



Julie Lewis



**A HEART
THAT ISN'T
MINE**



PART I: FROM THE START

Chapter 1

When he walked into the bar that night, Nick Carter's heart was already broken.

What am I doing here? he wondered as he made his way through the crowd, looking around at all the happy couples in costume, college kids who'd come to party, groups of women having a girls' night out. *I don't belong here anymore.*

He hesitated and had almost turned to leave when he heard the bartender call out, "Hey, what can I get you?"

With a sigh, Nick slumped down onto an empty stool. No one else even seemed to notice him; they were all engrossed in conversation, guys cracking jokes and girls giggling without a care in the world. Nick envied them. He'd never felt more alone.

"We've got some spooky drink specials tonight," the bartender added with a tight-lipped smile. Her face was made up like a Mexican sugar skull. Before he could order his usual beer, she slid a piece of bright orange paper across the polished wood bartop.

Nick scanned the menu briefly, almost smiling at some of the creative cocktail names. Halloween had always been his favorite holiday. He wasn't in a very festive mood, but being here at the bar was better than spending another night at home by himself, drinking vodka straight from the bottle. "How 'bout a Vampire Slayer?" he said, the combination of vodka and tequila catching his eye. "Make it strong."

The bartender gave a nod. "You got it." She poured equal parts of the two spirits into a shaker with a splash of lime juice and a scoop of ice. It was the kind of drink Lauren would have liked, Nick thought, feeling a pang in his chest as he watched the woman pour the cocktail into a martini glass and fill it to the rim with club soda. He fished a ten dollar bill out of his wallet as she handed him his drink. He took a sip. It wasn't

anything special, but not bad either - certainly better than the stuff he'd been drinking back at his vacation home. He couldn't help but wonder why a bland, colorless cocktail would be called the Vampire Slayer, but it wasn't a question worth asking. Besides, the bartender had already turned away to serve someone else.

Nick set the glass back down on the bar, absently sliding his fingers up and down the stem as he let his mind wander. He wondered what his wife and son were doing. He had texted Lauren that morning to wish her a happy Halloween - it was her favorite holiday, too. "*Same to you,*" was all she'd said back. He pulled his phone out of his pocket to see if she'd sent a photo of Odin in his costume, but there were no new messages. He checked the time. It was only seven o'clock on the West Coast; maybe they were still trick-or-treating. Or maybe she just didn't care. Maybe she was punishing him for being here instead of there, even though she was the one who had pushed him away.

Frowning, he sent her a new text: "*How was Odin's Halloween?*" Then he set his phone down on the bar and stared at it for almost a full minute, willing it to vibrate. But the phone remained silent and still. *She's just busy with Odin,* Nick told himself. *She'll text back once she's put him to bed.* But he wasn't so sure. Lauren hadn't exchanged many words with him since he'd left, in spite of his efforts to reach out to her. She was still hurting too, he knew. She just had different ways of showing it. That was what had driven them apart in the first place - not just his drinking or her depression, but the way they'd dealt with the same grief so differently.

As he took a deep breath and let it out slowly, Nick suddenly got the feeling that someone was staring at him. He looked up and around, his eyes panning across the bar, but no one caught his attention. He was just being paranoid. Still, he pulled down the brim of his Buccaneers cap as he bent over his drink. He didn't want to be recognized as "Nick Carter of the Backstreet Boys," though he doubted anyone here would know who he was anyway. It looked like a young crowd. *Some of these kids weren't even born when our first album came out,* he thought with some amusement, as he took a long swig from his glass. He swallowed hard, welcoming the burn of the tequila as it went down his throat.

"You about ready for another?" asked the bartender, as she poured vodka into a glass of ice.

Nick nodded. "Yeah, in a few," he said, his eyes dropping to his phone again. Still no word from Lauren. *Stop obsessing,* he scolded himself. He knew he needed to back off, just lay low and stay away long enough for her to start missing him. She'd be begging

him to come home by Christmas - and maybe he'd be able to get his life back together by then. But he missed her so much already...

"Here you go," said the bartender, setting a highball glass in front of him. It was filled with a bubbly, amber-colored cocktail and garnished with a slice of orange.

"Thanks," said Nick in confusion, "but this isn't what I was drinking."

The bartender smiled. "Compliments of the couple down at the corner," she said, tipping her head in their direction. "The lady requested this drink specifically, but if you don't like it, I'll make you another Slayer."

Curiously, Nick leaned forward and looked down the L-shaped bar. The blonde woman on the corner caught his eye first. She was wearing a little, white "naughty nurse" costume that was covered with blood, and her face was in full zombie makeup. The dark-haired man sitting beside her had on a bloodstained hospital gown and similar makeup. They looked like a fun couple. Nick smiled and nodded their way, holding up his drink to show his appreciation. They both grinned back, and the girl gave him a little wave. He turned back to the bartender. "What's in it?" he asked, wondering why the woman had chosen that particular drink.

"Vodka, bitters, and ginger ale. It's called a Headless Horseman."

"Ah." Nick smiled knowingly as he sipped from the glass. So he *had* been recognized - and by a real fan, too. Not many other people knew he had once been in a movie set in the legendary Sleepy Hollow. Now he knew who had been watching him earlier.

"So? What do you think?" the bartender asked, waiting for his reaction.

"It's good," he replied. "I think I'll stick with it. Thanks." He glanced down at the couple and smiled again. The woman winked. Nick took another drink, then lowered his eyes to his phone. It had been two whole minutes since he'd last looked at it. *Thanks for the distraction*, he thought.

There were two definite downsides to being at the bar by himself: no one to talk to and too much time to think. He supposed he could have struck up a conversation with someone sitting nearby, but he felt awkward doing so. Nick had never had to actively seek out the company of strangers when he went out; they usually came up to him instead. He was used to being the center of attention, constantly surrounded by friends and fans. It had been a long time since he'd felt this lonely.

In fact, Nick couldn't remember ever having been in Key West without some kind of entourage, whether it was his family or a group of friends who was with him. His estrangement from Lauren was making him realize how many old friends and family members he'd lost touch with over the years. That was mostly by choice and probably for the best, considering some of the bad influences he'd had in his life before Lauren had helped him turn it around... but still, it stung to realize that, outside of her relatives and his buddies in the music business, he basically had no one. It wasn't like it had been back in the day; he couldn't just randomly call Howie, AJ, Brian, or Kevin to come hang out with him. They were spread out across the country, and they all spent their breaks with their own families, the same way Nick had up until now. He'd come to the Keys because he hadn't known what else to do with himself or where else to go. Over the years, he had sold his properties in Parkland, Franklin, and Los Angeles. All he had left was a vacation home he rented in Key West, which had always been his go-to getaway spot. It hadn't always been the best place for him to be, but at least it was familiar. Besides, how much trouble could he get into by himself?

Too quickly, Nick finished his drink and ordered another - "plus a round for the zombie couple at the corner," he told the bartender.

"Coming right up," she replied with a smile.

As soon as she delivered the drinks to them, the zombie nurse and patient both grinned at him and raised their glasses. "Cheers!" they called down the bar, clinking them together.

Nick raised his own glass and nodded in acknowledgment. He thought that would be the end of their interaction, now that he'd returned the favor and bought them a round, but he was wrong. The next time he looked their way, they were both frantically beckoning him over. Nick hesitated for a second, then asked himself, *What the hell do I have to lose?*

Not a damn thing, he decided, taking his drink down to their end of the bar.

"Hey, man, thanks for coming over," the guy said right away, reaching out his hand to shake Nick's. "I'm Rob. My wife Dani here has been dying to meet you."

"Nice to meet you both," Nick replied, shifting automatically into "meet-and-greet" mode. Decades of practice had helped him perfect his stage persona. It didn't matter what kind of mood he was in; he could always fake a smile and turn on the Nick Carter charm when he needed to. "Thanks for the drink."

“Back at you, bro.” Rob seemed friendly, though he reminded Nick of an overgrown frat boy from the Jersey Shore. It was hard to tell how old he was with the zombie makeup on, but he looked closer to Nick’s age than the college crowd.

“I’m trying real hard to play it cool here, but my inner teenybopper is seriously about ready to lose her shit right now,” said his wife, Dani, as she shook Nick’s hand, beaming up at him with stars in her brown eyes.

He laughed - partly because of what she’d said and partly because it was pretty funny seeing someone fangirl over him in full zombie makeup (though it wasn’t the first time that had happened). “I hear that a lot, for some reason. You don’t have to lose your shit around me; I’m just a regular guy,” he said.

“Yeah, a regular guy whose face may or may not have been taped to my bedroom wall back in the day,” Dani replied, grinning broadly.

“But dude, I promise, you’re not hanging on our bedroom wall now, so you don’t have to worry about a thing. We’re normal, I swear,” said Rob, slapping Nick on the shoulder. “You wanna sit down? There’s an empty stool on the other side of Dani.”

“Not that that’s why we called you over or anything,” Dani added with another flirtatious wink, and for a few seconds, Nick forgot all about his own wife. Rob’s wife was undeniably sexy, even covered in zombie makeup and fake blood. Or maybe it was the costume that *made* her sexy - she looked more like a zombie pinup model than a monster from *The Walking Dead*. Either way, Nick was attracted to her. But that didn’t worry him - she was married, and so was he, at least in the legal sense of the word. There was nothing wrong with making conversation.

“Sure,” he said and sat down next to Dani. At the end of the night, they would go their separate ways and never see each other again, but for now, why not enjoy each other’s company? Nick thought it had to be better than continuing to wallow alone, drowning his sorrows in alcohol. If that were really how he wanted to spend his Halloween night, he would have just stayed home. “I love your costumes, by the way,” he added. “You guys look awesome.”

“Thanks! We love the undead,” replied Dani with a ghoulish grin, waggling her eyebrows.

Nick laughed. “Yeah, I’m a big zombie fan too.”

“Oh, I know. I’ve seen *Dead 7*,” she said, still grinning. “So much fun!”

At first, the mention of Nick's movie lifted his heavy heart a little, but the memory of filming it with his barely-pregnant wife brought his mood back down again. He missed both Lauren and Odin so much, it made his chest hurt.

Rob rolled his eyes. "Yeah, she even made *me* watch that one. I gotta say, though, it was actually pretty creative," he admitted with a wry smile. "Hey, speaking of which, we think we've got some good ideas for your next horror movie."

"Rob, *shh!*" hissed Dani, smacking her husband in the shoulder. "He doesn't want to hear your dumb ideas."

"Yeah, I do," said Nick, eager for another distraction. He smirked as he set his drink down, his curiosity piqued. "Come on, let's hear 'em."

"Well, okay, here's one. You know how you guys did that documentary?" said Rob, and Nick nodded, secretly impressed by how much this meathead seemed to know about him. "Well, you get the whole group together to make another Backstreet Boys movie, and you market it as a Backstreet Boys movie, like a boy version of *Spice World*, only what the fans won't know is that it's gonna be a *horror* movie. It starts out like what you'd expect a Backstreet Boys movie to be - you know, the five guys goofing around on the tour bus, basic shit like that. But then, all of a sudden, the bus gets hit by an asteroid!" He punched his fist into his palm for emphasis, his voice escalating with excitement. "Everyone thinks the Boys must be dead, but then they emerge from the crater as undead monsters, hungering for human flesh. See, the asteroid was carrying an unknown pathogen from space, and they've all been infected with... *dun dun dun...* a zombie virus. They start feeding on their fans, triggering the zombie apocalypse. And you call it... *Backstreet's Back*."

"Oh my god, babe, that is so bad," Dani groaned, facepalming, but Nick burst out laughing. It felt good to laugh like that again.

"That is *awesome*. I love it!" he exclaimed, thinking about how much fun it would be to play a zombie. Somehow, he'd missed out on that opportunity in his own zombie movie.

"Thanks," said Rob, shooting his wife a big, gloating grin. "Or - here's another one for ya - if you'd rather explore different genres of horror, or just can't get Brian and Kevin to commit..."

Nick laughed again, remembering how he'd tried and failed to convince the Kentucky cousins to be in *Dead 7*. Brian had filmed a cameo for every bad movie his wife had

been in, yet wanted nothing to do with Nick's, while Kevin, who had legitimately acted in other films and even been on Broadway, seemed to think a SyFy movie full of nineties boy band members was somehow beneath him.

"...then what about a nod to the fifties creature features - you know, like *Godzilla* or *Tarantula*? You could make it about some kind of giant monster attacking a city, and you could call it... *Larger Than Life*."

Nick snorted, as Dani shook her head. "Sorry about him," she told Nick, looking sympathetic. "For the record, *my* idea was much better."

"Yeah? So what's yours?" he asked, smiling at her.

Dani crossed her legs, hitching the hem of her tiny dress down over her thighs as she leaned toward him. "Well," she began, smiling back, "it's about this homicide detective who's been unlucky in love and is desperate to find someone, *anyone*, to be with. So, in the midst of this series of murders he's been investigating, he falls for this girl who seems to reciprocate his feelings. But just when he thinks he's found the one, he finds out she's been hiding a secret from him: she's the serial killer he's been looking for. So then he has to decide whether to arrest her or protect her. You could call it *As Long As You Love Me*."

Nick chuckled. "*I don't care who you are... where you're from.... what you did, as long you love me,*" he sang softly. "It's perfect. I love it."

"It sounds like a Lifetime movie," said Rob, wrinkling his nose.

"Yeah, well, your ideas sound like SyFy movies," Dani shot back.

"So? His first movie was *made for SyFy!*"

Nick downed the rest of his drink in one, long swallow. "Hey, I think they're all great," he said, trying to stop them from bickering back and forth. He set his empty glass down on the bar. "Who's ready for another round?"

The bartender brought them fresh drinks, and Nick changed the subject. "So, are you guys here on vacation or what?"

Rob laughed. "Ohh, no - actually, we live here."

"All year round," Dani added proudly.

Nick smiled. "Locals, huh?"

Dani looked at Rob and shrugged. "Not originally, but I guess we've been here long enough to be considered locals by now. I didn't grow up all that far away - Fort Myers - but Rob's actually from New Jersey."

Called it, thought Nick, suppressing a smirk. "Wow. What brought you down here?" he asked Rob.

"The weather," Rob replied without missing a beat. Nick and Dani both laughed. "But no, actually, I did my residency in Miami. That's where me and Dani met."

"Residency?" Nick repeated blankly.

Rob grinned. "Don't let my costume fool you," he said, looking down at his hospital gown. "I'm actually a doctor, not a patient... or a zombie, for that matter."

Nick raised his eyebrows. "For real?" He definitely hadn't called that one. Rob looked more like a personal trainer than someone with any real medical training.

"Yeah." Rob sat up a little straighter, puffing his chest. "I'm a critical care specialist. I work in the ICU - plenty of zombies in there, lemme tell you."

Nick laughed. "Wow, that's awesome. Sounds like a tough job though."

Rob nodded as he took a swig from his beer. "It's not easy, but I love it."

"So what about you?" Nick asked, turning to Dani. "Are you really a nurse?"

"I am," she replied, smiling. "I don't usually dress like this, though, don't worry."

Nick snickered. "Yeah, I could see some of your patients having heart attacks if you showed up looking like that."

"You mean 'cause she's scary-looking or 'cause she's so freakin' sexy?" Rob asked, resting his hand on Dani's thigh.

Nick nearly choked on his drink. "Uhh, I'm gonna have to plead the fifth on that one," he said with a grin, holding up his hands in defense. He could feel his face flushing and hoped they wouldn't notice. Rob laughed, while Dani just rolled her eyes.

“So what about you, man? You don’t live down here, do you?” Rob asked Nick.

He shook his head as he swallowed another sip. “Not full time. I’ve been coming to the Keys for years, though. Used to have a house in Marathon, and now I’m renting a place here in Key West. I’ve got a boat down here, too.”

“I bet that’s nice,” said Rob. “I’d like to buy us a boat one of these days. Gotta pay off some more of my med school loans first, though.” He grinned. “See, that’s what they don’t tell you about being a doctor. You think you’re gonna make good money, but the truth is, you don’t make a damn thing until already you’re hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt.”

“That sucks,” Nick replied, not knowing what else to say. He’d never had to worry about money the way most adults did. He was grateful for that, but it did make him feel awkward whenever he heard fans talking about how long they’d had to save just to be able to afford to go to one of his shows.

“Oh come on, babe, don’t start talking about money. You’re stressing me out,” said Dani, swatting playfully at her husband. Then she turned back to Nick and smiled. “So, is your family here with you?”

Nick felt another pang of sorrow in his chest, and for the first time since he’d sat down with them, he fought the urge to check his phone. “Nah. Not this time,” he said, and left it at that. He wondered how closely Dani kept up with him these days. He held his breath, waiting to see if she would bring up the baby, but she didn’t.

Instead, she stood up and said, “Excuse me, but I’ve gotta use the bathroom. Will you watch my drink?”

“Sure,” said Nick, smiling with relief as she walked away.

Once it was just him and Rob, the conversation quickly stalled. He heard Rob’s phone ding and saw him reach under his hospital gown to retrieve it - Nick was relieved to see he had shorts on underneath. Rob took his phone out of his pocket and frowned as he read the text he’d received. Taking advantage of the pause in their conversation, Nick pulled his own phone out and looked at the screen. Still nothing from Lauren. With a sigh, he set it down on the bar and took another swig of his drink.

On the other side of Dani's empty stool, Rob was texting up a storm, his phone dinging every few seconds. He didn't even look up until Dani came back from the bathroom a few minutes later. "Did you fall in or what?" he asked his wife, without his usual smile.

She frowned. "What's the matter?"

Rob sighed. "Dimitri wants me to come in to work."

Dani's mouth dropped open. "What, now? Tonight?" He nodded. "But you're not on call tonight!" she protested.

"I know, but there was a bad accident on the bridge. A lot of critical cases coming in. You know the hospital's not equipped for big traumas like that; they need all the help they can get."

Dani shook her head. "You can't work when you've been drinking!"

Rob shrugged. "I tried to tell him that, babe, but he said even if I don't do any procedures, I can still help supervise the residents." He heaved a sigh and shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I've gotta go. You okay with taking an Uber home tonight?"

Dani hesitated. "Don't you think I should go with you?"

"No, I think you should stay here and enjoy yourself," her husband said firmly. "It's Halloween. At least one of us should get to have some fun." Then he looked at Nick. "Will you make sure she gets a ride home?"

"Yeah, of course," Nick replied automatically, though he felt awkward about it. It was one thing to be the third wheel with a couple he hardly knew; it was quite another to be alone at a bar with an attractive, married woman.

But Rob didn't seem to be too concerned. "I'll see you in the morning," he said, as he kissed his wife goodbye.

Dani gave him a stern look. "Drive safely. And don't forget to wash all that shit off your face before you walk into the hospital."

He laughed. "Don't worry; I'm gonna stop home and change first. Nice meeting you again, man," he added, turning to shake Nick's hand one more time.

“You too,” Nick replied. Watching Rob walk away, he was filled with a sudden sense of regret. It was an ominous feeling that made his heart stutter and his stomach churn. *This was a bad idea*, he thought for the second time that night. *I shouldn't be here*. It felt like a betrayal to Lauren, somehow, even though she still hadn't bothered to text him back. He wished he hadn't agreed to watch out for Rob's wife. But he wasn't about to leave Dani there by herself, so he took another sip of his drink and made the fateful decision to stay.

Chapter 2

“Every girl dreams of marrying a doctor, but lemme tell you - sometimes it really sucks,” sighed Dani after her husband had left.

Nick laughed. “My wife would say the same thing about being married to a Backstreet Boy.”

“Aw, I bet that's not true. She gets to travel the world with you! What a lucky woman.”

He wished Lauren saw it that way. He checked his phone - still no word from her.

“Sorry,” said Dani when he didn't reply. “I didn't mean to imply that your lives are perfect or anything. I know no one's is.”

Nick nodded. “You're right about that,” he said, taking another sip of his drink. Their conversation quickly lapsed into silence.

“Are you okay?” she asked after two minutes had gone by without either of them talking. “You got quiet all of a sudden. Was it because of what I said about your wife?”

“Sorry,” said Nick, forcing himself to smile. “Nah, it's not that. I guess I just ran out of stuff to say.”

She made a face. “Aw, man... Am I really that boring? I mean, Rob likes to believe *he's* the fun one, but hey, I can be fun, too!”

Nick laughed and shook his head. “No, no, it's not your fault,” he assured her. “You seem like a lot of fun. I'm the one who's being lame tonight. Look at my costume compared to yours.”

“What costume?” she asked, laughing, as her eyes panned from his Bucs cap to the plain white t-shirt and jeans he was wearing.

“Exactly.”

She smirked. “I see. So this is like a ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ type of situation,” she said, making air quotes with her fingers.

“Yeah... sorry,” said Nick. “I’ve just been going through a lot of shit lately.”

“I know.” Her teasing smile was suddenly replaced with one of sympathy. “I was really sorry to hear about that.”

“Thanks.” His chest suddenly felt tight, as his throat constricted and his eyeballs burned. He turned to finish his drink, trying to hide the fact that he was blinking back tears. He could feel Dani staring at him.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asked softly. “You look kinda pale all of a sudden.”

Nick swallowed hard and set his glass down. “Says the girl in gray face paint,” he replied, forcing himself to laugh. “I’m fine. It’s just, my stomach’s sort of upset. I’ll be right back.”

Great, now she thinks I’m going to take a shit, he thought, as he excused himself and hurried off to the bathroom. He used the urinal and washed his hands, then splashed some cold water on his face and wiped it off with a paper towel.

When he came back, Dani had ordered him another drink. “Hey, thanks,” he said, as he sat back down.

“You’re welcome. Feeling better?” she asked, smiling.

He nodded. “This should probably be my last one, though,” he said, looking at the time on his phone. It was eleven o’clock - eight in Las Vegas - and he still hadn’t heard back from Lauren. “I wanna head home soon and try to Facetime my son before he goes to bed, find out how his Halloween was.” He wasn’t sure Lauren would answer, but it was worth a try - and, if nothing else, an excuse for him to leave.

“Aww, that’s so sweet!” Dani exclaimed. “What did he dress up as?”

“I... I’m not sure,” Nick admitted, ashamed of how out-of-touch he’d been with what was going on at home.

“Oh... well, whatever it was, I’m sure he was adorable,” she said, smiling again.

He smiled back. “Thanks. You got any kids?”

She shook her head. “Not yet. Rob and I both work long hours at the hospital, and with our busy schedules, I just don’t know how well we’d be able to balance work and family right now.”

“It’s not easy,” Nick admitted, “but you figure it out.” *Or you let your wife figure it out*, he thought, feeling the guilt stab at his heart yet again. That was how work and family had balanced out in his marriage: he went to work, and Lauren stayed home and took care of the family while he was away. Nick knew that wasn’t really fair to her, but it wasn’t like he’d wanted to leave, either. He didn’t have a choice. His career depended on him touring, and he had four other guys and legions of fans who were counting on him. He couldn’t let them down. But in fulfilling his commitments, he’d let Lauren down instead. His wife had needed him, and he hadn’t been there for her. It was no wonder she was still upset with him.

“I’m sure we will... someday,” Dani said wistfully, taking a sip of her drink.

Nick did the same, the vodka sliding smoothly down his throat. He was starting to feel the depressive effects of the alcohol now. Just a few more drinks when he got home, and he would feel nothing - which was exactly the way he wanted to feel. Numb.

Dani set her drink back down on the bar. “So,” she said, “if you don’t mind my asking, what are you doing here all by yourself on Halloween?”

Nick looked over at her, surprised by the question and unsure of how to answer.

“Honestly? I don’t really wanna talk about it,” he replied. “Sorry.”

“Fair enough,” she said, smiling at him. “I’m sorry, too. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“No problem.” Nick smiled back, but he felt awkward, as if his perfectly polished “meet-and-greet” mask had slipped to reveal someone rude and ugly on the inside. It wasn’t that he was trying to hide the truth. He just didn’t want to air all his dirty laundry in front of this woman, this fan, he hardly knew. He took a long drink, draining half his glass in one swallow. His head swam as the alcohol rushed straight to it.

“Looks like we’re going to get some weather,” said Dani. Her eyes had wandered to one of the TVs mounted on the wall over their heads. The local news was on. The sound had been muted, but Nick could see a radar image showing the rotation of a tropical storm in the Atlantic.

“Is it heading this way?” he asked.

“Hard to tell. It’s still too far out to sea,” she said. “I’m sure we’ll be fine though. After Hurricane Irma, I’m convinced Key West can survive anything.”

“Were you here during Irma? I bet that was scary.”

Dani nodded. “It was. We had to evacuate the whole hospital. I ended up spending almost a week in the great city of Gadsden, Alabama. But all in all, we were lucky.”

“That’s good,” said Nick. He stared at the TV screen, pretending to be interested in a report about a missing woman. Her photo swam in and out of focus as his buzz intensified.

“How about you?” Dani asked him suddenly. “You’ve been through hurricanes before, haven’t you, growing up in Florida?”

“Uh-huh.” Nick was sure she had expected him to elaborate, but his brain felt foggy, his thoughts muddled. “Hey, I hate to do this to you, but I’m about ready to head home. How about you?”

She shrugged. “Yeah, okay. Sure.”

“Sorry,” Nick said. “I’m pathetic, I know. Can’t even make it to midnight anymore.”

She laughed. “It’s fine. Just let me order an Uber first.” She gave him a sidelong glance as she opened up the app on her phone. “We can share a ride, if you want. I don’t know how you got here, but you sure don’t look like you’re in any shape to drive. I’ll just have the driver drop you off at your place on the way.”

“Sure, that’d be great - thanks,” Nick replied, downing the rest of his drink while Dani reserved their ride.

“Okay, we’re all set,” she said, stuffing her phone into the front pocket of her dress. “He should be here in a couple of minutes. Silver Corolla.”

“Sounds good.” As Nick went to stand up, he was rocked by a sudden wave of dizziness. He swayed on the spot for a few seconds before Dani reached out and caught his arm.

“You okay?” she asked, looking at him with concern.

“Yeah,” he said, holding onto the stool to steady himself. He let out a shaky laugh. “Look at me, stumbling around after four fuckin’ drinks. I guess I’m getting old... can’t hold my liquor like I used to.”

“Happens to the best of us,” said Dani, patting his shoulder. “Are you good now? We should get outside.”

Nick nodded. “Yeah... let’s go.” He couldn’t wait to get some fresh air; he was starting to feel slightly nauseous. He followed her out of the bar, fighting claustrophobia as they wove their way through the crowd. Once they were standing on the sidewalk outside, he realized he was drenched in sweat. He hadn’t noticed how hot it had been inside the bar until now. No wonder he felt so bad - he was overheated and probably dehydrated, too. When he got home, he was going to chug a whole bottle of water before he went to bed.

“I had a really good time tonight,” Dani said, smiling at him, as they waited for their ride. “I’m so glad I got a chance to talk to you.”

“It was nice talking to you, too,” Nick replied. He tugged at the neck of his t-shirt, trying to cool off the skin underneath. The warm air was thick with humidity, which didn’t help.

When the silver Corolla pulled up to the curb, Nick climbed into the back seat with Dani and told the driver his address. He couldn’t wait to get home so he could take a cold shower and go to sleep. His heart was hammering in his chest, and his head was pounding. “Man, I sure hit my wall all of a sudden,” he mumbled, leaning his head against the window.

“Hey, are you sure you’re okay?” he heard Dani ask.

“Yeah... fine,” he answered her, his eyelids growing heavy. The last thing he remembered was feeling the car shift into gear as he pressed his cheek up to the cool glass and let his eyes close.

Chapter 3

When Nick opened his eyes, his whole world had changed.

He was no longer in the car, but lying in a bed instead. Only it wasn't his bed. And this definitely wasn't his house. Bewildered, he looked around, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the bright lights and bare, white walls. Upon waking, what his sleeping brain had perceived as white noise gradually separated into distinct sounds: a series of slow, steady blips, accompanied by a soft, mechanical hiss. That was when he realized he was in a hospital room.

He tried to sit up, but his head felt too heavy to lift from the pillow. His chest hurt like someone had been sitting on it, and it was hard to breathe. There was a hose sticking out of his mouth like a big, blue snake that was slowly suffocating him. He tried to reach for it, but found that his wrists were tied to the bed rails.

He began to panic.

In the background, he heard the high-pitched beeping sounds accelerate as his heart began to race. An alarm went off as he writhed back and forth on the bed, fighting to free himself from his restraints before he choked to death on whatever was clogging his throat. In the midst of his struggle, he became aware of someone saying his name.

"Nick... Nick, relax. You're okay, Nick." Her voice was soothing, even though her words meant nothing to him. A pair of hands, warm and soft, pressed against his shoulders, gently but firmly holding him down. As the woman leaned over him, he looked into her brown eyes and realized he recognized them.

Dani? His tongue touched something foreign in his mouth as he tried to say her name, only to find that he couldn't make a sound.

"*Shh...* Don't try to speak," she said softly. "You're in the hospital. We had to put a tube down your windpipe. It's hooked up to a ventilator that's helping you breathe, so just lie back and let it do its thing."

As she spoke, Nick stared up at her face, forcing himself to focus on what she was saying. Once he finally surrendered, he was able to feel his lungs fill with the pure oxygen being pumped into them through the breathing tube. Slowly, his body began to relax. The frantic blips became spaced apart again, as his heart slowed back down.

“There you go,” said Dani. “See, the machine’s doing all the hard work, while you get to take it easy.” She smiled and patted his shoulder, releasing the pressure she’d been applying to keep him in place. Then she took off the stethoscope she was wearing around her neck and put it in her ears. She rubbed the round end with her palm to warm it before she pulled back the front of Nick’s hospital gown and pressed it against his bare chest. Her smile faded as she listened, lips pursed in concentration.

Nick watched her with impatience, wishing he could communicate all the questions he had. What was he doing here? What was wrong with him? He racked his brain, trying to remember what had happened. The last thing he could recall was leaving the bar with her. Had they been in an accident?

It was hard for him to assess what kind of condition he was in when he was lying flat on his back, tethered to the bed by tubes, but he gave it a shot, moving different parts of his body to check for pain. He worked his way from head to toe, slowly shrugging his shoulders, bending his elbows and knees, rotating his wrists and ankles, wiggling his fingers and toes. Everything seemed intact, with no obvious injuries. He felt groggy and weak, but otherwise fine. So why was he here?

“You want out of those restraints, don’t you?” said Dani, watching him squirm.

Nick tried to nod, but found it difficult to move his head much without tugging on the tube in his throat.

Dani seemed to understand. “Dumb question, huh?” she added, draping the stethoscope around her neck again. “Of course, Captain Obvious. I’m sorry we had to put them on; we just wanted to make sure you didn’t accidentally pull out any of your tubes when you started to wake up. You’re not going to do that, are you? Blink once for yes, twice for no.”

Nick blinked twice.

Dani smiled. “Good. Okay then, let’s get these off!”

She unhooked the straps that restrained his right hand first. Immediately, he reached up to touch the ventilator hose. *When can this come out?* he wanted to know, although he had no way of asking.

Dani seemed to understand. “One thing at a time,” she said, taking his hand and giving it a pat. “The doctor needs to assess your breathing before we can remove that.” She moved around to the other side of his bed. “Watch out for the arterial line in this one,”

she warned as she freed his left arm. Lifting it carefully, Nick could see a length of clear tubing connected to a catheter on the inside of his wrist. “You’re right-handed, aren’t you?” Dani asked, and he blinked. “I thought so. That’s why we put it in the left.”

On sudden inspiration, he raised his right hand and mimed writing in midair. If he couldn’t talk, maybe he could write out his questions instead.

Dani raised her eyebrows. “You want a whiteboard?” she offered, and he blinked again. She smiled. “Sure thing. Give me just one sec.”

She walked away from his bedside, leaving Nick to stare up at the plain, white ceiling, his barely-controlled panic closing in again as he waited for her to return. But before it could take hold of him completely, Dani came back, carrying a miniature dry erase board and marker. She uncapped the marker and handed it to him, holding up the board so he could write on it.

“*YMI here?*” he scrawled.

Dani cocked her head to the side as she deciphered the message. Then she gave him a grim smile and said, “I’d better get a doctor to help explain. Sit tight, and I’ll be right back.”

Nick’s mind raced as he lay helplessly in bed, listening to the unnatural hiss of the ventilator that was breathing for him and the annoying blip of the monitor that measured every beat of his heart. He had no idea what was wrong with him, but from the amount of equipment he was hooked up to - not to mention the look on Dani’s face just then - he knew it must be something serious. He held his right hand up in front of his face so that he could read the hospital bracelet around his wrist. Printed on it was his name, date of birth, and other basic information. The name of the hospital - Lower Keys Medical Center - was included at the bottom, but nowhere did it list the reason he’d been admitted there. Frustrated, Nick let his arm fall back to his side.

He waited an agonizing few more minutes for Dani to return. Finally, she walked back into the room with a dark-haired man in a white coat. Nick didn’t recognize him until he smiled and said, “Hey, Nick. Remember me?” Then he realized: it was Dani’s husband. He looked a lot different without his zombie makeup, but then again, so did she. “Dr. Rob,” he added, shaking Nick’s hand as he had in the bar.

Nick merely blinked, too nervous to smile back.

“It’s good to see you awake, man,” Rob said, reaching for the stethoscope around his neck. “You mind if I take a quick listen? I hear you’re pretty eager to have that breathing tube taken out - don’t blame you one bit. Dani, let’s sit him up a little more so he can lean forward for me.”

Dani raised the head of the bed until Nick was at a forty-five degree angle, instead of flat on his back. This was a definite improvement - he didn’t feel as helpless that way, at least. He waited impatiently while Rob moved the stethoscope around his back and chest, which he could now see was wired up with electrodes that connected to the constantly beeping heart monitor. It brought back bad memories of being in the cardiologist’s office over a decade ago, undergoing the battery of tests that had led to his diagnosis of cardiomyopathy. Thinking back to those days made Nick uncomfortable, and his anxiety only intensified.

Finally, Rob removed the stethoscope. “Good bilateral breath sounds,” he told his wife. “We’ll be able to attempt a spontaneous breathing trial and, assuming he passes, hopefully extubate him later today.”

Dani nodded. “That’s great news, Nick,” she said, giving him an encouraging smile. “We’ll get that tube out of your throat soon so you can talk again.”

Frowning, Nick pointed to what he’d written on the whiteboard. Rob read it, his eyes narrowing, and nodded. “You wanna know what the hell you’re doing here, huh? Of course you do.” He glanced at his wife. “Why don’t you start, Dani? You’re the one who was there.”

Dani took a deep breath before nodding her head. “You mind if I sit down?” she asked Nick. When he blinked twice, she lowered the side rail of his bed and perched on the edge, twisting her body around so that she was facing him. She took his right hand in hers and held it tightly. “Do you remember Halloween night? When we met at the bar?”

He blinked, surprised by her questions. Why wouldn’t he remember what he’d done the night before? He hadn’t had *that* much to drink. Then again, everything after they’d left the bar was still a blur. Obviously *something* had happened that he couldn’t recall.

“Well, we left together... and, um... you collapsed.” Dani bit down on her bottom lip, a dire look in her dark brown eyes. He frowned, not entirely understanding what she meant. Maybe he’d drunk more than he remembered, enough to make him black out and forget.

Rob helped her to explain. “What we think happened was that your heart went into this weird, chaotic rhythm called ventricular fibrillation, where it sort of quivers but doesn’t actually pump any blood. Basically, your heart stopped beating.”

Nick’s eyes widened with disbelief. His heart was sure beating now, harder and faster than before. How could it have just randomly stopped?

“We call it ‘sudden cardiac death,’” Rob continued. “It’s a scary thing - it usually happens without any warning, and obviously, a lot of people don’t survive it. But thankfully, you had this wonderful nurse with you who was able to start CPR right away.” He clapped his wife on the shoulder. “She kept your blood circulating until the paramedics came. Without her, you’d probably be brain dead.”

Nick looked at Dani, still struggling to process what she and Rob were telling him. She squeezed his hand. “They had to shock your heart five times to get it beating again,” she said softly. “But, thank god, they brought you back.”

Nick’s mouth fell open, but of course, he couldn’t speak. Not that he even would know what to say. He was still holding the marker, but there was no way he could put into words what he was feeling at that moment - an unexplainable mixture of shock, horror, gratitude, and confusion.

“You’ve been in a medically-induced coma for the last couple of days,” Dr. Rob went on. “We had to cool your body down for twenty-four hours to keep your brain from being damaged by the lack of oxygen; then we gradually warmed you back up. You’re doing better now, but obviously, there’s still some things you’ll need to discuss with the cardiologist. I think she wants to wait until you’re extubated to talk to you so you’ll be able to ask and answer questions. Is that all right with you?”

Nick blinked, already overwhelmed by what he had just been told. He took his hand out of Dani’s and pressed it to the left side his chest, holding it there until he could feel his heart pounding steadily against his palm. The sensation brought forth a powerful surge of emotions he hadn’t been prepared for. Unexpected tears sprang into his eyes.

“Are you okay?” Dani asked, as Rob reached for his stethoscope again.

Nick blinked a second time, waving them off with his other hand while the tears trickled down the sides of his face. There was no way for him to explain. Even though he could hear the rhythm of his heartbeat on the monitor, he had wanted to feel it for himself, fluttering beneath his fingertips. He tried to remember what it had felt like for it to suddenly stop, but he had no memory of that moment or anything that had followed. All

he could recall was feeling nauseous and dizzy as he and Dani had walked out of the bar. He had just wanted to sleep, sure that it would help him feel better, never guessing these could be warning signs of something much worse than a hangover. Had it not been for Dani, he would have died in the back of some stranger's car - or at home in his bed, with no one there to help him. Either way, the thought was so horrifying, it made his heart skip a beat and brought even more tears to his eyes.

Hearing the slight change in his heart rhythm, both Dani and Dr. Rob looked up at the monitor above Nick's bed. "Relax, Nick," Dani told him, as his heart began racing again. She placed her hand on top of his, rubbing the back of it reassuringly. "You're all right now. Just relax and breathe."

Nick fought the suffocating waves of panic, feeling his chest expand as air was forced into his lungs. *Breathe*. Dani's face swam in and out of focus, blurred by tears, so he closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on the sound of her voice instead. *Just breathe*. He let her words echo inside his head until, eventually, his heartbeat became slow and steady once again.

Chapter 4

Nick had been stable and breathing on his own for an hour when they decided he was ready to be extubated.

"All right, buddy, you ready to get that tube out of your throat?" asked Rob, as Dani helped him set up for the procedure.

Nick blinked an eager *yes*. He hadn't been able to eat or drink anything since waking up, and his mouth had never felt so dry. His thirst was so bad, he had actually been dreaming of water as he dozed in and out. He imagined himself floating in a vast lake, where all he had to do was lower his head to drink his fill of fresh, cold water. He couldn't wait to chug a whole bottle of it once the tube was out.

"He looks ready to me," Rob said, shooting Dani a grin. "Go ahead and suction him."

"Okay, Nick, just gonna suck out some spit here," said Dani, as she stuck a suction wand into his mouth. He couldn't imagine he had any saliva left, but in spite of how dry his mouth felt, he still heard some rattle through the thin hose as the tip reached the back of his throat, triggering his gag reflex. It was like being in the dentist's chair, but even

more unpleasant. He wanted to cough, but couldn't because of the tube that was blocking his windpipe.

