

Avery

Prologue

My family isn't perfect; it wasn't ten years ago, and it still isn't now, but there were times when I pretended it was. It was easier for me to believe that it was picture-perfect rather than see its faults. It seemed to me, easier to just play nice for people than to admit we had flaws in our family-unit design. The problems were never completely one person's fault, but for the longest time I blamed it all on my older brother (one of the three). That has all changed now, but there are still a few things that you need to know about this brother of mine, as he was many, many years ago: he was egotistical, spoiled, spiteful, charming, good looking, a liar, and at one time an all around jerk. There was a time when I looked up to all three of my older brothers, and then there was a time when only two-thirds of them were worth admiring.

I should start by telling you who my family is. First, and oldest, is Isaac. His real name is Clarke (and Isaac is his middle name), but ever since I can remember we have always called him Isaac or Ike. He was always one of the sweetest, nicest guys you could ever meet in your entire life, he still is. He is the all around American guy who takes a girl out to dinner and pays for it all, holds the door open for her, gives her a kiss on the cheek at the end of the night and says he'll call her tomorrow without expecting anything more. He's thirty-one now, married, and has two gorgeous boys and a little girl.

Next comes Taylor. His real name is Jordan (middle name Taylor), but for whatever reason he had always gone by Taylor. When we were young Taylor was great, and I loved to be around him; he was my favorite brother. He always hung out with me when no one else would, played games with me, let me steal his hairbrush to sing into while I was standing in front of the mirror – he would even encourage me, saying I had a pretty voice. He was the coolest even after their recording contract. He always let me stay with him on the bus,

and we'd have water wars between the buses when weren't on the same one, and even sometimes when we were. He would stay up late with me when I couldn't sleep, even if he had to be up early the next morning, let me brush his hair when it was long, and then he would read me a story or make one up to put me to bed. Looking back, the age I was at made it seem so much more short lived because I was too young to really understand; even if I had been older I'm not sure I would have truly understood his change. He was fourteen when the recording contract came into play, and it wasn't until the second record was released, on a new label, that things started to change. So, I guess he was closer to seventeen or eighteen when the real change happened. It started with Ike and Taylor cutting their hair, but it seemed that not long after that Taylor picked up an ego that Isaac didn't. So, after all the fans started going crazy over the new music, new look, and they got more and more praise, Taylor turned into someone that I barely even knew. With interviews, and signings, and meet and greets, and concerts...there was more and more attention focused solely on Taylor, and it went straight to his head. He turned into a real bastard – and it broke my heart. I noticed things then, finally just old enough to start understanding. Where he used to be sweet and shy with girls, he wasn't anymore. It didn't matter anymore if he remembered their names or not, he just got their phone numbers, took them out on a date (if you could call it that) and used them. The bragging started then, and I was disgusted by it. Suddenly, he had no time for me anymore, and it seemed he just...stopped being who he once was. I don't really think I need to say again how heartbroken I was. I'm just thankful we got a chance to change things before it was too late.

After Taylor comes Zac. He's a little crazier than most, but then again I guess he always has been – right from toddler up to teenager, and now adult. He was about nineteen when everything happened; he just turned twenty-nine not too long ago. He's sweet; I honestly never thought he would be, but he really is. He would take a girl out and make her laugh so hard it was impossible for her not to have a good time. Needless to say he had (and still has) a lot of

female friends (it's almost safe to say 'posse'), but only one girlfriend at the time, who is now his wife, and he treats her like gold. He treats her with more respect that I ever thought he would be capable of, and he is a wonderful father. He is just truly wonderful.

Next is Jessica, my older sister. She was seventeen at the time of it all, and I remember that she had also just gotten her licence. She was then, and still is just as blonde as the rest of us (with the exception of Mackenzie, who like Zac and Isaac, is not blond anymore), and she is amazingly beautiful. She is twenty-seven now and she looks just like our mother did at her age. Looking back, I realise how much support I got from her; I was lucky to have a big sister like her growing up. She is now the same amazing person she was then, only older, wiser, and married with two beautiful children.

I was born after Jess. At the time I was fifteen, and very, very bitter. I was so angry and hurt that I almost let it get the better of me, and almost lost my chance to set things straight. Certain circumstances forced me to see that life is too short to be angry with someone forever, and forgive, and realize that love for a person should overpower anything else.

Born after me is Mackenzie, and like most of the men in our family he goes by his middle name; his first name is Joshua. At the time he was twelve, and he looked like a miniature Zac. He was absolutely nuts, and still is sometimes, but he's still my little brother and I love him just as much at twenty-two as I did at twelve.

The youngest of us all is Zoë. She was eight then. She had these big, bright blue eyes, and long blonde hair, and none of that has changed even a little. She reminds us all so much of Taylor; she looks just like him. She could have passed as his daughter rather than his sister when she was little. She loved him more than anything when she was little, even with all the negative changes that took place. She didn't understand, and therefore she couldn't

see him any differently – which, in retrospect, I think was a good thing. She adored him ever since she was a baby; she still does, maybe more than she ever has.

We – my family – went through an incredibly difficult time for so long. We were distanced from each other, or some of us were, and when we got it all back together it was just another incredibly difficult ordeal. Things once again changed, as they always do. Circumstances changed. Everyone got caught up in a whirlwind of emotion, chaos, and blinding heartbreak. In that time we had something so precious returned to us, only to lose it all over again much too soon, leaving us in a painful haze, knowing nothing would ever be the same again.

Chapter 1

I can remember years worth of time when I shared a room with Jessica and we'd sit up at night and talk about all the cool places we got to go because of our brothers. I have a room of my own now, which I'm grateful for, but I'm beginning to think that I actually miss the lack of space and privacy. Jessie and I have always been close, and we still are, just not as close as we used to be. If I need someone to talk to she'll make time for me, most of the time. She has a new boyfriend so she's been hanging out with him a lot and leaving me to reflective silences while sitting in my room and staring at the ceiling. Mac is...well, Mac is Mac and he isn't really the brother I'd go running to anyway; beside the fact he's younger than me, he hasn't the common sense God gave a tree stump. Don't get me wrong, he's smart – book smart – but leave him to make any decisions for himself and forget it. Then again, he is only twelve. Ike doesn't live home anymore, but he comes by often enough. This was just one of those days that I wished he would; I felt kind of...blah. I wanted to do something, but there really wasn't much to do – I had even done my chores and Jessica's seeing as she wasn't home. I was just bored and feeling a lot like I wanted to go back in time and brush my brother's hair. Zac was in class – he goes to college at Tulsa University, and yes, that is a real college. He's taking some art and math classes there, and some social sciences, though I wouldn't be surprised if he became the focus of studies in behavioural patterns and personalities. He and my two other brothers are on hiatus as far as the music industry goes, for now anyway.

I got up from my bed, making my way across the room to sit in front of the vanity that my mother had given me. I looked at my reflection; long blonde hair – no surprise there seeing as it was the dominant gene in this family – brown eyes, smooth skin. Plain. I started to brush my hair out; it wasn't as long as Jessica's or Zoë's; my hair was only to my shoulders, whereas both of my sisters had hair down to their butts. I parted my hair down the middle, pulling two hair elastics from the drawer to my left. I started to French braid

the right side, screwed it up, pulled it out, and started again. I could French braid anyone and everyone's hair except my own. I heard a soft chuckle from the doorway and turned to see my mother standing there, her still butt-length hair held back with a barrette.

"I think I'll just cut it all off, as short as Zac and Ike's," I sighed and she laughed quietly.

"Honey, do you want some help?" she asked, coming into my room.

"Yeah," I sighed. "I can never braid my own hair." I scooted over on the small bench, allowing her to sit down beside me. She was the epitome of Taylor and Zoë, or they were the epitome of her. She was so pretty; my mother is elegantly beautiful. She had high cheekbones, like Taylor, and bright blue eyes. She had such a pretty smile that could light up any room; and she had this air about her...I loved her so much.

"Not everybody can," she said, taking a section of my hair and brushing it gently. She pieced it into three sections and set to work, meticulously lapping each piece over the other.

"Mom, if I ask you a question, you'll answer truthfully, right?" I asked her, looking at her in the mirror. She met my gaze in the glass and smiled softly.

"I'd never lie to you, if I can help it."

"Why do people change so much?" I asked, my eyebrows knitting together. "I mean, I know time goes by and people grow up, but why do they change?"

"Well," she started, sighing a little. "Circumstances can cause people to change; at least they can be a factor that helps change along. Why do you ask?"

“Cause; I was just thinking about when I was little. You know, when the boys first got their contract.”

I watched her brow crease in the mirror. “What made you start thinking about that?”

“Honestly? I was snooping through some stuff in your room yesterday, and I came across some photo albums.”

“I see.” She finished braiding one side of my hair and got up, and I scooted over again in the other direction to let her sit beside me again, just on the other side. “What were you looking for?”

“My old doll; the one you told me Taylor bought me for my first birthday – you know which one I mean; that rag doll.”

She nodded once, smiling a little, ruefully. “I do know.”

“Well, we have to write this essay for English on something that has meaning. I thought about it for a long time, and well...all I could think of was that doll. Maggie.”

“I haven’t seen her in a long time,” she said, pausing to look at me in the mirror.

“Yeah well, I packed her away when my brother turned into a bastard,” I said bitterly.

“Avie,” she said softly, scoldingly.

“Sorry,” I said quietly. “I have to write what it means to me; what meaning it holds. And I guess...well, it holds a lot of meaning. It reminds me of how

things used to be, a long time ago, and” I got quieter “how much things have changed.”

“What brought this on?” she asked, tying the elastic around the end of my hair as she finished.

“I don’t know really. I guess with Zac in college, and his new girlfriend, and Jessica getting her license and her new boyfriend...I guess I just miss old times, that’s all.”

“Feeling left out?” she asked, resting her chin on my shoulder and looking at us in the mirror.

“Yeah, a little.”

“Avie, it doesn’t change that they’re still your brothers, Jessica is still your sister, and they love you.”

“I know that. I just wish that some things hadn’t changed.” She knew what I meant, and she sighed as she stood up. She kissed the top of my head.

“I thought you might like to know, Taylor’s coming home in a few weeks. You might want to spend some time with him.” I snorted. The last person I wanted to spend time with was that jerk. I was quiet as she left the room, leaving the door open as I had left it.

I go to public school, hence the English paper. Jessica, Mackenzie, Zoë and myself all had the option of being home schooled like my older brothers or going to public school. We all opted to be home schooled, until last year when Jess and I decided we wanted to try high school. It was her junior year and my freshman year. She liked it, and now she’s in her senior year, and happy at that. I didn’t care for it that much, but I figured I might as well try one more

year and if I didn't like it after that, I'd go back to home schooling with the two younger kids.

I had the intentions of calling a friend and doing something, that was the sole reason I had my hair braided, but...I changed my mind. I hadn't seen Taylor in about two, maybe three years, and now he was coming home. I felt a little dizzy; it was strange. Suddenly, all I wanted to do was lie down and take a nap. My mind was reeling with the thought of my older brother coming home, and I just wanted to not think about it.

I wandered down the hallway to my brothers' room, not bothering to knock on the door, knowing that two out of three of them were definitely asleep. I crept in quietly, leaving the door cracked so the light from the hallway would allow me to see so I didn't trip over anything that they had strewn across the floor. I crept to Taylor's bunk bed, thankful that he slept on the bottom, and stood beside the trundle where Zac slept, my legs by his head. I reached out and gently tapped Taylor's shoulder, and like the light sleeper that he was, he turned over to look at me.

"Avie?" I nodded. "What are you doing up?"

"I couldn't sleep," I whispered, shrugging a little. He looked down at Zac, and then at the clock on the dresser. The bright green numbers read 12:03. He gave me a small smile and nodded toward the door. I headed in that direction and he followed, carefully climbing out of his bed, making sure not to step on Zac. He followed me out and down the hall to the room I shared with Jess. He turned on the lamp by my bed, knowing it wouldn't wake our sister – she slept like a log.

"What's up, Ave?" he asked quietly, tugging gently on a lock of my long hair. I shrugged.

“When are you guys leaving for L.A.?”

“You’re worried about that?” he asked, a little surprised.

“How far away is that?”

“It’s in California,” he answered. “What’s all this about anyway?”

“Mom said you and Ike, and Zac got a contract. She said you’re gonna make a CD.”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “That’s right.”

“Is California far away?”

“Pretty far,” he answered quietly, smoothing my hair. “What’s wrong, Ave?”

“I’m gonna miss you,” I whispered. I felt tears sting my eyes, and I really didn’t know why.

“Aw, honey,” he smiled a little and pulled me into a hug. “We’re coming back. And you won’t have to miss me; we’re all going to California – we’re just leaving a little earlier than you.”

“You’re gonna be famous, and forget about me.”

He held me out and looked at me sternly. “Avie, I could never forget about you, okay?” I sniffed and he repeated himself. “Okay?”

I nodded. “Okay.” We hugged each other, and I started playing with his hair.

“Come on,” he said softly. “Get under your covers.” I slid under my covers, and he smoothed my hair away from my face, wiping my tears.

“Sing to me?” I said, and he smiled.

“Only if you promise to go to sleep right after.” I smiled now.

“Okay.”

Then he started to sing; it was my favourite church song from Sunday masses.

“This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine...”

“Avery!” I was startled awake by Mac, his head stuck in my doorway, grinning like a mad man. “Dude, you should have seen yourself jump.” He laughed.

“Shut up, Mac. And I’m not a ‘dude’.”

“Whatever. Dinner’s ready,” he said, still laughing, and ran from my doorway. I swung my legs over the side of my bed, and just sat on the edge for a moment. That was no ordinary dream; that was a memory, and it kind of hurt. Remembering Taylor that way made me wish he was still that way. I suppose I should tell you where Taylor is coming home from. When he was twenty, or maybe twenty-one, I don’t remember that well, he moved to New York City. He has an apartment there with his friends, if it’s possible for him to even have any friends. I don’t know what he does there, but it probably involves skanky girls and sex, and then bragging about it to his buddies. That’s Taylor for you. Hearing my name shouted one more time, I sighed.

“I’m coming!” I called back, and headed down to dinner. Zac should be home by now; he could hang out with me if he wasn’t busy, and even if he was he’d let me hang in his room and play video games.

I helped Mom clean up the kitchen after dinner, scraping plates, drying the dishes and putting them away after she washed them. We had a dishwasher, but don't ask me why we never used it. She didn't mention Taylor again; I think she knew it was kind of a sore subject with me. He's kept in touch with us; he still calls Mom every single night, and she calls him every morning. He talks to my brothers and sisters on the phone occasionally, but I always make up some excuse not to talk to him. The truth is I don't want to talk to him.

"Avie?" Mom said my name and I looked at her as I reached up and put the last plate into the cupboard.

"Hmm?" I replied.

"I think your doll is up in the attic. You'll have to go up and check when you get time." I stared at her for a moment; she kind of caught me off guard.

"Oh," was my brilliant answer. "Okay. I'll go up and check tomorrow." She smiled and nodded.

"Go on, honey. I can finish the rest of this."

"You sure? I don't mind," I said, putting a glass in the next cupboard.

"Yeah. Go on and see Zac."

I smiled, thankful for her letting me off the hook. I said thanks and ran upstairs to Zac's room. I always knock before I go in Zac's room, not because I'm worried that I'm going to walk in and see something that will scar me for the rest of my life, but for the simple fact he's nice to me so I'm just being polite.

"Enter," he said, and I shook my head, smiling. He's such a dork. I opened the door and stuck my head inside and he smiled at me. "Hey Avie."

“Hey. Can I come in?”

“Sure.” I came in and closed the door behind me. I smiled at his girlfriend. She was really nice, and could get as crazy as Zac sometimes, or as quiet as Ike. She had really dark hair, almost black, and these really pretty green eyes. I told her before that I wished I had eyes like hers; it was really cool how she had all that bright, emerald green and then the flecks of gold mixed in with it. Her eyes were a lot prettier than my plain old brown ones.

“Hey Rachel,” I said, smiling at her.

“Hey Avie.” She smiled back. I always liked her, right from the start.

“Are you busy?” I asked my brother. He closed whatever text book he had open and smiled at me.

“Nope. Not too busy for you, anyway.”

“You’re such a dork, Zac.”

“Must run in the family,” he said, shrugging and grinning. Rachel laughed quietly and I laughed a little, too. He had a point though; we could all be pretty dorky sometimes – I think we get it from Dad. I sighed.

“I’m really bored. I hate to bug you, but...”

“Well, what do you wanna do?” Rachel asked me. She and Zac let me tag along with them a lot, when they weren’t in with groups of their friends; then they left me out for my own good, which I was always thankful for, knowing I would feel very out of place.

"I don't know, honestly. Just...something." I flopped down on his bed beside Rachel.

"You wanna see a movie?" he asked me. "I'll pay for you if you don't have any money."

"Thanks for the offer, but there really isn't anything good out." He seemed to digest that and just think for a moment.

"I could kick your ass on a game of *Mortal Kombat 4*." He grinned wickedly, and Rachel laughed.

"I think that's a challenge," she said, looking at me, and I grinned wide. They both laughed.

"We'll see who kicks whose ass." I slid off the bed and Zac followed me to the floor. "Prepare to lose, Zachary Walker."

"Oh no, Avery Laurel, I think you are the one who should prepare to lose," he said and leaned over toward me. "You've never beat me yet," he whispered and grinned.

"Shut up," I retorted, smiling in spite of myself. Rachel came and sat on the other side of me, sandwiching me between her and my brother. I didn't mind though; at least they always made me feel welcome and wanted. This was good for now. I could go up to the attic and search for Maggie tomorrow; I had more important things, like kicking Zac's ass on this game, or getting my ass kicked by Zac on this game, than look for a raggedy doll a brother I would like to forget gave to me when I turned one.

Chapter 2

Our attic is pretty big; pretty big and dusty. It has to be big, if you think about, with seven kids and a lot of memories to keep. There are about ten thousand boxes cramped together up here – okay, maybe ten thousand is pushing it. There has to be at least something near a hundred. Some of the boxes were marked with names, or whose room they should have gone into when we moved, and some were just blank with a thick layer of dust on them. Either way, I had no clue where to even start looking for that doll. I guess the most logical way to do it would be to look in any boxes with my name on it; so that's what I started doing. There were three boxes that actually had my name on them, and I figured it was probably all the stuff Mom had kept from when I was a baby. There was going to be a lot to go through, but, I had to find that doll. I wasn't sure if it was for my English paper or me anymore.

I started with box closest to the front; I had given up on the doll when I was nine, when Taylor wasn't the Taylor I loved anymore. Old dance costumes are the first thing I encountered. Mom had always made my costumes for me, and I guess she had saved them as well. I smiled a little, taking out the sequined one-piece I had used a couple years ago for my tap solo. I preferred jazz and ballet, but I never complained. I set it on top of the box next to me and continued to rummage through the one I had opened. I got about halfway through the box when I finally decided what I was looking for wasn't in there. So I stuffed everything back into it, closed it up, and pushed it aside, going to the one furthest in the back. This one had a lot of baby stuff in it, but...I started to get curious, so I went through it anyway. There were a few things that had 'baby's first...' whatever on them, and I had to smile. I used to be that small...I set aside a few photo albums, and picked up one that looked particularly dusty. I blew on the top of it – big mistake, I scattered dust everywhere, making myself choke. And I said Mac was the one with no common sense. When I opened it up I had to smile – there were pictures from my christening. Dad was holding me, and I was in this little white dress – it

almost looked like a mini wedding dress – and Ike, and Taylor, and Zac were standing around him. Dad was sitting on the couch, Ike to his right, and Tay to his left by my head. Zac was sitting by Isaac trying to see. Isaac had to be around nine, Taylor about seven, and Zac about four. Jessica had to have been two, but she wasn't in the picture. I smiled, and flipped through a few more; Isaac was holding me in a few of them, and then...Taylor was. I can't really explain how proud he looked to be holding me. It was almost hard to believe, now, that Taylor could have ever been so innocent...it almost felt like I had dreamed all of what happened, and he was never really the brother I remembered, almost like I had imagined it all. But I knew that I hadn't imagined those years, no matter what it felt like, and I suddenly found myself angry. I closed the book quickly, slamming it closed and tossing it on top of the others. I didn't come up here to look at old pictures; I came up here to get a stupid doll so I could write a paper about her.

After putting everything back into the box, I moved on to the last one. What I was looking for had to be in there. I coughed as I opened the box and dust flew up in my face, again. I dug around for a minute, and ended up finding an old soccer jersey. I never played soccer, but my brothers had. It was green with white numbers on the back – number 01. I suddenly knew who it belonged to and in spite of myself, laughed at the reason it was in my box of things. One night on the bus, I had a lot to drink before I went to bed, and I was sharing a bunk with Tay because we watched a scary movie and I didn't want to sleep alone. And, well, I kind of...peed on him. He was wearing that jersey to bed, and after it was washed he gave it to me. I was only six. But that was a long time ago...I tossed the jersey aside and sure enough, there it was: Maggie. I hadn't seen that rag doll since... 2000? 2001? I pulled her out, put everything else back, and closed the box. I'd had enough memories for one day. I didn't care to remember anything else. Besides, my allergies were killing me now, thanks to all the dust. So I just made my way back downstairs, avoiding anyone so I wouldn't have to tell them why I dug out Maggie, and went right up to my room, closing the door quietly. I threw the doll on my

vanity, and threw myself onto my bed. I really don't know what came over me, but I just...cried.

Mom said we were supposed to be in bed by eleven, but I had crawled into my bunk and started watching a movie at ten-thirty, and I still wasn't tired. I sighed, maybe a little more loudly than I had intended. I could hear someone coming, and hoped it wasn't Mom, because she'd make me turn my movie off, and I was into Beauty and the Beast...sort of. I was relieved when Taylor poked his head inside the curtain.

"Hey Avie," he whispered. I grinned at him and scrunched up my nose.

"What do you want?" I stuck my tongue out at him and he laughed quietly.

"Nothin'. I heard your" he sighed dramatically "sigh." He grinned at me and I giggled.

"You're a dork, Taylor." I pulled his hair gently. "Can I play with your hair?"

"How come you always wanna play with my hair? You've got your own." He smiled at me.

"'Cause, Tay, I can't play with my own hair; I can't see it." He seemed to think about it for moment.

"I guess I can see your point." He smiled at me. "Scoot over." I did as told and scooted over in the already cramped bunk, allowing him to crawl in next to me. He laid down with his back to me, and I started to comb my fingers through his hair.

"Your hair is soft," I whispered.

“Oh yeah? Maybe that’s why everyone thinks I’m a girl...” I smiled at his stupidity and poked him in the ribs. “Hey, I said you could play with my hair, not tickle me.” I rolled my eyes even though he couldn’t see it.

“Hey Taylor?” I said quietly.

“Hmm?”

“When I grow up, can I be like you?” I whispered. I looked over him, and he smiled slightly.

“Why do you wanna be like me?” he asked me, speaking quietly as well.

“Because...I just do.” I didn’t know how to explain it to him.

“If you really want to,” he said quietly, yawning.

“I really do,” I said, still combing my fingers through his hair. “You’re the best brother Tay.”

“Sure I am.” I watched him smile a little again. “You just say that because I let you get away with everything.” We both laughed quietly. I finally laid down, his back to me, and I curled up against him.

“I love you, Tay,” I whispered to him, my eyelids finally growing heavy.

“Love you too, Ave.”

I sat up quickly, my heart beating fast and my breathing quick. What on earth...? I fell asleep? I sat for a moment, just thinking about the dream I had just had. What is it with these stupid dream-memories? That was a long time ago, why was it coming back to me now? Because of this paper? Because

Mom told me Taylor was coming home? I just... didn't understand, and I didn't like it. I wanted to be like Taylor at one point, but not anymore. That changed. He changed. Everything changed.

* * *

Mom has been acting kind of strange for the last few days, ever since she told me Taylor was coming home. I could have sworn she was crying; I know what it looks like when my mom cries, and it's not something I like to see. She's had this sad look in her eyes that she's been trying to hide, and I don't know why. I have a feeling it has to do with my brother, and if he did anything to hurt her, I swear to God his ass will be hanging from a tree. In the meantime I have this stupid English paper.

"Hey Avie," Jessica stuck her head in my door. "Melanie is on the phone." So the English paper can wait.

"Thanks Jessie," I said as she tossed the cordless phone to me. She smiled.

"No problem." She turned and breezed back out. I rubbed my eyes for a moment and then picked up the phone, and answered it.

"Hey Mel," I said, running a hand through my hair.

"Hey Aves," she replied. "Are you busy today?"

"No." I stretched. "I just woke up."

"You lazy slug!" I heard her laugh on the other end, and I chuckled.

"I haven't slept all morning. I was up at nine and I went up to the attic to find something, and when I came back down I fell asleep."

“Well, me, Cat, Jen, Mikey, and JR are going to hang out and we wanted to know if you wanted to come.”

“Um, where?” I asked. Let it be known that I’m not a groupie, I never have been and I don’t think I ever will be.

“Mikey’s house; your mom’s let you come to his house before.”

“That’s because she knows Mike is too stupid to try anything.” We both laughed quietly. “Hey, isn’t JR a junior?”

“Yeah...” she replied, and I could tell she wasn’t telling me something.

“Okay, spill it. I know you’re hiding something.”

“JR asked me to call you; he wants you to come.” JR is very cute, very popular, and very my type. If there was any chance at all he liked me I was not going to pass up the chance to hang out with him.

“You’re lying.”

“I’m dead serious. I think he likes you Aves.”

“Um, what time are you going over to Mike’s?” I asked, sitting in front of the vanity and brushing my hair. I don’t really wear a lot of makeup. I’ll put on a little blush and some light mascara, but other than that, I really don’t bother. Mom says I have natural beauty; I say she’s biased.

“We’re meeting there in about half an hour.”

“Well I need to make sure it’s okay with my mom, and then I need to get someone to drop me off-”

“Don’t worry about a ride. JR is bringing me and he wants to pick you up.” I felt my heart skip a beat, or two, or three or four.

“Really?” I didn’t want to sound too excited, because then I would just look like an even bigger dork than I really am.

“Uh huh, and you know your mom will let you go. So we’ll see you in half an hour, okay?” I was speechless for a moment. “Avery?”

“Oh, um, yeah. I’ll be ready.”

“Great.” I could hear her grinning. “I guess we’ll see you then.”

“Okay, great. Bye.” I hung up the phone feeling a little numb. JR wanted to hang out with me? Why? There were senior girls who would kill to date him, and he was looking at me? What for? I looked at my reflection again. I brushed my hair once more, semi-satisfied, and sighed. “Guess that’s good enough,” I said to myself. I rose from my place in front of the vanity. I had to go and ask if I could actually go.

I bounced down the stairs, and into the kitchen where I knew I could find my mother. She was there, eating a sandwich and drinking coffee. She and Dad drink so much coffee it’s ridiculous; I think that’s where Ike and Taylor developed their love for it – Zac hates coffee. She had that look again; she just seemed...sad.

“Hey Mom,” I said, sliding into a chair beside her. She looked up at me and smiled a little ruefully.

“Hey sweetie,” she said, looking at me for a moment, and then down at her coffee. She took a sip and we sat quietly for a minute or so.

“Um, Mel just called, is it okay if I go to Mike’s house for a while?”

“If you give me a little bit I can drop you-”

“No, it’s okay. I have a ride.”

“Oh?” She raised her eyebrows in question. I kind of wanted to tell her anyway.

“Well, this kid, JR, from school is driving Mel and he offered to pick me up too.”

“I see. Is this the JR I’ve heard you talk about a couple times? The one who’s so popular?”

“Yeah, that’s him. I don’t know why he’d wanna hang out with me, but...whatever.” She smiled a little, and nodded.

“It’s okay with me, honey.” She looked back down at her coffee and stayed silent for a while.

“Where’s Dad?” I asked.

“He ran to get some more orange juice,” she answered quietly without looking up.

“Mom, is everything okay?” I asked her quietly, and she looked up. She smiled at me, but her heart wasn’t in it and I could tell. Something was bothering her, and I wanted to know what. “Mom...what’s wrong?”

“Nothing, honey. You go with your friends, go have a good time.” She patted my hand and I stood up, walking over to her and hugging her. “I love you,

Avery,” she said, hugging me back. I was hoping something wasn’t really wrong.

“You always tell me that you’re here if I need to talk,” I said softly, “but that goes for you too, Mom. If you wanna talk about anything...I know I’m your daughter and I don’t have that much wisdom to offer...”

“Thanks honey,” she said, letting me go. “But I’m fine.”

“Okay. I’m gonna go grab a light jacket.”

“Avery?” I turned around. “When you come back, would you put fresh linen on the bed in the spare bedroom? Tay’s coming home a little earlier than expected.”

“Oh,” I said flatly. “Sure.”

“Thanks baby.” I smiled tightly at her and ran up to get a light jacket, and with another thought, brush my teeth. I had just woken up after all, and who knew what my breath smelled like. I didn’t want to breathe on someone and kill them with my death-breath.

The first thought that entered my mind when JR and Melanie arrived to pick me up was: JR has a Mustang? I quickly ran my fingers through my hair, smoothing out any pieces of hair that had thus far decided to have minds of their own. I called to both of my parents to let them know I was leaving and headed for the door.

“Wait a sec,” Dad said, and I skidded to a stop in front of the door. I turned around, hoping against hope he wasn’t going to want to meet JR first. “Who’s that?” he asked, pointing out the window at him. I barely knew the kid myself, so I wasn’t going to try to explain too much in detail.

“It’s just one of the guys from school; he’s bringing me and Mel to Mike’s house.”

“I’ve never seen him before,” he said, eyeing him carefully.

“Dad, please don’t get super over-protective on me now,” I whined. “I really have to go...”

“How long are you staying at Mikey’s?”

“A couple hours. I’ll be home for dinner,” I answered. Those were my intentions, and I planned on sticking to them.

“All right, then.” He smiled. “Far be it for me to hinder you further.” I smiled at him and stood up on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

“See you in a little while, Daddy.” I opened the front door and hurried out, almost too excited. I had to remind myself not to say or do anything that would make me look stupid in front of JR.

I climbed easily into the back seat of his hunter green Mustang, smiling at him and Mel as I settled myself.

“Hey Aves,” Mel said, grinning like the Cheshire cat.

“Hey Mel,” I replied, pretending not to notice JR. He’s a little hard not to notice. He has that olive complexion with the dark hair and grey eyes, almost a steely colour. He’s built, but I don’t consider him ripped, and yet he is in no way scrawny. He was about the same height as Isaac.

“Hey Avery,” he said to me, smiling a little in the rear-view mirror. I smiled a little and hoped I wasn’t blushing.

“Hey JR,” I replied, looking out the window and hoping he wasn’t noticing too much the stupid grin on my face. “Thanks for picking me up.”

“My pleasure,” he smiled at me through the mirror again. I just smiled back and looked out the window so as not to stare at him. Did I mention he has a gorgeous smile? Oh yeah; the kind that makes just about any girl melt into a puddle where she stands, or in my case, sits? Well, that’s it. He was killing me.

* * *

“Mike! You’re such a loser!” I laughed, pushing him off of me. You have to know Mike to really be around him and not be annoyed to death. He’ll do stupid things like purposely fall on someone by accident, and cause you to spill what you’re holding or fall down with him. I had been holding a bowl of popcorn. He stood up, picking up some popcorn off the floor and eating it. “You suck,” I joked.

“Hmm,” he replied, stroking non-existent hairs on his chin. “Maybe...”

“You’re sick, Mikey,” Jen said, smiling. We all just laughed, and that’s about the time I almost died. I noticed that JR was looking at me, and quickly looked away. I felt the blush creep into my cheeks, and chanced a look up at him. He just smiled and looked down at the floor, and I did the same. Maybe he really did like me...

“What are you guys doing in there?” Mike’s mom asked, coming into the living room, chuckling as well. Thank God she was easy going or we would have been dead; we always make a mess, wherever house we’re at, but in the same breath we always clean up after ourselves.

“Mike’s a dork,” I said, kicking him, causing him to topple over the coffee table. It wouldn’t have been so funny if I had meant to do it, or if he had just done it as another one of his stupid antics. But he really toppled over, and it was one of the funniest things I had ever seen in my life, and I almost wet my pants laughing so hard. His dad, hearing the noise had come to check it out as well, and just shook his head, smiling.

“I don’t know about you guys,” he said, chuckling as he left us to ourselves.

After we had collected ourselves, and were no longer in danger of pants-wetting or hyperventilating, or suffocating from laughing so hard, I took a moment to glance at the clock.

“Oh crap,” I said, getting up. “Guys, I have to get home. I promised I’d be home for dinner, and that’s in like, ten minutes.”

“It’s no problem,” JR recovered quickly. “I’ll drop you off home.”

“Um, thanks,” I said, blushing a little.

“I’ll be back in a few guys,” he said, grabbing his jacket and pulling it on.

“See you guys later,” I said, waving to them, and following JR out of the house and to his car. I was riding up front this time. Go me.

It was about a ten, maybe fifteen minute ride from Mike’s house to mine, and most of that time I had spent brooding. I should have been thinking about how great it was sitting in the front seat of JR’s Mustang with him, but instead I was thinking of my mother. I couldn’t get over the fact that something was bothering her.

“You’re awfully quiet,” he interrupted my thoughts quietly. I turned to look at him, his features soft and bright, and a small smile on his lips. I smiled a little and blushed.

“Sorry. I was thinking about my mom,” I replied, inwardly kicking myself for how lame it sounded.

“That’s the first time I’ve heard that one,” he said, laughing a little.

“Oh, no, I didn’t mean...I wasn’t trying to ignore you,” I said, shaking my head, hoping he didn’t think I wasn’t interested.

“I know we don’t know each other that well, but if this makes you uncomfortable-”

“No! Um, no,” I said, trying to calm myself down. “That’s not it at all.”

“Well...wanna tell me about it?” he asked hopefully, looking over at me again for a moment.

“It’s really nothing big. It’s just...well, my mom has always been a happy person or whatever, but...lately she’s been kinda down.”

“Hmm.” He seemed to consider it.

