – throughout the concert on the nineteenth in particular, the balcony had been shaking so violently I had honestly thought it would come crashing down onto the audience below.

All the concerts along the tour had been insane in their own different ways, but I was now positive that Sydney Hanson fans were the craziest of the lot. I had heard stories from Taylor and his brothers about fans camping out in front of venues in many cities, but until I had seen it with my own eyes I hadn't quite believed it. It had taken a wander outside during my lunch break on the fifteenth and seeing sleeping bags, bedrolls and the odd pop-up tent dotted along the footpath to convince me. What made it utterly insane, though, was that it was the middle of June – and in Sydney, the middle of June didn't exactly tend toward warmth.

The morning of the all-ages charity show, even despite getting to bed late the night before, I woke up feeling better than I had in weeks. The temptation to go skipping downstairs was extremely strong, but I suppressed it in favour of wandering down the stairs at my usual pace.

"I was just about to come upstairs and wake you," Taylor said as I walked into the kitchen. He was dishing out pancakes from a frying pan onto a couple of plates as he spoke.

"Too late," I quipped, and stole half a strawberry from the bowl that sat within his reach. He smacked my hand lightly with the spatula and gave me a cheeky grin. "Those pancakes look so good..."

"They'd better *taste* good too," Taylor grumbled. I could tell he wasn't really annoyed, though.

"Can you get the maple syrup out of the fridge for me?"

"The icing sugar as well?" I asked as I went to the refrigerator and opened it, taking the bottle of maple syrup from its shelf on the inside of the door. I looked at him and saw him nod, and took the canister of icing sugar out of the cupboard above the stove once I had closed the refrigerator again.

"So how are we getting there?" I asked as we sat down at the kitchen table with our breakfast. "I mean, we don't have to be there until about three, so we can take our time if we want."

"Well..." Taylor glanced at the clock on the microwave. "It's eight o'clock now, and I think there's a train to Wollongong at ten. I'll check the train timetables after breakfast, but I'm fairly sure we can get to Sydney by one." He gave me a smile. "How does that sound?"

"Suits me," I replied.

After breakfast, I went upstairs to get ready for the day. Just as I went to turn the taps on in the shower, I heard the phone ring downstairs. A knock sounded at the door of the ensuite not even a minute later.

"Issie, Dr. Talbot's on the phone," Taylor called through the door, and I let out a quiet sigh. "It sounds pretty important."

I went to the bathroom door and opened it, taking the cordless from Taylor. "Thanks, Tay," I whispered. He gave me a smile and held up a hand to show me that he had his fingers crossed. We both knew what Dr. Talbot's phone call would be about, and I could only hope she had good news for me. "Hi Dr. Talbot."

"Hello Isobel," Dr. Talbot greeted me. "I'm sure you have a decent idea of what I've called you about this morning."

"A fairly good idea, yeah."

"Good. I received your results back from pathology this morning, and I'd like you to come in and see me so that we can discuss them. Is today a good day for you?"

Shit, I cursed silently. "I've actually got a prior appointment today that I can't reschedule," I said apologetically. "Could I come in tomorrow instead?"

"That should be fine," Dr. Talbot agreed.

We had soon agreed on a time for my appointment, and I hung up before handing the cordless back to Taylor. "Ten-thirty tomorrow morning," I told him. "I've got a really bad feeling about this, Tay..."

"Hey..." Taylor stepped closer to me and drew me into a tight hug. "Don't think like that, okay? This is going to be a good day. We're not going to talk about doctors, or test results, or anything that has the potential to depress the shit out of us. You're going to get up onstage this afternoon, and you're going to blow Sydney away all over again with that voice of yours." He drew back a little so that he could see my face. "All right?"

"All right," I agreed.

He smiled and kissed me quickly. "Now go and have your shower, while I finish cleaning up."

"Yes sir," I replied, snapping off a salute, and I closed the ensuite door again.

We were both ready to go by nine o'clock, and after stopping in at Woolworths to pick up the makings of a picnic lunch we drove out to Albion Park Rail. Taylor had hopped online while I'd taken my shower, and had written down the trains we would be catching in his schedule book – ten o'clock from Albion Park, quarter to eleven from Wollongong, and seven minutes past twelve from Wolli Creek. Our final train would arrive at St. James station at twenty-six minutes past twelve, with The Domain just a short walk from there.