"Now there's a balloon inflated around the tube," Rob explained, as he peeled off the tape that had helped to hold it in place, "and when I let the air out of it, it's gonna make you cough. Go ahead and cough while I pull out the tube."

No problem, thought Nick eagerly.

"Ready? Take a deep breath, and here... we... go." When Rob pulled the tube, it felt like he was ripping Nick's lungs out right along with it. Nick coughed and gagged, his throat burning as he struggled to catch his breath.

"Good job, Nick," Dani said, suctioning out more of the mucus that was clogging his throat. "Keep breathing. That's it."

"We're gonna give you some oxygen through a nasal cannula," Rob added, holding up a length of clear, narrow tubing. He placed the prongs of the cannula in Nick's nostrils and tucked the tubes behind his ears, tightening the piece that held them together beneath his chin. "This'll help you breathe easier, and it should be a lot more comfortable."

Nick could already feel the oxygen flowing into his nose. He nodded, grateful to be able to move his head and neck freely again.

"How do you feel?" Dani asked.

"Thirsty," Nick rasped, surprised at how rough his voice sounded.

She nodded. "I'll get you some ice chips."

While she was gone, Rob listened to Nick's chest with his stethoscope. "Your lungs sound clear," he said. "Oxygen saturation level looks good."

"How 'bout my heart?" Nick asked, although he was afraid to hear the answer. He knew there was something they weren't telling him. Healthy hearts didn't just stop for no reason. Hearts that were damaged sometimes did. He remembered Dr. Polakoff using the words "sudden cardiac death" when he'd diagnosed Nick's heart condition, warning him that if he didn't change his lifestyle, he would be at risk of dying young. Now Nick felt sick to his stomach, realizing how much he'd let himself slip back into his old ways over the past few weeks.

“Well, right now you have a normal sinus rhythm, which is good,” Rob replied, draping the stethoscope over his shoulders. “I’m gonna get the cardiologist in here to go over the rest.”

Nick swallowed hard, his throat still sore. Before he could ask any more questions, Dani came back with a styrofoam cup filled with ice. “Here you go,” she said, handing it to him. “Take it easy with those. You haven’t had anything to eat or drink in two days, so your stomach could be sensitive.”

“No wonder I’m so thirsty,” Nick whispered, as he popped one of the ice chips into his mouth. It felt wonderfully wet and cold, soothing on his dry tongue. He sucked on it gratefully, swishing it around in his mouth and swallowing the water as it melted.

“We’ve been keeping you hydrated with IV fluids. This is just dry mouth,” Dani said, sliding his bedside tray table in front of him so he had a place to set the cup down. “Your throat may be sore for a few days from the breathing tube, but that will go away soon.”

“What about my voice?” he wanted to know. It sounded a little stronger each time he spoke, but it was still very hoarse.

“Don’t worry,” said Dani, with a reassuring smile. “I made sure the paramedics used a smaller size endotracheal tube when they intubated you, to minimize the risk of damaging your vocal cords. I told them you were a singer. You’ll be back to belting out BSB songs in no time.”

Nick didn’t feel much like smiling, but he managed to curve one corner of his mouth upwards into a crooked grin. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” She gave him a sympathetic look. “It was the least I could do.”

He raised his eyebrows, giving her a significant glance in return. “Sounds like you did a lot more than that. Seriously... thank you.” The simple words didn’t seem like enough to convey the overwhelming mix of emotions he felt, but Nick didn’t know how to express them any other way. What else was there to say to someone who had literally saved his life?

Dani blushed. “I was just doing my job,” she said, shrugging. “I mean, I don’t know if it was fate or just a fortunate coincidence that we both happened to be in the right place at the right time. I can’t say you’re lucky, but hey... if you’re going to have a cardiac arrest,

you might as well do it when there's an off-duty critical care nurse around. Good thing you didn't let me get too drunk." She shot him a wry smile.

Nick snorted. "No kidding."

All jokes aside, he was still having a hard time wrapping his head around what she'd told him had happened. He had watched documentaries on near-death experiences, in which survivors had talked about looking down on their own bodies while they floated somewhere above, seeing themselves lying on hospital beds or operating tables. But Nick hadn't seen anything - not a bright light, not a long tunnel or a tall staircase, and certainly not his own resuscitation. He had no memory of what had happened between the moment he'd closed his eyes in the car and the instant he'd opened them in the hospital.

A part of him was disappointed to have been denied one of the powerful out-of-body experiences others had described, but maybe it was better that way. He couldn't imagine what it would have been like to look down and watch Dani giving him CPR. The mental image of her hunched over his lifeless body in her little white dress and red heels, pumping his chest with her hands, was disturbing enough. It made him thankful for the black hole in his memory.

As it was, just knowing he had been on the brink of death made Nick feel more vulnerable than he'd ever felt before. He was grateful to Dani for bringing him back to life, but also embarrassed by the turn of events. In the blink of an eye - or so it seemed to Nick - he'd gone from the bar to a hospital bed, where the same hot girl he'd been having drinks with one minute was sucking the snot out of his lungs the next. He didn't even want to think about what else Dani might have done for him as he'd lain there unconscious over the last two days. It was awkward enough without wondering who had put him in the hospital gown or placed the catheter he could feel poking out from underneath it. He wanted to know when that particular tube could come out, but decided he would wait and ask Dr. Rob.

When Rob returned, he was accompanied by an attractive woman in a white coat. *What is this, Grey's Anatomy?* Nick wondered, admiring her tall, slim figure as she approached his bed, her heels clicking against the tiled floor. *Does this hospital only hire beautiful people?*

"Nick, this is Dr. Elizabeth, one of our best cardiology attendings," Rob introduced his colleague. Noticing the way he kept using first names, Nick decided that, like the rest of the Keys, the hospital must also be pretty casual. "We called her in to consult on your case."

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Carter,” said Dr. Elizabeth, offering a polite nod. With her pale, blue eyes and long, brown hair, she reminded Nick a little of Lauren. He wondered if his estranged wife even knew he was in the hospital.

“You can call me Nick,” he replied, licking his lips nervously. Whatever news this doctor had been brought in to deliver, it couldn’t have been good. What if he was dying? *Dude, you already died*, he reminded himself. *It doesn’t get any worse than that*. “So... do you know what happened to my heart?”

Dr. Elizabeth nodded again. “You were diagnosed with alcoholic cardiomyopathy about eleven years ago, correct?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Nick. His mouth felt as dry as Death Valley again. He popped another ice chip into it, then added, “But, you know, the last time I saw my cardiologist, he said there were no signs of damage, that my heart had healed.”

“How long ago was that?” she asked.

Nick thought for a few seconds. “I don’t remember. I guess it’s been awhile,” he admitted.

Dr. Elizabeth pursed her lips. “I only ask because, unfortunately, that isn’t the case anymore. We ran some tests while you were unconscious, and the results are cause for concern. Your condition seems to have worsened significantly since your last checkup. The chest X-rays that were taken after your admission show that your heart is grossly enlarged. Let me show you.”

She slid a pair of X-ray films out of a manila envelope and set them on his tray. “The one on the left shows the normal heart of an average-sized adult male,” she explained, pointing to a white blob in the center of the black film. “The one on the right is your heart.”

Nick’s breath caught in his throat as his eyes shifted from one film to the other. The difference between the two was undeniable; the second heart was huge, leaving little room for a healthy pair of lungs. He pressed his hand against the left side of his chest until he could feel his heart beating again, his rib cage expanding as his lungs inflated beneath it. His chest was still sore from the CPR, and it hurt to take a deep breath, but otherwise, he felt normal. Not at all like he’d felt on the *Unbreakable* tour all those years ago, when he had first suspected something was wrong with him.

“Why haven’t I had any symptoms?” he wondered aloud. “We were just on a world tour. I spent the past six months performing two-hour shows almost every night, and I never felt any chest pain, shortness of breath... nothing. How could that be?”

The two doctors and Dani exchanged glances. “The symptoms of cardiomyopathy can be quite insidious,” said Dr. Elizabeth. “They come on gradually and slowly worsen over time. The warning signs are often so subtle, people don’t pay any attention to them until something catastrophic happens, like a sudden cardiac arrest. The human body is an amazing machine: it finds ways to keep functioning with failing parts for far longer than you would think. But eventually, even the strongest bodies start to break down.” She gave him a grim smile. “It sounds like yours worked around a weakening heart as well as it could, for as long as it could, until it just couldn’t anymore.”

Nick shook his head in disbelief. It still didn’t make sense to him that he could feel perfectly fine one day and be on the brink of death the next. There was only one thing he could think of that would explain his sudden collapse. “I never should have started drinking again,” he said with a sigh. “That’s what caused this, right?”

“It could have been a contributing factor,” Dr. Elizabeth confirmed.

Nick nodded. He already knew what she would say next: that he needed to abstain from alcohol completely to keep it from happening again. This wasn’t news to him; he’d heard the same advice eleven years earlier. It had helped him then: his heart condition had improved when he’d stopped drinking and doing drugs and started eating right and working out instead. The healthy lifestyle he’d adopted had helped him lose weight and stay clean and sober, and he’d felt better - both physically and emotionally - than ever before. But the heartbreak he’d suffered over the past year had taken its toll on him, and he had let himself go. He had been battling depression, gaining weight, and drinking heavily again. And although he’d tried to tell himself he was still in control, that he could stop any time and get back on track, this was a lie. The truth was, he had been in the midst of a downward spiral for months, and it seemed he’d finally hit rock bottom. Maybe this was his body’s way of giving him the wake-up call he so desperately needed.

“Okay... so once I get back on the wagon, I’ll get better, right?” Nick said, still trying to rationalize the situation to himself. “I just need to stay sober from now on.”

When he saw the three of them exchange glances again, he knew it wouldn’t be that simple. “Nick, your condition is very serious,” Dr. Elizabeth said. “The cardiomyopathy has progressed to Stage C heart failure. That means your heart has suffered structural damage and is no longer functioning properly.”

Nick frowned and swallowed hard, his throat tightening painfully. He was suddenly hyper-aware of his apparently sick heart pounding in his chest. The sensation was starting to make him feel light-headed. He lay back, letting his head rest against the thin pillow, and shut his eyes, hoping that when he opened them again, he would find himself in his own bed and realize it had all been a bad dream. He wanted nothing more than to wake from this nightmare.

“Nick? Are you still with me?” Dr. Elizabeth asked, squeezing his shoulder. Nick nodded, though he kept his eyes closed. “It’s a lot to process, I know,” she said sympathetically. “But I need you to understand your prognosis.”

“Prognosis?” he repeated, his eyes flying open. The word felt foreign on his tongue; he had only heard it used on TV, usually in the sort of dramatic scenes where doctors were diagnosing people with fatal diseases. All of a sudden, he understood. “Are you trying to tell me I’m dying or something?”

Dr. Elizabeth kept her hand on his shoulder. “The sudden cardiac arrest you suffered was caused by an irregular heart rhythm, which resulted from the weakening of your left ventricle. Unfortunately, once heart failure has progressed to this stage, it can’t be reversed.” She fixed her gaze firmly upon him, her light blue eyes locked onto his like a pair of tractor beams. Try as he might, Nick couldn’t bring himself to look away.

“Our best bet is to try to preserve what function you have left for as long as possible,” she explained. “We can manage your symptoms with medications to control your heartbeat and blood pressure, put in a pacemaker or internal defibrillator to hopefully prevent another episode of sudden cardiac arrest, and possibly even implant a device to help your heart pump more effectively. That would be down the road a ways... but it’s the road you’re traveling on now, and there’s no turning back.”

She paused to take a deep breath before dropping the bombshell: “If and when we run out of other treatment options, your only hope for long-term survival would be a heart transplant. Without one, yes, you will eventually die.”

Nick blinked, finally breaking eye contact as he tried to absorb all that she had said. A part of him was still in denial. After all, it seemed unbelievable that he had been brought back to life only to be given a death sentence. But if Dr. Elizabeth was right, his days were indeed numbered.

As if it could sense its impending demise, his heart started racing, determined to get in as many beats as possible before it stopped for good. It sure didn’t feel weak, hard as it

was hammering against his tender rib cage. This time, Nick welcomed the sensation. At least it meant he was still alive.

Chapter 5

“Does anyone else know I’m here?” Nick asked Dani after the doctors had left. She had stayed at his bedside, making small talk as she monitored his vital signs. It was slightly awkward for Nick, having this hot nurse hovering over him, but at least he knew he was in good hands.

Dani had just hung a fresh bag of clear fluid from his IV pole and was updating his chart when his question caused her to look up. “I don’t think so. I would have called your wife, but I couldn’t find a number for her. I’m so sorry,” she said, offering a sympathetic smile.

“That’s okay; I’ll do it. Where’s my phone?” he wondered, looking around the small room. He didn’t see any of his personal possessions, nor had anything been delivered to him - no cards, no flowers, no balloons... no signs at all that any of his family or friends had heard he was in the hospital. The realization that he could have passed away without anyone knowing was a scary one. More than ever, he needed to talk to Lauren.

“Actually, that was part of the problem: I wasn’t able to find your phone,” said Dani, her smile fading. “It wasn’t with you when we brought you in. I thought maybe you’d left it at the bar, but I called them and the Uber driver, and they both said they didn’t have it.” She bit her lip uncertainly. “I’m sorry. I hope someone didn’t steal it.”

Nick frowned. It wasn’t like him to leave his phone sitting around, but he couldn’t specifically remember putting it in his pocket before they’d left the bar, either. Even if he had, he supposed it could have fallen out somewhere. “It’s all right,” he said finally, shrugging. “Hers is the one number I know by heart. Is there a phone in here I can use?”

“We don’t have phones in the ICU rooms,” she replied apologetically, “but if you write it down for me, I can give her a call for you.”

It wasn’t the way Nick wanted his wife to find out what had happened - it would have been better for her to hear it from him firsthand - but he didn’t seem to have any other

option. “Okay,” he agreed, scrawling Lauren’s number across the whiteboard Dani had brought him earlier. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” replied Dani, as he handed her the whiteboard. “Where is your wife, if you don’t mind my asking? Still on the West Coast?”

Nick nodded. “She’s in Vegas.”

“Should I tell her to come here, or...?”

Nick hesitated. He had been trying to reconcile with Lauren for a while now, but he realized this wasn’t the way he wanted it to happen. “No,” he replied firmly. “Just tell her what’s going on with me. You don’t have to give her all the gory details; just make sure she knows I’m okay for now. She can decide for herself whether to fly down here or not.”

“Okay,” said Dani, offering him a sweet smile. “Sit tight, and I’ll go call her right now.”

“Thanks,” Nick replied. He watched her walk out the door and disappear down a hallway, which he could see through a window to his right. There was a red stripe painted along the otherwise stark white wall that reminded him of somewhere he’d been before, but he couldn’t seem to place it. He racked his brain, trying to remember if he’d ever had a reason to visit the hospital while in Key West. He came up with nothing. Still, he couldn’t shake the sense of *deja vu* he felt as he looked around the room, anxiously waiting for Dani to return.

To his left, a curtain had been pulled all the way across, obscuring his view of what he assumed was another patient’s bed. He could hear more machines hissing and blipping softly on the other side of the curtain. He wondered who was behind it and how much of his conversation they had overheard, but he wasn’t brave enough to call out to his mystery roommate. His curiosity would have to wait.

There wasn’t much else to look at - no windows to the outside world, no artwork on the walls, and worst of all, no TV. Without Dani, there was no one to talk to and nothing to distract him from the fact that he was dying. He lay in his hospital bed, unable to block out the obnoxious beeping of the heart monitor. It was an unsettling sound, a constant reminder of how sick he had become, and he wondered how long he could stand to listen to it before it drove him crazy.

No matter how much time he had left, Nick knew he didn’t want to spend his last days like that. *I’ve gotta get out of this place*, he thought, his barely-controlled panic closing

in on him again. He heard his heart rate accelerate as he sat up and pushed back the covers. Someone had put a pair of tall, white compression socks on his legs, Nick saw, as he swung them over the side of the bed. He felt light-headed at first, but he fought the dizziness, determined to make it to his feet.

It was a struggle to stand up without accidentally disconnecting any of the tubes or wires, but he managed somehow. Once he was out of bed, however, he realized some of the equipment he was hooked up to was permanently attached to the wall. He couldn't take more than a few steps without pulling the lines taut. Shackled to his hospital bed, he felt more like a prisoner than a patient.

"Nick! What are you doing up?"

And there's the warden, Nick thought when he heard Dani's voice from the doorway. He held his hands up over his head, as if to surrender. "Busted," he said, smirking. But as he turned around to face her, another wave of dizziness hit him hard, throwing him off balance. He swayed for a second before his knees buckled, and down he went, collapsing onto the floor before Dani could catch him.

"Shit!" she swore, as she sank to her knees beside him. "Are you okay?" Her face blurred before his eyes. Something was wrong with his sight; the whole room suddenly seemed tinged with a sickly shade of yellow, as if he were seeing it through a filter.

"I don't know..." He didn't seem to be hurt, but his heart was hammering, and it was hard to breathe. "I feel really woozy..."

Dani pressed her fingertips to the inside of his wrist. "Your pulse is irregular. Let's get you back in bed before you pass out again." She rose to her feet and punched a red button on the wall behind his bed. In a matter of seconds, Rob came running back into the room.

"What happened?" he asked when he saw Nick on the floor.

"Syncope episode," she replied. "He tried to get out of bed by himself and dropped his pressure. Pulse is weak and thready. Help me get him up, please?"

Together, she and Rob hoisted Nick to his feet and helped him back into bed. They did all of the heavy lifting, yet the effort left Nick gasping for air. He clawed at his chest, his heart galloping uncontrollably inside it.

“He’s throwing PVCs,” said Rob, looking at the rhythm on the heart monitor. “Push two grams of magnesium sulfate.”

“Nick, we’re going to give you some medication to get your heart beating normally again,” Dani explained as she drew up the correct dose and injected the drug into the IV line that had been inserted into the side of Nick’s neck. Within minutes, his heart palpitations and shortness of breath had subsided. Harder to shake was the feeling of panic that had accompanied those symptoms.

“What just happened to me?” he asked, once his heart rate had returned to normal. “You called it something,” he added, looking at Dani. “Sinkable episode?”

“Syncope,” she corrected. “It’s just the medical term for fainting from a lack of blood flow to your brain. It can happen when you stand up too quickly after lying down for a long time.”

“I didn’t *faint*,” he argued, his fear giving way to embarrassment. “I just got dizzy and fell.”

“Your poor heart just couldn’t keep up with the demands you were putting on it, so it started adding extra beats, trying to supply blood to all the parts of your body. Your blood pressure dropped suddenly, and that’s what made you dizzy,” Dani explained gently. “It’s good to get up and move around, but you have to do it gradually and give your heart time to adjust. Just ask next time so I can help you, okay?”

Nick nodded. “Okay,” he agreed grudgingly. He hated having to rely on other people. Just six weeks ago, he was performing full-length concerts with no problem; if his heart had struggled to keep up with the physically demanding choreography, he hadn’t felt it then. Now he could hardly get out of bed by himself without it going haywire. It was hard for him to accept how quickly his condition had deteriorated. But he couldn’t keep questioning Dr. Elizabeth’s diagnosis, not after what had just happened. There was no denying it: Nick’s heart was failing, and it was failing fast.

“Did you get a hold of Lauren?” he asked Dani anxiously.

“She didn’t answer, but I left her a message.”

“What did you say?”

“Not much. I gave her my name and the number of the hospital, told her you had been admitted, and asked her to call me back as soon as she can. I don’t like to leave too many details in a voicemail; it’s better to discuss them with the actual person.”

“Agreed,” said Nick, nodding. “Thanks for doing that.”

“You’re welcome.” She smiled. “If you need anything else, just let me know.”

“I could use a drink - how about another one of those Headless Horsemans?” he joked.

“Ha-ha, nice try. How about a shot of one hundred proof H₂O instead?” she responded with a smirk.

Nick chuckled. “Actually, a glass of water would be great,” he said seriously. “My mouth’s still really dry.”

Dani nodded. “One water on the rocks, coming right up,” she replied. She left the room and returned with a plastic pitcher of ice water, which she poured into a small cup. “Take it slow,” she warned, as she handed it to him. “This stuff will go straight to your head.”

He smiled and took a grateful sip. The water tasted wonderful to his parched tongue and felt even better as it wet the back of his throat, soothing some of the soreness on its way down. “Oh my god, that’s so freaking good,” he said, not even kidding. “Thank you.”

She laughed. “No problem. You’re pretty easy to please, huh?”

Before Nick could come up with a witty reply, he was startled by a shrill bleeping sound he hadn’t noticed before. “What is that?” he asked as he looked around in dismay, wondering what was wrong with him now. His heart had leaped into his throat when he heard the sudden noise, but otherwise, he felt okay, not woozy or short of breath the way he’d been before.

“Don’t worry,” Dani reassured him, “it’s just the alarm on your neighbor’s IV infusion pump. You enjoy that water while I check next door.”

Nick watched her pull back the pale blue curtain that had provided a semblance of privacy, his curiosity piqued again. Just as he had suspected, there was a second bed on the other side. The woman in it looked worse off than he was. She was hooked up to a ventilator, the hose protruding from her mouth the same way as when he’d first woken

up. He sympathized with her, remembering how suffocating it had felt to have the breathing tube shoved down his throat. But she didn't seem to be conscious; her eyes were closed, her body motionless except for the steady rise and fall of her chest beneath the blanket.

"She needs a new IV bag," said Dani, shutting off the alarm. "I'll be right back." She bustled out of the room, leaving the curtain open.

While she was gone, Nick watched the woman in the other bed. She was young and would probably have been quite pretty under different circumstances, though it was hard to tell with her face half hidden behind the ventilator hose. He couldn't help wondering what was wrong with her. He didn't see any obvious signs of illness or injury. In fact, had it not been for the breathing machine, she would have looked like she were simply sleeping, the picture of perfect health.

Dani returned a few minutes later with a full bag of fluid to replace the one on the woman's IV pole, which was almost empty.

"What happened to her?" he blurted, before he could stop himself from asking. He immediately regretted it when he saw how Dani hesitated, halfway through washing her hands at the sink. "Sorry," he apologized quickly. "I shouldn't have asked. I know you're not supposed to give out information like that."

"Heart attack," she said quietly, as she turned to reach for a paper towel.

His eyes widened. "For real? But..." He glanced across the room at the woman again. "She looks so young."

"She is," said Dani, drying her hands. "It's so sad what drug abuse can do to a person."

Nick's heart skipped a beat. "Drugs did that?"

Dani nodded. "Cocaine, I think. She's been in a coma for almost two weeks already, and she's still showing no signs of waking up any time soon. She'll be lucky if she pulls through this without permanent brain damage."

"Wow," whispered Nick, stunned. He didn't know what else to say.

Dani shook her head. "I'm sorry. You were right - I really shouldn't have told you that," she said, walking back to the woman's bedside.

She didn't say anything more as she set about switching out the IV bag and adjusting the settings on the infusion pump. He watched her work, admiring the way she would occasionally brush the woman's long, black hair back off her forehead or smooth the blankets over her body as she maneuvered around the bed. Her patient would probably never even know about these small acts of compassion, but Nick noticed, and it made him grateful to have her as his nurse.

"You must really like what you do," he remarked when Dani came back to his side of the room, drawing the curtain closed behind her.

She smiled down at him. "I sure do."

Chapter 6

The hours ticked by, and the day turned into night. Not that Nick could tell the difference, for his view in the ICU was always the same: white, windowless walls and bright, fluorescent lights that were always left on. He only discovered how late it was when Dani came in at the end of her shift to dim the lights and tell him goodnight.

"I'm taking off for the evening," she said, as she moved around his bed, straightening the blankets and fluffing the pillow behind his head - almost like Lauren did when she tucked in Odin, Nick realized, watching her with amusement. "Do you need anything before I leave?"

"Has my wife called back yet?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "Not that I know of. I'm sorry."

Nick sighed. He hadn't exactly expected Lauren to drop everything and hop on the next flight to Key West, but he'd at least thought she would want to know why he was in the hospital and how he was doing. Dani must not have made it sound very serious in her message, or Lauren surely would have called.

"If she still hasn't called back by morning, I'll try her again then," Dani promised, offering him a sympathetic smile. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Nah, I'm all right," Nick replied, flashing her a tired smile in return.

Dani nodded. “Your night nurse will be Patrick. I’m sure he’ll come in to check on you soon, but if you need anything in the meantime, just hit your call button, okay? I’ll be back tomorrow. Try to get some sleep.”

“I will,” he said. “Thanks for taking such great care of me.”

“Of course!” she chirped, patting his hand. “See you in the morning.”

“Night,” he replied. There was a strangely hollow feeling in his chest as he watched her walk away from the room where he would be spending the rest of the night. He wondered how many more nights he would have to spend there. Neither of his doctors had mentioned anything about him being discharged, nor had they given Nick any sort of timeline for his hospital stay. *Maybe the night nurse will know*, Nick thought, deciding to ask when he met him.

He was disappointed to find that his new nurse, Patrick, was nowhere near as personable as Dani. A heavyset man in his mid-thirties, Patrick wore baggy scrubs that were at least two sizes too big and breathed loudly through his mouth the entire time he was taking Nick’s vital signs.

“Hey, have you heard how long I’ll have to stay here?” he asked, as Patrick was checking his pulse.

Patrick didn’t answer at first. He stared at his watch, counting under his breath as he kept his fat fingers pressed firmly over the artery in Nick’s wrist. “No idea,” he finally said when he was finished, noting the number on Nick’s chart without so much as glancing up. “Ask your doctor in the morning.”

Gee, thanks for nothing, thought Nick, rolling his eyes when Patrick wasn’t looking.

The one advantage to having a male nurse was that Nick could finally ask him to take out the catheter in his penis without feeling completely embarrassed. The downside was that Patrick wasn’t nearly as gentle when pulling it out as Dani probably would have been. He couldn’t wait for her to come back.

It took Nick a long time to fall asleep that night. He lay awake for what felt like forever, listening to the blip of his heart monitor and wondering why Lauren still hadn’t called the hospital. He couldn’t stop thinking about what Dani said had happened to him and worrying about what Dr. Elizabeth said was going to happen. Even if he could have found a way to turn off his brain, the constant beeping of the monitors kept him awake.

At some point, he must have managed to drift off because he woke in the morning to the smell of warm food. “Good morning, sleepyhead,” said a familiar voice, as his eyelids fluttered. “Rise and shine.”

Nick opened his eyes to see Dani’s sweet face smiling down at him. “Morning,” he croaked back, his voice still as hoarse as it had been the day before. He cleared his throat before trying again. “What time is it?” It sounded better that time.

“Just after seven,” said Dani. “I brought you some breakfast.” She raised the head of his bed so that he was sitting up. On the bedside table in front of him was a covered tray. He took off the lid to reveal the blandest meal he’d ever seen: a bowl of plain oatmeal, a piece of unbuttered toast, and a cup of applesauce.

Nick wrinkled his nose. “Thanks, but I’m not really hungry right now.”

“I know, but you should try to eat something solid so you can get your strength back - and your bowels moving.”

“Ugh.” He gave her a look of deepest disgust, which she returned with a big grin.

“C’mon... just a few bites?” she coaxed him. With a heavy sigh, Nick spooned some oatmeal into his mouth. He normally didn’t mind oatmeal, but that morning, something about it made him feel slightly nauseous. He swallowed hard, choking down the tasteless blob. Dani gave him an encouraging smile as she watched. “There you go. Good job.”

Nick couldn’t help but smile, as he thought of his son. “You sound like me making Odin eat his oatmeal.”

She laughed. “Does that make you the picky toddler?”

“I’m not that picky, but this is definitely food fit for a toddler’s palate,” Nick replied. “Plain oatmeal? I at least put fruit in Odin’s.”

“Well, I’ll be sure to let the cafeteria know that for next time, Chef Carter,” she teased, winking at him.

He forced himself to chuckle. “How long do you think I’ll have to stay here?” he asked.

“It’s hard to say,” Dani replied. “At some point, you’ll probably have to go to a different hospital, one that has a transplant program. I guess that’ll happen whenever you’re

stable enough to be transferred. I'm sorry; I don't know all the details. It's up to Dr. Elizabeth to decide."

"That's okay. That's still more information than Patrick would give me last night," said Nick, offering her a half-smile. "Thanks."

She laughed. "No problem."

His smile faded as he thought about what she'd said. "So... a heart transplant, huh? That's really the only way I'm gonna get better?" He said it in an off-handed way, trying to sound casual, hoping she couldn't hear the tremble of fear in his voice.

"Not necessarily." Dani's voice was reassuring. "There are other interventions we can try first to improve your heart function or at least preserve it for as long as possible. A transplant is more like a last resort. But it can take a long time to find a donor heart, so Dr. Elizabeth will probably want to get you on the list, just in case you need one sooner rather than later."

Nick nodded, swallowing hard, as his heart thumped nervously in his chest. He felt nauseous just thinking about being cut open, having his heart removed and replaced with someone else's. "Has Lauren called yet?" he asked suddenly, eager to change the subject.

Dani didn't get the chance to answer. A high-pitched alarm had gone off on the other side of the room. She sprang into action, ripping the privacy curtain back as she rushed over to the next bed. Nick's heart leapt into his throat. He could tell by the urgency with which she moved that this wasn't just another alert about an empty IV bag. This time, something bad was happening.

Dani looked up at the monitor above the bed, then leaned over the woman lying in it. She rubbed her fist roughly over the center of the woman's chest. When there was no response, she ran around to the other side of the bed and smacked the blue button on the wall behind it. She lowered the head of the bed so the woman was lying flat. Then she pulled back her blanket, planted both hands in the center of her chest, and began pushing down hard and fast. Watching from across the room, Nick's worst fear was confirmed: the woman's heart had stopped.

His own heart was pounding as he watched Dani pump her chest, wondering what he could do to help. He fumbled for the call button she had showed him the night before, but it turned out not to be necessary. Before he could push it, more people came bursting into the room. He recognized Dr. Rob first, then Dr. Elizabeth, and finally

Patrick, his nurse from the night before, who must have been nearing the end of his shift.

“What happened?” Rob asked.

“She arrested,” said Dani, already out of breath from the force she was exerting to keep blood circulating through the woman’s body. “V-fib on the monitor. I just started compressions.”

“I’ll run the code. Patrick, you bag her,” ordered Rob. “Liz, charge the paddles to 120.”

Patrick positioned himself at the head of the bed, where he disconnected the ventilator hose from the woman’s breathing tube. Her head lolled to the side, and Nick was startled to see that her eyes were open. At first he thought she was starting to wake up, but then he realized there was no life behind them. They were like a doll’s eyes, empty and staring at nothing. Nick found this so disturbing that it was a relief when the nurse tilted her head back so that her frozen gaze was fixed upon the ceiling instead of him. Patrick replaced the hose with an inflatable bag he could squeeze to manually force air into her lungs.

In the meantime, Dr. Elizabeth had rolled a red cart up to the bed and pushed a button on the device Nick recognized as a defibrillator. As Dani continued to pump the woman’s chest, Rob pulled down the front of her hospital gown, exposing her bare breasts. They flopped up and down, the fat jiggling with the force of the compressions. Nick felt humiliated for her, horrified by the lack of dignity in the real-life drama unfolding in front of him. He knew he shouldn’t be watching it happen, but it was like driving by a bad car wreck - his morbid curiosity got the better of him, and he couldn’t bring himself to look away.

There was a tattoo on her rib cage, just below her right breast, of a bird in a cage. The little bird almost looked like it was moving, bobbing up and down and rattling the bars, as the woman’s rib cage was repeatedly compressed and released. Nick stared at it, transfixed by the effect.

“Charged to 120,” Dr. Elizabeth said, producing a pair of paddles. “Everyone stand clear.”

Patrick let go of the bag he was squeezing, and Dani stopped pumping, lifting her hands off the patient. They stood back as Dr. Elizabeth pressed the paddles to both sides of the woman’s chest. Her body jerked slightly as the shock was delivered. Almost immediately, they jumped back into action, Dani resuming compressions while Patrick

continued bagging. They kept this up for a couple of minutes before Rob said, "Let's pause for a rhythm check."

Everyone froze, their eyes shifting to the heart monitor overhead. It was still sounding its frantic alarm, the green line going across in the screen in a series of short, jagged peaks. "Still in V-fib," Dr. Elizabeth observed.

"Resume CPR," said Rob. "Let's give her an amp of epi and shock her again."

They moved like a well-oiled machine, each of them doing their part. Rob injected a syringe of something into the woman's IV line, while Patrick supplied her lungs with air. The whole time, Dani's hands pumped her heart, delivering oxygenated blood to the rest of her body.

Nick could tell Dani was getting tired. Beads of sweat stood out on her flushed face, and strands of her short, blonde hair were plastered to her forehead. She was breathing hard, panting in time to the beat of her compressions. He watched her with a mixture of fascination and dismay, wondering if this was how hard she had worked on him. He felt woozy as he pictured himself in this poor woman's place, without a pulse, his lifeless body being pummeled in a violent effort to bring him back.

"Trade me, babe," Dani said breathlessly to Rob after the second defibrillator shock, and he switched places with her like it was all part of a well-rehearsed routine, taking over the compressions while she administered medication at regular intervals.

This went on for several more rounds, until they paused to check for a pulse and found that the green line on the monitor had gone flat. "Asystole," said Dr. Elizabeth softly.

"Should we try another high-dose epi?" asked Dani.

Rob shook his head, wiping the sweat from his face. "We've been at it almost twenty minutes already. I'm calling it." He squinted at the clock on the wall. "Time of death: seven thirty-two."

Dani sighed as she stripped off her sterile gloves, tossing them into the trash bin. She raked her hands through her short, blonde hair and bowed her head for a few seconds before she straightened back up. "I'll clean up the body," she said matter-of-factly. "Elizabeth, will you call her family?"

"Of course," the doctor replied, nodding. Then she, Rob, and Patrick retreated from the room, leaving Dani to deal with the dead woman.

For a few seconds, Nick watched her stand, silent and still, in the center of the room, her back to him. Then he cleared his throat awkwardly and asked, “Are you okay?”

She turned around slowly and smiled at him sadly. “Yeah, I’m okay,” she said, coming back to his side of the room. He scooted over to make room for her to sit on the edge of his bed. “It might sound crazy, but believe it or not, you actually get used to this kind of thing after a while. Not that it’s ever easy to lose a patient, but... you learn to deal with it,” she added with a listless shrug. “What about you? Are *you* okay?”

He looked over at the woman in the other bed. One of her arms was hanging limply over the edge, her glassy gray eyes staring into eternity. Her upper half was still exposed, but the little bird tattooed on her side no longer seemed to be trying to escape its cage. It sat frozen on its perch, looking like it had given up on ever getting out, like it knew it would be locked inside the bars of ink forever. A lump rose in Nick’s throat as he nodded. “Compared with *her*? Yeah. I’m feeling pretty damn lucky, actually.”

She gave him a grim smile. “You should. Only ten percent of people who have a cardiac arrest outside the hospital survive. The rest end up like her.” She shook her head. “I’m sorry you had to see that, though. I should have closed the curtain.”

He shrugged. “It’s okay. I’m sorry you had to do all that stuff to me.” A shiver shot down his spine as he imagined himself in that state again.

“Hey, at least it worked on you,” she replied, rubbing his arm reassuringly. “You were one of the ten percent.”

He forced a smile. “Thanks to you. You were pretty amazing.”

Dani shook her head. “I was just doing my job. Speaking of which... I should probably get back to work, huh?” She slid off of his bed. “God, it’s not even eight a.m. yet. This is gonna be a long-ass day.” Sighing, she turned and smiled back at him. “Thanks for giving me a chance to decompress.”

“Anytime,” said Nick. “Just as long as it’s not me who needed resuscitating.”

She shuddered. “Sweetheart, I hope I *never* to have to resuscitate you again. You better eat some more of that heart-healthy oatmeal while I’m working over here.”

He snorted, staring down at his cold oatmeal, which was exactly the same color as the dead woman's ashen face. "Oh yeah, 'cause nothing works up an appetite quite like watching someone die."

Dani made a face, scrunching up her nose. "Sorry. I *really* should have closed this," she repeated, drawing the curtain back across the room before she disappeared around it.

As soon as she was gone, Nick pushed his breakfast tray away in disgust. He pressed the button to lower the head of his bed until he was lying down again. Then he closed his eyes, hoping he could fall back to sleep and forget about what he had just witnessed.

Chapter 7

Nick napped while Dani worked. When he woke, the privacy curtain was still pulled across the room. He could hear someone breathing heavily behind it. Had another patient been brought in while he was asleep, he wondered, or was Dani still cleaning up from before?

"Okay, on the next contraction, you're going to push as hard as you can," he heard her say, and he frowned in confusion. Was someone giving birth back there?

"I can't!" sobbed a second female voice - different from Dani's, yet still familiar somehow. "Really... I don't think I can do this."

"Yes, you can," said Dani, her voice kind but firm. "You have to."

Curious, Nick decided to find out what was going on. He sat up slowly, fighting the tangle of tubes and wires still attached to his body, and carefully swung his legs over the side of the bed. He sat there for a few seconds, letting his heart adjust to the change in position before he attempted to stand. He didn't want to make the same mistake as he had the last time he'd tried to get out of bed.

All of a sudden, the woman behind the curtain cried out in pain. "Push!" Nick heard Dani's voice encouraging her. "You can do this! Come on, now push!"

Planting his feet firmly on the floor, Nick stood up. He held onto the IV pole beside his bed to steady himself, then wheeled it along with him as he took one tentative step and then another toward the curtain.

On the other side, he could hear the woman panting. “That’s it. Bear down, and keep breathing,” Dani coached her. “You’ve got this, Lauren.”

Lauren? Nick froze for a split second, his heart skipping a beat. Then he began frantically tearing off the electrodes that had been taped to his chest, along with everything else that threatened to hold him back from running to her side - the oxygen tubes in his nostrils, the sensor clipped to his finger, and the blood pressure cuff wrapped around his arm. He left them hanging from their wires as he pushed his IV pole across the room. He tore back the curtain to reveal his wife lying atop the bed, her legs splayed and chest heaving. Dani stood on one side of her, holding her hand, while Dr. Rob was down at the foot of the bed, his hands between her thighs.

Before Nick could react, Lauren threw back her head and unleashed an animalistic howl of pain as she pushed. Over Rob’s shoulder, Nick could see a small patch of hair beginning to emerge from the opening between her legs. His breath caught in his throat. “I’m here, baby,” he whispered, as he went to her other side and took hold of her free hand. “I’m right here.”

“Nick!” Lauren sobbed, tears streaming down the sides of her face. “Where the hell have you been?! How could you leave me like that?!”

Nick shook his head, not knowing what to say. Nothing made sense anymore.

“The baby’s head is out. One more big push should do it,” said Dr. Rob. “Ready? Now *push!*”

Lauren’s hips rose off the bed as she arched her back and let loose another primal scream, squeezing Nick’s hand until his fingers were numb. But as the baby slid out into Rob’s waiting arms, her body suddenly went limp, and she let go of Nick’s hand.

