

Desperately Wanting

Prologue

October 15 2025

He was in my dream again last night.

I see that face every time I fall asleep. And even though I haven't the faintest idea who he is, he seems so...familiar. Like I've known him my whole life. He's young, maybe mid to late teens, blonde hair, blue eyes, rather tall. Quite the pretty boy if I do say so myself. And I am ashamed to say it, but, well...I'm rather attracted to him.

Is it wrong to say that about someone who not only looks as if they are eight years your junior, but you're not even sure *exists*? That you're attracted to them? It has to be – I'm sure of it.

But I digress. Every time I've dreamed about him, he's asked for my help. Help with *what*, you ask? Well, that's just it. I don't know. He won't tell me what he needs my help with, and each and every time I've tried to ask him he just...disappears, right into thin air. And I find myself in what looks like a cemetery or churchyard. That, of course, is when I invariably wake up. Which of course is when I turn to this, my trusty journal, and jot down what I can remember – normally when I am not at my most coherent. Though really, is that any different from my life as it is now? Even my *mother* says I've been a little off the planet lately. And this is coming from the woman who has her head in the clouds 95% of the time anyway!

I wish I knew what the hell it meant. I wish I knew what I'm supposed to help him with. And I wish I knew his name.

Chapter 1

"Your charity case is here again," Gen muttered as I exited the storeroom, a large brown cardboard box nestled in my arms. She sat up on a high stool at the counter, her laptop computer open on the glass countertop; the screen displayed the MTV homepage. She had her long blonde hair pulled back into a messy bun, secured with an elastic band and a couple of plastic chopsticks.

"Don't call him that," I chided. I pulled up a stool of my own and dumped the box on the countertop, rattling the glass. It was yet another slow day at Arcana, the café and New Age bookstore that Gen and I, along with my mother and my two sisters, own and operate. Gen might have been quite content to sit there and lower her intelligence by about ten points – staring at MTV for a few hours will do that to you – or play *Quake* against the computer geeks upstairs across the LAN we'd had hooked up during the summer, but I would rather do something that is actually productive. Like go through the boxes of old *Rolling Stone* magazines that my mother, for some strange reason, keeps in the storeroom.

"What am I *supposed* to call him, then?" Gen asked, her tone laced with hints of irritation. "He comes in here at one every afternoon, right on the button, and he sits at the same table in the corner. He won't talk to anyone."

"He talks to *me*," I said defensively as I opened the box. A couple of moths fluttered out of their dark prison, along with a cloud of fine dust. I coughed and sneezed as the dust settled over everything. *Hello allergies*, I thought. Gen lifted her computer out of the way.

"Nice *going* genius," she barked scathingly as she wiped the dust off the counter and set her computer back down.

"Oh shut up," I shot back, too focused on my running nose and stinging eyes to think of a better retort.

"I know he talks to you," Gen said, continuing her previous rant. "But you're the only one he'll say even just a couple of words to. Anyone else, he just keeps scribbling away in that book of his." She pushed her laptop away. "So what the hell is in there, anyway?" she asked, suddenly curious.

"Old magazines," I answered. I lifted a stack out of the box and set it on the counter. "This one's new though," I said, tapping the topmost magazine. "Last month's issue. Ma must have put it in there by mistake."

"I doubt it," Gen disagreed. She took the magazine and started flicking through it. "You do know what next Wednesday is, right?" she asked without looking up from an article about The Beatles.

"Aside from being my twenty-fifth birthday?" I asked dryly. "Yeah, thanks for reminding me. I'm getting old you know..."

"You? Old?" Gen snorted. "As if! I'm the one who's turning twenty-eight in January." She looked back down at the magazine. "No, aside from that."

I shrugged. "No idea."

Gen sighed a little. "Next week it'll be twenty-five years since my brother died," she said quietly.

"Oh..." I bit my bottom lip. "I'm sorry Gen."

"Don't be," she said dismissively. "It wasn't your fault, obviously. I don't remember him anyway. But..." She closed the magazine and set it aside. "It does mean that I won't be able to work next week; I'm going to Kansas City with my mother on Tuesday. You think you can get Kate to rearrange my schedule?"

"I should be able to."

"Thanks."

"Anytime, Gen."

One would think that, going by the way that Gen and I act around one another, we've been friends all our lives. In fact, we've only known each other since high school, when she moved here with her mother from Missouri, just a hop, skip and a jump away from where I've lived all of my life, in Tulsa, Oklahoma. After we'd gotten to know each other, we discovered that we had a lot in common. We both loved old music from the late twentieth and early twenty-first century – in particular Switchfoot, Linkin Park and Maroon 5 – we were both addicted to *Survivor* and old *Charmed* reruns, and we had both lost our fathers at a young age. Gen's dad died when she was three, while mine passed away when I was six.

But there is a lot that I've only discovered during the past couple of years – such as Gen's only brother dying when he was just seventeen. Gen was almost three years old when it happened, and believes that, indirectly, it may have contributed to her father's death. It's only a theory of course, but a sound theory in my opinion. She also can't cook – the first time she tried making pancakes in our apartment's kitchen, she set the stovetop on fire. I have since barred her from making anything more complicated than salad.

I slid down off of my seat and combed my hair through with my fingers. "I'm going to go over and talk to him," I said. "I can't sit still any longer."

"Suit yourself," Gen said absently; she had since returned to scanning the MTV website, her glasses sliding down her nose.

I crossed over to the sole occupied table and pulled the unoccupied chair out. "Hey, mind if I join you?" I asked.

He looked up then, looking a little shocked that I'd come over to talk to him. "Uh, yeah, sure," he said.

I smiled and sat down facing him. "You know, we've never been formally introduced," I said idly. "I'm Rosaria."

He smiled a little. "I'm Taylor."

"That's a...unusual name," I commented. "No offence, but I've just never heard it used as a first name before."

"None taken." He looked over at where Gen sat at the counter. "Who's that?" he asked.

"That's just one of my co-workers, Gen Walker."

"Oh." He looked down at his notebook. "She reminds me of someone I used to know a long time ago."

"Who's that?"

"My sister." He glanced at his watch. "I better go; my mom'll be wondering where I am." He closed his notebook and stood up, pushing his chair out behind him and walking away. Left on the table was what looked like an article from a newspaper. I reached across the table and picked it up, deciding I would keep it for the next time he came in, when the date written across the top caught my eye: *23 October 2000*. I frowned; I didn't know how old Taylor was, but I assumed that he couldn't be older than eighteen. Why then would he be carrying around an article that was nearly twenty-five years old?

"What's that?" Gen asked as she came up alongside me.

"Just something that kid left behind; his name's Taylor, by the way. So now that we know his name, you can't go around calling him a 'charity case' anymore. All right?"

"Fine, fine. Can I have a look?" I wordlessly handed her the piece of newsprint, and she scanned it. "Oh my *goodness...*" she whispered.

"What?"

"I...I can't say it. It's just too awful..." She pushed the article back at me and headed off toward the café entrance.

"Where're you going?"

"Outside. I need some fresh air."

I watched her go, then walked to my post behind the counter and laid the newsprint out on the countertop. What I read then chilled me to my very core.

The American music community is in shock this morning after the sudden death overnight of teen musician Taylor Hanson, lead singer of sibling trio Hanson, during a concert in Kansas City, Missouri. The seventeen-year-old collapsed onstage halfway through last night's performance at the Crown Center and could not be revived, and was pronounced dead on arrival at Truman Medical Center at nine-forty-five pm. A post-mortem will be conducted today to determine the cause of death.

"Holy *shit*," I whispered. No wonder Gen had been shocked – reading about something like that would frighten anyone.

I looked at the date that had been written at the top of the article again. October 23 2000...I had been born the day before. That in itself creeped me out. While one life had ended, mine had only just begun.

I shook my head. It was just so wrong. He had had his entire life ahead of him, and to have it cut short literally in the blink of an eye...it was just unthinkable.

I heard the door open mere minutes later, looking up from surfing the MTV archives on Gen's laptop – Gen was still more or less missing-in-action – to see my mother walk into the café, followed by my sister Mahalia. "Hey Ma," I said by way of a greeting. "Hey Lia."

"Hey Ria," Mahalia replied.

I hopped down off of my stool and crossed around to the other side of the counter, the article in my hand. "Ma, can I talk to you?" I asked. It wasn't a request so much as a thinly veiled demand – I knew that my mother had been quite the Hanson fan back in the day, so it was safe to assume that she might have been at that concert.

"Sure, what about?"

We sat down at one of the tables, and I took a deep breath. "Did you go to a concert the day I was born?" I asked. "A Hanson concert, to be specific?"

An expression of deep sadness painted itself on my mother's face, and I knew – she had been there that night. "Yes," she said finally. "I was in the third row from the stage. Why do you ask?"

"What happened that night?"

"Rosaria, please...it was hard enough being there when it happened. Please don't make me relive it."

"Ma, please, I want to know."

She sighed. "All right. But it happened almost twenty-five years ago, so you will have to excuse me if I leave out some of the details." When next she spoke, her voice was sadder than I had ever heard it. "There was absolutely no warning – one second he was acting completely normal, and the next...he was lying on the stage, completely still; we all thought it was a practical joke, and a couple of the girls around me started laughing. When one of their backup musicians bolted to the front of the stage and started CPR, that was when we realised that it was serious. It wasn't a joke." She drew in a shaky breath. "I think I speak for everyone who was there when I say that it was the worst night of our lives. And when the news broke the next morning that he had died...I think a little part of all of us died too."

"I'm sorry Ma," I said. "Did they ever find out how he died?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

I nodded, deciding to leave it be. It was more than obvious by this point that she was most certainly not ready to deal with her memories of that long-ago night. Not that I could really blame her, to be honest. I'd be feeling the same way if I had witnessed the death of someone I respected and admired.

Business picked up not five minutes later; Gen wandered back inside right after the afternoon rush commenced, smelling faintly of smoke and wearing a rather vacant expression. I put two and two together and surmised that Gen had fallen back on her old habit of chain smoking joint after joint until she was sufficiently numb to the world around her. I only hoped that she remembered that I wasn't going to let her into the apartment until she had come down off of her high; to further facilitate this, I fished around in her handbag until I found her keys. I slipped her copies of the keys to our apartment off of her key ring and dropped them into my pocket, making a mental note to tell Gen that I was locking her out. The reason for this was that while Gen wasn't violent when she was stoned, she did tend to eat everything in sight.

After my shift ended at five, I headed home and up to the apartment, shoving my key into the lock and jiggling it around. The building that Gen and I lived in was old, and the locks were extremely temperamental. It annoyed the shit out of both of us, particularly since the building superintendent didn't view lock-smithing as a high priority. I only hoped that he was willing to deal with two very irate twenty-somethings if someone broke in and made off with some of our gear. The lock clicked, and I turned the doorknob and let myself inside, closing the door behind me.

It didn't take me long to realise that something was up. I don't know exactly what it was, but something just felt...off. There was someone or something in here, and I intended to find out who or what they were, and how in the world they had found their way into my apartment.

The smart thing to do in this situation would have been to call the police, but I didn't exactly have the time or patience for that. Instead, I grabbed Gen's battered hockey stick from beside the door and started searching the apartment. I checked the kitchen, bathroom, laundry room, Gen's room and our poky little study, before slowly approaching my bedroom door, brandishing the hockey stick in both hands. I didn't care who or what was in my bedroom, they were trespassing. I grabbed hold of the doorknob and slowly turned it, pushing the door inward.

On first glance, there wasn't anything particularly amiss. My bed was neatly made, my desk was neat and tidy, the books on my bookshelf were lined up in orderly rows, and all of my CDs sat in their tower between the head of my bed and my desk. Even the row of shoes – two pairs of sneakers, my black Doc Martens, three pairs of high heels, one pair of ankle boots and one pair of ratty bunny slippers – lined up in front of my armoire was neat. It wasn't until my gaze swept the room a second time that I realised that my bedroom window was wide open – a window that opened onto the fire escape outside. In the rush to get to work that morning, I had forgotten to close my bedroom window.

"You, Rosaria Hill, are an *idiot*," I said to myself. I shook my head at my own stupidity and went to close it. I climbed up on my bed, wincing at the creak the iron frame gave as I placed all of my weight on it, and reached over to pull the window shut. And in the process I felt my bare right arm brush across what felt like someone's shoulder. I fell back onto my bed and stared up into a pair of wide blue eyes.

"Who the *fuck* are you, and what the *hell* are you doing in my bedroom?" I asked after I had gotten over the shock of seeing someone other than myself in my bedroom. "No, never mind that. If you aren't out of here before I count to ten, I'm calling the police and having you arrested for trespassing."

"Please don't." I blinked – that voice was strangely familiar. Where had I heard it before? "It's not like they'd be able to see me, anyway."

"And why shouldn't I? You broke into my apartment."

"The window was open."

"Makes no difference. You still broke in. And I am well within my rights to call the cops on you." I sized them up. "You're young, you could probably get away with a warning. Now get out. I'm giving you ten seconds."

"Rosaria, please." They sighed. "I...I need your help."