“I mean, my stupid brother is coming home, and if he had anything to do with her feeling down, I’ll kill him.”

“Maybe she’s having a mid-life crisis or something.” He seemed serious so I tried not to laugh. With seven children her whole life was her mid-life crisis. After a moment I actually considered it; it could be, I mean I hadn’t ever thought of it, but who’s to say that couldn’t be it?

“Maybe...” I said thoughtfully, looking out the passenger side window for a moment.

“I’m glad you came today,” he said, and I looked at him again. “I want to get to know you better.”

“Really?” I couldn’t help the half shy, half hopeful smile that graced my lips.

“Yeah,” he replied smoothly. “I think you’re really cool.” I laughed a little nervously, a little embarrassed.

“Thanks.” I looked down at my lap. “You’re pretty cool yourself.” He seemed to like that answer and laughed too. This was nice...

“Well...this is your stop.” I looked up, suddenly aware that we were alone in his car. What now? What was I supposed to do? Shake his hand like a nerd and say thanks for the ride?

“I guess it is,” I replied quietly.

“I hope we can do this again sometime.”

“Yeah,” I said, “maybe.” He leaned over and softly kissed my cheek. I smiled a little at him. “Thanks for the ride.” He smiled at me. Oh yeah, I am smooth.

“My pleasure,” he replied, as I undid my seatbelt and opened the passenger side door. I smiled one more time at him, and got out, closing the car door, and bounding for my front door. I was trying not to act too giddy. I heard him pull away and smiled to myself before I went in the front door. Today was good. And now, it was time to face dinner. You see, it’s a lot like the start of World War III at our dinner table; very noisy and often with flying debris.

Chapter 3

It was the day of confrontation, as I so called it. Taylor was coming home. Mom and Dad were picking him up at the airport. Why he couldn't drive himself, I have no idea. But that's Taylor for you; get everybody to do everything for you. He was actually second on my mind, Mom was first. She still hadn't been herself, and honestly, Dad had been acting weird for the past two weeks too. I hoped they weren't fighting or anything of that nature. It's not to say they don't ever fight, they do, just not huge blow outs. And you don't even have to personally know my mother to understand my concern; one, she's my mother, and two, if you've ever just seen her, in church or the grocery store or something, you'd know she was always smiling, always seemed to be happy, and it just wasn't like her to seem so...depressed. I mean she wasn't moping around the house or anything, but even Zoë had picked up on the fact something was off, and she's only eight. God help Taylor if he did anything to hurt her, or Dad for that matter, though I highly doubt I'd need to defend my father – he could still slap the shit out of Taylor if he wanted to, regardless of the fact Taylor was taller than him.

When he finally got home everyone went down to greet him; I went down, but greet him, ha – I promise you I did not. I gave him a really dirty look and went into the kitchen. Mac wasn't all that interested in his return either, saying his hello and finding something better to do than be occupied with Taylor – good boy; it's about time you showed that you have a brain that does real thinking. Zoë, on the other hand, I felt bad for. She wanted to know everything about what it was like in New York, did he have a new girlfriend, was he staying home long – did he come home to stay.

"Maybe later, Zoë," he said to her, basically brushing her off. She adored the ground he walked on and he just...dusted her off, like she wasn't worth his time. I wanted to come out of the kitchen and just slap him. Zac said his hello, made idle chat, and was off with Rachel to his room. Jessica talked to him for

a few minutes, but that was it. She wasn't thrilled to death with him either, but Mom and Dad, of course had to help him with his bags. He had a lot of stuff...just how long was he staying?

"Did you forget anything?" Mom asked him quietly, and he just shook his head. He almost looked tired. Duh, he just got off a plane; of course he's going to be tired. But did I honestly care? Nope. The other thing that I found a little strange was the fact it was almost eighty degrees out and he was wearing a long sleeved shirt. Is he really that blonde? Can he not feel the heat and realise this is T-shirt weather? I didn't care so I wasn't going to waste my time wondering. I grabbed a Coke out of the fridge and headed upstairs, whether it was to my own room or Zac's it didn't matter.

I did end up going to Zac's room, and almost burst into giggles as soon as I walked in. I stepped around him and Rachel on the floor and sat on his bed. They were fully engaged in a wrestling match, that Zac was winning; but don't get me wrong, she put up a good fight, gave him a run for his money.

"Zac, you are so much huger than me," she grunted under his weight. "This is totally unfair."

"Hey, you wanted to wrestle," he said back, pinning her shoulders down. She swung her legs loose, planting her feet on the floor and trying to push herself up and Zac off. She had swung one leg over enough to push against his hip, forcing him most of the way off of her. "Oh *no*. I am *not* going to let you win this." He grinned.

"Zac-"

"No way, Rach. It would hurt my pride way too much to be beat by my woman." He immediately began to tickle her. She instantly dissolved into a loud fit of laughter. I liked her laugh; it made me smile.

“Zac!” she screeched. “Stop!”

“Not until you say the magic words.”

“Uncle!” she shrieked, laughing harder as he tickled more.

“Nope, that’s not it.” He grinned. “Zac is the master and I will never beat him at wrestling.”

“Screw you!” she laughed, and he tickled harder. “Please!”

“Say the magic words.”

“Never.” He tickled her in earnest now, and I was giggling from my place on his bed, imagining her discomfort and being glad it wasn’t me; I would have peed my pants by now.

“Say it...”

“Fine!” She was laughing so hard she could barely catch a breath. I watched through narrow eyes as Taylor passed the doorway with the last bag he carried. “Zac is the master and I will never beat him at wrestling!” He just stopped. They lay on the floor, both on their backs, breathing hard. She turned her head to look at him. “You’re a jerk.”

“It comes naturally,” he replied smoothly. They both giggled. She reached over and slapped his chest.

“I’ll find a way to get you back.”

“Sure you will,” he said, rolling his eyes and sitting up. I was still giggling. “What are you laughing at? You wanna piece of this too?” I put my hands up as if surrendering and shook my head.

“No, I’m content to watch, thanks.” I smiled sweetly, and he stuck his hands out for Rachel to take, which she did, and he pulled her to her feet.

“I think I have rug burn,” she said, inspecting her elbows. “Do I have rug burn?” she asked me, lifting the hem of her shirt so I could see her back. Her lower back was bright red, and no doubt burned.

“Yep,” I answered. She turned to Zac, pouting fully.

“You gave me rug burn,” she whined sadly, pouting. She was great at pouting, and I had to grin.

“Aww, poor baby,” he cooed, teasing her. “Want me to kiss it?”

“Yeah.”

“Where?”

“Right on my ass.” I burst out laughing, as did she, and he grabbed her, pulling her into his arms. They were both laughing, and he snuffled his face into her neck. She put her arms around him, still grinning and they just stood like that for a moment. He pulled back and kissed her, and then smiled. I took that as my cue.

“I’m going to check my email, and you guys can make out without an audience.” I smiled sweetly, hopping off of his bed. I was almost as tall as Isaac now, and Zac ruffled my hair up. “Zac, you nerd,” I said, fixing my hair.

“Hey Zac?” That was Taylor’s voice and I stopped in my tracks. I just stood there looking at him as he looked at Zac, his head poked in the doorway.

“Yeah?” he replied, turning around. He was civil to Taylor; more than civil, *nice* even.

“Um, do you know where mom keeps the Pepto?” he asked. Like he couldn’t go in the bathroom and look for the medicine himself.

“Uhhh...” Zac scratched his head for a moment, squinting one eye. “Try the...second shelf in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom,” he answered, looking satisfied with himself because he remembered.

“Okay; thanks,” he replied. He glanced at me before leaving, and I made sure I gave him the most pissed off look I could muster, and it wasn’t hard. He turned away after a moment, and went to the bathroom in search of the stomach reliever. At least he knew better than to say a word to me.

“Avie?” That was Zac. I looked at him. “What’s with the dirty looks?” he asked me.

“Like you don’t know why,” I answered. “How can you be nice to him?”

He shrugged. “Life is too short to hold grudges.” That was Zac for you; personally, I think he was being too forgiving in this case. “It’s in the past.”

“Well, maybe it’s easy for you to forgive him at the drop of a hat, but I’m not that good of a person,” I said, knowing I sounded angry – I really was. “He was a bastard, Zac. I can’t forgive him.”

“Avery...” he said quietly. “Look, I know he hurt you when he...changed, but-”

“No, Zac. I’m not forgiving him,” I interrupted. “It’s taking a lot of willpower right now not to just say I hate him.” I have a fear of saying things I’ll regret, but that doesn’t mean I’m not blunt with people, because I am, because that’s just *who* I am. Though I doubt I would regret voicing the fact I seriously thought I hated Taylor.

“Avie,” Rachel said softly. “He’s your brother; you shouldn’t say things like that.”

“Brother or not, it doesn’t mean I have to like him or forgive him for the way he treated me and other people in this family, or for the things he did.”

“Ave...”

“End of discussion, Zac. I have an English paper to work on, see ya later.” I walked out briskly, heading for my room. Even the discussion of Taylor angered me beyond belief. I guess it’s safe to say I was still a little bitter. That paper was due at the end of the month anyway, I might as well work on it – at least that way I wouldn’t have to associate with my stupid brother.

When I got to my room I didn’t work on my paper; instead, I turned on my computer and went to check my email. Junk, junk, junk, porn, and more junk. I just kept deleting. I had a few messages from my friends, but I’d check those after I deleted all the crap I didn’t need. One of them caught my eye though. I didn’t recognise the email address, icebabygirl@yahoo.com. The subject line read TAYLOR. Against my better judgment, I clicked ‘read’. It was a girl from school, and how she got my email address was beyond me.

Hey Avery, I hear your brother is home. So what’s the deal? Is he sick? The th.org (www.taylorhanson.org) forms are buzzing like crazy.

<http://www.dyingtobealive.com/cgi-bin/pth-board/topic.cgi?forum=3&topic=3002>

Check it out and let me know.

Amanda

Oh. Her. She's the stupid bimbo I sit next to in biology and I wasn't going to reply to her email. But, like a moron, what do I do? I click on the link and check it out. Taylor Hanson dot org? Forums? Dear God, there is such a place that exists? Sure enough there was, and sure enough there was my brother's picture – from the airport an *hour* ago! He did look sort of sick, pale even – it wouldn't have surprised me if it was revealed he had some sort of STD; hell, he was probably a walking STD, but...*PLEASE*, don't these people have lives? Anything better to do with their time than moon over my dickhead brother? I'm not going to judge all of them – I'm sure not all of them were teeny boppers. I skimmed around for a few minutes and found that I was right – I particularly liked the threads where they were making fun of my brother. *Those* in particular were the best part. All in all, I wanted to gag at the thought people liked my brother enough to create a web domain dedicated to him. He was definitely not worth it. I deleted the email, and shut down my computer. Maybe I would just take a nap instead. Again.

Chapter 4

One person can think of a lot when she's left alone; she can think back on memories that made her happy, promises made that were broken, lies that were told. Am I talking about myself here? You better believe it. I sat in my room, on the edge of my bed, with Maggie in my lap for quite some time, just staring down at her and wondering when she became a *painful* reminder of the past. I like to dwell on the past; although, I don't know why, really. I guess I just want things to be that simple again. Nowadays nothing is ever simple. But this little rag doll...she held so much that I never wanted to let go of and wanted to forget all at the same time, and yet always found myself thinking about it when I let myself go.

"Hey Taylor?" I said, chewing on a piece of my hair.

"Hmm?" He looked up from the book he was reading, and scrunched his nose up. "Yuck, Avie; don't chew your hair." He reached out and pushed the lock of blonde away from my mouth and off of my face.

"Why do people grow up?" I asked him. He tilted his head to the side, seemingly in thought.

"I don't know," he replied, genuinely perplexed. "Because time passes, I guess."

"Do I have to grow up?"

"Someday," he answered. I looked down at the doll in my lap, and he followed my gaze, a soft smile touching his lips.

"Can Maggie grow up with me?" I asked him, hoping he wouldn't say no, and somehow knowing he would.

"No, but...you can keep her anyway," he said. "A lot of grownups keep things they had when they were kids." I looked down at my doll again, feeling tears in my eyes.

"I don't wanna grow up, Tay," I said quietly, digging my knuckle into my eye, trying to force the tears away.

"Why not?" he asked softly. "Don't you wanna do grownup things? Like get married?" I looked at him, and he smiled softly, but seeing that I was still upset he scooted closer and slipped an arm around my shoulders. He hugged me close, and I rested my head on his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"I don't wanna grow up."

"Why?"

"Because...people move away when they grow up..." I felt tears slide down my cheeks. Then he slipped his fingers under my chin, tipping my head up to look at him. "You'll move away..."

"Oh Ave," he said softly. "I'm not going anywhere. Sure, I'll grow up and move out someday, but...Tulsa's home. I'll never go far."

"Promise you'll never leave me?" He smiled and wiped my tears.

"Avery, I'll never leave you."

He lied to me, you know. He left me before he even left Tulsa. I felt my eyes burning with tears.

"Hey," Jessica said, poking her head inside my door. I quickly shoved my doll under my pillow, and turned my head the other way.

“Hey,” I said back, trying to sound normal.

“Can I come in?”

“Sure.” I wiped at my eyes, trying to be discreet. She came in and closed the door behind her. She came across the room and sat down on the bed beside me.

“Wanna talk about what’s going on?” she said, tucking my hair behind my ear so I couldn’t hide my face.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, laughing a little uncomfortably.

“Zac told me about how you’ve been acting since Tay came home.”

“And how is that?” I asked, letting my annoyance show.

“Just how you are now.” I quieted for a moment, staring at some invisible spot on the wall so I wouldn’t have to look her in the face. “Honey...what’s up?”

“Nothing,” I said angrily.

“Look, Avery, I know you’re angry with Taylor, and I don’t blame you. I’m still angry with him, too, but you have to let things go. How are you going to deal with him being home? I mean, he’s going to be living here-”

“Living here? Wait, when did this happen?” I asked incredulously. “I thought he was coming home and then going back to New York.”

She shook her head. “He’s here to stay,” she said quietly.

“Why?” I was getting mad, and to be honest, I wasn’t completely sure why.

“I don’t know,” she said quietly. “Something’s going on, but...I don’t know what.”

I snorted. “He probably got an STD from a whore in New York.”

“Come on, Ave, stop,” she said seriously. “You need to get along with him, for everyone else’s sake.”

“Easy for you to say,” I replied.

“No. I’m still mad at him, Avie. The things he did were wrong; he lied to people, and broke a lot of promises. He hurt all of us, but you can’t stay mad forever. I’m not sure I’ve really forgiven him, but I have to look beyond that. Come on, Avery, you’re better than this.”

“Whatever,” I replied.

“Just be civil, okay?” She hugged me for a moment, but I refused to look at her. Yeah, he did hurt all of us, but he hurt me a *lot*. How was I supposed to just get over it because he came to live back home again? “Please, just try?”

“Fine,” I mumbled. I wasn’t going to promise anything, but I guess, for everyone else’s sake, I could try...a little.

Unfortunately I had to try a lot sooner than I had expected. I went down to the kitchen for a snack, and Taylor was in there already, eating some homemade soup Mom had made earlier. I figured I could handle it; if I didn’t talk to him I couldn’t lose my temper.

“I haven’t seen much of you,” he said. I looked at him, snorted, and rolled my eyes, opening the refrigerator with every intention of ignoring him. I searched the shelves for some Jell-O. I knew Mom made some a few days ago, but I couldn’t find it, and I was getting frustrated because I just wanted to get it and get away from my brother. “What’re you doing anyway?”

“Looking for a snack; is that okay with you?” I snapped, pushing aside the gallon of milk to check the back of the top shelf.

“Well what the hell are you looking for?” he asked.

“Jell-O,” I said angrily.

“Try the bottom shelf; I think I saw it behind the leftover casserole.” He’s been here, what, a day or two and he already knows where things are? I don’t know why but it really made me mad. I felt like he was intruding; he hadn’t been here for three years and he thinks he can walk back in and act like he never left and I was just supposed to accept that? No, I don’t think so. I muttered “asshole” under my breath.

“Excuse me?” he said. I knew he’d heard me, he just wanted to hear me repeat myself so he could act like the big brother he hadn’t been for six years.

“Piss off, Taylor. You heard what I said,” I replied, yanking the Jell-O out of the fridge and slamming the door closed.

“What the hell is your problem, Avery?” he asked, staring at me, looking at me like I had done something to insult him.

“In short? You,” I said, looking at him. I turned away and went to the cupboard to get a bowl.

“What did I do to you? I haven’t even talked to you-”

“You did a lot.” Oh crap...I knew I’d lost control. “Let’s see, oh about six years ago you stopped being my brother, turned into a male slut and the biggest jerk-off I ever met in my life. You lied to me, and you broke a ton of promises. Then, you moved to New York and treated this family like we had the plague. Think those are enough and good reasons to be really pissed at you?” I slammed the cupboard closed, and yanked a drawer open, pulling out a spoon.

“You know-”

“I don’t care,” I interrupted. “I don’t want to hear a million and one excuses. None of them are good enough. There’s too much about you that changed, *Jordan*,” I spat angrily. “There are a million things about you I have a problem with.” He got up from his chair and put his bowl in the sink, only half eaten. “And why are you wearing a long sleeved shirt,” I looked at him, scrutinising, “and a freaking *purse*? I think there are two things you forgot: one, it’s about eighty degrees out and two, you’re a *boy*.”

“You know what?” he said, angry now as well. “I don’t have time for this shit, Avery. If you have so many problems with me make a goddamn list and email me. I’ll make sure to go over it carefully and change just for you,” he said sarcastically.

“Sure thing, Taylor. Who should I send it to? Gaylor@mystupidpenis.com?” I said smugly, knowing I threw in a good one.

“Oh that was mature, Avery,” he said, rolling his eyes and starting away.

I slammed my spoon down on the counter and he turned back around to stare at me. "You don't know the first thing about being mature," I seethed. "You're such an asshole."

"Aren't you a little young to be using language like that?" he asked through gritted teeth. I knew I had struck a nerve. Taylor hated to be confronted with the fact he made mistakes; he just couldn't admit to them; he hated being wrong.

"Screw you, Taylor," I said scowling, and going back to my red Jell-O. I heard him turn around and walk away, and heard my mother's voice shortly after. They were talking to one another, and then one of them went upstairs. Probably Taylor so he could lick his wounds in peace and quiet.

"Avery?" Mom's voice was quiet. "What's going on in here?"

"Nothing," I snapped, regretting it immediately.

"Turn around," she said, surprisingly not angry. I did as told and faced her. "What's going on with you and Taylor?"

"Nothing, Mom," I said, shaking my head, not wanting to explain. I'd managed to keep from her for six years how I felt about him; she didn't need to know now.

"Sit," she said, gesturing to a chair.

"Mom-"

"Sit," she said again, a little more commandingly. Whether I wanted to or not, whether I liked it or not, we were going to have a talk. I huffed and sat in a

chair across from her, purposely not looking at her. "Look at me." I sighed and did as told. "What was that all about in here? What's going on with you?"

"Mom...I just...he makes me so...*mad*. He left three years ago, moved to New York, treated us like garbage, and expects to come back and just be...accepted?"

"Yes," she said. "Family does that."

"Not this one," I said.

"Yes, this one does, and this family includes you. I don't want you treating him like-

"What? Do you have any idea how much Taylor hurt me?" I felt tears burning my eyes. Why did it hurt so much to talk about this? "Mom, he made me so many promises, and he broke them. He *lied* to me. That *hurts*."

"I know, honey," she said softly. "But...he's changed."

"No, he hasn't," I argued.

"Baby he has," she said softly. "Things are" she seemed to think, and I watched the sadness creep into her eyes "different now."

"How? He's still the same as when he left for New York."

She shook her head slightly and looked down at the tabletop. "He's sorry for what he did," she told me softly. "He's really sorry, Avie, he just doesn't know how to show it."

"I knew you'd defend him," I said quietly, looking away. "You always have. Even when it was right in front of you, you never wanted to believe he was the way he was, or that he did the things he did."

"I *know* about the things he did, Avery, and I *know* he was wrong. But I'm his *mother*, I'm supposed to look past those things, and I do. I love him just the same. He's my *son*. He's your *brother*."

"It doesn't feel like he's my brother," I said quietly, fighting tears. "Sometimes... sometimes I feel like...like I want to say that I hate him."

"Avery..." she said softly, taking my hand. "You don't hate him."

"I know I don't," I said quietly. "But sometimes...sometimes it really feels like I do."

She was quiet for a moment. She sighed quietly. "Avery, he's not the same. Just give him a chance and you'll see."

"Does Taylor have something to do with why you seem so sad all the time?" I asked quietly, and I watched the tears form in her eyes. She looked away.

"Don't worry about it, baby," she said, her voice almost a whisper. "I'll be fine."

"He does then," I said quietly, trying to think of what he could have done to make her so sad. She hid it well though, I had to give her that, but that didn't change that I still knew something was bothering her, and he had something to do with it. "Mom what did he do?"

"He didn't do anything," she said quietly, still looking off somewhere, her whole tone had taken on a certain subtle melancholy air.

“Then what does he have to do with you being upset?” I waited for her to answer me, and she drew in a slow, deep breath, letting it out shakily.

“Honey, I wish I could tell you,” she said softly. “But I can’t.” I was a little surprised; my mother and I did not keep secrets from one another – we never had. Taylor was back in the picture and suddenly my mother and father had a secret. If the conversation we had just had did anything to soften me to him, I was immediately hardened again; this made me want to grab him and shake him for all I was worth, made me want to slap him as hard as I could.

“I see,” I said quietly, pushing my chair back.

“Avery, please, it isn’t that I don’t want to tell you,” she said pleadingly, causing me to look at her again. “It’s Taylor’s business and he doesn’t want anyone to know; it isn’t my place to tell you if he doesn’t want me to.”

“That’s fine,” I said quietly, feeling somewhat defeated. “I’m not angry with you, Mom. I’m angry with Taylor, and this does nothing to make me not angry with him. I’m sorry.” I turned to go to my room, and she gently took hold of my wrist. I looked at her and she had tears in her eyes, ready to brim over at any moment, and my heart was breaking for her – she was my mother, and when she hurt I hurt.

“Please,” she almost whispered, “just talk to him.”

“I don’t know if I can,” I said honestly, quietly.

“Avery...” She closed her eyes, trying to hold back her tears. She looked up at me, and I don’t know how to explain what I saw in her eyes. Hurt? Sadness? It was something that moved me, deeply. “Please?”

“I’ll try,” I said softly, “but only when I’m ready.” She nodded.

“That’s fine.” We just looked at one another. “I think...he needs to know that you still love him. Please tell him that you do.” I didn’t say anything, unsure of what I would say if I spoke, unsure of what to say.

When I finally made it up to my room, I started to think hard about the things she had said to me. What was going on with Taylor? I wasn’t concerned, I wasn’t sure I even really cared, but I was curious. It was something I wasn’t included in and it bothered me; I wanted to know, even if it was for the sheer sake of just knowing. It had felt good to throw things in his face today, about his past, about him in general, but the way my mother had been talking almost made me feel guilty for doing so. I mean, Taylor has always been a little...flamboyant. He’s not gay, I can promise you that. I don’t know why, but I thought about the ‘purse’ he was carrying around. He’d been carrying it around with him since he got home, and I was beginning to wonder what was in it. He’d carried a ‘purse’ before, though he refused to call it such, but never around the house, constantly. And what was up with the long sleeves? Taylor had always been one to show off as much skin as possible for attention, in his tight muscle tank-tops, even if it wasn’t really warm enough to be wearing them. And now he was wearing long sleeves in eighty-five degree weather? *That* was a little strange. I thought about taking Mom’s advice and talking to him, even if it was solely for my own purposes.

Chapter 5

Contrary to what it may seem, other things were going on in my life beside my preoccupation with my brother. I had school, and friends to think about, and JR. He'd called me a lot in the past few days. He wants me to go out with him, as in a date. I have to admit that I'm a little nervous; I've never really been out on dates, and I've never really had a boyfriend, so it's a little scary. But...it's a little exciting at the same time. Someone is actually interested in me. Of course, Zac wants to meet him, but I haven't exactly agreed to that yet, and Isaac is coming to dinner on Sunday – he wants to meet JR too. Melanie is more excited than me, I think. In a sense, it seems almost surreal. But I'm not complaining.

When I got off the phone with JR, Dad came into the den and sat down on the small couch across the room. I had the distinct feeling he was going to give me a lecture, or something relatively similar to a lecture.

"You busy?" he asked me. It seemed innocent enough.

"No," I said.

"Have you talked to Taylor at all?"

I groaned. "Dad...why are you bringing this up?"

"Honey, I'm not here to lecture you." Sure Dad. "It's just, I talked to your mom, and she said you two had a long talk, and you were just asking some questions..."

"No, I haven't," I said. "I haven't seen him; he stays in his room and I've been busy."

“Well...” He shrugged a little. “When you get the chance, sit down and talk to him?”

“Mom already talked about this with me; I said I’d try when I was ready.” To my complete surprise, he surrendered.

“Okay,” he said, “just making sure.” He got up and started out. “So, um, what’s this I hear about a date with JR?”

“Dad...” I felt my face flush with heat, and knew I was lovely shade of red. “It’s no big deal.”

“Sure it is. You’ve spent a lot of time with him lately.”

“So? Isn’t that good?”

“Hmph.” That was his reply.

“Relax, Daddy,” I said, getting up and hugging him. “Everything is good.” I kissed his cheek.

“Why don’t you have him over for dinner on Sunday?” he asked, looking down at me, but I shook my head. I was most definitely not up for having him over for dinner. Not with Isaac, Zac, and him all together.

“No,” I replied, and smiled. “Nice try.” He shrugged, and smiled a little too.

“I’m heading downstairs to help your mom get dinner started.” He kissed the top of my head. “Talk to Taylor,” he whispered, and disappeared down the hall. I sighed. I guess there’s no time like the present – unless it’s the future, or never. I might as well get it over with.

I trudged down the hallway to Taylor's room. The door was partway open, enough for me to see inside; I could see him sitting at the desk in the corner, chin rested on his hand, just gazing out the window. I pushed the door open quietly, and went in. He looked at me, but didn't say anything; he turned his chair, so he was facing me as I sat down on the edge of his bed. I sighed.

"I wasn't expecting to see you in here," he said. He sounded...sad? The anger we had felt for each other not too long ago seemed to be gone from him.

"I wasn't expecting to see me in here either," I replied unenthusiastically. "But Mom seems to think that I should talk to you. I'm yet to be convinced."

"No one's forcing you to stay here," he said, and gestured to the door. "Go if you want. I think it's obvious how you feel about me."

"Taylor..." I shook my head. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't hate you, one good reason why I shouldn't stay mad at you for the rest of my life."

"Because," he said quietly, looking at the floor. "I'm human, and I make mistakes too." I was shocked. I had never expected to hear those words come out of his mouth. Maybe Mom was right...maybe he had changed... "And I'm sorry..." I didn't know how to respond to that. So I didn't, and I changed the subject.

"So what do you have in there anyway?" I asked, pointing to the 'purse'. It didn't really look like a purse; it looked more like a fanny pack, and there was something rectangular in it, I could tell that much. He looked down at it for a moment, and I couldn't read the expression on his face. It was almost blank for a moment, and then I saw the same look I saw in Mom's eyes, just a different form.

“It’s nothing,” he said, his voice quiet. I couldn’t tell if he’d said with sadness, anger, bitterness, or even contempt, and I didn’t know if it was directed at me for asking the question, or because he was hiding the answer he didn’t want anyone to know.

“It can’t be that bad-”

“Just drop it, Avery,” he said quickly. “It doesn’t matter,” he said crossly, pushing himself back in his chair. I sat there for a moment and shook my head.

“You and your secrets, Taylor,” I said quietly. I stood to leave and he didn’t stop me, which I was thankful for, and then I turned to him sadly. “I knew you couldn’t have changed. Everything you just said was probably just another lie...everything you are is lies.” We just looked at each other for a long moment. “Everything about you that I remember, all the good things” I shook my head “it’s all overshadowed by all your broken promises and lies. I don’t know why I thought it would be any different now.”

“Avery...”

I shook my head. “Never mind,” I said quietly. I started out of his room.

“Avie, please-” I closed the door behind me, cutting him off. I didn’t want to hear lies; I can’t believe I even thought for a moment he meant what he said. I can’t deny though, that something was wrong. Something about him just wasn’t right...I’m not saying that I’m concerned, or that I even care, just like I said before – I just wanted to know.

Dinner wasn’t bad on Sunday – there were a lot of questions for Taylor, about New York, about his friends, if he had a girlfriend. He wasn’t too enthusiastic at first about answering them all, but he eventually just started talking. He was

still wearing long sleeves, the 'purse' or 'fanny pack' still around his waist. I was just quiet, only making conversation when it concerned me, or something was directed towards me. I helped Mom clean up again after dinner, wanting to avoid any confrontations with Taylor. Ike came in the kitchen while we were cleaning, just wanting to visit for a while.

"So what have you been up to little sister?" he asked me, taking a sip of his coffee. Mom was just quiet. I looked at him pointedly.

"I'm almost as tall as you, so you really can't call me 'little' anymore." We both smiled. "And not much; hanging out with my friends and doing homework most of the time."

"So, uh, when do I get to meet JR?" he asked, taking another sip of his coffee from the mug with his name on the side.

"How about never?" I suggested with a grin. "And isn't there a mug that says *Doofus* on it that's more suitable for you?" He balled up a napkin and launched it at me. We laughed quietly for a moment.

"How are things around here?" he asked, more quietly than his other questions had been. I immediately got quieter, and Mom looked at him.

"Fine," I said quietly. "You know how things go around here," I forced a smile, "there's always some drama going on. Mac ate too much for lunch the other day and went running around and puked in the hallway; Zoë dropped a water balloon on Zac's head from Mom and Dad's bedroom window-"

"That's not what I meant," he said. My smile faded. "How are things with Taylor?"

"Isaac..." Mom started.

“No, it’s okay,” I said quietly. She looked at me quietly, not speaking. “I talked to him, but it didn’t go that well.”

“I heard,” he said. I looked at him questioningly. “I talked to him a little while ago. He wants to talk to you, still.”

“I can’t talk to him,” I said. “I can’t trust him; I don’t know what to believe anymore when he says things.” It had been so long since I could do those things, and I had spent six years feeling nothing but anger and bitterness and hurt concerning him.

“Avery,” Mom said softly. “I know he hurt you, and I know you’re scared to get close to him again.” Get close to him? I had no intention of doing that. And how did she know that anyway? I didn’t tell her that, but she was dead on target. “But you two can’t keep this up.”

“Mom?” Taylor’s voice interrupted the three of us, and we all looked at him. He looked a little on the pale side. “I don’t feel too good, so I’m gonna head upstairs.” Mom turned a little more toward him, maybe a little too quickly.

“Are you all right?” she asked, sounding a little too eager. He cast a nervous glance at Isaac and me, and then at our mother; almost immediately she straightened and calmed herself.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “I’m gonna take a nap.”

“Okay, baby,” she said softly, and we all watched him turn and go.

“Ma?” I looked at Isaac as he called her from only a few feet away, where we sat. She looked at him. “What was that all about?” She shook her head.

“Nothing,” she replied.

“Mom,” he said again. “Is there something you’re not telling me? Is Taylor okay?” She looked at us again, this time with tears in her eyes.

“You’ll have to talk to him,” she said, her voice a near whisper. She set down the plate she was drying and headed out of the room, I assumed to go check on Taylor. Isaac then looked to me, as if I knew something and had any answers.

“What was that about?” he asked me quietly. I shrugged slightly.

“I don’t know,” I mumbled. I was still trying to convince myself that I didn’t care what was up with Taylor that I was just curious, but I was starting to not believe myself. “Ike...I keep telling myself that I don’t really care, that I’m not concerned but...I’m not sure if I am or not,” I said unsurely. I knew I could talk to Isaac; he’s really good with advice, and I’m sure he could probably make more sense of what I was telling myself than I could.

“What do you mean?” he asked, his brow creasing – he looked a lot like Dad right then.

“I know this sounds crazy, stupid even,” I mumbled the last part more to myself. “But...I know something’s up with Taylor, I just don’t know what. And...I think something’s wrong.”

“Like what?” he asked, tilting his head to the side.

“I don’t know, Ike. And I keep telling myself that I’m not worried at all, that I don’t care, it’s his own freaking problem, but...I don’t know,” I shrugged a little. “It kinda feels like I am getting concerned.” He almost smiled, but not quiet, sensing that I was right and something was going on.

“Whether you like to admit it or not, you feel that way because he’s your brother and you love him, no matter how long you’ve been mad at him.” I hated it when he was right; I felt like an idiot.

“I don’t know.” I looked toward the doorway, and I could hear Dad talking with Jess and Zac and Rachel, and I could hear Mac cracking up watching reruns of *The Simpsons*.

“You wanna get outta here for a little while?” he asked me. He was always good at sensing how a person felt, or interpreting what they were thinking before they were even sure they were thinking it. I loved that about him, and I was very thankful at that moment for his abilities to do just that.

“Yeah,” I sighed. “I need to get out of here for a while.”

“Want some ice cream? I think Tasty Freeze is open.” I smiled a little at his kind gesture. Leave it to Ike to take your mind off your troubles with ice cream; and the funny thing was he could do it too. He’d let you leave it be if you wanted to, or he’d sit and listen until you were through, and offer a piece of advice afterward if you were interested. He was one of the best brothers a girl could ask for.

“Sure,” I smiled at him warmly. “That sounds really nice.”

“Come on, kid, just you and me for a while.” He smiled at me, putting his arm around my shoulders and pulling me into him, kissing the top of my head.

“I love you, Ike,” I said, looking up at him. A few more inches and I’d be eye level with him.

“Love you too, Ave.” He told Dad we were skipping out for a little bit and we just left, happy to just be away for a little while. Maybe he could help me

figure out what the hell I was going to do about Taylor. I had so much going on in my life with finals in school now, my friends wanting to get together all the time, JR always wanting to hang out – not that I mind – and then family stuff. I was beginning to realise that being a teenager was not all it was cut out to be. Thank God for older brothers.