“You did it, Lauren!” he heard Dani exclaim, a second before he watched his wife’s eyes roll back into her head.

“Lauren!” he shouted, shaking her shoulder. She didn’t respond. Nick looked desperately across the bed at Dani. “What happened to her?” he demanded.

Dani’s eyes were glued to the monitor above the bed, which was flashing an alarm. “Her blood pressure dropped,” she said. “She must have passed out. Lauren?” She leaned over her. “Open your eyes, Lauren!”

As Dani lowered the head of Lauren's bed, Nick looked down toward the foot, where Dr. Rob was holding his newborn baby. "Can I... see her?" he asked hesitantly.

"Of course," said Rob, coming around the side of the bed so he could have a closer look. Nick's breath caught in his throat as he gazed down at his daughter. Her face looked like a sleeping angel's with her eyes closed, her little rosebud lips curved into a pout. He counted her ten tiny fingers and ten tiny toes. She was perfect in every way, except for the fact that she was dead.

"Are you sure there's nothing you can do for her?" Nick asked, but he already knew she was beyond help. Her skin was a mottled shade of purple-gray, far different from the healthy, bright pink Odin's had been when he was born. Rather than flail around, her limbs hung floppy and limp, and her thin chest did not rise or fall. Her body showed no signs of life. From the moment she'd arrived into the world, she was already gone.

Rob shook his head. "I'm so sorry," he said.

"Rob, I need your help up here!" Nick heard Dani call out suddenly. "She's crashing!" He looked back at Lauren, who was still unconscious. "I've lost her pulse. Starting CPR..."

"No!" Nick cried, watching, with a sickening feeling of déjà vu, as Dani leaned over Lauren, laced her fingers, and began compressing her chest. He felt like he was about to pass out himself. "Come on, baby," he begged Lauren. "Come back to me!"

Her last words echoed in his head: *How could you leave me like that?*

"I'm here now," he told her. "I'm right here. Stay with me."

"Stand back, please," said Rob, gently pushing Nick aside. "Give us room to work." Nick wondered what he had done with the baby, before he noticed Rob wheeling the red crash cart to the side of Lauren's bed. "She has a shockable rhythm," he said, and out came the defibrillator paddles once again. "Charging to 120... and clear!"

Nick cried out as the doctor pressed the paddles to Lauren's chest. Standing behind him, he couldn't see much except her legs twitch when the shock of electricity was applied. But when Rob backed away, replacing the paddles on top of the red cart, Nick was startled to see that the body on the bed wasn't his wife at all. Instead, he was staring down at himself.

His mouth dropped open in dismay as he watched Dani's hands go back to pumping his own bare chest. His belly rippled with waves from the force of her compressions, yet Nick felt no pain. Shaking his head, he closed his eyes, unable to believe what he was seeing.

"Come on, Nick!" he could hear Dani calling as she continued to work on him. "If you can hear me, come back to us."

I want to, he thought desperately, but how can I?

"Open your eyes, Nick."

When Nick opened his eyes, he was back in his own hospital bed. Dani was hovering over him, her stethoscope in her ears. "Hey there," she said softly, as she slid the end of the stethoscope down the front of his gown. "Sorry to have woken you up."

"What happened?" he asked, blinking groggily as he squinted into the bright, fluorescent light. His voice sounded muffled, and he realized the oxygen tubes in his nostrils had been replaced with a mask that covered his mouth and nose.

She smiled. "I was just going to ask you the same thing. Your oxygen sats suddenly dropped, which triggered the monitor, and when I came in to check on you, your heart rate and B.P. were through the roof."

Nick could feel his heart racing and his pulse pounding in his neck. "I had a nightmare," he admitted. He knew now that was all it had been. All the sensors and electrodes were still attached to his body, and he could hear the heart monitor blipping steadily in the background. He had never left his bed. Turning his head, he looked across the room and saw that the curtain was wide open, the other bed stripped bare. His wife wasn't there; she never had been. "Has Lauren called?" he asked.

Dani nodded, holding up her finger. "Just let me finish listening, and then I'll fill you in," she promised, pressing her stethoscope to the left side of his chest. "Deep breath, please."

He inhaled the pure oxygen flowing through his mask and felt his heart rate start to slow down as he let his lungs deflate.

"Everything sounds okay," said Dani, as she finished examining him and took the stethoscope out of her ears. She looked up at the monitor over his bed. "Your sats are back to normal now. I bet you're ready to get that mask off your face, huh?" She flashed

him a knowing smile, and he nodded, holding his head still while she took off the oxygen mask and slid the cannula back into his nostrils. “There you go,” she added, tucking the narrow tubes behind his ears. “That’s much better.”

Nick nodded again. “My heart didn’t stop that time, did it?” he asked uncertainly, still rattled by the bad dream.

“No, definitely not,” replied Dani, her smile fading to a frown. “Why? Is that what happened in your nightmare?”

“Among other things,” he said, sighing.

She offered a sympathetic smile. “Wanna talk about it?”

He shook his head. “Not really.”

“That’s okay; you don’t have to,” said Dani, as she updated his chart. “I do have one question, though. Have you ever been diagnosed with sleep apnea?”

“What? No,” said Nick. “I don’t even know what that is.”

“Oh, it’s a sleep disorder that causes you to stop breathing for a short time while you’re asleep. It’s actually pretty common, especially in people with heart conditions. That’s why I wondered if that could be what caused your oxygen levels to suddenly drop. It’s something we should keep an eye on, just in case.”

“Great,” said Nick sarcastically - as if he wasn’t already being monitored closely enough. “So... Lauren called?”

“Yeah... I guess she called back last night after I left. Your night nurse, Patrick, talked to her. He told her what happened on Halloween and that you’re doing better now, but still have a ways to go before you’re ready to be discharged.”

“Is she coming here?” Nick wanted to know.

“Um... unfortunately, no, I don’t think so,” said Dani. She perched on the side of his bed, turning her body toward him. “I’m so sorry, Nick. It sounds like Patrick may have given her more information than she needed to know.”

Nick frowned. “What does that mean?”

Dani seemed hesitant. With a sigh, she said, “Well... for one thing, she knows you were with another woman that night.”

Nick raised his eyebrows. “Another woman... meaning *you*? We shared a ride - so what? Nothing happened... besides my heart crapping out on me, anyway,” he added, shaking his head. “Why would he even tell her I was with another woman?”

“She probably wondered where you were and who was there to help you when it happened,” Dani said with a shrug. “But Nick... you don’t remember what happened before that, do you?”

He stared at her. “What do you mean? The last thing I remember is closing my eyes in the car... and then I woke up here.” He had always assumed his collapse must have occurred shortly after he’d passed out in the back of their Uber driver’s Corolla. Only now did he stop to consider the possibility that this wasn’t the case. “What else happened?”

Dani bit down on her bottom lip. “Well... we got back to your house, and you invited me inside. I went in - because, come on, when Nick Carter invites you in, you don’t say no - and we drank some more. One thing led to another, and we started making out.”

Nick’s jaw dropped. “What?!”

She winced. “I know. I’m not proud of it either. I mean, Rob and I joked at the bar about you being my free pass, but I never really meant to act on that or anything. I was drunk. We both were.”

He shook his head again, not wanting to believe what she was telling him. Nothing about it made sense. At the bar, he had been so ready to head home, take a shower, and go to bed. He hadn’t felt well. There was no way he would have invited some random woman into his home. But then he remembered how hot she had looked in that sexy little zombie nurse number... and how lonely he had been.

He looked up at Dani. With her petite body, short blonde hair, and dark brown eyes, she was physically different from Lauren in almost every way. She reminded him more of his last serious girlfriend before Lauren, who had turned out to be just another fame-seeking gold digger. He had been at the lowest point in his life when he’d hooked up with Julie - and here he was, back in that same place now. The drinking may have pushed him over the edge, but if he really had cheated on his wife, then he’d officially hit rock bottom again. “Is that all we did?” he asked Dani, desperate to hear her say they hadn’t gone any further than first base.

She shook her head. “You couldn’t stand the taste of my zombie makeup and wanted me to wash it off.” Her voice dropped to almost a whisper as she went on. “We ended up taking a shower together... and that’s where we had sex.”

His heart sank. “Are you sure?”

She let out a sardonic laugh. “I wish I wasn’t. Believe me, it would be nice to be able to forget all about that night. Not that it wasn’t amazing, or that *you* weren’t amazing - because you were...” Nick allowed himself a tiny smirk. “...until you went into cardiac arrest right after climaxing.” The smirk quickly faded, as Nick’s mouth fell open in horror.

“Oh my god... *That’s* how it happened?!” He shook his head, feeling his face flush with humiliation as he pictured himself collapsing in the shower. “So the whole time the paramedics were working on me... I was bare-ass naked?” He thought about the poor woman he’d watched die without dignity in the other bed and realized his own brush with death must have been even more indecent than that. He wasn’t sure why that bothered him so much, after everything else he’d been told, but it did. Even now, he felt oddly exposed.

Dani shrugged. “Trust me, it happens more often than you’d think. Usually it’s much older men who drop dead during sex, though.” She paused and shook her head. “I’m sorry... that probably sounded really insensitive. My point is, it’s nothing to be embarrassed about. You were in the middle of a medical emergency; no one was thinking about the fact that weren’t wearing anything. If it helps, I did cover your bottom half with a towel before the paramedics arrived.” She winked at him, and he blushed even harder, his cheeks burning with shame. “But honestly, Nick, it’s not a big deal - they see this kind of thing all the time,” Dani insisted. “In fact, they usually have to cut people’s clothes off to get the access they need. You made their job easy!”

Nick knew she was trying to make him feel better, but it wasn’t working. To him, it *was* a big deal - and an extremely embarrassing one, at that. He wished he had never asked Dani about that night. Now he could barely look her in the eye.

“At least you were unconscious,” she added. “I answered the door in a towel, and I only had time to put on my underwear and your t-shirt before I hopped into the back of the ambulance, so I showed up in the ED looking like a half-drowned whore.” In spite of his humiliation, Nick couldn’t help picturing her in a skimpy pair of panties with his plain white t-shirt tied in a knot above her navel, the thin fabric clinging to her wet skin. He had to suppress a smile as she went on. “Patrick was working that night; he’s the one

who helped me get cleaned up and changed into some scrubs before Rob saw me. That's how he knew what happened."

"So your husband doesn't know?" Nick asked.

Dani shook her head. "No. And he can never find out. Promise you won't say anything to him?" She looked at Nick with pleading eyes.

He raised his eyebrows. "You mean, the way your friend Patrick told my wife we hooked up?"

"He didn't tell her we hooked up, per se," said Dani. "I think she figured out that part for herself."

Nick sighed. "Great. Just fucking great. Now Lauren's got another reason to leave me."

Dani frowned. "I thought you left her."

"Why, did that come out in her phone call with Patrick too?" Nick snapped.

Dani's eyes widened. "No! Not that I know of. I just meant... well, you were here by yourself on Halloween, and she was home with your kid, and you didn't seem to know what he had dressed up as or anything. I just assumed you were separated." She shook her head apologetically. "I'm sorry. You know what they say about people who assume..."

He shrugged. "It's all right. I guess, technically, we are separated," he admitted. It hurt to hear himself say those words out loud. "But I still love her," he added quickly. "I didn't leave her - at least, not this time. She kicked me out."

Dani looked at him with sympathy. "I know it's none of my business, but I'm being nosy anyway. Why did she kick you out?"

Nick took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It's a long story. You know about the baby, right?"

Dani nodded, still looking at him with those sad eyes. It was the same look he and Lauren had gotten from the sonogram technician who hadn't been able to find their baby's heartbeat... the doctor who'd told them their daughter had died in the womb... the midwife who had helped Lauren deliver her... and everyone who had offered their condolences afterward.

“We lost her right after I got back from Europe at the end of June,” said Nick, a lump rising in his throat. He swallowed hard before he went on. “We had two weeks to grieve together before I went back on tour. Lauren and I argued about whether or not I should go. She thought it was too soon, but I felt like I needed life to get back to normal, and I didn’t want to let the guys or our fans down by cancelling dates. I tried to convince Lauren to come with me, but she wasn’t ready. She basically gave me an ultimatum, telling me if I left, I was not to come back. I accused her of being dramatic and trying to make me choose between my career and my family, which wasn’t fair.”

Dani shook her head. “Everyone grieves differently,” she said softly. “She shouldn’t have put that kind of pressure on you.”

“Yeah, that’s what I told myself too - that we each needed time and space to grieve in our own way. But what she really needed was me... and I wasn’t there for her. I went on tour. So in a way, I guess I did leave her.”

“She could have come with you,” Dani pointed out. “It was her decision to stay home just as much as it was your decision to leave.”

Nick smiled sadly. “You don’t have to defend me,” he said, shaking his head. “It was a shitty thing for me to do. I know that now. I shouldn’t have gone, but at the time, it was what I thought I needed to do. I thought it would help me to be on the road, to be busy, but it just made everything worse.”

Once he had started opening up to her, it was hard to stop. The words flowed from his mouth like floodwater, and Dani absorbed every drop.

“Lauren basically stopped speaking to me, unless it was about Odin. I was depressed and lonely, so I slipped back into my old bad habits and started drinking again. It was the only way I could sleep at night,” Nick explained, and Dani nodded, as if she understood. “I’d have a few at each after party so it would look like I was having fun, then go back to my bus and keep drinking by myself until I finally fell asleep or passed out, whichever came first.”

He shook his head with regret as he thought back to how he’d spent the summer. It was like the *Unbreakable* tour all over again. *Been there, done that*. Why hadn’t he realized what he was doing to his body? He really should have known better.

“When the tour ended,” he continued, “I called her bluff and flew back home. I went straight from the after party to the airport and took an early morning flight from

Newark to Vegas. When I showed up at the house, I was hungover, I hadn't slept in twenty-four hours, and I was still wearing the same clothes from the night before. I'm sure I looked like shit." He let out a sigh. "Anyway, Lauren took one look at me and told me to turn around and leave before Odin saw me like that. She wouldn't even let me come in. So I spent like a week in a hotel, trying to convince her to take me back... and when that didn't work, I came to Key West."

"Wow," whispered Dani, staring at him with wide eyes. "I don't even know what else to say, except I'm sorry about everything: the baby... Lauren... us..."

Nick shook his head again. "Thanks, but you don't have to be sorry. If anything, I'm the one who should be apologizing for putting you in that position."

"You didn't do anything except invite me in," said Dani, shrugging. "I could have said no. I could have said no several different times, but I never did." She slid off the edge of his bed and stood next to it instead. "I'm a grown woman, Nick. I make my own decisions. What happened between us that night was as much my decision as it was yours."

He nodded, grateful to hear her say that. The last thing he needed was another sexual assault accusation, on top of everything else he was already dealing with. "I just wish I could remember making that decision," he replied with a frown. "Was I really *that* drunk?"

Dani shook her head. "I don't think it's from drinking so much as oxygen deprivation. Memory loss is pretty common after a cardiac arrest - I mean, you only lost a million or so brain cells that night." She gave him a wry smile. "It's a miracle of modern medicine that you're even awake and able to talk to me right now."

Nick raised his eyebrows. "I guess it's a good thing I invited you in, then."

Chapter 8

"I really need to talk to Lauren," Nick told Dani. The guilt had been eating away at him ever since he'd learned what had really happened on Halloween. He had to find out where he and his wife stood now that she knew he'd been with another woman that night. Would she ever be able to forgive him, or was this the final nail in the coffin of their dying marriage?

“I’ll tell you what,” said Dani, smiling. “There’s a phone at the nurses station just down the hall. If you can make it there, you can use it. It’ll give you a good excuse to get up and moving. Whaddya say?”

“I say let’s do it,” Nick replied without hesitation. After lying in bed for the last few days, he was eager to stretch his legs.

“Then let me help you this time,” Dani insisted. “Getting out of bed can be quite a process with all this equipment around you.”

“Tell me about it,” Nick agreed, thinking back to his failed escape attempt the previous day. He hadn’t been allowed out of bed since, not even to use the bathroom. As if peeing into a plastic urinal wasn’t bad enough, he was already dreading the humiliation of having to ask Dani to bring him a bedpan. If he could prove he was capable of walking down the hall, hopefully she would let him go to the bathroom by himself.

“Don’t worry - we’re going to get rid of some of these tethers so you don’t have to drag so many tubes around with you,” Dani assured him, as she went to the sink to wash her hands.

“Sounds good,” said Nick gratefully, eager to be free from at least some of the tubes and wires.

Dani dried her hands and snapped on a pair of sterile gloves. She disconnected the IV line from the catheter in his neck, then drew up a syringe of clear liquid. “This is just a solution to flush your central line, so it doesn’t get clogged,” she explained, as she slowly injected it into the catheter.

“When can that come out?” Nick wanted to know. It was uncomfortable having tubes hanging out the side of his neck, and the dressing that held them in place itched his skin.

“I’m not sure,” said Dani apologetically. “Right now it’s necessary so we can deliver medications directly to your heart and monitor your blood pressure more closely.”

Nick sighed, the anxiety building inside him again. He wanted to rip the thing right out of his vein and run screaming from the room. The realization that he wouldn’t get far with a failing heart - if he didn’t bleed to death first - only intensified the feeling that he was being held hostage in his hospital bed.

Dani gave him a sympathetic smile. “I know... it’s a real pain in the neck, right? Like, literally.” He groaned at her bad joke, and she winked, her brown eyes twinkling. “But hey, on the bright side, at least we don’t have to stick you every time we need to draw blood.”

“Yeah... I’m starting to think you people are a bunch of vampires,” he muttered back, shooting her a quick smirk. He didn’t much feel like laughing, but he appreciated her trying to lighten the mood.

“How do you know we’re not?” Dani replied, raising her brow. “Some of us do sleep during the day, stay up all night, and never see the sun. I mean, when you think about it, what better field would there be for a vampire to work in than healthcare?”

“Good point,” said Nick. He wished she would hurry up and help him out of bed. He couldn’t wait to get back on his feet. Even a brief walk in the hallway would feel like an excursion after lying down for so long.

Dani pattered around his bed, removing the blood pressure cuff from around his arm and the pulse oxygen sensor that had been clipped onto his finger. When she unplugged the cable that connected the electrodes on his chest to the monitor behind his bed, an alarm immediately sounded. “Ignore that,” she said, silencing it with the flick of a switch. “It’s just letting me know it’s not capturing any of your vitals.”

Nick nodded.

“I’m going to switch your supplemental oxygen supply over to a portable tank now, so you may feel short of breath for just a few seconds,” she explained, as she fiddled with a valve on the wall behind him. Nick noticed when the oxygen stopped flowing into his nostrils, but he was still able to breathe easily enough without it. “How you doing, Nick?” Dani asked, as she adjusted the settings on the tank.

He shrugged. “Fine.”

“There should be oxygen flowing through your cannula again,” she said when she was finished. “Can you feel it?”

Nick inhaled deeply through his nose and nodded again.

“Okay, good. I think we’re all set then. We have to leave the a-line in for now,” she added, gesturing to the thin tube in his wrist. “You can wheel the IV pole along with you, and I’ll take care of the oxygen tank.”

“Awesome,” Nick replied eagerly. “I can’t wait to get out of this bed.”

She smiled. “We’re going to take it slow,” she warned him. “You’d be surprised at how quickly your leg muscles can weaken when they’re not being used at all. You’ve basically been lying down for the last few days, so your body may need some time to adjust to being upright again. I’m just going to have you sit on the side of the bed for a minute first and see how that feels before you try to stand.”

Nick thought she was underestimating his strength, but he played along, allowing her to slip her arm behind his back and support him as he sat up. With her help, he slid his legs over the side of the bed, scooting forward until his feet were touching the floor.

“How do you feel?” Dani asked.

“Fine,” insisted Nick, who was dizzier than he wanted to admit.

“That’s good. Now, don’t hate me, but I have to put a couple of things on you before I can help you stand. Hospital policy,” she added apologetically. “First... proper footwear.” She produced a pair of slipper socks with nonskid soles. “The last thing we want is for you to slip and fall on the floor,” she said, as she knelt down and pulled the socks onto his feet.

Looking down at his legs, Nick snorted. With the white compression hose and fuzzy slippers, they looked more like an elderly woman’s than a not-quite-forty-year-old man’s. “Sexy,” he said sarcastically, and Dani laughed.

“I know, right? But wait... there’s more!” she exclaimed, whipping out a thick, white fabric belt. “This is a gait belt. It goes around your waist to help me lift you if needed and grab hold of you if you were to lose your balance.”

Nick shook his head. “You’re making me feel like I belong in a nursing home,” he griped, but he lifted his arms and let her wrap the belt around his waist anyway. “I did get out of bed all by myself yesterday, you know.”

“Yes, and you almost passed out, remember?” Dani replied without missing a beat, as she cinched the belt snugly around his middle. “Is that too tight?”

Nick smirked. “Nah, it’s all right. Can we do this already?”

She smiled back at him. “You bet. On the count of three, you’re going to push yourself up to a standing position, okay? One... two... three.”

Without the tangle of tubes and wires to worry about, Nick had no trouble standing up this time. Dani had been right about one thing, though: his legs *were* weak. He wobbled slightly before she helped him regain his balance, and even then, he still felt woozy.

“You feeling okay?” she asked, holding on to his arm with one hand while the other kept a firm grip on the gait belt behind his back.

He nodded.

“Any dizziness or shortness of breath?”

“No,” Nick lied, sure that the sensation would pass in a few seconds.

“Are you ready to try taking a step?”

He took a deep breath before nodding. “Yeah.”

“All right, awesome. Hold onto this,” said Dani, pushing the IV pole to his left side. She positioned herself on his right, her hand resting lightly on his back. “Now you let me know if you start to feel light-headed. You can stop and rest any time.”

“I’m all right,” he assured her, anxious to get going. He took a tentative step forward, followed by another, fighting the queasy feeling in his stomach.

“That’s it,” Dani said encouragingly, as she walked alongside him. “You’re doing great, Nick.”

He snorted. “You sound like Lauren when our son was first learning to walk.”

“Is that a bad thing?” asked Dani. “If so, I’m sorry - I swear, I’m not trying to treat you like a baby. It’s just good to see you back on your feet. In the ICU, we celebrate every success, no matter how small.”

“No, I understand,” Nick said. “It’s all good. Just thought it was funny.”

She smiled. “Still feeling okay?”

“Yeah... just tired.” His legs felt heavy, and his heart was already beating hard, like he’d been running uphill instead of shuffling slowly across a flat surface. He inhaled deeply, but the extra oxygen didn’t seem to help much.

“Take it easy,” said Dani. “Let me know if you need to sit down.”

“No... I’m okay.” Nick needed to get to that phone; he needed to call Lauren and beg for her forgiveness. But as he approached the doorway, the queasy feeling in his stomach intensified into full-blown nausea. He paused, pressing his hand to a spot at the base of his ribcage, as waves of pain began to radiate from his stomach to his chest.

“Are you sure?” Dani asked, putting her hand on his shoulder. “You’re looking pretty pale all of a sudden. Plus, you’re sweating.”

He forced a shaky laugh. “Guess I’m in worse shape than I thought.”

Dani didn’t reply at first. She reached for his hand and pressed her fingers firmly against the artery on the inside of his wrist. “Your pulse feels weak,” she said, frowning, after a few seconds had passed. “Your blood pressure may be dangerously low. We should get you back in bed.”

“No,” said Nick stubbornly, shaking his head. Despite how winded and woozy he was, he was determined to make it out door and down the hall. “I wanna keep going. I have to talk to my wife.”

“Then I’ll get you a wheelchair,” Dani replied rationally. “I don’t want you to push yourself too hard. We can try walking further tomorrow.”

“I don’t need a wheelchair,” Nick protested, tired of feeling like an invalid. “I’m *fine*.” But as he tried to take another step forward, his knees suddenly buckled. He felt Dani grab the gait belt behind his back as he lost his balance, but all she did was slow his fall, helping him slump safely to the floor.

“See, now that’s exactly what I was trying to avoid,” she said, as she knelt next to him, her arm around his shoulders. “Are you okay?”

Nick shook his head again, finally forced to admit defeat. “No. I’m really dizzy... and nauseous...” This time, he could not deny the fact that he had almost passed out. He was covered in cold sweat, and his heart was hammering so hard, it felt like it was about to burst out of his chest.

“You need to lie down for a few minutes,” she said, helping lower his head to the floor. “Let me grab something to elevate your legs.” He lay helplessly while she went and pulled the pillow and blanket off his bed. She placed the pillow behind his head, then folded the blanket and used it to prop up his feet. “Better?” she asked.

“A little,” Nick lied, but he didn’t feel better at all. If anything, he was feeling worse by the second. Lying flat on his back like that, he could barely catch his breath, and the pain and pressure in his chest were building. His heart seemed to be skipping beats, which scared him so much, he was relieved when Dr. Elizabeth appeared in the doorway.

“What happened here?” she asked, hurrying into the room.

“I was helping him ambulate when I noticed he was diaphoretic,” Dani explained. Nick suspected she had hit the call button to summon help while she was getting the pillow and blanket. “He collapsed before I could get him to sit down.”

Dr. Elizabeth’s eyes swept over Nick’s body. “Why is he off the monitor?”

“Just trying to limit how much equipment we had to bring with us. His vitals were stable before he got up.”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. “And now?”

Dani bit down on her bottom lip. “Pulse is weak and thready. I was just about to get a B.P.”

“Let’s get him back into bed and on the monitor first,” said Dr. Elizabeth. “Bring a wheelchair.”

Dani rushed out of the room, returning with a wheelchair. She and Dr. Elizabeth used the gait belt to help get Nick up from the floor and into the chair. Even though the two women did most of the work, the effort of moving from the floor to the wheelchair and finally to the edge of his bed left Nick gasping for breath. He hunched over, his chest heaving as he inhaled the oxygen flowing through the tubes in his nose. His vision was blurry, as if he was about to pass out again. His head and his heart were pounding. Sick to his stomach, he suddenly began to vomit. The small amount of oatmeal he’d eaten for breakfast ended up on the front of his hospital gown, along with the rest of his stomach contents.

“S-sorry,” he stammered breathlessly, as Dani held a basin under his chin.

“It’s okay,” she said soothingly, rubbing his back as he threw up again. When he was finally finished, she and Elizabeth eased the soiled gown off of him and lifted his legs over the side of the bed so he could lie down. Nick felt so unwell, he wasn’t even embarrassed about being helped, half-naked, into bed by two beautiful women.

“How are you feeling now, Nick?” Elizabeth asked, slipping her stethoscope into her ears.

“Bad,” he admitted. “My chest hurts... It’s hard to breathe...”

“Let me take a listen.” She leaned over him, pressing the end of the stethoscope to his bare chest as Dani moved around his bed, hooking him back up to the various pieces of monitoring equipment. In the background, he heard an alarm go off on the heart monitor, which didn’t help his anxiety any.

“He’s bradycardic,” Dani said, as she wrapped a blood pressure cuff around his arm. “Pulse is thirty-eight.”

“Get the crash cart,” said Dr. Elizabeth.

When Nick saw Dani roll over the same red cart they had used to try to resuscitate his roommate that morning, his panic skyrocketed. His pulse pounded in his ears as he looked desperately up at Dr. Elizabeth, her face but a blur in his snowy field of vision. “Am I having a heart attack?” he asked, a new terror taking hold of him. “My dad died of a heart attack...” Tears welled in his eyes as he considered the possibility of passing away the same way his father had, without ever seeing his son again. “Please, don’t let me die.”

“Nick, I promise, you are not going to die today,” the doctor replied, studying the rhythm on the monitor as she listened through her stethoscope. “And I don’t think you’re having a heart attack. You’re having an arrhythmia - an irregular heartbeat. We’re going to give you some medication to try to revert it back to a healthy rhythm. Dani, administer one milligram of atropine, IV push, please.”

“You got it. Hang in there, Nick,” said Dani, squeezing his shoulder reassuringly as she injected something into his IV.

Nick felt the effects of the medication almost immediately. There was a swooping sensation in his chest as his heart reacted and began to race, followed by a hot flash that made his face flush with sudden warmth. This did nothing to help his nausea or

dizziness; in fact, it only made his symptoms worse. “I really don’t feel good,” he said, shaking his head. “God... I’m gonna die, aren’t I?”

Dr. Elizabeth gave him a grim smile and shook her head. “Not if we can help it,” she said. “Dani, let’s hook him up to a twelve-lead ECG.” To Nick, she explained, “This will give us a more detailed reading of your heart’s electrical activity.”

“You know what we call Dr. Elizabeth around here?” asked Dani conversationally, as she attached more electrodes to Nick’s chest and limbs. “We call her the Queen of Hearts. That’s because she’s the best cardiologist in the Keys. You couldn’t be in better hands.”

“Good to know,” said Nick faintly. He could feel his heart slowing down again, but it still seemed to be beating abnormally, making his chest ache as it thumped heavily against his ribs. The blip of the heart monitor in the background was uneven, like a piece of music being played by a percussionist with no sense of rhythm. Suddenly, the alarm went off again.

“He’s bradying down again,” said Dani, looking from the monitor to Dr. Elizabeth.

The latter was studying a strip of paper that had been printed from the ECG machine next to Nick’s bed. “He’s in complete heart block,” she said. “We need to begin transcutaneous pacing.”

“Wait... what now?” Nick was frightened by the unfamiliar medical words they were using. They might as well have been speaking a foreign language. He didn’t understand most of it, but he knew it must be bad because he was feeling worse by the minute instead of better. As much as he wanted to believe them when they said he wasn’t dying, he was filled with a sense of impending doom.

“There’s good news and bad news, Nick,” said Dr. Elizabeth. “The ECG is showing no signs of a heart attack - that’s the good news. What it does show is a problem with the conduction system of your heart, probably caused by the cardiomyopathy. Your heartbeat is usually controlled by an electrical signal that passes from the upper chambers of the heart to the lower chambers, but in this case, that signal has been blocked. Your atria and ventricles aren’t communicating, so they’re contracting independently of each other, completely out of sync,” she explained. “Because of that, your heart is beating too slowly to effectively pump blood to the rest of your body - that’s the bad news. If we don’t correct the problem soon, you could be at risk for another cardiac arrest.”

Nick closed his eyes as he tried to absorb all of this information. When he opened them again, he asked, "So what can you do to correct it?"

"We'll have to put you on an external pacemaker in order to help your heart beat normally again," answered Dr. Elizabeth. "It'll only be temporary, until you're stable, but eventually you will probably need a permanent pacemaker implanted to prevent this type of arrhythmia from recurring."

"Great," said Nick sarcastically, feeling again like he'd aged five decades in a single day. Pacemakers were for old people, not guys in the prime of their lives. But he was in no position to argue about whether he needed one or not.

"We're going to put a pair of pacer pads on your chest and back," Dr. Elizabeth explained, as Dani pulled the extra electrodes off his chest and wiped his skin clean. "They'll send small pulses of electricity to your heart, stimulating it to contract."

"That sounds painful," Nick said warily, while Dani peeled the clear back off a large, sticky pad and applied it to the left side of his chest.

"It can be uncomfortable," Dr. Elizabeth admitted, as she and Dani rolled him onto his right side to place the other pad on his back, below his left shoulder blade. "Once we get started, we can give you some pain medication and a mild sedative if it gets to be too much."

"Don't worry, Nick," added Dani. "I know this is scary, but we're going to get you through it, okay?"

Nick nodded, swallowing hard. He had no choice but to trust her. With his life hanging in the balance, he lay back and let the so-called "Queen of Hearts" take control of his.

Dani plugged the pacer pad wires into the defibrillator on top of the red crash cart - apparently, it doubled as a pacemaker. When she first began pushing buttons and fiddling with the dials on the machine, Nick didn't feel any different. *This isn't so bad*, he thought, letting out the breath he'd been holding. But that was before he felt the first shock surge through him, followed by another - and another - and another. Every second, his upper body jerked with a jolt of electricity. Each one was like a jab to the chest with a white-hot poker. "Holy *shit*," he exhaled sharply, as the air was forced from his lungs.

"Hang in there," Dani said, squeezing his hand. "I know it hurts."

“No kidding. How ‘bout those painkillers?” he asked, his voice shaking.

Dani looked at Dr. Elizabeth, who nodded. “Give him eight of fentanyl and five of diazepam.”

“Relief is on its way,” said Dani, as she added the new drugs to Nick’s IV. When he didn’t reply, she remarked, “Isn’t it crazy what a little electricity can do? I mean, who ever came up with the idea of shocking a person to control their heartbeat? It’s like something out of *Frankenstein*.”

“Actually, it was a man named John Alexander MacWilliam who first experimented with applying electrical impulses to the heart in the late eighteen hundreds,” Dr. Elizabeth answered matter-of-factly.

Dani raised her eyebrows. “Queen of Hearts *and* heart-related trivia right here,” she told Nick, with a reverent nod toward Elizabeth. “So anyway, what’s your favorite horror movie?”

“Huh?” said Nick, confused by the seemingly random question.

“*Frankenstein* is one of mine; that’s what made me think of it. What’s yours?” Dani asked again, as she fiddled with his IV.

“I dunno,” Nick muttered. It was too hard to think clearly with his whole torso twitching every time his heart contracted. He could only focus on his own discomfort.

“Oh, come on, Carter, I’m trying to distract you here!” Dani said, sounding exasperated. “The least you can do is play along.”

Despite his pain, Nick managed to smile. “Okay, okay... um... *Aliens*. Not the first one - the sequel.” It was an honest answer, but he wished he would have thought of a different series when the chestburster scene from the first film started replaying in his mind. He rested his hand on his own quivering chest and imagined his heart exploding through it with a quick spatter of blood.

“Nope, not a horror movie,” Dani said dismissively, shaking her head. “*Aliens* may be scary, but it’s more of a sci-fi film. I’m talking true horror movies.”

Nick rolled his eyes. “Okay, fine. *Nightmare on Elm Street*, then.”

“The original or the remake? Or one of the five hundred sequels?”

“Original, of course. But some of the sequels weren’t so bad. I’m a big Freddy Krueger fan.”

“Solid choice,” said Dani, smiling, as she sat down on the edge of his bed and picked up his hand again to check the pulse in his wrist. “Personally, I prefer the more realistic stuff, like *Psycho* or *Silence of the Lambs*.”

“You like serial killers, huh?”

“I *love* serial killers.” She grinned as she looked up from her watch. “God, that sounds so twisted, doesn’t it?”

“Nah, I get it,” said Nick, smiling back. Either her attempt to make conversation and take his mind off the treatment was working, or the medication must have been kicking in, because the pacing was becoming more bearable. He was starting to feel better.

“What’s his pulse?” Dr. Elizabeth interrupted.

“Seventy and strong,” said Dani, giving Nick’s hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Good. Let’s pause the pacing and see what his underlying rhythm looks like.” With the push of a button, the pacemaker stopped firing, and Nick felt an overwhelming sense of relief. Dr. Elizabeth placed her stethoscope on his chest, listening as she looked at the monitor. “Back in normal sinus,” she said at last.

Dani smiled down at Nick. “See? I told you we’d get you through this.”

He nodded. Now that he was finally able to relax, he could feel the effects of the sedative she’d given him. He was still light-headed, but his eyelids were growing heavy, as exhaustion set in.

“Dani, draw some blood to send to the lab. I want a CBC, lytes, and cardiac enzymes,” said Dr. Elizabeth, all business as usual. “We’ll need to run more tests to assess whether you need a permanent pacemaker implanted,” she told Nick, “but until we have the results, I’m putting you on strict bed rest. I don’t want you walking around while you’re at risk for another arrhythmia.”

It wasn’t what Nick wanted to hear, but he was too exhausted to argue. Talking to his wife would have to wait for another time.

Chapter 9

Nick took another nap that afternoon. Along with the nap came another nightmare.

This time, he was asleep in bed when he woke to a sudden, stabbing pain in his back. As he tried to sit up, he saw a pair of sharp knives protruding from his chest. Their blades pointed toward the ceiling, having slashed straight through his body from the bed underneath him. Screaming in agony, he tried again to pull himself up, but being impaled upon the knives meant that the slightest movement resulted in unbearable pain, as their razor-edged blades ripped into the internal structures of his body. He gagged and choked as blood gurgled up his throat, leaving the taste of metal in his mouth. Unable to breathe, he began to thrash around, but in spite of his painful struggle, he remained pinned to his hospital bed, unable to free himself from Freddy Krueger's clutches.

He woke with a start, breathing hard, to find both Dani and Dr. Elizabeth standing beside his bed. "Holy shit!" he gasped, his hand going to his chest. He could feel his heart hammering against his rib cage, but his skin was unharmed. Of course there were no stab wounds, he told himself, as reason sank in. It had all been another bad dream.

"What is it? Are you having chest pain?" asked Elizabeth, her stethoscope already halfway to her ears.

"No," said Nick, shaking his head. "No, I'm okay. I just had a nightmare."

"Another one?" Dani asked sympathetically. "I'm sorry."

He snorted as he remembered their earlier conversation. "You should be. You're the one who got me thinking about Freddy Krueger."

Dani raised her eyebrows. "You had a dream about Freddy Krueger?" When he nodded, she started to snicker. "Sorry... I shouldn't be laughing, but that is seriously so cute. It's like a little kid's nightmare."

Nick shook his head. "If I'd had nightmares like that as a kid, I would have never gone to sleep again."

“Aww... that scary, huh?” He nodded. “Well, no need to worry. You’re in safe hands here. I promise we won’t let Freddy come for you,” said Dani with a wink. Nick smiled sheepishly.

Dr. Elizabeth cleared her throat. “If you’re feeling up to it, Nick, we need to run another diagnostic test, and I’d rather get it done this afternoon than wait until tomorrow.”

“What is it?” Nick asked warily, rubbing the place on his chest where the pacer pad had been earlier. The skin there was slightly red and sore, as if it were sunburned.

“It’s called a stress echocardiogram,” said Dr. Elizabeth. “It will show us how your heart responds to stress, such as exercise. From what we’ve seen so far, it seems like your arrhythmias are being triggered by physical activity. If that’s the case, this test can prove it. It’s painless, I promise.”

“Okay,” Nick reluctantly agreed.

Elizabeth wheeled a new cart of equipment into the room, leaving the red crash cart sitting ominously in the corner. “What we’re going to do is use ultrasound technology to take a picture of your heart while it’s pumping,” she explained. “Once we get a good look at your heart at rest, we’ll give you a drug called dobutamine, which simulates the effects of exercise by making the heart work harder, and see how it reacts.”

“What if it freaks out the way it did earlier?” Nick asked nervously.

“If you were to develop another arrhythmia, it should resolve once we discontinue the dobutamine drip. This is really a pretty low-risk procedure,” Dr. Elizabeth assured him. “Now let us show you the shape of your heart.”

Nick snorted with laughter when he realized she was quoting his own lyrics at him. “Nice one, Doc,” he said, appreciating that the seemingly straight-laced Dr. Elizabeth did, in fact, have a sense of humor.

“She’s a big BSB fan too, you know,” said Dani, tilting her head toward Elizabeth.

Nick raised his eyebrows. “Really?”

Elizabeth blushed. “I may have listened to your music back in the day,” she admitted.