Chapter 2

"How did you know my name?" I asked suspiciously.

"You told me what it was this afternoon."

I blinked. "You know what? I do want to know who you are, so I know what name to give when I call the cops."

"Taylor. My name's Taylor."

"And you say I told you my name this afternoon?" I asked.

"Yes."

Right, *now* we were getting somewhere. I pulled the folded-up piece of newsprint from my pocket and handed it over. "I believe this is yours, then," I said, my tone as even as I could make it. "Now tell me – how did you find out where I live, and why the hell do you need my help? Unless it's help with homework or something like that, I'm not entirely sure that I'm the right person to ask."

"I followed you home once."

Okay, now *that* was creepy. "You followed me home?"

"Yes."

I shuddered. It was bad enough that I had some kid in my bedroom, but they'd followed me *back* here? Jesus *Christ*...

"And I need your help, because...well, it's a little hard to explain."

I sat up against my pillows and crossed my arms over my chest. "Well, I have plenty of time before my roommate gets home. Now get talking."

"I assume you read this?" he asked, holding up the article.

"Yes, I did."

"Nosy parker," he muttered. "Well, it has everything to do with this. I need your help because I am trying to find my way to where I'm supposed to be. I..." He sighed. "Twenty-five years ago next Wednesday, the last-ever Hanson concert took place, on the twenty-second of October 2000. Your mother was there, third row from the front." He smiled wryly. "I never forget a face Rosaria, and you happen to look just like your mother did when she was younger. Consider that a compliment." The smile disappeared as he continued his story. "This article...it's about me. I died that night."

I froze. *I died that night...* I turned that little detail over and over in my head. "You're a ghost," I said flatly. Well, this is great. Just fucking *wonderful*. I have Taylor Hanson's ghost sitting in my bedroom.

"Not quite."

"Well then, what *are* you?"

"Trapped." When I cocked an eyebrow in disbelief, he sighed and elaborated. "I can't come back to life because I died more than twenty years ago, and the post mortem would have put paid to that anyway. And I can't go where I'm *supposed* to be, for reasons even I haven't worked out yet. I've spent the past quarter of a century trying to figure that out."

Interesting. "And you say you need my help?" There was something about that little phrase that was strangely familiar. He nodded wordlessly. "Why me?"

"I don't know."

"Oh that's just *wonderful*."

He let out an exasperated sigh and raked his hands through his hair. "Look Rosaria, I did not ask for this. I did not ask to die onstage, on my own brother's fifteenth birthday no less. I did not ask

to be trapped between Heaven and Earth for almost a quarter of a century. And believe me, I most certainly did *not* ask to follow you around for at *least* six weeks, trying to work up the nerve to ask for your help."

"I never *said* you asked for any of it." I paused. "You died on your brother's birthday?"

He nodded again. "Yes," he said finally. "A wonderful birthday present, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"Yeah, well, neither would I." He looked down at his feet. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"Not really, no."

"I didn't think you would." He looked over at the laptop computer that sat, lid closed, on my desk.

"Do you have the Internet hooked up on that?" he asked.

"Yeah, of course I do."

"Go to Google Image Search and type in my name."

I frowned, but got up off my bed and sat down at my desk, fired up my laptop and opened up Internet Explorer. From there, I surfed over to Google Image Search and typed in *taylor hanson*, and hit the enter key. A page of miniature snapshots popped up onscreen, and I scanned them, looking for the most likely-looking photograph.

"Oh Goddess," I said when I had chosen a photograph, and compared it with the teenage boy who was currently perched cross-legged on the end of my bed, looking down at his jean-clad knees.

"Kid, either you have a twin...or this really is you."

"If I had a twin, I would have known about it by now," Taylor muttered sourly without looking up.

"I'd watch your mouth if I were you." I turned around in my swivel chair and faced him. "I'm not totally convinced yet," I said. "But that doesn't mean that I don't *want* to help you out. I just need a little more proof first."

"Do you know where the city cemetery is?"

"Well, yeah, of course I do. My father's buried there."

He looked up at last. "Meet me there tomorrow morning. I'll show you the exact proof you need."

* * *

I have always hated cemeteries. There is an overwhelming sense of grief and undeniable pain that pervades every corner, and a chill in the air even in summer. And yet, it was in the city cemetery that I found myself the next morning, on the instructions of an apparent figment of my admittedly overactive-at-times imagination.

I stared down at the black granite headstone, its golden lettering still unfaded and completely legible after nearly twenty-five years. There was a small bunch of sunflowers at its base, tied with a length of bright blue ribbon. The inscription was fairly simple.

Jordan Taylor Hanson

March 14 1983 – October 22 2000

Aged 17 years

Beloved brother, son and friend

"Now do you believe me?"

I turned around to face him. He stood a few feet behind me, hands shoved in the pockets of his jacket, looking down at his feet. A breeze had picked up, blowing his long blonde hair about.

"I do now," I replied. "This place...I've been dreaming about it." I let out a slightly hysterical laugh. "Now I remember where I'd seen you before. You've been in my dreams every night for the past...Christ, I don't know *how* long." He merely shrugged. "Are you all right?" I asked tentatively. He shook his head. "This is so hard for me," he said quietly. "This place...it's nothing more than a reminder of what I've lost, and how far I still have to go. I am stuck in this God-forsaken city until I figure out just what's stopping me from going where I'm supposed to be."

"Maybe we should go," I suggested. He didn't say a word, merely turned around and led the way to the world outside. My car was parked right outside the cemetery, and we both got in after I had unlocked the doors.

"There's something I've been wondering about, ever since you left yesterday," I said as I drove away from the curb. "Where do you go exactly? I mean, you can't be wandering the streets all night..."

"That's all I do sometimes," he answered. "Nobody except for you and Gen can see me, so I'm free to do whatever the hell I like." He was quiet a little while. "Sometimes I head back home when I'm tired of walking around. My mom kept my room the way it used to be, and there's always a window open in there – I don't dare go in any other way when she's at home. I don't want to freak her out."

"Is it just your mother living there?" I asked, and he nodded. "What about your dad?"

"He died a year after I did."

I could have kicked myself. "Oh Jesus, I'm sorry," I apologised. "I had no idea..."

"Don't worry about it," he said, sounding almost dismissive. "It's mostly my fault, anyway."

I reflexively slammed on the brakes, and Taylor jerked forward in his seat, narrowly escaping slamming face-first into the dashboard. “Jesus *Christ*, woman!” he barked as he settled himself again. “What the hell was that for?”

I stared at him. “How can it be your fault? You died before him!”

He let out the bitterest-sounding laugh I had ever heard – it sent a chill down my spine and raised goose bumps on my arms. “Rosaria, believe me...it is pretty much all my fault. It’s hard to believe, I know – and trust me when I say that it was completely unintentional.” He glanced down at the watch I wore around my right wrist. “Is your roommate going to be at home right now?”

“Yeah, probably. Why?”

“We’ll go to my mom’s house, then. There won’t be anyone home – I’ll tell you there. We’ll have to clear out by three, though, otherwise she’ll think someone’s broken in.”

“*You* break in,” I pointed out. He didn’t say a word. Sighing, I released the brakes and resumed driving.

When we had arrived, Taylor led me around to the back of the house. He knelt down on the wooden decking and felt around behind a potted fern. “Gotcha you little piece of shit,” he muttered as he pulled a key out from its hiding place. “Come on in,” he said as he unlocked the door, pocketing the key and walking in.

“I don’t think we should be doing this,” I said warily.

“Oh, relax,” he said. “Nobody lives behind this place – we’re safe. And close the door behind you.”

“Yes Your Royal Highness,” I said sarcastically, doing as I was told. As soon as I had closed the back door, I followed him upstairs and into what I assumed was his old room. It wasn’t much – a bed, an old wardrobe, a bookshelf piled with old books, and an old wooden desk with a swivel chair before it. A positively ancient-looking laptop computer was on top of the desk. Faded

posters and dusty framed photographs adorned the walls. I sat down in the swivel chair backwards and crossed my arms on the back.

"All right, spill," I said, eyeing Taylor. He was lying down on the bed, tossing a baseball in the air and catching it. "Why in the world is it *your* fault that your father died?"

He sighed and closed his eyes. "The day it...happened, I wasn't feeling all that well. I'm still not sure why. I mentioned it to my parents that morning, and..." He trailed off, seeming to think.

"They made you go onstage that night?"

He stared at me. "What? No, they'd never do something like that!" he said indignantly. "No, my mother insisted that we cancel that night's show, but my dad told me to wait and see if I was feeling any better by show time." He let out another sigh. "Worst mistake I ever made. Halfway through the concert, it just...gave out on me."

"What did?"

"This." He tapped his chest, before continuing with his story. "When I hit the stage, I felt like my spirit was literally being torn from my body – I think that's why they couldn't bring me back. It's sort of like a *Matrix* thing."

"A *what*?"

"You can't honestly tell me that you've never seen *The Matrix*." When I shook my head, he let out a low whistle. "Basically, the principle is that the body cannot live without the mind or spirit – whatever. It just...stops. And when that happens..."

"Game over," I finished.

"Exactly." He resumed tossing the baseball in the air. "I was pronounced DOA at a quarter to ten in the evening on October twenty-second 2000. They'd done all they could – I should know, I watched the whole damn thing. Creeped me out, actually."

"And what does all of this have to do with your father dying?"

"From what I've been able to figure out, Dad believed that the whole damn thing was his fault. He hadn't forced me to go onstage that night, but he hadn't sided with my mother, either. It didn't matter what anyone said, he pretty much blamed himself." He looked over at me. "If I hadn't died, my father would still be alive."

"How did he die?"

"Car accident. Ploughed right into a tree."

"Ouch."

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

There was quiet for some time, as I tried to take in all that had been said. "What about the rest of your family?" I asked.

"They're all scattered nationwide. Only my mother and my youngest sister still live here – I have two brothers living in New York, the third lives in Louisiana, and two of my sisters live in Florida."

"How old's your youngest sister?"

"She'll be twenty-eight in January."

"Really?" He nodded. "That's pretty cool, actually – Gen's turning twenty-eight in January as well."

"I know." Taylor dropped the baseball on the floor and sat up. "There's something that Gen has never told you about herself. And I normally wouldn't tell you, but I really think you should know – just as long as you don't tell her how you found out."

"All right."

He closed his eyes. "Gen Walker is my youngest sister. Her real name is Zoë Hanson."

Chapter 3

The shock I felt upon hearing that my best friend for over ten years wasn't who I thought she was lasted less than a week. By the time my birthday rolled around, I had a rather lengthy list of questions that I wanted to ask her. However, I hadn't seen her all that week – either she had gone to Missouri, like she had said she would, or she was laying low until she judged that it was safe enough to show her face.

But that wasn't something I had the time – or the inclination – to worry about right now. I was due at my mother's house for dinner – something I normally tried to get out of, being that I worked with my mother and therefore didn't feel the need to spend the evening with her, but I had a slightly ulterior motive this time.

"Happy birthday, Rosaria," Ma said as I walked into her kitchen. She stood in front of the cooktop, her back to me, stirring something in a large pot. She looked back over her shoulder at me and smiled. "Genevieve isn't here?"

"She had to go to Kansas City with her mom," I replied. "What's for dinner?"

Ma laughed. "Oh Ria, you're just like your father – always thinking with your stomach."

"I do *not*," I said in mock indignation.

"Mom's right," my sister Katia said as she walked in. She stopped and looked at me. "And really, with all the food you eat, I'm surprised you're still as thin as you are..."

"Katia, be nice to your sister – it's her birthday after all," Ma scolded.

"Yeah, Kate – I'd actually like to get through one family dinner without either you or Mahalia ripping on me," I said.

"Rosaria, that goes for you too," Ma scolded. "Honestly, the two of you..."

After dinner – fettuccine and Tuscan meatballs, with chocolate and cherry fudge cake for dessert – I followed my mother into the living room; Mahalia and Katia had disappeared upstairs to Katia’s room. “Ma, would I be able to borrow some of your CDs?” I asked as she sat down on the couch and turned the TV on.

“Which ones?” she asked.

I let out a quiet sigh. “Your Hanson CDs. Before you say anything, I know that today isn’t the best day for me to be asking, but I want to know more about them. And a good starting point is their music. I’ve never heard any of it – you never played it when we were growing up, and I don’t recall hearing any of their songs on the radio. And you never told us anything about them. I honestly wouldn’t know the first place to look.” That last part was a lie, and I damn well knew it – I had a veritable font of information at my disposal, in the form of one Jordan Taylor Hanson. Still, my mother wasn’t to know that, and I wasn’t about to tell her that I – or Gen, for that matter – was more or less seeing things.

“Oh, I suppose,” she said, sounding rather reluctant. “But please be careful with them. They’re in your old bedroom.”