After ice cream Ike brought me back home and hung out with me for a while, along with Zac and Rachel, and then he headed out. It was good to just spend time with him for a while. When I passed Taylor's room, heading for my own, I could see in a little and Mom was sitting on the edge of his bed talking to him. I didn't eavesdrop, just kept walking to my own room. Unfortunately, I had another memory that I associated with his door being partway open. He did a lot of things, like I've said a million times, which were less than decent. Insert bad memory here:

I was heading down the hall to the room Jessie and I shared, tired beyond belief. It was way past my bed time and I was practically falling asleep standing up. I had no intention of staying up any later, but the sound of hushed voices from Taylor's room stopped me. At almost ten years old curiosity often got me in trouble, so to speak. I stopped outside his room, his door open enough that I could see inside if I stood little to the right. I could see him in there with someone, a girl with choppy blonde hair. They were talking quietly to one another, but Taylor seemed annoyed. He hadn't spent much time with me at all lately, and I wondered if he had been spending time with her instead.

"Kate, no one is even up," he said quietly, running his hand through her hair. She had her back to me so I couldn't see her face. He leaned over and kissed her and I fought the urge to giggle. He was already sitting so close to her that they were touching, and he slid his hand behind her back, pulling her almost into his lap.

“Taylor,” she said quietly, pulling away from his kiss. “People are home; they’re sleeping...”

“For Christ’s sake, Kate, nobody is going to hear anything,” he argued. “Don’t be such a damn baby.”

“I can leave now,” she said, sounding like she was getting angry too.

“Don’t be stupid,” he said. “I know you’ll like it.” He smiled at her, leaning in and kissing her neck. I suddenly felt like I shouldn’t be watching. She tipped her head back.

“It doesn’t feel right,” she whispered, “having sex while people are in the house.”

“It adds to the thrill,” he replied, and I felt sick. Mom taught me about sex, and she told me we were supposed to wait until we got married, wait for the person we loved on our wedding night. I’d heard Taylor talking about having sex before, but it wasn’t the same as this. I looked one more time, and he was taking her shirt off, and then his own. I quickly crept away to mine and Jessie’s room, closing the door quietly. I was just only beginning to understand what Taylor was like.

I had seen worse after that; I’d actually walked in on him and some girl just after I turned ten, and it wasn’t the same girl he was with that one night. He yelled at me for ruining his ‘good time’, and made me cry. He never apologised either. By then I knew Taylor had changed, and I was feeling pretty hurt that he didn’t ever spend time with me anymore; I felt like he didn’t love me anymore. I felt like my brother abandoned me for a bunch of girls and sex – it was nice to know what was more important to him. And things like that are what keep me from wanting to forgive him. How could I?

Chapter 6

I got the biggest surprise of my life a few days after that. JR took me out for some ice cream, and then just asked me to go to prom with him! He wanted me to go to prom with him? Why?

“I want the prettiest girl in school to go with me – I want everyone to know she’s *my* girl.” He smiled at me winningly. There was no way I could tell him no, not that I wanted to.

“Really?” I asked, finding it too good to believe.

“Yes, really,” he laughed a little. “So...whaddaya say?” He raised his eyebrows, smiling at me.

“Of course I’ll go with you,” I said. He smiled wider, then leaned over and kissed me, right on the lips. I can’t even begin to explain how excited I was. I couldn’t wait to tell Mom.

I came home from school and ran up the stairs to my room, threw my backpack on the floor, and ran back down the stairs calling for my mother. I ran into the kitchen to see her standing there, her back to me.

“Mom, guess what?” I was too excited to wait for her to answer. “JR asked me to go to prom with him! Can you believe that?” It was then I noticed she was crying. I hated to see my mother cry, and the fact that she had been so down lately let me know that this was caused by whatever it was. “Mom, what’s wrong?” She shook her head.

“Nothing, baby; I’m fine.”

“Mom,” I said consolingly. “Why are you crying?” She shook her head a little. “Does it have to do with Taylor?” When she didn’t answer I knew it did, and was suddenly infuriated. Yeah right, sure he changed. I turned and started to march away, and she must’ve known what I was going to do.

“Avery, don’t,” she said, pleading with me.

“Mom, I can’t stand the thought he made you cry,” I said back.

“Avie, he didn’t do anything. He’s upstairs, in his room, asleep; he’s...sick.”

“So what?” I said.

“Please, just let him rest?” Why was she so adamant on me leaving him alone? Big deal, he had the flu or something. She doesn’t need to baby him.

“Okay,” I said, not wanting to argue with her. “Mom...what’s up? What’s going on?” She didn’t answer, just shook her head. I was sick of being left out. If this was centred around Taylor, then he knew the answers to my questions, and he was going to answer them.

I climbed the stairs, going over in my head what I was going to say to him, and by the time I reached his door I didn’t know how to approach him. I knocked a couple times and opened his door. He wasn’t asleep like Mom said, but he was sitting on his bed, his head rested back against the wall, his knees up.

“Taylor?” He looked at me, and I realised Mom was nowhere near kidding. He looked sick. He was pale, very pale. I know I’ve said that he looked pale in the last couple weeks, but this was a lot paler. He swallowed hard.

“What are you doing in here?” he asked, his voice a whisper.

“What’s going on? Why was Mom crying?”

He shook his head slightly. “Never mind,” he whispered, closing his eyes again.

“I’m sick of being left out. Tell me what’s going on, right now,” I said, coming into his room. I’d had enough of being left out of whatever loop it was between him, Mom, and Dad.

“Just...get out,” he said, his eyes still closed.

“Look, I’m making an effort here to talk to you, to get along – I want to know what’s going on.” He didn’t respond at first. “Taylor!”

He got up off the bed, and for a minute I thought he was going to fall back onto it. He stood for a moment, apparently steadying himself, and then came toward me. He took me by the arm and started walking toward the door.

“Let go,” I said, trying to twist my arm out of his grasp, but he didn’t let go and kept walking toward the door. “Damn it, Taylor!”

“Just go,” he said quietly; he didn’t even sound angry. “Just leave me alone.” I turned to look at him, standing now in the doorway, and for the first time in a very long time I thought I saw tears in his eyes.

“Taylor...” My tone softened. “What’s wrong?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he replied quietly. “You don’t give a shit anyway.” He pushed me gently out the door and closed it before I could get another word in edgewise. As much as I fought caring about him, I was worried now. Something was wrong with him – I could see that now. Whatever it was Mom and Dad knew about it, and it was enough to upset them for weeks. The only

thing I could think of was he had AIDS or something. I suddenly felt very guilty for treating him so badly. I mean, what if there is something *really* wrong with him, and God forbid he dies or something? I'll regret the way we've been to each other and I know it. As much as I hated to admit it, I think everyone else was right: I needed to settle this thing with Taylor; I needed to make amends.

I was lying on my bed with the radio on, listening as some unknown singer sang some soft ballad. She was singing about her broken heart, and all that stuff, and it was interrupted by some knocking on my door. I was hoping it wasn't my mother coming to tell me to leave Taylor alone or something like that. It wasn't my mother, but Jessica.

"What's this I hear about prom?" She smiled at me, and I couldn't help but smile back and sit up.

"How did you hear about that?" I asked her, motioning for her to come in.

"Mom mentioned it." She sat down on the edge of my bed grinning like the biggest goofball I've ever seen. "So...?"

"JR asked me to go," I said smiling, looking down at my lap. "And I said yes."

"Well I'm happy for you, sweetie. Now we can go dress shopping together."

I looked at her, knowing that my eyes were huge. "You mean that? You'll take me dress shopping?"

"Of course I will!" she shrieked. "We'll start looking this weekend."

"Thanks Jessie!" I launched myself at her, hugging her tightly. At that moment, if I already thought she was a great sister, she became the best

sister on the face of the planet. Seriously. “You’re the best,” I whispered. She laughed a little and squeezed me back.

As I lay in bed that night, I thought about really swallowing my pride and apologising to my brother – but I scratched that idea. I’d make an effort to be civil, but he was going to apologise first, and mean it. It had been a very long time since I slept with any kind of stuffed animal, and I found myself holding Maggie close to me. Having to write the paper about her brought up a lot of things I thought I had buried, and in retrospect, I guess it was a good thing; it made me face things that I had been running from. I found myself holding her tightly, trying to feel like I had when I was just a little girl, wishing that I could recapture all of those memories and bring them to life...after spending so long ‘hating’ Taylor, I was beginning to realise no matter how angry your family makes you, you don’t hate them – ever. I was feeling a little cross though, with myself, for letting my guard down and being so willing to just forgive all the hurt he caused. But I guess that’s what this is all about. I fell asleep with that doll cradled to my chest.

* * *

I stood at my locker, turning the correct numbers of my combination and opening it. I shoved my book bag inside, sick of carrying it, and pulled out my Global History books. My brothers got the best teaching in Global History – they travelled the globe, and learned what they needed to as they went, therefore, they remember things that I will probably never even understand in this Godforsaken class.

“Hey there.” I jumped when the words were said lowly into my ear, turning quickly only to meet JR’s eyes. I relaxed and smiled.

“Hey yourself,” I replied. He leaned down and kissed my lips right in front of everyone in the hallway, leaving me feeling a little embarrassed. I looked around us and saw that hardly anyone had taken notice, thankfully.

“What’re you doing after school today?”

“Um, I don’t know. I have some things to talk about with my older brother.”

“Which one?” he asked, knowing I had three.

“Taylor,” I replied, turning back to my books to get my assignment notebook.

“The one who looks like a girl?”

“JR, that wasn’t funny.” I slammed my locker shut and started to walk away. Whoa. Hold the phone and rewind. What just happened? Was I offended because someone insulted *Taylor*? I insult Taylor. What the...?

“Avery, I’m sorry,” he said, catching up to me, but I kept walking. “Avie, babe, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it; I was only joking.”

“Well it isn’t funny,” I said, finally stopping.

“Okay,” he said softly, tucking my hair behind my ear. “I’m sorry.”

“Okay. Let’s drop it.”

“Fine with me,” he said, and looked down at my shirt, smiling a little. He looked back up at me. “You look sexy today.” I felt an embarrassed grin grace my face.

“Me? Sexy? JR, are you feeling all right?” We started walking again.

“No, really,” he said. “Showing a little cleavage is...nice.” I looked down at myself, and he was right, I did show a little cleavage. And I mean a *little*. I was flat-chested until a summer ago, and then all of a sudden I was wearing a B-cup one day. Very strange, and beside the point.

“Thanks,” I said, smiling at him. “You aren’t looking too shabby yourself these days.” He laughed and slipped his arm around my shoulders, walking with me.

“Come on, I’ll walk you to class.” He was walking me to class. Was I in Heaven? Oh yes I think I was.

When I came home everything was relatively quiet, with Mac and Zoë watching cartoons, and Isaac was around somewhere because I saw his car in the driveway when JR dropped me off. I had to smile to myself – he was my boyfriend. I found myself laughing at the thought of me having a boyfriend; the thought had never even crossed my mind until I found myself in the situation.

“What are you laughing at?” Ike asked me, coming in from the kitchen. I shook my head, and he chuckled a little.

“Nothing,” I laughed. “It’s just...I never thought I’d get a boyfriend...”

“Boyfriend?” He squinted at me. “What boyfriend?”

“Well, JR, duh?” I shook my head, making my way toward the stairs.

“Oh no,” he said, shaking his head. “Come on, you gotta tell me more than that!”

“No way,” I said, shaking my head and laughing at him. I bounced up the stairs.

“Come on Avie!” He laughed. “I promise not to hunt him down and...hurt him,” he called up the stairs behind me.

“Ha!” I threw my book bag on the floor in my bedroom, ending the conversation good naturedly. I could always count on a good banter with Ike and or Zac, more so Zac than anyone else. I stood quietly for a moment, thinking to myself. Taylor’s door was closed, but...maybe I should try again to talk to him. I still wanted to know what was up with him lately and moreover why it made Mom cry and had Dad so quiet.

I stepped out of my room, heading towards Taylor’s. I didn’t knock, but I cautiously opened the door anyhow. I was expecting him to throw me out again, but I got nothing. I stepped in, praying the floorboards wouldn’t creak. He was asleep. In the middle of the afternoon? What the...? I was letting curiosity get the better of me, and I crept toward him; I wanted to know what was in that little ‘fanny pack’ he was always hiding under the hem of his long-sleeved shirts. Something about him looked different...no, something *felt* different. I sat carefully on the edge of his bed, not moving, not touching him – I didn’t want to chance the fact I might wake him. I looked at the ‘fanny pack’, and at his face – God...why was he so *pale*? I reached out for it, hoping I could just take a peek inside to see something, *anything*. I jumped considerably when he grabbed my wrist.

“What’re you doing?” he rasped.

“I...I was...” I was so startled that my brain forgot that I was supposed to be thinking up an excuse.

“You’re not supposed to be in here,” he said, sounding almost scared. “What were you doing?”

“I-I...I just...I wanted to see...”

“Avery.” I turned around to see my mother, a sympathetic expression on her face. “I told you not to bother your brother...”

“I just wanted to know what was going on...” I wanted to slap myself; I had tears in my eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Come on, baby,” she said softly. “Let him be.”

I turned to look at Taylor instead. “Please, Tay...” I hadn’t called him Tay in so long... “I just wanna know what’s wrong...” I don’t care what I said earlier – I’m eating my words: I was worried.

“Baby...” She was looking at Taylor now, not me. “Maybe you should tell her...”

“*Mom*,” he said, and I swore there were tears in his eyes. “I...I can’t...”

“I’m not forcing you,” she said softly. “But you said you wanted to fix things with her; being honest is a good place to start.”

“Mom...I don’t think I can,” he said quietly, pushing himself up into a sitting position. “She already hates me,” he continued to talk about me like I wasn’t there.

“I don’t hate you,” I said, causing him and Mom to look at me. “Tay...I could never hate you; you’re my brother...”

“Avie...” he said quietly. We just stared at each other for a long moment, Mom standing silently behind us. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered, tears fully visible in his eyes. “I’m so sorry for everything I did...” I did something then that surprised me even – I hugged him. I just reached out and pulled him to me, hugging him tightly.

"I love you, Taylor," I whispered. I felt any resolve I had just crumble.

"God I'm so sorry..." he whispered. Taylor was crying.

"Tay, baby," Mom said softly. "I think she needs to know." He pulled back slightly, looking up at Mom. "I'm going to give you two some time." She looked at Taylor sorrowfully. "I love you, baby," she said softly, obviously holding back tears. He nodded, and she quietly left the room. I looked at Taylor, getting the very distinct feeling he was going to tell me something bad.

"Tay...what's wrong?" I asked him, and he turned his eyes to the bedspread. That was a dead giveaway that something was definitely wrong.

"Avie..." he said quietly. He shook his head slightly. "Ave...I'm..."

"You're what Tay?"

"Avie," he said softly, lifting his eyes to mine once more. "I...I'm sick." He turned away for a moment, and those words raced through my mind. Sick? Sick how? With what?

"So go to the doctor," I said, but he shook his head.

"Avie, I'm *sick*." In other words, this was serious, and I was scared. My heart started to pound at a pace that ached in my chest. Taylor and I haven't been close in a long time, but with this reconciliation I was finding myself worrying about him like I would have six years ago.

"What do you mean?" I asked, my voice suddenly small. "Like...like...AIDS?" My voice came out so quiet I wasn't sure it came out at all. He shook his head.

"No, not AIDS," he said quietly. "I'm not sure if this is just as bad or worse."

“Tay...” I was fighting tears now. “Does it have to do with that?” I asked, pointing to the ‘fanny pack’. He nodded slightly, looking down at it.

“Yeah.” He spoke quietly, and stayed quiet for a moment. I wondered what he was going to tell me, and after a long silence I just asked what it was.

“What is it?”

He tried to force a smile, but it didn’t work, and he almost cried instead. “It’s...it’s, uh...a portable treatment unit.” He bit his lip, trying to keep from crying.

“Treatment?” I echoed. “What kind of treatment? For what?”

“It’s, um...it’s a portable chemotherapy unit,” he said, turning his head away. I couldn’t breathe for a moment, and when I finally did release my breath it came out quickly.

“What? Chemotherapy? Why?” I asked one question right after the other. “For what, Taylor? Chemotherapy is for people with cancer. You don’t have cancer.” I actually watched the tears roll down his cheeks before he could no longer look me in the eyes. He was crying again. “Tay...?”

“Yes I do,” he whispered. My heart pounded heavily in my chest, the blood pulsing in my temples. I shook my head, unable to even think it. No, my brother was *not* that sick.

“No,” I said. “You *don’t* have cancer, Taylor.”

He didn’t even bother to wipe the tears rolling down his cheeks. “Yes I do,” he whispered. Oh God...I shook my head again, suddenly forgetting how to breathe. This wasn’t real...this wasn’t real...

“No,” I repeated, “you don’t.”

“Avie,” he said quietly, sorrowfully. “I really do.” I watched him lift his sleeve, and sure enough there was a little tube in his arm, like an IV; he lifted the hem of the shirt and I could see the tube running up under his shirt, coming to the spot in his arm. He really was getting chemotherapy...

“Oh God...” I whispered, feeling tears building quickly. “Taylor, no...” I took his hands in mine. “Please no...” I looked him in the eyes, and I could see that he was very serious. The tears rolled down his cheeks again. This was *my* Taylor sitting in front of me, my old Taylor, and God he was hurting. It was like I suddenly forgot all the wrong he’d ever done. “What...what is it?” I whispered.

“Um,” his voice broke, and I squeezed his hands gently. “You know what leukaemia is?” I covered my mouth with my hand.

“They...” I let my hand drop to the bed. “They can fix it, right? I mean, with the chemo?”

“I-I don’t know,” he stammered. “They don’t know...”

“Taylor?”

“I’m really sick, Avie,” he said quietly. “Really...really sick.”

“It’s not like you’re dying,” I said quietly, wiping tears, forcing an uncomfortable laugh.

“They aren’t too sure about that,” he said quietly, looking away from me again.

I stood up, backing away. “Don’t say that,” I said, shaking my head.

“Avery, please...” He stood up, reaching out for me, but I backed away.

“How could you keep this from us?” I asked, tears running down my cheeks. How could he just *not* tell us that there’s a possibility he was dying? How could he just drop this bomb on me? “How could you not tell me?”

“Avery, please,” he pleaded with me. “I didn’t tell you because I was pretty sure you hated me-”

“That makes no difference!” I yelled at him, tears streaming down my face. I just started to run.

“Avery, wait!” he called after me. I could hear his footsteps behind me, trying to catch up with me as I ran down the stairs. I had no idea where I would go, but I needed to get out of there. That was just too much. We fix things, and then he tells me he could be dying? I really couldn’t handle that.

“Avery?” It was my mother but I ran past her, headed for the front door.

“Avery, please wait!” I heard Taylor behind me. I was almost sobbing when I ran out the front door, slamming it behind me. Part of me wanted to run back, wrap my arms around him, make sure he was okay, but more of me needed to run away, get away from what I’d just found out. I suddenly wished I was left out of the loop again.

Chapter 7

It was late by the time I came home; I spent my evening crying in Melanie's lap. She was surprised when she realised I was crying about Taylor, but she let me cry anyway. I'd talk to him eventually about what he told me, but when he did tell me I was a little overwhelmed. I called Mom and let her know that Mel's mom was going to bring me home late, and she was okay with it. I got in and made my way up to my room, hoping to avoid any confrontation. I made it up to my room successfully. I went to turn on the light once inside my door and:

"They don't know."

I jumped out of my skin at Taylor's quiet words. I could see him through the semi-darkness sitting on the edge of my bed.

"Christ, Taylor," I whispered. "Don't scare me like that."

"Please don't tell them," he whispered. "They don't know."

"Who?" I replied quietly as well, going and sitting beside him. He looked out the window.

"Ike, Zac, Jess...Mac, Zoë..." he said quietly.

"Why me? Why did you tell me and not them?" I asked him quietly.

"Because..." he said softly. "I was desperate. I don't want to die knowing you hated me."

“Stop it.” I closed my eyes. “I didn’t hate you, and I don’t hate you now. I was just mad at you – really mad at you. And you’re not dying.” He looked at me, and I could see tears shining in his eyes.

“I’m sorry I dropped this on you...I never wanted you to find out...”

“I’m glad you told me,” I said softly, taking his hand. “I feel like I have *my* Taylor back... the brother I lost a long time ago...”

“I really am sorry,” he said quietly. “I wish I didn’t have to figure things out like this. I wish it didn’t take cancer to open my eyes up.”

“Everything’s gonna be okay, Taylor,” I said, touching his cheek. Everything had to be okay. Sitting there, looking at him I noticed he looked as sick as he was trying to convince me he was, and he’d only gotten that way in the last few weeks. He brought his hand up, holding my hand to his cheek, relishing in the loving touch. I let it stay that way for a moment, and then I moved closer to him and hugged him. He needed it, I knew he needed it, and I was willing to give it. I gently rubbed his back, trying to soothe him a little as I realised he was crying. “Shh...” I whispered to him.

“Please don’t tell them, Ave,” he whispered to me. I didn’t want him to keep this from them, but it wasn’t my place to tell them the littlest thing if he didn’t want me to; it was his right.

“Okay, but you have to tell them sometime,” I said softly.

“I know; just not now – I’m not ready,” he said, shaking his head, his hair tickling my ear. We stayed that way for a little while before he finally pulled back and looked at me. He took my face gently in his hands and pressed a soft kiss to my forehead. I had really missed him so much... “You get some sleep, okay? It’s late.”

I nodded and watched him rise – slowly – and make his way to my door.

“Taylor, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he said, smiling a little. “If I get up too fast I’d fall back down.”

“If you’re sure...” He nodded.

“I’m all right,” he said quietly. “Get some sleep.”

“I love you, Tay,” I said, watching him start towards his room again, and turn to look at me.

“I love you too, Avery.”

“Sleep sweet,” I said, quietly enough I wasn’t sure he heard me.

“I’ll try,” I heard him say quietly in return. “But I don’t think I can.”

I was up early for breakfast, before the rest of the kids were. It’s almost funny for me to refer to them as the rest of the ‘kids’, considering two of them are older than me. But that’s beside the point anyway. I came down to the kitchen and Mom was already sitting at the table with her mug of coffee, and the obituaries.

“Isn’t kind of morbid to read the obituaries first?” I croaked. She looked up at me and smiled a little.

“I don’t usually,” she said, “it was just the first thing I dug out and picked up.” I slid into a chair next to her, and sighed, resting my chin on my hand. “Something wrong, baby?” she asked, as I turned to look at her, her features somewhat concerned as she tucked my hair behind my ear.

I shrugged. "I guess I was just thinking about Taylor." She was quiet, just sitting and observing me.

"He's all right, sweetheart," she said softly, cupping my cheek. I knew she left off the 'for now'.

"I know," I replied. "I already checked on him this morning." She smiled a little. I knew my sudden change of attitude toward Taylor had surprised her, but she welcomed it, glad to have her children getting along. "Do you know who the heck was in the bathroom this morning?"

Her brow creased and she shook her head. "No."

"Well whoever it was, they woke me up."

"Honey, you're such a light sleeper that a mouse hiccup could wake you." She was right. I guess I thought of myself as a cautious sleeper; I never fell into a deep sleep because I was afraid of missing something while I slept, or someone coming into my room to hurt me or something. I just never slept fully, at least never deeply or soundly. The sound of shuffling footsteps down the stairs captured both of our attentions, and as a result we both turned to see Taylor coming into the kitchen somewhat slowly. I thought he looked sick last night? Well, he looked sicker. Mom must've seen it too because I watched her expression change. "Baby, everything okay?" He shrugged a little, easing himself down into a chair. "What are you doing up so early?"

"I guess I couldn't sleep." He rested his forehead against the heel of his palm for a moment. It was obvious he didn't feel well. "Do you have some orange juice?" he asked quietly. Mom nodded, though he didn't see it.

"In the fridge," she said, eyeing him carefully. He started to move and she stood up. "No, no, you stay; I'll get it." He didn't respond, just kept his eyes

closed. I looked at Mom, sharing the same thought: what was going on? Something was obviously not right, but he wasn't saying anything.

"Tay?" I said quietly, hoping to at least get him to look at me. He swallowed hard.

"It's all right, Avie," he whispered. I noticed that for the first time that I had seen, he was wearing a T-shirt, which I figured was because he slept in his boxers and he didn't want to come down half naked, though he always had – it was a Taylor thing to do. He had reasons now. The tube going into his arm was plainly visible.

"Baby, do you want something to eat?" she asked him. The question, for whatever reason, prompted me to look over him. Taylor was always a stick; I mean, he could usually build enough muscle to look a little less like a beanpole, but skinny was something Taylor always was. I was a little disturbed to realise he'd lost weight. That was something Taylor really couldn't afford to lose – he'd be a bag of bones. He shook his head slightly to my mother's question. "Tay, you didn't have dinner yesterday either. You have to be hungry."

"I just don't feel too hungry," he said, accepting the glass of orange juice she handed him. Taylor gulped everything, from coffee to the occasional soda, to water, to orange juice. He took a tentative, tiny sip and set the glass down.

"You've got to eat something. What if I just make you two pieces of plain toast?" she asked quietly but hopefully. I could tell he didn't really want to accept, but there was no use arguing with Mom.

"Sure," he replied quietly, lifting the glass of orange juice to his lips and taking another small sip. I knew I was staring, watching his every move the

way I was, but I couldn't help it, really. He was quiet for a minute and then spoke quietly again. "I have a doctor's appointment tomorrow."

"Taylor," Mom said, putting a hand on her hip. "Honey, why didn't you tell me sooner?" He shrugged.

"I didn't want you to worry." He looked up at her. "Do you think you or Dad could drive me? I don't think I could make it on my own..."

"Of course," she replied. "Did you really think I would say no? What time?"

"Nine-thirty," he answered, taking another small sip of his orange juice.

"What's the appointment for?" I asked, my voice quiet. I wanted to know and in the same breath didn't.

"Dr. Peterson is taking this thing," he said, pointing to the 'fanny pack'. "And I need to have blood work done."

"You're done with your treatment?" I asked, a little surprised it would be over so soon. He shook his head a little.

"No. You get chemo in intervals. You get treatment for a few weeks, and then you get a week to two weeks recovery period." He turned his head away from mine, so as not to look me in the eyes. "That's when you get really sick..."

"Oh..." I said quietly. What was I supposed to say? Gee Taylor, I'm sorry you have cancer and the only thing that you have to possibly help you is making you sicker than a dog. Somehow I don't think that would have been appropriate.

I watched as Mom set two pieces of plain toast in front of him. “Thanks,” he said quietly, carefully beginning to pick one piece apart, painstakingly putting a small piece in his mouth and chewing slowly. It was easy to tell he didn’t want it, or couldn’t eat it – one of the two, probably the latter. I watched him get through about six bites of the first piece. “I’m sorry, Mom,” he said quietly, shaking his head a little. “I just can’t.”

“It’s okay, baby,” she said softly. “You just worry me...”

He looked up at her, and I could see tears in his eyes. “I’m sorry...” He got up, fumbling around for a moment trying to quickly get up and out of the room. I watched him fly from the room, and we heard him quickly making his way up the stairs. We looked at one another, and both made our way upstairs to follow. I knew it wasn’t really my place to be witnessing these things between my mother and Taylor, but I was the only other one who knew besides Dad, who was still snoring.

The bathroom door was closed when we got upstairs, and Mom knocked gently. “Taylor?” She got no answer, and knocked softly one more time, and looked at me. She tried the handle and it turned easily. When we walked in I had to turn my head away; Taylor was on the floor in front of the toilet, throwing up. “Oh baby...” she said softly, kneeling down beside him.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

“Shh,” she whispered. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“What’s going on?” I turned around at Dad’s quiet voice, and he saw the look on my face, and looked to Taylor. “Is everything okay?” The question was directed more toward my mother than me, and when she looked at him, the sadness and sympathy in her features were enough of an answer for him. He came in and quietly closed the door. I kept my head turned as he threw up

again. When it seemed quiet I chanced a look. Mom and Dad were on either side of him, trying to just soothe him a little.

“I can go...” I said softly. I felt like I was intruding. Taylor shook his head slightly.

“You’re okay,” he said softly. Apparently the heaving had subsided, and Mom flushed the toilet. Taylor was shaking a little, and he drew in a deep shaky breath. “I can’t keep doing this.”

“It’ll stop, son,” Dad said quietly. “It’s a small price to pay for your life, Taylor.” He spoke softly, and I swore I could hear tears in his voice.

“Dad...” I knew what Taylor was going to say when we made eye contact, and he never said it. “I just...this is the third time this morning.”

“That was you in here this morning?” I asked quietly. It was a rhetorical question, I knew it was now. He was just sitting on the floor in front of the toilet, Mom and Dad each on a side of him.

“I hate this,” he whispered, leaning his head back against our father. Mom reached out and gently ran her fingers through his hair, and when she pulled back, I think all three of us – me, Mom, and Dad – held our breath. His hair was just there in her fingers, and I swore she was going to burst out crying.

“Taylor...I...” She didn’t know what to say. “I’m sorry...” she whispered. It was becoming too real now; the treatment was real and now his hair was falling out.

“It’s okay,” he said softly. “It’s been falling out little by little for a while now.”

“Taylor...” Dad didn’t say anything more with that one word; he didn’t know what to say. What could he say? I mean, he was sitting in the bathroom with his sick son who had been throwing up from his chemotherapy, and now his hair was falling out. It was becoming *too* real.

“It’s okay,” he said again. Mom unsurely dropped his hair into the wastebasket, and Dad carefully helped him to stand. He leaned heavily against our father. “I’m sorry; my energy is just zapped...”

“You don’t have to explain,” Dad said, “I understand.” The way I felt must have been incredibly readable by the expression on my face because he looked at me next, trying to fight the tears forming in his eyes.

“It’s okay, Avie,” he said softly. “I knew it was going to happen eventually. It’ll grow back.” I wasn’t sure why it hurt so much to see or hear that, but I felt the tears slide down my cheeks. “Please don’t cry...” he whispered.

“I didn’t know,” I said quietly. “I didn’t know your hair was falling out...Tay, I...”

“It’s okay...” he said, taking my hand. “I’m...” his hesitation unnerved me more than I could ever explain. “...okay.”

“Let’s get you back in bed, son,” Dad said quietly. “I think you need to rest.” He didn’t argue, just leaned further on our father, letting him lead him back to bed. I think that experience was a lot more intense than it seemed at first, because when I left the bathroom I went back to my own bedroom, and closed the door. I stood there for a few minutes, almost feeling numb. And then out of nowhere, I just started to cry. I couldn’t think of just one thing that morning that hurt, there was just so much to be scared of and unsure about; what I had seen...I think it scared me, more than I was willing to admit.

Chapter 8

Taylor left for his doctor's appointment with Mom and Dad around eight-thirty the next morning. I was a little anxious, so much that I even skipped school to make sure he was okay when he came home. Zac didn't have any classes that morning, so when he saw that I had stayed home from school I had to think of a decent explanation.

"I just didn't feel like going today," I said, shrugging. Nice excuse, eh?

"That's a real good reason. You can't just not go to school because you don't feel like it," he said, flopping backwards on the couch and putting his feet across my lap.

"Yuck, Zac! Get your nasty feet off me!" I tried pushing his feet off but they weren't budging. "I can miss school whenever I want – Mom can teach me."

"You don't like my perfume?" he said, waving his toes right in my face. "And Mom can't teach you the same way your teacher does."

"No I don't. You're gross," I said, scrunching my nose. "And you're right, she can't; she can teach me better."

"Just one little whiff..." He stuck his socked foot right in my mouth, and then burst out laughing.

"Zac! You're so disgusting! God, how did you ever get a girlfriend?" I pushed him hard and he rolled onto the floor, still laughing.

"Man that was awesome!" He was cracking up. I rolled my eyes, wiping at my mouth somewhat frantically, seeing as the thought of his foot in my mouth was

less than appealing. He held onto his sides, laughing so hard I thought he was going to pee himself.

"It wasn't that funny, Zachary." I threw a couch pillow at him, hitting him squarely in the head. "You loser."

He seemed to regain control of himself, and propped himself up on his elbows. "Hey, where did Mom and Dad go this morning with Taylor?"

"Doctor's," I answered and immediately regretted it. Now I was going to have to try to explain.

"Why didn't he just drive himself?" I shrugged at his question. "Well do you know why he went?"

"Nope," I answered, staring intently out the window. "Maybe he has the flu or something and didn't want to drive because he was afraid he might throw up all over himself in the meantime."

"That's...kind of gross, but I see your point." He tickled the bottom of my foot, and I quickly pulled my leg up and tucked my foot under myself. I had begun to wonder again how Taylor was making out, and what was taking so long. Was the doctor going to tell him that he was going to be okay? A little more chemo and he'll be cancer free? Maybe that the chemo was working just fine? *Something* that would let them know he was all right or at least going to be all right. Suddenly all I wanted terribly was for him to come home and tell me that he was healthy. It would have been a huge blessing, but I had a feeling that wasn't what I was going to hear when he came home.

"Hello? Earth to Avery?" I looked at Zac, just aware that he was speaking. "You were a million miles away, Ave. What's up?" I shook my head thoughtfully.

“Nothing,” I lied. I wanted to tell him so badly; I wanted to confide in him, wanted him to reassure me and tell me that Taylor was a fighter, that Taylor was strong, that Taylor would beat this. But it wasn’t my place to tell him if Taylor didn’t want that; I had to respect his wishes.

The phone interrupted any further train of thought that I might have had and I bounced up. “I’ll get it.” I quickly picked up the phone and answered, and thank God it was Mom.

“Baby, we’re on our way home now. Tay isn’t feeling well, so make sure Mac and Zoë are quiet, okay?”

“Okay,” I answered. “So how did everything go?” I asked, trying to keep my voice down so Zac wouldn’t hear me.

“We’ll talk when we get home, okay?” I didn’t like the sound of that...

“Okay...” I waited for her to say goodbye and then hung up as well.