“But not anymore?” he asked, smiling.

“Oh, please!” Dani exclaimed, rolling her eyes at Elizabeth. “She’s trying to play it cool, but she told me once she had posters of you guys hanging in her dorm room at college.”

“Wow... bet you never thought you’d be taking care of one of us someday,” said Nick. It was a little awkward, knowing his doctor was a fan. His last cardiologist had been a middle-aged man who couldn’t have cared less about him being a Backstreet Boy. But to Dr. Elizabeth’s credit, she had kept her interactions with him incredibly professional, never treating him as anything other than her patient.

“Not in my wildest dreams,” said Elizabeth with a smile. After a pause, she added, “Actually, it was Brian who inspired me to specialize in cardiology.”

“Oh yeah? That’s really cool,” Nick replied. “I’m sure he’d be honored to know that.”

“Well, you’ll just have to tell him next time you see him then,” said Dani, smiling at Elizabeth.

“Yeah, sure.” Nick wondered when that would be. With a sickening feeling, he realized he wouldn’t be able to finish the world tour with the group. He needed to let the guys know that. “You think I could borrow one of your cell phones when we’re done here?” he asked, taking advantage of the fact that he was talking to two fans. “I really need to call Brian and the other fellas, fill ‘em in on what’s going on with me.”

Dani and Dr. Elizabeth looked at each other. “I’m sorry, but we can’t allow cell phones to be used in the intensive care unit,” said Elizabeth. “There are too many important pieces of equipment the signals could interfere with. But one of us can call whoever you’d like us to.”

Nick sighed. “No, that’s okay. I don’t know any of their numbers, anyway.” Without his phone, he was starting to feel strangely disconnected from the outside world. It had been a long time since he’d gone more than a day without texting someone or getting on social media.

“I’ll try calling Lauren again later,” Dani offered. “I’m sure she could help with that.”

“Good idea, Dani. Now let’s get started with the procedure,” said Dr. Elizabeth, back to her usual businesslike manner. “Nick, we’re going to take off your gown and have you lie on your left side...”

Sorry, Dani mouthed at Nick as she helped him get undressed and into position.

“I’m just going to darken the room so I can see the ultrasound screen better,” Dr. Elizabeth added, as she dimmed the bright fluorescent lights.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were trying to seduce me,” Nick joked, wagging his eyebrows. He couldn’t be sure, but he thought Elizabeth was blushing again.

Dani laughed. “She’s just trying to find a way back to your heart,” she told him with another wink.

He groaned. “How many heart jokes are you guys going to make with my song lyrics?” he asked, amused.

Dani shrugged. “I dunno, how many songs do you have with the word ‘heart’ in the title?”

“A lot,” said Elizabeth, as she adjusted the settings on her screen.

“A lot,” agreed Nick, laughing.

“Let’s see... so we’ve already mentioned ‘Shape of My Heart’ and ‘Back to Your Heart,’” said Dani. “There’s also ‘Straight Through My Heart.’”

“‘Don’t Go Breaking My Heart,’” Nick added, arching an eyebrow.

“‘I’ll Never Break Your Heart,’” Elizabeth replied without missing a beat.

Dani laughed. “Don’t forget my personal favorite, ‘Quit Playing Games (With My Heart).’”

“Oh yeah, that’s her CPR song,” said Elizabeth, smirking at Dani.

Dani’s mouth dropped open. “Don’t tell him that!”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it”

“Wait, what?” asked Nick, laughing as he looked between them. “What does that mean, her CPR song?”

Dani rolled her eyes. “Okay, so this may sound weird to someone who’s not in the medical field, but when you learn CPR, some instructors will suggest singing a song in your head to help you stay at the right pace of a hundred compressions per minute.

Most people use 'Stayin' Alive' by the Bee Gees because both the beat and the title are perfect, but I happen to prefer 'Quit Playing Games'."

Nick narrowed his eyes at her. "Wait, so let me get this straight: while you were giving me CPR... you were singing one of my songs?"

"Of course not, because that would've made an already weird situation even weirder," she replied quickly, though even in the dark, Nick thought he saw her face redden.

"Hey, what about 'Welcome to My Heart'?" Elizabeth interjected, holding up the ultrasound wand. "Now, Nick, I'm going to need you to lie perfectly still while I move this transducer around on your chest. It's covered in a conductive gel, so it may feel a little cold at first."

Their light-hearted conversation came to a sudden halt. Nick flinched when the transducer touched his skin - it *was* cold. Dr. Elizabeth circled the left side of his chest for a few seconds before she found the right spot. Once she had centered the wand over his heart, Nick could hear a '*whoosh, whoosh*' sound coming from the machine. He looked up at the monitor, watching the blurry white shape of his heart beating on the black screen. Both the sight and the sound reminded him of being with Lauren in the sonogram room when she was pregnant.

He remembered the first sonogram photos they'd gotten to share with their family and friends when they'd announced they were pregnant... seeing the progression of their babies' alien-like bodies transforming into tiny humans as they grew bigger... and hearing each one's heartbeat for the first time. He also remembered the last time, when they'd been told there was no longer a heartbeat, no more movement from the perfectly-formed fetus on the black screen.

They had been through two painful miscarriages before, but this one was different. Doctors don't call it a miscarriage after twenty weeks, and Nick and Lauren had made it all the way to the third trimester. They'd thought they were out of the woods - even if Lauren went into preterm labor, the baby would be viable by that point. They had the nursery almost finished, the name already picked out, and a small "sprinkle" shower planned for the following week when they'd found out their daughter was dead.

Numb with shock, Nick had driven Lauren straight to the hospital to have her labor induced. The whole way, he'd wondered how they were going to explain what had happened to Odin, who had only just started to understand what it meant to become a big brother. Nick didn't understand it himself. At times, he was in denial. All throughout Lauren's labor, he had hoped and prayed for a miracle. Maybe there had

been some mistake, his mind reasoned. Maybe the doctors were all wrong. Maybe they could still do something to save the baby once she was born. But after the delivery, as he'd held her for the first and final time, he had been forced to face the reality of his daughter's death.

They'd given her the name they had thoughtfully chosen: Arya, after their love of music and the show *Game of Thrones*. Instead of hanging above her crib, it was engraved on the tiny, gold urn they had picked out to hold her ashes.

"Take a deep breath and hold it, please." Dr. Elizabeth's voice brought Nick back to the present, back to the hospital bed in which he lay on his side, letting her examine his heart. He inhaled a breath of oxygen through the cannula in his nose and held it in his lungs until he heard her say, "Perfect. You can exhale now." Then he let the air out slowly, struggling to keep his composure.

"You okay?" Dani asked, putting her hand on his shoulder.

"Yeah," he lied. "It's just getting uncomfortable, laying on my side like this."

"Go ahead and change positions if you'd like. You can lie any way you want for a little while; the first part of the test is finished," said Dr. Elizabeth.

"How'd I do?" Nick asked, as he rolled over onto his back, stretching out his legs with relief.

Elizabeth shrugged. "About like I expected. Your left ventricle is enlarged, and your ejection fraction is low. In layman's terms, that means your heart isn't able to pump blood as effectively as it should, hence the diagnosis of heart failure. But we already knew that," she said matter-of-factly. "What we want to find out with the second phase of the test is how much your heart function is affected by physical activity. Usually we have people walk on a treadmill or ride a stationary bike for this part, but since you haven't been able to get out of bed without experiencing symptoms, we'll raise your heart rate with medication instead. Dani's going to start the dobutamine drip now. As it takes effect, you may notice your heart pounding faster and harder - that's normal. If you feel light-headed or have any chest pain, palpitations, or shortness of breath, let us know right away, okay?"

Nick nodded. He realized he'd been through a stress test before, remembering how Dr. Polakoff had made him run on a treadmill with wires taped to his chest to record what his heart was doing while he exercised. It had sucked then, but at least he'd been able to do everything that was asked of him. Now he could barely get out of bed. He still didn't

understand how his heart had gotten so bad so quickly. It must have suffered some serious damage during his episode of sudden cardiac death, he decided. Dani had saved his brain, but not his heart - and by doing so, she had doomed him to a slow, drawn-out death instead of an instant one.

On one hand, he was grateful to have been given a second chance at life - a chance to see his son again and make amends with his wife. But on the other hand, he dreaded the long, boring days that lay ahead of him - days he would almost certainly spend lying in bed, subjected to more painful procedures intended to prolong his life as he waited for a new heart. In some ways, he thought it would be better if he had just died on Halloween night.

Then he would be with Arya.

Depressed, Nick pretended to doze while Dani set up the dobutamine drip, plugging it into one of the ports of his central line. As the drug began to circulate through his bloodstream, his heartbeat accelerated. Although they had both told him this was to be expected, it still filled him with anxiety to feel his heart beating so fast without the slightest bit of physical activity.

“All right, Nick, I’d like you to roll onto your left side again so I can get another look at your heart,” said Dr. Elizabeth. Dani helped Nick get back into the correct position without disturbing any of the electrode wires. She checked his pulse and blood pressure as Elizabeth placed the transducer on his chest. After a few minutes, Elizabeth said, “We’re going to increase the infusion rate of the dobutamine now, which will raise your heart rate. Let us know if you experience any of the symptoms I mentioned earlier.”

Nick nodded. As more of the drug flowed through his IV, he felt a fullness in his neck and a fluttery feeling in his chest.

“PVCs on the monitor,” Dani warned Dr. Elizabeth in a low voice.

“What does that mean?” Nick asked anxiously.

“It stands for premature ventricular contractions - extra heartbeats that begin in one of the ventricles of your heart,” Elizabeth explained, as she studied the screen. “Are you feeling any chest pain or palpitations?”

“Not really pain, but... palpitations, yeah, I guess you could call it,” said Nick. His heart was pounding as hard as if he had just finished performing one of the fast songs on stage. “Is that bad?”

“Let’s go ahead and stop the infusion,” Dr. Elizabeth said to Dani, dodging his question.

As Dani disconnected the IV and flushed out the tubing, Nick felt what could only be described as a hot flash. Suddenly, his face felt flushed and sweaty. His heart was still racing like he was in the middle of a show, making it hard to catch his breath. “I don’t feel right,” he blurted out, abruptly rolling away from Dr. Elizabeth and her equipment. Lying flat on his back didn’t help; in fact, it only made it harder to breathe. He sat up and leaned forward, holding his hand against his heaving chest.

“He’s diaphoretic and tachy at one twenty,” Dani said. “Pressure’s dropping: ninety over sixty.”

“Are you short of breath, Nick?” asked Dr. Elizabeth, pressing her stethoscope to his back. Nick nodded. “Bilateral rales at the base of the lungs,” he heard her say to Dani, as she moved the stethoscope from one side to the other. “What’s his pulse ox?”

“Down to 93 percent,” Dani replied.

“Put him on one hundred percent O₂, non-rebreather,” Elizabeth ordered. To Nick, she said, “We’re going to give you some extra oxygen through a mask to help you breathe. Try to relax and take deep breaths while your heart rate comes back down.”

Nick nodded again, feeling light-headed. As Dani took the oxygen cannula out of his nostrils and replaced it with a mask that covered his mouth and nose, a wave of dizziness washed over him. He started to slump sideways, but Dani caught him under the arm and eased him back down before he blacked out completely.

“Run of V-tach,” he heard Dr. Elizabeth say, as his vision blurred in and out. He could hear an alarm going off on the heart monitor in the background. “Let’s try eighty of lidocaine.” She turned the overhead lights back on, giving the room a strange, chartreuse tone. When she leaned over him, it looked like she had a fluorescent green halo glowing around her head. “Nick, your heart is beating too fast. We’re going to give you another drug to get it back into a normal sinus rhythm. Just relax and breathe, okay?”

It was hard to relax and breathe when his heart was racing, but after a few minutes, Nick felt it start to slow down. “Back in sinus,” said Dr. Elizabeth, looking at the monitor. As the fluttery feeling in his chest went away, Nick breathed a sigh of relief. “Are you feeling better now?” she asked him.

“Much,” he replied, his breath fogging up the oxygen mask over his face. Dani removed the mask and slipped the tubes back into his nose so he could speak more easily.

“Good,” Dr. Elizabeth said, patting the back of his hand. “Unfortunately, you failed the stress test. It didn’t take much to trigger another arrhythmia, which tells me your heart isn’t able to withstand any extra physical demands placed upon it. That means your heart failure is progressing rapidly.

Nick felt a sinking feeling in his stomach, as the implications of what she was saying became clear. Despite Dani’s and her assurances that they wouldn’t let him die, he *was* dying, perhaps faster than Dr. Elizabeth had initially predicted.

“I’m recommending you have an ICD placed before you can be discharged,” Dr. Elizabeth continued. “That stands for implantable cardioverter-defibrillator - it’s a small device inserted into your chest that connects to your heart. It can detect an abnormal heart rhythm and either act as a pacemaker to help regulate your heartbeat or, in the case of a particularly dangerous arrhythmia, deliver a small shock to your heart to get it beating correctly again.”

Remembering the painful experience of being paced, Nick shook his head. “I don’t want one,” he mumbled. “I’d rather die than go through that again.”

Dr. Elizabeth gave him a sympathetic smile. “It’s not anywhere near as unpleasant as the external pacing you endured earlier, I promise. Because the internal pacemaker is wired directly to your heart, the electrical impulses it sends are much smaller - you won’t even feel them.”

Nick was not convinced. “What if it shocked me?”

“Now that you would feel - most people describe it as being like a punch to the chest - but it’s a small price to pay for saving your life, don’t you think?”

“What’s the point if I’m just going to die anyway?” Nick asked with a shrug.

“This device can help keep you alive until a donor heart is found,” said Dr. Elizabeth. “It can even improve your quality of life while you wait for a transplant. You don’t have to decide anything today, though. We can talk about it more tomorrow, after you’ve had some time to think about it, okay?”

Nick nodded.

“Try to get some rest. You’ve had quite a day,” she added, patting his arm. “Dani’s going to continue to monitor you while I make some calls. I’ll be back to check on you later.”

After she had left, Nick looked at Dani. “Do you think I should do it?”

Dani nodded. “Without a doubt,” she replied. “A lot of people end up with ICDs, and they really do help. It’s not as big of a deal as it sounds. But it’s your decision.”

Nick sighed. “I guess I should do it, if that’s what it takes to get out of here. No offense.”

“None taken,” she said, smiling. “No one wants to stay in the ICU. Hopefully we’ll get you stable enough to go home soon.”

Home. The word made Nick feel like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, stuck in a strange land and desperate to find her way back to Kansas. If only he could click his heels and wake up in his own bed with Lauren beside him.

But this time, Nick wasn’t dreaming. He was trapped in a nightmare that was all too real.

Chapter 10

In *The Wizard of Oz*, it was a tornado that took Dorothy away from her home. In Nick’s case, it was a hurricane.

“Change of plans,” said Dr. Elizabeth as she bustled in the next morning. “You can forget about the ICD for now. Hurricane Melissa has strengthened to a Category 4 and shifted her course; she’s headed straight for South Florida. We’re going to have to evacuate the whole hospital.”

“What?!” was Nick’s first reaction. He stared at her, stunned.

Elizabeth looked flustered. “I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “I forgot you haven’t been able to watch the news. It’s all they’ve been talking about for the last few days.”

Nick vaguely remembered seeing something about a tropical storm on the TV at the bar on Halloween, but so much had happened in the meantime, he hadn't given it a single thought since then. "So what does that mean for me?" he asked.

"I called in a favor from a former colleague of mine who works at Emory University Hospital in Atlanta. We're going to transfer you there. They have a wonderful heart transplant program, and Atlanta's far enough inland that it shouldn't be affected much by the storm, no matter what course it ultimately takes. Plus, I know you'll have at least one friend around for support," she said, smiling.

It took Nick a few seconds to realize she was talking about Brian. He and Brian weren't nearly as close as they had been at the beginning of their friendship, but he was sure Brian would come to visit if he knew Nick was in the hospital. Of all the guys in the group, Brian would best be able to understand what Nick was going through because of his own heart condition. It would be nice to have him nearby.

"Yeah, Brian lives like an hour outside Atlanta... but that's pretty far from here," Nick replied, frowning. "How will I get there?"

"Air ambulance. You'll be taken to the mainland by helicopter and then flown from there to Atlanta in a private plane."

Nick shuddered. He hated flying, especially in small aircrafts, but he supposed there was no other good way to get that far in a reasonable amount of time. Having grown up in Florida, he knew how congested the highways could get during an evacuation.

"Don't worry," said Dr. Elizabeth, patting his arm. "You'll be in safe hands. A flight nurse and paramedic will be with you the whole way."

She thought he was concerned about his heart. Nick forced a smile and nodded, not bothering to correct her. It made no sense to worry about the helicopter crashing when he was dying anyway, he told himself. What did it matter?

When it was time, Dani helped get him ready for the transport. "I called Lauren to fill her in on what's happened," she said, as she flushed his central line. "She sounded pretty upset. I don't know if she's planning to go to Atlanta or not, but she did give me Brian's number so I can call and tell him you're coming."

"That'd be great," said Nick gratefully. "Thanks."

“No problem,” Dani replied, hanging a fresh bag of fluid on his IV pole. “This should last until you get there.”

“Are there any tranquilizers in there?” Nick asked, only half-kidding.

Dani laughed. “Well, let’s see,” she said, looking at the label on the side of the bag. With the air of a pretentious bartender, she began to describe its ingredients. “This lovely cocktail contains a potent blend of cardiac drugs: a beta blocker to help your heart pump better, an antiarrhythmic to prevent abnormal heartbeats, an ACE inhibitor to control your blood pressure and improve blood flow, and a diuretic to keep your body from retaining extra fluid... but, alas, no tranquilizer. Why, do you want one?”

“I freakin’ hate flying,” Nick admitted.

“Really?” She raised her eyebrows. “I wouldn’t have expected that from a world traveler like you.”

“Yeah, well, I fly when I have to for work, not for fun. I’ve never even been in a helicopter before,” he added.

“I have. It’s not so bad,” said Dani, “but if you’re serious about wanting something to take the edge off, I can ask Dr. Elizabeth.”

“Nah, it’s all right,” Nick said, shrugging. “I’ll survive.” *I hope*, he added in his head.

“I know you will.” Dani smiled at him. “I’m gonna miss having you around here, you know,” she said, as she moved around his bed, unplugging the various pieces of equipment from and hooking him up to portable versions. “I’m sorry it had to be under these circumstances, but I’m glad I got to spend so much time with you these last couple days.”

“Thanks for taking such good care of me. You’ve been great,” said Nick, smiling back. “I can’t say I’ll miss this place much, though.”

“You might once you see the other hospital,” said Dani, arching an eyebrow. Then she broke into another smile that made her brown eyes twinkle. “Just kidding. I don’t blame you one bit. Let’s hope they have phones in their ICU rooms, huh?”

Nick nodded. “A TV would be nice too - just sayin’.”

“I’ve been saying the same thing for years. Blame it on budget cuts,” Dani replied, rolling her eyes. “The decision-makers don’t want to spend their dimes providing entertainment for people who may be too sick to enjoy it.”

“Well, when I get better, maybe I’ll make a donation just for that purpose,” Nick decided. “Not having TVs to help those sick people pass the time is pure torture.”

“Put it in your patient satisfaction survey,” she said, handing him a piece of paper and a pen. “And if you don’t mind, I’d love an autograph at the bottom to remember our time together.” She flashed him a big grin.

Nick laughed. “Like you could forget.”

She smirked back at him. “Yes, Nick, the night we spent together was definitely unforgettable.”

His smile faded as he realized their conversation had taken on a flirtatious tone. It wouldn’t have been a big deal under different circumstances, but considering the fact that they’d both been unfaithful with each other, he felt guilty about it.

“What are you gonna do as far as the storm goes?” he asked, wanting to change the subject. “Are you evacuating too?”

She shrugged. “If I had my way, we wouldn’t. I’d rather just ride out it out here-”

“Spoken like a true Floridian,” Nick said with a grin.

“-but Rob wants to leave. I think we’re gonna go up to my grandparents’ place in Gainesville.”

“That’s probably a good plan. Good luck getting there.”

“Thanks.” She smiled and patted his hand. “Good luck to you too. You’re gonna get through this, you know.”

“I hope so,” he said, feeling his heart flip-flop in his chest. For a few minutes, he had actually forgotten why he was there. He decided would miss having Dani around to distract him. He hoped the nurses at the new hospital were as friendly as her - and it wouldn’t hurt if they were also as attractive.

“You will,” she assured him again. After a pause, she added, “This is probably inappropriate, but I really just want to give you a big hug right now. Do you mind?”

He smiled. “Of course not,” he said, opening his arms. “C’mere.” As she bent down to embrace him, he leaned forward, letting her wrap her arms around him. He patted her on the back, catching a whiff of sweetly-perfumed soap under the smell of disinfectant that clung to her hospital scrubs.

“Well, Mr. Carter, you ‘bout ready to blow this joint?” Nick’s heart skipped a beat as he recognized Rob’s voice. Dani released him and straightened up quickly as her husband sauntered into the room, wheeling a gurney along with him. “The chopper’s on its way, so we’d better get going,” he said, as he rolled the gurney right up next to Nick’s bed and lowered the side rail. “You wanna scooch on over here?”

“Sure,” said Nick shakily, hoisting himself off his bed and onto the gurney. His heart was racing - whether from exertion or being startled by Rob, he wasn’t sure. He could feel it hammering against his ribs as he tried to relax, taking deep breaths of oxygen from the portable tank Rob placed between his legs.

Dani was in the midst of hanging the heart monitor on the side of the gurney when she suddenly frowned. “Your heart rate just shot way up,” she said, looking up at Nick. “Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m a little light-headed,” he admitted.

Rob was already reaching for the stethoscope around his neck. “He’s also diaphoretic,” he told Dani, as he stuck it into his ears and slid the round end down the front of Nick’s gown.

“What does that mean?” Nick asked weakly. He definitely didn’t feel well now; the room around him was starting to go a sickly shade of green. *Not again*, he thought with a sense of dread.

“Sweaty,” said Dani, still frowning. “You look pale all of a sudden, too.” She picked his hand up off the gurney to check his pulse.

A high-pitched alarm went off on the heart monitor. “Multifocal PVCs,” said Rob, ripping the stethoscope out of his ears. He lowered the head of the gurney so Nick was lying flat. “He’s not stable enough to be moved anywhere right now, let alone flown in a friggin’ helicopter. Page Elizabeth,” he added, punching the red button on the wall behind Nick’s bed. “Let’s get him back into bed before he crashes. On my count: one...

two... three.” He and Dani grabbed the sheet underneath Nick and used it to haul him off the gurney and onto the bed.

“What’s happening now?” Nick asked, feeling helpless and frightened as his heart fluttered uncontrollably in his chest.

Dani lowered the head of the bed and leaned over him, looking directly into his eyes. “You’re having another arrhythmia,” she said, her hand on his shoulder. “Hang in there. We’re going to help you.”

“He’s in V-tach,” Rob said suddenly, as the monitor sounded another alarm. “Get the crash cart; we need to cardiovert him.”

“He still has a pulse,” protested Dani. “Try lidocaine first; that worked last time.”

“All right, go for it, but I’m gettin’ the crash cart,” Rob replied. While he went to retrieve the red cart from the corner, Dani rolled her eyes at Nick.

“What does he know?” she muttered, as she drew up a dose of the drug into a syringe. “This is going to work.” She injected it straight into the central line in the side of Nick’s neck.

But that time, it didn’t seem to make any difference. “He’s still in sustained V-tach,” said Rob, watching the rhythm on the monitor. “You want him to arrest? ‘Cause he’s going to if we don’t do something. We’ve gotta cardiovert him.”

Dani sighed. “Okay, fine, you win.” She turned to Nick. “Your heart didn’t respond to the drug; it’s still in a dangerous rhythm. We’re going to use the defibrillator to give your heart a shock that should reset its rhythm and get it beating right again.”

“No,” Nick moaned, shaking his head as he imagined how much that would hurt. “Please don’t.”

“We have to, honey - trust me. Your heart can’t keep beating like this for long. If we don’t correct the arrhythmia right away, you could go into cardiac arrest again. We have to do this. Do you understand?”

Tears welled in Nick’s eyes as he nodded. He had never felt more terrified. “Just don’t let me die,” he whimpered.

“Nick, we are *not* going to let you die,” Dani replied fiercely. “We’ve done this hundreds of times. You’re going to be just fine. I’ll give you something to knock you out for a few seconds while we deliver the shock so you don’t remember it.” She drew up a syringe full of milky white liquid and injected it slowly into his IV. “Try to relax.”

Yeah, right, thought Nick anxiously, as he waited for the medication to work its magic. He wished his heart would slow down on its own, but it kept galloping like a racehorse gone rogue.

Dani pulled down the front of his hospital gown as Rob fired up the defibrillator, attaching extra electrodes to Nick’s chest so it could track his heartbeat. “Ready when you are,” Nick heard Rob say to Dani, as he held up the paddles.

Nick felt his eyelids growing heavy as the drug took effect. The last thing he remembered was seeing the pair of paddles looming over him before the room went black.

Nick’s eyes rolled back into his head as Rob pressed the button on the defibrillator. When the synchronized shock was delivered, Nick’s body twitched atop the bed. His hands curled into tight fists as he flung them toward his face, a typical reaction to being cardioverted. But a second later, his arms fell limply to his sides, as his heart stopped beating and began to fibrillate.

Dani had been studying the monitor, waiting to see what the shock would do. Her breath caught in her throat as she watched the tall waves suddenly flatten into a random series of tiny ripples. The jagged line that ran across the screen looked more like a child’s scribble than a waveform. “He’s in V-fib!” she exclaimed, as the alarm sounded to alert them to the fact that their patient’s heart was no longer pumping blood, but merely quivering inside his chest. Without medical intervention, Nick would be brain dead in a matter of minutes.

“Start CPR,” said Rob. “I’ll get the defibrillator ready.”

A rush of adrenaline shot through Dani’s body as she lowered the bed, laced her fingers together, and leaned over Nick, planting her hands firmly in the center of his chest. She pushed down hard and fast, knowing she needed to do it at least a hundred times per minute at a depth of two inches to be effective. Despite her denial, she couldn’t help hearing his song in her head. “*Even in my heart... I see... that you’re not being true to me...*” It was surreal to be performing chest compressions on a pulseless Nick Carter as

“Quit Playing Games (With My Heart)” played in her brain, but it was how she had learned, and even now, it helped her keep the beat.

“Charged to two hundred,” Rob announced. “Clear!”

Dani stood back, lifting her hands off Nick’s body, as Rob leaned over him, pressing the defibrillator paddles to both sides of his chest. She watched his body jerk again as the shock was applied; then she went right back to pumping his chest.

“Keep up the compressions for another two minutes,” said Rob, as he set the paddles aside. “I’ll start ventilating him. Where the hell is Elizabeth?” He smacked the blue code button on the wall as he reached for the resuscitation mask.

Elizabeth arrived less than a minute later. “What happened?” she asked, as she hurried into the room.

“He went into V-tach while we were transferring him onto the gurney,” Rob explained from the head of the bed, where he was bagging Nick. “We gave him a dose of lidocaine, but it didn’t work, so we tried cardioversion at fifty joules, which triggered V-fib.”

“How long has he been down?”

“Just a couple minutes.”

“Have you given him any meds?” Elizabeth wanted to know.

“Not since the lidocaine,” replied Rob.

Dani listened to their conversation without contributing, keeping her focus on delivering high-quality compressions. Her arms were starting to get tired, but she didn’t slow down. Her heart raced, fueling her with adrenaline as she continued fervently pumping Nick’s chest. She was determined to keep going until Rob told her to stop.

“Let’s pause for a rhythm check,” her husband said after another minute had passed. “Hold compressions, please.” Dani took her hands off Nick’s body and turned her attention to the cardiac monitor. She watched the jagged line flatten for a second, then jump, slowly transforming into a recognizable waveform. “Sinus rhythm,” said Rob triumphantly. Dani felt herself sag with relief.

“He’s got a strong radial pulse,” Elizabeth added, as she palpated the artery in Nick’s wrist. “Nice work. Now let’s make sure he doesn’t arrest again.”

As they moved around the bed, administering oxygen and medications to keep his heart beating, Dani bent down by Nick's head and put her mouth next to his ear. "I told you we wouldn't let you die today," she whispered. "And when you wake up, you won't remember a thing."



PART II: HOUSE OF CARDS

Chapter 11

Brian Littrell was still in bed when his phone rang. With a sigh, he reached over to his bedside table and picked it up to see who was calling. He didn't recognize the number on the screen, so he set it down and rolled over, letting the call go to voicemail.

"Who was that, babe?" his wife Leighanne asked without bothering to open her eyes.

"I dunno - no one I know," replied Brian, burrowing back under the covers.

"You should've answered it. What if it was about an opportunity for Baylee?"

"Then hopefully they'll leave a message or call back." Brian had just closed his eyes again when he heard the phone beep to let him know someone had done the former. With a groan, he grudgingly rolled back over and reached for the phone again. He pressed a button to access his voicemail box, entered his passcode, and put the phone to his ear to listen to the message.

"Hi, Brian. This is Danica Logan, calling from Lower Keys Medical Center in Key West. Will you please call me back at this number as soon as you get this message? It's concerning Nick."

Brian's heart sank when he heard Nick's name. Of course it was concerning Nick; Nick was the only one he knew who regularly vacationed in the Florida Keys.

"Please call as soon as possible," the woman said again, then rattled off a phone number and repeated it. *"Thank you."* The message ended with no further information.

Brian sat up, feeling sick to his stomach. Normally, his first reaction to a call about Nick coming from Key West would have been, *What kind of trouble has he gotten himself into now?* But if Nick had been arrested again, the call wouldn't have been coming from a hospital. The fact that it had meant Nick must be hurt... or sick... or dead. Brian's heart began to hammer. He put his hand on his bare chest, feeling it beat against his palm.

"Who was it?" Leighanne asked again. As she opened her eyes and looked up at him, her curious tone turned to one of concern. "Husband? Is everything okay?"

He shook his head. "It was someone calling from a hospital in Key West," he said, his voice cracking. "Something happened to Nick."

"Oh no..." She sat up too, tossing back her tangle of long, blonde hair as she turned to face him. "What happened? Is he all right?"

Brian swallowed hard. "I don't know. She didn't say."

Leighanne bit down on her bottom lip. "Do you want me to call her back and find out?" she offered.

"No, that's okay. I will." Brian's hands were shaking. He fumbled with the phone, finally managing to find the callback button. He pushed it with a trembling finger and put the phone back to his ear.

It rang twice before someone answered. "Lower Keys Medical Center. How may I help you?"

Brian cleared his throat. "Hi... my name's Brian Littrell," he began uncertainly. "I just got a call from y'all about my friend, Nick Carter?"

"Oh, of course! I'm actually the one who called you," replied the young woman on the phone. "Thanks for calling back so quickly."

"No problem," said Brian. "So what's going on with Nick? Is he okay?"

“I’m so sorry to have to tell you this, but Nick suffered a medical emergency early Friday morning. He’s in the intensive care unit, in stable but critical condition.”

Brian’s heart skipped a beat, then began to race again. “Oh my God. What happened to him?”

When he said that, he felt Leighanne grab his leg and glanced up to see her looking at him with wide eyes, clearly wondering the same thing. *What??* she mouthed at him frantically, but he shook his head, wanting to concentrate on what the woman on the phone was saying.

“I’m afraid I can’t give you any more details over the phone - it’s against hospital protocol,” the woman apologized. “But he could really use your prayers right now.”

Brian was frustrated by the lack of information. “Is his wife with him?” he asked, wondering why he hadn’t heard anything from Lauren.

“No... it’s my understanding that they’re separated.”

“Separated?” Brian frowned. “Since when? Where did you hear that?”

“Nick told me.”

Brian’s thoughts were racing even faster than his heart. He wanted to question her further about Lauren, but he decided to keep the focus on Nick. “So he’s awake? He’s talking?”

“He was, but he had a major setback this morning and hasn’t regained consciousness yet.”

Brian sighed, his frustration growing. “So you can tell me that, but you can’t tell me what the hell happened to him?”

“I’m so sorry,” said the woman. “I wish I could, but I’m not allowed to give out any more medical information over the phone.”

“What if I was there in person?” Brian asked, annoyed. “Could you tell me then?”

“Yes.”

Brian didn't hesitate more than a second before making a fateful decision of his own. "Fine, then I guess I'm coming down there. What hospital did you say he's at?"

"Lower Keys Medical Center," the woman replied. "If you let me know what time your flight gets in, I can send a driver to pick you up at the airport. The weather's getting pretty bad, so you may have a hard time finding a ride when you get here."

"That'd be great," said Brian, warming to her some. "Can I call you right back after I've booked a flight?"

"Of course."

"Thanks." As they both hung up, Brian took a deep breath and let it out slowly. When he looked up, Leighanne was still staring at him.

"What in the world was that all about?" she asked. "Is Nick okay or not?"

A lump rose in Brian's throat as he shook his head. "It sounds like he's in bad shape, baby. The woman on the phone wouldn't tell me what's wrong with him, but she said he's unconscious and in critical condition."

Leighanne gasped, covering her mouth with her hand. "Oh God... I'm so sorry, honey." She kept her other hand on his leg, giving it a squeeze. "So you're flying down there?"

He nodded. "I feel like I have to. I don't think anyone else is with him; she said he and Lauren are separated." Frowning again, he added, "Did you know anything about that?"

Leighanne raised her eyebrows. "No, but I'm not surprised."

"Really? Nick and Lauren always seemed like they had a pretty strong marriage to me."

"Maybe, but grief changes people. I knew it was a bad sign when he went back on tour without her after they lost the baby," she said, shaking her head. "If you had done that to me, Husband, I don't know that we would still be married right now."

Brian nodded. "I tried to get him to take some time off. He wouldn't do it. But y'know, me and Nick are two different people; I'm a homebody, and he's always been more at home on the road. I think he needed to go back to work for his own mental health as much as Lauren needed to stay home for hers."

Leighanne sighed. "Poor Lauren. I should call her."

“Don’t,” said Brian. “Not yet. Let me get down there and find out what’s going on first.”

“Don’t you want me and Bay to come with you?” she asked.

Brian considered her offer for a second before shaking his head. “Nah, y’all should just stay here - you’ve got enough going on here, with Baylee’s birthday and the holidays coming up. I don’t know how long I’ll have to be down there. It may be awhile,” he warned her. As much as he wanted to be with his wife and son, Brian felt it would be better if they weren’t with him this time. He’d always had a hard time finding a balance between his family and his friends, which was what had driven a wedge between Nick and him in the first place. Their friendship wasn’t what it had been back in the beginning, before Brian had gotten married. But now Nick needed him, and Brian wanted to be there for his former best friend. He knew the only way he would be able to focus fully on Nick was if he went to Florida by himself and left his family behind.

He could tell Leighanne didn’t like that answer, but she knew better than to push the issue. She packed Brian’s bag for him while he went online to book a last-minute flight.

On his way to the airport, Brian tried calling Nick’s phone, but it went straight to voicemail. He left a brief message:

“Hey, Frack, I heard you’re in the hospital. I don’t know if you’ll hear this anytime soon, but if you do, call or text me back if you can. You’ve got me pretty worried about you, bro. I’m on my way down, so I’ll see you soon. Hang in there, all right?”

Then he called Howie.

Out of all the Backstreet Boys, Howie Dorough was the closest to Nick - not only personally, but also in proximity. He was the only one of the five who still lived in Florida. If there was anyone who would be able and willing to meet Brian in Key West that afternoon, it was Howie.

“Hey, man,” Howie answered his phone cheerfully. “What’s up?”

Brian took a deep breath. “Hey, have you heard from Nick lately?” he asked, trying to stop his voice from shaking.

“Yeah, I talked to him last week,” replied Howie. “Why?”

You're a better friend than I am, Brian thought guiltily. He hadn't spoken to Nick in at least six weeks, not since he'd gotten home from the tour in mid-September. If he had, he might have known that Nick *wasn't* home, but hanging out in Key West. "Did he sound okay?" Brian asked, avoiding answering Howie's question directly.

"Not really. He seemed depressed. I think he's been drinking pretty heavily again," Howie admitted with a sigh. Brian's heart sank. He'd had no idea Nick was having such a hard time, which made him feel even worse. "Why?" Howie asked again. "Do you think we need to stage another intervention or something?"

Brian swallowed hard. "Howie, something happened to him. He's in the hospital in Key West. I got a call from a woman who works there; she said Nick's in critical condition, but she wouldn't tell me why."

"What?!" Howie gasped.

"I'm gonna fly down there," Brian continued, still trying to keep his voice steady, "and find out what the hell's going on. I'm on my way to the Atlanta airport right now, and I should be in Key West by three this afternoon."

"You want some company?" Howie offered. "I can come down too."

Brian knew he could count on Howie. "Yeah, man, that'd be great if you could," he replied with a sense of relief. Whatever he found when he got to Florida, it was nice to know he wouldn't have to face it alone. Up until that moment, he had been regretting telling Leighanne to stay home, but now that he had Howie on board, Brian felt better about his decision.

"I'll look for a flight now. Let me put you on speaker," said Howie. In the background, Brian could hear him filling his wife Leigh in on what was going on as he booked his flight to Key West.

"Did y'all know Nick was down there?" Brian asked during a break in their conversation.

"Yeah, I told you I talked to him the other day," said Howie. "He's been there the whole break."

Brian frowned, feeling guilty again for being a bad friend. "So is it true he and Lauren are separated?"

“I don’t think they are in the legal sense, but it sounds like they might be heading that way,” Howie said sadly. “She’s still in Vegas; Nick hasn’t seen her since the end of the tour. He told me she hardly speaks to him.”

“She’s still grieving,” said Leigh. “I’m sure he is too.”

The furrow in Brian’s brow deepened as a troubling thought that had been in the back of his mind since the beginning of the conversation came to the forefront. “Howie, you said he seemed depressed. You don’t think he would deliberately do something to hurt himself, do you? Like overdose, or...?” He trailed off, leaving his last thought unfinished because the other possibilities were too horrific to put into words.

Howie and Leigh were both silent for a few seconds. Finally, Howie said, “No... I don’t *think* so. Not Nicky.” But he sounded as uncertain as Brian felt.

Neither of them had considered the possibility that Nick was not just depressed, but literally broken-hearted. They hadn’t discussed Nick’s heart condition in a long time, for it hadn’t seemed to affect him much in the last decade. As far as Brian knew, it was a thing of the past, just like his own congenital defect. He never imagined Nick’s heart problem would come back to haunt him. Instead, it was Nick’s history of substance abuse that weighed heavily on Brian’s mind the whole way to the airport.

It was raining when Brian landed in Key West.

He was not normally a nervous flier, but he had spent the better part of the flight praying, first for Nick and then for the pilot and all the passengers on the plane, including himself. As they’d made their turbulent descent through the thick storm clouds, he’d kept his hands clasped tightly together and his eyes squeezed shut, silently begging God to get them safely to the ground. After a bumpy but successful landing, Brian took a few deep breaths before he unbuckled his seatbelt and prepared to disembark the plane.