I nodded my thanks and headed upstairs to my old room. It was right at the back of the house, two rooms away from the bathroom, and was filled with assorted junk, most of which belonged to me. What I had been unable to fit into my poky Hyundai Excel the day I’d moved out of home, I had left behind. Sitting on my old desk was a dark blue cardboard box that had a white adhesive label with *Rhiannon Chalmers* written on it in black marker stuck to its side. I stepped up to the desk and lifted off the lid of the box, revealing seven plastic CD jewel cases, a hardcover notebook and a pile of newspaper clippings. Satisfied that I had found what I had gone upstairs to get, I closed the box, picked it up and headed back downstairs.

At home later that evening, I liberated my laptop from its usual home on my desk and carried it into the living room. Instead of sitting on the couch like I normally did, I sat myself down on the floor, my laptop on the rug before me, and I began the process of loading each album into iTunes.

"What're you doing?"

"Jesus *Christ!*" I yelled, dropping the CD case that I'd been holding. Looking up, I saw Taylor crouched down in front of me, a mildly amused smile on his face. "God Taylor, don't scare me like that!"

"Sorry Ria." I smiled upon hearing my favourite nickname; he had taken to calling me that lately, claiming it to be easier than saying my full first name. He scooted around to sit next to me and picked up one of the CDs I had already loaded into iTunes. "I haven't seen this in so long," he said, sounding wistful. The CD he held was called *This Time Around*. "It was the last album we ever recorded together."

"What song should I play?" I asked. "I've never heard any of your music before; my mother wouldn't play it in the house when I was growing up."

"Not to sound conceited, but you're in for a treat," Taylor said; he grinned for the first time that I had seen and pulled my laptop toward him. "Hmm...play *This Time Around*."

"As you command," I joked, and skipped through the tracks to find the one that he had requested, pressing the space bar on the keyboard to play it. As the song played, I noted that Taylor had closed his eyes, and was tapping his fingertips on the floor to the beat. I could already tell that he liked the song a lot.

"So where is my little sister tonight?" Taylor asked as a song called *Runaway Run* started; I turned the volume down a little so that we could have a proper conversation.

"Kansas City," I replied. "Or that's what she tells me every year, anyway. She'll be back either late tonight or early tomorrow morning – stoned out of her brain, if I figure correctly."

"I wish she didn't have to do that," he said quietly. He shook his head, seemingly in dismay. "So how has your birthday been so far?"

"Oh, not bad." I chuckled. "You know, it's funny – if my mother *hadn't* gone to that concert, I most likely would have been born at the end of January 2001, rather than on October twenty-second."

"Really?"

"Yeah." I nodded. "I don't think my mother was expecting to have to go to the hospital on what should have been one of the best nights of her life." I drew my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them. "Seeing her favourite band in concert for the first time – and last time, as it turned out – having a great time until all hell well and truly broke loose..." I sighed. "But yeah, today's been pretty good. I had to work today, so my mother is giving me the day off tomorrow to make up for it."

The two of us talked until late. As the clock on the wall above the TV chimed midnight, I heard a loud knocking on the apartment door, and a voice yelling through from the corridor.

"Rosaria, I know you're up – open the damn door!" I heard Gen yelling. "I don't have my keys!"

"You'd better hide until I can calm her down," I said as I gathered up my mother's CDs and my laptop, and carried them through to my room. "She might not take kindly to the fact that you've been here all night."

"Good point," Taylor agreed; he had followed me. "Would I be able to use your computer?"

"Yeah, sure. Just keep the volume down." He nodded his agreement, and I left my room, closing the door behind me. The pounding at the door had grown even louder, and for some reason I could hear Gen crying. "Jesus Gen, hold your fucking horses!" I yelled as I ran to the door and opened it. "It was unlocked you idiot, why didn't you come in?"

"I don't know," Gen replied; she had calmed down rather quickly, I felt. She had semi-dried tears on her cheeks, and her blue eyes were red-rimmed and slightly bloodshot. "I just thought that this late, it'd be locked. That's all."

"Well, it wasn't. Here, come on; wash your face and I'll make you some coffee."

"Thanks Ria." She gave me a tremulous smile and headed through into the bathroom; I soon heard the water running, and I walked into the kitchen. I quickly had a pot of espresso coffee brewing, and was pouring the dark liquid into two large mugs as Gen emerged from the bathroom. She carried a washcloth with her; as she sat down at the small table in the corner of the kitchen, she pressed it over her eyes.

"How are you feeling?" I asked as I spooned sugar into one of the mugs – Gen liked her coffee black and rather strong, while I preferred a little milk and a good deal of sugar. It helped take away some of the bitterness.

Gen let out a bitter laugh and took the washcloth away from her eyes so that she could see me. "I feel like I've had my heart ripped out of my chest, kicked around and then shoved back in." She gave a quiet sigh. "I honestly can't believe it's been twenty-five years..."

I didn't say anything as I sat down across from her and slid her coffee across the table. "How's your mom holding up?"

"As well as anyone can expect, for someone who lost both their only son and their husband within thirteen months of one another." She put the washcloth down on the table and took her coffee mug into both hands. "I wish she would move out of that house. It's just too big, now that I've moved out. I mean, it was a big house even when I was still at home, but at least it was the two of us. Now that she's the only one still there..." She shook her head. "I just wish I could talk some sense into her, but she's stubborn as all hell. Walker family trait, I'm afraid."

*You mean **Hanson** family trait*, I almost said, but I held my tongue. I doubted that Gen would take kindly to my interrogation on a night like tonight. *I have to stop calling her that – her name is Zoë*, I reminded myself.

We sat there in silence, drinking our coffee, until around three in the morning. “I had better get some sleep if I’m going to be up for work this morning,” Gen said as she got up from the table. “Thanks for listening, Ria – I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome, Gen,” I replied.

* * *

“Your name isn’t really Gen Walker, is it?”

Gen looked up from reading the newspaper; her glasses were perched on the very end of her nose. I had chosen to wait until Saturday to begin questioning my roommate, as Arcana was closed on the weekends. “I beg your pardon?” she asked.

“‘Gen Walker’ is just an alias, isn’t it?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Rosaria.”

“You do, and you damn well know it.” I got up from the table. “Where’s your driver’s licence?”

“It’s in my wallet, where it *usually* is,” Gen replied. She closed the newspaper and set it aside.

“What is *wrong* with you?” she asked me as I got up and headed to the kitchen counter, where Gen’s wallet sat next to her cell phone.

“Oh, nothing,” I said nonchalantly. I snapped Gen’s wallet open and pawed through the cards, old train and bus tickets and numerous assorted bits and pieces, finally pulling her driver’s licence out into the open. I flipped it over – the back of it had been staring me in the face – and examined it.

The name on it read *Zoë Genevieve Hanson*.

"I *knew* it!" I crowed triumphantly. "Now I know why you never let me see your licence. It wasn't because your licence photo always looks like shit – it's because Gen Walker isn't even your real name."

Gen stalked over and snatched her licence and wallet from my hands. "I'll ask you *not* to go poking around in my belongings, *Rosaria*," she said, glaring at me. With that, she turned her back and left the kitchen. Moments later, I heard her bedroom door slamming closed.

"That was really the wrong way to go about it, Ria."

I looked over to see Taylor sitting at the table in Gen's spot. He had one eyebrow raised at me, his blue eyes stormy. He didn't look very happy.

"Well, pardon me for wanting to know the truth, *Jordan*," I said, addressing him by his first name.

He obviously chose to ignore this. "When she's calmed down, apologise to her. Then ask her *nicely* why she's kept who she is a secret."

"You don't know?"

"No. Though I do have a rough idea of why she chose to adopt my father's name as her surname."

I gave Gen about two hours to calm herself, remembering that it had taken her about that long to cool down the last time she got angry, before venturing over to her room and knocking on her bedroom door. "Gen?" I asked. "Can I talk to you, please?"

"No."

"Gen, c'mon – I know you're pissed off. I would be too. But you can't ignore me forever, you know. We *do* work together."

There was quiet for a little while. Finally, Gen's door opened, and she looked through the gap at me. "I didn't want you to find out that way," she said quietly. "I...I wanted to tell you myself, but I didn't know how."

I could hardly blame her for that. "Look, Gen...if it's any consolation, I'm sorry for being such a bitch. But you know how I get when I've got a theory about something." I cocked an eyebrow. "So what do you want me to call you now?"

"I'd prefer it if you just kept calling me Gen. There is only one person now who I want to call me Zoë, and that's my mother." She opened the door wider. "I suppose you know now why I bolted when I saw that article."

"Yeah."

"It just...it triggered something in me. I know I wasn't even three when he died, but I do remember it pretty damn well. And seeing that article...it felt like I was losing him all over again." She shook her head. "And the worst part is that I never got to say goodbye."

"What if you had that chance?" I turned slightly away, toward the living room, and nodded to Taylor, who had moved from his seat at the table to the couch. He got up and crossed the apartment to where I stood.

Gen now had tears in her eyes. "I would give *anything* to be able to see him again," she said quietly.

"Come out here," I said, and Gen opened the door fully. She took just one step before she stopped in her track. Her mouth dropped wide open.

"Hey Zo," Taylor said quietly. He gave his youngest sister a small smile.

"Taylor?" Gen whispered.

Chapter 4

"Yeah." Taylor nodded. "It's me."

"I think I need to sit down," Gen murmured faintly.

Taylor immediately went to his sister's side and put an arm around her shoulders. "*Get her a glass of water,*" he mouthed as he guided her into the living room. The last thing I saw before heading into the kitchen was the two of them sitting on the living room couch, Taylor with his arms around his sister, and Gen crying into Taylor's shoulder. It wasn't hard to tell that she had truly missed him.

"I can't believe how *long* it's been," Gen was saying as I sat down on the couch next to her, setting the two glasses I carried down on the coffee table as I did so. She picked up one of the glasses and took a small sip of water. "I can hardly believe that you're even *here*..." She swiped haphazardly at the semi-dried tear tracks that were still visible on her face. "How long?" she asked, her tone turning vaguely accusing.

"What?"

"How long have you been hanging around this place without telling me you were here?" She paused. "And why the *fuck* didn't you tell me that you had been coming to Arcana every day?"

"I've been stuck here for twenty-five years, Zoë," Taylor said evenly. "And would you have believed me if I'd told you who I was?"

"Of course I would have!" At Taylor's raised eyebrow, Gen sighed. "No, I suppose not. Though I did wonder after you left that article behind." Gen nodded to me. "Ria showed it to me after you left that afternoon."

"Ah."

A tense silence descended on us, until Taylor broke it. "So why have you been using Dad's name as your surname?" he asked.

"For privacy. If I'd showed up at school for the first time calling myself Zoë Hanson, it probably would have been hell to say the least. There are still people who deride the name of Hanson, and there are still people who want to say how *sorry* they are." She rolled her eyes. "So I took on my middle name and Dad's name – Mom did the same. I've gotten so used to being called Gen Walker that I don't even bat an eyelid anymore. The only person who *doesn't* call me that is Mom."

"Except in public."

"Yeah." Gen nodded. Her gaze trailed down to her hands, and she promptly sat on them. She had recently kicked her long-time habit of biting her fingernails whenever she was nervous or had a spare moment. "It sort of defeats the purpose of having an alias if she slips up and calls me by my real name."

"So what now?" I asked.

Gen raked her hair back off her face. "Well, I'm supposed to go to my mom's place for dinner tomorrow evening..."

"I can come with you if you like," I offered.

"You don't mind?" she asked, and I shook my head. "Okay. Sounds good to me."

I watched the two of them for a little while, before standing up. "I might let you guys catch up," I said as I left the living room, heading for the bathroom.

I closed the bathroom door behind me and went to the vanity, leaning on it and staring down into the sink. The pale blue porcelain was stained bright red, especially around the drain, the remnants of my last attempt at disguising the dark brown that was my natural hair colour.

"You really don't know how lucky you are, Gen," I whispered. Gen may have lost both her father and one of her brothers, but she was at least getting to see the brother she had lost again. I would never be able to see my father again, short of losing my own life. And that was something I did not plan on any time soon.

Losing interest in the dye-stained sink, I allowed my gaze to travel up to the reflection of my face. As much as I tried to deny it, what Taylor had told me before dropping his little bombshell in my lap was true. I did look a lot like my mother. Dark brown hair with red highlights that fell in loose curls to my shoulders, dark brown eyes, high cheekbones, an upturned nose. My mother of course looked older than I did, but she had aged gracefully. It was part of the Chalmers-Hall gene pool for the women of the family to look younger than their years.

When my reflection ceased to hold my interest, I turned away and set about doing what I had come in here for in the first place. A shower.

A knocking sounded at the door just as I stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around myself. "What is it?" I called as I grabbed another towel and started drying my hair.

"Ria, can I talk to you when you're finished in there?" I heard Gen call.

"Yeah, sure..." I squeezed the last of the water from my hair and bent over at the waist, letting my hair hang loose, and wrapped the towel tightly around my hair. "Lemme get dressed first, okay?"

Once I had dressed in clean jeans and a long-sleeved black shirt that had a triquetra printed on front in silver, and had dried my hair, I went back out into the living room. Taylor had disappeared to parts unknown, and Gen was sitting on the couch, twisting the plain silver bracelet that she had worn since we had met around her wrist. She looked at me as I sat down next to her.