“So, did everything go okay?” Zac repeated my question to me, eyebrows raised.

“I guess,” I lied, shrugging. “But Tay doesn’t feel too good so Mom said to make sure Mac and Zoë keep the noise down.” I could tell that Zac knew there was more to it than that, and I was grateful that he didn’t ask me any questions.

I think it must have been obvious that I needed to get out for a while. When Jessica got home, a little while after Mom, Dad, and Taylor, she suggested we go dress shopping. She offered for Mom to come, but I couldn’t blame her when she passed and wanted to stay home. Of course, I was the only one who knew why.

“So what colour are you looking for?” she asked me, as we stepped out of the car and headed toward the Sears mall entrance.

“I’m not sure; I’m pale so I can’t get anything too dark.”

“True,” she said nodding. “Well, what did you have in mind?”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” I answered. “What do you think I would look good in?”

“Not white,” she said, shaking her head and then looking at me. “Maybe a pale blue.”

“Hmm, maybe.” I looked at a couple of clothes racks as we passed by them, heading for the formal dresses. “I was thinking even lavender, maybe. Or red.”

“No red,” she said. “It wouldn’t look right on you. Maybe crimson, or wine coloured.”

“Whatever you think looks good,” I said, shrugging, my mind on my brother rather than there where it was supposed to be.

“No” she laughed a little “it’s whatever *you* want.”

“Sorry, Jess,” I said, shaking my head a little. “I just have some things on my mind.”

“I can tell,” she said quietly. “Wanna talk about it?” I shook my head; I couldn’t talk about it even if I wanted to.

“I can’t tell you,” I said regretfully. “I’m sorry, Jess.”

“Don’t be. There are some things people can’t share with other people.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to, believe me I do, but I can’t. It’s someone else’s business and it’s not my place to tell his business.”

“Understandable.” She looked at me and smiled a little. “And admirable.” I smiled in return and stopped in front of a light purple dress.

“This one’s pretty.” I smiled at her.

“Well let’s try it on.” She grinned back and pulled it off the rack, and we went in search of a dressing room.

“I still like the black and white one,” Jessica said from outside the dressing room. We had been searching for almost two hours for the perfect dress – granted I didn’t have to find it that day, but it would make things a whole lot easier.

“You mean the black one with the white on top?” I asked in return, as I tried to get the halter buttoned of a light purple dress.

“Yeah.”

“Well, if this one doesn’t look good, then I agree. I’ve been thinking about that one – I really like it.”

“Well, let me see this one,” she said as I finally got it buttoned and looked in the mirror. I didn’t really like it – I liked the black and white one a lot too. It was long down to my toes, with crinoline beneath it, and the top was strapless with something like a collar that was white – except it wasn’t really a collar because it didn’t go around my neck but around my chest. I stepped out of the dressing room.

“What do you think?” I asked, shrugging.

“Eh...” she shook her head. “I don’t really like it.”

“Me neither,” I replied, starting back in. “Go get the black and white one for me in a three?”

“Sure. I don’t know if the numbers run even or odd, if they don’t have a three do you want a two or a four?”

“Four,” I answered, pulling the button behind my neck undone.

“Okay; be right back.” I heard her walk away and starting undressing to redress in my own clothes. The dressing room wasn’t dirty, just kind of faded and dingy. The rug was obviously well trodden, and the cream coloured paint on the walls was chipping. The mirror hooks had somewhat discoloured, and part of the metal lock had rusted. The store had been in the process of being renovated for about a month now, and I guess they must not have gotten around to the dressing rooms yet. It kind of reminded me of the paint on the back of my door – it was chipping a little. Mom and Dad said I could repaint it – I wanted to paint it this really light grey, and put a sun and moon border up in black to go with my black cast iron bed frame. As a matter of fact, Mom and Dad said I could help them repaint a bunch of rooms in the house, Taylor’s included. But with him being so sick it probably wasn’t a good idea for him to breathe in all the paint fumes. So either we weren’t going to paint that room, or move him to a different one while we did paint.

“I got it,” I heard Jessica say. I realised while I had been daydreaming I was still standing in my panties.

“Okay,” I replied. “I’ll be out in just a sec.” I quickly pulled on my shirt and pants, and slipped into my shoes, picking up my purse from the floor. I

unlocked the stall door and came out, leaving four or five dresses hanging on the old-looking hooks in the stall. “I didn’t bring much money; I don’t have enough to pay for that. Will they hold it over for me?”

Jess smiled and shook her head. “Mom and Dad gave me a credit card to buy dresses and shoes. Purses and all that jazz we have to take care of on our own.”

“Hey, no complaints here. Besides, the sooner we pay for this the better. I wanna get home and check on T-” I stopped myself before I finished. “Never mind,” I mumbled. She looked at me oddly, her head tilted to one side. And then I followed her to the shoe section to pick those out and then to the cash register.

When we got back Ike’s truck was in the driveway – one of two vehicles that he owned – and I was a little excited. I loved it when Ike came over. Jessie and I quickly got our things and hurried into the house, but the excitement was broken when we saw everyone sitting solemnly on the couch, and loveseat, and recliner – Mac and Zoë sitting on the floor facing the rest of them.

“What’s going on?” Jessie asked before I had the chance to. I looked to the couch and Taylor was sitting between Mom and Dad, Mom’s arm around his shoulders, his knees pulled up, and his head on her shoulder.

“We all need to talk, sweetheart,” Dad said softly. I had a feeling I knew what this was about, and if this was what I thought it was, then things must have not turned out well at the doctor’s if he was going to announce it to the family.

“Come and sit down,” Mom said softly. I looked to one end of the couch; Zac and Rachel were sitting close together, and Jess went and sat at the other

end. I looked to Ike, who was sitting on the recliner. I went over and sat on the arm of it, but he tugged me over, and I sat down on his knee.

“Don’t worry,” he said quietly. “You won’t hurt me; you don’t even weigh anything.” I smiled a little, and was thankful for the reassuring hand he placed on my knee, mine and Jessica’s dresses lying draped over the coffee table.

“I know all of you know that Tay has been sick since he came home,” Mom started quietly. Taylor had his eyes closed, Mom gently rubbing his arm, and Dad’s hand gently squeezing one of his knees. “Well, um, this is...it’s a lot different from having the flu or something that you can just take medicine and get rid of.”

“Oh God,” Zac said quietly. He ended up having the same thought I did. “Please don’t even say it’s AIDS...”

“No,” Dad said quietly. We all heard Zac sigh.

“It doesn’t matter,” Taylor said quietly – we almost couldn’t hear him. “You die from that too.”

“Taylor...” Mom said slightly scoldingly, closing her eyes for a moment.

“Be honest with them,” he said quietly. He sat up a little, opening his eyes. “Guys...” He looked at all of us apologetically, and then right at me. “The only other person who knows what I’m going to tell you is Avie.” They all looked at me. “I wanted to tell you all, I just...I didn’t know how to do it.” He looked at Dad for a long moment. “I can’t do this...” he whispered.

“Guys,” Dad said softly. “Your brother is really sick.”

“How?” Ike asked quietly. “What is it?”

“It’s a rare form of acute leukaemia,” Mom said quietly. Everyone went dead silent. My heart was pounding and I already knew this, so I couldn’t imagine how the rest of my siblings felt.

“What’s that?” Zoë asked quietly, finally breaking the silence.

“Remember how Mommy taught you about cancer?” Dad asked and she nodded, what they were saying seemingly dawning on her. “It’s a type of cancer.”

“But...cancer makes you die...” she said quietly; I knew it wouldn’t be long before she started crying.

“Sometimes,” Mom said quietly. “But, you see, Taylor’s doctor has been giving him treatment; it’s medicine to help fight the cancer.”

“But it makes me really sick,” Taylor added quietly. “And it makes me lose my hair.” He wouldn’t look at any of us when he said that, and I got up, went to him and just wrapped my arms around him. He put his head down on my shoulder and just stayed there for a while.

“Taylor...” Isaac said quietly, gently shaking his head. “I wish I had known...” He got up, and I moved, and he took his turn hugging Taylor. Zoë had started crying, and it was more than touching to see Mackenzie comforting her. I think it was more than a little emotional for all of us at that moment. Now everyone knew, and I was just praying for Taylor’s sake they all took it well.

“You guys have to understand,” Dad said, loud enough to make us all look, including Taylor. “The treatment Taylor’s getting makes it very easy for him to get sick, and it would be very bad if he got sick right now; so if any of you have even a runny nose, or a sore throat, or even feel a little bit sick, you

can't be around him. Okay?" We all nodded. "You need to wash your hands any time you plan on touching him or being around him-"

"Dad," Taylor interrupted quietly. "They don't have the plague. A little germs on their hands won't hurt me."

"Taylor..." he protested.

"Just trust me, okay?"

Dad looked over at Mom, and then back at Taylor. "Okay," he said quietly. "The next week or so Taylor needs to rest, a lot, because he needs to recover from the treatment. So just...don't be too loud."

"I can sleep through noise," he said, smiling a little, making us all do the same. "I grew up with all of these monsters." It seemed to ease the thick tension to hear Taylor making a joke. So now the whole family knew, along with Rachel – but I guess we considered her family anyway.

Chapter 9

It was about two in the morning, and at the time I didn't think of whom it could be, I just knew someone was in the bathroom, and it was annoying the crap out of me – it was keeping me awake. I lay there for a while, tossing and turning, and finally decided to go tell whoever it was to get back to bed before I had to resort to physical violence. I got out of bed and made my way a little ways down the hall to the bathroom door, I didn't even bother to knock; I opened up the door and felt terrible almost immediately. Poor Taylor was kneeling on the floor in front of the toilet, puking.

“Oh...Tay, I'm sorry...” I said a little unsurely; I didn't really know what to do. I didn't want to leave him alone so I came in, quietly closing the door behind me. I knew what Mom always did for me when I was sick so I did the same for him. I got a wash cloth from the linen closet by the sink, and wet it with cool water, wrung it out, and gently placed it on the back of his neck, wishing there was something more than just that that I could do for him.

“Thanks,” he managed to sputter. I leaned back against the counter, trying not to look, waiting for him to be finished. The sound of him throwing up was enough to make me want to do the same, but I stuck it out for his sake – he shouldn't have to be alone. When he was finally finished, he leaned back against the wall, still sitting on the cold tiled floor. He reached up, closing the lid on the toilet, and flushing it.

“Are you okay?” I asked timidly.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “I'll be okay.”

“How come you didn't tell anyone you were in here?”

“Come on, Avie, I’m a big boy; besides, what would I have said to anyone? Gee, I just thought I’d let you know that I’m going to the bathroom to puke my brains out for a while.” He had a point, and I felt really bad for him because there really wasn’t anything any of us could do to make it any better or easier for him. I think seeing Taylor go through what he was sparked an interest in me, and from that very first moment I found out he was sick on, I had thought about medicine – practicing it, I mean, like being a doctor. I didn’t say anything to anyone, but the thought was definitely there, and it had good reason to be. I watched him struggle to stand up on his own and offered an arm for him to grab onto, which he did gratefully albeit reluctantly. “I hate not being able to do things on my own,” he said quietly. “This damn chemo makes me so sick...”

“It’s okay,” I replied, quietly as well. “I don’t mind helping you out, and I doubt anyone else minds.”

“Well, I still hate it – I feel helpless.” I was listening to his words, but I was looking at the hair stuck to the shoulder of his black T-shirt. It wasn’t a huge clump or anything like that, but there was still a lot of it. “Avie? What?”

I forced my eyes back to his, feeling embarrassed for staring – I mean, he’s my brother; I didn’t have a reason to be staring. “I...n-nothing.” I reached out, and gently brushed the shoulder of his T-shirt, and we both watched several strands of hair fall to the bathroom floor. We made eye contact for a brief moment, and then he looked away, and I felt horrible.

“I’m gonna get back to bed,” he said quietly. He wouldn’t look at me, and I felt like I had done something terribly wrong.

“Taylor, I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to upset you, I just-”

“It’s okay,” he said quietly. “I know.”

“Do you need any help?” He shook his head and made his way slowly from the bathroom to his bedroom. As I stepped out and back into my own room, I could only help but wonder – how was this family going to deal if...if something...*happened* to Taylor? The thought itself made me shiver; I didn’t want to even think it could happen. I slipped back into bed, and did my best to fall asleep quickly.

I walked down the familiar hallway, the carpet worn from years of children’s feet making their passage. I had walked this way so many times before, but...something was different this time. Something felt like it was...missing. The air held a certain chill I never remembered, and everything was eerily silent. There was no sign of Mom or Dad, no sign of Jess or Zac, or Mackenzie or Zoë, or even Ike, Zac, or Taylor. Everything just felt empty, abandoned. Where pictures once hung on the walls, were bare spots lighter than the rest of the paint colour on the wall.

“Hello?” I called out but got no answer; the bedroom doors were all open, and each room was still furnished with beds, but nothing else and empty of persons. One by one, I passed the rooms and each was empty – nothing but the beds and bare carpets were left. I began to hurry along down the hallway.

“Jessica?” No answer, and empty room. “Mac?” It was exactly the same. Someone had to be there. “Taylor?” I stopped outside his room. There was still everything of his in it – but...boxes. Boxes were out, and some of his things were packed inside them. Was he moving away again? “Tay, are you here?”

I stepped into his room and touched some of the clothes inside one of the large boxes. If his stuff was here...where was he? Where was everyone else? And why was I the only one there? I sat down on his bed, looking around the room. Something had changed...other than the obvious, it felt very different...

Something on his desk caught my attention. It was a baggie; inside, there were all the chokers and necklaces he used to wear, along with the HANSON ring he always wore on his right ring finger. Why would he go somewhere and leave them behind and looking like he wanted them to be preserved? I set the baggie back down and saw another; inside that one was a cut hospital wristband, and a few sheets of paper with Taylor's handwriting, although it seemed strained, like he was struggling to write. That, in particular, I found peculiar. I picked up the baggie and examined it; the hospital wristband had his name on it, and a date which was too blurred to read except for the year: 2006. I didn't want to open the bag, so I examined the lettered pages through the clear plastic. I had only read a few lines when I finally started to understand. His things being packed up in boxes, these preserved mementos...he had to be dead...I suddenly replaced the baggie to the desk surface, and stood up quickly. What was going on...?

"Taylor!" I called out for him. I began to cry, realising what this was. He was gone... "Taylor!"

"Avery-" The touch of someone's hand on my arm caused me to start in surprise, my heart beating wildly and my breathing erratic. I was staring up at Taylor's concerned face. "What's wrong? You were calling my name..." I sat up suddenly, wrapping my arms around his neck. I just held on tightly. "Avie?"

"I just had a bad dream," I whispered. "A really...really bad dream."

"Shh..." he whispered, gently rubbing my back. "It's okay."

"Promise me something?" I whispered to him.

"Anything."

“Promise me you’ll never leave me again.” I was sure he wasn’t going to promise, and I had felt the tears begin in earnest, but his response stilled my tears instead.

“I promise you,” he said quietly. “I’ll never leave you again, Avie.” I just held him tightly, thankful to hear those words from his mouth – more than thankful. “Scoot over,” he said quietly. I did as told, and scooted over toward the wall. It was a welcome sense of *déjà vu* for a change as he stretched out beside me. I nestled myself comfortably in his arms, resting my head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat.

“I’m sorry I was so mean to you when you came home,” I said quietly.

“It’s okay,” he said, gently stroking my hair. “I deserved everything I got from you. I was a real asshole, Avie, I realise that now, and I’m really sorry for it.”

“We’ll get past it all,” I replied.

“How can I make it up to everyone, Ave? Especially Zoë? She was so little and I was so mean to her when I left...”

“Not a pleasant trip down memory lane, huh?”

“Not at all. And I just ditched Ike and Zac, and all they ever were was there for me, and my best friends.” He sighed quietly. “It doesn’t feel like sorry is enough.”

“It isn’t,” I said honestly. “Just spend time with them; you can’t get back what you lost, Tay, but you can at least make up for it.”

“Why are you so smart?” he asked; without even looking at his face I could see the little smile that resided there.

“I took after someone I used to know,” I replied softly. We were both quiet for some time, and by the calm expression on his face I knew he had taken the compliment – his eyes were what really gave it away.

“I love you, Ave,” he said quietly, kissing the top of my head.

“I love you too, Tay,” I whispered, finally starting to doze off again. Things that happened could be overlooked, I suppose, but I don’t think ever forgotten. But he’s doing the best he can, and that has to count for something.

When I woke I could hear the phone ringing over and over – about twelve times, actually, before someone picked it up. It didn’t take me long to realise Taylor had gotten up; there was still a depression on the surface of the bed next to me where he had lain, and the other reminder he left behind brought tears to my eyes. I bit my lip as I reached out, taking nearly a handful of blonde hair from my pillow case. I truly felt sad for him, for lack of a better way to put it. He did some shitty things, but nobody deserved something like this. I didn’t understand why God chose to work the way He did; why bring a family together through something as tragic as this? Why punish someone so young with a disease like Taylor’s? I took the thin handful of his hair and got up, striding across the room slowly, and dropping it in the wastebasket next to my desk. He was acting so strong, but something was telling me that he wasn’t as strong as he was making himself out to be; that was one thing that never changed about him – he always hid it whenever he was hurting. It was just him to put up this front that he was okay; he said once that he didn’t like to be a burden on other people, so maybe that’s why he hides it. If I were him I’d be crumbling, terrified; I’d seen him cry, but I hadn’t seen him break down, and I don’t know how he didn’t. He was twenty-three years old and fighting for his life, for which we still didn’t know how long the battle would be, or how tough, or if he would even win – though the last part we chose not to think about or talk about. Death was a topic of avoidance.

I made my way downstairs and had to smile a little, even if it only lasted for a moment, as I laid eyes on Taylor sleeping on the couch. If he didn't look so ill it would have been a Kodak moment. My smile faded as I stood there at the bottom of the stairs just watching him. My train of thought was lost to me when I felt a tap on my arm. I looked down and was greeted with my little sister's big blue eyes.

"Hey Zoë," I said quietly, giving a small smile. She smiled at me, and then looked at Taylor.

"Is Tay getting old?" she asked, keeping her voice down, and I realised it was still fairly early in the morning.

"He's getting older, but no, he's not getting *old*," I told her. "Why do you ask?"

"I thought maybe he was getting old, because Dad said once he was getting old because his hair was thinning. That means it starts to fall out, even if it's just a little, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well...Tay's hair is falling out..."

"Honey," I said quietly, squatting down to her level. "Taylor's not getting old; he's really sick remember?" She nodded.

"But why does his hair fall out? I thought it only happened to old people." It was hard for her to understand, but I had patience.

“Remember when Tay told us he was sick?” She nodded. “And they told us his medicine makes him sicker?” She nodded again. “Well, his medicine makes his hair fall out.”

“Is he gonna go bald?” she asked quietly, looking at the floor. I felt a swell of emotion.

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “Probably.”

“Will he have to wear a wig?”

“Probably,” I answered, able to give a little bit of a reassuring smile. But it faded immediately with her next question.

“Is he gonna die?” Her voice was small and quiet, and I could tell the prospect of that question scared her, as well it should.

“No,” I said firmly. “We have to pray, and ask God to watch over Taylor, and help him. Okay?” She looked at him, then at me, her big blue eyes slightly glassy.

“Okay,” she said quietly. “I’ll pray every night.”

“Good girl,” I said, kissing the top of her head. “Now go play.” She smiled up at me, and bounced up the stairs calling for Mac. I smiled a little and shook my head, heading for the kitchen. Ike was there, and Mom and Dad.

“Morning,” I said, kissing Dad’s cheek, and then Ike’s, and then going over and putting my arms around our mother.

“Hi baby,” she said quietly. “Is Tay still sleeping?”

I nodded. “Out on the couch.” She nodded once, and I took my place next to her. “Let’s get out of the house today,” I said to her.

“Oh, Avery, I would love to, but I can’t.”

“Mom, please?”

“Honey, I need to stay with Taylor.”

“Di, sweetheart,” Dad said softly, reasonably. “I’ll be home all day; go on – you haven’t been out since Tay got home. I think I can hold the fort down while you’re gone.”

“Are you sure?” she asked him. When he nodded she looked back at me. “All right; let me go shower, and then we’ll go out shopping and get some lunch. That okay?”

I smiled and nodded. “That’s great.” She smiled back at me and kissed my head. I just sat there with her while she drank her coffee, Dad and Isaac reading their respective sections of the newspaper. When she got up to go shower and get dressed I took her spot – it was still warm. I looked at the weather forecast and it was supposed to be warm and sunny; at least it was hopeful we would have a good day out.

“I wish I was a painter,” Isaac said quietly, seemingly out of nowhere. I creased my brow, looking at him like he was nuts.

“Why? You have enough talents.”

“Because, when I got here this morning, I went up to see if Tay was awake, and I found you two together; it reminded me of a long time ago, that’s all, and

I guess I kind of wanted to freeze the moment.” For whatever reason, what he said was incredibly touching.

“That was a beautiful thing to say,” Dad said quietly, almost reverently, looking admiringly at my oldest brother and his oldest son.

“It was just the truth,” he said.

“Thanks, Ike,” I said even though I knew it wasn’t necessary, and found myself suddenly wishing Ike still lived home, that way all the family would be there, just like it used to be. He must’ve read my sentiments through the expression on my face because he reached out and gently touched my cheek.

“Don’t worry,” he said softly, giving me a gentle smile. “Everything’ll be okay.” I managed a small smile in return, and turn my attention back to the newspaper in front of me that my mother had abandoned.

Chapter 10

Mom sighed as we merged into traffic, heading in the direction of the mall. I had just been to the mall the other day, and I didn't really want to go there, but I wasn't going to be difficult. If the mall was easiest for her then it was good enough for me.

"It's good to get out," she said quietly, keeping her eyes on the road.

"I imagine so," I said, smiling a little. "You haven't left the house since Tay came home."

"I'm just afraid I'll go somewhere and something will happen..." She shook her head slightly. "I guess I'm just being silly."

"You're not being silly, Mom. You're his mother; you're supposed to be worried."

She nodded once. "I see you two have worked things out?" She glanced at me momentarily and looked back at the road.

"For the most part," I said, nodding once as well. "I can't say the circumstances didn't have anything to do with it."

"I know," she said quietly. "But it's better than you two fighting all the time; if it took this to get you all to come together again..." she trailed. "I wish this wasn't what it took."

"I wish it wasn't, too," I said, looking out my window at a yellow Volkswagen whirring by. "How did his blood test results come back?"

“I don’t know,” she said. “He didn’t tell your father or me anything. I assumed he knows, though.”

“Does that mean it’s bad?”

“I don’t know what it means, if anything at all. I think he’s still coming to grips with this; he isn’t really comfortable discussing it, not that I would be if I were in his place.”

“And his hair’s falling out,” I said quietly, suddenly. We both knew that already, and I wasn’t sure why I said it. It was just a thought that came to mind, and I blurted it out before I had time to think of what I was saying. She grew quiet for a few minutes, and I knew it probably wasn’t the best thing to say. Nothing like sticking my foot in my mouth. “Mom, I’m sorry-”

“No, it’s okay,” she said softly. “It just...it makes it seem so much more real. Does that make any sense?”

Those had been my thoughts exactly. “You have no idea how much.”

“Well,” she sighed again, “what do we have planned for today?”

“Whatever you wanna do,” I replied. “We can shop around and then go to lunch if that’s what you want.”

She smiled. “Want to get your nails done?” she asked, glancing over at me. I smiled at her, knowing she was in a rare good mood as of late. It wasn’t that she had been in bad moods, it was just she had been so down, so not-Mom.

“If you get yours done, too.”

“It’s a deal.”

“I’ll buy lunch,” I informed her, and refused to listen when she tried to protest. “You deserve it, Mom.” She reached over and placed a hand on my knee.

“You’re sweet, baby,” she said. “Thank you – it means a lot.” It was official: we just had a moment. I smiled back at her, and settled back in my seat until we got to the mall.

The house was relatively quiet when we got home, a few bags each in tow, and both of us with freshly manicured nails. They must have just finished eating lunch because I could smell the distinct smell of macaroni and cheese. Mom and I made our way into the kitchen. Dad was cleaning up; a few bowls still left on the table, all empty except for one that was a quarter of the way eaten.

“Who wasted this time?” Mom asked, her ‘Mom voice’ returning.

Dad sighed. “Taylor.”

“That’s *all* he ate?” I asked, finding it hard to believe what little was gone from the bowl could sustain anyone. He sighed again and shrugged his shoulders, taking the bowl, turning on the garbage disposal and dumping what was left of the orange noodles.

“I hope he’s all right,” Mom said, concerned.

“Maybe it’s a side effect,” I said. I don’t really know where it came from, or how I knew it, it was just...there. The thought just ‘popped’ into my head.

“Huh? Side effect?” Dad repeated.

“Of the chemo,” I said. “I mean, when he was on it he could hardly stand the sight of food; maybe it’s a prolonged side effect.”

“Dr. Avery Hanson everyone,” Mom said, smiling at me. I was pleased that she wasn’t mocking me like some of my siblings might have.

“I never thought of that,” Dad said. “You think?” he asked, looking at Mom.

“I wouldn’t doubt it.”

“Where is Taylor anyway?” I asked, looking around. When we came in Mac and Zoë were glued to the TV set and Jessie was on the phone; I assumed Zac was either in one of his classes or upstairs with Rachel.

“Upstairs,” Dad answered with another quiet sigh.

“Is he all right?” Mom asked.

“I don’t know...”

“Walk, what happened? Is he okay?” She was getting nervous and it was obvious.

“I think so; it’s not what you’re thinking.”

“Don’t scare me like that,” she said, leaning on a chair. I watched passively as they talked. “Well, what is it then?”

“Dr. Peterson called him.”

“Oh; what did she say?” Mom wanted to know, but she was doing well trying to keep her interest less obvious.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Taylor didn’t say anything; but he was pretty upset when he got off the phone with her. He went upstairs to his room, and he hasn’t come down. I think he’s been up there crying...”

“Oh no,” she said softly.

“Di, I wanted to go up to see him or talk to him or something but...I didn’t know what to do,” he said quietly, and I swore he was about to cry. “I just didn’t know what to do...”

“Oh Walk...” she said sympathetically. “Honey...”

“I don’t think any of us do,” I said quietly.

“I’ll go up and try to talk to him,” she said softly, kissing Dad gently on the lips.

“I’m sorry; I just didn’t know what to do.” He had a point; I know what it’s like to see a grown man cry, and it isn’t often a twenty-three year old man cries alone in his room. I don’t think I would have known what to do either.

“Can I come?” I asked my mother as she started toward the stairs. She hesitated for a moment, and I could tell she was about to protest, but for whatever reason decided not to.

“Okay,” she said softly. I started after her and followed behind her up to Taylor’s room. I was worried about what he was going to say; the only thing I could think of if he had been up here crying was that she had given him less than good news.

Mom knocked quietly and we could hear Taylor's strained voice from the other side – tear-ravaged, it was obvious; he really had been crying all that time...

"What?"

"Honey, it's Mom..." she said quietly.

"Just...I need some time alone right now," he said.

"I don't think you do," she replied softly. "I think you need somebody right now."

"Just go away."

She opened the door slowly, and we could see Taylor's face, wet from tears, and his eyes pink and swollen.

"Mom I told you to go away," he said, trying to sound angry but not quite getting there. He sighed and waved his hand dismissively. "It doesn't even matter; come in."

"What's wrong, baby?" she asked quietly. He laughed bitterly.

"Everything." He shook his head and looked at us. "I'm sorry; I don't mean to be so..." He shook his head again. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," she replied. I sat down on the end of his bed and she sat up at the top, next to him. Something about his demeanour said plainly that he was more upset than he had been when he first told us; there was just something that I could feel... "Your dad told me that Dr. Peterson called."

“Yeah,” he replied quietly, looking out the window. It was a tactic everyone used: you don’t look someone in the eyes when you have to give them bad or upsetting news, or when you’re lying – and that wasn’t the case this time.

“What did she say?”

“Enough,” he answered. “Nothing I wanted to hear.”

“Is it bad?” I asked. He looked at me, wiping his eyes somewhat angrily. He hated to cry in front of people, and that only happened as he got older; when the whole changing process happened he sort of hardened to everyone – it was like nothing touched him or moved him, like he didn’t have emotions, and it was strange but welcome to see him acting like he used to when he was fourteen.

“She called about my blood test,” he said quietly. He looked down at the plain comforter on his bed, picking at an invisible piece of fuzz, avoiding eye contact with either me or Mom.

“Oh?” Mom got a little hopeful. “Well, honey, what did she say? Did the chemo do anything yet?”

“Not really,” he said quietly. He looked up at us. “God I wish you didn’t look so hopeful...you’re killing me here.”

“What do you mean?” I asked quietly.

“I guess,” he paused, taking a breath, “whatever rare form of leukaemia this is, it’s...it’s not good. The chemo barely did anything, but that’s expected I guess – the first time, I guess, doesn’t ever do much. But I guess...” He shook his head. “Things don’t look that good.”

“Jordan,” Mom said softly, “honey...what are you saying?”

“It’s bad, Mom,” he said as I watched his eyes filling with tears again. “It’s growing fast; it...”

“But the chemo will stop it, right?” I interjected. He looked at me, pain, sorrow, fear all in his eyes, across his features.

“She gave me a prognosis,” he said quietly, lowering his head. “She said that, um, this form of leukaemia has a high mortality rate, and, um, they’re going to do everything they can...”

“Baby, that’s what the treatment is for.”

“I don’t know if it’s even worth it, Mom,” he said quietly.

“Of course it’s worth it; Taylor, it’s more than worth it if it’s going to save your life-”

“Mom...” He looked at her sadly. “This form of leukaemia...the prognosis is six to twelve months...”

“What?” Her voice was almost inaudible; my mouth went dry, and I felt sick. It felt like everything had just caved in on us. Did he just tell us he was only going to live for another six to twelve months?

“But the chemo-”

“They aren’t sure it’s going to do anything,” he interrupted me. “The chances of surviving this...” He shook his head slightly. “Six to twelve months includes treatment.”

“No,” I said quietly, feeling the tears roll down my cheeks. “You’ll get better, Taylor.”

“I have to go into the hospital next week,” he said, letting Mom hold his hand. “She wants me on intensive chemotherapy, and wants to be able to keep an eye on me because it’s going to make me so sick.” He looked at me. “Avie...”

“You’re not going to die, Taylor,” I said defiantly.

“I’m sorry, Ave,” he said softly. “I never asked for this.”

He was crying again, and Mom moved closer to envelop him in her arms. “My baby...” she said softly. He put his head on her shoulder, wrapping his arms fully around her, and she rocked him gently.

“I’m so scared,” he cried. “I don’t wanna die, Mom...”

“Shh,” she whispered, crying as well, gently stroking his hair like she would if she were comforting Zoë.

“You won’t die,” I said weakly. I left them alone after that; I think they needed to be alone together. Taylor wouldn’t die; he couldn’t die, because he was a part of the Hanson family and things like that don’t happen to us. They happen to other people – they don’t happen to *us*.

Chapter 11

Prom was two weeks away. I had my dress, my shoes, and a hair appointment set up. JR had spent a little time at my house a couple of times, but he wanted to go out most of the time. We spent a lot of time together, and I think it might be a guy thing, but he always wanted to make out or something. I never got carried away, not once, I always stopped wandering hands that made me uncomfortable or kisses that were headed in directions I didn't like. Taylor had been doing all right; he'd gotten out of the house a bit; he went to dinner with us once, and went out on his own a few times – I think he just needed time to think, or rather not think. It was after I had finished eating breakfast one morning, before I had to head out for school that he decided to share one of those expeditions with me. It was nothing close to anything I wanted to hear.

"Avie?" I stopped outside his open bedroom door.

"Yeah?"

"Can you come here for a minute? I think...there's something you might want to know."

"Taylor, if you're going to tell me something depressing, can we save it until *after* school?" I was trying to make light of a situation that I was afraid might turn into a big tissue fest.

"It has nothing to do with me," he said, surprisingly, as I came into the room. "It's about you...and your prom date."

"JR?"

"Yeah." He motioned for me to sit, and I did. "How much do you like him?"

I smiled, trying to keep it in but failing utterly. “A lot.”

“Then I really hate to tell you this...”

“What?” The smile was still on my face.

“I went out the other day to run some errands, and I stopped to get something to eat, and your date – JR – was with some of his friends.”

“Okay...”

“I overheard him talking, and he said some pretty...questionable things.”

“What are you talking about, Taylor?” I asked him. I was starting to become annoyed; I didn’t like people ragging on guys that I had a thing for.

“He said he was just using you; I heard him say that he was going to win some bet.” I stared at him in disbelief. “He said he was going to ‘crack’ the ‘Hanson goody-goody’. Avie...he thinks he’s gonna score on prom night.”

I was furious. I stood up, speaking loudly and heatedly. “Not every guy is like *you*, Taylor.” I saw that that comment hurt his feelings but I was too angry to care. “I don’t need you to tell me things that aren’t true about the guy that I’m dating. You’re going right back to your old ways; you just can’t stand to see someone else getting attention, can you?” I started to walk away, fuming.

“Avie; it’s the truth-”

“Shut up, Taylor,” I said angrily. “Just mind your own damn business.”

“Avery-”

I slammed his door behind me. God, why did he have to go and say something like that? Things were going so well, and then he says stupid things like that that aren't true. It made it seem like he was going back to asshole-Taylor and that only pissed me off more. It set my whole day off track. I didn't even give it a second thought; JR liked me for real, he wouldn't use me...