Waiting for him at the gate was a heavysset man in a suit, holding a sign that said LITTRELL. “Hi, I’m Brian Littrell,” Brian introduced himself as he approached him. “The hospital sent you, I take it?”

“That’s right,” replied the man. “You ready to roll? Any checked bags?”

“No, just the carry-on,” said Brian. He had packed nothing but a few changes of clothes and the essentials into his small suitcase, not sure how long he would be staying or what else he would need.

“Good deal. Right this way, then.” The driver lead him out of the small airport, producing a black umbrella to protect them both from the pouring rain as they walked to the lot where he was parked. By the time he popped the trunk of a silver sedan, the bottoms of Brian’s pants were soaked from splashing through puddles, but at least his head was dry.

Brian waited until they were in the privacy of the car to ask, “Do you know how my friend Nick’s doing?”

“No, sorry, sir,” said the driver, as he started the engine. “I don’t have any patient information. I just drive.” He checked his mirrors before backing carefully out of the parking space. “I’m sure his doctor will fill you in once you get to the hospital, though,” he added, putting his windshield wipers on high as they pulled out of the lot. “Do you want to head straight there or drop your stuff off at a hotel first?”

“You can take me straight to the hospital,” said Brian from the back seat. He had booked a room at a hotel, but didn’t want to waste time checking in before he found out what had happened to Nick. “Thanks.”

“You got it,” the driver replied, taking a left turn onto the A1A.

As they drove up the coastal highway, Brian watched the waves roll over the stormy sea outside his rain-streaked window. He didn’t notice the other car pull out behind them, and he never saw what caused the driver to slam on the brakes, but suddenly, he heard the squeal of tires on wet pavement and felt his body flying forward, his forehead smacking the back of the seat in front of him.

Before his brain had time to react to the first blow, Brian felt the impact of something heavy crashing into the back of the car and heard the sickening crunch of metal - or maybe bone - as his head struck the seat a second time. It was then that his whole world seemed to implode, the gray clouds collapsing upon him as the angry sea swelled, swallowing Brian into a black hole of oblivion.

Chapter 12

Nick had been drifting in the same sea of nothingness, but slowly, he began to surface.

It was different than being woken from a deep sleep, for in the abyss of unconsciousness, he did not dream. There were no nightmares, no near-death experiences to dwell upon, nothing but impenetrable darkness. But as his brain emerged from its blackout state, bits of light began to filter through.

He felt like he was floating, but although his body seemed to be weightless, his limbs were heavy and hard to move. At first, he fought waves of bewilderment as he struggled to break through the surface. Only once his head was above water was he able to feel the bed beneath him, hear the blips in the background, and form a coherent thought: *hospital*. This was followed by another flood of confusion, as he realized his face was wet. But the water was warm, more like bathwater than seawater. That was when the second moment of clarity came: Someone was washing his face.

His eyelids fluttered as he tried and failed to lift them. Then he heard a vaguely familiar voice whisper his name. "Nick?" He knew that voice. He wanted to respond to it. "Wake up, Nick." When he finally forced his eyes open, her face came into focus.

"Dani?" he croaked. His cheeks and forehead were wet, but his throat was incredibly dry. He winced as he tried to swallow; his tongue felt like sandpaper, and it was hard to work up enough saliva to wash out the inside of his mouth.

"Hey there," Dani said softly, smiling down at him. "How are you feeling?"

Nick licked his lips, still trying to moisten his tongue. "Tired," he muttered. Through the fog of fatigue, his mind became acutely and painfully aware of the rest of his body, as the parts below his neck rose to the surface. The semi-pleasant, floaty sensation went away, leaving him feeling like he'd been hit by a truck. He half-expected to find tire tracks on the front of his hospital gown, for it felt like something heavy had rolled right over his chest, crushing it. "Chest hurts."

"I'll bet," she said, her tone sympathetic. "You've been through a lot in the last few days. Do you know where you are?"

He repeated the word that had run through his head upon waking. "Hospital."

"That's right." Dani wiped his forehead with a wet washcloth. Nick found himself wishing she had one for his dry mouth. "Do you remember what happened?"

He shook his head, still feeling a little like he'd been out to sea. "Was there a hurricane?" he asked, struggling to recall the conversation he'd had with her about riding in a helicopter.

Dani nodded. "It hasn't hit us quite yet, but it's still heading this way. It's supposed to make landfall tomorrow night."

"I thought I was going to Atlanta," he said, as the details came back to him in bits and pieces.

Dani patted his face dry with a towel. "You were, but you had a bit of a setback yesterday," she told him, setting the towel aside and picking up his hand instead. She held it tightly as she started to explain. "As we were getting ready to transport you, your heart went into another arrhythmia. When we tried to treat it, you arrested again."

Nick stared up at her in dismay, wondering if he was stuck in a nightmare that would never end. It was like a horror remake of the movie *Groundhog Day*. How many times would he have to wake up to hear that his heart had stopped? He supposed he should be grateful he was awake at all, that he was still alive somehow, but instead, hearing about his latest brush with death just made him feel afraid. What if he didn't wake up the next time?

Dani squeezed his hand as she went on, "You were only down for a few minutes before we brought you back, but you've been unconscious ever since. It's good to see you awake and talking. I was starting to worry about those brain cells of yours." With her free hand, she brushed back his hair, running her fingers through it. It felt so good, Nick closed his eyes for a second, savoring the sensation of goosebumps prickling on his scalp.

"I guess this means I'm not going to Atlanta, huh?" he mumbled.

She shook her head. "No. You weren't stable enough for us to send you anywhere, and at this point, it's probably too late. The weather's already gotten pretty bad, and the airports are all shut down. We'll just have to ride it out here... like true Floridians, right?" she said, patting the back of his hand.

Nick nodded, managing a smile as he remembered more of their last conversation. "Fine with me," he replied. "I told you, I hate flying."

“Well, you sure found a dramatic way to get out of doing it!” Dani joked. She let go of his hand and picked up her washcloth again, wringing it out over a basin of water before she started wiping his neck with it.

“What are you doing?” Nick asked, as Dani tipped his head back to wash under his chin.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” she laughed. “Giving you a bath, silly.”

He groaned. “You don’t have to do that.”

“Actually, I do. It’s part of my nursing duties.

“No, I mean... I can do it myself,” said Nick, holding out his hand to take the washcloth from her. He hated feeling helpless.

“I’m sure you can, but seeing as how you were still unconscious when I started, why don’t you just lie back, relax, and let me do it this time?” Dani replied.

Nick wondered how many other times he had been bathed while he was unconscious. He decided he was better off not knowing. “All right, fine... but can you bring me some water first? Like, for drinking? My mouth’s really dry.”

“You bet. I’ll be right back.”

While she was gone, Nick looked around the room. He noticed the privacy curtain next to his bed had been pulled closed again. “Did I get a new roommate?” he asked when Dani came back, carrying a plastic pitcher.

She glanced briefly at the curtain before pouring him a cup of water. “Yes, you did,” she replied, raising the head of his bed so he could sit up. She stuck a straw into the cup and handed it to him. He sucked greedily, gulping the cold water. It felt so good going down his parched throat, he didn’t stop to ask any more questions about the mystery patient behind the curtain, and Dani didn’t offer any other details.

“I’m going to take your gown off now,” she said, reaching behind his neck to undo the tie in the back and easing the front down over his shoulders. “I’ll get you a new one when I’m all done.” She kept his lower half covered with a blanket as she began to bathe his upper body, running the washcloth up and down both arms and across his chest. She worked around the tubes and wires still attached to him, carefully avoiding getting the electrodes wet.

It was weird for Nick to watch someone else wash him, as if he were a baby, but once he got past the awkwardness of it, he had to admit that it actually felt pretty good. He wondered if it was weird for her, too. If it was, Dani didn't show it. She maintained her professional demeanor, making polite small talk to put his mind at ease as she wiped the soap off his skin and patted it dry. She was probably used to doing this for her patients, but she'd never bathed a Backstreet Boy before - especially not a Backstreet Boy she'd once been with in the shower. Nick couldn't help but smirk as he imagined the tables turned, the two of them standing together in his shower, she with her top off while he lathered her breasts with soap. He tried to force the mental image out of his mind, for it represented betrayal, but he had to admit, he wished he could remember the real thing.

"When will I be able to take a real shower again?" he asked Dani, as she helped him into a clean hospital gown.

"I'm not sure. You're still on bed rest because of the abnormal heart rhythms you've been having, so it may be awhile," she replied. "I'm sorry. I know that's not what you want to hear."

Nick sighed, but nodded. "It's okay. Not your fault."

"Later I'll show you some simple exercises you can do in bed to prevent blood clots and muscle atrophy, especially in your legs," said Dani, as she pushed back the blanket to expose them.

I know some exercises that can be done in bed, thought Nick, smirking again, but he kept his mouth shut. Sex jokes would only make things more awkward.

She peeled off his compression socks and washed the skin underneath, massaging his calves and ankles as she worked her way down each leg. Nick squirmed when she touched his feet. "Ticklish," he muttered.

She smiled. "Sorry."

When she was finished with his legs, Dani had him roll onto his side so she could wash his back. Changing positions was painful at first; he felt an uncomfortable pulling sensation across the front of his chest made it scream in protest. But he began to relax as she rubbed his back, using the heels of her hands to massage his muscles. For a moment, he was almost able to forget he was stuck in the hospital and pretend he was at the spa instead. "That feels really good," he said gratefully.

“I figured it would,” she replied, and though he couldn’t see her face, he could tell she was smiling. “You should lie on your side like this some of the time to take the pressure off your back. You don’t want to get a bedsore from lying in the same position all day.”

So much for pretending he was somewhere else. With another sigh, Nick nodded. How much longer would he have to be in this state of medical limbo, trapped somewhere between life and Hell? he wondered. He knew, eventually, his heart would either recover enough for him to leave the hospital, or it would finally fail him for good. But until one of those things happened, he would just have to lie there and wait. Wait to die. Wait to live. Either way, he was tired of waiting.

“You all right?” Dani asked, as she dried off his back.

Nick inhaled a deep breath through the cannula in his nose. “Yeah,” he said hollowly, not bothering to elaborate. He didn’t want to seem unappreciative. After almost dying twice, he knew he should be thankful for every breath he took because it meant he was still alive - but lying in this windowless room all day, completely cut off from his family and friends and the rest of the world, didn’t feel much like living.

“I know this sucks,” Dani said, squeezing his shoulder. “Hang in there.”

“That’s what I’m doing,” muttered Nick. “Hanging in there.”

She walked around to the other side of his bed, where she dipped her washcloth into the basin of warm, soapy water and wrung it out. “Here,” she said, handing it to him. “I thought you’d want to wash your private parts yourself.”

Nick felt his face redden. “Nothing you haven’t seen before,” he joked, trying to play off his humiliation.

Dani smirked and blushed, looking slightly embarrassed herself. “I’ll be back,” she excused herself, stepping behind the curtain around his bed so he could clean himself without her watching. When she came back, she brought Nick everything he needed to brush his teeth and shave the fine layer of stubble that had sprouted on his face. He felt better afterwards, like he was finally a fully functioning human being again.

But of course, this wasn’t the case. His heart was still failing him, leaving him feeling fatigued and short of breath even as he lay in bed. His lips had taken on a faint bluish tinge from a lack of oxygen, something Nick noticed in the hand mirror Dani held up in front of his face while he was shaving. It was the first time he’d seen his own reflection in days, and he found the sight more concerning than comforting.

“It’s caused by a condition called hypoxia,” Dani explained when he commented on it. “Your heart’s having trouble pumping enough oxygenated blood to your tissues. We’re giving you a higher concentration of supplemental oxygen to try to compensate for it, but your oxygen levels are still lower than they should be. See, look, your nail beds are blue too,” she pointed out, picking up his hand to show him the same discoloration underneath his fingernails. “Once you get your new heart, they’ll go back to being bright pink.”

Staring down at his stubby, dead-looking nails made Nick feel slightly nauseous. “And when will that happen, now that I’m not going to Atlanta?” he asked. It was hard to hide the apprehensiveness in his voice, though he tried to sound casual.

“As soon as this hurricane is past us and you’re stable enough, Dr. Elizabeth will still have you transferred to a hospital with a heart transplant program. It’s probably just going to take a few days to get everything figured out. But don’t worry about it - you’re in safe hands here,” said Dani, squeezing his hand between hers.

Nick nodded. “I know,” he replied, shooting her a half-smile as he squeezed her hand back.

He expected a reassuring smile in return, but Dani suddenly looked very serious. “So, um, speaking of Atlanta and the hurricane...” She sat down on the side of his bed, keeping both hands wrapped tightly around his. “Now that you’re awake, there’s something I need to tell you, Nick.”

“What?” he asked nervously, bracing himself to hear more bad news about his health.

“After you coded yesterday, I went ahead and called Brian. You were in no shape to be flown to Atlanta, but I thought you would want the guys to know what was going on with you anyway.”

Nick nodded, wondering where this was going. Was she worried he would be upset that she’d called one of his bandmates while he was unconscious?

Dani took a deep breath before continuing. “Brian was so worried about you, he hopped on the first flight down here and arrived right before they closed the airport. The weather was already getting bad; it was raining pretty hard by the time his plane landed. We sent a driver to pick him up from the airport and bring him to the hospital, but on their way here, they were involved in a bad accident.”

Nick's heart skipped a beat, then started hammering hard. "Oh god," he gagged, his stomach churning with another wave of nausea. "Is Brian-?" He couldn't bring himself to finish the question. He clapped his hand over mouth, feeling like he was about to throw up.

"He's alive... but he sustained some very serious injuries," Dani said, holding out the basin Nick had spat in earlier while brushing his teeth. He shook his head to signal that he didn't need it. Now that he knew Brian was alive, at least, he felt better.

"How serious?" he forced himself to ask, though he was afraid to hear the answer. He could already tell by the look on her face that it was going to be bad.

Dani stood up abruptly, letting go of his hand. "See for yourself," she said, as she pulled back the privacy curtain.

On the opposite side of the room, in the other bed, lay Brian. He was barely recognizable with his bruised, swollen face half hidden behind the big, blue hose attached to the breathing tube protruding from his mouth. His eyes were closed, and except for the steady rise and fall of his chest as the ventilator inflated his lungs, his body looked lifeless.

Nick's own breath caught in his throat as he stared across the room at his brother, and his heart sank like a stone. Not even an hour earlier, he had been floating in a sea of nothingness. Now he found himself falling, dropping back into the black depths of an ocean of despair.

Chapter 13

"Can you move me closer to him?" Nick asked Dani. He wanted - no, he *needed* to be near Brian, not only to get a better look at him, but to let him know he wasn't alone.

"Of course," said Dani with an understanding smile. She unlocked the wheels on his bed and rolled it slowly and carefully as far across the room as the equipment cords could reach, bringing his IV pole and everything else that was portable along with it. She parked Nick's bed right next to Brian's, with just a foot of space between them.

"Thanks," he whispered through the lump that had lodged in his throat when he looked at Brian. Even without knowing exactly what was wrong with his friend, Nick could tell

it was bad. A machine was breathing for him, which meant he wasn't able to breathe on his own, and a maze of wires and tubes surrounded his bed. There was something attached to almost every part of his body - electrodes stuck to his head and chest, IV lines in both arms, a catheter coming out from under the blankets.

"You can touch him if you want to," Dani told Nick. "Hold his hand. Talk to him. He's unconscious, but he may still be able to hear you."

Nick nodded. Reaching tentatively through the tangle of tubes, he took Brian's hand and held it in his. It was limp, but reassuringly warm. Running his thumb across Brian's knuckles, Nick couldn't help but notice the contrast between the healthy pink color of Brian's hand compared to the sickly gray pallor of his own. At least Brian's heart was still beating, pumping oxygen-rich blood into his fingers. Nick took comfort in that fact, feeling it was a good indication that Brian could recover from his injuries.

"Hey, bro... it's me, Nick," he said softly, as he stroked the back of Brian's hand. "I'm right here, man. I'm hanging in there, so you hang on too, okay?" He watched Brian's face closely as he spoke, hoping for a reaction, some sign that his friend could hear him, but there was no response.

"He's in a deep coma," said Dani, as if she knew what he was thinking, "so don't expect him to respond to you, at least not right now. He suffered a severe closed head injury in the crash, and it could take a long time for him to heal."

"How long?" Nick wondered. "I mean, when do you think he'll wake up?"

"It's hard to say. We have to wait for the swelling in his brain to go down before we can get a better idea of what to expect."

Nick swallowed hard. "So he has brain damage?"

Dani nodded. "The MRI showed a diffuse axonal injury, which can happen when someone's head is suddenly flung forward or backward and the brain slams into the skull."

"Like a concussion?"

"Sort of like a concussion, yeah, but this kind of traumatic brain injury is usually a lot more serious."

Nick sighed and covered his face with his free hand. “This is all my fault,” he moaned, his voice muffled. “He flew down here for me.”

“It’s not your fault,” Dani said firmly, putting her hand on his shoulder. “If anything, it would be my fault for calling him, but I’m not going to blame myself for this, and neither should you. It was an accident. It’s not anybody’s fault.”

“Yeah, but...” He stopped and shook his head. “Never mind.” No matter what she might say to make him feel better, Nick knew the only reason Brian had been riding in that car on that road in the rain was because of him. And if it hadn’t been Brian, it could have been one of the other guys or even Lauren. None of them would have come to Key West had it not been for Nick, and he hated himself, hated his failing heart, for putting his friend in the path of a Category 4 hurricane. He hoped no one else had followed Brian to Florida. “Did he fly down by himself, or was his family with him?” he asked, wondering about Leighanne and Baylee. Brian rarely went anywhere without his wife and son.

“He was alone,” answered Dani, and Nick let out a sigh of relief. At least he wasn’t responsible for harming the whole Littrell family, though he worried Leighanne would resent him for being the reason Brian had been hurt. “His wife has been notified, but with all the airports shut down, she won’t be able to get here anytime soon. Besides, everyone’s been ordered to evacuate.”

“But not us?”

“Nope. I’m not leaving you,” said Dani, patting his arm. “Elizabeth and Rob and I are gonna shelter in place and see you through this.”

“What about Brian?”

Dani bit down on her bottom lip. “Truthfully, he’d be better off at a Level 1 Trauma Center, but he’s not stable enough to be transferred in this weather either. We think he may also have a spinal cord injury that could be made worse by putting him in a bumpy helicopter.”

“Oh god,” said Nick, his heart skipping a beat as he looked back at Brian, whose neck was immobilized by a hard brace that went all the way from the top of his chest to the bottom of his chin. “You *think*?”

“The X-rays and MRI showed several fractured cervical vertebrae that seem to have compressed his spinal cord,” she explained, “but we won’t know the full extent of the injury until he comes out of the coma.”

“So he could be paralyzed?” Nick’s heart had started to pound, as he considered the possibility of Brian being permanently disabled, confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. For someone as active and athletic as Brian, such a fate would be almost worse than brain damage.

“Calm down,” Dani warned him, with a wary look at his heart monitor. “We don’t know anything for sure yet. It’s a waiting game, at this point.”

Nick sighed. More waiting. As much as he hated it, he knew Dani was right. There was nothing else to do but wait. He took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds before he released it, trying to slow his racing heart. It seemed to help. “When did you say the hurricane’s supposed to hit?” he asked her.

“Sometime tomorrow night. But don’t worry; we’ll be all right,” she replied, flashing him a reassuring smile. “The hospital was built to withstand a Category 5, and we have backup generators and plenty of fuel, in case the power goes out. We’re on the third floor, so we shouldn’t be affected by flooding. We’ll be just fine.”

She thought he was worried about the storm. But Nick was only worried about Brian.

Dr. Elizabeth came in a while later. “Hi, Nick. I hear Dani’s already filled you in on what happened yesterday. How are you feeling now?” she asked, as she removed her stethoscope from around her neck.

Nick didn’t know quite how to answer that question anymore. “All right, I guess,” he replied with a shrug, deciding the way he felt was all relative. At the moment, he felt better than he had the day before, when his heart was beating out of control, but not as well as he had prior to it failing him in the first place. He was weak and tired and slightly nauseous, his chest hurt, and his head ached, but Dani had already noted his complaints on his chart, so he didn’t see the point in repeating them. He was still better off than poor Brian.

“Any pain, palpitations, or trouble breathing?” Elizabeth probed, rubbing the round end of the stethoscope over the palm of her hand before she slipped it under the neck of Nick’s hospital gown.

“My chest is a little sore,” said Nick, “but otherwise, no, not really.”

“Yes, I bet it is. Deep breath, please.” She pressed it lightly to the left side of his chest and listened for a few seconds, closing her eyes to concentrate on what she heard. When she was finished examining him, Dr. Elizabeth pulled a stool over to his bed and perched upon it. “I want to revisit the conversation we had a couple of days ago, about the implantable defibrillator.”

His stomach lurched. “You still think I need one?”

“After yesterday, I’m even more convinced you do,” she replied. “You almost died from another lethal arrhythmia that, thankfully, responded to defibrillation. If that had happened outside the hospital, I don’t think you would here be talking to me right now... not unless you had an ICD that could have automatically done what our code team did and delivered a shock to reset your heart’s rhythm.”

Nick’s blood ran cold, as his heart skipped a beat. The thought of having such a device inside his body still bothered him, but he could tell Dr. Elizabeth wasn’t going to back down until she had talked him into it.

“Think of it as a safeguard, like built-in backup for your heart,” she continued. “It can’t prevent another episode of cardiac arrest, but it could protect you if one were to happen after you’re discharged from the hospital. The pacemaker would constantly monitor your heartbeat to make sure it’s not too fast or too slow, and the cardioverter-defibrillator could correct a dangerous rhythm before it became fatal. It could make the difference between life and death.”

He glanced at Dani, his mouth going dry again. She gave him an encouraging nod. Looking back at Dr. Elizabeth, Nick asked, “How does it get put in? Would I have to have open-heart surgery?”

“Not at all,” Elizabeth replied. “We would make a small incision on the left side of your chest, right under your collarbone, and create a ‘pocket’ of space beneath the skin in which to place the pulse generator - that’s the computerized part that contains the battery and controls the device. We would also thread a couple of wires called leads through your veins and attach them to your heart. It sounds complicated, but it’s actually a pretty minor surgical procedure that isn’t usually performed under general anesthesia. We would give you a mild sedative instead of putting you all the way under.”

Nick ran his hand over his chest, trying to imagine what it would feel like to have a piece of hardware implanted inside it. “Does it hurt?” he asked.

“We would numb the area with a local anesthetic, so you wouldn’t feel any pain during the procedure itself. Most people are sore for a few days afterwards, but once they recover, they don’t even notice the device unless it has to deliver a shock.”

That was the part Nick was most worried about, though he supposed living through a shock would be better than dying without one. Reluctantly, he made what he hoped was the right decision. “Okay,” he agreed. “I’ll do it.”

Dr. Elizabeth looked relieved. “Excellent. I’ll schedule the implantation procedure for this afternoon.”

Nick raised his eyebrows. “This afternoon??” he repeated, his heart rate accelerating with anxiety.

“With this storm on the way, I’d rather do it sooner than later,” Dr. Elizabeth replied. “If we were to lose power, it may be awhile before we’d be able to perform any surgery, and I don’t think we can afford to wait.” She patted the back of his hand. “We’ll all feel better knowing your heart has that safeguard in place as we prepare for the hurricane.”

He swallowed hard. “Yeah, I guess so.”

When Elizabeth left, Nick looked across the room at Brian’s bed again, wishing he was awake. If there was anyone who could have reassured Nick he had made the right choice - or helped him realize it was the wrong one - it was Brian. In a way, Brian had been there before, having made the difficult decision to undergo heart surgery himself. Their circumstances were different, but the uncertainty was the same. Nobody else in Nick’s life could know what that fear felt like better than Brian.

“Please wake up, Frick,” he whispered. “I need you.”

Chapter 14

“You know, I’ve never had surgery before,” Nick said in what he hoped was an off-handed way, while Dani prepped him for the procedure that afternoon. “I still have my tonsils, my appendix, and my wisdom teeth.”

“Wow, aren’t you lucky? Well, don’t worry. This won’t be any worse than having your wisdom teeth removed,” Dani assured him, as she shaved his chest with a pair of clippers. “And it definitely won’t be as bad as an appendectomy or tonsillectomy.”

Nick could tell she had seen right through his attempt to downplay his nerves. “At least I’ll be able to eat afterwards, right?” He was trying to stay positive, but it was hard to look on the bright side when he was stuck in the hospital with a failing heart, a best friend who might never be the same, and a hurricane heading straight for them. There just wasn’t much to feel hopeful about at that point.

“You bet! I’ll bring you anything you want,” Dani promised with a smile.

Nick forced a smile back, but all he really wanted was the one thing she hadn’t been able to provide: his family. There was an ache in his chest that he knew had nothing to do with his heart condition. He missed Lauren and Odin so much, it hurt.

“All done,” said Dani, setting down her clippers. “You’re dolphin-smooth now.”

He chuckled. “It doesn’t feel all that different, to be honest,” he replied, as he ran his hand lightly over the left side of his chest. “I barely had any chest hair to begin with.”

“I’ve shaved much furrier patients before, that’s for sure,” she admitted.

Nick wrinkled his nose. “Doesn’t it gross you out to wash other people’s bodies and wipe their butts and stuff? I’ve always wondered that about nurses.”

Dani shrugged. “Not when they look like you,” she said, without missing a beat. Nick raised his eyebrows, and she blushed. “Sorry - that was inappropriate; I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Hey, no need to apologize here,” said Nick, smirking. “I’m glad you don’t think I’m gross.”

She smiled back, still blushing. “Of course not. In all honesty, though, it takes a lot to gross me out. I’ve pretty much seen it all - the good, the bad, and the ugly. And sure, some parts of my job are less pleasant than others, but they’re no less important. I like taking care of people,” she replied, pulling his blanket back up to cover his bare chest.

“That’s admirable. I could never do it,” Nick said, shaking his head. “Is that why you became a nurse?”

“Not exactly. When I was a kid, I was at the beach one day and witnessed a man drowning. I saw the lifeguards pull him out of the ocean, just like on *Baywatch*. By the time they got his body back to the beach, he wasn’t breathing, so they started CPR. Most people, myself included, were just standing around watching, not sure what else to do, but I remember this off-duty nurse running up to help them resuscitate him. She and the lifeguards worked on this guy for what seemed like forever, but it was probably only a few minutes, because by the time the ambulance arrived, they’d already brought him back. It was so scary, but cool at the same time,” said Dani, a faraway look on her face. “Anyway, that’s when I decided I wanted to go into the medical field, so I would know what to do in an emergency and could help save lives like they did that day.”

“Wow,” said Nick, his eyes wide. “That’s a great story. I’m sure glad you were there to save mine.”

“Me too. I mean, what if I’d never run into you? What if you never smiled at me?”

He smiled at her now, recognizing his own lyrics. “What if I hadn’t noticed you too?” he returned. “And you never showed up where I happened to be?”

“Well, you would be dead by now,” replied Dani with a shrug.

Nick snorted with laughter. It shouldn’t have been funny, considering she was probably right, but her flat tone and comedic timing were perfect. He couldn’t help cracking up.

“I’m sorry; that was insensitive,” she said, smiling sheepishly. “In case you couldn’t tell, I have a pretty twisted sense of humor. You almost have to, working in this place.”

“I understand,” he said, smiling back. “Personally, I appreciate your twisted sense of humor. You don’t ever have to apologize to me; I’m pretty hard to offend. I’d rather see your real personality than have some strictly-professional robot taking care of me. It’s boring enough in here without someone to talk to. I like talking to you.”

She beamed. “I like talking to you, too.”

“Will you be with me during the surgery?” he asked hopefully. Several minutes had passed since he’d last thought about the implantation procedure, and he was grateful to Dani for taking his mind off it temporarily. It would help to have her in the room to distract him while Dr. Elizabeth put in the ICD.

“I sure will. I’m assisting Dr. Elizabeth with it. We’ll try to keep it as painless as possible, I promise,” Dani replied, patting his shoulder. “I’m going to give you some medicine through your central line now - an antibiotic to lower the risk of infection, a painkiller to take the edge off, and a sedative to make you sleepy. It won’t knock you all the way out, but it’ll help you relax. You might even be able to doze off during part of the procedure.”

“That’d be nice,” said Nick, starting to feel nervous again. He lay back and listened to the steady blip of his heartbeat as Dani injected the drugs into his IV. When she was done, she gave him a gauzy surgical hat to cover his hair. “Do I look like a mushroom in this?” he asked, making a face at her.

Dani shrugged. “Not any more than you did with your bowl cut back in the nineties.”

“Whoa... sick burn!” he said, pretending to be hurt by her words.

“Hey, you said you wanted to see my real personality. Well, here I am!” She grinned and struck a pose, holding her gloved hands up on either side of her face.

He laughed. “Love it.”

Dani raised the head of his bed so he was sitting up straight. “Here,” she said, handing him his plastic, portable urinal next. “You’ll want to empty your bladder before we start the procedure. It can take a few hours, and you’ll have to lie still on your back the whole time, so it will be awhile before you can go again.”

“Awesome,” said Nick sarcastically. She turned around so he could pee in semi-privacy, but a second nurse, Patrick, walked in while he was still in mid-stream.

“Elizabeth wants to know if he’s almost ready,” Patrick addressed Dani, ignoring Nick.

“Almost,” Dani replied. “Are you here to help me transport him?”

“Yeah, sure.”

When Nick was finished, Dani handed the urinal to Patrick to empty while she hooked him up to a portable oxygen tank and disconnected the pieces of equipment that were permanently attached to the wall. “We’re just going to wheel you down the hall to a different room for the procedure,” Dani explained to Nick, as she lowered the head of his bed again. “Let one of us know right away if you start having chest pain, palpitations, or anything like that, okay?”

Nick nodded. A pleasant drowsiness had descended upon him, as the drugs took effect, and he felt surprisingly calm all of a sudden.

Dani and Patrick didn't bother trying to transfer him onto a gurney that time. They just rolled his whole bed into the hallway, following the red line on the wall to a room around the corner, where Dr. Elizabeth was waiting.

"Hi, Nick," she said. Half of her face was hidden behind a surgical mask, but he could tell she was smiling. "Are you ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," Nick replied, his nervousness returning. He took a deep breath and held it as they helped him slide from his bed onto a padded table.

"Just lie back, relax, and breathe," Dani said reassuringly, as she and Patrick hooked him back up to more monitoring equipment. Nick tried to take her advice, but he felt another flood of anxiety when he noticed Patrick applying a large pacer pad to the center of his chest.

"What's that for?" he asked, his voice rising with panic as he remembered the pain of the external pacing he'd endured two days earlier. He thought the whole point of this procedure was to prevent him from ever having to go through that again.

"It's just a precaution, in case your heart were to go into another arrhythmia before the ICD is installed," said Dani. "If all goes as planned, we won't need to use it, but we want to be prepared for anything." She helped Patrick roll Nick onto his side so they could stick the second pad onto his back, as before. He prayed they wouldn't need it.

Hang in there, he told his pounding heart, trying to help it relax. But his anxiety only increased as they strapped him down to the table, using soft restraints to tie his wrists to the sides of the table so he couldn't touch the sterile field as they worked. They covered his body with blue sterile drapes, leaving only the left side of his chest exposed.

"I'm going to put some antiseptic solution on your skin to prevent bacteria from getting into the incision," said Dr. Elizabeth. "This may feel a little cold." Nick shivered as she painted his chest with something wet and cold. "Now I'm going to inject a local anesthetic to numb the area," she said next. "You'll feel a little pinch at first, but afterwards you shouldn't feel any pain, only slight pressure." He winced when he felt the needle slide underneath his skin, but soon a pleasant, tingly feeling spread through the left side of his chest, and afterwards, he felt nothing.

Once Nick was nice and numb, Elizabeth began the procedure. He closed his eyes and ignored her running commentary, trying to pretend he was at the tattoo parlor instead. It reminded him of the time he'd gotten the pair of Blackfoot Indian footprints tattooed on his chest. Getting the tattoos in the first place was painful, but it had hurt even worse to have them removed. This wasn't half as bad as that had been, he reasoned with himself.

"How are you doing, Nick?" the doctor asked him every few minutes, and each time, he answered that he was fine. As she had promised, he felt no pain, only the pressure of her poking, prodding, and pulling on his chest. It wasn't exactly comfortable, but it wasn't unbearable either. The worst part was having to lie flat on his back, unable to move, while she threaded the wires into his heart. It didn't hurt, but he could feel his heart flutter and race as it reacted to this intrusion into its chambers. He heard Dani recite his heart rate and blood pressure readings on a regular basis, but they stayed within the acceptable ranges, and no arrhythmia occurred. As the procedure continued without complications, Nick began to relax again.

"We're almost finished," Elizabeth said finally. "Everything went well. The ICD is in and hooked up to your heart, but before I sew you up, we have to test it and make sure it works the way it's supposed to. Dani's going to give you another dose of sedative to put you into a deeper sleep so you don't feel anything as we're doing this."

"Does that mean you're gonna make it shock me?" Nick muttered.

Dr. Elizabeth nodded. "We need to know the device will work if your heart were to go into a rhythm that required defibrillation. After you're asleep, we'll induce ventricular fibrillation with a small shock, then wait for the ICD to recognize a dangerous arrhythmia. Once it does, it should shock your heart to reset its rhythm. If it doesn't work, we'll use the external defibrillator," she explained, placing her hand over the pad on his chest. Now he knew the real reason Patrick had put it there.

Nick groaned, hating her plan. His heart had already proven itself to be pretty unreliable over the past few days. What if they weren't able to shock it back into beating the right way? What if it just stopped beating, period? He didn't want to be defibrillated, and he definitely didn't want to die.

"It'll be okay, Nick," Dani said softly in his ear as she bent down to inject the sedative into the IV in his neck. "We don't call her the Queen of Hearts for nothing. Dr. Elizabeth has done this test tons of times before; she's got it down pat by now. You're gonna be just fine."

Swallowing hard, Nick nodded. Dani had never let him down before; he had to believe her when she promised he would be fine. As he felt the sedative take hold of him, he squeezed his eyes shut and prayed she was right.

“He’s out,” said Dani, as she watched Nick’s features relax. “Get ready to shock him.”

Elizabeth adjusted the settings on the touchscreen of the computer that controlled the ICD. “Charging,” she said. “Clear of the patient.”

Dani took a step back from the table, keeping her eyes trained on Nick’s torso. Her breath caught in her throat as she watched it twitch when the shock was applied. Then she turned her attention to the telemetry monitor, where the once-consistent waveform had suddenly descended into chaos. The current of electricity had disrupted the intrinsic rhythm of his heart; it was no longer beating but barely trembling, the blood pooling inside its chambers instead of being pumped to the rest of his body. “V-fib,” she whispered, as the monitor began to wail.

“Let’s see if the device detects it,” said Elizabeth, watching the screen. Dani looked back at Nick, holding her breath as they waited. “Here we go,” Elizabeth said a second later. “It’s charging. Stay clear.”

Another second passed before Nick’s body jerked again, jolted by the fourteen joules of electricity that had just surged through his chest. Dani watched the waveform on the monitor spike and dip as it registered the shock, briefly flatlining before returning to a normal sinus rhythm. “Back in sinus,” she announced to the rest of the room. Then she pressed two fingertips to the carotid artery in Nick’s neck and felt the fluttering of blood flowing through it. “Pulse has been restored.”

Nick was already starting to regain consciousness. He let out a loud groan, in obvious discomfort.

“It’s okay, Nick,” Dani said automatically, applying pressure to his shoulder to hold him down. “It’s over. You did great.” Across the table, she exchanged glances with Elizabeth, who was looking triumphant.

“It worked. We’re in business now.”

Chapter 15

A storm may have been brewing outside, but inside his windowless hospital room, Nick experienced none of it. He couldn't hear the pouring rain or raging wind, nor could he see the water flooding the streets, the debris flying through the air, or the palm trees bent double, their roots desperately clinging to the ground beneath them. All he saw were the same white walls he'd been staring at for a week; all he heard were the infinite blips and beeps that kept him awake and haunted his sleep. Instead of seawater, he smelled antiseptic. And instead of fearing the hurricane, he felt afraid for his best friend and anxious about his own failing heart.

The surgery had been a success, but rather than reassure him, the the so-called "safeguard" implanted inside his chest put Nick on edge. After he'd been brought back to his room, he lay still in bed, listening to the steady blip of his heartbeat on the monitor and waiting to hear it suddenly speed up or slow down, as it had in the days before. How long would it be before his dying heart went into another dangerous arrhythmia that, when detected by the ICD, would result in a painful shock? To Nick, it was just the calm before the storm, both literally and figuratively.

"I feel like I'm in the movie *Speed*," he confessed to Dani, "but instead of a bomb on a bus, there's one inside my chest. If my heart goes above a certain number of beats per minute, it'll engage... and if it drops below fifty, it'll explode."

"Wow... well, that's one way of putting it," replied Dani, with a raise of her eyebrows. "It's not necessarily about the rate, though; it's about the rhythm. As long as you have a regular heartbeat, you have nothing to worry about. The pacemaker will start firing to force your heart to beat faster or slower if needed, but you won't feel any pain from that. The impulses are so small that most people don't even notice them, but the ones who do say it just feels like a fluttering in their chest. The defibrillator will only deliver a shock if your heart goes into a chaotic rhythm where it isn't beating correctly and can't pump blood, at which point you'd probably be unconscious anyway and wouldn't even feel it."

Nick appreciated her reassurance, though it didn't completely relieve his anxiety about the ICD. At least he wasn't in much pain from the procedure. The left side of his chest was sore, and they'd put his left arm in a sling to limit the movement on that side, but besides that, he felt pretty good. The painkillers certainly helped.

On the other side of the room, Brian seemed the same as he had been before Nick's surgery - no worse, but no better either. He was still unconscious and unable to breathe

on his own, but his heart beat steadily, supplying his body with the oxygenated blood it needed to stay alive. “Hang in there, Brian,” Nick told him from time to time, hoping he could hear the words of encouragement and wishing they would help him wake up from his coma.

“It’s getting pretty bad out there,” Dani commented when she came in to check on them both. “Rob’s been up on the roof, watching the storm roll in. Typical guy.” She rolled her eyes as she wrapped a blood pressure cuff around Nick’s right arm. “No offense.”

He chuckled. “None taken. I get it, though. Us guys can’t resist going outside to see a good storm. Must make us feel manlier or something.”

She shook her head, removing the stethoscope from around her neck and sticking it into her ears. “So stupid,” she said, as she pressed the end of the stethoscope to the crook of his elbow and inflated the cuff until it was tight around his arm. Then she was quiet for a few seconds, listening carefully as she let the cuff deflate. “One-ten over seventy.” She smiled as she noted the numbers on Nick’s chart. “That’s right in the normal range.”

“Does that mean my heart’s getting better?” he asked hopefully.

Dani’s smile faded. “It just means the interventions seem to be working. The medications are keeping your blood pressure under control, and the pacemaker is helping to regulate your heartbeat. Your condition’s stable for now.”

With a sinking feeling, Nick understood what she was trying to tell him without actually saying the words: his heart wasn’t going to get any better and would probably get worse. All he could hope for was that the treatments would keep him alive long enough to undergo a transplant.