"Thank you," was the first thing she said.

"For what?"

"Just...everything. But mostly for that." She let out a small sigh. "I honestly thought I'd never see him again. None of us did. And now...I realise that I don't really have much of a right to miss him, because I never knew him. I wasn't even three when he died – I honestly don't remember him that well. I just have little flashes." She scratched the back of her right hand. "Do you know what my first memory is?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Losing him. The morning after he died, when my mother told me that my big brother had gone to Heaven...that is the first thing I remember. And I remember Jess and Ave crying, and Zac just sitting there frozen..." She shook her head. "It was awful. Ironic, isn't it – my first-ever memory just happens to be my worst. Nothing since, not even Dad dying, has been able to top it."

"You have every right to miss him, Gen," I said quietly. "He's your brother." I looked over at her. "Do you know how I knew your real name?" She shook her head. "He told me. He felt I deserved to know who you were. And now that I know who you really are, I think I know why he's been stuck here for as long as he has been."

"Why?"

"To keep an eye on you."

Gen snorted. "Yeah, right. It's not like I do anything he needs to keep an eye on me *for*."

"Gen, he's your big brother. I don't know shit about brothers, because I only have sisters, but I do know something about being older than the rest of my siblings. You've got this protective instinct when it comes to those younger than you – something I'm guessing you don't have, because you're the youngest in your family. You sort of feel like it's your duty to watch over them, in case they do something amazingly *stupid*. And I think that's why Taylor has been stuck here for so long. Partly because he feels that it's his duty, and partly so that he can see you grow up, because he can't be there physically anymore. It's the only way that he can be any part of your life."

We sat there in silence for a little while. "So are you absolutely sure that you want to come with me tomorrow night?" Gen asked. "I mean, you know what my mom's like, but I don't think you've ever spent more than half an hour in her presence. This is going to be a whole fucking *evening* with my mother."

"I know that. And I'm prepared for it. I think that as long as I don't let slip that I know your little secret, we'll be fine."

"Well, let's hope that you're right." She let out a quiet chuckle. "I'm just hoping that my brother doesn't decide to tag along, because that would seriously be the end of it all."

"Would your mom be able to see him?"

Gen shrugged. "Honestly wouldn't be able to tell you one way or the other. But I'm hoping not – or if she can, that he doesn't choose to show himself any time soon, because I quite like my mother alive."

I laughed. "Me too, Gen. Me too."

* * *

"So *why* exactly are you doing this?"

I turned away from my bedroom mirror. Taylor sat on my bed, his right leg stretched straight out toward the end frame of my bed, the other tucked under his right knee. One of my books from college, the *Iliad* – one of my classes had been Classical Greek – was open on his lap. He had been completely absorbed in reading it for over an hour.

"Doing what?" I asked as I tried to push a black chopstick into place.

"Spending an evening with my mother."

I shrugged. "Something to do, I suppose?"

He snorted. "Right."

"Taylor, do you know what I *do* on Sunday nights when Gen goes out?" I asked; he shook his head.

"I sit in the living room of this apartment, a great big bowl of Doritos on the couch beside me and a bottle of Sprite on the coffee table in front of me, and I watch movies on cable. I don't have many friends – I mostly kept to myself in high school and in college. Plus not many people liked me. I'm a bit of a know-it-all, in case you haven't already guessed."

"You mean that this" he gestured to the book in his lap "isn't just for show? I never would have guessed..."

"Oh be quiet," I said, smothering a giggle.

Gen and I had become quite accustomed to having Taylor around over the past week or so. And during that time, we'd learned quite a bit about him. There were some things that the loss of his life all those years ago had robbed him of – he no longer had a heartbeat, he didn't breathe, he didn't have a reflection, he was invisible to everyone save for Gen and I, and his footsteps made absolutely no sound when he walked. He could be running on concrete, wearing the Doc Martens that I'd noticed he rarely took off, and he wouldn't make a sound.

But at the same time, there were some things that death couldn't have taken from him even if it had tried to. He had an absolutely devilish sense of humour, an amazing singing voice that the recordings he had made all those years ago could never hope to match up to, and one hell of an appetite. The fact that he was perpetually a seventeen-year-old boy may have had a lot to do with that, but it was still surprising. He was also an excellent cook, and was great at making coffee – so good, in fact, that we had asked him to help us out at Arcana. He made the coffee, and we sold it to our customers. It was a good partnership, and since he had joined us on staff running the café had become somewhat easier. His invisibility was a great asset to us to say the very least.

I finally coaxed the chopstick into place and stepped back from my bedroom mirror. Gen had told me to 'just wear whatever', but her judgement was often flawed at the best of times. So the outfit that I had put together was one I felt was appropriate for dinner with a friend and said friend's mother – the only catch being that Gen's mother was old enough to be my grandmother. Gen had told me that because of the fourteen-year age difference between herself and Taylor, her mother was *slightly* older than I might expect, but I definitely hadn't expected Mrs. Walker to be as old as she was. I wore a dark blue short-sleeved blouse, black dress pants, and my black Doc Martens – I looked like I'd actually made an effort, but at the same time I didn't look as if I was trying too hard to make a good impression.

I checked the time on my watch and grabbed my jacket and bag from the back of my desk chair. "I think it's about time I went," I said. "There's plenty of food in the kitchen, you know where we keep the coffee, and you can use my computer if you like. Just try not to burn the building down, okay?" He snapped a salute without looking up from reading, and I allowed myself a quiet chuckle. "Sure you don't want to come with me?"

"I'm positive."

I shrugged. "Had to ask. Gen and I'll see you later on." He raised one hand at me in farewell, and I chuckled again before leaving my room.

Gen's mother lived outside the city limits, a good ten-minute drive from where Gen and I lived on the east side of the city. When I arrived, Gen's Honda was parked out the front; I pulled my Excel up alongside and cut the engine, and grabbed my jacket and bag from the front passenger seat.

Gen opened the front door after I rang the doorbell – she was dressed much the same as I was, only she wore a long black skirt and a dark green blouse, and her hair was pulled back into a French twist. "Dinner's almost ready," she said as I stepped into the front foyer.

"I can tell," I said, taking a deep breath – I could smell roast chicken, mashed potatoes, peas, beans, apple pie...my favourite things. "Lead the way, Miss Hanson."

She gave me a strange look at my use of her true surname, before turning and leading me to the kitchen. Her mother stood at the stove, dressed elegantly as always, her long hair pulled into a long braid, stirring something in a large pot. "Rosaria's here, Mom," Gen said somewhat unnecessarily, before adding, "She knows, Mom."

Gen's mother stopped stirring and placed the wooden spoon she was using on the stovetop, away from any of the burners, and turned to face Gen and I. "Oh dear," she said, sounding worried.

"I sort of figured it out yesterday," I lied, shrugging.

"I see..." She sighed. "Well, there's no sense in keeping up this pretence any longer. I suppose my daughter has told you everything?"

I nodded. "Though I wish Gen would have told me earlier, Mrs. Walker."

"Rosaria, please, call me Diana." Then she turned to her daughter. "And Zoë, I'm surprised at you. Rosaria is your *friend* – if you can trust no-one else, you should at least trust your best friend. Did I teach you *nothing*?"

"Sorry, Mom," Gen said, sounding sheepish.

"As well you should be." Diana pointed to the drawers nearest to the refrigerator. "Set the table, please."

"I'll help," I said, following Gen and grabbing three forks and three knives from the drawer.

"I wish you didn't have to see that," Gen said as she snagged three placemats from the top of the refrigerator. "That was worse than if she just *yells* at me. At least then I can fight back." Gen flashed me a small grin, and I followed her into the dining room.

"How old's your mom again?" I asked as I followed her around the table, setting down cutlery as I walked.

Gen muttered to herself, counting on her fingers. "Seventy-one," she replied.

I let out a low whistle. "Damn..."

"Tell me about it. I forget that she's my mother a lot of the time. But then, my grandmother wouldn't have the nerve to talk to me like *she* does."

Dinner was fairly painless, considering the tension that now hung between Gen and her mother. I ended up leaving before Gen, after my offer to do the dishes was politely rejected, and got home well before eight-thirty. I could hear music drifting out from behind my front door – Oasis, by the sound of it – and I smiled. It seemed that our friend Taylor was as much a gos music fan as I was – Oasis just happened to be one of the most-played bands in my iTunes library.

"Having fun, are we?" I asked as I hung my jacket up on the hook next to the door, tossing my keys onto the end table.

Taylor paused in playing air guitar and looked over at me. "Hi Ria," he said. "You don't mind, do you?" He nodded to the stereo. "I made a CD out of some of the songs on your computer."

"No, that's fine. I'm surprised you were able to figure that out."

"It wasn't exactly hard." He grabbed the stereo remote and paused the CD. "Did...did Zoë tell my mother what I asked her to?"

"That was *you* who told her to say that?" I asked, and he nodded.

"Yeah. I wanted to let my mom know that I was okay, but I didn't know how to get the message through to her. And now that Zoë knows who I am now, I asked her to pass the message on for me." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "How did my mom take it?"

"Well, she was surprised, but she took it fairly well."

Taylor nodded. "Good."

I stepped forward and took the remote from him. "What Oasis songs did you put on the CD?" I asked.

"Uh... *Wonderwall*, *Champagne Supernova*, and *D'You Know What I Mean*."

I grinned. "Excellent." I hit play again and skipped through the CD tracks until I found *D'You Know What I Mean*. "Come on, dance with me," I said, dropping the remote on the couch and extending my hand to Taylor. He gave me a grin of his own and took my hand, and we spent the next seven minutes and twenty-four seconds dancing around the apartment together, singing the song at the very tops of our voices, Taylor's well-trained but somewhat rusty tenor voice blending perfectly with my completely untrained soprano.

"Step off the train all alone at dawn...back into the hole where I was born...the sun in the sky never raised an eye to me...there's blood on the tracks and it must be mine...the fool on the hill and I feel fine...don't look back 'cause you know what you might see..."

"Look into the wall of my mind's eye...I think I know but I don't know why...the questions are the answers you might need...coming in a mess going out in style...I ain't good-looking but I'm someone's child...no-one can give me the air that's mine to breathe..."

"I met my maker, I made him cry...and on my shoulder he asked me why...his people won't fly through the storm...I said, 'Listen up man, they don't even know you're born'..."

"All my people right here, right now...d'you know what I mean, yeah, yeah...all my people right here, right now...d'you know what I mean, yeah, yeah...all my people right here, right now...d'you know what I mean, yeah, yeah...yeah, yeah...yeah, yeah..."

"I don't really care for what you believe...so open up your fist or you won't receive...the thoughts and the words of every man you'll meet...get up off the floor and believe in life...no-one's ever gonna ever ask you twice...get on the bus and bring it on home to me..."

"I met my maker, I made him cry...and on my shoulder he asked me why...his people won't fly through the storm...I said, 'Listen up man, they don't even know you're born'..."

"All my people right here, right now...d'you know what I mean, yeah, yeah...all my people right here, right now...d'you know what I mean, yeah, yeah...all my people right here, right now...d'you know what I mean, yeah, yeah...yeah, yeah...yeah, yeah...yeah, yeah..."

"All my people right here, right now...d'you know what I mean, yeah, yeah...all my people right here, right now...d'you know what I mean, yeah, yeah...all my people right here, right now...d'you know what I mean, yeah, yeah...yeah, yeah...yeah, yeah...yeah, yeah...yeah, yeah..."

As the final strains of the song echoed around the apartment, we came to a stop near the kitchen; I bent over and tried to get my breath back.

"I can't believe that wore you out," Taylor said, sounding surprised. He cocked an eyebrow at me as I straightened up. His cheeks were bright red, but I suspected that was from the heat in the apartment.

"Yeah, well, you try sitting behind a shop counter for eight hours a day, five days a week, and not doing much exercise aside from climbing eight flights of stairs, and you see how it leaves *you*," I retorted.

He rolled his eyes. "Thanks, Ria," he said, referring to our little jaunt around the apartment.

"Anytime, Taylor. Anytime."

Chapter 5

Christmas was swiftly approaching. The weather outside was unseasonably cold, resulting in a drop in business for Arcana – it seemed that not many people wanted to venture forth from their homes. Not that I could blame them – if Gen and I didn't rely on our wages from work to pay the rent and utilities, and to buy food every week, we probably would have stayed at home in our apartment.

Two weeks before Christmas Day, however, my mother gave Gen and I an early Christmas present.

"The two of you have been absolutely wonderful over the past month or so," Ma said during our lunch break. "I can't recall the last time Arcana took in more than a thousand dollars' takings. And it's all thanks to you." *And Taylor*, I added mentally. "So, as a reward, I am giving the two of you the rest of the year off, along with the first week of January. I'm sure that Kate and Lia won't mind doubling their shifts. That should give you both a little bit of time to do your Christmas shopping." She paused, to allow this to register. "And before you ask – yes, you will be paid. Let's say...double-time-and-a-half?"