I passed my English test – it was the paper that I had to write, the one about my doll Maggie. Taylor had made me so mad earlier that day that I didn't even get excited about acing it; there wasn't a single thing wrong – perfect punctuation and grammar, perfect spelling and form. After school JR tried to cheer me up by taking me out for some ice cream, even though he didn't even know what was upsetting me – no, I didn't tell him what Taylor said. See? If he was using me, why would he be so nice to me? He gave me a ride home, and I'm thankful that he realised without being offended that I needed some time to myself to think. I came in and told Mom and Dad that I was home, then went up to my room, closing the door behind me; I still had a lot of thinking to do and I wanted to be by myself to do it. But I was exhausted, and I could feel a nap coming on, yet I didn't want to take one because I knew I had homework to do. I pulled out my Course two notebook and text book, a pencil and my scientific calculator. Ugh, if there is one thing I hate it's geometry proofs. They suck – big time. I sighed, opened my notebook and book and started to work even though my mindset wasn't exactly on math. It had to get done, no matter how much I needed to think, or the fact that I was so tired I could barely focus my eyes on the problems. The first few problems were hard enough, and I decided to just put my head down for a few minutes, just long enough to keep my eyes from burning any longer, and to make myself able to focus. Just a few minutes...

I sat on Daddy's knee, waiting still; Taylor was supposed to pick me up an hour ago to take me to the beach. It was supposed to be just me and him – like old times. He had a new girlfriend, again, but he promised me that he would be there. He told me that he would pick me up and just me and him

would go the beach and spend the day together, and he would buy me lunch and teach me how to swim on my back, and on the way home we'd get ice cream and just hang out in his car at Tasty Treat.

"Daddy, how much longer?" I asked, and he looked at the clock again. I hopped down off of his legs and started to skip excitedly back and forth across the room, watching the window carefully for my big brother's black car.

"He should be here soon," he replied, smiling down at me. I smiled back, trusting his word. I picked Maggie up from her spot beside him, and held her to my chest, gently stroking her hair. We were going to have fun with Taylor; he wouldn't tell me he would spend time with me if he couldn't again...

"What time is it?"

"Um, it's...it's 2:30, honey," he answered, and a less than pleasing one at that. Tay promised me he'd pick me up at noon. I looked down at the carpet and felt my eyes begin to burn – Taylor lied to me; he wasn't coming to get me...

"He's not coming, is he, Daddy?" I asked quietly.

"Oh honey," he said sympathetically, "honey, I'm sorry but...no, I don't think he's coming..."

"He promised me, Daddy," I said softly, heartbroken. He liked his girlfriend more than me, and to tell the truth it really hurt. He made me cry – again. It was the third time in a week he had broken his promises to me, and I wasn't going to let it happen again. I was never going to believe another promise he made me ever again. I dropped Maggie quietly to the carpeted floor, my tears falling as she did, and Daddy picked me up, wrapping his arms around me.

“I’m sure he has a good reason, sweetie. He wouldn’t forget you; Tay wouldn’t lie to you,” he said, trying to convince me and it was obvious.

“Yes he would, Daddy; he always lies to me...” I buried my face in his shoulder and cried, my tears soaking through his shirt, my doll lying forgotten on the floor.

I lifted my head groggily, the imprint of the notebook spiral on the side of my face; I rubbed my face for a moment, scrunching my face. What was that noise? I looked around, and suddenly realised – and feeling mighty stupid – that someone was knocking at my door.

“Um, come in,” I called, still rubbing my face, and yawning.

“Avie, please don’t throw me out,” Taylor said quickly. “I just wanna talk to you. Please?”

“Fine,” I said, turning in my chair to face him as he shut the door and came to sit on my bed, across from me.

“Look, I’m really sorry, please, please, *please* don’t be mad at me.” Taylor was begging me? I could have taken advantage of that, but I decided not to. I cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Have you been drinking?”

“I’m serious, Avie,” he said. “I didn’t mean to upset you today, so let’s just forget about it, okay?”

“I still don’t believe it,” I told him.

“Fine, don’t believe it then. Just don’t be mad at me.”

“Fine,” I replied in return. “It’s forgotten. Now is there something you want?”

He cocked his head to the side, grinning a little. “Did you fall asleep doing your homework?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Other than you have the I-just-woke-up look going on, you have a bunch of wire marks in your cheek from your notebook.”

“Oh...” I rubbed the tell-tale indentations and laughed a little. “I was a little tired so I took a little nap.”

“Well,” he said, standing, “Mom sent me up to tell you it’s dinner time.”

“Holy shit,” I said.

“Ah-hem?”

“Oh come on, you swore when you were my age.”

“Not quite so freely,” he said, still grinning a little. “How long were you asleep anyway?” He slung his arm around my shoulders, pulling me close to him.

“Um, two and a half hours?”

“Damn, I guess you were tired.”

“No thanks to you making me crazy all day.” I playfully socked him in the ribs.

“Umph,” he grunted a little. “Take it easy; I’m easily damaged, remember?” I had forgotten completely, and I suddenly felt horrible.

“Oh my God, Tay, I’m sorry; I forgot-”

“Relax; you didn’t break anything.” He smiled at me as we started down the hallway. “Yet.”

“Shut up,” I grinned at him.

“Come on,” he said, starting down the stairs. “It’s tuna casserole tonight.” I followed him down the stairs close at his heels, both of us coming into the dining room with our differences from earlier that day resolved.

There’s a habit in this family that we all inherited, well a few, but one in particular: eavesdropping. I know it’s rude and unethical but sometimes you just can’t help your curiosity. Me, and Mom, and Taylor (surprisingly enough) cleaned the kitchen together; he wasn’t as slowed down as he was when he was on the chemo; I think that day he told me, when I ran out, the only reason I made it out the door without him catching me was because of his treatment, because Taylor’s always been a wicked fast runner, and for him not to catch me...there just wasn’t any other explanation in my head. Well anyway, after we were done cleaning Mom and Taylor asked me if I could give them a few minutes alone, so of course I agreed, but I wanted so badly to know what they were going to talk about that I had to listen.

“There’s something I want to tell you,” he said quietly. “I feel so guilty about it – I never told anybody; you’ll be the only other person who knows beside me and Shanna.”

“Who’s Shanna?” she asked.

“My ex-girlfriend. We were dating for the last year; she was the first long term relationship I’d had in a long time...” He was quiet for moment. “I did something horrible to her, Mom.” The first thing I thought of was he cheated

on her, but that didn't seem so horrible coming from Taylor. Sorry, I know, but still...then a thought crossed my mind that I never want to ever think of again; I thought maybe he raped her, but even as much as a bastard as he had been I knew he wasn't capable of something like that.

"Baby, what is it?"

"I left her," he said quietly, "because she was pregnant."

"What?" She was shocked, mildly so, but shocked nonetheless. "Was...was it yours?"

"Yeah," he answered quietly. "I told her I didn't want a baby, and I told her I wasn't going to have anything to do with her if she had it..." He was almost in tears; I could hear it in his voice.

"Taylor," she said softly, almost scoldingly. "Where is she now? And what happened?"

"She got an abortion, Mom, because of me," he cried softly. "She *killed* that baby because of me..."

"Oh honey..."

"I don't want your sympathy." I was shocked to hear him say that. "I deserve every ounce of guilt I have; I'm the one who told her I didn't want her if she had the baby. And now...now I feel so...horrible, Mom."

"She chose to do it, Taylor," Mom reasoned.

"Because of me," he replied. "If I hadn't said what I did then she never would have had it done."

“Taylor, why are you telling me this?” she asked him softly. I heard the scraping of chair legs as she pulled out a chair and sat next to him.

“When I went for the consultation about chemo, one of the repercussions is...if I live through this, it damages the sex cells; I probably won’t be able to have kids.”

“Oh Taylor...”

“After I found that out, all I could think of was Shanna and that baby...I called her the other night; she said she forgives me; God only knows why, but she does.”

“Isn’t that good?”

“I guess. But I have nothing to offer her. I’m just going to die anyway-”

“Jordan,” she whispered. “Don’t.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered in return. “I deserve this,” he said quietly. “I deserve everything that’s happening to me after all the things I did to people who’ve done nothing but love me. God has every right to hate me.”

“God doesn’t hate, Taylor,” she said softly. I felt bad for intruding on this, but I had and I knew something now that I wasn’t sure how I felt about. I didn’t believe in abortion because of my moral and religious upbringing, but this girl that Taylor had gotten pregnant obviously did. Taylor could have been a daddy...and with the way he used to be with Zoë, and the way he is with her now – the way he is with all young children I guess – says that he would have been a good one too.

“Why not? After everything I did-”

“Stop it. You’ve made up for the things you’ve done; you’re changing your lifestyle.”

“It isn’t gonna save me, Mom. I’ve still got this horrific cancer, and...” he was quiet a moment “there’s no guarantee that treatment is going to do anything. I need a miracle to live through this Mom, and I don’t feel like I even deserve it, so how can I expect to get one?” He was in tears again, and I heard my mother say something comforting and heard them embrace, and decided I had done enough intruding for one day. I would keep it to myself, not even writing it in my journal; that was something I wasn’t supposed to have heard in the first place, and I wanted to make sure it never got out. It was none of my business, and yet I knew, and I felt bad for Taylor, and for his ex-girlfriend, Shanna, and for that baby that will never get to open its eyes to this world or take its first breath. And Taylor...I had hope, but it wasn’t enough; every time I heard him speak despairingly I was afraid that one day too soon he’d be taking his last breath.

Chapter 12

A week passed quickly; Taylor had gone back to see Dr. Peterson and managed to talk his way out of the intensive treatment until the next round. He said it was because he wanted to be able to see me in my prom dress, but I think it was because he was scared. He was put on a higher dosage though, and there was a nurse who had to come and stay with us to take care of him when he needed it, and maintain and manage his treatment; her name was Sarah. She was fairly tall, average size, and had really dark hair; you could tell she was Italian by more than her last name – which was Gianni. She was actually from Italy; she came here when she was ten, and even though she spent the majority of her life here she still had an accent; it wasn't thick, but it was present.

When they came home I, of course, followed them upstairs and watched her settle him in; he was sentenced to as much bed rest as possible. The chemo hadn't started getting to him yet, but it was bad the first time and with a higher dosage I was sure it would be worse when it did get to him this time. He still had the small portable unit – you know, now that I think about it, the first time I ever heard of that was when I saw the movie *Step Mom* for the first time, and was old enough to understand it. Although, Taylor didn't have breast cancer and his doctor didn't prescribe him marijuana for his upset stomach.

"What's in it?" I asked quietly.

"Hey Avie," Taylor said, smiling a little. "I didn't know you were home from school." I nodded at him and looked to Ms. Gianni.

"His medicine," she answered with a small polite smile.

"No, I know that; I meant what kinds of medicine?"

“Well, it’s a combination of therapeutic drugs; he’s on three: Neosar, Cytosar-U, and Paraplatin. All of those are used to try and wipe out the cancer cells in his system.”

“Why do they make people sick though?”

“It’s just a side effect,” she answered, still polite. “They’re given in such high doses that it’s almost toxic – that’s why we have a recovery period, and with leukaemia patients they usually need to have a bone marrow transplant done.”

“You promise you’ll take care of my brother?” I looked at Taylor and he smiled a little at me.

“Cross my heart,” she replied smiling at me, making an ‘x’ across her chest.

“Good,” I replied, getting ready to head out of his room and let him rest. “Take it easy, okay?” I said softly to him.

“Yes Mommy,” he said quietly, giving me a small smile. I smiled back at him and left the room, giving him some peace and quiet.

He was on the chemo treatment for about three days before it started to really get to him. He started looking run down – dead tired – and his hair was falling out more rapidly and in larger clumps – he started wearing a baseball cap to cover it up. On the fourth day, well really it was the fifth day of his treatment, it was just incredibly early in the morning, I witnessed something that was quite heartbreaking. I knew Taylor had been getting sick since the day before, as in vomiting almost violently. I got up to go to the bathroom at about quarter to three in the morning, but when I got to the bathroom it was already occupied. I had opened the door some already and just peered inside. Taylor was curled up on the floor, his head in our mother’s lap, crying. She was gently stroking his head, covered by a blue bandanna this time.

“I hate this, Mommy,” he said faintly; his eyes were closed, but it didn’t stop the tears from trickling from the corners.

“Shh, baby; I know,” she whispered soothingly, keeping him semi-calm. I assumed Sarah – or Miss Gianni was in her room, asleep.

“I feel like just dying,” he whispered.

“It’s just the treatment, baby; it’ll go away.”

“It hurts all over, Mommy...” Hearing Taylor talk like a child was something I couldn’t really explain; I guess it hurt, seeing him come apart so much that he was talking like Mac or Zoë would. If it had been me in his place, I don’t know what I would have done; I don’t think I would have been able to handle it all, and I think I might have given up. But Taylor wouldn’t do that; Taylor was a fighter; Taylor could beat this; Taylor could win. I told myself those things over and over, making sure I believed them more each time I said them.

* * *

“Excited?” JR asked, sitting beside me in the booth at Denny’s. I pushed my brownie sundae around, making it into mush.

“Yeah,” I said, not sounding convincing.

“Gee, don’t sound too happy or anything.”

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly. “I am, I’m excited, it’s just...I’ve been thinking a lot about my brother; with him being so sick and all...” I shrugged a little hoping he didn’t need any more explanation than that.

“You can’t let it control your life,” he said, and for a moment I wondered how he could be so insensitive, but I bit my tongue. He just didn’t understand, and I really didn’t think there was a point in trying to make him; he didn’t have an older brother, so how could I expect him to know how I felt, right?

“Just...forget it,” I said quietly. “I’ll be in a better mood the night of the dance. Um, right now, I’m just not in the mood for this; would you mind bringing me home early?”

He seemed almost annoyed, but I dismissed it as me taking it the wrong way. “Fine,” he sighed. “I hope this isn’t how you’re going to be when we go to prom.”

“I won’t,” I said, “I promise; I just have a lot on my mind tonight.”

“Okay,” he said, sighing again. “Come on, let’s take you home.” He slid out and offered me his hand and I slid out as well. I just wasn’t in the mood to be on a date; I had too much on my mind. I thought for a moment though, putting thoughts of Taylor to the side, how exactly did I feel for JR. I mean I know I liked him *a lot*. I almost wondered if I was in love with him...

When I got home everyone was still up. Jessica was doing some homework on the coffee table; Mackenzie was reading, and Zoë was playing with her Barbies in the middle of the floor. I could hear Zac and Rachel in the den arguing over who was better at pinball, and here I was straggling in my thoughts of my brother. Why couldn’t I turn it on and off like they seemed to? I was a lot like Taylor was at my age, and I wasn’t very good at hiding my emotions, and they were starting to actually get to me physically. I’m not sure what emotion it was in particular, but the oh so clichéd ‘worried sick’ phrase seemed applicable; I was actually getting physically ill with all of the things going on inside my head, my heart, and I think mostly my soul. I mean, how

does a person deal with the fact someone they care about is *suffering* from a horrible disease?

“Hi there, Avery.” Sarah’s voice surprised me when I walked into the kitchen; Mom was in there, and I wasn’t too sure where my father was.

“Oh, hi,” I said, lacking some vocabulary for the moment because of being caught off guard. “I’m sorry Miss Gianni, I’m a little spaced.” I gave a quick smile and a nervous laugh.

“Call me Sarah,” she said, smiling at me.

“You’re home early,” Mom said, bending to put a pot in one of the lower cupboards.

“I wasn’t in the mood for a date tonight,” I said honestly, sitting down in the chair beside Sarah. They both laughed quietly.

“I hope you didn’t tell your date that,” Mom said, still chuckling a little.

“Yeah I did,” I replied.

She shook her head slightly, smiling a little at me. “You always were one to give someone the straight truth.”

“Is Taylor awake?” I asked, looking between them.

“Oh, no honey; he went to sleep awhile ago,” Sarah answered. “He wasn’t feeling well.”

“He might be up a little later,” Mom added softly.

“To be sick,” I supplied, sighing deeply. “Sarah, isn’t there anything you can do so he won’t get sick so much?”

“His doctor prescribed him something for nausea,” she said. “It only can do so much...”

“I’m gonna go up and see if he’s awake yet; don’t worry, I won’t wake him up if he’s still asleep.”

His door was closed, as usual. I didn’t knock, in case he was asleep, and just opened the door quietly. I peered inside, and tangled in his sheets, almost as white as they were, he lay sleeping; his closed eyelids were darker than the rest of his skin, like the semi-circles beneath his eyes, and his lips were pale. In just a matter of weeks he’d come to look so deathly ill...he breathed in and out so softly it was almost inaudible, and for the first time in a while I saw him without a hat or bandanna, and I found myself staring; he was almost completely bald. He moved a little, his too-thin limbs tangling more in his bedding. He coughed dryly, and winced in his sleep. I carefully backed out of the doorway, closing the door softly, making extra sure not to make any unnecessary noise. I knew I needed to let him sleep; I could visit with him later.

Taylor didn’t leave his room for a few days, unless it was to use the bathroom, and he was always accompanied by Sarah, and it made me wonder if there was maybe more to their relationship than they were letting on, but that was none of my business; for once I didn’t want it to be my business; for all I knew she could have been his new best friend, and either way it wouldn’t have mattered. I liked her no matter what; she was helping my brother therefore she was worth my liking. She asked me to come up with her to get Taylor, to bring him downstairs and sit out on the back deck. She was saying how she wanted him to get out of the house for a while, even if it was just sitting out on the back deck watching the kids play. And by kids I mean, Mackenzie, Zoë and Chris. In case you’re wondering who Chris is, I’ll explain. Isaac, over the

period of time Taylor's been home and all this drama had been going on, had met this great girl that we were just meeting for the first time. Her name was May, and it suited her well. She had natural blonde, shiny hair, and bright hazel eyes. Chris was her two-year-old son. She had been in a bad marriage for three years, and Chris was the product, and a beautiful one – he looked just like May. She was the same age as Isaac, in fact their birthdays were only four days apart, and she had gotten officially divorced earlier that year. It would be good for Taylor to see that life was still going on, maybe even give him a little extra hope, a little extra strength.

We climbed the stairs together, talking quietly to each other about my brother. She liked him, she said so, but their relationship was caretaker/patient at that moment, and if it never turned out to be more than friendship she'd be happy with that. She told me that she had spent a few nights comforting him while he was sick, or while he couldn't sleep, or while he cried over the unfairness of this. She was there for him, and that made her earn my respect even more.

When we reached his room she knocked gently a few times, and opened the door. Taylor's bed was right by the window on the far right hand side of the room, and you could clearly see outside from his bed. He was laying there, eyes open, looking sicker than he had the day before, and the day before that; I briefly wondered if he could look any sicker...

"Hi Taylor," Sarah said softly. He turned his dulled eyes to us; the blue bandanna on his head was a sharp contrast to the paleness of his skin. He was rarely seen without it now, or a baseball cap, since his hair was gone for the most part; there was a little left, but nothing even worth considering.

"Hi," he said quietly. "How come you two aren't outside with everyone else?" He looked longingly outside.

“Because the whole family is outside; last time I checked you were still family.” I smiled a little at him, and he gave a weak one in return.

“Sorry, Avie, but I really don’t have any energy to horse around out there.”

“So don’t. Just come and sit outside; it might do you some good to get out,” Sarah said softly.

“I don’t know...” He looked outside. “Hey, who’s that? And who’s the little one?”

“That’s the woman Ike’s seeing, May, and her son Chris,” I answered. “You can meet them.”

“I...I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t really wanna go out looking like this.” It wasn’t hard to pick up on the sadness in his voice.

“Tay, she isn’t gonna care,” I said reasonably.

“I don’t wanna scare her little one,” he said, looking down longingly at the child with tears in his eyes. I knew he was thinking about that girl, Shanna, and what he had told Mom.

“You don’t look that bad, Taylor,” Sarah said softly. “I promise.” She looked at me, and I knew that it was only the half truth, because I had eyes of my own and saw the same thing she did.

“You shouldn’t make promises that aren’t true,” he said quietly.

“Come on, Taylor,” she said softly, going over to his bed. “I want you to get some fresh air, and some sun; it won’t hurt you.” He turned his head toward us, looking right at me with sad blue eyes.

“Just for a little while,” I said quietly. Sarah reached out, taking his skinny arms, and carefully helped him out of bed; I was a little surprised at how much he leaned on her for support.

“I don’t know if this is such a good idea,” he said quietly, slipping his bare feet into a pair of sandals. I handed him his sunglasses.

“You need to get out of this room,” Sarah said. “Maybe later we’ll go out for a drive, just for a change of scenery if nothing else.”

“Can I come?” I asked without hesitation.

“Yes,” Taylor answered for her.

“There,” she said. “Now, let’s go sit outside for a while.”

It took us a few minutes to get Taylor down the stairs; I guess it wasn’t until that moment I realised just how weak he’d been lately. This round of chemo had really been kicking his ass, and it wasn’t hard to see he was getting discouraged. Just as we neared the back patio doors, Taylor carefully broke away from Sarah’s supportive hold on him, and made his way slowly outside on his own. The dark blue bandanna and dark sunglasses looked even darker when the sun hit his skin; he looked almost pure white. Mom and Dad watched him carefully as he gingerly sat down in the wooden deck chair. It looked like he was in pain...when he turned his head toward Mom she smiled a little to cover up the fact she had been staring at him.

“Hi baby,” she said softly.

“Hi Mom.”

“How’re you feeling, son?” Dad asked him quietly.

He gave a small but sarcastic laugh. “Not the best in the world right now, but I’m alive.”

“Hang in there,” Dad said reassuringly.

“I’m hanging,” Taylor said, giving him a small smile.

“Hey bro,” Zac said quietly. “It’s good to see you come out of your room.” He cracked a smile at our sick brother, and it was impossible to resist a Zac-smile, and Taylor had to return a small genuine one himself.

“It’s nice to see something besides four walls and bed sheets.” He took notice of Ike standing off to the side with May. “Hey Ike.”

“Hi Tay,” he said. “Um, I want you to meet someone.” He guided May by the small of her back over to Taylor. “This is May; May, this is my brother, Taylor.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” she said, smiling sweetly.

“Ah,” he grinned a little. “I don’t know if I like that...”

“It’s nice to finally meet you,” she said, laughing a little. I had to give her credit; she did a good job not staring. My brother was quite a sight, and I don’t think I caught her staring once.

“Same here,” he said, smiling a little. He looked off into the yard, watching Mac, Zoë, and Chris playing. Zoë was paying particular attention to rolling around in the grass with the two-year-old, and it was amusing to the rest of us.

“How old is he?” Taylor asked quietly of May.

“Two,” she answered with a small smile, Isaac’s arm around her back.

“He’s beautiful,” he said quietly. She looked at my brother then, almost in awe.

“Thank you,” she said quietly as well, looking down at him. I knew his mind was working overtime again about what he could have had, too, but didn’t.

“Baby, are you hungry?” Mom asked him. “We have some salad and stuff inside.”

“No thanks,” he replied. “I’m not hungry.”

“Are you sure you don’t want something?” Sarah asked.

“I don’t think my stomach can handle anything right now,” he said, averting his gaze back to the yard as he said so. He had a point; he was sick much too often, and I could only imagine how much worse it must be for him when he has food in his stomach, and then again...in the same breath it bothered me that he didn’t want anything. He hadn’t eaten much of anything in a while, and he was getting much too skinny; it was a side effect of the chemo, but it was in its extreme with Taylor lately. I don’t think I had seen him eat anything for three days, but it wasn’t like he was purposely starving himself or anything like that. But still, the whole side effect thing wasn’t good for him; he was almost looking bony from eating so little because of the chemotherapy. But I assumed it would get better; the doctor wouldn’t let him starve because the chemo made him sick; I was sure Sarah would make him eat something that wouldn’t upset his stomach too much. It was good enough to just see him outside for a reason other than making a trip to the doctor. And watching him watch the other kids, specifically little Christopher, I knew he would have been an amazing daddy; he must have been thinking that too by the expression on his face.

Chapter 13

It was finally prom night. I was decked out in my black and white dress, my hair done up, my make up done, all my four pieces of jewellery, and my purse. Jessie looked amazing too; I never realised how beautiful my sister really was. I mean, I see her everyday, I see her when she first wakes up in the morning before she brushes her hair or teeth or puts on her make up, and she had always naturally just looked pretty. Well, that night she looked absolutely gorgeous. I got a lot of the same compliments. I could see that Taylor was still apprehensive about me going with JR, but he bit his tongue, and he knew I was thankful for that without me having to say a word.

We could have rented a limo, my family offered to pay for it, but JR wanted to drive us. We aren't the only family in Tulsa with money, and he proved that when he picked me up in his black Jag. He came inside, gave me my corsage, took pictures, all the stuff prom dates are supposed to do. The grand march was at 5:30 and the prom didn't start until 7:00. My family was coming to the grand march, and JR's mom was coming, too.

I don't really want to drag out all the details of prom since it lasted until 12:00 a.m., and then JR wanted to go to two or three parties. Thankfully, he only had a beer at the first party, and one at the second, and then didn't touch any more because he knew he had to drive us home. That's where things got a little...unpleasant. I know I'm skipping a lot of actual prom detail, and party details, but what's important is what happened afterward. JR drove me home, and we sat in my driveway for sometime, looking at the stars through his moon roof. At first I didn't mind him putting the seats back, and getting closer to me. It was nice, warm. We stayed that way for some time, and it was about 2:30 in the morning when I said I should probably get inside.

"Just a little longer," he mumbled into my neck, kissing.

“Um, JR...” I said, pulling back a little. “I should really get back in now-”

“Shh.” He put his finger over my lips to silence me, and I was quiet for a few minutes. He pulled his face from the crook of my neck, kissing my lips instead. His kiss sent a warm tingling feeling up and down my spine, but when he got a little more forceful, I started to get this feeling in the pit of my stomach...

“Stop,” I whispered, pulling myself away from him, or at least trying to.

“Relax,” he mumbled, reaching behind me, trying to pull on the zipper of my dress.

“Don’t,” I said, almost as forcefully as he had started kissing me. “Leave the zipper alone.”

“Don’t be a baby,” he mumbled, pulling my hands away from his chest where I had planted them, and started pushing him away. He pushed my hands up, over my head, climbing on top of me in the passenger seat.

“JR, come on...” I tried to lift my arms, and was a little alarmed when I realised he pinned them above my head, and obviously didn’t plan on letting me go.

“You’re so pretty...” He started kissing down the side of my neck, getting much too close to my chest, and forcing his knee between mine.

“JR, this isn’t cool,” I said. “Stop it.”

“Shh.” He kissed me hard on the mouth, and when his free hand started to wander I started to panic.

“Stop it,” I said forcefully, trying to push him off.

“Come on, Avery,” he said, pulling the hem of my dress up. “Just relax; it’ll be quick...you’ll like it...”

“Get off of me!” I started to get frantic, and he started to get pushier. “Stop it! Get off!”

The next thing I knew the door was yanked open, and JR was being dragged out; that’s when I realised I was in hysterical tears, and scared shitless. When I finally opened my eyes, I was so shocked I didn’t know what to do. Somehow, Taylor had found enough strength to drag JR from the car and throw him up against it.

“What the-”

“Shut up,” Taylor said through gritted teeth. “You listen and you listen good you son of a bitch.” He was too weak to be doing this and I knew it, so I don’t know how he did it at all. “If you ever, ever touch my sister again, I will kill you. Do you understand me?”

JR was silent for a moment, obviously taken off guard. “Do you understand you little piece of shit?”

“Yeah,” he managed to get out. Taylor swung him around, and threw him on the ground. He turned to me, his demeanour changing completely. “Are you okay?” he asked me softly.

“Yeah,” I answered quietly, wiping my tears. “Just take me inside, okay?”

“Yeah,” he said softly. “Come on.” He gently took my hands and helped me out of the car, and as soon as I was standing I was suddenly his support. His knees almost gave out from under him and for a moment I thought he was going to pass out on me.

“Tay? Are you okay?”

“Y-yeah,” he said quietly, putting his arm around my shoulders both to comfort me and lean on me; I slipped my arm around his tiny waist, and snuggled close to him as we walked. There just wasn’t the kind of safety anywhere in the world that a girl can find in her brother other than right there in him. No one else could ever make me feel safer than he just had. “Let’s just get upstairs.”

“Okay.”

We carefully made our way upstairs, as quietly as a few squeaky floor boards would allow. He led me to my room and stopped outside the door. “You change,” he whispered, “my door is open when you’re done. Come in and we’ll talk.”

“I don’t wanna talk, Tay,” I said quietly, feeling tears sting my eyes. “You were right about JR. I’m sorry I didn’t believe you.”

“Avie-”

“We can talk about it tomorrow; after I change can I just come in and sleep in your room?” I was crying again and he reached out and gently wiped a tear from my cheek.

“Sure. I’ll be waiting,” he said softly, kissed my head, and made his way down the hall. Everything he had ever done wrong, anything at all, I had just very nearly completely forgiven; his saving me was more than atonement enough for his wrongdoings. If it hadn’t been for him, I don’t even want to think of what JR would have done to me; he had definitely atoned for his sins or mistakes or whatever you wanted to call them.

His door was open like he said it would be, and I knocked quietly on the doorframe before going inside. I was wearing an oversized T-shirt and a pair of shorts, my hair still done up and my makeup still on; I was sure I had black streaks down my face from my mascara. I made my way across the room and sat down on his bed; he reached out and tucked a stray hair behind my ear.

“How’re you holding up?” he asked me quietly; he knew that I’d had my feelings hurt really beyond repair, and I’d just have to wait for the hurt to go away on its own.

“I feel really stupid,” I cried quietly.

“Oh, Avie, you shouldn’t feel that way,” he said softly. “You didn’t do anything wrong; that guy was a jerk.”

“You tried to tell me, and I didn’t believe you.” I spoke quietly, admitting my wrong.

“I wish you would have; you wouldn’t have had to go through this tonight.” I sniffed, and he scooted closer to me, pulling me into his arms.

“How could I have been so blind, Tay?” I cried into his shoulder.

“Everyone makes mistakes, Ave; he was a good liar. That’s not your fault.”

“I feel so humiliated...”

“Avery,” he gently held me out at arms length. “He didn’t...he didn’t...hurt you, did he?”

I knew what he meant, and it meant a lot to me that he was that concerned. I shook my head. “No,” I whispered. “You saved me.”

“I did what any brother would do; I would have killed him if he...”

“He didn’t,” I said softly. “Thank you.”

Looking at Taylor, and thinking about how weak he had been recently...how did he do what he had just done for me? “Taylor...how did you...?”

“I don’t know,” he said quietly. “I really don’t, Avery. This week I’ve been feeling like I was about to die, but when I saw what he was doing – trying to do to you, I just...snapped. You’re my little sister, and there was some guy trying to hurt you...” He shrugged a little. “I couldn’t let him hurt you.”

“Are you okay? Now, I mean?”

“I don’t know,” he answered. “I feel...really drained. I think I went a little overboard.”

“You should get some sleep,” I said softly. “No offence, Tay, but you’re not looking too good right now...”

“I don’t feel too good.”

“I’ll go; sleep sweet.”

“Avie?”

“Yeah?” I looked at him, waiting for whatever it was he was going to say.

“You know I love you, right?”

“I know,” I said softly. “I love you, too, Tay.” I shifted one foot to the other and looked at the doorway, and back at him. “If...do you think I could...? Can I stay with you tonight?” I asked quietly.

“If you want,” he answered, lifting the comforter. I couldn’t explain why I wanted to stay with my brother; I guess I just needed to feel safe, and the only place that felt safe at that time was with Taylor. I slid under his comforter, staring up at the ceiling, as he lay on his right side, facing the wall. “Night Avie.”

“Night, Tay,” I whispered back.

I was up before Taylor the next morning, and thought I should just let him sleep, so I went back to my own room. I climbed into my bed and laid there for a while, realising it was still relatively early. It was about seven, and I could hear Zac rustling around in his room, getting ready to shower and take off for his first class, which was at 8:15. I could hear him talking to Rachel, telling her it was time to get up, and he was sorry to wake her. I decided that I really needed to stop listening in on people’s conversations; one of these days I was going to end up hearing something that I really didn’t want to hear. I knew Mom was already up because I could smell coffee, and I could smell toast, and I knew Dad was up because of the same reasons – he and Mom usually got up together. On a lighter note, it was the alone time together that they liked, and if they got it early in the morning, then so be it. I smiled a little thinking about how in love my parents still were with one another, and it almost made me sad to think that I had ever thought of JR like that. I snuggled into my covers, pulling them tight around me – the air conditioning was too high in my room, and I finally fell back to sleep.

My stomach was what woke me up the second time; it was growling loudly, and demanding that I put food in it that instant. I had every intention of doing that, but stopped about halfway; I was standing outside Taylor’s door and I

could hear something... what, I wasn't too sure, but it almost sounded like quiet gasping...I know I shouldn't have, but I did; I opened his door a hair more than it already was, and Taylor was sitting in front of the mirror – he was crying. I could understand why he would be crying; his life was a mess, a constant struggle, his physical appearance had changed drastically and none for the better; what I didn't understand was how it felt to him. I had no idea he'd felt so badly, and I wished he had told someone; he didn't have to go through so much alone, and yet... he always tried to keep it that way. I don't know if he was doing it out of fear of disappointing someone, or if he did it because he didn't want to burden anyone. Either way, he would have been wrong; we loved him, and we would have done anything in the world to make it just a little easier on him.

"I said I was sorry," he whispered, crying still. "What more do you want from me?" He looked Heavenward and I suddenly realised who he was talking to. "Why are you doing this to me? I'm sorry I made so many mistakes...but this isn't fair..." he cried, talking to Him and unaware that I was listening. "Please don't do this to me..." he sobbed quietly, and I closed the door the bare amount I had opened it; it was definitely out of line listening to that. It was not my place to be listening to my brother's conversation with God – that was between them. But I couldn't help but think of his words, and they echoed inside my head, playing themselves over and over in my brain. "*What more do you want from me?*" I wanted to ask Him the same question; what more did he want from Taylor? If He kept taking the way he was Taylor would never make it...

The day was quiet; I talked to Mom about what happened with JR and what Taylor did for me, and that was all the discussion there was about it. The day was pretty uneventful except for a phone call that Taylor got in the late afternoon. Of course I was the one who answered the phone, so I knew who it was.

“Tay?” I said, touching his shoulder. He had been sitting on the couch with Zoë, watching *The Little Mermaid* for the ninety-millionth time. He looked up at me and I held the phone out to him.

“Who is it?” he asked quietly, obviously not expecting a phone call from anyone.