Taylor's phone rang seconds after we had bought our tickets to the city from the vending machine in the train station's waiting room. He hurriedly crammed his wallet back into his pocket, dropped

into a crouch and unzipped his backpack, and started digging around in it in search of his phone. All the while, his ringtone (currently set to a somewhat obnoxious remix of *Walking On A Dream* by Empire Of The Sun) kept playing for all and sundry to hear.

"This is why you should keep your phone in your pocket," I told him, as I'd done many a time before.

"Bite me, Issie," he snarked at me. He finally found his phone at the very bottom of his backpack, tangled up in the cord of his earphones, and stayed crouched down as he answered it. "Hello?...we're on our way now, we're getting the ten o'clock from Albion Park...twelve twenty-six at St. James, that's what the train timetable says. You gonna meet us there?...okay, good. Did they get to Sydney all right?...great. We'll see you guys at St. James. Bye Mark."

He snapped his phone closed and zipped his backpack up again, sliding his phone into a pocket of his jeans as he rose up out of his crouch. "Mark's going to meet us at St. James," he told me.

"Okay." Here I raised an eyebrow at him. "Why did you say 'they'?" I asked, barely managing to keep a hint of suspicion from colouring my tone. "You're hiding something from me, aren't you?"

His only response was to give me a very secretive smile before walking out onto the platform.

The ten o'clock train, an Endeavour diesel that had come all the way from Bomaderry, rolled into the station on schedule. We hurried onto the train with the other passengers bound for Wollongong that morning, finding two free seats in the front carriage, and settled ourselves in for the twenty-three minute journey into town. I dug my iPod out of my backpack, along with my earphones and my splitter, and handed it to Taylor. "Pick a playlist," I told him. "The longer the better."

"On it," he said. He unlocked my iPod and started hunting for a good playlist to listen to during our journey. As soon as he had stopped scrolling, he took the splitter from me and plugged it into the headphone jack, connecting our individual sets of earphones up right after that. The second I heard the opening notes of *Like The Way I Do* by Melissa Etheridge, I grinned happily – he had

gone straight to my playlist of songs I'd bought from the iTunes store. I scooted a little closer to him and put my head down on his nearest shoulder, and he put an arm around me.

Two train changes and nearly two-and-a-half hours later, the Airport and East Hills train we had caught from Wolli Creek rolled to a stop alongside platform one at St. James, and we disembarked with quite a few of the other passengers. I rolled my shoulders to work the stiffness from them while Taylor sorted out everything we'd brought with us, making sure we had left nothing on the train – our backpacks, his guitar case, and the two calico bags of groceries that we had bought from Woolworths. He had decided to leave Ratchet at home today, which was somewhat unusual for him, but I didn't question it. "C'mon," he said as he lifted his backpack onto his shoulders, settling its straps into place before picking up his guitar case by its handle. I followed his lead somewhat, swinging my own backpack onto my shoulders and picking up our lunch.

After what felt like an interminable number of stairs later, we emerged onto the main concourse of the station. I stopped right at the top of the flight we had just climbed and tried to catch my breath. "You okay?" Taylor asked, concern in his voice.

"I'm fine," I told him. "Jesus bloody *Christ* that's a lot of stairs."

Taylor looked back down the flight of stairs. "Really? Doesn't look like that many to me."

"You've got longer legs than I do!" I pointed out.

"They're not *that* much longer than yours." He shifted his guitar case to his left hand and extended his right hand to me. "Come on, still a little bit of a walk to go. We'll be there before you know it."

My only response was a tired groan.

Mark was waiting for us beyond the ticket barrier, hands in the pockets of his jeans and a red scarf wound around his neck. Standing with him were two people I had never expected to be here, not in a million years.

"Oh my God," I whispered when I saw Jack and Schuyler standing not six feet away. I dropped my backpack and the calico bags on the floor and ran toward them, letting Jack catch me up in a tight embrace. "I missed you guys," I said as my brother and I hugged for the first time in almost six months.

"Aw Bel, we missed you too," Jack said. He released me, and Schuyler came in for a hug of her own.