I could hardly believe my ears. My mother, who was a real hard-ass when it came to the day-to-day running of the café, was not only giving Gen and I a four-week vacation from work, but she was paying us two-and-a-half times what we were normally paid each week. I half-expected a flock of winged pigs to come soaring past the windows of the café. "Can we even *afford* that?" I asked.

"We'll manage," Ma replied. "Not to mention that the two of you deserve it."

Gen and I looked at each other. Four weeks off of work, with full pay...there was only one thing to be done.

"Road trip!" we chorused.

Ma turned us loose a couple of hours later, and as soon as the two of us got home we retrieved our laptops from our rooms. The door to the former study – now Taylor’s room, seeing as he was now staying with us on a permanent basis – was tightly closed as usual, which meant that either Taylor was out again, or he was taking a nap. I figured that the former was much more likely.

“So where do you want to go?” I asked as I fired up my laptop and signed onto my desktop. “I mean, you can’t be wanting to hang around here for the next four weeks.”

“I promised my sisters that I’d go and visit them soon,” Gen replied as she started tapping away. “So unless you and Taylor have any objections to that...”

“No, that’s fine by me. I’d like to meet your sisters, anyway.” I cocked an eyebrow at her. “And what’s this about Taylor coming along?”

“Did you *really* think we’d leave him here? I think he’d want to see them as much as I want to. He hasn’t seen them in years, I know that for a fact.”

“Would he even be able to come with us? I mean, he said something to me about being stuck here.”

“I guess we’ll find that out when we leave.” She paused in her tapping away. “Oh, good *Lord*...”

“What?”

“I can’t believe we’re planning to *drive* to Florida. It’s going to take us nearly nineteen hours to get there.” She let out a slightly hysterical laugh. “I suppose we *could* stay overnight along the way, but still...”

“Why don’t we fly there?”

Gen fixed me with a hard look. “And where, may I ask, is my brother going to sit? He’s not sitting on *my* lap.”

I shrugged. "Fine, we'll drive. But we're taking your car."

"Suits me. Your car's too small anyway. I mean, there's the three of us, along with three suitcases, Christmas presents for my sisters, brothers-in-law, nephews and nieces, and anything else we decide we're going to need. There's no way we could fit all of that in your Excel."

"Precisely." I pulled up Microsoft Word and began typing out what we were going to have to do before leaving. "Just one other thing – how the hell are we going to pass Taylor off? I mean, there's a good chance that your sisters will be able to see him."

"We'll just say that he's your cousin or nephew. I'm pretty sure that my sisters know that you don't have any brothers, but they don't know any of your other relatives."

"Saying that he's one of my cousins might be a little more realistic."

Gen resumed her tapping away, letting out a groan after a few more minutes. "If we make an overnight stop in Atlanta, it's going to take us just over nineteen hours to get to Jacksonville. That is *insane*..."

"You said it."

The door to the apartment closed and opened, and I looked behind me. Taylor had returned, and he had a black messenger bag looped around his neck, the shoulder strap resting on his left shoulder. "What're you guys doing?" he asked as he dropped the bag on the floor.

"Planning a road trip," Gen replied. "We're going to visit Jess and Avery for Christmas. Want to come?"

He frowned. "Are you sure you want to put up with me for however long it'd take us to get there?"

"Nineteen hours, ten minutes," Gen replied. "And yes, we're sure." She fixed a pained look on her face. "Don't tell me that you'd rather spend Christmas *alone*..."

"That's not what I meant." He shrugged. "I've been seventeen years old for the past twenty-five years – I just thought that you might not want to have a teenage guy tagging along with you."

"We're not leaving you here," I said. "That'd be cruel of us. The first real, *tangible* human contact that you've had in a quarter of a century, and we go off and leave you alone at Christmas – it's just wrong. Besides, we don't mind having you around. *Do we, Gen?*" I asked, elbowing Gen for good measure.

"No, of course not," Gen said hurriedly, shooting daggers at me. She pushed her laptop to one side and went into the kitchen, returning with the cordless phone. Settling herself back down on the floor, she proceeded to dial what I guessed was one of her sisters' phone numbers. "Hey Matthew, it's Auntie Gen, is your mom there?...thanks kiddo." She swapped the handset to her other ear and tapped her fingers on the floor. "Hey Jess, how's things?...yeah, I'm good. Listen, you remember how you wanted me to come visit you? Well, I was thinking of coming over for Christmas, and Ria's thinking of tagging along...no, Ria's mom gave us a four-week vacation from work, and we don't want to hang around here...you sure you don't mind? What about Chris?...oh, did he?...I see. Would it be okay for us to come a couple of days before Christmas, or is that a bit too late?...okay, great. Also, Ria has to bring her cousin with her, would that be all right with you guys?...yeah? Awesome. We'll see you in a couple of weeks. See you soon." She hung up and tossed the cordless over her shoulder; it landed on the couch. "Well, that's it – Jess and Chris are totally cool with us coming for Christmas, *and* they don't mind Taylor coming with us."

"What if they can't see him?" I asked.

"Then we'll say that I couldn't come after all," Taylor said. "And I wish you wouldn't talk about me as if I'm not here."

"Who is Chris, anyway?" I asked.

"Jess's husband. You know the band Fantasia?" I nodded. "Jess married their guitarist about 15 years ago." Gen chuckled. "It's ironic, isn't it – both my sisters married musicians, when they themselves have two brothers who *are* musicians."

"It is a bit," I agreed. I closed my laptop and set it aside. "Let's get going – we're going to need to get Christmas presents, we need to figure out what we're taking with us, and we need to get my mom to deposit our pay into our bank accounts rather than sending it to us via the post, seeing as she can't give it to us face to face." I looked up at Taylor. "Want to come with us?"

"Do I *have* to?" he asked, affecting a childish whine. "I just came *back* from the store..."

"Well, now that you mention it..." I gave Gen a quick nod, and she shot to her feet, latching onto Taylor's right shoulder. "Yep. You do."

"Grab my phone and my wallet, would you?" Gen yelled over her shoulder as she steered Taylor toward the front door, ignoring his rather vocal protestations as she shoved him through into the corridor.

I couldn't help myself. Instead of getting to my feet and trailing after Gen, I just sat there on my living room floor, threw back my head and laughed. The sight of Gen treating her much older brother like a petulant child was just too much. One thing was for sure – this was going to be one hell of a road trip, and a rather interesting Christmas.

* * *

We left Tulsa at eight-thirty in the morning of December twenty-second, heading east. Gen had burned an MP3 CD the night before that contained her favourite driving songs – partially in deference to her own musical tastes, and partially to keep Taylor from bitching too much, the CD contained mostly music from the 1990s and the early 2000s. Taylor had told us a few weeks earlier that he greatly disliked most of the music that was released nowadays; so that he didn't have to listen to the radio so much, he had raided mine and Gen's CD collections so that he had something

to listen to. Gen had loaned him her old Discman to use whenever he left the house and wanted to be able to listen to music – to make this a little easier on him, so that he didn't need to carry a bunch of CDs wherever he went, Gen and I had bought him an iPod as a Christmas gift; we both knew full well that it would be the first Christmas present he would have received for twenty-six years, so we had wanted it to be something special.

"You do know what time we'll be getting to Atlanta, don't you?" I asked Gen as *The Anthem*, Gen's favourite Good Charlotte song, melted into Phantom Planet's *California*.

"Yeah, of course I do," Gen replied. She adjusted the position of her hands on the steering wheel and glanced at the rear view mirror. "It's going to be about twenty to midnight by the time we get there, I know. Why do you think I made reservations *before* we left?"

"Yeah, whatever."

I looked back over my shoulder at Taylor, who was sitting in the back seat behind Gen; he was completely absorbed in the most recent issue of *Rolling Stone*. "Hey," I said, flicking the magazine so that he looked up. "You've been quiet."

He didn't say anything for a little while. "This is the first time I've left Tulsa since...it happened," he said finally. "I didn't think I'd even be able to."

As *California* faded away, and the familiar opening notes of the Stone Temple Pilots' *Interstate Love Song* tumbled from the speakers, I reached forward to the car stereo and cranked up the volume. All three of us loved this song, and it wasn't hard to see why. It was the perfect driving song – it had a good rhythm, the lyrics were easy to sing along with, and the overall feel of it just lent to driving down the highway, with the windows rolled down and the wind rippling through our hair.

"Waiting on a Sunday afternoon...for what I read between the lines...your lies...feelin' like a hand in rusted shame...so do you laugh or does it cry...reply..."

"Leavin' on a southern train...only yesterday you lied...promises of what I seemed to be...only watched the time go by...all of these things you said to me..."

"Breathing is the hardest thing to do...with all I've said and all that's dead for you...you lied...goodbye..."

"Leavin' on a southern train...only yesterday you lied...promises of what I seemed to be...only watched the time go by...all of these things I said to you..."

I turned the volume down again as the song faded out, and looked out of the window at the passing scenery. Pretty soon, the only sounds in the car were the music that played over the stereo speakers, the hum of the tyres on the highway, and the engine, as each of us became lost in our own thoughts.

* * *

Four o'clock the next afternoon saw us arriving at Gen's older sister's place on the outskirts of Jacksonville, Florida. I had never been to Florida – heck, I'd never been further east than Missouri – so this was entirely new to me. Not so to Gen and Taylor, who were chatting away about their favourite parts of the state.

"Gen!" a tall, blonde woman said as she opened the door. "It's great to see you, sis."

"It's good to see you too, Jess," Gen said as the two of them embraced. They broke apart, and Gen introduced us. "Jess, this is my friend Rosaria Hill; Ria, I'd like you to meet my sister Jessica."

"Hi Jessica," I said. "It's nice to meet you."

"And you, Rosaria." Jessica then raised an eyebrow. "And who is that gorgeous young man standing by your car, Gen?"

Oh *shit*. Jessica could see Taylor. She could see her brother.

"He's my cousin," I replied. I turned around and waved at him. "Get over here, Jesse!" I called, using the name that we'd chosen as Taylor's alias. Gen 'introduced' the two of them, Taylor remaining uncharacteristically quiet throughout. And Gen and I knew exactly the reason for it – he was seeing his sister for the first time in over two decades.

"So is Ave coming over?" Gen asked as the four of us walked inside Jessica's house.

"Yeah, in an hour or so. Chris and I invited her and Phil over for dinner, so you'll get to see her then. In the meantime, why don't you show Rosaria and Jesse where they'll be staying?"

Gen nodded and led Taylor and I upstairs to a pair of guest bedrooms. Instead of leading me into one and directing Taylor into another, she pulled both of us into the room nearest the stairs.

"Well this is just wonderful," Gen said as the door closed behind us. She threw herself onto one of the two beds and let out a loud sigh. "She can see him."

"Well, at least she doesn't recognise him," I said. "That at least has to count for something."

"She's going to recognise him sooner or later," Gen said. "Out of the three of us girls, she remembers him the best." She shook her head. "Those two, from what I remember, were like two peas in a pod. Losing him absolutely devastated her – it took her years to recover. Even now, she'll come across something that reminds her of him and that'll be it – downward spiral that she won't come out of for weeks."

"I wish you two wouldn't talk about me as if I'm not here," Taylor said. "It's annoying."

"Well, if you'd *breathe* or something, maybe we'd notice," Gen muttered.

"I *can't*, Zoë. I haven't been able to since everything went to hell." He got to his feet and left the room, slamming the door behind him.

Gen let out another sigh, this one quieter than the last, and covered her face with her hands. "I'm always fucking up," she whispered. "Always."

I went to try and comfort her, but she shied away. "Don't, Ria," she said. "Just...don't. Go and talk to Taylor or something, but just keep the hell away from me."

Taylor was sitting halfway down the main staircase, staring downstairs with his chin propped in his hands. "I think you might have hurt her feelings or something," I said offhandedly as I sat down beside him. He didn't say a word, merely kept staring into space. "Are you all right?" I asked.

"I'm fine," he said flatly.

"Liar," I disagreed. "You're not. You're miserable, and that's putting it lightly."

"Well, how would *you* feel if you were fighting with your little sister?"

"I don't think you're fighting, per se. You're just...you're both stressed out. That's all. And I don't really blame you – this kind of thing would stress anyone out if they were in your...shall we say, *unique* position."

"Unique." Taylor let out a sharp bark of laughter. "That's one way of putting it."

"Well, it is in a way." He looked at me and raised one slender blonde eyebrow. "Taylor, for all intents and purposes, you're a ghost. There are only three people in the world that we know of who are physically able to see you – me, and two of your sisters. And in most people's experiences, ghosts do not go on road trips, and they usually don't celebrate Christmas. You're rather unique in that aspect. Trust me when I say that it's a good thing."

Another laugh. "Right."

"I'm serious." I clapped him on the shoulder and made to stand up. "Now, c'mon back upstairs, and apologise to that sister of yours."

"Excuse me?"

I looked downstairs to see another blonde woman who looked like an eerie combination of Jessica and Taylor, standing there with her hands on her hips. "Did I hear the word 'sister' in there somewhere?"

"Ave, leave them be," we heard Jessica call.

"No Jess, I will not 'leave them be'," 'Ave' shot back. "I heard something about a sister."