“It’s Shanna.” I watched his expression change from inquiring to shocked, and then something I couldn’t read.

“I’ll...I’ll take it up in my room,” he said quietly, getting up. “Tell her to hold on.”

I did as asked, but when I heard the line click when he picked up the phone, I didn’t hang up. I pressed the ‘mute’ button on the receiver and listened to what she was saying.

“Tay...I miss you,” she said softly.

“I...Shanna, I miss you, too, but...”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” It was obvious she was crying now, albeit quietly, and controlled.

“Tell you what?” he asked in return, and I imagined he cradled the phone between his ear and shoulder.

“That you were so sick...”

“How...” He was shocked. “How did you find out?”

“It was in the newspaper, Taylor. There’s a picture of you coming from the hospital in Tulsa, and an article.” People couldn’t ever give this family a break; what right did anyone have to intrude so far into his life like that?

“Shanna, I...I didn’t want anyone to know; none of my friends even know...”

“They probably do now; it was in the *New York Times*, the right hand column on the front page.”

“Oh no,” he said quietly. “Shanna, I’m so sorry you had to find out this way.” Now it sounded like he was going to cry.

“How bad is it Taylor?” she asked quietly. “Are you coming back to New York?”

“No,” he said softly. “I’m not coming back to New York.” Somehow I gathered there was more to that than he actually said plainly. “And it’s really bad.”

“Oh my God,” she said softly. “Are you doing okay?”

“Not really,” he said quietly, and I imagined he was staring a hole into his carpet. “I’m sure it was in the article that I’m getting chemo.”

“Yeah,” she said quietly, “it was. I wanna see you, Tay.”

“I can’t travel, even if I wanted to come see you I couldn’t.”

“I care about you,” she said softly. “I care about you a lot, and I care about what happens to you, Taylor.” I had eavesdropped enough, and hoped he didn’t realise that I had been listening when I finally quietly hung up the phone.

Chapter 14

Taylor was on the last day of his second round of chemotherapy, but something, to this day I don't really know what, went wrong. We were all in the family room, it was a Sunday after church, and we had just come home about twenty minutes earlier. Taylor had come with us, and he had gone upstairs to change at least fifteen minutes ago, but no one had thought anything was wrong. When he came back downstairs, he was changed, but he had gone milk-white, and he was sweating and shivering.

"Oh my God," Mom said quietly. "Taylor, what's wrong?"

"I...don't know," he said quietly and swallowed hard. He looked to Sarah. "Turn it off; make it stop."

"What do you mean? Turn what off, Taylor?" she asked, standing up, and going over to him. His knees almost buckled and he reached out for her, using her for support. "Taylor, are you all right?"

"No...I don't know..." he whispered, closing his eyes momentarily. "Take this out," he said quietly, placing his hand over the catheter in his left arm.

"Taylor, I can't until tomorrow morning; just wait until tomorrow morning, and you'll be done with your treatment until the next round."

"Take it out, Sarah," he whispered. "It's making me sick..."

"What's wrong with him?" I asked the question we all wanted to know.

"I don't know," she answered honestly.

“Turn it off...” His right hand was right at the tubing in his left arm. “Take it out.”

“Taylor, come on, let’s sit down-” His knees gave out, and Dad rushed forward to help Sarah support his weight. “Easy, easy...” she said quietly. Without warning he just pulled; the catheter and tubing ripped from his arm, and blood suddenly began to flow down his arm.

“Oh my God,” Mom said quickly, standing up.

“Oh jeez, Taylor...” No one had rubber gloves, and Sarah broke a lot of rules, but she grabbed his bleeding arm with a free hand and clamped down hard on it.

“I couldn’t do it anymore,” he whispered; I think he was ready to pass out. “I felt too sick; something wasn’t right...”

“Taylor, you’re really bleeding; please, sit down,” Sarah said, and before they could actually sit him down, he went limp in their arms. I watched him collapse right in front of me, and it was horrible.

“Taylor!” There was a chorus of shouts of his name, everyone crowding him at once, and Sarah telling them all to step back and give him some room; she sent Jess to call an ambulance.

You’d swear I was his mother and not his sister, other than the fact I was way too young to be his mother. We followed in the van behind the ambulance, Sarah riding with Taylor. There were so many things running through my head on the way there, and when we got there they wouldn’t even let us see him and that only made matters worse. We were all worried as it was, but for them to not let us see him...something had to be really wrong, right? It was a good hour or more before we were allowed to see him, and that was only after

hospital security had to force reporters and their stupid cameras out the doors. When we saw Dr. Peterson we assaulted her with questions, resulting in her giving a piercing whistle. We all stopped talking.

“One at a time, please,” she said softly. “Mr. and Mrs. Hanson, you first.”

“God is he okay?” Mom asked immediately.

“He’s stable for now,” she easily danced around the question.

“What happened?” Dad asked. “He was...okay...for the whole week, and then this.”

“In short, the chemo did a lot of damage to his healthy cells as well,” she answered. It didn’t look like she was going to tell us all anything more. “If you want details,” she said quietly, “we’ll talk later when you don’t have young family members with you.” They both nodded.

“When can he come home?” Zoë was the first to ask that question, and it was a good one that I had planned on asking myself.

“Not for a while.” That answer wasn’t what we wanted to hear. If she was making him stay something had to be more wrong than she was letting on.

“Why?” Zac asked, sitting in a chair beside Jessica.

“Taylor is incredibly sick,” she said. “I don’t think you all realise what a sick young man he is. With all the chemo, and the intensity of his last treatment compared to the first, putting it simply it’s depleting his immune system. In order for Taylor to start getting better now, we need to fix the problem.”

“What’s the solution?” I asked.

“Well, it’s important that Taylor’s immune system be built back up, and in order to do that he needs healthy cells. Unfortunately, he’s losing many of those.”

“In his whole body?” Jessica asked, creasing her brow.

“No, no, just his blood. Leukaemia is a cancer of the blood, and agents of the blood. The chemo helps eradicate the cancer, but it also has consequences which are damages to healthy blood cells and agents.”

“So, Dr. Peterson,” Isaac said, “how do you help him?”

“He needs a bone marrow transplant. And I hate to make you all worry more than you are, but he needs it soon. We have to allow him to recuperate from the last treatment, but he won’t really get better until the transplant has been done. What we need right now is to find a donor.”

“Who can be a donor?” I asked.

“Any number of you could be,” she said, indicating us – his siblings. “We run special blood tests, and take a sample of your bone marrow to see if it matches Taylor’s as close as possible.”

“Can you test me?” Zoë offered. “I wanna help Tay.”

“If your mommy and daddy say it’s okay, we can test you too,” she answered, smiling a little at my eight-year-old sister.

“How many of us can be tested?” Dad asked.

“The whole lot of you,” she answered. “The chances of parents being donors aren’t usually too high, but the chances of siblings being donors are usually much higher.”

“How soon can this be done?” Mom asked.

“Well, the transplant has to wait. First, we have to do something called conditioning, or preparative regimen. Taylor wasn’t happy about it, and protested, but the ultimate decision was made that this was for his own good in the future.” She took a breath and gestured to the seats, taking one herself. “Taylor needs to recover from this round of chemo before we can move on to anything else. Once he’s recovered enough, before the transplant, he has to undergo a rigorous chemotherapy treatment. I’ll warn you now; he’s going to be too sick to even have visitors ninety percent of the time.

“There’ll be a catheter, like the one that was in his arm, inserted into a large vein in his chest, just above his heart; that way drugs can be administered and the many, *many* blood samples needed can be taken without constantly having to stick needles in his arms. Now, concerning the chemo; it’s much stronger than dosages of patients who aren’t going to undergo a bone marrow transplant. You have to understand that he’s going to be very weak, and irritable, and nauseous, and he may not *want* visitors. Don’t be upset with him for that.”

“We would never be upset with him for that,” Mom said, almost sounding offended.

“When do you start the chemo again?” Dad asked quietly.

“As soon as Taylor has built up enough healthy cells on his own to continue,” she answered. “So it shouldn’t be started until sometime next week, but I *am* keeping him here. I’ve already had him signed in as an inpatient this time. I

think it's better he stay so we can monitor him; he's going to need constant care once the intensive treatment starts, and even more after the transplant." She looked down at the floor and then back at us. "He's going to need tremendous support from all of you," she added softly. "I'm just his doctor, so I don't expect him to just open up to me, but it's my impression he's trying to deal with this all on his own, but you can't let him do that. He needs all of you right now, even if he can't admit it. You'll need to be there for him."

"We will," Isaac said softly.

"Dr. Peterson, can we see our son, please?" Mom asked quietly. I wanted to see him too! I wanted to see him so badly it hurt.

"Just the two of you for now, all right? And you'll need gloves and gowns; the last thing he needs now is an infection to hinder his treatment."

"All right," Dad said quietly.

"Go on to the nurses' station and they'll set you up with what you need." They thanked her after that and she went on her way, to whatever other patient she had to help save. I just hoped that with everything she was putting my brother through 'for his own good' was actually going to do something in the long run. I hadn't forgotten what Taylor told us his prognosis was, with treatment, and the thought was terrifying that he would go through all of this for nothing. That couldn't happen to him. He had to be okay. This treatment had to work. And one by one, we started the testing for his bone marrow donor.

Mom and Dad weren't a match. It was disappointing, but not unexpected. We each had the blood test done, and one by one we started getting the results back. Over a period of three days we had found out that Zoë wasn't a match, Mackenzie wasn't a match, and Isaac wasn't a match. That left me, Zac and Jessica. I know this is the part where you all expect me to say that I was a

match, that I would be Taylor's donor. It would have been very poetically just, but that wasn't the case. I wasn't a match; I couldn't be a donor. Even though we were told that if one of us was a donor, we'd be put under for the procedure – I think she told us it was called a bone marrow harvest – it would hurt afterward, but nothing unbearable – she would give Tylenol for the pain – I was devastated that it wasn't me. It meant that I wasn't the one who could help possibly save Taylor's life.

A week was almost up and we were finally told that Zac was the closest match; it wasn't perfect, but it would do. The only way they could have had a perfect match was if Taylor had a twin, but he didn't, so Zac was the next best thing. I had been in to see Taylor a number of times that week, decked out in a gown and gloves so I didn't spread any germs on him – she almost made us wear face masks, but didn't. Taylor was nervous, and scared, he'd cried that out once while I was there; he had just been crying that day and that was one of the things that had come out. Shanna had called him almost everyday to see how he was doing. If you want the truth, I think they never stopped loving each other – he just made a big mistake and she was having a hard time getting past it. Once over that week, before the intensive treatment, there were two reporters that somehow managed to get into Taylor's room, and he had to call for security to get them out. He didn't want tabloids to get this all over; if he was going to be interviewed it was going to be done the right way, with a credible reporter, not some muck-raking airhead.

There was one day I went in to see him, and for a change he was actually sitting up in bed. He wasn't himself lately, and I wasn't sure what was going on inside his head. I knew he was scared, but he was sort of pushing everyone away, almost like he was keeping them – us – at arm's length. I made my way over to his bed and sat down on the side. The blue bandanna had somewhat become a part of him, a part of who Taylor Hanson was now; his hair was gone, all of it, and he never took that thing off. He was fitted for a wig a week before he ended up back at the hospital, and I only knew that because I had to

listen to the messages on the machine when we got home the night before. I never thought Taylor wouldn't have hair...as stupid as it seems, I got emotional over that. Their hair was very much a part of who my brothers were; granted, Zac and Isaac's were much shorter than it was in 1997, Taylor had had the same hair style since 2000. It was a part of him – his persona – and now it was all gone, and it was almost like we were grieving for it because it wasn't gone by choice. It made me realise what little things about people I take for granted.

"What's up, Tay?" I asked quietly.

"Nothing," he said softly. "Just thinking."

"Hmph. You? Think? Ha ha." He looked at me and I was pleased to see him smile a little.

"Hardee-har-har," he said sarcastically.

"What were you thinking about?" I asked quietly, looking up at him.

"A lot of things," he answered quietly.

"About Shanna?" I knew it was sensitive territory, but he didn't know that I knew what I did, so I figured it was safe to tip-toe.

"Maybe," he said quietly, finding a spot to stare at on his blanket.

"Are you in love with her, Taylor?" The question had been on my mind, not because I was nosy, but because I cared about my brother.

"Maybe," he answered again quietly.

“What’s it feel like to be in love?” I asked him, resting my chin on my hand, looking up at him.

“I don’t know, Avie.”

“You’ve never been in love before?”

“Yeah, I have, but that doesn’t mean I’ve been loved back.” It seemed like there was a story to this, and I wanted to know, but I wasn’t going to pry because it was obviously a sore subject.

“Oh...I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories.”

“Don’t worry about it; I had to face my demons sooner or later; I guess it was just sooner.”

“What...happened?” I asked cautiously.

“I fell head-over-heels for someone, right in this town, and she didn’t care about me in the least – only what I could buy her. She was running around with some guy from the city, and when I found out...I was a little bitter for a long time.”

“Is that why you were the way you were with girls?”

“Somehow I don’t think I should be having this conversation with you, but for what it’s worth, yeah that was part of it.”

“I almost thought I was in love with JR,” I said quietly. “But I was really wrong about him.”

“You’ll find someone better, who you deserve. Not a jerk-off like him.”

“What was your first time like?” The question was out, and I don’t think I would have had the guts to ask anyone but him that.

“Uh, Ave, I think this is ground you shouldn’t be covering with me...”

“I know about sex, Taylor; I don’t need the birds and the bees talk, I just want to know what it was like your first time,” I replied. “Because I thought about it with JR once...”

“It wasn’t what I expected,” he answered quietly. “I wasn’t ready for it, or mature enough to handle it; I thought I was in love with her, and I thought she loved me too, but I was very, very wrong. I was the one who got used, and it hurt a lot...”

“I almost did with JR,” I said softly. I felt ashamed somehow.

“Well I’m glad you didn’t. Your first time should be something special, Avery, with someone you love with all your heart and soul, who loves you back.”

“I’ll wait for him,” I said quietly.

“Good. I don’t want you to get hurt the way I did.”

“Taylor?”

“Hmm?”

“Let’s keep this between us, okay?”

He smiled a little; we really understood each other. “Okay,” he replied softly.

Chapter 15

This was it. Taylor was being hooked up to the catheter in his chest, the chemo all set and ready to go. Taylor on the other hand, was less than ready for that. He looked so scared I could have cried. I was only in the room for a few minutes before it all, only long enough to see him grab my mother's hand and squeeze, fear in his eyes, *"I don't wanna do this...I'm scared, Mommy..."* I wished so hard that there was something I could do for him. We were all asked to leave shortly after that so they could start everything up and make sure it was going to go well. He was going to be on the intensive chemo for five days straight, and according to Dr. Peterson it was going to 'cripple' his immune system considerably; no one could go in there without the proper hospital attire out of the risk he could get an infection – with no immune system people usually tend to get sick.

I had three days to think about what was happening to him before I was allowed to see him. Mom was afraid I wouldn't be able to handle it, but Dad reminded her that I'm mature for my age, and I could deal with it. Mom warned me of *how* sick and weak he had become, and just how sick he looked. She warned me that he had spent considerable amounts of time vomiting, sleeping restlessly, crying...he was weak more than just physically. I had to be dressed up in a gown, gloves, and a surgical mask – there could be no risk of sickness – none whatsoever. I was little scared, to be honest, of what I was going to see exactly, and when I walked into that room with my parents, I think I stopped breathing. I had never seen *anyone* look like that in my entire fifteen years. It brought tears to my eyes, and I felt like someone was trying to pull my heart out, and ripping at my very soul. Imagine what it must have been like for Taylor...

"Hi..." My voice was strained, almost too quiet to hear. He didn't answer me, just opened his pale blue eyes, looking at me pleadingly. I looked at Mom and Dad, finding sorrowful, apologetic looks upon their faces.

“Honey...” I don’t think Mom knew what to say to me; I wasn’t prepared for what I saw. I thought I was strong enough to handle anything they could, but I was wrong. Just looking at him, seeing him that way...his skin was pure white; his lips were pale and dry and cracked, his eyes dull and glassy with dark circles around them, his dark blue bandanna seeming almost black in contrast to his skin...I just started to cry. I really couldn’t handle seeing him that way...

“Avie...please don’t cry...” he whispered. I shook my head through my tears, unable to stop them.

“I’m sorry,” I cried softly. “You look so sick...”

“Oh Avie...” he whispered. “I told them not to bring you here...” He looked at our parents, his eyes pleading with them. “Take her home,” he whispered.

“Come on, sweetheart,” Dad said softly. “Let’s go.”

“I’m so sorry, Tay,” I whispered, shaking my head. “I wanted to see you so bad, but I can’t...I’m sorry...” It was obvious how much it took out of him just to speak, let alone move. He shook his head slightly, and motioned for me to come to him, but to be honest, I was scared to...I moved slowly to him, and he took my gloved hand, barely able to give me the assuring gentle squeeze he meant to.

“I’ll...be okay,” he whispered unconvincingly.

“I love you, Tay,” I whispered back.

“I know, honey.” He had tears in his eyes. “I love you too.” He let go of my hand and closed his eyes. “Take her home, please...”

“All right,” Dad said softly. “We’ll be back in the morning, okay?”

“Yeah.” His voice was nothing more than a hoarse whisper.

That night was something I would never forget. I dreamt about it. The image of Taylor’s face, looking the way he did, haunted me for so long...there was so much despair in his pale blue eyes that night it was practically dripping from them. His whole body oozed it. And as if things weren’t bad enough, the type of leukaemia that Taylor had – acute monocytic leukaemia – caused him to develop these red spots on his arms; they weren’t like boils or anything, but they still looked painful, almost like rug-burns minus the scabbing. It was too obvious how much he was suffering already, and I had this uneasy feeling...it’s strange; I’ve always been that way, and most of the time I’m right. Maybe I’m clairvoyant or something, but I’ve always known when something bad was going to happen. But he was getting the transplant from Zac, and that was going to help him, so why the bad feeling? I was completely baffled and made myself believe that I was just nervous for him; nothing else could go wrong for him – he’d been through enough and didn’t need to go through anything worse.

“You ready?” Isaac asked Zac, who was sitting on the mobile hospital bed in a patient’s gown.

“Oh yeah,” he replied. “I’m always ready to go under and have a huge needle stuck in my hips repeatedly.”

“Stop,” Rachel said lightly, playfully smacking his chest.

“Hey, wanna join me? You know I’m naked under this thing...” He grinned at her, and she slapped his shoulder.

“Gross, Zac,” I replied, hearing Isaac chuckle. “I definitely don’t wanna know when you’re nude; it’s a mental picture I *never* want in my head.”

Then I decided it was time to be cute. “Besides, have you thought about the fact Dr. Peterson isn’t doing your harvesting? It’s some male doctor that’s going to be staring at your naked ass for however long the procedure takes.” I grinned, snickering to myself.

“Aw man, Avie,” he said, grimacing. “That was just plain cruel to make me think about.” Rachel was laughing along with Ike, and Jessie standing off toward the corner of the bed.

“I hope he isn’t sweet on you,” Jess added with a chuckle.

“Aw gross,” he said grimacing. “My ass is an exit not an entry.”

“Zac!” the three of us chorused, laughing a little. Then I started to think about Taylor and how scared he was, how scared I was for him...

“Zac Hanson,” a man in green scrubs said, interrupting us.

“Yeah?”

“Are you ready young man?” he asked. “You’re about to help save your brother’s life.”

“When you put it like that it makes me want to get poked with huge needles.” We all smiled.

“You won’t feel it; you’ll be asleep, and it’ll be over before you know it. And we’ll be transplanting your bone marrow into your brother, and hopefully giving his life a better chance.” I still had such a bad feeling...

“What if something goes wrong?” I asked. “With Taylor, I mean.”

“Gee, don’t worry about me, Avie,” Zac said, “I’ll be a-ok.”

“Shut up, Zac; you know I care about you too.”

“We’re hoping nothing will go wrong. We can only hope for the best. Things seem to look well, though.” He turned to Zac again, two nurses coming in. “Let’s get you to the operating room, young Mr. Hanson.” He smiled, and the two nurses began to wheel Zac’s bed out.

“See you guys soon.” He smiled, and settled back, his arms folded behind his head as he was wheeled out.

“Don’t worry,” Ike said, “everything will be okay.”

* * *

We came back the next day for Zac to be discharged, also after Taylor’s transplant had been completed. According to Dr. Peterson it – the bone marrow – was given to him much like fluids were given through an I.V., directly into his bloodstream. Now the waiting began, and we had to sit and wait to see how well the engraftment took place – that means the new bone marrow ‘migrates’ to his bone cavities and starts to produce healthy cells. He had a bunch of tests done before the transplant – tests on his heart, lungs, kidneys, and a whole bunch of other ‘vital organs’ according to the doc. The tests were done before so they could be compared to tests done after the transplant to make sure that everything was going over okay. I could only hope and pray, like the rest of us. We were warned that the transplant was a debilitating experience; it was like symptoms of a severe case of the flu – nausea, vomiting, fever, diarrhoea, extreme weakness – only it lasted several *weeks* instead of several *days*. Dr. Peterson explained all of these things to us, and made it very clear that like when he was receiving the chemo we would all be decked out in hospital gear if we wanted to see him. She told us the risk of

graft-versus-host disease, which would be if his body started to 'disagree' with Zac's bone marrow; the worst case scenario would have been graft rejection, which would be his body directly rejecting Zac's bone marrow – I didn't know the details of either, only what the doc had told us briefly about each. All in all, Taylor was going to very sick and weak; it would take more energy than he really had to just sit up in bed for a long time, to watch TV, or talk on the phone, to read even, or have visitors. He spent a lot of time trying to sleep off his symptoms, though unfortunately, it never seemed to really work.

We went to see Zac first, seeing as he was being released. He was sitting up in bed, and of course we had brought Rachel with us. She went over to him, sat down beside him and kissed him. Mom smiled at him, Dad's arm around her shoulders. Jessica was at school – she was getting out at noon to come visit both of our brothers; Ike was with May and Chris, and would be joining us later, and Mackenzie and Zoë were with a sitter.

"Hey Zac-man," I said, smiling a little at him.

"I'm so proud of you," Mom said. "We all are. What you did for Taylor..."

"Hey, if it's going to help save his life..." he said seriously. "Besides," he said, returning to his usual goofy self, "I don't mind a little ass pain."

"Zac," Mom said, grinning a little and shaking her head.

"Rach, kiss me and make me feel better?"

"Sure, baby," she said with a small smile, leaning over, but he started to turn over. "What are you doing?" she asked, which all of us were thinking.

"You said you would kiss me and make me feel better – so kiss my ass and make me happy." He grinned over his shoulder at her.

“You jackass,” she laughed. “No.”

“Damn,” he pretended to be disappointed. “Almost had you.”

“Or not,” she replied, taking his hand.

“Hey, has anyone gone to see Taylor yet?” he asked. Mom and Dad nodded.
“How is he?”

“Not feeling too wonderful, but he’s dealing,” Dad said softly.

“Well, I’m ready to blow this Popsicle stand,” he said standing and taking his clothes from Rachel. “I’m gonna change in the bathroom so we can get out of here sooner.” He started toward the bathroom and stopped to turn one more time. “Hey, um, do you think I could stop and see him first?”

“Of course,” Mom answered. “He wanted to see you anyway.”

We let just Zac go in to see Taylor; he had to wear the whole get-up: the gown, the gloves, and the surgical mask. I hadn’t seen Taylor yet, and I almost didn’t want to; I was afraid of what I was going to see. It was horrible just seeing him on the chemo treatment, and they said he was going to be sicker after the transplant until the new bone marrow started to kick in, so I was scared to see him. I knew we needed to be strong for him, and I was afraid that I would just crumble, and I didn’t want him to see that happen.

I almost wanted to know what I had missed when Zac came out of the room. He slowly pulled off the mask, and was obviously trying to hold back tears. I was afraid something was wrong with Taylor, but I suddenly couldn’t find my voice.

“Son, are you all right?” Dad asked him quietly.

“Yeah,” Zac answered quietly as well.

“What happened?” I whispered. “Did something happen to Taylor?”

He shook his head, pulling off his gloves slowly. “He thanked me for trying to save his life,” he said quietly. “He said he’d never forget me doing this for him, even after he dies...”

“Oh Zac,” Mom said quietly.

“Why would he say something like that?” he asked, shaking his head slightly. “I mean...” He shook his head again, and welcomed Rachel’s warm hug.

“Everything will be fine,” she said softly to him.

“How is he doing?” I asked him; it was less curiosity and more need.

“Uh...” he hesitated. “He’s...not feeling too good.” I knew he was searching for delicate words that I could handle.

“Just tell me, Zac,” I said. “Does he look like he’s dying?”

“He isn’t,” he said insistently, “but he looks like it. He said he’s really sick to his stomach, and he’s *really* weak – he had a hard time just talking to me.”

“He’ll be okay though,” Rachel said comfortingly. She turned to our parents then. “He will, won’t he?”

“I’m sure he will,” Dad said tightly. It made it more and more obvious that my parents were doubting his recovery, which meant one thing: they knew something we all didn’t.

Chapter 16

I think God must've had it out for our family. As if all of the things going on weren't bad enough, a week or so after the transplant was the beginning of one of the worst events of the year. We were going to visit Taylor, and when we got there we weren't allowed to see him. Dr. Peterson wasn't allowing us to see him until she came down to talk to our parents. The only thing to be interpreted from that was that something was wrong. That feeling I'd had the day of the transplant had been present ever since that day, and it was strong again. I knew that we were going to be hit with bad news, but instead, we were slammed with it. The words that came out of her mouth were seven of the most terrifying words I had ever heard.

"Taylor's body is rejecting the bone marrow."

"What?" Mom's words were barely audible. "I thought Zac was a match."

"No one could be a perfect match unless it was a syngeneic donation – unless he had a twin. Zac was as close to perfect as we could get, and apparently..." She gestured for us all to sit, including me. She started to speak again, more softly. "The bone marrow isn't engrafting; what is left of Taylor's immune system is strong enough to fight, and unfortunately it's fighting the wrong thing. His T-cells are attacking the new bone marrow, and if we don't do something right now, it will destroy it." She grew quieter, letting her next words out even more gently: "Taylor's life is in jeopardy."

"What can you do?" Dad asked quietly. He and Mom had their hands linked tightly together, both out of fear. Who could blame them? This was their *son*, my *brother*...

“He needs to be given immunosuppressive drugs immediately; it’ll reduce the response of his immune system enough to hopefully stop it from attacking the new bone marrow.”

“What will it do to him?” I asked quietly. They all looked at me, no doubt wondering how I had known it would do anything at all to him. She – the doctor – looked back at my parents.

“Taylor’s going to be very ill,” she said softly. “The side effects from these drugs are severe in most cases, but the risk is a needed one.”

“Is he going to die?” My mother barely got the words out.

“Not directly from the drugs, no, but...” she was quiet a moment. “Taylor’s very sick right now – his life is in serious danger, and if I don’t do something about it right now-”

“Do what you have to if it’s going to help him,” Dad interrupted.

“I can’t allow you to see him,” she said softly, regretfully, “not tonight, or tomorrow even.”

“When?” Mom asked quietly.

“In a few days, but you need to continue to wear the gowns, the gloves, and the masks. These medications are going to severely deplete his immune system, and that makes him even more susceptible to infections than he already is. It is so very important for him not to get any infections...” She looked at us all, sorrow and pity evident in her eyes. “I’m sorry to have to give you news like this, I really am, but you needed to know. I’m going to put him on two medications; one is called cyclosporine and the other is called azathioprine, and I need to warn you that they both have serious side

effects. You need to know that Taylor is going to be *very, very* sick. He's going to be very weak-

"Weaker than he already is?" I asked quietly, sadly.

"Much," she said softly. "He's going to be very tired. Side effects of both include nausea and vomiting..." I knew there were more serious side effects that she wasn't telling us, but I assumed it was for good reason.

"Will he be okay?" Mom asked quietly.

Dr. Peterson's answer just about crushed us. "I really don't know right now."

I don't know why, but I had this new feeling like...like he was hurting, more than emotionally. I suddenly spoke again, my own voice making me jump. "He's in pain..." They all looked at me, a little shocked at my perception.

"Yes, some," she answered. I knew she was candy-coating it for us. When a nurse came out of his room, we could hear his voice faintly.

"God it hurts..." he said "...please make it stop..."

The heartbreaking looks on my parents' faces were almost unbearable. Luckily, she was saved from being put on the spot when the nurse came up. "Dr. Peterson? I'm sorry to interrupt, but..." she looked towards Taylor's room. "He's spiking a high fever," she said in a hushed tone, "and he vomited twice."

"I'll be right in," she said in the same hushed tone, and the nurse went back to his room, closing the door, but not before we heard Taylor's strained voice once more. "Please...I want my mom..." Mom broke down crying, and the doctor apologised again before going into his room. We were told to go on

home, there was nothing we could do for him that the doctor couldn't, and we all needed rest.

I couldn't sleep that night; I really don't think any of us did. But I did do a lot of praying, but it didn't seem that anyone was listening. I know *God works in mysterious ways*; making my brother suffer needlessly was not mysterious, it was downright cruel, and I was beginning to question my faith. I've always – well, we've always been taught to believe in God, to have faith in God, to do this and that for God; I've never even thought about questioning those things, or him, until this happened. I never mentioned it to my mother; I figured me telling her that God was cruel and I was really pissed off at him for being so unfair would probably bother her, and her attention needed to be focused on Taylor. I mean, her attention was already on Taylor, not that it was a problem – all of our attention was focused on him. Ike was over a lot; he helped Zac out with the younger kids, and besides, when he brought May she brought Christopher and it usually kept Zoë busy having a little one around. But that feeling I had? The one that told me this was going to happen? Well, it wouldn't go away. I – and the rest of us – had thought this would be the worst of it, and once he was over this hump it would all get better. It was more than just a little hump; this was Mount Everest, and Taylor was slowly falling back down the slopes instead of trucking his way up. He was too weak for that; he barely had the strength or energy to talk to any of us when we went to see him and were finally allowed to; it was a struggle just for him to breathe at times.

The first time anyone was allowed to see him again just Mom and Dad went; we all knew that they needed time alone with their son. And when they both came home with eyes red rimmed and a little swollen, we knew they had both been crying considerably so that meant one of two things: they were happy and Taylor was doing better, or they were truly saddened, and Taylor looked and was probably doing horrible. I think we all knew it was the latter, though it remained unspoken. That night, after they visited them, Mom was sitting out by herself on the porch swing. She was in sweats with her amazingly

gorgeous, long blonde hair pulled back into a bun. She was sitting on the two person swing with her knees drawn up to her chest, her arms around her legs, and her chin rested on her knees. It surprised me how young she looked sitting that way, and then I was surprised once more when I saw her face and how much she seemed to have aged in that past few months. She looked so worn and sad, like she had been dragged through some storm of Heaven, left somewhere between a rock and a hard place, and then dragged some more. All of us had experienced that – at least our emotions had.

“Mommy?” I was fifteen, and I was calling her Mommy, and I noticed it wasn’t the first time since all of this had started.

“I didn’t know you were out here,” she said softly, looking at me momentarily and then looking off into the distance. The sky was almost clear; the clouds were little puffs of white, like cotton, and spread out sparsely over the dark-blue velvet blanket the sky created.

“Are you okay?” I asked quietly.

“Baby, I’m not the one you need to worry about.” Her voice was quiet, and I had never heard my mother sound so resigned. She sounded like she was losing her hope...my mom never lost hope in the face of hopeless situations, she never did...

“Mommy?” She looked at me again, and patted the spot next to her. I went more than willingly, and sat beside her, and was so comforted when she slipped her arm around my shoulders, pulling me close to her. I just rested against her for a little while, neither of us speaking, watching the night sky. The stars went on twinkling, sparkling, unaware that one of their fellow earth-bound spirits was suffering so badly...I had asked my mom once where souls came from, and she told me they came from the stars – a gift from God – and that each star was a soul waiting to be born, or reborn. I always did believe

that. I shivered, suddenly covered in goose bumps when I thought about the possibility of Taylor's soul rejoining all those millions of others...

"I don't have any answers for you," she said quietly, almost sadly. "I know I've always told you that there are reasons for everything that happens to us, but...I can't find a reason in this."

"Nobody can," I said softly. "Mom, was he doing bad?"

"Oh baby," she said softly, the sound of tears making itself known in her voice. "Luck isn't on his side," she said softly. "And I don't understand..."

"Mama?" I whispered. "What happened at the hospital?" The swing was swaying gently, creating a calming effect that wasn't calming.

"Oh Avie," she cried quietly. "My poor baby is so sick..." I felt her shake her head slightly, and I felt her tears drop onto my head. "I don't know why this is happening to us – to him, Avie..."

"Mom, what happened?"

"Every side effect – every *damn* side effect you could think of...they're just slamming him. He can't take this, baby...how much can one person take?"

"I don't know, Mama," I said softly. "But Taylor will be okay; Taylor was always okay..."

I felt her kiss my head and hold me close. "God, Avie...I hope you're right. Did you pray for Taylor tonight?"

"Yes," I answered honestly.

“Good girl,” she whispered, gently stroking my hair. “He needs every prayer he can get.” When she spoke next I knew she wasn’t speaking to me, her voice hushed. “Please...send him a miracle...”

Isaac and Zac and Rachel went to see him next. Obviously they didn’t all go together – he could only have two visitors at a time. Ike went first, and came home the day he went much like Mom and Dad had the day they went. And Zac and Rachel the same; she was still crying a little when they came home. Jessica, naturally, went to see him next and the same result was brought back with her like I knew it would be. He must have been doing really bad...I knew it – because it’s the kind of luck I have (I apparently seem to have been in the same boat as Taylor in that department, except my life wasn’t hanging above me) – that when I went to see Taylor that something was going to go horribly bad. I couldn’t go alone – I was under sixteen – so Mom went with me. In our gowns and gloves and masks we slowly entered his room. I was completely shocked, not expecting to find what I did. My poor brother...his skin was disgustingly white, and his cheeks were bright, brilliant red with fever. His forehead, where his bandanna didn’t cover, was a little damp, maybe from his temperature being so high...there was an oxygen tube under his nose and an I.V. in his arm now. His breaths were shallow, and sounded a little laboured, like he was having a hard time breathing...I found out shortly after that difficulty breathing was a side effect of one of his immunosuppressive meds. It had been almost a week since I had been allowed to see my own brother. He swallowed harshly, forcibly.