"When did you guys get here?" I asked as Schuyler did her best to squeeze the breath right out of me.

"Sunday morning," Schuyler replied. "We hopped on a late-night flight from Los Angeles. Wanted to surprise you – looks like we succeeded!"

"I'll say," I agreed.

After our reunion, the five of us left the station and began the walk through Hyde Park to The Domain. "So what made you decide to come here now, rather than months ago?" I asked my brother. "We've been on tour for months already."

"This was the earliest we could both get a flight," he replied. "Schuyler couldn't get any leave from work until now. We thought it was just sensible to come down together."

"You, sensible?" I scoffed. "That'll be the day. How long are you here for?"

"Just the next few weeks," Schuyler answered. "We both have to be back in the States by the beginning of July. Until then I'm afraid you're stuck with us."

"No complaints from me," Taylor said. I knew he had missed hanging out with Schuyler as often as they had been able to before the move, nearly as much as I had.

The stage of The Domain and the grassed area directly in front was a hive of activity. Taylor's brothers were all onstage, going through their paces in preparation for the evening's show, with my bandmates doing some practice of their own. Kickoff was at five-thirty, with the concert

scheduled to last for at least two hours. Taylor and I had worked on the set list together a few afternoons before, and we had come up with what we considered to be a good combination of both bands' music along with a decent amount of cover songs. The ratio was something like two original songs to each cover.

"We got company!" Mark yelled out once we were within shouting distance of the stage.

"Did company bring lunch?" Zac yelled back.

"Yes, we brought lunch," Taylor answered, his voice pitched to carry. He dropped his backpack on the grass and unzipped it, pulling out a tightly-rolled blanket and uncinching the straps.

"Seeing as you're so eager to stuff your face, you can come help Issie and I sort everything out."

Pretty soon we had the blanket spread out over the grass and the fixings for lunch unpacked. We'd brought enough food and drink with us to feed and water a small army, and before long we'd all sorted out our lunches the way we liked them.

"Are you ready for tonight, Isobel?" Diana asked me. The core group (which for the time being was considered to be Taylor, Mark, Zoë, Diana and I) had stayed in front of the stage for lunch, everyone else having dispersed to different parts of The Domain.

I waited until I had swallowed my mouthful of chicken, cheese and tomato before I answered. "As ready as I can be. I want this show to be as amazing as we can possibly make it, though considering it's absolutely freezing that might be a bit of a tall order. I don't think we're going to get much of a crowd."

"You'd be surprised," Mark said. He reached for the jar of mustard, opened his sandwich and slathered even more of the condiment on. "You saw those girls hanging out in front of the Enmore last Thursday, right? The ones that had camped out overnight?"

"The insane ones, yeah."

"Multiply *that* by a good ten or twenty thousand. They're not going to give a damn that it'll be colder than a witch's tit out here tonight – sorry Mom," he appended hurriedly when Diana smacked the back of his head. "Believe me when I say that our fans will do whatever we tell or ask them to do. And if we ask them to come out for a charity concert in the freezing cold, then that's exactly what they're going to do. Especially when it's only going to cost them a couple of dollars to get in."

"Those girls are stupid," Zoë said without looking up from picking apart her peanut butter sandwich, summing up what we were all thinking.

"Zoë, that's not very nice," Diana scolded. "They're just..."

"Yeah?" Taylor prompted, a very wicked grin beginning to turn the corners of his mouth upward.

"They're just passionate," his mother finished.

"Yeah, that's *one* word for it," Mark said darkly, which set Taylor to snickering into his sandwich.

The rate of activity ramped up a few notches once we had all finished lunch and tidied everything away. My bandmates and I took over the stage for about half an hour, with Taylor's brothers joining in at the end for a quick jam session. Our rehearsal time culminated in Taylor being coaxed onstage for a raucous rendition of 30 Seconds To Mars' *The Kill*, with the twins on lead vocals.

All too soon, though, it was four-thirty and time to get ready to hit the stage for the final time this tour. I cast a glance back over my shoulder as I followed my bandmates backstage to our dressing room, and I swallowed hard. There was still a whole hour to go before the concert began, and already I could see little groups of people dotted around the grounds. The most we had played to each night on tour was a couple of thousand, a far cry from the twenty-five thousand that I knew The Domain could hold when a concert was scheduled to be held there. As much as I was looking forward to this show in particular, I was definitely more than a little apprehensive.