"Yeah, me," I heard Gen say from behind me. "Hey Avery."

"Hello there stranger," Avery said, the hostility completely stripped from her voice. "How has Tulsa been treating you?"

"Not bad. Work's been good – I bet you never thought you'd hear anyone say that!"

"Well, nobody except...you know," Avery said. She looked at Taylor and I, fixing the two of us with a searching gaze. "Jess, want any help with dinner?"

"If you don't mind." Jessica and Avery walked off, leaving Gen, Taylor and I alone again.

"Great," Gen said. "She knows something." She sat down on Taylor's other side. "So what now?"

"We tell them the truth."

Two pairs of blue eyes stared at me in something akin to horror. "What, now?" Gen asked.

"No, after dinner. Then there's less of a risk that we'll be wearing our meal rather than eating it."

"I don't like the sound of this..." Taylor and Gen said in unison. There was a short silence as they looked at one another, and they dissolved into laughter.

Dinner was tense that evening. We had eaten out on the back patio, being that Jessica and Chris' dining room just wasn't large enough to accommodate the two of them, their three children, Avery and her husband along with *their* children, not to mention Gen, Taylor and I.

"You're quiet, Jesse," Avery's husband Phil noted as the dinner plates were cleared away. That was something else we had noticed – it wasn't just immediate family, as in just his sisters, who could see Taylor. Phil and Chris, along with Gen's nieces and nephews, could also see him. The interesting thing was that other people *couldn't* see him, which made things harder for us when it came to going out in public.

Taylor shrugged and toyed with the edge of the tablecloth. "I...don't often get to eat dinner with others," he said, choosing his words carefully by the sound of it. "My parents work a lot, and I'm an only child," he added, lying through his teeth. "Which is part of the reason I'm staying with Rosaria for Christmas – so that I'm not by myself."

"How old are you?" Avery asked. "I mean, if you don't mind me asking."

"Seventeen."

"Thought so," she said thoughtfully.

After dessert – fresh fruit salad and vanilla yogurt – Gen made her request. "Jess, Ave...can we talk to you?" she asked. "Alone?"

"Of course," Jessica agreed, sounding a little confused. She looked at her husband; Phil had already gone inside.

"Come on kids, inside," Chris said, picking up on the hint. He herded the kids inside, leaving Avery, Jessica, Gen, Taylor and I outside.

"We sort of have a confession to make," Gen said. Jessica raised an eyebrow. "Jesse isn't Rosaria's cousin. Hell, his name isn't even Jesse." Gen sighed and tugged at her hair. "You...you remember Taylor, don't you?" she asked.

After a few moments of quiet, Jessica and Avery both nodded. "Yes, but I don't see what that has to do with anything," Jessica said.

"Because this *is* Taylor, Jess," Gen said calmly.

"Gen..." Avery sighed and rubbed her temples. "Gen, it can't be him. Taylor died twenty-five years ago. You just *want* it to be that way."

"Don't fucking patronise me, Avery. I know my own brother when I see him." She nodded to me.

"Rosaria reunited us. He's been hanging around Tulsa for a whole quarter of a century since...it happened. And it's been an interesting two months, let me tell you."

Jessica suddenly stood up, tipping her chair over backwards, and walked into the house, slamming the back door closed behind her.

Gen let out a soft groan, breaking the silence that had settled over us. "Why do I *always* have to open my big mouth?" she asked.

Chapter 6

I couldn't sleep.

I lay in my borrowed bed in the second guest bedroom at Jessica and Chris's house, staring through the darkness at the ceiling, listening to the sounds of the Jacksonville night – Gen mumbling in her sleep, cars driving past the house, the house's foundations settling, water rushing through the pipes as someone flushed the toilet, someone crying.

Wait a second.

I frowned as I heard the unmistakable sound of someone trying desperately to keep their crying quiet filtering through the wall of the room. I knew it wasn't Gen, because she was right across the room, fast asleep, and I was pretty sure it wasn't Taylor, because to my best recollection he wasn't a crier. He had been quite stressed out since our arrival, which I attributed to the two-day journey and being in the company of not only two of his sisters, both of whom he hadn't seen in many years, but also people he didn't even know. He'd never met his two brothers-in-law, nor had he met any of his nieces and nephews. However, stress – as far as I knew – did not give him cause to break down in tears.

I kicked off my covers and left the room, knocking on the door of the other guest bedroom; I carefully pushed the door open when I didn't get a response.

To my surprise, sitting on the floor inside next to the bed was Jessica. She had tears streaming down her face, and was gently running her fingers through her brother's hair. Even despite the night's warmth, Taylor was buried beneath a mound of blankets right up to his nose.

"Oh, Jessica, sorry," I apologised quietly. "I heard someone crying, and I thought it might have been him." I nodded at Taylor.

"Rosaria, please, call me Jess." She sighed. "I'm sorry if I woke you."

"It's all right. I can't sleep anyway." I curled my fingers around the hem of my T-shirt. "Do...do you want to talk?" I asked tentatively. "I don't mind, really; anything's better than not being able to sleep."

"Are you sure?" Jessica asked dubiously.

"I'm positive."

She sighed again. "All right then. Come on."

We went downstairs to the kitchen and sat down on opposite sides of the table. I kept my mouth shut, not wanting to press Jessica to talk if she didn't want to. She stared at her hands for a good five minutes before she spoke.

"I didn't want to believe it," she said finally. "When I saw the three of you get out of Gen's car, I told myself that it couldn't *possibly* be him. But then I heard him speak for the first time, and then I *knew*...it was him." She shook her head. "I honestly thought I'd never see him again."

"How old were you?" I asked.

"Twelve." She let out a bitter laugh. "I was twelve years old, and I was experiencing my worst nightmare – that I was going to outlive one of my brothers. And the worst thing about it was that I never got to say goodbye." She traced a pattern on the wooden tabletop with the tip of her left index finger. "Gen really doesn't know how lucky she is. She doesn't remember him – she has no idea of the hell we all went through when we lost him."

I decided to keep my mouth shut. It wasn't my place to correct Jessica and what she believed – actually, I was surprised that Gen hadn't told her sister the truth, but I supposed that she had her reasons for doing so.

"So where are you headed to next?" Jessica asked after a few minutes of quiet.

I shrugged. "I honestly have no idea. Gen probably does, though."

"You should head up to New York – it's really nice there this time of year, if a little cold. Gen promised her brother a visit, anyway."

"Really?" I asked, and Jessica nodded. "I've always wanted to go to New York. Maybe I'll ask Gen if we can head there next."

"Sounds like a plan to me." She gave me a small smile as she stood. "I should probably get some sleep. Thanks for listening."

"No problem," I replied.

* * *

On Christmas Day, I was woken by someone throwing something at my head. I opened my eyes to see Taylor standing at the end of my bed, pelting me with popcorn, a cheeky grin on his face.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I asked through a curtain of hair, my voice sleep-roughened and sleepy. "And I hope you realise that I am *not* cleaning that up."

"Waking you up, what's it look like?" he replied.

I let out a mock growl and threw my covers off. He threw the bowl of popcorn at me and bolted from the room, laughing the whole way. I shook my head, chuckling to myself, before picking the popcorn out of my hair and heading downstairs.

While Jessica and Chris's kids tore into the stack of gifts beneath the living room Christmas tree with wild abandon, Gen, Taylor and I retreated to the dining room and exchanged gifts. I had bought a new scarf for Gen and a necklace for Taylor – Gen's new scarf was dark green, her favourite colour, and had small silver stars dotted all over it; Taylor's necklace was a black leather cord with a silver Celtic cross threaded onto it.

When Taylor had unwrapped the gift that Gen and I had bought for him, he nearly dropped it on the table. He just stared at it for what seemed like ages, until Gen broke the silence.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

"That depends on what it is," Taylor replied, his voice shaking a little.

"It's an iPod," Gen replied. "It's a bit like a Discman, but it's much better." She quickly explained the various features and how to make the thing actually work, before telling him to stick the earphones in his ears and turn it on.

The look on his face as the first song began playing – going by the display on the front of the iPod, it was *Hysteria* by Muse; Gen had taken the liberty of loading her entire iTunes library onto it – was absolutely priceless.

"Holy *shit*," he whispered as he hit the pause button after the song finished. "I think you can have your Discman back now..."

Gen and I laughed. Taylor turned the iPod off and removed the earphones from his ears, setting it aside, and bent down to the side of his chair. He picked up two neatly-wrapped parcels and straightened up, placing the parcels on the table. He passed one to me and the other to Gen. "It's not much," he said with a shrug.

'Not much' was one hell of an understatement. Gen's gift was a new watch, one with a black leather band and a silver-edged face. I, on the other hand, unwrapped a copy of the *Odyssey* – my copy had been destroyed after I had left it out on the fire escape a couple of weeks earlier, and it had started bucketing down with rain. There had been no point in trying to salvage the sodden mess, and so I had thrown it in the kitchen recycling bin and covered it with a few newspapers. Somehow, Taylor had known that my copy had been ruined – I'd never told anyone that I had been so stupid as to destroy one of the things my father had left to me before he had died.

It was then that I did something unbelievably stupid. Instead of thanking him, like I *should* have done, I asked, rather bluntly in fact, "You didn't steal this, did you?"

Taylor just stared at me for what felt like an eternity, before standing up so quickly that the chair he was sitting in tipped over backwards. He turned around and stalked from the room, and minutes later I heard a door slamming upstairs.

* * *

Gen, Taylor and I left for New York City a couple of days before New Year's Eve. Gen had called her brother the morning after Christmas Day and, using the same story she had used on her sister, had asked if it would be all right for the three of us to pay a short visit. Gen's brother had given his consent, and so it was on the twenty-eighth of December that we piled ourselves and our gear into Gen's Honda and left the city of Jacksonville.

It wasn't until we made an overnight stop in Wilmington that I was finally able to apologise to Taylor. He had made a point of avoiding me ever since Christmas Day, even going so far as to leave the room as soon as I entered. In addition, he had spent the car ride between Jacksonville and Wilmington – all seven hours and twenty-five minutes of it – in the back of Gen's car, the earphones to his iPod jammed in his ears, staring out of the car window. I knew him well enough by now to know that he was *extremely* pissed off at the world and everyone in it.

"You have to apologise to him, Ria," Gen told me. We had arrived in Wilmington only a few hours earlier, and almost as soon as we had checked into a motel Taylor had taken off to parts unknown.

"How am I supposed to do that?" I asked. I sank down onto one of the two double beds in the motel room and looked up at Gen. She was perched on the room's writing desk, feet on the desk's matching chair, staring at me. "He won't even look at me, let alone speak to me."

"I'll corner him somehow. Lord only knows where he is right now. But after I've managed to convince him to be in the same room as you, you'd better do the right thing. He can hold a grudge for so long you wouldn't believe it."

Gen was true to her word. She somehow managed to track Taylor down and brought him back to our room, ignoring his rather vocal protestations as she dragged him through the door.

"Now *sit*," she ordered him. "I'm not going to listen to you anymore. You two need to work this out before we get to New York, because I am *not* going to put up with this any longer. That drive was the longest seven hours of my life." She pointed at the bed I was sitting on. "I'm not letting you leave until the two of you deal with this." With that, she resumed her seat on the writing desk and eyed the two of us unblinkingly, arms crossed over her chest.

Over an hour passed before either of us spoke. I was tracing a pattern on the leg of my jeans when I heard Taylor speak.

"I really don't understand you sometimes, Rosaria."

I looked up. He sat opposite me on the bed, cross-legged, his hair pulled back into a messy but functional ponytail. His eyes were darker than usual, and rather stormy.

"Why the hell did you ask me if I'd stolen that book?" he asked.

"What else am I *supposed* to think?" I shot back. "You don't exactly have money lying around. You don't even carry a wallet with you."

Instead of answering my question, Taylor got up from the bed, stood up and bent down to where his shins were covered by his cargo pants. He unzipped a pocket near his ankle and pulled out a black leather wallet. He flipped it open and pulled out a credit card. "*This* is how I bought it," he told me as he handed it to me. The name on the front read *Jordan T. Hanson*. "I use it only when I need to. My bank account isn't exactly limitless."

"How can your bank account still be open?" I asked as I gave it back to him. He slipped it back in his wallet, returning it to his pocket and reziping it. "Especially seeing as you've been out of the picture for twenty-five years."

"I asked my aunt Catherine to keep an eye on it for me," he replied. "I think I knew that *something* was going to happen that night, but I didn't think it would be as serious as it was. So that morning, I called my aunt and asked if she would be willing to look after it for me; she was the only person aside from my parents I ever really trusted." He shrugged. "It's lucky that I asked her to look after things when I did, really."

He resumed his place on the bed and stared at his shoelaces. "I do steal," he admitted. "Y'know, things like food and clothes. But it's only out of necessity. Anything else, I buy online."

He levelled a steely gaze at me. "I believe you owe me an apology," he said evenly.

That I did. I drew in a deep breath and closed my eyes. "Taylor...I'm sorry. I was out of line – I should have known you didn't steal it." I opened my eyes and looked at him. "Forgive?"