“Tay?” My voice came out a whisper, but it was enough for his tired, fading eyes to slowly slide open. And I was suddenly at a loss for words; I didn’t know what to say to him, how to act, what to do... “Oh God...” I sobbed quietly. Mom put her arm around me, pulling me close enough that I could hear her heartbeat as I rested my head against her. It occurred to me then that the rhythm of her heart and the rhythm of his heart monitor were slightly off. No, *Taylor’s* was off...it was faster, and didn’t sound like the normal *bump-*

bump bump-bump bump-bump. The rhythm of his heart was off, actually, more so than I had realised at first. He shivered a little.

“Are you cold?” Mom asked quietly.

“A little,” he answered, his voice incredibly hoarse. “Bad case...of the chills today,” he said, slowly, shivering again. “But I can’t...have any more blankets ‘cause...of the fever.”

“I know,” Mom said comfortingly. “You need to get that temperature down; they’re only trying to help.”

“I know,” he whispered. We both moved forward, both of us taking his right hand. He squeezed suddenly, almost hard. “Sorry,” he whispered, drawing a few short, shallow breaths. “Been doing that...all day. Muscle spasms.”

“Were you okay today? Were you sick?” she asked gently. He closed his eyes for a few moments, and reopened them even more slowly than he had the first time.

“It was so bad...” he whispered.

“Were you able to eat anything?” she asked softly.

I watched his mouth contort into a small frown and tears begin to fill his eyes. “No,” he whispered. “I tried...but I puked all over. I can’t...keep anything...down.” That feeling hit me again, hard, as his hand involuntarily squeezed ours again, hard. “They gave me this thing,” he said pointing to the IV. We knew enough about IV’s by now to know what they were used for; he couldn’t keep anything down, so they had to nourish him somehow. And I realised as he had lifted his hand to weakly point to the tube in his arm, his

hand was trembling so bad...something horrible was happening to my brother, and I was witnessing it too now.

“Mommy...” he whispered. It brought tears to my eyes. I knew he wasn’t ignoring me, he just needed his mother – he was like a little boy.

“What is it, baby?” she whispered back.

“I feel like I’m dying inside...” Tears made paths from the corners of his eyes to his pillows.

“Oh Taylor...” she whispered, kissing his hand.

“Please don’t give up...” I whispered, and he opened his eyes, and looked at me, the tiny movement seeming to drain him of all his energy.

“I’m trying, Avie,” he whispered. “But it’s so hard...”

It was a simple, horrible truth: he was doing bad. And things only got worse that afternoon. I never thought I would ever see what I did, and I pray to God I never see it again. One of the side effects of one of the medications he was on was convulsions...it was the worst thing to see. His eyes rolled up into the back of his head, his whole body went rigid, and his whole body started to shake. Mom quickly ran out and called for someone to please help us, but all they could do was try to hold him still. Someone kept their hands on either side of his face, pillows under his head, and someone held his arms down, having to kneel over his chest, and someone else held his legs down as best as was possible. I cried the whole time, and Mom cried. And after an agonising four or five minutes it finally began to taper off. The short, violent jerking movements began to slow to slight twitching, until he was completely still, sweat in a glistening sheen over every visible part of his body.

“His blood pressure’s sky-rocketed,” someone said.

“We need Dr. Peterson in here now,” someone else said, taking charge.

“His rhythm is way off,” the first person who spoke said – it was a female nurse with black hair. His breath was coming out in short shallow gasps, and I was so scared. And when Dr. Peterson rushed in, his lips had taken on a slightly blue tinge.

“This isn’t supposed to be happening,” she said, looking at him, checking him over, and scanning his chart. “Turn his oxygen up,” she said. “And goddamn it, get his temperature *down*.” She turned to Taylor, Mom and I frozen where we stood. “Taylor,” she said softly. “Come on now; open your eyes up for me.” He didn’t move, save for a slight creasing in his brow. “I need someone to watch him,” she said. “Someone needs to constantly be monitoring him. Every goddamn side effect for these damn meds...” she said, shaking her head. She looked at us apologetically. “I’m so sorry, but...you’ll have to leave.”

“Is my son okay?” Mom asked quietly. “Dr. Peterson, is my baby okay?”

“He’s as stable as we can get him right now,” she said softly. “Please, go home and rest. You can’t do anything more for him here. You can come back and see him in the morning.”

“Please don’t let him die,” I said quietly, begging the doctor.

“Avery,” she said, knowing me now by name. “We are doing everything we humanly can to make sure that doesn’t happen.” It was as close to a promise as I was going to get and I knew that. I went over to him, Mom with me, and leaned down, gently kissing his forehead; I gently traced his cheek with the backs of my fingers.

“I love you, Tay,” I whispered, leaning down and kissing his head one more time, and Mom did the same. I was truly afraid – the chance seemed more real than ever that we could lose him. It just about killed me inside to even think about it. And Shanna had started to call regularly to check on him, and when I told her what had happened with the bone marrow transplant she had started to sob. I assured her that he would be okay; he had to be okay. Taylor wasn’t going to die.

Chapter 17

Taylor wasn't doing much better when we went to see him the next morning. Dad took me this time – I don't think Mom could have handled seeing something as bad as the day before happen to him if it did. He was laying on his side, slightly curled into a foetal position, his cheeks still red with fever. His blankets covered him from the waist down though he wore a bland hospital gown; his arms were visible, and much thinner than they had been months before. Dr. Peterson told us that his blood count still had yet to return to safe levels, and the immunosuppressive therapy was brutal, but it would help the new bone marrow do its job. I don't think Dad really knew what to do at first, as we just stood there, looking at him. When he finally spoke it was simple, but it was something.

"Hi Jordan," he said softly, scraping chair legs across the floor as he pulled one up beside the bed and sat down. He took one gloved hand and took Taylor's, gently running his thumb across the back.

"Dad..." Taylor whispered.

"How're you feeling?" he asked, and Taylor barely shook his head.

"Not good," he answered. "My stomach hurts...a lot. It seems like I'm throwing up every other hour..."

"It'll get better," Dad said quietly.

"I...don't know if...I believe that anymore." Things had gone so wrong for him, I could understand how he couldn't really see a good side to it, couldn't see the possibility that it would get better.

"Come on now," Dad said softly, "don't talk like that."

“We all miss you at home,” I offered quietly. He looked at me, his blue eyes an open sea of resolute sadness.

“I miss everything,” he whispered, “even the arguing...anything is better...than this.” The oxygen tube was still under his nose, and I assumed it would be there throughout the treatment. Dr. Peterson was going to stop by before we left and explain a bunch of things to Dad about Taylor’s treatment, and the side effects. It didn’t take a genius to see my brother was suffering; it was all over the media – even people who didn’t know him were seeing it, and the fan mail was incessant. It was crazy. There was so much of it that I can’t even tell you what the old house looked like; we had all the fan mail and teddy bears and flowers and balloons sent there – all addressed to Taylor.

But the fan mail was of lesser concern. We were with Taylor right then, and he was all that mattered. Shanna had called again that morning to see how he was doing, but I didn’t have any news for her seeing as I hadn’t been to see him yet, so she was going to call back later that evening. There was a priest that usually came around – I really think he was Taylor’s sanity in that hospital. Instead of talking to a ‘professional’ about what he was going through, he talked to Father Maguire instead. It was easy for me to tell that Taylor was losing his faith, and Father Maguire was helping him hold onto it for the time being.

The next thing I realised: Taylor was crying softly, and Dad was trying to comfort him. I’m not sure what happened. “I wanna go home,” he cried softly. “Daddy I can’t do this anymore...”

“You have to be strong,” Dad said softly, gently stroking his forehead with his fingertips. “You have to hold on and keep fighting, Jordan. This family needs you.”

That statement was so completely...I don't know the right words for it. True doesn't do that statement justice. We more than needed him. With everything 'fixed' between all of us and him, we needed him to be the brother he wasn't for so long, and we understood at the same time that right then he couldn't be. It was more important for him to concentrate on fighting for his life. I think sometimes that Taylor knew what people were thinking, because ironically enough, right after that thought flittered through my head, he told us that he didn't think he could win this fight. And I thought about that day in his room, when he told Mom and me that the prognosis for his type of leukaemia was six to twelve months including treatment – six to twelve months to live...it didn't seem like it, and I may not have made it clear, but six months had already gone by since the time he came home and that moment in the hospital; I had spent my entire summer vacation already, and it was already three months into the next school year – and I had decided to let Mom school me; I couldn't concentrate in school with what was going on with Tay. The realisation that time was running out just made me cry. I knelt down beside his bed, and put my hand over his and Dad's hands.

"Please Tay," I whispered. "Please don't stop fighting. We need you – *I* need you...you can't leave us – you can't leave *me*."

What I said must have been that poignant, because I made myself, Daddy, and Taylor cry. He reached his free, and trembling hand out to touch my face.

"I'd never leave you, Avie," he said softly. "I'll fight...until there's nothing left to fight for."

"You'll always have something to fight for, son," Dad said softly.

Tay fell asleep after that, of course after he got sick again. He was exhausted, and that was more than obvious every time we went to see him. He needed his rest and we had to get back home, so we thought it was the best time to

leave. Ike and May were supposed to stop by and see him later that evening anyway, and then Zac and Rachel. He was going to need rest, and we needed it too, but not before we talked to Dr. Peterson. Dad had wanted Mom to be there when he got the specifics, but I think he really understood why she couldn't be there. She was afraid; what we saw the day before...it really did something to her.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting," she said to Dad, gesturing for us to sit with her. "I know you've been waiting to hear about Taylor's progress, and the treatment and how it's affecting him."

"Why is it doing this to him? Shouldn't he be getting better by now?" he asked.

"That's...actually what I wanted to talk to you about." I didn't like her tone of voice; something in her tone of voice said 'bad news'. "We started the immunosuppressive therapy to stop his body from rejecting the bone marrow his brother donated; the problem is that his body is still rejecting it."

"What? Why?" Dad replied.

"I don't know; some people don't respond to treatment the way they should. And on top of that, I think your son is having some of the worst luck with side effects that I have ever seen. Almost every side effect for both medications has been hitting him hard. Just yesterday he suffered a seizure from the cyclosporine. Now I left the decision up to Taylor, but over the next two weeks if the treatment doesn't start taking effect – working properly – it may be best to stop."

"But if you stop..." I started, but didn't finish.

“If we stop the immunosuppressive therapy, his body will destroy the new bone marrow,” she said almost sadly. “Then...there isn’t anything else to do. I asked him if he wanted to try radiation, but he said no. If we stop the immunosuppression, and the rest of the new bone marrow is destroyed, all we can do is let the cancer run its course.”

“That is totally unacceptable,” my father said. “I won’t sit back and just let my son die!”

“Mr. Hanson, with all due respect, it isn’t your choice; it’s Taylor’s, and he’s made his decision. If this doesn’t work, there isn’t anything else to do. We just...wait.”

“Taylor doesn’t want the radiation?” I asked incredulously.

“No,” she said softly. “Frankly...I don’t blame him. Look at what he’s been through and put yourself in his place; would you want to do it?” She had a point, and I hated it. Taylor had every reason under the sun to refuse radiation treatment, and every reason not to. He had a family that loved him, friends that loved him, a girl in New York City that plainly loved him, and he was ready to just quit because it was hard. It didn’t hit me then how selfish I was being; it only hit me how selfish *he* was being.

When we got home I went straight to his room, threw myself on his bed and cried. I don’t know how long I was in there before Zac came in, but when he did, it was so hard to tell him what I had found out. And when I did he was in as much disbelief as I had been, and he cried too. He held me while I cried, rocking me gently, telling me that it would all work out, and everything would be okay. I didn’t believe a single word. And after that, I couldn’t bring myself to go see Taylor for almost another week. It was easy to see after that how worn he was; this was wearing him down day by day, hour by hour, minute by

minute. If it kept wearing him the way it was, there would be nothing left to even wear at all. His strength was quickly becoming a fraying thread.

The end of that second week was one of the worst. When we got to the hospital Mom and Dad went to see Taylor, but I hadn't eaten breakfast, so she gave me money to go down to the cafeteria and eat. I was down there for a little while, but I wouldn't stay more than fifteen minutes, and when I came back, I wished I hadn't. Mom was standing beside his bed, just looking down at him, and she was crying while he slept.

"Mom?" I said quietly.

"There's nothing else left," she cried softly.

"What do you mean?" I asked; my voice sounded small even to my own ears.

"It's all over, sweetie," she cried softly, shaking her head slightly. "There isn't anything else that can be done for him."

"But..." I looked at him. He looked so frail... "What now?" I asked quietly. I wasn't *accepting* this...was I?

"We just wait for it to...stop." I knew what she was saying, and God it hurt – it hurt so much.

"Where's Daddy?"

"He went to the chapel," she answered.

I stood beside her, looking down at Taylor. "How is he?" I asked, now unable to control the tears burning my eyes.

“He’s dying, baby,” she said softly, “he hurts.” She wiped her tears, still standing there, looking down at him.

“That can’t be right,” I said quietly. “Mom, it *has* to be a mistake.”

“Avery,” she looked at me, nothing but painful, teary, naked truth in her eyes. “There’s no mistake. He’s just...too far gone. There’s no way to beat this.” She took my hands as the tears rolled down my cheeks, and we both sat down in the chairs beside his bed. “Baby, the bone marrow transplant didn’t work – you know that. There’s too much cancer; it’s too strong, and it’s spreading too fast.”

“No,” I whispered, shaking my head, unable to stop my tears.

“Baby, I know this hurts; I know,” she whispered tearfully. “He’s my *son*, and I’ve been watching him suffer for the last six, almost seven months. And now...” she looked at him and back at me. “Now I have to learn to let go...I have to watch my baby die.” Her voice had become so quiet as the tears ran down her cheeks.

“This isn’t fair, Mommy,” I cried.

“I know...” she cried softly, and pulled me into a hug; we stayed that way for some time, and then she pulled back and kissed my head. She took a deep breath, composing herself. “I think you should know what the doctor said – I’ll tell your brothers and sisters when we get home. The next month or so is going to be rocky; he’ll be getting better and worse at the same time. He’ll be getting better because he’s recovering from the treatment, but the cancer will be getting worse.”

“So...what do we do?”

“Nothing; we just help him when we can, and be there for him. He’s coming home at the beginning of next week – as soon as he’s strong enough.”

My brother was dying. There was no way around it, no lying to myself, no denying it. Taylor was going to die. How does someone deal with that? How do you deal with knowing someone you love is going to die soon? I didn’t know how to deal with it, and I wasn’t sure I would have if I could. I got up and started to back away.

“Avie, baby, where are you going?”

“I...need...to go somewhere. I...the chapel,” I managed to get out. I needed my daddy.

I ran as fast as I could, crying, to the chapel, praying the whole time that my dad would still be there. When I got there he was kneeling in the front pew, hands together, praying for what I knew was his son’s life – a prayer that would never be answered.

“Daddy...” I said weakly, but it was enough. He turned around to face me.

“Avie?”

“Daddy...” I cried, and ran to him. He took me in his arms without question, sitting in the pew with me, holding me while I sobbed uncontrollably. “I don’t want him to die, Daddy,” I cried. “Please, make him fight.”

“Oh Avery,” he said softly; I could hear the tears in his voice, and didn’t need to look at him to know they were in his eyes. “I can’t do that. I’m sorry, sweetheart, but I can’t.”

“Why is God doing this?” I cried into his neck.

“I don’t know,” he whispered. “I don’t know anything anymore.” I knew how he felt. Who knew what anything meant anymore? Why did a twenty-three year old young man have to be dying of cancer? What was the point or purpose of it? Did God have control over this or not? And if he did *why* was he letting this happen?

Chapter 18

Taylor came home that Tuesday. I had told Shanna the day that we found out what was going on – that we were going to lose him. Taylor didn't tell us how much time he had, if he knew; everyone was just so happy to finally have him home again that I don't think the time frame mattered right then. That Thursday we all got something we weren't expecting; although, I think the surprise was meant for Taylor, it got us all. Tay wanted to just lie down and relax on the couch; he was slowly rebuilding his strength. Mom and Dad made everyone clear out of the living room and find something else to do somewhere else. I had been in the kitchen, washing dishes when we heard the doorbell. I stopped what I was doing to get it so Taylor wouldn't have to get up, but when I got to the doorway leading into the living room, he was already up, carefully making his way to the door. When he finally got there and opened it up, I figured out who it was standing there within ten seconds. He stood there, shocked, not saying anything. A young woman with blondish-brown, a little longer than shoulder length hair, and obviously pregnant stood in front of him; I assumed right then that it was Shanna.

"I needed to see you," she said softly. "Taylor..."

"I don't understand," he said quietly. "I thought..."

"I lied to you," she said. "I told you I had it done, but I never went through with it; that's why I wouldn't see you after that. I couldn't do it, Taylor. I'd rather have my baby grow up never knowing his father rather than kill him."

"I...I'm so glad you didn't," he said, reaching out and taking her hand.

"I thought you would be upset..." she said, tears becoming evident in her voice. "But I had to chance it; I had to see you..."

“Shanna...” He stepped out, and pulled her into his arms, and they wrapped their arms around each other. “I’m so sorry for everything,” he said quietly.

“I needed to be here for you,” she said, “all that stuff doesn’t matter now.”

“Taylor,” I said quietly. “It’s starting to rain; you should invite her in.” He looked at me thankfully, I think because I understood and didn’t question him.

I don’t know what happened between them because I knew they had a lot to talk about, so I let them be alone. But she was still there when it was time for dinner and Taylor brought her in to meet the entire family; I guess it was easy to interpret they were back together, even with whatever problems they had had. Everyone was a little surprised to see she was pregnant, mostly Mom. I was nearby enough to hear the conversation when he asked her where she was staying; there was a hotel just outside of town, about twenty minutes away where she had checked in, but he convinced her to stay with him instead.

“I don’t have any clothes...” she said.

“I have a couple of big shirts,” he said, touching her stomach, “and you could wear a pair of my sweatpants...”

“If you really want me to stay...”

“I do,” he said quietly.

“Though I doubt your sweatpants will fit me.” She smiled a little.

“It’s okay if they don’t,” he said, gently touching her cheek.

“Um, Tay?” I said quietly, sorry to have to interrupt. I had an armful of pillows. “Mom wanted me to bring some extra pillows up here.” He motioned for me to come into his room. “She said Shanna would probably need a few extra than what you have already.”

“Thanks,” she said softly. “Avery, right?”

“Yeah,” I said smiling a little. “But you can call me Avie.”

“Thanks Avie,” she said softly, standing away from Taylor for a moment, one hand on her round belly, and one on the small of her back. I took the pillows over to his bed and set them down.

“Thanks,” he said to me, kissing my head.

“How far along are you?” I asked her, a feeling of wonder filling me. I was going to have a niece or a nephew...

“Six months,” Taylor answered for her, smiling a little, and she smiled too.

“Is it a boy or a girl?”

She and Taylor made eye contact and smiled at one another. “A boy,” she said softly.

“Wow,” I said quietly. “Tay...you’re gonna have a son.”

“I know,” he said, sounding awed. I wanted to stay up and talk to them both, and since I didn’t go to public school anymore it wouldn’t have been a problem, but I knew they needed time together, and I needed to respect that. Taylor was still recuperating and I had a feeling that having her there with him,

and knowing that she hadn't 'gotten rid of' their child, was going to help him feel a little better a little sooner.

"I'll let you to get some rest," I said quietly. "It was really nice to finally meet you, Shanna. I hope you're here to stay."

"It was nice meeting you, too, and your family."

"Avie," Taylor said as I was about to go out his bedroom door. I turned around and he smiled softly at me. "I love you."

"I know you do," I replied. "Love you, too, Tay. G'night." I closed the door quietly behind me, thinking that something was finally going to go right.

* * *

3 months later

Things had been going well around the house. Shanna had moved in, with no objection – surprisingly – from my parents; Taylor hadn't convinced her yet to stay in Tulsa permanently and not go back to New York City. Zac had proposed to Rachel on Valentine's Day and she said yes, and May and Christopher moved into Ike's apartment with him. Zoë had turned nine back in January, and Shanna was due for the baby February twentieth – which was the event we were all waiting for. But there could never be anything that good without a downside. Taylor had recovered, for the most part, from the horrible treatment three months previous, but his health was still failing; though, it wasn't unexpected. His hair had grown back some – it was really short, sort of like someone had given him a buzz cut and it was growing back in. He made sure that he occupied himself all the time so he didn't have to think about or confront the fact his health was waning and his time was growing thin. He and Shanna had picked out a name for the baby: Jordan Parker Hanson. Mom and

Dad wanted them to get married, but Taylor wouldn't agree to it, but not because he didn't love her; he didn't think it would be fair for him to marry her knowing that he was dying; he couldn't force himself to do it knowing he was going to leave her and the baby. But we could tell he was wrestling with his emotions; it was obvious how much they loved each other, and he really did want to marry her. But within the last three months...he started feeling better with the end of the treatments, and at the same time the cancer was getting worse. It was finally starting to get to him, and we could all see that he wasn't feeling well. On top of that, his birthday wasn't too far off. He told us he didn't want a huge celebration; he only wanted us there, and he wanted it to mean something. He told us all he didn't need gifts to be bought for him, but instead, just spend time with him. Mom decided that we would all give Taylor something, but it wouldn't be bought; it would be something of our own that meant something to us, that we wanted him to have. I knew exactly what it was I wanted him to have.

It was the twenty-second when Shanna went into labour. We were in the family room when Taylor came in, holding Shanna's hand, one arm around her, supporting her. We knew she had been having contractions since the night before, and Mom had been keeping an eye on her, knowing what to expect since she had seven kids of her own.

"Mom," Taylor said surprisingly calmly. "Shanna's water just broke."

"Oh my..." She got up from her spot and went over to both of them, taking Shanna's arm gently. "Come on, I think it's time to take you to the hospital." As I watched them go – just Mom, Dad, Taylor and Shanna went – I had a sinking feeling. It was great she was having the baby, and Taylor was going to get to see his son before he died, but watching them walk out together it was impossible to tell who was leaning on whom for support. Taylor pretended like he was okay ninety-nine point nine percent of the time, but he wasn't, and I knew that. He was getting weak and tired again, and this time it was the

effects of the cancer and not its treatment. He seemed to have gotten a cold that he couldn't shake, and it worried us, but we never said much because we didn't want to upset him. Just the day before Shanna went to have the baby, I walked in on Mom in her room. She had a box of Taylor's 'kid things'. I knew she was reminiscing because of the circumstances, and she really had every right to. She was looking through some pictures of him – baby pictures and whatnot, all his little toys from when he was a toddler. She had his birth certificate on her dresser, his little footprints in ink on the front of it. And not that I didn't expect it, but it still hurt to see her crying. She was preparing herself, I guess, or making it worse for the fact she wouldn't have him for much longer...

Mom called us around nine-thirty that night to tell us that Jordan Parker was born at nine-twenty seven, and he had one proud papa. I was happy for Taylor, we all were, and in the same breath we were all sorry for him; he'd never get to see his son grow up, never give him a sibling, never really have the family he used to want so badly when he was younger. If things like that hurt us, then they had to hurt Taylor; he had to think about these things, too...maybe those things were the reason I could hear him crying sometimes, late at night, when everyone else was asleep and I should've been. Sometimes, I cried too; we all had the right to mourn things we would lose, and Taylor had the right to mourn everything he was going to lose before he had the chance to have it.

Shanna and the baby came home a few days later, and Taylor had something going on, though at the time, none of us were really sure what. He had something set up in the backyard that he didn't want anyone to see, and he laid out a beautiful, pale yellow cotton linen dress for Shanna. He was the one carrying the baby when they came into the house, which wasn't a surprise, really; Taylor had been around kids for a long time, so of course it was natural for him to be more comfortable holding a newborn. I remember Shanna telling me once that she was afraid to hold the baby at first, because she'd never

really been around babies, and she didn't want to hurt him; but once she got the hang of it, she was a natural – I guess every mother is and just doesn't realise it at first. Taylor dressed the baby in a pale blue onesie with the white blanket with blue shapes of some kind on it – it was cute – and a little blue hat from the hospital. He was a beautiful baby; he looked exactly like Taylor did in the baby pictures I had seen of him. He held the sleeping newborn and told Shanna to go up and change, and without argument, though her curiosity was piqued, she did so. She looked absolutely beautiful when she came down. It wasn't until that moment I noticed that Taylor was sort of dressed up, too...he had a white button up shirt on, and casual but dressy khakis. He was more than grateful that he didn't have to wear a bandanna or hat – in the three months that had gone by, his hair had grown back; although, it was nowhere near as long as it had been, he had hair. It was short, much shorter than we were ever used to, but it didn't look bad on him. He looked grown up, and handsome, despite the subtle, but obvious (to us) signs he wasn't healthy.

He led us all out into the backyard; there was an arch set up, with pretty pastel – and real – flowers. Beneath it there stood a man dressed in a black suit with a white collar, and I realised as we all did that it was Father Maguire, holding a small Bible in his hands.

“Taylor...” Shanna said softly, taking in the gorgeous but simple sight as we all did. “You did this?”

“Yes,” he answered, holding the baby close to his chest. “I did it for you; for us...”

“Taylor, what's going on?” she asked quietly.

“We're getting married,” he answered softly, kissing the top of her head, careful not to squish his son between him and his wife-to-be.

“But we don’t have a license-”

“It’s all taken care of, everything.”

“Jordan,” Mom said softly. He turned to look at her, and for once I could plainly see contentment in his features; no pain, no discomfort, and if he was in either he didn’t show it in any way whatsoever. “You did all of this?” He nodded. “You don’t know how proud this makes me,” she said softly, standing on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

He reached into his pocket, and pulled out two plain silver bands. He turned to Isaac and May and Christopher and gave a soft smile. “Ike, I hope you don’t mind being a last minute, but the only consideration, best man.”

“Not at all, Tay,” he said softly, taking the rings from Taylor.

“Well, come on,” he said to all of us. We followed him out into the yard, he and Shanna fittingly barefoot. He held her hand, their fingers laced together, leading her down to the priest waiting to pronounce them husband and wife. As I watched them, it made me realise something: people can change. Taylor had changed for the bad, and made a complete turn around. It also made me realise that people really can find love like you read about in cheesy romance novels, only when it’s real, it isn’t quite so cheesy – it’s actually kind of touching. And as if things weren’t perfect enough, there was a warm breeze as the sun was setting, making it a real Kodak moment; it made me wish that I could stop time and hold that perfect moment in my hands for all time. None of us knew it, but he hired a photographer, who stayed fairly far back until the ceremony was through; but he got that moment I wanted to keep, and though it wasn’t what I meant by holding it in my hands, the moment was captured: all of us standing together, watching as the priest stood before them, Taylor and Shanna facing one another, the breeze stirring gently...it was a perfect family portrait by accident. The ceremony didn’t take long, and when it was ended

we had a nice dinner inside, and Tay had even handled a small wedding cake – it was nothing huge, just enough to feed all of us a piece, and save one for a year from then...the only damper was thinking a year from then Shanna would be eating that piece of cake alone, maybe to his memory and to the memory of this day, grieving instead of rejoicing. But in all truth, that day was one of the most vivid and beautiful memories of my childhood.

It was much later that night, but I stopped by Taylor's room, more than happy when he let me come in. He had a white bassinet on the other side of the desk; close enough for them to get up and get the baby easily but far enough that they wouldn't trip over it getting out of bed.

"So how does it feel to be married?" I asked, unable to keep back the small smile on my face.

"It feels..." He seemed to think for a moment before answering, taking a second to look at his sleeping son, and then at his wife before looking back at me. "It feels really good."

"I'm glad to see you happy," I said softly, suddenly feeling tears sting my eyes. "You really deserve it, Tay; I'm happy that things turned out like this."

"Why the tears?" Shanna asked softly, gently wiping one off my cheek.

"I didn't think I'd ever see Taylor get married," I said. "Things were really rocky between us for a long time, and I made myself think that I wanted to hate him, but...I really didn't. I never hated you, Tay." He had tears in his eyes too. "Way down deep, I loved you more than anything – you're my brother...I just wanted you to be the Taylor that taught me how to be a good person, the Taylor that loved me; I just wanted you to be happy..."

“Oh Avie...” He pulled me into a hug and kissed my hair. “I love you,” he said. “I was a jerk for a long time, but I never stopped loving you – I never stopped loving any of you.”

“I love you, too, Tay,” I said softly. He turned from me for a moment when we heard the baby start fussing. I nodded as he stepped away to the bassinet, reaching inside and carefully drawing the little baby boy to his chest.

“He’s so beautiful,” Shanna marvelled quietly, gently smoothing the fine blonde hair on his tiny head. “He looks just like you, Taylor,” she said softly, smiling up at him.

“He’s so small...” I hadn’t realised I spoke until they both looked at me.

“Do you wanna hold him?” she asked me.

“I don’t know...” I hesitated; the only baby I think I ever held and was old enough to remember doing so was Zoë, and that was sitting on the couch with Dad’s supervision.

“It’s okay,” Taylor said softly, both of them coming towards me. “Here, hold your arms out,” he told me, and I did so. “Now support his head,” I did that, “and put one hand under his butt.” I was holding my nephew. “There,” he said softly, “not so hard, is it?” I shook my head mutely, staring down at the tiny wonder in my arms. It was sort of a joyful moment, until Taylor said something that nearly made us cry.

“You better help take care of him when I’m gone.” His words were soft and sad, but serious.

“Taylor...” Shanna said softly, coming to his side and taking his hand; she closed her eyes for a moment, obviously fighting tears, as was I.

“Shan,” he said softly. “Why don’t you take him down to see my mom for a little bit? I just wanna talk to Avie alone for a few minutes. Okay?” She looked up at him and nodded, standing on her tiptoes to kiss him gently on the lips. She reached down and carefully took Jordan from my arms. I simply watched as my sister-in-law and my nephew departed from the room.

“Avie,” Taylor said softly, interrupting my daydream. I looked at him, his softly sad voice catching my attention. “I need you to do something for me, okay?”

“Okay...”

“I need you to convince her to stay,” he said softly. “I don’t want her to go back to New York City and raise him alone; she’s gonna need this family, and I want you to make her stay.”

“Why me?” I asked.

“Because I know you can,” he said. “I want her to live here; she and Jordan can have my room, and Mom and Dad can help her and stuff...I just want to make sure they’re taken care of.”

“I...I’ll do my best, Tay...” I wasn’t sure how to react to what he was saying to me.

“I know you can convince her, Avie,” he said softly.

“Tay...it’s your wedding night; why are you talking like this?”

“Because,” he said softly; tears shone in his eyes now. “I don’t think I have very much time left.”

“But...” I felt tears burning my eyes again.

“Don’t ask questions, please,” he begged me quietly. “Just...just trust me, and don’t be sad, okay?”

I knew better than to argue, and I don’t think I could have spoken if I had wanted to, so I simply nodded once, letting him know that I understood.

“I love you, Avery Laurel,” he said softly, pulling me into a gentle hug.

“I love you, too, Jordan Taylor.” I held onto him tightly but gently, praying to God that I would get to do this more times in the future. It seemed impossible that he was dying; he had a family now, a son and a wife. How could his life be withering away beneath him? It didn’t seem possible or right, and I didn’t think it ever would. And it never has.

Chapter 19

I planned on talking to Shanna like Taylor had asked me to, though I wasn't too sure of how to approach her or what to say to her once I had approached her. Talking to someone about their dying husband didn't seem like an easy thing to do, especially since her dying husband was my brother. I knocked quietly on his bedroom door, knowing he wasn't inside and Shanna was. I heard her call for me to come in, and when I did she was sitting on the bed feeding the baby; she breastfed.

"Oh, sorry," I said, blushing. "I can come back later."

"Don't be embarrassed," she said, smiling a little. "It's a natural thing. And don't come back later; you're fine right now. Come on in." I shut the door behind me, coming towards her and watching as she fed the tiny boy.

"Doesn't it hurt?" I asked, scrunching my nose. She laughed quietly.

"No," she said, "but it feels strange. I don't think it'll hurt until he gets teeth."

"Ouch," I said cringing, and she laughed a little.

"What can I do for you, Avie?"

"Um, actually, it's not for me." I looked at her, and she looked a little confused, and granted if I were in her place I'd be confused too. "Um, Taylor asked me to speak to you the other day..."

"What about?" she said, her eyebrows knitting together.

"Um, living arrangements," I said, feeling a little weird about doing what I was about to do.

“Taylor put you up to this?” she echoed my statement. “Why am I not surprised,” she said, smiling a little.

“It’s kind of important,” I said, unable to smile about what I was about to talk to her about. Once she saw the look on my face she stopped smiling.

“What is it, Avie?”

“Um, Tay...Tay wants to make sure that you’re...taken care of, after he’s...after...” I cursed myself in my head for not being able to do this properly. “...after he’s gone.”

“Oh...”

“He wants you to stay here, Shanna,” I said quietly, “I mean to live – you and Jordan. He said you and the baby could have this room – his room – and Mom and Dad could help you with stuff.”

“I couldn’t do that to your family-”

“You’re family too,” I said, finding myself needing to convince her now, too. “I mean, you married my brother, and you have a baby together...”

“I don’t have much here...”

“We can send for your things in New York,” I said. Finally knowing what I really needed to say, and it killing me the whole while, I said it: “I think it’s one of Taylor’s last requests...”

“Oh...” She looked down at the baby, and I could see her eyes filling with tears, as my own did as well. “I can’t deny him that,” she said softly.