"You've got nothing to worry about," Mark assured me when I confided this to him, after we had all changed into our stage outfits. "For one, it won't just be the five of you girls onstage by

yourselves. It'll be just like the first Perth show. The three of us will be with you the whole time. And secondly, just remember who's watching."

"Thousands of obsessive women and screaming teenies?" I hazarded.

He raised an eyebrow at me. "Your *husband*, Isobel – my twin brother. I know he's insanely proud of you right now. Well, okay," he amended, "he's always been proud of you. But that you're getting up in front of all those people tonight, when we both know you're as freaked as hell over it? That's fucking *amazing* and something to be proud of. Trust me on that." He put his hands on my shoulders and looked at me, bright blue eyes identical to Taylor's burning into my hazel. "I've never been more proud to call you my sister, Bel," he told me. "Taylor is very lucky to have found you."

I managed a very faint smile. "Thanks, Mark."

About ten minutes after Mark and I had our moment, all eight of us took up our positions on the darkened stage. The grass in front of the stage was floodlit, and from my vantage point I could see what had to be thousands of people sitting on blankets or in picnic chairs, all of them bundled up against the cold. I gripped my microphone tightly in my right hand, my fingernails digging into my palm, and tried my best not to pass out or throw up.

Right on five-thirty the opening guitar chords and drumbeats of the first song of the night rang out, with Mark's vocals coming in as the stage lights went up a few seconds later.

"Let me reintroduce myself as a man with a cause...I've had a lot of time to think, and look at who we are...and I've got nothing left to say, but we've got to carry on...and I've got so much left to do, but I'll start with this song...why do they lie, why can't you see...get up everybody, stand up with me...

"Let's go everybody...let's go, tell 'em we're coming...let's go everybody...let's go, stand up with me...let's go, take the world with me..."

"You've got something on your mind, but you get in your way...don't tell us tomorrow, you better buy change today...and all we have is who we are...and all we know is pretending...you gotta think of something real, save a life worth spending...why do they lie, why can't you see...get up everybody, stand up with me...

"Let's go everybody...let's go, tell 'em we're coming...let's go everybody...let's go, stand up with me...let's go, take the world with me...

"So if you've got a torch to carry, hold it high...come take the world with me...let it burn, let it burn, let it light up the sky...stand up, get up, let's go...stand up, you gotta let them know...stand up, you gotta make them see...get up people, stand up with me...

"Let's go everybody...let's go, tell 'em we're coming...let's go everybody...let's go, so I'll sing...let's go everybody...let's go, tell 'em we're coming...let's go everybody...c'mon everybody, stand up with me...let's go, take the world with me...let's go, let's go..."

As the song ended, the concert precinct *exploded* in cheers and yells, and I fought back a cheer of my own. Even though we had only just started the show, that the crowd had responded so positively to the first song was one hell of a good sign.

"Well, that's quite the welcome," Mark said as the cheering died down somewhat. "Thank you, everyone, for coming out to the show this evening – I know it's very cold right now, which is why we want you all to get up and dance and jump around as much as you can. This show is all about us and you guys having fun, not freezing your backsides off." There was a ripple of laughter at this. "Are you all ready to rock?" he asked, and was answered with cheering from all quarters of the grounds. "Yeah, I think you guys are definitely ready." And with those words, the first beats and chords of Eskimo Joe's *Foreign Land* sounded out. "Let's see if you know this one."

As the show progressed, I realised something – with every song that we played, I grew less and less nervous. Mark had been right in what he had told the crowd – this show *was* about having

fun. It was something I kept in mind when the time came to perform my favourite of all the covers we had picked for the show.

"I want each and every one of you to raise your voices to the sky for this one," Mark said as Ayesha and Isaac played the first chords on their guitars. "Don't let us down now, I know you can do it!" He looked over at me, one eyebrow raised slightly, and I nodded before beginning to sing.