He smiled for maybe the first time in days. "Of course I do."

Chapter 7

I shivered as I stepped out onto the footpath and started walking north along Hudson Street towards the café that Gen had driven past the previous evening. I could feel the chill even through my heavy winter coat, bought on Gen's advice just before our departure from Tulsa – I had never owned one before now, as it never really got cold enough at home to warrant needing one.

It hadn't taken me long to decide that I didn't like New York. It was freezing cold, there were too many people, and everything was just too fast. I was immensely glad that we would only be here for five days, tops, because I didn't want to stay here any longer than we had to. I was sure that the city had its redeeming qualities, but there were none that I could see.

Aside from Gen's brother, of course. His name was Zac, and he lived with his wife Kate and their three children in an apartment in Greenwich Village. Gen's other New York-bound brother, Isaac, was currently overseas in Germany for some reason. I had immediately taken a shine to Kate, partially because of her musical tastes, and partially because she was just so damn nice. The latter, I attributed to the fact that she was a Southern girl – Gen's quick-and-dirty lecture during the journey from Wilmington had included the tidbit that Kate was a Georgia girl born and bred. Her lecture had also included a quasi-warning about the fact that there was a decent chance that Zac would not be able to see his brother, though she wouldn't say why.

I found the café – a glass-fronted, sunshine-yellow joint with the words *Sunrise Café* painted in bright blue concave letters on the main window – and stepped inside as quickly as I could, shedding my coat as the warmth enveloped me. Quiet conversation and music piped from the speakers in one of the corners filled the café, and I smiled before heading for a table tucked right in the back.

"Fancy finding you here," I quipped as I sat down opposite Taylor. He looked up from toying with the salt shaker and the pepper mill, the ghost of a small smile playing on his lips. "Gen sent me out to find you," I explained.

"How'd you know to find me here?"

I shrugged. "It wasn't hard. I know you like eating, and you kept staring at this place even after Gen had driven past yesterday. I put two and two together, and I knew you'd be here. You hungry?"

He nodded, and I laughed quietly. One of the waitresses came over and I ordered something I knew we both liked to eat, banana cake with cream cheese frosting; the waitress looked momentarily at where Taylor was seated, just a flick of her gaze, before jotting down my order and walking away.

"I think she saw me," Taylor said softly, his voice barely audible above the hum of music and conversation.

"Well if she did, she didn't recognise you," I reasoned. "She doesn't look any older than twenty, maybe twenty-two at a stretch. You ask any twenty-year-old these days who Hanson is, and you'll get a blank look. Trust me, I know."

Taylor remained quiet even after my order arrived, picking at the thick slice of cake with his fingers as I commenced a restrained attack on it with my fork. "What's up?" I asked him as I licked the cream cheese off the fork and set it down on the plate that held about half of the original slice.

"I never thought this would worry me, but..." He looked up at me. "He can't see me, Ria. He can't fucking see me."

"Maybe...he has to want to see you," I hedged. Taylor looked at me quizzically, so I elaborated. "You want him to see you, right?" He nodded. "Well, maybe it works both ways. Sort of like how it is in a relationship. You both have to want the same thing for it to work." I offered him the fork, and he shook his head. "You said you died on his birthday, right? To be honest with you, I wouldn't

want to remember something like that. I'd never be able to deal with it. This might be his way of protecting himself."

"What, forgetting me?"

"I didn't say that."

"No, but you implied it."

"Okay, so maybe I did. But come on – if you were him, and one of your siblings died on your birthday right in front of you, so to speak, would *you* want to remember?"

He let out a small sigh. "Oh, I suppose you're right..."

"Of course I'm right." I offered him the fork again, and this time he took it and dug into the remainder of the cake.

We returned to Zac and Kate's apartment about half an hour later to find dinner on the table – it seemed that this evening, we were having pumpkin risotto as our main course, followed by lemon cheesecake, both of which had been cooked by the oldest of the Hanson children, seventeen-year-old Taylor-Kate, who looked uncannily like her long-since-deceased uncle. Though fortunately for her, it seemed that she was likely to reach her eighteenth birthday – something her namesake had never achieved.

After dinner, I excused myself and managed to sneak a fork and a spoon, a bowl of leftover risotto and a slice of cheesecake on a plate down the hall to the room I was sharing with Taylor. He was sitting on the bed that he had claimed, surfing the Internet on my laptop and singing quietly to himself. As I set Taylor's dinner and dessert down on the bed in front of him, he looked up and smiled.

"What was that you were singing?" I asked.

"Just something I wrote," he replied. He shoved a spoonful of risotto into his mouth and let out a quiet groan of what sounded like pure delight. "Who made this?"

"That would be your niece. She's quite the cook. I think she's planning on going to cookery school when she finishes her senior year."

"Well, she definitely should. She'd be fantastic at it."

I went to where I had stowed my backpack and unzipped it, digging out my computer microphone headset and a blank CD. "What are you doing?" Taylor asked, sounding wary.

"I want you to record that song you were singing. And I want your brother to hear it. It might be the only way he's going to be able to see you."

"You have to be kidding me."

I shook my head and sat down on the other bed, and held out my hand for my laptop. He closed the lid and passed it to me one-handed, and I hooked up the microphone and loaded the blank CD into the disc drive. "Now, I want you to put this on" I held up the headset "and sing that song." He shook his head stubbornly. "Jordan Taylor Hanson-"

"Don't call me that. You're not my mother."

"Technically," I continued as if he hadn't even interrupted me, "I am eight years older than you. You're still a seventeen-year-old boy, in case you had forgotten."

"I haven't forgotten," he muttered.

I sighed. Taylor's eternal age was one of his sore points. "Look, just do this for me, all right? I won't ask you to do this again if you don't want to – I know this is sort of a painful reminder for you. But please...that song is amazing. He deserves to hear it."

He let out a sigh of his own. "Fine. But you ask me to do it ever again and I'll kick your ass."

"Agreed." I loaded up Audacity and waited for him to put the headset on, and hit record. And as he started to sing, I closed my eyes and let the words wash over me.

"Hello, goodbye my friend...feels like the start all over again...but I'd rather not pretend...there aren't things still left to mend...somebody break my fall...I'm slipping down all over again...

"I'll do it all over...taking my own sweet time...I may make it slower...but I'm taking my own sweet time...I'm taking my own sweet...

"Tell me where I begin...you can't deny what's already been...I won't break but I can bend...shaping the scars that I can't mend...feel your fingers around my throat...there's nothing but bones beneath my skin...somebody break my fall...I'm slipping down all over again...

"I'll do it all over...taking my own sweet time...I may make it slower...but I'm taking my own sweet time...I'm taking my own sweet...I'll do it all over...taking my own sweet time...I'm taking my own sweet time...

"I'd do it all over again, my friend...my friend, you know I'd do it all over again...hello, goodbye my friend...until we start all over again...somebody break my fall...I'm slipping down all over again...

"I'll do it all over...taking my own sweet time...I may make it slower...but I'm taking my own sweet time...I'm taking my own sweet...I'll do it all over...taking my own sweet time...I'm taking my own sweet...I may make it slower...but I'm taking my own sweet time...I'm taking my own sweet time...

"Do it all over...hello, goodbye my friend...until we start all over, start all over again...do it all over...hello, goodbye my friend...until we start all over, start all over...I'll do it all over again...I'll do it all over again..."

As the final echoes of Taylor's voice echoed around the room, I opened my eyes and stopped the recording. "Ask me to do that again and I am so kicking your ass," Taylor muttered as he pulled the headset off and tossed it across to me.

"Threats don't have as much of an impact the second time around," I informed him. "And really, you're a stick. If anyone's kicking ass, it's going to be me."

I quickly burned Taylor's song to the blank CD and fished around in my backpack for the permanent marker I always carried with me for vandalism purposes. I always felt a urge to leave my mark in public toilets for some reason, and then to take a photo for evidence purposes. "What do you want to name your song?" I asked, and Taylor shrugged. "Fine, I'll name it for you." I uncapped the marker, thought for a little while, and wrote *My Own Sweet Time – Taylor Hanson* on the upper side of the disc. "Come on, I want you to be out there with me when he hears it." I snapped the disc back in its case and extended a hand to Taylor.

"Nice to have you grace us with your presence once more, Rosaria," Kate said as I walked into the living room, Taylor trailing along behind me like a lost child.

I smiled. "Could I put a CD on?" I asked. "I just recorded it now."

"I didn't know you were a singer," Zac said.

"I'm not," I said with a shrug. "But the person who recorded this is – and before you ask who it is, you know them pretty damn well." I opened the CD case and popped it into the stereo, and hit play. And for the first time in, I guessed, over twenty-five years, Taylor's somewhat rusty voice came rolling out of the speakers. I couldn't help but smile – it was a little sneaky, and if there was another option open I would have taken it, but if anything was going to make Taylor visible to the one person who probably would have preferred to forget him, this was it.

The song ended, and we sat in silence for a little while. It was, of all people, Zac and Kate's son Riley, who finally spoke.

"Who was that?" he asked.

All eyes swivelled to Zac.

"He was my brother – your uncle," Zac replied finally.

"What happened to him?" Taylor-Kate asked.

When Zac didn't answer, Kate took up the thread. "He died, honey," she told her daughter. "Long before I met your father, or even before you were born."

"How did he die?" the youngest Hanson kid, Elise, asked.

"Nobody knows," Kate said. "It's just one of those mysteries that can't be solved."

"It was an aneurysm," Taylor said quietly, but only Gen and I heard him.

* * *

A couple of weeks after we had returned from our road trip – which from Taylor's perspective had been a total bust, being that no matter how hard he tried or what he did, he remained invisible to Zac – Gen turned twenty-eight, and ended up dragging me to her mother's house for the evening. Well, she and Taylor both did. All I wanted to do was crash out on the living room couch with the remote for the DVD player in hand, the first DVD of my Season One box set of *Sex And The City* playing, and an untouched tub of Ben & Jerry's Cherry Garcia all to myself. I wasn't particularly in the mood to spend an evening with Gen's mother.

But honestly, the fact that Taylor had told me the evening before that he was 'ready' for his mother to see him had been enough to let myself be packed into Gen's car. Apparently, Taylor was able to 'shield' himself, as he called it, from those who he didn't want to see him – and it seemed that his mother was one of those people. His rationale was that he wanted to protect her, but I didn't believe him for a second. Why he had chosen today of all days to let his mother see him, I really didn't know. I only hoped he knew what he was doing.

"Hello Rosaria," Diana said as Gen dragged me into the kitchen behind her.

"Hi Diana," I replied. "Gen, for God's sake, you're going to yank my arm out of its socket in a

minute, let go!”

“Zoë, how old are you exactly?” Diana asked her daughter as she turned back to the cooktop.

Gen rolled her eyes. “Mother, please, not in front of Ria.”

“Then I would kindly ask you to act your age for once in your life – it really isn’t all that hard.”

Gen sighed. “Sorry Mom.”

Diana nodded. “Thank you. Now, why don’t you go and make yourself comfortable in the living room, and let Rosaria and I do the cooking.” It was a thinly-veiled order, not a request, and Gen headed off to watch TV.

“How have you been, Rosaria?” Diana asked as she stirred something in a large pot. “Oh, I hope you like pumpkin soup.”

“Like it? Diana, I was *raised* on it. I love it. Ma makes the best homemade pumpkin soup – I think it’s a family recipe.”

In response, Diana ladled the equivalent of a mouthful of soup out of the pot and held the ladle out to me. I took the handle of the ladle in hand and tasted the soup. “Oh, that is *divine*,” I said as my tastebuds reacted. “It’s even better than Ma’s. I’d better not tell her that, though.” I grinned and handled the ladle back, then answered her original question. “I’ve been...” I shrugged. “I suppose I can’t complain. I have a good job, I have my own place that I get to share with my best friend, and I don’t have my sisters ripping on me every day. Things could be worse.”

“Indeed.”

After dinner – the aforementioned pumpkin soup, followed a chaser of tiramisu, Gen’s favourite dessert – I helped rinse the dishes and load the dishwasher while Gen spoke to Taylor in the living room. Taylor had thankfully made himself scarce during dinner (I figured he had gone up to his old room), but had come downstairs just as we had finished dessert. And as I entered the living

room, I decided to leave it up to Gen to do the talking. She knew her mother better than I did, and I knew I'd probably fuck it up. Besides, Gen had already practiced on her sisters – if anyone knew how to handle Diana, it would be Gen.

"Mom..." Gen started. "God, I don't know how to put this."

"Just take your time, Zoë."

Gen drew in a deep breath. "I know this is going to sound stupid, but...you remember Taylor, right?"

Diana just looked at her daughter, before sighing sadly. "How can I forget him, Zo? He was my son. And it's not every day you lose one of your children."

"Maybe I should go," I said.

"No, you're fine," Gen told me. She flashed me a quick smile, before she continued. "Mom, I can't believe I'm saying this, but..." She sighed. "He's here, Mom. I'm serious. He's been living with Gen and I since November, and he tagged along with us this evening." She then delivered a sharp jab to Taylor's ribs with her elbow, and he let out a yelp – one that I could plainly tell that his mother heard loud and clear. "Show yourself," Gen told him.