“I’m sorry, Shanna; he asked me to make you stay-”

“It’s okay,” she said softly, looking up at me as tears ran down her cheeks. “I’m glad you talked to me; I would’ve gone back to New York, to no one, and nothing, and raised my baby alone – at least here he’ll have all the family he needs.” She smiled sadly. “I just don’t know how I’m going to be able to live in this room knowing he used to be in here, and being without him...”

“There are other rooms,” I said. “You could have one if you needed it.”

“Thanks Avie,” she whispered. “I haven’t known you long, but I love you like I’ve known you my whole life.”

“I love you, too,” I said, feeling incredibly touched. “This whole family loves you – Taylor loves you, with all his heart, and Jordan too.”

“I know,” she said quietly, wiping her tears. “I’ll tell Tay tonight that I’ll stay, and he and I have a certain sister to thank for it.” She smiled a little at me, and I put my hand over hers, giving it a gentle squeeze before making my way out of the room.

What I had just done was kind of morbid, and it set my mind about a certain train of morbid thoughts. I began to wonder if they had funeral arrangements, or a casket, or a ground plot, or a headstone picked out – did Taylor pick an epitaph or did he write his own? It was one of the most morbid trains of thought that ever ran through my head, and what made it worse was how much it hurt. The thought of my brother in a casket, in the ground, and a headstone with his name on it...it gave me chills for an hour and nightmares that night. I might have been more afraid of Taylor dying than Taylor was of dying.

I found something about a week after Jordan was born, although, being a Hanson family weird and unintentional tradition (excluding Zac) he had been called by his middle name, Parker, more often by Taylor – Shanna preferred to call him Jordan, after his father, and often told Taylor to stop calling him Parker before he confused the kid. It was humorous when witnessed. Mom, and Shanna and the baby, and I all went small town shopping – it was more like a flea market down in Jenks, and I found this beautiful plaque. There was a picture on it of a sunset on the beach, the waves coming up gently on the shore and foam-capped, and footprints across the sand. I knew as soon as I read the inscription that followed that it was perfect – I needed to get it for Taylor. He had started feel under the weather, and it was starting to worry us all more than it had before. It was more than just a cold, and we all knew it. I could tell he was starting to get a little discouraged, and like I had, he was losing his faith in God; it didn't matter to me at that point if I lost my faith, but I didn't want Taylor to lose his; if anything I thought he needed it more than ever at that point. So I bought it, after letting Mom and Shanna read it, and making them both cry.

When we got home I think we were all a little affrighted when Dad told us Taylor was upstairs lying down – he didn't feel good. I let Shanna go up and see him, even though I wanted to; I had to get used to the fact she was his wife and the mother of his child, and she got to see him first. So I waited for a while, and when she was through talking to him, she came out and apologised for taking so long even though she didn't have to. She let me go in and have some time alone with him – she knew I wanted to give him the gift I bought him. I was a little dismayed to see him in bed and notice that he had lost some colour in his face. He wasn't deathly pale like he was when he was getting treatment, but the healthier pigment to his skin had decreased some.

“Hey Taylor,” I said quietly. He turned to look at me, seeming to be okay – not good, but okay.

“Hey Avie,” he said quietly as well. “I hear there was more female bonding today.”

I smiled at him – he had a way of making people smile... “Yeah,” I said, “it was fun.” I looked down at the bag in my hands, “I, um, got you something today. I thought you might appreciate it.”

“You didn’t have to get me anything,” he said, frowning slightly.

“I know I didn’t, but...I really liked it, and I think you will too.” I pulled the plaque out of the bag and handed it to him. “It isn’t much, but, it was worth every penny...”

“Oh Avie,” he said quietly, “it’s gorgeous.”

“Read the little story, Tay,” I urged.

He took a deep breath and sighed, and looked at me; he looked back at the plaque and pushed himself into a sitting position. He took it in his hands again, and took a breath. *“One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand: one belonging to him, and the other to the Lord.*

“When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life. This really bothered him and he questioned the Lord about it.

““Lord, you said that once I decided to follow You, You’d walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life,

there was only one set of footprints. I don't understand why, when I needed You most, You would leave me.'

"The Lord replied, 'My son, my precious child, I love you and would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.'"

He continued to stare at the plaque for a moment, as I swallowed against the knot in my throat, trying to blink back the wave of tears that seemed to come to my eyes. When he finally looked at me, his eyes were filled to the brim with tears. "Thank you," he whispered. I started to cry, and so did he. He motioned me over, and I sat down on the bed, and he took me in his arms; we held each other tightly, and just wept. We were going to lose so much...I knew that he appreciated the gift, and understood it; and after that, he hung it above his bed.

We, as in all of the family, went with Zac and Rachel to *Wedding Belle*, a dress and tux shop down in Jenks so they could pick out their colours. I had always thought Rachel had good taste in clothing and colours until she picked up a lime green bridesmaid dress; it reminded me of aliens and puke, neither of which were associated with weddings in any way, shape, or form. Luckily, it didn't become one of her choices. She found the prettiest satin teal dresses, and some soft yellow ones, and some gorgeous deep purple dresses. And Zac was picking out styles they had discussed, and coordinating the colours with the dresses she had picked thus far. He had picked out all black suits with white shirts, and vests that coordinated the colours; the ones for the teal dresses were silver and teal vests, the ones for the soft yellow were just that solid colour, and the ones for the purple dresses were silver and purple. The last set of dresses were a beautiful dark burgundy colour – those and the purple were off the shoulder, and the teal and yellow were spaghetti strapped. Two of her close friends were to be bridesmaids, and Jess and I were also asked. She planned on having Zoë as her flower girl, even though she was

nine and flower girls were usually younger, Zoë was petite enough to pass; and though Mac was twelve, he was the only option for a ring bearer. Zac had asked two friends of his from college to stand up for him, and Ike, and he had asked Taylor to be his best man. He was hesitant at first, and none of us could understand why, until he said that he wasn't sure if he would even be around for the wedding...it kind of put a damper on things, but he agreed finally, and if anything were to happen, Isaac would take his place.

Rachel had already had her wedding dress picked out and purchased, and it didn't need a stitch of alterations, and when all of us girls saw her in it, we were breathless. She looked absolutely beautiful, and that was even without the aid of a professional hair-do or professional makeup. She was a natural beauty anyway. It was a perfect fit and style for her; it was a thin spaghetti strapped top that dipped into a low but modest V, with beautiful sparkles all the way down the fitted bodice, and the bottom half fluffed out – but not too much – in a gorgeous bell-like shape with a gauzy type material – the fabric of the bottom half almost seemed gossamer – leaving a train of the same fabric trailing about two or three feet behind her. It was supposed to have been a spring wedding, so she was choosing the right styles, and chose the right colour when she chose the beautiful pale teal satin dresses. The men were all getting themselves fitted when Rachel came over and sat beside Mom and I, who was gently running her fingers through my hair.

“Diana,” Rachel said softly. “Zac and I have changed the wedding plans.”

“What?” Mom replied, a little shocked. “I thought everything was good...”

“Everything is fine. We put everything on rush. All of you are being fitted today, and Mrs. Maxwell is getting a bunch of the seamstresses that work for her together so all the tuxes and bridesmaid dresses will be ready by next week.”

“Next week? Why?”

“Well,” she said softly. “Taylor’s worried he won’t make the wedding...so Zac and I decided to move it up.”

“How up?” Mom asked, still playing with my hair.

“Next Friday,” she answered.

“You’ll never have enough time,” I added.

“Yes we will,” she replied. “The first practice is this weekend; the rehearsal dinner is Wednesday, and the wedding is Friday.”

“You two have everything set? A church? A reception hall?”

“St. John’s Church,” she answered. “One pm. We talked to Walker and he said your house was fine, seeing as we were making it family and closest friends only; there’ll only be about sixty guests or so.”

“If you’re sure that’s what you want,” Mom said.

“We’re sure,” she said, smiling a little. They went and changed all their wedding plans for Taylor, which was more than admirable, except Taylor was starting to feel worse with each day that went by. He did his best to hide it from us all, but we could tell; we could see him changing...

We got as far as the first quick rehearsal with no problems, but the actual rehearsal dinner was another story. The Wednesday of the rehearsal dinner Taylor had been feeling particularly bad, almost to the point they were ready to take him to see Dr. Peterson, but he protested, like I knew he would, and they made it through the evening, though it was visible now that Taylor was

not well. He'd said he felt incredibly fatigued, and achy, and he'd woken up dripping in sweat four nights in a row, but he refused to see the doctor and chance missing his little brother's wedding.

Well, the wedding day came, and it went off without a hitch. Taylor was the perfect best man, giving an amazing toast at the reception once we got back to the house. Although, he and Ike had to perform their pranking duties, and had painted 'SAVE ME' on the bottoms of Zac's dress shoes in white-out. It was all humorous in good fun. And when the day was over, Zac and Rachel retired to his room to bed, ready to be up early the next morning to catch their flight out to Hawaii.

It was the beginning of the next week that set off a chain of bad events. Taylor had been sleeping in constantly, unable to get himself out of bed because he was starting to feel so poorly. Shanna spent considerable amounts of time between taking care of baby Jordan and taking care of Taylor. He had started to look sick again; his colour had started to pale, and his eyes had started to dull. He tried to hide the fact he was in some kind of pain, but it didn't ever really work on us. And I guess one day it all just gave way.

Taylor had been in the living room with Shanna and the baby one day, watching a movie, the rest of us milling about the rest of the house. Mom spent most of her time cleaning someone's room or in the kitchen, and Isaac was coming *from* the kitchen, and I was coming down the stairs heading *to* the kitchen. We both saw Taylor get up and head toward the staircase, but he stopped partway there, seeming a little unsteady, or uncertain.

"Tay," Isaac said, "is everything all right?" There was this strange look on Taylor's face that I don't really know how to explain, and he gave no answer. "Taylor? Are you okay?" He had the same strange look on his face when he finally looked up at our brother; he just stood there for a moment, then his

brow creased slightly as he barely, slowly shook his head, looking almost 'tipsy'.

"Ike?" He looked at our brother again, Isaac taking a step forward, Shanna and I just watching with passive concern. "I think something's wrong..." Suddenly his eyes rolled up and his knees just went out from under him. Isaac moved quickly, reaching out just in time to catch Taylor before he could hit the ground, collapsing in Ike's arms.

Shanna was up in an instant and I was hurrying over. "Mom!" I called.

"Oh God..." Isaac said quietly, unsure of what to do. "Tay? Taylor can you hear me?" There was no response or movement, or any indication from Taylor that he could hear Isaac at all. "Oh God..."

"What happened?" Dad asked, coming in the same time as Mom.

"Oh my God..." She ran over to him, touching his face, but there was no response whatsoever from him. "Avery," she said turning to me, "go call an ambulance."

A short time later, there was an ambulance outside our house, and a couple of men taking Taylor away strapped onto a stretcher, covered by a blanket, an oxygen mask over his face, and completely unconscious. And I stood watching helplessly as they put my brother in the back of the ambulance, its flashing lights casting brief and repetitive shadows over everything, bathing things in its red light, and the doors closed behind two EMT's. I stood in the doorway as the siren started again and the ambulance rushed off. I don't remember when I started crying, only felt the wet, warm tears rolling down my cheeks.

"Come on," Ike said softly. "Let's get to the hospital." I had this feeling...Taylor was never coming home again.

Chapter 20

When we got to the hospital it was a while before we were allowed to go see him. Shanna and the baby went first, and when she came out about fifteen minutes later she said he had drifted out of it again. The sadness in her features was too much for me, and I couldn't even bear to look at her. I knew how she felt, in a more familial type of love or sense, whereas she was feeling the pain of knowing she was losing the only man she could ever love this much, the man she married, the man she shared a child with...my brother. The rest of us stayed in the waiting room when Mom and Dad went to see him; it was just starting to become evening, the sun setting to the west side of the hospital ward, allow a golden glow envelope everything it could touch within its reach – it didn't touch anywhere near Taylor's room. I couldn't help but feel, then, that there was some meaning in that.

I think, to be honest, we were all afraid to see Taylor, afraid to see him sick again, to see him suffering again. But this time it would be different for all of us; it had been almost four months since he'd stopped all treatment, and like I mentioned before, he had hair again – short, but soft, and enough to run your fingers through...I needed to see him, I knew at least that much. I got up and turned to the rest of the family, Zoë sitting on Isaac's lap and Mac leaning against Zac – Zac's arm around him. Jessica was sitting beside Shanna, watching baby Jordan sleep in his mother's arms, and Rachel on the opposite side of Zac.

"I need to go see Taylor," I said softly. They all looked at me, obviously doubting I could handle it.

"I don't know, Avie..." Ike said quietly.

"Maybe you should wait a little bit longer," Zac added.

“I can’t,” I said quietly, shaking my head. “I really need to see him...” They looked at one another, and back at me, one nodding and then the other. “I’ll tell him you all love him.” Shanna started to cry, turning her head into Jessica’s shoulder.

I opened the room door, immediately greeted with the familiar sound of a heart monitor’s steady, even beeping. Mom and Dad were sitting beside his bed, chairs as close together as possible, holding hands; they weren’t speaking, or even really moving much, they were just sitting there watching him sleep, the lights in the room off. It was like it was some wonder, just to see him breathing, I mean, and really...I guess it was. They sat there, their heads rested against each other’s, and I moved closer.

“How is he?” I whispered; I was afraid I would wake him, afraid that maybe speaking in a normal volume would hurt him or something. Mom turned first, and then Dad. I think maybe they had fallen asleep.

“Avie...” Mom whispered, obviously not expecting to see me.

“How is he?” I whispered again. She looked back at him; he was pale, and he had an oxygen tube under his nose again. He almost looked peaceful, lying there motionless, sleeping so softly...but the telltale sadness on his face was heartbreaking, disturbing the peace I had envisioned in my mind for him.

“Dr. Peterson doesn’t think Taylor has much time...” she was speaking very quietly, unable to look me in the eyes. I think if she had there would have been tears, much like my own. “If...if he sees the end of this month...he’ll be lucky.” His birthday was a week away – he’d be twenty-four – and the painful reality of it all hit me, and it was crushing me: it would be the last birthday he’d ever celebrate with us.

“Is...is he in any pain?” I whispered, wiping at the tears that had started down my cheeks.

“I think, a little, yeah,” Dad whispered back. “He hasn’t said much...”

“What about his birthday?”

“Honey, he can’t leave the hospital,” Mom said softly.

I nodded silently, watching as his chest rose and fell with the breaths he took. He stirred a little, moving his hand, giving Mom access to it; I watched her take his hand in hers, bending down and placing a soft kiss on the back of it. “I’ll go...” I whispered, the tightness in my chest and throat hardly allowing me to speak. I stepped out of the room, closing the door behind me and pressing my back against it. *No, no, no...* I kept saying it over and over in my head. *Why is he dying? I can’t lose my brother...*

“Avie...?” I heard Isaac’s soft voice, but I merely shook my head in response, my eyes closed, my head hung. “Avie, come ‘ere...” I shook my head again.

“I think we should all stop in and give him a kiss, and I think we should take the kids home,” Zac said to Isaac, who I also heard agree.

When I felt someone’s soft hand on my arm, I knew it was Isaac, and I shook him off. “Don’t,” I whispered. “Please don’t...I need to be alone right now.” I started away, unable to look at them, unable to look back at that room, that place...it was just a death box to me. It was the last place my brother would see before he died; it was *where* my brother was going to die...

“Avery,” I heard Zac’s strong voice. “Where are you going?”

“I’ll be in the car.” I took the stairs down – I never liked elevators – and sat down on the bottom step, knowing they would be at least ten minutes. I sat down, and I cried. I had no choice to accept this now; it was in front of us, right on our damn doorstep – these were our last times together, our last memories with Taylor, and I knew it – I could feel it.

Visiting hours were over at nine, and Mom and Dad got home around nine-thirty; they looked exhausted. All of us were ready for bed as well, but Shanna was particularly upset by this, and she had every right to be. As soon as Mom had changed her own clothes, she called Shanna upstairs, I assume to comfort her and help with whatever she needed help with. When I finally made my own way upstairs, heading for bed, Taylor’s door was open and Shanna was lying with her head in my mom’s lap, crying; Mom was gently stroking her hair, like she did for me, or Jess, or Zoë – or any of us kids, really – when we were upset and she was trying to soothe us. I didn’t say goodnight to anyone, I just went to my room and went to bed, not that it did much good, because I slept fitfully that night.

It was late when I woke up the next morning; I didn’t smell any food cooking, and everything seemed to be eerily silent. There were still ‘children’ in the house, so I didn’t understand how it could have been that quiet, unless of course they really understood what was going on, what was going to happen. When I came out of my room the door hinges squeaked and I heard Mom call my name. I made my way down to her bedroom; I don’t know where Dad was, but he wasn’t in there with her. “I wanted to show you something,” she said.

“Hmm?” I stood there for a moment, waiting for her to give me some direction on what she wanted me to do.

“Come here for a moment,” she said quietly. “I want to show you something.” I came into her room, glancing at the clock and realising it was after noon. I went over to where she was sitting on the floor, pictures spread out all around

her. I knew that Mom had kept an individual baby album for each of us kids, right on up through our childhoods. Taylor was always so photogenic, and not to mention a ham, that his album was undoubtedly the thickest. I went over and sat down beside her, looking at the hundreds of pictures, and thought for a moment that she had completely lost her mind.

“Mom, what are you doing?”

“Just going through some things,” she said quietly. “Look at this,” she said, turning a family photo album toward me; Taylor was sitting on a chair in the hospital, holding a little pink bundle in his small arms – he had to have been around eight years old.

“I’ve never seen this before,” I said quietly, touching the picture carefully. I saw her smile thoughtfully out of the corner of my eye.

“That was about seven hours after you were born,” she said softly.

“That’s *me*?” I asked. I had never seen this picture before, and the fact that it was Taylor holding me made it all that much more special.

“Mmm-hmm,” she replied. “He was so fascinated with you...” she said, obviously losing herself in thought for a moment. “He always wanted to be around, always wanted to help me out with you.” I looked at her and smiled a little. “Look at this one,” she said, handing me another picture. It was Taylor again, holding me, but this time with a bottle on the couch at the old house. He looked so...in awe, or proud, or...something...

“Can I look at Taylor’s baby book?” I asked quietly. I looked at her, seeing her eyes darken slightly with sadness.

“I’ve been doing that a lot lately,” she said softly, “looking through his baby book.”

She picked up the thickest album and carefully handed it over to me. I was anxious to look at it. When I opened the first page, on the inside cover, his birth certificate had been returned to its proper place. There were so many memories in that book that I had never even known about, never seen...I sat with her for hours going over pictures, and apparently, she had taken her turn with each of her children to show them pictures of themselves with Taylor, and this album.

His birthday came quickly, and just as quickly his health was failing. He was just in this rapid spiral downward, and to be honest, it was scary as hell. I had my gift for him all set and ready to go the night before, and was more than ready when we left the house at ten o’clock the next morning to see him. March fourteenth was his big day, and though I wished he didn’t have to spend it in a hospital bed, I knew he would appreciate us being there and whatever we gave him no matter what. Part of his present included a picture I had found in the dozens and dozens scattered on Mom’s floor. It was of Taylor and I; he was about sixteen, post-haircut and pre-jerk days, and we were outside, by the swing set. There was an absolutely perfect burst of bright sunlight behind us, and we had the smiles to match. It was a great picture of the two of us, and I knew he’d love it...

Everyone took a turn going to see him, but I wanted to be last; I wanted to save my gift for him for last, maybe because I wanted him to remember mine the most. I came into his room, my footsteps sounding on the cold tiled floor. He looked over at me, his eyes glassy from tears, and forced a small smile.

“Hey there,” he whispered.

“Hi,” I whispered back. “How do you feel?”

“Lonely,” he said softly. “And scared...”

“Don’t worry about any of that stuff right now, son,” Dad said softly. “It’s your birthday; just try to enjoy what you can.”

“I...I brought you something,” I said, coming to his bedside. He tapped his fingers on the empty space beside him and I carefully sat down; I think I was afraid I would break him.

“You didn’t have to bring me anything.”

“I know that, but...I really wanted to give you this,” I said. I took out the picture first. “This is the first part of it.” I handed him the picture and watched him inspect it.

“Avie...it’s beautiful,” he whispered.

“And...I want you to have this; it always used to make me feel safe, and I always knew I was loved...” I quietly handed over Maggie, placing her gently on his chest as he brought his hands up to hold onto her gently.

“Avie...” he whispered. I could tell he was fighting tears; I looked at Mom and Dad and they had tears in their eyes as well, and so did I.

“I wanted you to have her, Tay.”

“I don’t know what to say,” he said quietly, trying to force his tears back. “Avery...this is the second best gift I’ve ever gotten in my life; nothing, except my son, has ever meant this much to me...”

“I love you,” I said, “and I wanted to make sure you had a little piece of home, and me, with you; maybe you won’t feel so lonely anymore...”

“I love you,” he said.

“Get some rest okay?” I said softly. “You look like you need it.”

He shrugged a little. “I don’t get much sleep here,” he said softly, almost inaudibly.

“How come?” I asked, frowning, not understanding how he couldn’t get a lot of sleep in a quiet hospital.

“I kind of toss and turn all night; I wake up a lot in the night,” he said. “I have a hard time sleeping...”

“Why?”

“Because, Avie...I’m afraid when I close my eyes at night...that I won’t open them again...”

“Oh Jordan,” Mom said softly, reaching out and gently caressing his cheek.

“I know I’m dying,” he said quietly, looking at the three of us with enormous tears standing on his eyelashes. “I’m just not so sure when it’s gonna happen, and it kinda scares me; I’m afraid that...that I won’t get to say goodbye or something...”

“Promise me you won’t ever say goodbye?”

“What?” My comment caught him off guard; he didn’t understand what I meant, and I don’t think our parents did either at that moment.

“Promise me you won’t ever say goodbye?”

“Why...?”

“Because Taylor,” I said softly, feeling the tears run down my cheeks. “Goodbye is so...so final...if you say goodbye, then I have to let you go...” I looked down at my hands, “and I don’t think I can do that.”

We were all in tears, and it only hit me that moment after how profound something like that was coming from a fifteen year old, almost sixteen year old. He squeezed my hand, and through our tears he promised me. Mom and Dad let me stay and just sit with him until he finally fell asleep for a little while. We all knew he wasn’t doing well at all anymore; he was unbelievably sick, but he pretended to be so strong in front of all of us. I couldn’t help but think that after we all left, when visiting hours were over each night, that Taylor stayed here alone and cried to no one in the dark. The thought of him being so alone, with no one to calm his fears, no one to ease the pain at night, no one to hush his crying, it made me ache somewhere deep inside.

Chapter 21

After his birthday Taylor's condition declined rapidly. Shanna spent a lot of time with him, bringing Jordan to see him as often as she could, and each time she came home she cried; he was getting worse by the day. He barely ate anything, and they were hydrating as well as nourishing him through an I.V. When I had gone to see him, it was almost frightening to see him looking that way again. He was incredibly pale, and very weak, and I don't think he could have spoken above a whisper if he wanted to. His heart monitor seemed to be beeping at an impossibly slow rate that made me more than nervous, and his breathing was too slow for my comfort as well. For once I was allowed to see him by myself, Mom and Dad out in the waiting room with Zoë and Mackenzie. I pulled up a chair beside his bed, and he tiredly, forcefully lifted his eyelids to look at me through glassy, dull eyes.

"Hey," I whispered, taking his hand, though it remained almost perfectly still in mine.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I don't feel much...like talking today..."

"It's okay," I replied, "just rest, okay?" He nodded barely, swallowing dryly, closing his eyes again. He looked so exhausted. "Maybe I should go," I said, gently running my fingers through his soft, short blonde hair. "You need some rest-"

"Stay," he whispered, so quietly in fact, that I wasn't sure that was what he said at all the first time.

"What?"

"Stay," he whispered again. "Please..."

“I’ll stay,” I said softly, “if you want me to.”

“Please...I don’t...don’t wanna be alone.” I could hear the tears threatening his whispered voice. It was quiet for a while, with no sound except the beeping, the incredibly quiet sound of him breathing, and the sound of my breathing. “Sing to me,” he whispered.

“I can’t, Taylor,” I whispered. He gave my hand a faint squeeze.

“Yes you can,” he whispered back. “Avie please...” The sound of tears in his voice was enough to make me have to turn my head and close my eyes. I almost lost it, and I knew I couldn’t do that in front of him; he needed us to be strong for him now more than ever, because he couldn’t be strong for himself.

“Spend all your time waiting for that second chance, for a break that would make it okay. There’s always some reason to feel not good enough. And it’s hard at end of day; I need some distraction, oh a beautiful release. Memories seep from my veins; let me be empty, oh weigh weightless and maybe...I’ll find some peace tonight,” I sang softly to him, trying to keep my voice in tune the way he had taught me; he was right, a long time ago, a song really does sound better when there are real emotions behind it. I felt my eyes burn with tears as I continued on softly. “In the arms of the angel, fly away from here; from this dark cold hotel room, and the endlessness that you fear. You are pulled from the wreckage of your silent reverie; you’re in the arms of the angel, may you find some comfort here...”

I had never sung anyone to sleep in my life, nor comforted anyone with my singing, and when that is what I did for Taylor, it touched me in a way that I couldn’t explain. He could have easily asked Mom to sing for him, knowing she had the voice of an angel, but he chose me instead...Taylor and I shared something in those minutes I sang to him, as I watched the painful comforted tears slide into his hairline. My big brother was hurting, inside and out; he was

in pain – physical, emotional, and mental – and he was exhausted to his core. I kissed his forehead gently before I left the room.

“Goodnight, Avie,” he whispered as I reached the door.

“Sleep sweet, Taylor,” I said softly.

“You too...” I stood for a moment, just watching him, realising what a wonder it truly was just to see him breathing.

I was emotionally and physically drained when Mom and Dad and I finally got home. I went upstairs after saying goodnight to both of my parents, and showered, and then changed into some clean pyjamas and climbed into bed. The sheets were soft, and cool against my skin, soothing me in a way. They acted as sort of a silent but tangible lullaby, urging me to lie my head back against my cool pillows and close my eyes, and slip into a much needed sleep. I was no one to resist; I needed sleep so badly, I craved it, and it wasn't long before I was nestled in the safety of my bed, thankful to have shared what I did with Taylor that night, praying to God that he take care of my brother. And sometime during the night I felt someone's cool lips press softly against my forehead; I didn't think anything of it then; I thought it was just my father coming in to check on me like he did sometimes. So I stirred a little, letting him know I felt it, and went back to sleep.

It had to be about ten after six in the morning when I heard my bedroom door creaking open; I hadn't heard the phone ring. I opened my eyes tiredly to see who was waking me up that early in the morning only to see Mom making her way towards me, and I briefly wondered where Dad was if she was awake this early.

“Avie?” she said softly.

“Yeah?” My voice was thick with sleepiness. She came and sat down on the edge of my bed.

“The hospital just called...”

I pushed myself up, feeling suddenly more awake but still groggy, sitting up and rubbing my eyes. “Is Taylor okay?”

I watched her eyes glaze over with tears. “Baby...he passed in his sleep during the night,” she said softly. Everything seemed to just stop; my chest suddenly felt uncomfortably tight, making it hard to breathe or speak.

“What?” I whispered.

“He’s gone, baby,” she whispered softly, her tears gliding down her cheeks uninhibited. I felt the tears burning my eyes, my throat constricting considerably. I felt like I was dying inside; it hurt to breathe, to think. Taylor died. Taylor was gone...

“Mommy...” I cried softly, “no...”

“Oh baby,” she cried softly, reaching out and pulling me into the safety of her arms, but somehow...there was no safety this time, no comfort. I knew she was trying, but she was grieving too, she was hurting, dying inside. She just lost her son, my brother...

“Oh God, Mommy...” I cried into her shoulder, sobbing uncontrollably. There was nothing I could do now, maybe nothing I could have ever done at all; Taylor was gone. And suddenly, my whole world was crashing in on me. I heard the incredible sob from down the hall and was suddenly aware of where Dad was: he had told Shanna. And I could hear her sobbing.

“Shh...” my mother tried to soothe, crying as well. “It’s gonna be okay, baby; it’s gonna be okay...” I knew she was saying those words without meaning them. Nothing felt okay, nor did it feel like anything was ever going to feel okay again...

* * *

When I stepped up to the casket and looked at the lively picture of him that rested on the closed lid, I felt my eyes burning with yet another ocean of unshed tears; all of the members of the Hanson family had done their share of crying that day, and yet no amount of crying seemed to be quite enough to make up for the empty hole he left in us, a hole that would never be filled, or covered up. Taylor had taken a little piece of each of us with him; it was hard on everyone, the most painful thing we had ever gone through in our lives. Death was so final, and when it was time to bury him, I felt numb all over. Life was suddenly something that didn’t seem worth living, and all I wanted to do was crawl into that tiny bunk on the bus and curl up next to my brother, but instead, he was inside a closed box, and I couldn’t see or touch him.

I stepped up to the brand new polished headstone feeling somewhat numb, both inside and out. Can someone have so much grief that it overflows and has nowhere to go but back inside and seep back out again? It seemed unseasonably cold, staring down at the freshly dug and filled in grave, with the fresh white lilies resting on the large dirt mound.

Jordan Taylor Hanson

March 14, 1983

March 17, 2007

Beloved son, brother, husband and father

“...Good night, sweet prince

And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.”

I couldn't force myself to eat, or sleep, or do anything but sit silently, crying when the tears decided they could come again. Shanna took the empty room on the other side of mine, unable to live with being in his room, knowing they had been together in there, that he had held her in there, held their baby in there; his presence was too much for her to handle yet. I couldn't face the world, or anything that reminded me of him; little things that I took for granted, little things I hadn't associated with him before were breaking me down. All the years we spent fighting, unaware that this was the way it would all end...I never regretted anything more in my whole life than those years we spent apart. I had cried so much I didn't think I would ever have enough tears to cry again; my eyes burned from the salt, pink and puffy, my nose red and running, my throat sore. I just wanted to touch his hand, or hear his voice, or hear him laugh, or just see him smile...there was nothing but empty space, and images of him played themselves over and over in my head, of when he was healthy, when he was young, things we fought over, when he took me out for ice cream or to the park, when he was sick, when he cried, the way he looked when he smiled and his eyes lit up...it all hurt so much. I had enough sense left to realise that I didn't know how to let him go; his memory was this...glowing ember, still burning so hot...and I couldn't touch it or I'd get burned, and I couldn't reach out for him because it was only empty air. I was trapped between these two places, trapped the same as the rest of the family, falling apart at the seams. I knew I couldn't be with him, and yet...that's all any of us wanted. I was so incredibly exhausted in every sense of the word that I curled up on my bed, squeezing my eyes shut, praying to God a prayer I knew was useless, praying that he would just be in his bed when I opened my eyes again. I knew he wouldn't be; I knew that I would never walk down that hallway and see him again, never hear him...every moment I tried to push myself through it, was just tearing me apart; every moment was marked with these apparitions of his soul in my head; I thought I was going to lose my mind. I just wanted to be numb; I didn't want to feel anymore because all I could feel was this incredibly deep emptiness, and this unbelievable painful grief. I didn't know how to handle it at all. And nothing my mother or father did could help;

nothing my brothers and sisters did – there wasn't enough comfort in the world to make any of us stop hurting. They say that 'time heals all wounds' but I wasn't so sure; every minute that went by that we didn't have him, we all seemed to hurt just that much more.

* * *

Everything was eerily still and quiet; no one was really the same, and we all knew it was going to be a long time before it all felt normal again. It had only been a little over a week, and the wounds were still fresh, and every memory was precious and salted those wounds a little more. Through the unbelievable haze in my mind and incredible emotional pain, I was somehow able to make my way into his room. Like my dream, his few belongings he'd had on him when he was brought to the hospital were in the plastic baggies on his desk, and the rest of his things remained untouched. I couldn't stop the overflow of tears; it had only been one week, and it felt like one year.

The whole room still smelled like him, was still occupied by the presence, the essence of him. I wanted to see him so badly...lined up on his desk were pictures of all of us kids, of Mom and Dad, of him and I, or some combination of him and a sibling or two. Those would never be enough; pictures, memories, things that used to belong to him...they would never be enough. They weren't him, but...they were a part of him, and that at least counted for something, but it just wasn't *enough*. Mom hadn't had the heart to touch anything in there, but I needed to; I needed something to try to fill the incredible empty space, even though I knew in my heart nothing could ever truly could.

I stood and opened the desk drawer nearest to his bed, and my eyes immediately filled with tears again. There was a book, a journal of some kind, worn and obviously used. There was an envelope taped to the front of the leather cover, and on it in Taylor's handwriting was *For Avery*. Through

blinding tears I pulled the journal out and detached what I knew was a letter.

Hey Avie. I don't really know how to start this, or even what to say, really. If you're reading this then I'm gone. The only way you would've been able to find this is if I died and my things are being sorted out. So I guess this is my last will and testament – really, it's my goodbye to you. These past ten months have been hell for me, but you've made it bearable – all of you have. Make sure you tell Shanna that she and Jordan meant the world to me, and I'll never be too far...

I made a lot of mistakes before all of this happened, and I'm glad you let me back in to make up for them. I wish I could be there for you, to watch you become one of the most beautiful women in the world, see you grow up and get married...I'm sorry that I can't. I guess God had different plans for me.

Do me a favour, okay? Shanna's going to need all of you, and so will Jordan. Be there for them, please. She loves you all, and I know you all love her and the baby, and I just want you all to lean on each other. Help her raise Jordan to be good.

My point was to tell you that this book is yours now. There are a lot of memories in that old leatherback. I never used it all the time, so that's why it lasted me ten years. There are some more things in there for you – I know you'll want to keep it, so, it's yours. You never have to share it with anyone if you don't want to, but you can.

I guess this is the part where I tell you you'll always be my little sister, and I'll always be your big brother. Just remember me; remember I'm never really gone – no one's ever really gone, Avie; we all leave a little piece of ourselves behind.

Love Always, Taylor

I had to smile through my tears. Yeah, he was right; he'd never really be gone. There were little pieces of him in all our lives, in all of us. And I opened the journal, beginning a journey through Taylor's life, picture by picture, page by page.