"I know, I know, I know, I know what you'd say...I know, I know, I know, I know all the games you play...I am, I am, I am, I am not afraid because...I know, I know, I know, I know what to say...I feel it, it's coming...it's here if you want it...

"I am out on my own...moving in shadow, nobody knows who I am...standing alone...and it's me but you can't see who I am...

"I'd like to rip you out of your skin...I'd switch us around and put you back in...and I know, I know, I know, I know what to say...but it couldn't be any other way...yes I feel it, it's coming...it's here if you want it...

"I am out on my own...moving in shadow, nobody knows who I am...standing alone...and it's me but you can't see who I am...

"So close but you don't know...and it's me but you can't see...so close but you don't know...and it's me but you can't see...so close but you don't know...and it's me but you can't see...so close but you don't know...and it's me but you can't see...

"So close but you don't know...it's me but you can't see...so close but you don't know...it's me but you can't see...I feel it, it's coming...it's here if you want it...

"I am out on my own...moving in shadow, nobody knows who I am...standing alone...and it's me but you can't see who I am...so close but you don't know...and it's me but you're never gonna see who I am...so close but you don't know...and it's me but you just can't see who I am..."

I didn't even try to fight back the grin that erupted when my solo ended. I knew it was good, and I figured the audience felt the same way – the cheers, yells and applause that went up were some of the loudest all night. I looked over at Mark and saw him mouth the words "*Well done*" to me. My response was a smile, one he readily returned.

After that, it almost felt as if the time flew past. Before I even realised it, it was time to perform the final song on the set list – one that had all eight of us on vocals.

"You have all been absolutely amazing tonight," Mark said as the opening chords and drumbeats sounded. "Thank you so much for coming out and having fun with us, even though it's absolutely freezing out here. We have just one more song for you tonight, one that you probably all know very well, and we want you all to sing it with us."

If there had been a roof on The Domain, I was quite willing to bet that the combined voices of Hanson, Sincerity and the audience would have lifted it right off.

"You found a home inside a heart and lost it all with broken feelings...I watch you churn inside your mind and put it out with double meanings...

"Well we're coming home...we've been searching for a place to call our own...yeah we're coming home...all you lonely vagabonds, looking for a place to call your own...

"With blackened face and tired hands, and all the memories are mistaken...a blinding light from up above for every truth that you've been faking...

"Well we're coming home...we've been searching for a place to call our own...yeah we're coming home...all you lonely vagabonds, looking for a place to call your own...

"Lonely days gonna get you callin'...lonely days gonna get you callin'...lonely days gonna get you callin'...lonely days gonna get you callin'...

"Coming home...we've been searching for a place to call our own...yeah we're coming home...all you lonely vagabonds, looking for a place to call your own...coming home...we've been searching

for a place to call our own...yeah we're coming home...all you lonely vagabonds, looking for a place to call your own..."

Backstage after we'd all taken our bows, not even ten minutes after the end of the show, I found a quiet spot off to one side and did my best to pull myself together. I had basically been running on adrenaline for the majority of the show, and now that I was offstage it had completely worn off. I'd started to feel a little dizzy and light-headed coming backstage, a feeling that had only intensified as I'd sat down. I bent over and propped my elbows up on my knees, rested my forehead on the palms of my hands and closed my eyes.

"Isobel, are you okay?"

I raised my head up just enough that I could see Avery crouched in front of me. Concern was plainly evident in her eyes.

"I don't know," I told her quietly. "I feel kinda...spinny and stuff."

"Like your head's gonna come flying off your shoulders?" she asked, and I nodded a little. I immediately regretted the movement, and a new sensation joined the dizziness and light-headed feelings. I now felt like I was going to be sick.

"Whoa, whoa, easy there," Avery said, alarm in her tone as I came close to pitching forward out of my seat. "Mark, go find Taylor – Isobel's not feeling very well," she called out to her brother.

The next thing I knew, Taylor had taken Avery's place at my feet. "Issie, stay with me okay?" he said to me. If I hadn't known better, I might have imagined he was pleading with me. It was my very last thought as I fell out of my chair onto the floor, my vision going fuzzy right before I closed my eyes.

The final sound I heard as I lost consciousness was one I never wanted to hear ever again – Taylor's voice, in a complete panic, calling out my name.

~ *fin* ~