“Well, at least something’s going right,” he replied, trying to stay positive in spite of this depressing realization. “Do you think I could try getting up again so I can go call Lauren?”

“Sorry,” said Dani, shaking her head. “Dr. Elizabeth still wants you to stay in bed while you recover from your procedure. Besides, the phone lines went down a few hours ago.”

Nick sighed. “Damn. When do you think I’ll be able to talk to her?”

“I don’t know. That’ll depend on how you’re doing when the phones are working again, whenever that may be.” Dani moved behind his bed to put the blood pressure cuff back

into its holder on the wall. “Didn’t you say you had been in a hurricane before?” she asked, changing the subject back to the weather.

Nick recognized her attempt to distract him from dwelling on how much he missed his family, but he played along anyway. “Yeah... I was actually down here for Hurricane Dennis. I think that was what, like, 2005?”

“Sounds about right,” said Dani, reemerging with a digital thermometer in her hand. “Same year as Katrina.”

Nick nodded. “Yeah, it was 2005 because I remember it was right before the *Never Gone* tour.”

“That’s right!” she replied, smiling. “I was at the first two shows on that tour - West Palm Beach and Tampa.”

“Oh wow, were you really?”

“Yep.” She bent down beside him, easing the thermometer into his ear. “That was the summer before I started college. I was still living with my family in Fort Myers then. We didn’t have to evacuate for Dennis.”

“No, I don’t remember it being that bad. They did order an evacuation for the Keys - well, for tourists, anyway - but I was friends with the commissioner of Key West, so I was allowed to stay.”

“Ah, I see how it is,” said Dani with a wink. When the thermometer beeped, she took it out of his ear and checked the temperature readout. “Ninety-nine on the nose.”

Nick smirked. “Does that make me hotter than 98 Degrees Nick?”

“Nick Lachey?” She laughed. “Oh, hands down. Don’t go getting any hotter than that, though,” she warned, wagging her finger at him. “Then we would worry about you having an infection from your ICD, and you definitely don’t want that.”

“Nope, definitely not,” Nick agreed. He knew he shouldn’t be flirting with her, but it felt like nothing but harmless fun now. Their hookup on Halloween night had been a one-time thing, a mistake made under the influence of too much alcohol. It hadn’t meant anything, and it wouldn’t happen again. Even if they weren’t both married, Nick doubted a beautiful woman like Dani would want to date a man who was dying of heart

failure, Backstreet Boy or not - especially when he was one of her patients. She was only flirting back because it was harmless fun for her, too.

When she was finished with Nick, Dani went to Brian's bedside next. She left the curtain open so Nick could watch her work. He lay back, admiring the way her ass looked in her teal scrubs as she leaned over Brian. Even though he was unconscious, she still took the time to introduce herself before she began poking and prodding him. "Hi, Brian, I'm Dani, your nurse. Can you open your eyes for me?"

Nick studied Brian's face closely, but his eyelids didn't even flutter. Dani put her hand on top of his head and pushed her thumb against the top part of his eye socket. "What are you doing to him?" Nick asked her, watching with a frown.

"Applying a painful stimulus to see if it'll get him to open his eyes," Dani replied. "It's part of an assessment called the Glasgow Coma Scale that we use to monitor a patient's level of consciousness. Since Brian's not opening his eyes, even in response to pain, he gets a score of one for the first category. The higher the score, the better."

"What's the highest score he could get?" Nick wanted to know.

"A four, for that category."

"Oh." He felt disappointed, knowing how much Brian would hate getting such a low score. "C'mon, Bri," he urged, appealing to his best friend's fiercely competitive side. "Open your eyes, bro. You can do it."

Dani waited for a few seconds, watching, but when Brian's eyes remained shut, she shook her head. "He would have gotten a three for opening them to the sound of your voice, but not this time," she said regretfully. "Keep talking to him, though. He may still be able to hear you, even if he can't respond."

Nick nodded, but it was hard not to be discouraged by Brian's bleak condition.

"Normally I would assess his verbal response next, but since he's intubated, he won't be able to speak anyway, so I can't score the second category," Dani explained, continuing to narrate her way through the assessment. "The last category is Motor Response, which is also tricky to score in someone with a spinal cord injury. Brian may not be able to move or feel some parts of his body below a certain point, so I'll focus on his face." She leaned over his bed again. "Brian, can you raise your eyebrows?" she asked, slowly and clearly, but there was still no response; Brian's forehead stayed smooth. Behind the breathing tube, his face was totally blank.

Nick missed the funny faces Brian loved to make. It was eerie to see someone who had always been so animated lying there like a corpse, expressionless and still. He had to look at Brian's chest rising and falling beneath the blankets and listen for the steady blip of the monitor to reassure himself that Brian was still breathing, that his heart was beating, that there was still some life left inside him, even if it didn't show on the outside.

"He's not responding to my commands, so I'm gonna try to cause enough discomfort to make him move," said Dani. Working around Brian's neck brace, she began by pinching him hard in the place between his neck and shoulder, just above his collarbone. When that didn't work, she made a fist and rubbed the middle of his chest with her knuckles, as Nick had seen her do to his last roommate. Brian didn't so much as flinch, which made Nick think he wasn't much better off than the woman who had flatlined in his bed. "No response to painful stimuli, so he gets a one in that category as well," Dani concluded. "That means he has a GCS of two out of a possible ten."

"Twenty percent?" Nick grimaced. "That's not good."

Dani shook her head as she entered the numbers into Brian's chart. "No, it's not. He's still in a deep coma."

"At least he didn't get a zero."

"The lowest score for each category is one, so no one can get a zero. Technically, even a dead body will score twenty percent," Dani pointed out. "Sorry-" She paused, biting down on her bottom lip. "-that was probably more than you needed to know."

Nick sighed, as reality set in. Brian's condition wasn't just "not good." It was *bad*... really bad. "No, it's okay, you can be honest with me. Is Brian gonna die?" he asked.

"I don't know," Dani admitted. "It depends on how he does over the next few days. We'll keep giving him this assessment and hope his scores improve. If they don't, it means he may never come out of the coma."

Nick swallowed hard. He couldn't face the possibility of losing Brian. The only thing worse than the grief was his guilt. If Brian died, it would be Nick's fault, and nothing Dani or anyone else said could convince him otherwise. How could he live with himself, knowing his hospitalization had led to his best friend's death?

Not for long, he thought, looking down at his dusky blue nail beds. While Brian's condition could still get better, Nick's was only going to get worse. They were both fighting for their lives... but at least they didn't have to do it alone.

"Can you please put my bed by his again?" Nick asked Dani.

"Sure," she agreed. She came around to the right side of his bed and rolled it toward Brian's, until the cords connected to the equipment on the wall were almost taut.

Without warning, the room was suddenly plunged into total darkness. The overhead lights went out, and all the monitors turned black. Nick's first thought was that Dani had pushed his bed too far, accidentally pulling something unplugged. Then he remembered the hurricane and realized it was a power outage.

"Don't panic," he heard Dani say. "The generator should kick in any second."

Nick had no reason to panic, until it occurred to him that the life support machines relied on electricity to run. Without power, Brian wouldn't be able to breathe.

He rolled painfully onto his left side and reached blindly toward the other bed with his right hand, groping around in the darkness for Brian's. When his fingers finally brushed against bare skin, Nick grabbed hold of his friend's hand and held on tight. "Hang on, Bri," he said, giving it a squeeze.

It took less than ten seconds for the emergency standby power to be activated, but to Nick, it felt like an eternity. Finally, the fluorescent lights flickered on, and the machines and monitors came back to life, filling the room with a familiar cacophony of blips and beeps. Nick had never been so glad to hear those sounds. Watching Brian's chest rise and fall along with the rhythmic hiss of the ventilator, he felt an overwhelming sense of relief. "You'll be all right now," he whispered, relaxing his grip on Brian's hand.

Up until that point, weather had been the least of his worries. But the storm was just beginning.

Chapter 16

"How long can the hospital run on generators?" Nick asked Dani. A few hours had passed since the power outage, but it was impossible to tell in the ICU, where the

equipment seemed to be functioning at full capacity. The monitors were blipping, the infusion pumps dripping.

“I know we’re required to have enough fuel for at least ninety-six hours. Beyond that, I’m not sure,” said Dani, as she changed his IV bag.

Ninety-six hours, Nick thought with a frown, doing the math in his head. “So that’s, what, four days?”

Dani nodded, fiddling with the roller clamp on his line to adjust the flow rate. “Let’s hope the power won’t be out *that* long!”

What if it is? Nick wondered, but he didn’t ask, not wanting to add any more stress to an already tense situation. Instead, he said, “How much longer are you working?” It was hard for him to keep track of time inside the ICU, but it seemed like Dani’s shift had lasted days instead of hours. He would doze off for awhile, but whenever he woke, there she was at his bedside. Nick didn’t mind; he much preferred her to his night nurse, Patrick, but poor Dani looked exhausted. There were dark circles under her eyes, like she hadn’t slept in a week.

She shrugged. “As long as I have to. Technically, my shift ended last night, but since most of the hospital has been evacuated, there aren’t many of us left to take care of the patients who are still here.”

Nick raised his eyebrows. “Girl, you better be getting paid overtime.”

She smiled as she stripped off her gloves. “We’ll see. I don’t mind, really,” she said, tossing them into the trash bin. “I’ve got everything I need here - food, shelter, plenty of fuel, and my husband. This is probably the safest place for us to be right now.”

Nick nodded. He would never want to put his wife and son in harm’s way, but a part of him wished they were with him. Or rather, he wished he was with them, far away from the hospital and the hurricane. “Where does the rest of your family live?” he asked Dani, wondering about her parents and other relatives.

“My mom’s still in Fort Myers, but she went to stay with my grandparents in Gainesville. My dad hasn’t been in the picture for years - last I heard, he was living somewhere in Mississippi. My siblings are spread all across the country: I’ve got a sister in South Carolina, a brother in California, another brother in Texas, and my little sister lives in Tennessee.”

Having kept a running count of the siblings he'd heard her mention, Nick smiled. "Wow, so you're from a family of five kids, too. Where do you fall in the age order?"

"Right smack dab in the middle," Dani replied, flashing him a tight-lipped smile in return. "Lucky me."

He laughed. "I can't really relate there. I went from being the oldest in my family to the youngest in the group. I've never been a middle child."

"In some ways, it's the best of both worlds... but also the worst of both worlds. It was always harder to get my parents' attention, but that also allowed me to fly under the radar and get away with more than some of my siblings," she said with a grin.

"Ah, so you weren't always such a good girl," he teased, winking.

Dani crossed her arms over her chest and arched an eyebrow. "Who ever said I was a good girl?"

"Oh c'mon, you'd have to have a heart of gold to be an ICU nurse," Nick said, thinking about all the unpleasant jobs he'd seen her do just for Brian and himself. "Bathing people, emptying bedpans, changing catheter bags... As far as I'm concerned, that qualifies you for freaking sainthood."

She laughed. "It's not that bad. I told you, I like taking care of people."

"See? You just proved my point. You're a saint."

Dani just smiled and shook her head.

"Why don't you sit down for awhile?" he suggested, patting an empty spot on one side of his mattress. "You look dead on your feet."

"Well, aren't you sweet?" she said, beaming at him. But she had barely perched on the edge of the bed when everything went dark again. The lights and all of the machines abruptly shut off, leaving the room around them pitch black and eerily silent.

Before Nick's eyes could adjust to the sudden darkness, he felt Dani spring back up again. "What the hell?" he asked her. "Why did the power go out again?"

“I don’t know for sure, but I think the generator just failed.” He heard her fumbling in the dark, her footsteps getting farther from him as she felt her way blindly across the room.

“But how could that happen? I thought you said you had enough fuel for four days. It’s only been, like, four hours!”

“Don’t ask me! I have no idea.” Her voice sounded shaky.

His heart had started to pound. “What about Brian? How’s he gonna breathe without the ventilator?”

“I’m working on it!” she shouted. He could hear her rummaging around on the other side of the room, slamming cabinet doors and drawers. A second later, Nick was nearly blinded by a bright light shining directly into his eyes from the far corner. Squinting, he could just make out Dani’s silhouette behind it. The beam of light bounced up and down as she ran back to his bed. “Hold this up for me, please,” she said breathlessly, handing him the flashlight she had found. “I have to bag him.”

Nick focused the beam on her as she hurried to the head of Brian’s bed. She unhooked the ventilator hose from his breathing tube and grabbed the bag valve mask from the wall behind the bed. After attaching the bag to the tube, she began to squeeze it, forcing air from the bag through Brian’s trachea to reinflate his lungs. Nick sighed with relief when he saw his friend’s chest rise. “Will he be okay now?” he asked her.

Dani nodded. “Yeah, as long as someone squeezes this Ambu bag every five seconds.”

He watched what she was doing. It did look just as simple as she made it sound - no real skill required except a sense of rhythm, which was one of Nick’s strengths. “I can take over when you get tired,” he offered.

She smiled. “Thanks, but I don’t want you putting any extra stress on your heart right now, not when we have no way to monitor it.” She tipped her head toward the blank monitor mounted on the wall behind him. “I’ll take care of Brian. You just take it easy,” she told Nick firmly.

Swallowing hard, he nodded. He hadn’t noticed right away, but now he realized that for the first time in a week, he couldn’t hear the constant *beep... beep... beep* of his heartbeat being measured by the bedside monitor. A week ago, he would have been relieved not to have to listen to it anymore, but now he found the silence unsettling. As annoying as the endless beeping had been at first, it had become like white noise to

Nick. There was something reassuring about being able to hear his heart's rhythm, to know it was still beating regularly behind his rib cage. Now he was at the mercy of his new pacemaker to recognize an abnormal rhythm and correct it before his heart started racing out of control again. The last thing he needed was to have another arrhythmia. But just imagining the worst-case scenario - an episode of cardiac arrest while the hospital was without electricity - was enough to make his heart skip a beat. Knowing he needed to keep himself calm and relaxed, Nick remembered what Dani had told him: *You just take it easy*. Resting his hand on his chest, he repeated her words in his head for only his heart to hear. *Take it easy now*.

It seemed to help. He could feel the vibration of his heart beating steadily beneath his palm. He gave it a reassuring pat, wincing at the shockwaves of pain that shot through the pocket of skin under which the pacemaker had been implanted.

"You doing all right over there?"

Dani must have heard his hiss of pain. Nick turned his head to see her watching him with concern. "Yeah," he said, exhaling slowly as the throbbing subsided. "You?"

She smiled as she squeezed another breath of air into Brian's lungs. "Living the dream."

Dr. Elizabeth came bursting into the room a second later, carrying a lantern. "Oh, thank goodness!" she said breathlessly when she saw Dani bagging Brian. "I knew I could count on you to keep things under control."

"We're okay in here," replied Dani, cool as a cucumber. "What happened to the generator?"

"I wish I knew." The loss of power seemed to have put Elizabeth on edge. She paced back and forth at the foot of Brian's bed, fumbling with her stethoscope for a few seconds before finally managing to put it in her ears. It was a far cry from her usually calm demeanor. "The guys went to see if they can figure out what's wrong with it."

Dani raised her eyebrows. "Rob and Patrick think they're going to find the problem and fix it themselves?" she said skeptically. "Good luck with that."

"It's worth a shot, isn't it?" said Elizabeth, as she went to Brian's bedside, setting the lantern down on his tray. "We're screwed if they don't."

Nick's heart skipped another beat. How long could Brian be kept alive like this? How long could they continue pumping air into his breathing tube before it became impractical, even impossible?

Elizabeth pressed the end of her stethoscope to Brian's chest, pausing to listen to both sides of it. "Good breath sounds bilaterally," she said after a few seconds. "He has a strong heartbeat."

Nick felt slightly better after hearing that. "Doing great, Bri. Hang in there," he muttered.

"Do you want me to take over bagging for awhile?" Elizabeth asked, but Dani shook her head.

"No, I'm fine for now. Why don't you see how Nick's doing?"

"I'm fine, too," Nick echoed, but Elizabeth insisted on listening to his chest and checking his pulse and blood pressure anyway. He held the flashlight for her so she could read the numbers on the gauge attached to the blood pressure cuff.

"Everything seems to be okay," said Elizabeth when she finished examining him. "Any pain, dizziness, or shortness of breath?"

Nick shook his head. "No, I told you I'm fine. Please, just take care of Brian."

"We're doing everything we can for Brian," Elizabeth assured him, "but we want to make sure you're being taken care of, too. Tell us if you start to feel unwell."

"I will," Nick said, but he wasn't worried about himself.

It was hard to keep track of time without a working clock to watch, but the seconds kept on ticking away, the minutes turning into one hour, then two. Eventually, Elizabeth traded places with Dani, taking on the task of ventilating Brian when Dani's hands began to cramp. Between the two of them, they never stopped bagging. Together, they kept him breathing.

Nick watched them work from his bed, feeling helpless. With his arm in a sling and his heart so weak, there wasn't much he could do for Brian or the women, yet he wanted to contribute in some way.

"Keep talking to him," Dani encouraged Nick. "Let him know he's not alone."

Nick swallowed hard. “Brian, I’m right here,” he called across to the other bed. “I love you, bro. Stay strong, all right?” He studied Brian’s face, hoping for some sign his friend could hear him, but of course, there were none. In the ghostly light of the lantern, Brian had a gray pallor, but at least he seemed peaceful. His features were relaxed into a blank expression. He didn’t appear to be in any pain. Although Nick wanted to believe Brian could hear him, a part of him hoped his friend had no idea what was happening - and that when he woke up, he would have no memory of that night.

At some point, Rob and Patrick turned up with enough food to feed a small army. Watching them spread their smorgasbord across the counter next to the sink on Brian’s side of the room, Dani raised her eyebrows. “What did you do, raid the refrigerator?” she asked, while Elizabeth frowned in disapproval.

Rob shrugged. “It’s gonna spoil if we don’t get the power back on soon. We couldn’t let good food to go waste.”

“I thought you were working on the generator.”

“We were, but neither of us really knew what we were doing, so we recruited a couple of guys from the ED to take a look at it. Can I make you a sandwich?” he offered.

“No, thanks. You can give Elizabeth a break and bag Brian for awhile, if you’d like to be helpful,” replied Dani, hardly missing a beat. “We’ve only been in here trying to keep him alive for the last two hours.”

Rob smirked. “Touche.” He took over for Elizabeth, who flexed her tired fingers gratefully as she stepped back from Brian’s bed.

“Do *you* want a sandwich or something?” Dani asked Nick. “You haven’t eaten anything in hours.”

Nick shook his head. “I’m not really hungry.” For some reason, the thought of food made him feel nauseous. He hadn’t had much of an appetite lately, but that could have been the result of worrying as much as it was a symptom of heart failure.

“You sure? You really should try to eat something. How about a popsicle?” She held up a box of them. “We better polish off a few of these bad boys before they melt, don’t you think?”

Nick cracked a smile. “Well, in that case... yeah, okay.”

“Cherry, grape, or orange?”

“Cherry,” he replied.

She pulled a red popsicle out of the box and unwrapped it. “*Sweet as cherry pi-i-i-i-ie...*” she sang softly as she brought it over to him, sashaying her hips to the beat of the song.

He smirked appreciatively at her, though he felt too weak to sing along. “Thanks.” He took a lick of the popsicle and had to admit, it tasted pretty good, sweet and refreshing on his tongue. But looking over at Brian made him feel guilty for enjoying it while his friend was fighting for his life.

“Hey, you gonna get one of those for me, too?” Rob asked, as he continued bagging Brian. “Grape, please.”

“Why, of course, dear,” replied Dani sarcastically, peeling the wrapping off a purple popsicle. “Anything else I can do for you?”

Rob grinned. “Nah, I’m good now,” he said, holding the stick in one hand while he squeezed the Ambu bag with his other. “Thanks, babe.”

For Nick, the scene felt surreal. It had only been one week since he’d met them both at the bar on Duval Street, one week since his whole world had been turned upside down. Now here they were, sitting around a dark hospital room, sucking on popsicles, and taking turns pumping air into poor Brian’s lungs, while a hurricane raged outside. It seemed unbelievable, like he was stuck in a nightmare instead of real life.

The room had gotten quiet, as everyone enjoyed their frozen treat. Nick strained his ears, trying to listen to the sounds of the storm, but he still couldn’t hear any wind or rain, only the rush of air through the tube in Brian’s trachea. Their ICU room must have been in the very heart of the hospital, far from any exterior walls and well-insulated from the elements.

He thought about Leighanne and Lauren, watching the news at home and worrying about their husbands. They both had to be distraught by now. Nick wished there was a way to let them know he and Brian were still alive, at least, if not well. But without electricity, phone service, or wi-fi, he was completely cut off from communication with the outside world. Key West had never felt more like an island than it did that day.

“How long do you think it’ll take to get the main power back on?” he asked the others.

Dani looked at Rob. “It only took a few days after Irma - right, babe?”

Rob nodded. “As long as the power lines running from the mainland don’t get knocked down, it shouldn’t take much more than that. I’m more worried about our friggin’ generator,” he said, squeezing the Ambu bag forcefully.

Nick knew what Rob really meant: Even a few days was too long for them to keep Brian alive that way.

Feeling sick to his stomach, he bit the bottom of his popsicle off its stick and chewed it quickly, cringing as the shock of cold made his teeth ache. The last bite tasted bitter and gave him a brain freeze. Rubbing the center of his forehead, he licked the popsicle stick clean before he set it on his bedside tray, glad to be done with it.

“Do you want another one?” Dani offered. She was perched on the end of Brian’s bed, halfway through an orange popsicle.

Nick shook his head. “No, thanks.” His heart was pounding, and he had a fluttery feeling in his chest that could have been from the pacemaker trying to control it or simply from the cold popsicle sliding down his esophagus. He wondered if it was even worth mentioning to Dr. Elizabeth. She was busy checking on Brian, listening to his chest with her stethoscope again, so Nick said nothing. Figuring she would make her way to his bed next, he lay his head back against the pillow and took a deep breath, trying to calm his heart down. But until the power came back on, Nick knew he wouldn’t be able to relax, not with Brian in the next bed, paralyzed and unable to breathe on his own. He couldn’t even close his eyes without feeling guilty and worrying about what might happen while he slept. He would stay awake all night if he had to, just to make sure Brian was still alive.

“You doing okay?” Dani asked him, a frown creasing her forehead. “You look pale.”

Before Nick could answer, a bomb exploded inside his chest - or, at least, that was what it felt like when his defibrillator fired for the first time. His body bucked with the force of the shock, his hands clenching into tight fists, and he heard himself cry out as he fell back onto the bed. The pain was the last thing he remembered before he passed out.

Chapter 17

Dani's heart leapt into her throat when she heard Nick yelp and saw his whole body spasm, his back arching off the bed as his limbs jerked rigidly. She knew right away what she had just witnessed, and it took her less than ten seconds to react and rush to his bedside. But by that time, his eyes had already rolled back into his head, and his body had gone limp and still.

"Nick?" She called his name, but he was unconscious and could not respond. Pressing two fingertips to the carotid artery in his neck, she palpated for a pulse, but felt nothing. Without the telemetry monitor, there was no way to know what Nick's heart was doing, but it didn't seem to be pumping blood, and the ICD implanted inside his chest had failed to correct the problem. If she didn't intervene, he was going to die. "No pulse," she announced to the rest of the room, her own heart racing. "I'm starting compressions."

"Be careful, babe," she heard Rob warn her, as she took Nick's arm out of its sling and shoved it aside. "If the defibrillator didn't do the trick the first time, it's gonna try again. You don't wanna get shocked, too."

"I don't want him to die, either!" Dani shot back, pulling down Nick's hospital gown and putting the heel of her hand over his sternum. "Besides," she added matter-of-factly, as she placed her left hand on top of her right and laced her fingers together, "there's never been a reported case of a rescuer being injured from an ICD shock during a resuscitation." She locked her elbows and began pumping.

A second later, as if on cue, she felt a sudden vibration beneath her hands; Nick's torso twitched as a strange tingling sensation spread through her fingertips. It was uncomfortable, but not unbearable. Feeling energized by the flow of electricity from his body into hers, she compressed his chest even more forcefully.

Elizabeth and Patrick appeared, parking the crash cart alongside Nick's bed. They worked in tandem, interrupting Dani's compressions just long enough to roll him onto his side; Patrick wedged a CPR board under Nick's body while Elizabeth applied one of the external defibrillator pads to his back. She put the other pad on his chest, making sure it was several inches away from the ICD. While the portable defibrillator analyzed his heart rhythm, Dani's hands pushed down repeatedly. She paused when another wave of electricity surged through them, but Nick still did not respond.

"He's in V-fib," said Elizabeth, looking at the defibrillator's monitor. "How many shocks has he already received?"

“At least three so far,” Dani replied, resuming compressions. “I felt the last two.”

“The device is programmed to deliver up to six shocks per event. We can disable it with a magnet and try external defibrillation instead, but if you can stand it, we should probably let it complete its therapy first and see if it’s enough to restore a sinus rhythm. External defibrillation can damage an ICD,” Elizabeth explained.

Dani nodded. “Go for it. I’m fine.” She continued pumping Nick’s chest as Patrick placed the resuscitation mask over his face and began bagging him. “C’mon, Nick,” she panted, breathing hard from the physical effort of keeping his blood flowing. “Come on back to us.” She felt the ICD fire off a fourth shock, but there were still no signs of life from Nick.

In the background, she could hear Elizabeth rummaging around in the drawers of the crash cart. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the cardiologist draw a dose of something into a syringe and inject it into Nick’s central line. Dani pumped harder, hoping she could help deliver the drug to his heart that much faster. Perhaps she pushed a bit *too* hard, because she heard a disconcerting crunching noise that suggested she had cracked part of his rib cage. She cringed, but continued the compressions. A broken rib was better than being dead.

“You doing okay, Dani?” Elizabeth asked. “Want me to take over?”

She shook her head, her hair falling into her sweaty face. “No, I’m fine for now,” she said, though her hands had gone numb. Nick’s body twitched beneath them as a fifth shock from the ICD passed through it, making the tips of Dani’s fingers tingle with the feeling of pins and needles.

Suddenly, she heard Patrick shout, “He’s vomiting!” She looked up to see Patrick pull the mask off Nick’s face as reddish fluid foamed from his open mouth.

“Roll him before he aspirates!” Dani barked, reaching for Nick’s right shoulder. As the other two helped her turn him onto his side, Nick started to cough, his stomach contents splattering onto the floor. “He needs suctioning,” she said to Patrick, but with the power off, the suction unit on the wall was worthless. “You’ll have to clear his airway with your finger.”

“What?” Patrick made a face. “Why me?”

Dani glared back at him. “Because you have gloves on and I don’t, asshole! Don’t argue; just do it!”

With a disgusted groan, Patrick put his gloved finger into Nick’s mouth and scooped out the rest of the vomit. Nick seemed to be regaining consciousness; he continued to cough, trying to clear his own airway. Dani could hear him taking raspy breaths in between the retching noises, and she let out a sigh of relief.

“He’s back in sinus rhythm,” said Elizabeth, her eyes on the portable defibrillator screen. At the same time, her fingers palpated his carotid artery. “Pulse has been restored.”

Dani picked up Nick’s right hand and pressed her fingertips to the inside of his wrist. She felt a faint fluttering there as well. “He has a weak radial pulse, too.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Then we’ve achieved a return of spontaneous circulation. Good work, everyone,” she said, reaching for her stethoscope. “Let’s get a B.P. and monitor his breathing. Give him ten liters by mask and leave him in the recovery position until we know he can protect his own airway.” She slipped the stethoscope into her ears and leaned over Nick to listen to his chest, leaving the two nurses to carry out her instructions.

“Yo, Pat!” Rob called from across the room. “Come bag my patient, and I’ll take care of Carter.”

“Be my guest,” said Patrick, sounding relieved, as he stepped over the puddle of vomit next to Nick’s bed and took Rob’s place behind Brian’s.

“Is that blood?” Dani asked, looking down at the reddish-brown liquid on the floor. Her mind raced, as she wondered what could have caused Nick to throw up blood. Had she damaged more than his ribs during that last resuscitation? Was he bleeding internally?

Rob laughed. “That, my dear, is Red Dye 40. He just had a cherry popsicle, remember?”

“Oh... right.” Dani forced a laugh, too, feeling dumb. “Duh. I think I broke one of his ribs doing CPR... I was starting to worry it had punctured something.”

“Way to go, She-Hulk,” he joked as he brushed past her, giving her a playful smack on the butt. “You were so hot, babe.”

She raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean, *were?*” she asked, pretending to be offended, as she wrapped the blood pressure cuff around Nick’s right arm. “I hope I still am!”

“Always,” said Rob, smiling. “But especially when you’re saving someone’s life.”

“All right, you two, that’s enough pillow talk,” Elizabeth interrupted, giving them both a look as she replaced her stethoscope around her neck. “If you were paying as much attention to your patient as you are to each other, you might have noticed that he’s awake.”

Dani looked down in surprise. Sure enough, Nick’s eyes were open.

In his dream, Nick was drowning.

Submersed in deep, murky water, he struggled for the surface, but whenever he came close, a strong wave would crash over him, pushing his body back under. He bobbed up and down like a cork, unable to keep his head above water long enough to breathe. His lungs burned, desperate for fresh oxygen.

Something brushed the bottom of his foot. Looking down, he saw Brian floating on his back, a few feet below him. His best friend looked surprisingly relaxed. Brian smiled and waved up at Nick, beckoning him to come closer, but Nick shook his head. He knew he couldn’t allow himself to sink any further into the depths of the dark water, or he would drown for sure. He wondered how Brian had managed to stay so calm. How could he possibly breathe down there, without any diving equipment?

The answer to that appeared a second later, in the form of a small fish. As it swam toward Brian, the fish’s body suddenly inflated to four times its previous size, becoming as round as a beach ball. *Pufferfish!* Nick thought excitedly, temporarily forgetting about his breathing problem. He watched in astonishment as the pufferfish approached Brian, positioning itself in front of his face. Brian put his hands on either side of the fish’s body and pulled it right up to his mouth. *No, Brian!* Nick wanted to shout. He waved his arms wildly, trying to warn his friend that pufferfish were extremely poisonous. The deadly neurotoxin they carried could paralyze a person. But Brian didn’t seem to be worried. He gently squeezed the sides of the pufferfish, forcing air from its stomach straight into his mouth. Somehow, it worked. Brian’s chest expanded as his lungs filled with air, and the fish deflated back to its former shape. Nick shook his head in disbelief.

Then, out of the darkness, loomed another creature. It had the face of a rather unfortunate-looking fish, but its long, slender body was more snakelike. As it slithered toward Nick, he realized it was some type of eel, but by that time, it was too late to swim away. The eel struck without warning, lunging straight at him. Even before it touched his body, Nick felt a surge of electricity shoot through his chest, making his heart flutter. He let out a silent scream, his mouth filling with water, and the last of his air supply escaped his lungs as the liquid he'd inhaled flowed in.

Nick knew then that he was doomed, that he was going to die in the dark depths of the water he'd once loved. Yet he fought to live. Flailing his arms and kicking his legs as hard as he could, he propelled himself upward, away from the eel. As he approached the surface once again, the powerful waves battered his body, pushing him back down. Water filled his lungs, making them feel as bloated as the pufferfish's body. His chest felt ready to burst from the burning pain and pressure of being unable to breathe.

Then someone threw him a lifeline.

He looked up and saw a life preserver bobbing above him. With his last ounce of energy, he managed to reach up and hook his arm around it. Then he felt himself being hauled out of the water. It took all of his strength to hang on as he was pulled through the choppy waves. A flash of lightning illuminated the black sky overhead, revealing the silhouette of a small fishing boat.

"C'mon, Nick!" he heard a voice call out to him from the boat. "Come on back to us!"

I'm trying, thought Nick, but he couldn't speak, couldn't breathe. A pair of strong arms reached down and pulled him out of the water. As he collapsed onto the boat deck, coughing uncontrollably, he felt more hands on his body, rolling him onto his side so he could expel the water from his lungs.

Only once he was out of danger did it occur to him that he had left Brian behind. But he didn't want to go back into the water. He was too exhausted to keep fighting the waves... too afraid of what would happen if he lost the fight. *Brian will be okay*, he thought as he let his eyes close, eager to rest awhile.

When he opened them again, he was looking into a pair of beautiful, brown eyes.

"Hey there," Dani said softly. "How are you doing?"

Slowly, the rest of the room materialized around her, and Nick realized he was lying not on a boat deck, but in his hospital bed. He'd had another nightmare... but the look on her face and the pain in his chest were enough for him to know that wasn't all he had experienced. "I dunno... you tell me," he muttered, his voice muffled by an oxygen mask. "What happened?"

"Well..." She gave him a grim smile. "Let's just say your ICD did its job."

"So I got shocked." It wasn't a question. As the details of his dream became muddled, the memory of the bomb detonating inside his chest manifested itself. He looked down, half-expecting to see a bloody hole where his heart should have been, but the only outward sign of damage was some mild bruising over his breastbone.

Dani nodded. "Several times, actually. It took a few tries before it was successful."

With a sinking feeling, Nick realized he had been near death again, not only in his dream. "Did you have to do CPR on me?" he asked, already knowing the answer. What else could have caused those bruises on his chest? She confirmed his suspicion with another nod. "Thanks," he added softly, "for saving me again."

"No need to thank me," she replied, shaking her head.

"I know, I know... just doing your job, right?"

"Well, yeah... that, and I may have cracked one of your ribs. I'm so sorry," said Dani, biting down on her bottom lip.

Nick's mouth dropped open underneath the oxygen mask. "Holy shit... are you serious?" He ran his hand down his torso, cautiously tracing the curves of his rib cage with his fingers, and winced when he encountered a tender spot on his right side. No wonder his chest was so sore.

"I wish I wasn't, but it does happen sometimes," Dani replied sheepishly, tucking a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. Nick stared at her, still trying to understand how someone so petite could possibly push hard enough to cause him that much pain.

"She doesn't know her own strength," said Dr. Rob with a crooked smile, as he came up behind Dani and rested his hands on her shoulders. "Sorry about that, man. It should heal in about six weeks if you take it easy."

Nick was starting to wonder if he would even still be alive in six weeks, but he didn't tell them that. Instead, he said with a sigh, "Not much else to do around here except take it easy."

"I know." Dani offered Nick a sympathetic smile. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right." He let his eyes wander past Dani and Rob to Brian's bed behind them. The other nurse, Patrick, was bagging Brian now. Nick watched his friend's chest rise and fall a few times before he asked, "Is Brian doing okay?"

Rob nodded. "As far as we can tell. It's hard to know for sure without most of our monitoring equipment."

"I bet. Any idea when the power will be back on?"

"I dunno. Maybe I should go check on the guys I left in charge of looking at the generator, eh?" Rob grinned. "You guys got this?" he asked Dani, patting her on the shoulder.

"Yeah, we're fine," she replied, reaching for her stethoscope. "Go find out what's going on with the generator." Once Rob had grabbed a flashlight and left the room, she perched on the edge of Nick's bed. "I just need to check your blood pressure," she said, as she slipped the stethoscope into her ears. She pressed the other end to the inside of his elbow, just below the cuff that had been wrapped around his arm. Nick felt the cuff tighten as she inflated it. A furrow appeared in her brow as she frowned in concentration, listening carefully while the cuff gradually loosened again. "Ninety over sixty," she announced when she was finished, taking off the cuff. "A little on the low side, but not bad - a lot better than it was a few minutes ago."

Nick swallowed hard. "What do you think made my heart start freaking out this time? I wasn't even doing anything."

"It's not your fault," Dr. Elizabeth spoke up from somewhere behind him. She came around to the other side of Nick's bed so he could see her face as she answered his question. "Arrhythmias are just another unfortunate symptom of worsening heart failure. They can't be predicted or prevented, even by the ICD. All it can do is attempt to correct the problem, as yours did."

"So you're saying it'll probably happen again," he replied flatly. The prospect of facing another defibrillator shock filled him with dread. It was a hopeless, frightening feeling, knowing his heart could give out on him again at any time, without warning.

“I’m going to adjust your dosage of antiarrhythmic drugs to hopefully prevent another episode like this one,” said Dr. Elizabeth, “but until you get a new heart, it’ll always be a possibility. That’s why we put in the ICD.”

Nick touched the tender pocket of skin into which the device had been implanted. A part of him wanted to tell her to take it out and let him die, but he knew that was just the pain talking. “My chest is really sore,” he said, rubbing his side. “Can you give me anything for that?”

“Of course. Dani, let’s try Tylenol with codeine and see how he does with that.” She and Dani helped him roll onto his back and raised the head of his bed until he was sitting halfway up. Dr. Elizabeth took off the oxygen mask he’d been wearing and replaced it with a nasal cannula so he could drink. Dani brought him a bottle of water and two tablets, which he took.

As Nick was waiting for the painkillers to kick in, the lights suddenly came back on. All around the room, machines sprang back to life, emitting a loud array of alarms and beeps.

“We have power!” Dani exclaimed, slapping Elizabeth a high five across the bed.

“Everything will need to be reset,” the doctor replied, all business again. “I’ll start with the vent so poor Patrick can stop bagging. Will you take care of this half of the room?”

“You bet.” Dani bustled around Nick’s bed, checking and reprogramming every piece of equipment, as Elizabeth did the same on Brian’s side. In a matter of minutes, both heart monitors were blipping steadily, while the ventilator hissed softly in the background. The medley of medical noises, once so unnerving to Nick, now felt reassuringly familiar. Everything was back to normal - his new “normal,” anyway.

Rob returned a few minutes later and rambled something about a vapor lock preventing the generator from pulling fuel from its reserve tanks. “It’s fixed now,” he proclaimed, “so we should be good to go for another few days.”

The reason for the outage didn’t matter much to Nick. He was just glad the power had been restored, at least for the time being.

“Did you hear that, Brian? We made it, bro,” he called across the room, feeling relieved as he watched his friend’s chest rise and fall without anyone squeezing a bag over his face. Brian was still unable to breathe on his own, relying on the ventilator to force

oxygen into his lungs, but Nick tried to look on the bright side. At least he and Brian were breathing, and both their hearts were beating. They were no longer in any immediate danger. “We’ll be okay now.”

Chapter 18

With the power back on and the storm almost past, Nick felt like a weight had been lifted off his chest. But in spite of his relief, a lingering ache remained. Lying flat on his back in the dark, he could feel it radiating across his chest, from the broken rib on his right side to the small incision above the ICD on his left. The pills Dr. Elizabeth had prescribed took the edge off the pain, but didn’t block it completely. The dull throbbing kept him awake, too uncomfortable to sleep.

“Can I get you anything?” Elizabeth offered, once Dani had turned in for the night. Now that the danger was over and they weren’t all needed at once, the doctors and nurses had decided to take it in turns to watch over Nick and Brian. Elizabeth and Patrick were working the night shift, while Rob and Dani slept. In the morning, the married couple would relieve them so they could get some rest, too.

Nick couldn’t help but feel jealous of Rob - not only because Dani was amazing, but because he missed his own wife so much. He would be so much more comfortable in his own bed at home in Las Vegas, with his arms wrapped around Lauren. And nothing would cheer him up more than seeing his son. Their absence in his life these last few months only seemed to magnify the ache in his chest. That was why his first answer to Elizabeth’s question was, “My family?”