"That hurt," Taylor told her, sounding wounded, but he did as he was told, getting up off the couch and going to kneel before his mother. Gen directed her mother to close her eyes, and then nodded to Taylor. He dropped his chin onto his chest, and the air around him seemed to shimmer slightly. "You can look now, Mom," he said quietly as he looked up; I could hear the faintest hint of tears in his voice.

"Oh my Lord," I heard Diana say faintly once she had opened her eyes. "Taylor?"

Taylor nodded. "Yeah, it's me." And then I watched him break down for the first time. "Mom I'm so sorry," he cried. "I should have listened to you..."

“Oh my baby,” Diana whispered; she was crying now, as she gathered her long-lost son into a tight embrace. “You couldn’t have known what was going to happen...”

As Gen and I watched the long-overdue reunion between mother and son taking place right before our eyes, I realised that this was what Taylor had been searching for all these years, what he had so desperately wanted and needed. His mother.

And in the midst of the tears and near-uncontrolled sobbing, I heard Taylor take in a deep, shuddering breath.

* * *

Two months later, in the middle of March, Gen, Taylor and I holed ourselves up in the apartment and celebrated one long-since-overdue birthday – Taylor’s eighteenth. Gen and I both felt that he deserved it. He had never made it to his eighteenth while he had still been alive, and while our party couldn’t really make up for all those years as a seventeen-year-old – nothing could, to be honest – it was the next best thing.

But something had put a bit of a dampener on the festivities. For the whole day and most of the evening, Taylor had locked himself in his room, claiming a headache. It was actually a little worrying – before now, he had never shown any inkling of being able to feel pain. And yet here he was, laid up in his room in the dark with the headache from hell, while Gen and I cooked up a storm in our poky little kitchen. Well, *I* cooked up a storm – as usual, I’d limited Gen to the simplest task possible. I had set out the ingredients for nachos, and had watched Gen like a hawk as she made them. She had, fortunately, managed to complete her task without incident.

I knocked gently on the closed door with my elbow, as my hands were full – a glass of water in one hand, and an unopened packet of Advil liquid capsules in the other. Neither Gen nor I had anything more heavy-duty in the apartment, purely because we didn’t need it. I only hoped it was enough to deaden the pain.

"Tay?" I called quietly as I opened the door, letting a small sliver of light into the darkened room. Through the dark I saw Taylor raise his head off of his pillow and squint at me.

"What?" he asked.

"Want something for that headache?" I asked. I held up the painkillers. "I don't know if it will be enough, but it's worth a shot, right?" He nodded his answer, and I went to switch the light on. "Watch your eyes," I warned, and I flicked the switch.

"Oh my *head*," he moaned as he opened his eyes. "I haven't felt this bad in the past two-and-a-half decades. I'm not shitting you."

I believed him. It had been an aneurysm that had killed him all those years ago – though how that had been missed, I had no idea. And the worst part was that his family would never know for sure how he had died.

I tossed him the painkillers and set the glass on his night table. "You know, if you just want to sit around and talk tonight, I'm game," I said. "The food'll keep."

"No, s'all right," he assured me. "I'll be fine once this headache fucks off." He popped two pills and swallowed them with a couple of mouthfuls of water.

He was right – once the painkillers kicked in, he was fine. For the rest of the night, we cranked the music up to maximum and pigged out on nachos, hot dogs, Doritos, ice cream, and more chocolate than I think any of us knew what to do with. Gen spent most of the evening taking photos of Taylor and I, though I did manage to wrestle her camera away from her momentarily so that I could get a few photos of she and Taylor together. We had no idea if he would even show up in any of the photographs, but I supposed it was lucky that Gen's camera was a digital – we wouldn't be wasting any film if that was the case.

It was nearly midnight when we finally wound down the celebrations. I was heading off to my room when Gen called me back. "Gen, I'm *tired*," I protested. "No more photos, please. I think

you've taken enough."

"I just want one more. You can go to bed when I'm done – I promise."

I sighed. "Fine." I headed back to the living room couch and collapsed onto it next to Taylor; he pulled me close and wrapped an arm around me.

"Okay, hold it there," Gen said. But just as I heard Gen press down on the shutter, Taylor leaned over and planted a kiss squarely on my lips, and I closed my eyes as the flash went off, digitally preserving the moment for all time.

Epilogue

"Gen, have you seen Taylor?" I called as I entered the apartment. I'd just spent over an hour driving around the city, looking for Taylor in all the places I knew he liked spending time in. I had even – though it was very much against my moral principles – climbed up the tree outside his old bedroom window and peeked in through the glass, but no such luck. And I was starting to get worried. Never, in all the time I'd known him, had he gone off during the day without at least telling Gen and I where he was going. Where the hell was he?

"No, not since last night," she called back. "Forget about him for the moment and come and have a look at these."

"What is it?"

"The photos I took last night. They turned out really well."

I went through to Gen's room, where she sat at her desk, her laptop open before her. She was scrolling through a screen of miniaturised photographs, her digital camera sitting next to her computer with its battery compartment open. "Look at this one," she said. She double-clicked on one picture in particular; it expanded to reveal Taylor and I sitting on the living room couch, making faces at the camera. "At least we know one thing about him for sure," she said as she scrolled through the rest of the photographs. "He might not have a reflection, but he doesn't look half bad on camera."

"You'd think that he wouldn't show up in photographs," I mused.

"Yeah, well..." Gen shrugged and continued going through the photographs.

I wandered back out into the apartment and over to Taylor's room. As usual, the door was tightly closed, with the thinnest strip of sunlight streaming out through the gap between the bottom of the door and the floor. "Taylor, it's Rosaria," I called after I'd knocked on the door. "Are you all right?"

"He's not in there," Gen yelled, but I ignored her. Instead, I turned the doorknob and pushed the door open. And sure enough, Gen was right.

The room was empty. There were a few signs that the room looked lived-in – the bed was unmade, a half-filled glass of water, his iPod and a book of Greek myths that he had borrowed from me sat on the small table that served as a nightstand, and the clothes he usually wore to bed were draped over the end frame of the bed. That at least was a sign that he hadn't left until this morning. The window was wide open, the curtains fluttering in the spring breeze.

And then it clicked. The window in this room looked out toward the cemetery. In that instant, I knew where he had gone. It was the one place that I had neglected to look in my city-wide search.

I bolted into my room and found my jacket, yanking socks and my black Docs onto my feet before racing into Gen's room. "I know where he is," I told her. "It's the one place I never looked this morning. How could I be so *stupid*?"

"Where is he?"

"The cemetery."

"What would he have gone *there* for?" Gen asked, sounding genuinely confused.

"I don't know. But he's there, and he's going to do something."

Gen shut her computer off and pulled on socks and sneakers, grabbing her jacket off of the hook on the back of her bedroom door. I didn't know how long we had to get there, but one thing was for sure – we were going to have to drive there, else it'd take us all day.

When we arrived, I jumped out of the car before Gen had even shut off the engine. "Ria, wait!" she yelled as I tore off through the cemetery, my hair flying out behind me like a long, dark banner.

"I can't!" I yelled back. "Come on, hurry up!"

He was standing before the headstone that I knew to be his own, hands shoved in his pockets and head bowed. "Taylor!" I called as I came pelting up the path, Gen following behind me. He spun around to face me as I came to a halt. "Whatever you're going to do, don't you fucking *dare* do it."

"I have to, Ria," he said. "I know now why I was trapped here for so long – I needed to say goodbye to everyone. And you helped me do that. I can't thank you enough for that." He looked up toward the blue sky. "And now...it's my time to go."

"You can't," Gen said, and he looked at her. "Tay, please, you *can't* go..." She sounded as if she was pleading with him.

"Zo..." He shook his head. "I have to, sis. I don't have a choice. I've done what I needed to do. There's no reason for me to stay here any longer."

"Please don't," Gen whispered. She was crying now. "I don't want to lose you again."

"You're not losing me, Zoë," he told her. "I'll still be here. You just won't be able to see me anymore." This didn't seem to make any sort of impact, and he sighed. "Come here," he said to her, and pulled her into his arms. "God I am so proud of you," he whispered. "You've become everything I hoped you would."

"I don't want you to go," Gen whispered. "*Please* don't go Tay..."

"Shh," he whispered. "Zoë, I need you to listen to me very carefully. In your room and Rosaria's, I've left some letters. Check all your books. There's also a whole stack of them inside your hollow book – I need you to send them to Zac, Jess, Avery and Mom. Don't read them, because they're pretty damn personal. Okay?" Gen nodded. "Look at me, Zoë." She shook her head. "Zo, please. I want to see your face."

With what I guessed to be a great deal of reluctance, Gen finally looked up at her brother, and he smiled at her. "I know you don't want me to go, Zo," he told her. "I don't particularly want to go either. But it's just the way things have to be."

"If you see Dad, can you tell him that I love him?" Gen asked.

"He already knows, Zoë. But I'll tell him for you anyway."

Gen nodded, and Taylor released her, before turning to me. "Zoë is lucky to have you as a friend," he said. "You're a wonderful person, Ria – you could have refused to help me, but you didn't. I know you probably thought I was crazy, but as far as I can tell that didn't matter to you."

"I did, actually," I admitted; I gave him a sheepish smile. "Sorry."

"Don't apologise. You had every right to think I was nuts." We embraced for the last time. "Look after yourself, okay?"

"I will," I promised. I stepped back next to Gen and waited.

Taylor looked at the headstone one final time, before kneeling on the grass with his head bowed. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life," he said quietly, before looking up at the sky. "I'm coming home," he added, before letting out an unearthly cry that was terror and pain rolled into one.

"Why is he doing this if it hurts so much?" Gen asked me in a whisper.

"I don't know," I replied just as quietly. And as we watched, our arms around each other, a golden light appeared around Taylor. I couldn't tell if it was his aura, or if it was something else. But one thing was for sure – he was going where he truly belonged, where he should have gone all those years ago.

He looked back at us one final time and smiled. "I'll always be with you," he promised, before the light surrounding him intensified, and I had to look away.

When the light faded, he was gone.

* * *

It took me more than two weeks before I could bring myself to read the letter he had left for me. The apartment was so *empty* with him gone – now it was Gen and I once more, the way it had been since we had moved in together, and it was the most unnerving feeling in the world. I had grown so accustomed to his general presence that not having him around anymore actually hurt. Part of me was glad that he was gone, however – it meant that he'd found peace at long last. He was where he belonged.

I was going through my journal when I found it. It marked the entry I had made the week before my twenty-fifth birthday, which I found ironic. At first, I didn't *want* to read it – reading it would have cemented the fact that he was truly gone and would never be coming back, at least not in a physical capacity. It sat on my desk for a further week, propped up against an empty glass jam jar that I had filled with pens and pencils, my name written in flowing cursive on the front.

At the end of March, well and truly fed up with having it stare me in the face, I took the letter in hand and opened it, pulling from the envelope and unfolding a single sheet of lined notebook paper.

March 14 2026

Dear Rosaria,

Thank you.

Words can't express how thankful I am to have met you when I did. And I've been kicking myself for months now, because if I had managed to get up the nerve to talk to you earlier, maybe we'd have had a lot more time to get to know one another.

I have a confession to make. When I told you I had been following you around for six weeks before I asked you to help me, I lied. I'd actually been keeping an eye on you for most of your life. And I have never told anyone this – mostly because there's been nobody to tell – but before it happened, all those years ago, I looked at your mother, and I knew that we were connected somehow. And I was right. You showed me the way home.

I also want to thank you for being such a wonderful friend to Zoë. She's had a lot of friends in her life, but none who are like you. You've been there when she's needed you the most, and I know how thankful she is for that. She's going to need you more than ever now – I know that I don't have to ask this of you, but please be there for her.

I don't know if we will ever meet again, but I hope that we do. Until that time comes – if it ever does – look after yourself, and stay safe. Don't ever change.

Always,

Taylor Hanson

As I went to slip the refolded letter back into the envelope, a necklace fell out, landing on my desk. I set the letter and envelope aside and picked the necklace up. It was a silver Celtic cross threaded onto a length of black leather cord – the same necklace that I'd given to him for Christmas three months earlier, that he had worn every day until he had left us forever. A folded slip of paper had fallen out with it. Written there was something that my grandmother had taught me when I was much younger.

May the road rise up to meet you

May the wind always be at your back

May the sun shine warm upon your face

And rains fall soft upon your fields

And until we meet again

May God hold you in the palm of His hand

I smiled for maybe the first time in weeks, before slipping the necklace over my head. No matter what, even if we never saw each other again, I would always have a small piece of Taylor with me.

I opened my laptop and scrolled through iTunes, looking for my favourite Goo Goo Dolls song, hitting the play button when I had found it. And as I listened, I could almost hear Taylor singing along.

Right at that moment, I knew something. True, he was no longer present in a physical sense. That was obvious. But he was keeping his promise nevertheless – he was still here. And that was really all that mattered to me.

~ fin ~