She smiled at him sadly. “I wish that was possible, but with this weather, it may be a few more days before the airport’s able to open back up. Is there anything else?”

He shrugged his right shoulder; the left one was immobilized by a sling once more. “I dunno... I guess a new heart would be nice, too.”

“I’ll do everything I can to make that happen,” she promised. “The transplant process will move much faster once the hurricane is over and we can get you transferred to a different facility and officially listed.”

Nick nodded, but his heart skipped a beat. The relief he’d felt had been short-lived: now he had a new reason to panic. In spite of his prognosis, he was in no real hurry for

the transplant to happen. Though he hated being hospitalized and wanted to get better, the thought of having his heart cut out and replaced still terrified him.

He didn't tell Dr. Elizabeth that, not wanting to sound ungrateful. But she must have been able to read the fear in the expression on his face, because she suddenly added, "Did Patrick tell you he had a heart transplant as a teenager?"

Nick's eyes widened with surprise as he looked across the room at the nurse who was tending to Brian. "No way - really?"

Elizabeth nodded. "It's true. Ask him. He can tell you all about it."

Nick waited until Patrick was finished with Brian before waving him over to his bedside. "Hey... so a little birdie told me *you've* had a heart transplant?"

"Yep," Patrick replied, pulling down the neck of his scrub top to show Nick a thin, white scar in the center of his chest. It didn't look much different from the scar Brian had sported ever since his own heart surgery, yet Nick leaned closer, staring at it with morbid fascination.

"Wow... that's crazy. Did you have cardiomyopathy, too?"

Patrick shook his head. "No, mine was a congenital condition. I was born with a bad heart that gradually got worse as I got older. I finally had a transplant when I was fifteen."

"That must've been scary," said Nick. He thought about himself at fifteen, recording his first album. He couldn't imagine going through this at that age and realized he should be grateful for the many years of good health he'd gotten to enjoy before his heart had failed. Patrick probably never took his health for granted, the way Nick had.

"Yeah, it sucked, but I felt better afterwards," replied Patrick. "It was worth the wait. I wouldn't have lived much longer without a new heart."

Nick swallowed hard. "I bet it gave you a new lease on life, huh?" he asked, trying to focus on the positive and not let the fear and negativity he could feel lurking in the back of his mind creep to the forefront. "Is that why you became a nurse?"

Patrick shrugged. "Something like that."

He didn't elaborate, and Nick didn't ask any more questions. He didn't want to dwell on the topic of transplants, but he did wish Patrick would keep talking to him. Instead, the conversation came to an awkward close as Patrick shuffled away.

Desperate for someone to keep him company and distract him from his pain, Nick closed his eyes and pictured Dani's pretty face. But when he finally drifted off to sleep, he dreamed of Lauren.

Nick woke the next day with a smile on his face, having spent the night with his family. In his dreams, he had walked the dogs with Lauren and played in the pool with Odin - perfectly ordinary things that, nonetheless, he was no longer able to do. When he opened his eyes and found himself back in his hospital bed, far away from his family, Nick felt like he was in the midst of a nightmare. But he was wide awake now, no longer dreaming. This sad existence was what his real life had become.

Blinking groggily, he glanced over at the other bed, wanting to make sure Brian was still in it. His best friend looked the same as he had the night before - still unconscious, but also still breathing, his chest rising and falling steadily as the ventilator filled his lungs.

Turning his head to the right, Nick was relieved to see Dani standing by his bedside, looking pretty in a pair of bright pink scrubs. She was in the middle of changing his IV bag when she realized he was awake. "Good morning!" she greeted him with a radiant smile.

"Morning," Nick croaked back. It didn't feel much like morning, but without windows, it was impossible to tell what time of day it was. His circadian rhythm had been disrupted by periods of unconsciousness, and the recent power outage had rendered the wall clock incapable of providing a reliable clue. Even if the clock had been reset since the secondary power was restored, Nick could hardly see its hands from across the dimly-lit room. He wondered if they were deliberately keeping the lights low to conserve energy. Clearing his throat, he asked, "Is the main power back on yet?"

"Not yet," Dani replied, shaking her head. "It may be awhile. We'll know more when Rob gets back; he went out to drive around and see how bad the damage is."

"So the storm's over?"

"Uh-huh." She hung the new bag on his IV pole. "It's still pretty windy outside, but the worst of it has moved past us."

“What time is it?”

“Wow, you’re just full of questions today, huh?” She smiled down at him again. “It’s almost eight. Did you sleep okay last night?”

“Surprisingly, yeah,” he replied. “It took me awhile to fall asleep, but once I finally did, I was out. I don’t think I woke up once during the night.”

“You must have needed the rest,” she said knowingly.

He made a face. “I don’t know why. All I’ve done for the past week is rest. I mean, how much rest could a person possibly need?”

“You’ve been under a lot of stress lately - not just physically, but emotionally, too,” she said, giving his right shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “Think about everything that’s happened in the last week: first all the stuff with your heart, then Brian ending up in the hospital, and finally the hurricane. All that has taken a toll on you. I’ll bet your brain needed a good night’s sleep even more than your body did.”

Nick nodded, knowing she was probably right.

“You must’ve had some good dreams, too, huh?” Dani added with a wink.

He arched his brow, giving her a bemused look. “And what makes you think that?”

“Well... you were smiling right before you woke up,” she replied, raising her eyebrows right back at him.

He cracked a smile. “Yeah... I was dreaming about my family. God, I miss them so freaking much.”

“I know,” said Dani sympathetically. “I’m so sorry. I wish there was more we could do, but there’s just no way to reach your wife right now. As soon as the phones are working again, we’ll get a hold of her.”

“I know. It’s not your fault.” He sighed. “I just wanna get out of here and go home.”

“Believe me, so do I,” replied Dani. Nick reminded himself that she, too, had been stuck at the hospital, but at least she had volunteered to stay there. Besides, her husband was

with her, whereas his wife and son were clear across the country. She couldn't really compare her situation to his.

"Do you know if your house is okay?" he asked her.

"No idea. Rob's going to drop by there and find out. Fingers crossed." Tucking her index finger under the middle one, she held up her hand for Nick to see.

He imitated her, crossing his own fingers for good luck. "Hopefully there's no major damage. But if there is, that's what insurance is for, right?"

"Yeah, tell that to the residents who had to rebuild after Irma. Their insurance checks weren't nearly enough to cover the cost of all the requirements for new construction."

"Wow, really? That sucks," said Nick. He knew it was a lame reply, but he wasn't sure what else to say. He felt bad for those people, but it was hard to relate when he hadn't had to worry about money in his whole adult life. He was fortunate in that respect, but money certainly hadn't solved all his problems. His wealth would pay his hospital bills, but it couldn't buy him health or happiness. No amount of insurance guaranteed he would get a new heart before his old one gave out.

"It does. But hey... let's hope for the best," replied Dani with a shrug. She finished adjusting the flow rate of his IV drip and then filled a basin with warm water for his daily bed bath.

Now that he'd gotten over his embarrassment, Nick found himself actually looking forward to this part of his morning, not only because it broke up the monotony of lying in bed all day, but simply because it felt good. He enjoyed having his hair washed, feeling Dani's hands massaging his head as she worked the shampoo into his scalp.

"I always liked your hair like this," she remarked, spiking his lathered locks between her fingers.

He smiled. "Like what - wet and soapy?"

She laughed. "No, silly. I meant more of the spiky, messy, bedhead look. So much better than your middle-part mushroom cut."

Nick wrinkled his nose. "Hey now... you already made fun of me for my mushroom hair. In case you don't remember, that was a huge trend thanks to me."

“In case *you* don’t remember, Devon Sawa had it first,” Dani shot back, as she started rinsing the shampoo out of his hair. After a beat, she added, “You know I’m just messing with you, right?”

“I know,” he replied. “I don’t mind. It’s a good thing you prefer the bedhead look, though, ‘cause that’s about all I can pull off right now.”

“It’s perfect,” she assured him with a wink, wrapping his head in a towel before she began washing the rest of his body.

When she was finished, she brought him a banana and an English muffin for breakfast. Nick took a few bites out of the muffin and barely touched the banana. He was still slightly nauseous, and nothing tasted good.

“Not hungry?” Dani asked after a while, looking down at his plate.

Nick shrugged. “No, not particularly.”

She pursed her lips. “You need to eat so you can keep your energy up.”

“Why?” he scoffed. “I barely do anything but lie in this bed; it’s not like I’m burning a lot of calories.”

“Well, maybe it’s time to get you moving then,” she replied. “How about I show you some of those bed exercises I mentioned the other day?”

“Yeah, sounds good,” said Nick eagerly. So much had happened in the last two days, he’d almost forgotten about Dani’s promise to teach him ways to prevent his muscles from weakening. Now he looked forward to learning, wanting to keep his body as fit as possible. “It’ll be like my morning workout.”

“That’s the spirit,” said Dani with a smile. “Let’s start with your legs.” She lowered the head of his bed until he was lying flat and pulled back his blankets to free his feet. “First I want you to point your toes toward the foot of the bed until you feel a nice stretch. Good,” she said, as he followed her directions. “Hold them like that for three seconds... and relax. Now you’re going to flex your feet so your toes bend backward...”

She guided him through a series of simple stretches, from pointing and flexing his toes to rotating his ankles and bending his knees one at a time. He was doing leg lifts when Rob returned.

“How does the house look?” Dani asked him immediately, biting down on her bottom lip as she awaited his answer.

Rob sucked in a deep breath. “You want the good news or the bad news first?”

“The good news, please.”

He sighed. “Sorry, I lied. There is no good news. The house is uninhabitable.” Dani gasped, clapping her hand over her open mouth, as Rob continued, “Half the roof’s been ripped off, and the whole neighborhood is flooded, so I can only imagine what it looks like inside. I wasn’t able to get close enough to go in.”

Nick felt like a fly on the wall, watching with dismay as Dani’s face fell. He lowered his leg back to the bed and lay there silently, not knowing what to say or do. Rob wrapped his arms around his wife and pulled her into a tight hug. He held her like that for a few seconds, letting her bury her face in his shoulder. “It’ll be okay,” Nick heard him whisper reassuringly as he rubbed her back. “We’ll get through this.”

Dani nodded as she slowly straightened up, wiping her eyes. “What about the rest of the island?”

Rob shook his head. “It’s bad, babe. Really bad. Melissa must’ve strengthened to a Category 5 before she hit. All the cell towers have been knocked down, a section of the Overseas Highway has been washed out, and someone said the main power line was severed, too. That means we may be going weeks, even months without electricity.”

Nick’s heart began to race. “Won’t the hospital run out of fuel for the generators way before then?” he asked, unable to stay silent any longer.

Rob looked over at him and nodded. “We only have enough to last us a few more days. Unless we can get more delivered, we’ll have to evacuate.”

Dani’s eyes wandered from Nick to Brian before she shook her head. “I still don’t think either of them are stable enough to be moved,” he heard her whisper to Rob.

“Yeah, well, I’m not sure how we’d move them anyway, with the bridge washed out and the helipad underwater,” he muttered back. “By boat, maybe?”

She raised an eyebrow, giving him a skeptical look. “You’d put a comatose patient with a spinal cord injury on a *boat*?”

“Only if there was no other option... but it’s a risk we may have to take if we run out of fuel before the floodwaters recede,” Rob replied with a shrug.

Nick felt sick to his stomach, remembering what had happened the last time they’d tried to evacuate him. He had the same nervous, fluttery feeling in his chest he’d had then. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to calm his heart down.

“I’m gonna get on the satellite phone and see if I can arrange for a fuel drop,” said Rob. “I’ll be back.”

After he left, Dani looked at Nick. “It’ll be all right,” she said reassuringly. “Rob will figure everything out.”

Nick was frowning. “You have a satellite phone?” He wondered why she hadn’t mentioned it before.

“Only for emergencies,” she replied. “It lets us keep in contact with the mainland, but it’s too expensive to use for personal calls.”

“Oh.” He paused, suddenly realizing how insensitive he must have sounded, asking about a satellite phone when she had just found out her home was ruined. “I’m really sorry about your house, by the way.”

She sniffled. “Thanks.”

“I’m not sure how much I can do to help,” he added, “but you can count on me to donate money to the recovery effort as soon as I’m able to access my accounts.”

Dani managed a tight-lipped smile. “That’s so sweet of you,” she said. “Thank you.”

Nick shrugged. “It’s the least I can do. You’ve done so much for me... and don’t say you were just doing your job, because you’ve gone way above and beyond that by now.”

She laughed. “Alright... I won’t say it this time. But hey, if it wasn’t for you, Rob and I might have been in our house when the storm hit. Who knows if we would have made it out alive? So in a way, you might have saved our lives, too.”

“Yeah, well, if it wasn’t for me, you and Rob would have gone to Gainesville, right? You guys would have been safe - and you wouldn’t have been stranded here.”

“You don’t know that,” she said, shaking her head.

Nick wasn't going to argue with her. "Do you think you could take me up to the roof later? Or at least a room with windows?" he wondered. "I want to see what it looks like outside."

Dani pursed her lips. "You know you're not supposed to get out of bed."

"Then wheel my bed. Please?" he begged, giving her his best puppy dog eyes.

She offered him a sympathetic smile in return. "We'll see. Why don't you finish your last set of reps while I get Brian started on his workout?"

Nick was distracted from his disappointment when he watched her walk over to Brian's bed and pull back the blankets. Somehow, Brian's body seemed even smaller than usual. His skinny legs looked like toothpicks poking out of the bottom of his hospital gown, though his bare feet were as big as ever. "What are you doing?" Nick asked, as Dani picked up Brian's right arm and slowly pulled it up over his head.

"Passive range of motion exercises," she replied. "It helps to keep his joints flexible."

As Nick returned to his leg lifts, he watched her raise and lower Brian's arm, straight up and down at first, then out to the side. The whole time, Brian's hand hung limply from its wrist, his fingers loose and floppy. It was strange to see Brian looking lifeless and still, so unlike his usual energetic, athletic self. It unnerved Nick.

"Can he feel you pulling on his arm like that?" he asked Dani.

"I don't know. That depends on his level of awareness and how much sensation he has. It's hard to assess right now, since he's been unresponsive so far." Nick frowned. "I'm not hurting him," she added quickly, "if that's what you were wondering."

He shook his head. "No, I know you're not. I just wish he would wake up - or at least react in some way. It's weird to see him like this."

She nodded. "I know. It's weird for me, too. I've never even met him before, but just from seeing him perform, I know how full of energy he was."

Noticing her use of the past tense, Nick swallowed hard. He hoped with all his heart that Brian would be full of that same energy again someday. He couldn't bear the thought of his best friend being bedridden for the rest of his life. Having been confined to a hospital bed for a full week now, Nick knew this was no way to live.

Already, the days of inactivity had taken a toll on him. He could feel the stiffness in his muscles and the strain across his sore chest as he slowly raised and lowered each leg, one at a time. It was a lot harder than it should have been. A mere two months ago, his body had been so well-conditioned, he could dance and sing at the same time for over an hour without getting out of breath. Now the slightest movement made his heartbeat accelerate as if he were in the middle of a strenuous aerobic workout instead of what amounted to a simple warmup. He'd had to stop and rest after each set of reps, just to catch his breath and allow his heart to calm down.

But on that last set, his heart didn't cooperate. Instead of slowing down, it continued to speed up. Nick broke out in a cold sweat as his heart began to race out of control. He tried to call out to Dani, but his chest was tight, and he could barely breathe, let alone speak. He didn't have to, though - a second later, the alarm on his monitor sounded, issuing a series of high-pitched beeps that brought her running to his bedside.

"Nick?" He heard her say his name and briefly saw her hovering over him before his vision blurred and faded, blackness closing in. "Stay with me!" she barked over the frantic beeping in the background, pressing her fingers to the side of his neck to feel his pulse. Her face swam in and out of focus as he struggled to stay awake.

He was still semi-conscious when the ICD fired inside his chest, knocking the wind right out of him. He hardly recognized the harsh, guttural sound that came from his own mouth, half groan, half strangled cry. In agony, he clutched at his chest. It felt like he'd been kicked by a horse.

Dani put her hand over his, gently prying it away from his chest. "It's okay, Nick," she said, squeezing his hand tightly as she lowered it to his side. "You're okay now." She let go of him and reached for her stethoscope. He felt a shock of cold as she slid the metal disc down the front of his gown. "Just relax and breathe."

Nick was struck with a sense of *deja vu* as he lay still and let her listen to his heart. *Relax and breathe.* He had heard that line before. How many times had something like this happened by now? It was beginning to feel almost routine, as if he and Dani were players in a real life drama, rehearsing the same scene over and over again. The dialogue and stage directions had become second nature, and the setting never changed. Yet Nick was far from comfortable in his role as the helpless patient. No matter how many times he had survived one of these episodes, it was still terrifying to feel his own heart turn against him - and his newfound fear of experiencing another shock made it even worse now.

“What happened?” he was finally able to ask, once his heartbeat had stabilized and he could breathe again. His vision was still blurry; Dani looked almost like an angel with a halo of golden light glowing around her head as she leaned over him.

“You had another arrhythmia - it looked like ventricular tachycardia that time,” she answered, her eyes darting to the monitor behind his bed and back again. “Your ICD caught it and cardioverted your heart back to a healthy rhythm before it turned into a lethal one. If V-tach continues for too long, it can become V-fib, which causes cardiac arrest.”

Nick felt a swooping sensation in his stomach, which made him nauseous. He was hyper-aware of the way his heart was thumping inside his chest and wondered how it sounded to Dani’s trained ears.

“It was a close call,” she continued, “but I think you’re okay for now.” She removed her stethoscope and reached for his right hand, rubbing the back of it reassuringly. “Just take it easy - no more exercise until Dr. Elizabeth’s had a chance to examine you.”

He sighed. “I take it that means no going to the roof either,” he said, as she slipped a blood pressure cuff around his arm and inflated it.

She shook her head, pressing the end of her stethoscope to the inside of his elbow. She listened in silence for a few seconds as she let the air out of the cuff. “Sorry,” she said finally, unstrapping it from his arm. “Not until we know what’s triggering these events.”

Nick nodded to show he understood, then closed his eyes so she wouldn’t see the tears welling in them. He had never felt so worthless. What was the point in living like this? He was hardly better off than Brian. In some ways, Nick had it worse. At least Brian didn’t seem to know what had happened to him. Nick hoped he didn’t, anyway. It was awful to be so helpless, confined to a bed, betrayed by his own body, with nothing to do but wait for his heart to give out on him again. He wouldn’t wish that feeling on anyone.

He rubbed his aching chest, trying to alleviate the pain that continued to throb through it. He couldn’t tell if it was coming from his cracked rib, his bruised sternum, or his broken heart, but in that moment, it was almost unbearable. He tried to take deep breaths, but couldn’t because it hurt too much. Squeezing his eyes even more tightly shut, he felt a few tears trickle down his cheeks. He didn’t even bother to brush them away. He was afraid to move, afraid of triggering another arrhythmia. Instead, he let the tears flow as he thought about his family, focusing on the familiar faces he’d seen in his dreams. He had to stay alive long enough to see his wife and son again in real life.

Lauren. Odin. He chanted their names in his head, over and over again, drawing strength from them as he tried to distract himself from the pain.

Chapter 19

Nick spent much of the day drifting in and out of sleep.

Lately, he had been sleeping more and more. Some would say this was a symptom of his worsening heart failure or maybe a side effect of his medications. Others might think he was just bored or depressed. They may have been right. But Nick knew the main reason he'd been sleeping so much was because it was his only way to escape.

In his dreams, he could leave his hospital bed and go somewhere else - wherever his mind took him. He had traveled far and wide, to the strangest and most mundane places. No matter where he went, his family was never far from his thoughts.

“Look, Daddy!”

He grinned at his son, Odin, who was standing at the bow of his boat, gazing out across the open water with a fascination Nick knew well. The Florida sun shone down on the little boy's blonde hair, making it appear even lighter than it was already. Seated beside him was Lauren, looking beautiful in her black bikini, her long, dark hair blowing in the warm sea breeze. There was nothing like being out on the ocean with his family, thought Nick with a smile. He was back in his happy place and feeling better than he had in months, both physically and emotionally. As he perched on the deck rail, resting his hand on Lauren's bare shoulder, he was relaxed and at peace with the world.

“You watching for sharks, bubba?” he asked Odin.

“Der's a baby!” Odin replied, pointing down at the water.

Nick chuckled. “A baby, huh? *Baby shark, doo doo doo-doo-doo-doo...*” he sang, expecting Odin to laugh and sing along, as he always did. But Odin shook his head and pointed again, more urgently this time.

“No! Not baby shark!” he shouted. “Baby sissy!”

Nick's heart skipped a beat as he suddenly heard an infant's cry. He leaned over the rail, looking down at the water, and his heart lodged in his throat when he saw what Odin had been trying to show him.

There *was* a baby in the water. A human baby, wrapped in a pink blanket and nestled inside a wicker basket that was somehow floating on the surface. "Oh my god!" Nick gasped. He blinked in the bright sunlight, unable to believe what he was seeing, but every time he opened his eyes again, the baby was still there, wailing helplessly in her basket as it bobbed gently upon the waves.

As he leaned closer for a better look, Nick's heart skipped another beat when he realized he recognized the baby's face. Her big, blue angel eyes and little rosebud mouth were open this time, and her cheeks were bright pink, but he had memorized every inch of that sweet face when it was gray and still. Even though she looked different now, Nick would know his daughter anywhere.

"Arya!" he cried. "It's Arya!"

"Baby sissy!" Odin exclaimed again, bouncing up and down. He had never laid eyes upon his sister before, yet instinctively, it seemed he had known her from the start.

"What?!" gasped Lauren. "It can't be..."

Nick didn't understand how it could be possible either, but there wasn't time to question what he was seeing. The wicker basket was beginning to flood. The waves sloshed over the sides, filling it with seawater. The baby shrieked louder as her face and blanket got wet. Nick watched in horror as the basket started to sink.

He didn't hesitate another second. Hurdling himself over the side of the boat, he dropped to the water below, desperate to get to his daughter before she disappeared beneath the waves.

"Nick, what are you doing?!" he heard Lauren call down to him, but he ignored her, swimming frantically toward the small basket. It was farther from the boat than it had appeared, and it was foundering fast. Before he could reach it, the basket overturned, dumping his baby into the ocean.

"Nooo!" Nick howled, as he watched her slip below the surface. He sucked in a deep breath and held it as he dove after her, using his arms to propel himself downward. Ignoring the sting of the saltwater, he forced his eyes open, but the water was dark; he could only see a few feet in front of his face. He wished he was wearing goggles.

Through the murky water, he caught a glimpse of a small body drifting below him. He kicked his legs harder, but kept his arms stretched in front of him, fingers groping blindly in the hope of grabbing hold of a tiny hand or foot. But no matter how far or fast he went, Arya always seemed to be just out of his reach.

As he swam deeper, his chest began to hurt from holding his breath for so long. He ignored the feeling, hellbent on finding his daughter before he took another breath of fresh air. But as his lungs screamed for oxygen, he started to feel light-headed. If he didn't resurface soon, he was going to pass out and drown, and then they would both be dead.

In the second that he hesitated, torn between swimming for the surface or descending further, he lost sight of Arya. It was then that Nick began to panic. He knew he couldn't keep going much longer, but if he gave up now, he might never find her again.

"Nick!" Faintly, he could hear a familiar voice calling him from far away. "Come on, Nick! Come back to us now."

I can't, he thought desperately, his eyes burning as he squinted into the depths of the dark ocean. *I can't leave her.*

But he couldn't stay. He couldn't leave the rest of his family behind. In anguish, he kicked for the surface, following the sound of Lauren's voice as she continued to call his name. His chest felt like it was on fire, his lungs burning with pain as his heart beat chaotically. Darkness began to close in from the corners of his eyes as he fought to stay conscious, but from somewhere above, he saw a faint circle of light. As he swam toward it, further and further away from Arya, the pain and pressure in his chest became almost unbearable. It felt like his heart was breaking into pieces - and in a way, it was. He'd left a little piece of himself to sink to the bottom of the ocean.

Just when he thought he couldn't go another second without breathing, Nick felt his head break through the surface. As the fresh sea breeze blew across his face, he gasped for air, filling his lungs with frantic breaths. He floated on his back for a few seconds, his body bobbing up and down with the rhythm of the waves, before he finally opened his eyes.

When he did, his dream faded away, and he found himself in his hospital bed. He was lying flat on his back with an oxygen mask over his face, forcing air into his open mouth. Dani was leaning over him, pressing down hard on his chest. It hurt so much, he moaned in pain and reached up to push her hands away.

“He’s moving,” Nick heard Rob say said from somewhere behind his head, but Dani kept going as if she hadn’t. “Babe - hold compressions.” He felt Rob’s fingers probing the side of his neck. “He has a pulse. We got him back.”

The pressure in his chest was finally relieved when Dani took her hands away, but not the pain. “It happened again, huh?” he mumbled faintly, his breath fogging up the mask. Rob removed it and replaced it with the nasal cannula Nick had grown accustomed to, as Dani stepped back without answering.

Dr. Elizabeth appeared, taking Dani’s place alongside Nick’s bed, her stethoscope already in her ears. “Don’t try to talk right now,” she said softly, as she rubbed the round metal piece between her palms. “Just relax and breathe.” She let it rest lightly on his chest as she listened to his heart and lungs.

Nick waited impatiently for her to finish. He was tired of being poked and prodded, tired of being told to “relax and breathe.” The pain made it difficult to take a deep breath, and he didn’t know if the fluttery feeling in his chest was just from anxiety or another arrhythmia. How could he relax when he was worried about his heart freaking out again and dreading another shock from the defibrillator?

When Dr. Elizabeth was done listening, she draped the stethoscope over her shoulders and sat down on the edge of the bed. “Let’s sit you up a little bit so you can breathe easier,” she said and slowly raised the head so Nick was no longer lying flat. “Is that better?”

He shrugged, not sure it made any difference. It was still hard to breathe because his chest hurt so much, but that was not his biggest concern at the moment. “I almost died again, didn’t I?” he asked bluntly, expecting an equally straight answer out of Elizabeth.

Looking him in the eye, the doctor nodded. “You had us pretty worried there for a few minutes,” she admitted, “but let’s focus on the positive here. In the past twenty-four hours, you’ve survived a hurricane *and* an electrical storm. That’s what we call three or more separate episodes leading to an ICD shock within the same day.”

To Nick, it sounded far more negative than positive. He swallowed hard, feeling nauseous as his heart sank into his stomach. “Why does this keep happening?” he wondered, overwhelmed with a sense of hopelessness. His heart condition loomed over his head like a dark cloud, threatening to unleash another storm of chaos any second. “I wasn’t even doing anything this time! I was just taking a nap!” It was terrifying to

realize he had essentially just died in his sleep. Without Dani and the two doctors, he would have simply slipped away and never woken up.

“As the heart muscle weakens, it’s more prone to arrhythmias,” Dr. Elizabeth replied. “I think that’s probably what is happening in your case, but I do want to check your device to make sure it’s working correctly and delivering the appropriate therapy.”

“Does that mean more surgery?” Nick asked warily.

Elizabeth smiled and shook her head. “Not at all. It’s all done externally and only takes a few minutes. In fact, we can do it right now.”

He waited while she wheeled in a cart with a computer on top and unwound the cord of what looked like a large computer mouse. “We just have to put this wand over your ICD,” Dr. Elizabeth explained, as she draped the cord around Nick’s neck so the wand couldn’t slide off. She set it lightly on top of the bandage that covered the small incision on the left side of his chest, then stepped back. “It will communicate with the device and deliver information about your heart back to the computer so we can see exactly what’s been happening.”

He held still while Dr. Elizabeth watched the computer display, occasionally tapping on different parts of the screen with a stylus. After awhile, a strip of paper started printing out of the side. She pulled a pair of reading glasses out of the front pocket of her white coat and perched them on the bridge of her nose as she studied the printout. “So what’s the verdict?” Nick asked nervously, trying to read the expression on her face. She was frowning, but he wasn’t sure if it was just because she was concentrating or if she had truly seen something concerning.

“Well... it looks like your ICD is doing what it’s supposed to. This report shows you’ve had several episodes of sustained ventricular tachycardia, an abnormally rapid heart rate that begins in the lower chambers. In every case, the device has recognized it and attempted to correct it with cardioversion, sending a small electrical impulse across your heart to reset its rhythm. It worked once, but the other two times, you went into ventricular fibrillation and had to be defibrillated. During both of those episodes, it took more than one shock to reestablish a normal sinus rhythm, which means you may have a higher defibrillation threshold than we initially thought.” She put down the piece of paper and picked up her stylus again. “I’m going to adjust the settings so your device is programmed to deliver a slightly higher-powered shock from the start.”

Nick winced, hating what she was suggesting. “Won’t that make it hurt even more?”

“Maybe, but if it works, it means you won’t have to be shocked multiple times,” she replied without meeting his eyes, her stylus poised over the computer monitor.

He sighed, as a sense of desperation descended upon him again. “What if I don’t want to be shocked at all?”

Dr. Elizabeth looked up in surprise, blinking at him from behind her glasses. “No one *wants* to be shocked, Nick, but it’s the only way to treat a life-threatening arrhythmia. If you were to arrest again, you would die without a defibrillator.”

“Then maybe you should just let me die,” Nick muttered, tears prickling in the corners of his eyes. The more he reflected on what had just happened to him, the more he realized that dying in his sleep, without any awareness of it, wasn’t a bad way to go. It wouldn’t hurt nearly as much as being shocked or having his rib cage repeatedly crushed in the effort to resuscitate him. He wasn’t ready to die, but if it had to happen, he hoped to pass away more peacefully than the woman with the bird tattoo who had died in Brian’s bed.

Dani came around to the other side of Nick’s bed, looking at him in concern. “You don’t mean that,” she said softly.

“Maybe I do. I’m sick and tired of this!” he snapped, the tears spilling out. “This is torture!”

Dani picked up his hand and held it tightly in hers. “I know it may feel that way now,” she said, stroking his knuckles with her thumb, “but Nick, it’s going to get better. Once you get your new heart-”

He shook his head, not wanting to hear her talk about the heart transplant again. “Isn’t there something I can sign?” he interrupted her. “A ‘Do Not Resuscitate’ order? That’s what it’s called, right?”

“Well, yes, but we usually only discuss DNRs with patients who are reaching the end of their lives or have little chance of recovering,” Dr. Elizabeth explained. “Like Dani was saying, a transplant will give you a new lease on life.”

Dani nodded emphatically. “Once you get your new heart, this will all be nothing but a memory... like when you wake up from a bad dream,” she added, flashing him a hopeful smile. “You just have to be patient and wait for it to happen.”

Nick stared at her, tears streaming down his face. “Do you know what I was dreaming about before you woke me up? I was dreaming about my family. Lauren... Odin... and Arya. Our daughter. She was alive in my dream.” He wiped the tears away. “We were all out on the ocean. She fell into the water, and I went in after her.” His breath caught in his throat as he saw his baby sinking below the surface. “I stayed underwater for as long as I could, but I couldn’t find her.”

He remembered his frantic search, the desperate feeling of not being able to breathe, and the heartbreaking decision he’d been forced to make. Had it all been a dream, or was it something more? In choosing between the rest of his family and Arya, had he really been deciding whether to live or die?

Nick swallowed hard, his breath rattling in and out of his lungs. “I had to leave her there to come back here... but I shouldn’t have. She’s all alone down there. She needs her daddy.”

Dani seemed to understand what he was suggesting. “What about Odin?” she asked. “Doesn’t he need his daddy, too?”

Guilt stabbed at Nick’s heart, making his chest ache even more. “He’s got his mom. Arya needs me more.”

“You don’t think her grandpa and aunt are taking good care of her?”

Nick’s eyes welled with fresh tears. He’d had such a complicated relationship with his family, but still, it was comforting to imagine Arya being with his father and sister in the afterlife, if there was such a place. Leslie would know exactly how it felt to be without her baby, and Nick could picture her cradling Arya in her arms and loving her just like Alyssa, the little girl she’d left behind. The image made him feel a bit better. “Yeah,” he whispered with a nod. “Of course they are.”

“Then don’t worry,” said Dani, squeezing his hand. “It was just a dream anyway. You’re awake now. You’re alive. You need to concentrate on getting better so you can go home and be there for your wife and son.”

Nick nodded, but he still wasn’t convinced what he’d experienced had been a dream at all. He had been dreaming about Arya ever since her death, but something about this was different. Having come so close to dying himself, had he finally had the kind of near-death experience he’d heard others describe in the documentaries he had watched? In a way, it would almost be worth it to allow himself to be resuscitated if his heart stopped again, if only so that he could come back with a better understanding of the in-

between in which he had seen her - and, of course, live to see Lauren and Odin again, too. Yet his family felt so far away, and with his condition seeming to worsen each day, Nick wasn't sure whether he would survive long enough to see them ever again.

Chapter 20

In spite of his dark thoughts the previous day, Nick was relieved when he woke up the next morning. His hospital room, with its bare white walls and harsh lighting, was not exactly a welcomed sight, but at least it meant he wasn't dead. He sucked in a deep breath of oxygen through the cannula in his nose and held it in his lungs for a few seconds before he slowly released it, listening to the steady beep of his bedside monitor in the background. He was still breathing. His heart was still beating. He was still alive.

Looking across at the other side of the room, he saw that the curtain separating his bed from Brian's had been closed, and his heart skipped a beat. "Brian?" he called, his voice rising to a higher pitch than he had intended.

"Nick?" Dani's head suddenly poked out from behind the curtain. "Sorry, I didn't know you were awake," she said. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, but is Brian alright?" he replied, feeling his heart beat faster.

Dani smiled. "Relax. He's fine. You were sleeping so deeply, I decided to do his bath first today. I'll be finished in a few, and then it'll be your turn."

Nick sighed with relief. "No hurry. I was just worried something had happened to him while I was asleep."

"Nah, it's all good. Go back to sleep if you want."

But Nick couldn't fall back to sleep now that he was wide awake. He felt better than he had the day before and wished he could get out of bed and walk around for a bit. He would have loved to stretch his legs, go outside, get some fresh air and some much-needed exercise. But he didn't dare do anything that might bring about another electrical storm inside his chest, so instead, he stayed flat on his back in bed, listening to the beep of his heart monitor and the faint slosh of water as Dani went back to bathing Brian.

When she was finished, she came around to Nick's side and helped him get washed up as well. After she had given him a clean hospital gown to change into, she finally pulled back the privacy curtain so he could see across the room.

"Morning, Brian!" Nick called with forced cheerfulness, watching Brian's face hopefully as he waited for some sign that his friend had heard him. But Brian's eyes remained shut, his expression blank, his body still but for the mechanical rise and fall of his chest. Disappointed, Nick turned back to Dani. "How's he doing today?"

"He's stable," she assured him.

Nick nodded, knowing this meant Brian was no better than he had been the night before - but at least he wasn't any worse. "How about you?" he asked. "How are *you* doing?"

She smiled. "I'm here," she said with a shrug, holding her arms out at her sides. "I'm alive. I'm healthy. I guess that means I'm doing pretty darn well, all things considered."

"Compared to the two of us, you mean," Nick added with a smirk, jerking his head towards Brian's bed.

Dani's brown eyes widened. "No, I didn't mean it that way!" she exclaimed, laughing. "Well, maybe I did a little, but mostly I was thinking about the hurricane. We're all lucky to be alive, aren't we? I can't complain."

"Well, I can. This sucks," said Nick in a deadpan tone.

Dani cracked another smile. "You know what? You're right. This really sucks," she replied, sitting down on the edge of his bed. "But hey, look on the bright side: at least you're stranded with a beautiful blonde." She struck a pose, folding her hands beneath her chin as she beamed at him.

"Yeah..." Nick let out a wistful sigh as he looked past her to the bed where Brian lay. "He looks just like Sleeping Beauty."

Dani burst out laughing. "He does, doesn't he? If only true love's kiss would wake him up..."

"Hey, I'd full-on make out with him if I thought it would help," said Nick with a shrug, not even kidding.

She smirked. "I'd love to see that."

He wiggled his eyebrows. "I bet you would. You're a naughty nurse, aren't you?"

"You have no idea." She winked. "I'll be right back."

Nick's heartbeat accelerated again as he watched her walk out of the room, admiring the view from behind. *Stop flirting with her*, he scolded himself while he waited for her to return. *What would your wife think? And what about her husband?*

Dani's husband happened to be with her when she came back into the room, carrying a covered tray. "Good morning, Nick," Rob greeted him with a wave before he went over to Brian's side of the room to begin his rounds.

"Breakfast is served," Dani said as she set the tray down on Nick's bedside table. Nick took off the cover to find a bowl of oatmeal and a banana. He couldn't help but smile and think of his son as he cut up the banana with his spoon and arranged the slices on top of the oatmeal. Oatmeal with fruit was one of Odin's favorite breakfast foods. Nick wished he was hungrier, but he only took a few bites before he felt full.

While he was picking at his breakfast, Rob had begun to examine Brian. Nick watched the doctor poke and prod different parts of Brian's body, trying to trigger some type of reaction, but just as before, Brian remained totally unresponsive.

"He's not getting any better, is he?"

Rob glanced back at Nick, his stethoscope halfway to his ears. He hesitated, then shook his head. "Not that I can tell. His vitals are stable, but he's still not responding to commands or painful stimuli."

Nick's heart sank with disappointment. "When do you think he'll start doing that?"

"Honestly, I hoped he would have started to show some signs of improvement by now," said Rob with a grimace. "Comas can last indefinitely, but the longer he stays like this, the lower his chances of making a meaningful recovery. If his Glasgow score doesn't start going up soon, we may have some hard decisions to make." Rob gave Nick a significant look, and Nick realized he was talking about taking Brian off life support. His breath caught in his throat as his chest tightened painfully.

"I'm not pulling the plug on my best friend," he said, shaking his head. "You don't know Brian like I do. He's a fighter. He'll pull through. He always does."

Rob nodded. “I really hope you’re right, man.” He slipped his stethoscope into his ears as he turned his attention back to Brian, bending over to listen to his chest. “One thing we need to be thinking about is the best way to support his breathing,” he said when he was finished, slinging the stethoscope around his neck. “Brian’s been intubated for four days now and hasn’t given us any indication that he can breathe on his own, so it doesn’t look like we’ll be able to start weaning him off the ventilator any time soon. But the longer we leave the breathing tube in, the higher the risk of complications: he could develop a serious infection or sustain damage to his vocal cords.”

Nick’s eyes widened, his heart lodging in his throat. “Please, do whatever you need to do to protect his vocal cords,” he pleaded. “He’s had to overcome a lot to get his voice back.” He thought about how devastated Brian would be if he woke up from his coma without a voice. After how hard he had worked just to be able to sing again despite his dysphonia, another setback would destroy him.

Rob nodded. “I know. We’ve been using a smaller endotracheal tube than we typically use in adult men to try to minimize the possible damage, knowing he’s a professional singer. But it’s looking more and more like Brian’s going to need prolonged mechanical ventilation, and in that case, his best option is a tracheostomy.”

Rob paused while Nick struggled to process what he was saying. It took a few seconds for him to make sense of it, but suddenly, a picture of the actor Christopher Reeve popped into his head, and he understood. “Isn’t that when you cut a hole in his throat?” he asked, hoping he was wrong. He didn’t want to imagine Brian that way, strapped into a wheelchair with a tube hanging out of his neck.

Rob nodded again, confirming Nick’s suspicion. “We create a small opening in his trachea, called a stoma, and insert a tracheostomy tube that we can connect to the ventilator.” Seeing the look on Nick’s face, he smiled and added, “It sounds extreme, but it’s actually a pretty simple surgical procedure.”

Nick wasn’t normally squeamish, but the mere description made him cringe. “Won’t that cause even more damage to his vocal cords?” he wanted to know.

“No, because the tube will be placed below his voice box,” Rob explained, touching the base of his own throat. “That’s one of the benefits of a trach over the type of breathing tube he has now. If he turns out to need it long-term, he can learn to talk, even sing with it in.”

That's if he wakes up, thought Nick, swallowing hard. He immediately felt ashamed of himself, knowing he shouldn't think that way. Brian needed prayers and positive vibes, not negativity. He had to hope for the best. "Would you take the tube out once Brian's able to breathe on his own again?" he asked.

"Of course," said Rob. "It doesn't take long at all to heal. The hole usually closes by itself within a couple of weeks, and he would be left with nothing but a small battle scar on his neck."

That made Nick feel slightly better, but he was still unsure. *What would Brian want?* he wondered, absently rubbing his adam's apple. *When* Brian woke up, he would want to be able to speak... and sing... and do his silly impressions. Even if he was never able to walk or dance again, as long as he could still use his voice to express himself and to entertain others, he would be okay. Nick felt confident about that much. Clearing his throat, he said, "If this is the best way to save his voice, then do it."

Rob gave a short nod. "For what it's worth, I think you're making the right decision," he replied, flashing Nick a reassuring smile. "I'm gonna go get prepped for the procedure."

Once he had left, Nick looked at Dani. "Do *you* think it's the right decision?" he asked her.

She nodded. "I do. Rob's right: a tracheostomy may not be pretty, but it really is the best way to help Brian breathe without risking the complications associated with a prolonged intubation."

Nick sighed. "I just wish he would wake up. I hate seeing him like this."

"I know," Dani sympathized. "But until he does, we'll give him what he needs to get better." She patted his shoulder. "I'll be right back."

A lump rose in Nick's throat as he watched her leave again. She and Rob both sounded so sure of themselves, a far cry from what he was feeling at that moment. He hoped they were right. Brian was counting on him, and Nick didn't want to let him down.

"Please forgive me, Frick," he whispered, swallowing hard as he looked over at Brian. "When you wake up with a fucking tube sticking out your neck, know that I had your best interests at heart, okay? I just want you to get better. I *need* you to get better. Please..." He trailed off, feeling stupid for talking so long to someone who most likely wasn't listening. He didn't know if Brian could even hear him, let alone comprehend his words.

Unbeknownst to Nick, however, Brian had heard everything.



PART III: IN THE DARK

Chapter 21

Brian didn't know how long he had been unconscious after the car accident, but since he had survived a hurricane that seemed to have come out of nowhere, he assumed it had been at least a few days. It was hard to keep track of time in the ICU; he had so far been unable to open his eyes by himself and had caught only brief glimpses of his surroundings when they were pried open by the people taking care of him, who would shine a bright light into them for several seconds before lowering his eyelids again. While these exams seemed to occur regularly, Brian couldn't say for sure how often they happened without the help of a clock. Instead, his sense of time stemmed from the embarrassment he experienced each morning during his daily bed bath.

On the day he'd regained consciousness, he had woken up right in the middle of this humiliating ritual. He was horrified to find himself lying flat on his back in a hospital bed, fully unclothed, his naked body being wiped down with a wet washcloth that was not nearly warm enough by hands that were not his own. Even worse - far worse - was the disturbing discovery that he had no control over his own hands, nor any other part of his body. When he tried to push the stranger's hands off of him, nothing happened. His attempts to roll away, sit up, lift his head, or even open his eyes were equally unsuccessful.

That was when Brian had realized he was not just a patient, but a prisoner, being held captive inside his own body. He couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't even breathe by himself. That had become abundantly clear during the power outage, when the ventilator had failed and he'd faced the prospect of suffocating. Without fully realizing

what was happening, he had felt the last of the air leak out of his lungs, and when he tried to take another breath on his own, nothing happened. He found he was unable to move any of the muscles beneath his rib cage that controlled his breathing; his diaphragm had been immobilized right along with the rest of his body. Therefore, his lungs simply would not reinflate; they remained hopelessly empty, his chest refusing to rise. In his mind, the ventilator hose had become a boa constrictor, slowly squeezing the life out of him as it coiled around his chest. The only thing worse than the crushing pressure was the panic. It was truly terrifying to feel the last few minutes of his earthly existence slipping away and be utterly powerless to save himself.

Instead, it had taken an entire team of nurses and doctors to save him. Dani. Elizabeth. Patrick. Rob. Brian had made it a point to listen for and learn their names as they'd worked together to keep him alive through the long night, taking turns pumping air into his lungs with their own hands. For hours, he had been at their mercy, completely dependent on them to deliver each breath of oxygen his body needed. How long could they keep going, he'd wondered, before they got too tired to continue and decided to give up on him? Desperately, he had prayed for his Holy Father to give them the strength they needed to persevere until the power was restored, and by the grace of God, his silent prayers had been answered. He was still alive when the generators started working again. Only then had he been able to relax enough to let his racing mind rest.

Two more days had passed since then, and they'd both started the same way: with a lukewarm bed bath, followed by a full-body examination that was even worse than the daily wipedown. Every morning, as Dr. Rob made his rounds, he stopped by Brian's bed and asked him a series of questions, poking and prodding different parts of Brian's body as he assessed his ability to respond. Each time, Brian found himself humiliated and frustrated by his own failure.

"Can you open your eyes for me, Brian?" Rob would ask, and Brian would think, *Well, sure I can.* But whenever he tried to lift his eyelids, they stubbornly refused to rise, as if his lashes were laced tightly together. They weren't really, of course; Rob was able to force Brian's eyes open easily enough with one finger. "Follow my light," he would say, shining his pen light into each eye, but Brian found it difficult to focus on the bright beam as it moved from side to side, out of his line of sight. Before his eyes could adjust, the doctor would pull his lids down again like a pair of blackout drapes, plunging him back into darkness.

By his count, Brian had been living this way for at four days, but it felt much longer. Being imprisoned inside his paralyzed body made the time pass impossibly slowly, for there was nothing to do except sleep, pray, and eavesdrop on other people's conversations. He had never felt more isolated.

His only comfort was knowing Nick was nearby. Even if he couldn't communicate with him, it helped to hear Nick's voice. At least it let him know he wasn't really alone. He wished there was a way he could return the favor and reassure Nick that he wasn't alone, either.

From what Brian had been able to piece together, he knew that Nick's heart condition had worsened and that he was in need of a transplant. How he had gotten so sick so suddenly, Brian was not sure, but he still suspected that Nick, in the midst of his grief and depression, must have gone back to abusing alcohol or drugs. What else could have caused such a dramatic decline in his health in the two months since the tour had wrapped?

Of course, Nick could have been hiding some of his symptoms on the road, but there was no way he would have been able to perform five shows a week with his heart in as bad of shape as it seemed to be in now. Brian remembered how hard it had been to keep up with their rigorous dance routines before his own heart surgery, when the congenital hole in his heart had made it work twice as hard to pump enough oxygenated blood to the rest of his body to meet the demands he was putting on it. He'd felt tired all the time, and though he should have been in the best shape of his life, he had often found himself so short of breath, he could barely sing. Brian was sure he would have noticed if Nick had been struggling the same way.

There was no denying how dire Nick's condition was now. Brian had heard his heart monitor blasting its high-pitched alarm, bringing the doctors and nurses rushing into the room to resuscitate him. He'd lain there, listening helplessly as they assembled around Nick's bed, barking out orders and frightening phrases like "No pulse." At that point, all Brian had been able to do was pray and hope his Holy Father would listen to the frantic thoughts in his head. So far, his prayers had been answered, and Nick was still alive. But for how much longer?

His life is in God's hands now, Brian told himself. Whatever happens is the Lord's will, and I have to accept that. But he couldn't help taking the words he'd heard Nick whisper to him and trying to project them back to his friend. *Hang in there, Frack.* He wished Nick could hear his thoughts the way his Holy Father could. But unless he discovered some hidden telepathic powers, Brian had no way of communicating with Nick or anyone else. He could only lie there and listen to their conversations, growing more and more frustrated when he continued to fail every test they performed on him.

"Can you open your eyes for me, Brian?" Dr. Rob asked on his fourth day of consciousness, pushing painfully on his forehead. Brian fought to follow the command,

but his eyelids wouldn't even flutter. He felt Rob's fingers pinch and poke him, trying to cause enough pain to trigger a reaction, but although Brian's nerves were firing, sending frantic signals to and from his brain, he still couldn't move a muscle. It was as if there was a complete disconnect between his brain and the rest of his body. Nothing was working the way it was supposed to.

"He's not getting any better, is he?" he heard Nick ask, as Rob rubbed his knuckles roughly over the center of Brian's chest, right where his sternum had once been sawed apart and wired back together during his open heart surgery. It hurt, and he wanted to wince and wriggle away. But try as he might, his body remained motionless.

"Not that I can tell," Rob replied. "His vitals are stable, but he's still not responding to commands or painful stimuli."

Brian hated when they talked about him like he couldn't hear them. *I'm right here!* he cried inside his own head. *Can't you tell how hard I'm trying to respond?* He could hear the soft beeping of the monitor he was hooked up to accelerate as his heart hammered against his rib cage and felt annoyed that neither of them seemed to notice.

"When do you think he'll start doing that?" Nick wanted to know. Wondering the same thing himself, Brian waited anxiously for the doctor's answer. He wasn't prepared for what he heard next.

"Honestly, I hoped he would have started to show some signs of improvement by now. Comas can last indefinitely, but the longer he stays like this, the lower his chances of making a meaningful recovery. If his Glasgow score doesn't start going up soon, we may have some hard decisions to make.

No, thought Brian desperately. *Please don't give up on me. I'm not brain dead!* He didn't understand how his doctor could think he was comatose when he was aware of everything happening around him. Even though he was incapable of opening his eyes, he was still conscious. Why couldn't anyone tell?

"I'm not pulling the plug on my best friend!" Nick replied fiercely. "You don't know Brian like I do. He's a fighter. He'll pull through. He always does."

Brian felt a surge of gratitude toward Nick. At least his brother believed in him. *Thanks, Frack.*

"I really hope you're right, man," said Rob.

Brian hoped so, too. He hated being helpless, trapped inside a body that seemed to be broken. What if, this time, it couldn't be fixed? He didn't know which would be worse: dying without ever speaking to his family again, or living this way forever.

Listening to Rob and Nick discuss his need for a tracheostomy overwhelmed him with fear and frustration. The body on the bed didn't even feel like his own. Surely, it had to belong to someone else, some other poor soul who needed help breathing through a hole in his neck. They couldn't be talking about Brian, for Brian had always been strong. Nevertheless, Nick consented to the procedure on his behalf, and before he knew it, Brian was being prepped for surgery.

Not right now?! he thought with dismay. Panic set in as he heard people assembling surgical instruments at the side of his bed. If his breath could have caught in his throat, it would have. *Please don't cut me open,* he begged silently, wanting to cringe at the sound of sharp blades scraping against stainless steel.

He focused his concentration on the incompetent lungs inside his broken body, trying to gain control over his breathing. *Come on... just take a breath,* he encouraged them in between the forced bursts of oxygen from the ventilator. He tried to hold onto these breaths before exhaling, but found he could not. Despite his best efforts to exercise his free will, his lungs deflated and remained flaccid and empty until the ventilator filled them with air again.

Forced to accept the fact that he still had absolutely no ability to breathe on his own, Brian surrendered to his fate. He hated feeling so helpless, but the sad reality was that without the ventilator, he would suffocate and die in a matter of minutes. Whether he wanted one or not, he was going to get a tracheostomy. He just prayed it wouldn't be as unpleasant as it sounded.

But it was worse. So much worse.

Am I supposed to be awake? Brian wondered, as they strapped his head to the bed to hold it still while they removed his neck brace. Then they lay something lightweight and soft over his face, blocking out the bright, fluorescent light that filtered through his closed eyelids. He wanted to wince when he felt one of them swab something cold and wet over his skin from his chin to his chest, but of course, he couldn't move. He lay motionless as a pair of gloved hands poked and prodded his exposed neck, dragging a dull object across his skin. He could tell by the smell that it was a permanent marker; the doctor was drawing on him, perhaps plotting the line he would soon be cutting along. The fact that Brian was still fully aware of what was going on, able to feel everything yet completely unable to communicate his thoughts and feelings, was

beginning to worry him. *Shouldn't the anesthesia be kicking in by now?* he asked himself, his heart beating faster.

“Scalpel, please,” said Rob.

Brian's blood pressure skyrocketed. *No, wait!* he wanted to scream. *I'm awake! I'M AWAKE!!!* In the background, he heard an alarm go off on his bedside monitor as his vital signs went haywire, which should have alerted them to the fact that something was wrong. Instead, the alarm was silenced without acknowledgment.

“Do you want the ten blade or the fifteen?” Dani asked as casually as if she were offering the choice between coffee or tea.

“The ten blade's fine.”

Please, no... NO... NOOO!!! Pain suddenly began to radiate up and down Brian's neck as he felt something sharp slice through his skin. But still, he couldn't scream, nor wince, nor twist away. Try as he might, he wasn't able to do anything to raise the alarm or resist.

“Retractors,” said Rob. Then the pulling began. Brian tried to block out the pain, but found it impossible. He pictured a cavernous hole in his neck, expanding as rapidly as a rip in a pair of blue jeans when Rob's fingers poked through it. Frantic distress signals fired through Brian's nervous system as the doctor deepened the incision and widened the opening.

Why can't they tell I'm conscious, that I can feel everything?! Brian wondered, his heart jackhammering against his ribs. Couldn't Rob or Dani feel his pulse pounding just a few inches from where their fingers were probing? Hadn't they noticed the beads of perspiration erupting from his pores, the tears leaking out from under his eyelids? No, of course not - his face was covered, most of his body hidden behind surgical drapes. Their attention was focused fully on the exposed flesh at the front of his neck.

“Ready for the Bovie,” Rob ordered next. Brian braced himself, but there was no way to prepare for the white-hot pain that seared the inside of his throat or the pungent smell of burning flesh that filled his nostrils. They were cauterizing the blood vessels and tissues inside his neck, he realized, rocked by a sudden wave of nausea. Thankfully, there was nothing in his stomach to throw up; he hadn't eaten solid food in days. That didn't stop him from feeling queasy, though.

Please, just let me pass out, he implored his Holy Father. He had been so eager to escape his dark prison, but now he welcomed the darkness. He wanted nothing more than to drift back to sleep and not wake up until this nightmare was over. But God did not grant his wish. Brian remained fully conscious for the rest of the procedure, able to hear and feel everything that was happening to him, yet unable to respond. He felt the rush of cool air deep inside his throat as they cut open his trachea, the pain of a needle piercing his flesh as they stitched the torn flaps to his skin, and the sensation of suffocating as they pulled out his breathing tube.

For a few seconds, as his lungs deflated and didn't refill, Brian thought he was about to die. At first, he was frightened, but the fear quickly faded away, replaced by a sense of peace in the promise that his pain would soon be gone for good. He prayed that death would take him quickly, hoping to find himself in Heaven with all the loved ones he had lost. *From darkness to light*, he thought. Tears poured from his eyes as he fought against the unrelenting waves of pain and panic, trying to summon strength from the final words of his Savior: *Father, into Your hands, I commend my spirit*.

Then he felt the trach tube being forced into the freshly-cut hole in his throat. They connected the ventilator to it, and before Brian could be spirited away, oxygen began flowing into his lungs once more. In spite of his agony, he felt a sense of relief.

"How's his end tidal CO₂?" he heard Rob ask Dani.

"Right in the normal range," she replied.

Next Brian felt a shock of cold as a stethoscope was applied to one side of his chest, then the other. "Bilateral breath sounds," Rob said. "The tube's in place. Time to suture. Get me a 2-0 silk..."

It's almost over, Brian told himself, bracing himself for more pain as the trach tube was stitched to his skin. Tears trickled down the sides of his face, ending up in his ears. He was powerless to wipe them away.

Gradually, the sharp pain subsided as they finished the procedure. It was replaced by a dull ache that radiated from the opening in his neck. Brian wished he could ask for a painkiller - not that it would make much difference. Whatever they had given him before clearly hadn't worked.

He tried to relax and take his mind off his discomfort, but it was impossible to forget the traumatic experience he had just endured. He kept reliving it in his head until he could no longer tell whether his pain was real or remembered. His nerves were shot, his mind

exhausted, but he could not seem to rest. The longer he lay awake, the more he wished to return to the state of oblivion he'd been in before he had woken up. He had been better off not knowing what was happening to him.

Chapter 22

The days dragged by. Inside the hurricane-ravaged hospital, nothing really changed. Nick's health had seemed to stabilize for the time being - he was no better, but no worse either. In the next bed over, Brian's condition had also stayed the same since his tracheostomy.

It unnerved Nick to see the breathing tube sticking out of Brian's neck, but he didn't appear to be in any pain. His face, no longer obscured by the ventilator hose, wore a perpetually blank but peaceful expression. The swelling had gone down, and his bruises were nearly healed. If Nick ignored the tubes, it looked like he was just sleeping. According to both doctors, Brian was still in a deep coma, but his vital signs remained steady.

"He has a nice, strong heartbeat," Dr. Elizabeth remarked whenever she examined Brian, listening to his chest with her stethoscope. Nick was always encouraged by this, until the time he heard her add under her breath, "I just hope he has some brain activity, too."

If he only had a brain... Out of nowhere, Nick was reminded of *The Wizard of Oz* again. Brian was like the Scarecrow, and he was the Tin Man, hoping for a heart. If only there really was a wonderful wizard or a good witch who could wake up Brian's brain, repair Nick's heart, and send them both home again.

Instead, there were two dedicated doctors and a pair of hard-working nurses who were doing the best they could just to keep them both alive until they were able to be transferred to a different facility. Dr. Elizabeth, Dr. Rob, Dani, and Patrick continued to work around the clock to take care of Nick and Brian. Rob had arranged for more fuel to be delivered to keep the generators running, so at least they had power and, according to Dani, plenty of food and water. That was a good thing because, until the floodwaters receded, they weren't going anywhere.

The only thing that kept Nick from going completely stir-crazy was having Dani around to keep him company. He looked forward to the day shifts, when she would sit by his

bed, play cards, and talk to him for hours at a time. They had more in common than he had realized. Besides being a horror movie buff, she was also a lifelong Tampa Bay Buccaneers fan like he was, and they commiserated together about not being able to watch games or even check scores while the wi-fi and cell towers were down. He told her stories about performing the halftime show at Bucs games before he was a Backstreet Boy, and she talked about trying out to be a Buccaneers cheerleader while she studying to become a nurse. “I cheered all through high school and college, but they said I was just too short to make the cut at that level,” she confessed, shrugging.

“I’m glad you became a nurse instead - but if you ever wanna show me some of your moves, I sure wouldn’t mind,” Nick said with a wink.

“Now, now... Dr. Elizabeth said to avoid doing anything that will raise your heart rate too high,” Dani replied, wagging her finger at him.

He smirked at her. “You telling me you know how to make my heart race?”

She raised her eyebrows, smirking back. “You bet I do. But let’s save that for after your transplant, okay? I’ll have a full routine planned for you by then - I promise.”

He laughed. “Be careful what you go around promising. I’m gonna hold you to that, you know.”

Grinning, she nodded. “You better.”

Nick had gotten over the guilt he’d felt about flirting with her. Despite what had happened on Halloween night, he told himself it was harmless fun. Dani was devoted to her husband, and while Nick’s heart may have been weak, the love it held for Lauren was still as strong as ever. His talks with Dani were just a way to pass the time and distract him from missing his family and worrying about his failing health.

But one day, Dani didn’t seem like her usual, bubbly self. She greeted Nick with a simple “Good morning” when she came in and went about her business without another word, barely speaking between checking his vitals and changing his bedsheets. At first, Nick wondered what he might have done to make her mad, but the more he watched her work in silence, the more he realized she wasn’t angry, just upset. Something was obviously bothering her; her eyes were bloodshot, like she’d been crying or had barely slept.

“What’s on your mind this morning?” he asked when he finished with his breakfast and she was done bathing Brian.

Dani hesitated for a few seconds before she turned towards him. “I need to tell you something,” she said finally, biting down on her bottom lip.

“What is it?” Nick wondered, his heart skipping a beat. He assumed it had something to do with Brian’s health or his own. He was totally unprepared for what she was about to tell him.

Dani took a deep breath and let it out slowly. After a long pause, she said, “I’m pregnant.”

Nick raised his eyebrows, not sure how to react. Normally this was happy news for a woman her age, yet Dani didn’t seem happy. “Wow,” he said, deciding to hold off on the congratulations until he knew how she felt about it. He remembered her saying she and Rob wanted to start a family someday, but that was before the hurricane had destroyed their home. She had to be overwhelmed by the thought of bringing a baby into the world when it had just been turned upside down. “Did you just find out?”

She nodded, perching on the edge of his bed. “I was supposed to start my period a few days ago. It’s never been this late before,” she explained, looking down at her lap. “I thought maybe the stress of the hurricane had messed with my cycle, but I took a test anyway - and it was positive.”

He reached for her hand, returning one of the many reassuring squeezes she had given him over the past two weeks. “Hey, I know it probably doesn’t seem like the best time to have a baby, given everything that’s happened, but look on the bright side - you’re having a *baby*! You and Rob are gonna be great parents!” He grinned, remembering how happy he’d felt when he had first found out he was going to be a father - and also how freaked out he’d been. “You’ve got nine months to get ready, and trust me, those nine months feel like *forever*. By the time that little nugget gets here, you’ll have a new home, and the hurricane will just be a bad memory.”

He had hoped his words of encouragement would help ease her mind and make her feel better about everything, but Dani didn’t smile back. Instead, when she finally looked up at him, he was dismayed to find that her eyes had filled with tears. “You don’t understand,” she said, shaking her head as she took her hand out of his. “The baby isn’t Rob’s.”

Nick blinked. He didn’t understand at first. When it finally dawned on him what she was really trying to tell him, his mouth dropped open in disbelief. “You don’t mean... it’s mine?”

Dani gave a nod before dropping her gaze again.

Feeling his heartbeat accelerate, he swallowed hard. “So we didn’t use any sort of protection?” That didn’t sound like him at all. He’d done plenty of dumb stuff back in the day, but he had always been careful when it came to sex, always taken the necessary precautions to make sure he didn’t accidentally get some groupie pregnant.

She shook her head. “We were drunk... and stupid.”

He frowned, still full of skepticism. “But how do you know it’s not his?” he persisted. “You telling me you two haven’t-?”

“It can’t be Rob’s because he’s sterile!” Dani blurted, her brown eyes flashing back at Nick’s as the tears overflowed. She wiped them away with her fingertips as she went on to explain, “He had cancer as a child, and the chemo made him infertile. We didn’t know for sure until we went to a fertility specialist, after we’d been trying for awhile and couldn’t seem to conceive. We were told we’d never be able to have children the natural way. So when he finds out I’m knocked up, he’ll know it’s not his.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Nick, nervously licking his lips. “I hate to have to ask, but are you *sure* it’s mine?”

She glared at him. “How many guys do you think I would cheat on my husband with?! You think I go around having one-night stands every night?? I’m not a slut! I made a mistake. *We* made a mistake.”

Wincing, Nick nodded, finally accepting what she’d told him as the truth. “I know. I’m sorry. And I don’t think you’re a slut.”

“I’m sorry, too.” Dani sighed. “Sorry for dumping this on you. I didn’t mean to add one more thing to the pile of shit you’re going through already. I just thought you deserved to know.”

He took a deep breath before he responded, trying to stay calm and keep his racing heart under control. “I understand. I’m glad you told me,” he replied in a measured tone.

He was having a hard time figuring out how he felt about Dani being pregnant with his child. First and foremost, there was guilt. As if having a one-night stand with another woman wasn’t bad enough, now there was a baby on the way. He couldn’t go back to

Lauren and pretend like it had never happened; from that point on, he and Dani would be forever linked.

There was also worry. What would his wife do when she found out? File for divorce? Try to take Odin away from him? The cracks that had appeared in what he'd once thought was a strong marriage now looked more like deep crevasses. Despite the love he still felt for Lauren, Nick knew their relationship might be broken beyond repair. He was afraid of losing his little family forever, but he had to face the facts. The beautiful life he and Lauren had built together was about to fall apart, and it was all his fault.

But hidden beneath the heavy weight of his shame and fear, there was another part of Nick that was almost... pleased? Ever since Arya had passed away, Nick had felt as if he was missing a piece of himself, like there was a hole in his life he desperately needed to fill. He still wasn't sure what had possessed him to hook up with Dani that night, but whether it was a drunken mistake or divine intervention, he believed in the notion that everything happened for a reason. The mere possibility of her bringing a new baby - *his* baby - into the world made him think maybe it was meant to be.

He wondered if Dani was feeling the same way. She had to be just as conflicted as he was. On one hand, she had betrayed her husband, but on the other, she'd conceived the child they had desperately wanted. "What are you going to do?" he asked her.

She shook her head, as fresh tears fell from her eyes. "I don't know. What do you want me to do?"

Nick swallowed hard. "Hey, your body, your decision," he said, holding up his hands. He knew he could neither tell her what to do, nor make the decision for her. Dani would have to be the one to choose between her husband and her unborn child. She could sacrifice her chance at becoming a mother in order to save her marriage, or she could keep the baby but risk losing Rob. Either way, it wasn't up to Nick.

"I know... but it's your baby, too. It shouldn't just be me making this decision on my own," replied Dani, looking imploringly at him. "We need to decide together."

He nodded. "But we don't have to decide today. Let's take some time to think about it, okay? Then we'll talk."

"Okay," Dani agreed, and they left it at that. Neither of them brought up the fact that Nick was on borrowed time, though they both knew it. There was no guarantee he would last long enough to have another conversation about the baby, let alone live to see

it born. Nine months into the future had never felt further away to Nick than they did on that day, as he lay dying in his hospital bed.

When Dani went to dry her eyes, he held his right hand up in front of his face and looked at his nail beds, which were still tinged blue from bad circulation. He bent and flexed his fingers, trying to get more blood flowing into their tips, but it didn't seem to make much of a difference. After a few seconds, he lowered his hand and lay it across the left side of his chest, pressing lightly until he felt the faint flutter of his heart pulsing against his palm. As he listened to the blip of the monitor that measured its rhythm (*beep... beep... beep... beep... beep...*) and counted the beats in his head (*one... two... three... four...*), he was reminded of an old-fashioned clock with a pendulum that constantly swung back and forth (*tick... tock... tick... tock...*).

But the monitor felt more like a doomsday clock, counting down to the moment when Nick's weakened heart would finally give out for good. When that happened, the monitor would sound an alarm as the ICD detonated inside his chest, delivering a series of shocks that would ultimately fail to restore his heart rhythm. Dani and the others would come running to resuscitate him, as they had so many times before, but this time, their frantic efforts would be futile.

Nick had come to accept that, without a new heart, this was the way he would inevitably go. It was not a question of *if*, but *when*, and though no one could give him an exact answer, Nick knew he would likely be faced with this unfortunate fate sometime in the near future. There was no denying it. Death could be lurking around the next corner, lying in wait for him like a lioness stalking a sickly wildebeest.

The thought disturbed him, yet there was nothing he could do about it. He wasn't ready to die, but he felt helpless to stop it from happening. Dr. Elizabeth had done everything in her power to improve his condition, but it was out of her hands now. The only way anyone could reset the clock was to cut out his ruined heart and replace it with a healthy one, but that would require both a donor and a team of doctors capable of performing such a complex procedure. Nick had neither.

And so the clock continued to count down as time ticked on... but still, his heart kept beating.

Chapter 23

When Rob arrived for his usual morning rounds, he stopped by Nick's bed first. "How you feeling, man?" he asked cheerfully, as he removed the stethoscope from around his neck and slipped it into his ears.

Nick put on his best poker face before he replied, "Fine." This couldn't have been further from the truth, but by lying, he hoped to avoid having to answer any additional questions. He felt awkward around Rob, worried he would accidentally reveal Dani's secret. If his face didn't give it away, he was afraid his vital signs would. He could feel his heart hammering against his rib cage as Rob rested the round end of the stethoscope on his chest. Even if the doctor didn't realize how hard it was pounding, he would surely hear it racing and wonder why it was pumping so fast while Nick was just lying in bed.

Sure enough, Rob frowned as he listened, his eyes fixed on the heart monitor over Nick's head. It might as well have been a lie detector; Nick was pretty sure a polygraph machine measured many of the same things as his hospital monitor. "Any chest pain or palpitations this morning?" Rob asked, as he moved the stethoscope around to auscultate from a different angle.

"No."

"How 'bout shortness of breath?"

Nick shook his head. He was starting to feel hot and clammy.

"Go ahead and breathe normally," Rob encouraged him, and Nick realized he had been holding his breath. He let it out in a rush, the air rattling through his lungs. "You sure you're not short of breath at all?" Rob persisted. "I'm hearing signs of some fluid build-up in your lungs, which is fairly common with congestive heart failure."

"Yeah, maybe a little bit," Nick admitted, taking advantage of the excuse Rob had given him. If fluid in his lungs would explain why his heart was racing for no other apparent reason, he would go with it.

"How long has that been going on?"

Before Nick could answer, Dani came back into the room. Her eyes widened when she saw her husband standing at Nick's bedside, but by the time he turned toward her, she had recovered and composed herself.

"Where have you been?" Rob asked her, his tone almost accusatory.

“Bathroom,” Dani replied casually, frowning at him. “Why?”

“Your patient here has pulmonary edema. His heart rate, resps, and B.P. are all elevated, and I heard rales at the base of both lungs. Plus, he’s diaphoretic. Didn’t you notice any of this before your little bathroom break?”

“No, because I was busy bathing Brian before my little bathroom break,” Dani snapped back, her dark eyes flashing dangerously. “Where the hell were you?”

Nick’s eyes darted nervously between the two of them. He had never seen them bicker like this before. Clearly, the stress of the situation was getting to them, too.

“Never mind,” said Rob, rolling his eyes. “Get me a CBC, lytes, BUN, creatinine, and an ABG, and then start him on a nitro drip.” Turning back to Nick, he said, “Dani’s gonna draw some blood so we can check your levels before we make any adjustments to your meds. Hopefully a higher dose of the diuretic will do the trick and help you get rid of that extra fluid your body’s hanging onto. In the meantime, I’m gonna put you back on the mask so you can breathe better.”

For once, Nick wasn’t bothered by the oxygen mask. It was a relief to have half his face hidden and not feel obligated to talk much. He lay back and took deep breaths while Dani drew blood from both the central venous catheter in his neck and the arterial line in his wrist. “Sorry about all this,” she whispered to him while Rob was on the other side of the room, checking on Brian. “Are you doing all right?”

Nick shrugged. “I don’t even know anymore.” He felt betrayed by his own body, for not even he could tell if there was really fluid accumulating his lungs, or if Rob had simply mistaken the symptoms of his anxiety for something more serious.

Dani flashed him a sympathetic smile. “Hang in there,” she said, patting his hand as she finished collecting her samples.

He forced a smile back at her. “You too.”

While Dani took his blood samples to the lab, Nick turned his attention back to Rob, who was busy examining Brian. “Any change?” he asked, lifting the oxygen mask off his face to let his voice carry across the room.

Shining his penlight into one of Brian’s eyes, Rob shook his head. “Doesn’t look like it.” He lowered Brian’s eyelid and lifted the other one, moving his light slowly back and forth as he looked closely at Brian’s face. “His pupils still respond to light, but that’s the

only positive sign I've seen so far. His eyes aren't focusing or following anything, and he's not moving any other part of his body either."

Nick swallowed hard. He felt sick to his stomach, afraid of what Rob would say next.

"Look, man, I'm just gonna lay it out there," Rob continued. "He's been like this for two weeks now. Comas rarely last longer than four. It's possible that he'll progress to what we call a 'persistent vegetative state' sometime in the next couple of weeks, but at this point, we need to prepare ourselves for the likelihood that his condition won't improve. In that case, it's important to consider Brian's wishes. What would he want, if there was little to no chance of him ever waking up or making a meaningful recovery?"

Nick's chest felt tight. His heart was hammering again, and it was hard to breathe. He struggled to take a deep breath, trying to calm himself down before his heart raced out of control. The last thing he needed was another jolt from his defibrillator. *What would Brian want?* he wondered. In the twenty-six years they had known each other, he couldn't remember ever having a serious conversation about such topics as life support or last wishes. Brian didn't like to talk about the tough stuff, and neither did Nick.

"You don't have to answer that question right now," added Rob, offering a reassuring smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "It's just something you should be thinking about. Now put that mask back on and leave it there."

Grudgingly, Nick replaced the oxygen mask over his mouth and nose and took another deep breath, but it didn't do anything to ease his anxiety or relieve the tightness in his chest. As if Dani dropping the baby bombshell on him wasn't bad enough, now he had something much worse to worry about. Nick didn't think he could take any more bad news or make the kind of difficult decisions Dani and Rob were asking him to.

Lifting the mask once more, he made a desperate plea. "Please, Brian... please get better," he begged, his eyes boring into the lifeless-looking body lying in the next bed. "Please don't put me in that position. Don't make me decide." He stared determinedly at his best friend, praying for some sort of positive sign - a blink, a twitch, anything. But still, nothing happened.

Disappointed, Nick pulled the mask back down over his mouth and rolled over in bed, putting his back to Brian. He didn't want Rob to see the hot tears that had risen in his eyes.

Brian was five years old the last time he had been hospitalized for longer than two weeks. It had been two *months* that time, two months spent tethered to an IV, his tiny body being flooded by a steady stream of strong antibiotics meant to fight the staph infection that had invaded his heart, almost killing him. He still had vivid memories of being strapped to his hospital bed, sobbing as a nurse pounded on his chest to try to break up the infection. Yet not even that experience had been as torturous as this one.

At least that time, he had been able to open his eyes, talk, and move around. Plus, he'd had plenty of people there to keep him company and help pass the time. His mother had never left his side, spending night after night sleeping on a cot next to his hospital bed. His father and brother had visited every day, bringing him *Star Wars* toys to play with and promising to get him a brand new bicycle as soon as he got better. His grandparents, aunts and uncles, and nurses had gathered around his bed with the rest of his family to pray for his recovery, even as the doctors were telling his parents to prepare for the worst. Brian's prognosis wasn't any better now, and he had no one there to pray for him but Nick. And Nick seemed to be losing faith.

"Any change?" he asked, as Rob was examining Brian. His voice had taken on a despondent tone, much different from the hopeful one Brian was used to hearing. Was Nick merely depressed from spending his days moping in a hospital bed, Brian wondered, or had he given up on the possibility of Brian ever waking up?

"Doesn't look like it," replied Rob, as he shone a light into Brian's eyes. Brian wanted to squint, but he couldn't do anything but stare straight ahead. He could barely make out Rob's features behind the blinding beam of bright light, and before his eyes had time to adjust, Rob had closed them again. "His pupils still respond to light," he continued, "but that's the only positive sign I've seen so far. His eyes aren't focusing or following anything, and he's not moving any other part of his body either."

But I can hear everything! thought Brian, feeling both frustrated and defensive. *I know more about what's been going on around here than you do, buddy.* He thought about the conversation he'd overheard before Rob came in - the one between Nick and his nurse, Dani.

Brian had picked up on a flirtatious tone to their previous interactions, but he had always assumed they were just playing around, living by the adage that laughter is the best medicine. From what he'd figured out, Dani was in a relationship with Dr. Rob, and while Nick had been known to flirt with fans for the fun of it, Brian had no doubt that he loved Lauren. Nick would never be unfaithful, Brian had thought... until he'd found out otherwise.

Brian's first reaction to Dani's big news had been disappointment. *Oh Nick... what have you done now?* he wanted to say, his heart sinking. *Why would this woman think she's pregnant with your baby?*

It wasn't a hard question to answer, yet it made no sense to him. Nick had a lot of flaws, but infidelity had never been one of them. He was almost loyal to a fault, always finding his way back to the family that had used and abused him, staying in toxic relationships long past their expiration date. That was why Brian had been so happy to see him fall for a woman who actually seemed to be good for him. He and Lauren were in it for the long haul, he'd thought. Why would Nick cheat on her now, when she was still hurting from the loss of their daughter?

Maybe he was hurting, too. Maybe this was his way of distracting himself from the pain. He had seen Nick turn to drugs and alcohol to deal with disappointment in the past. Apparently he'd added sex with strangers to his list of vices.

But where the hell did they hook up? Brian couldn't help but wonder. *The hospital??* If he could have laughed, he would have done so then. Leave it to Nick Carter to get laid in a hospital bed by the hot nurse who had been taking care of him. Not many other guys could get away with that.

But then, he hadn't really gotten away with it, had he? If Dani was indeed carrying his child, it was only a matter of time before their indiscretion was discovered. And then what? Did Nick realize the ramifications of what he'd done? It would ruin his marriage and destroy the reputation he had tried so hard to rebuild... unless they decided to get rid of the problem.

Please don't encourage her to have an abortion, Brian silently begged Nick. He knew it was none of his business, but the murder of an unborn baby went against everything he believed. He prayed Nick would do right by Dani and help her make the moral decision. Their baby didn't have to die just because they'd made a mistake. If only he could talk to Nick, give him some guidance, and reassure him that everything would be all right.

But would it? Brian had heard the doctors and nurses talking; he knew Nick's health was getting worse. Nick was tired all the time, he had no appetite because he always felt nauseous, and he'd been unable to get out of bed without his heartbeat becoming irregular. Now his lungs were filling with fluid, making it harder for him to breathe. These were textbook signs of congestive heart failure. Brian was all too familiar with the symptoms, having been asked about them at every appointment with his cardiologist before and after his heart surgery. He had been lucky: his own heart condition had been easily corrected. But it was becoming clear that Nick's heart wasn't going to get

any better. It would continue to grow weaker until it gave out and simply stopped beating. Without a new heart, Nick would die before his baby was born.

But that's not what's gonna happen, Brian told himself firmly. Nick's not going down without a fight. They'll get him to a hospital that will find him a heart, and he'll be fine. We'll both be fine.

Dr. Rob didn't sound as optimistic. "He's been like this for two weeks now," he was telling Nick. "Comas rarely last longer than four. It's possible that he'll progress to what we call a 'persistent vegetative state' sometime in the next couple of weeks, but at this point, we need to prepare ourselves for the likelihood that his condition won't improve."

Brian's heart began to pound. *I'm not a vegetable!* he wanted to shout. *Can a carrot form coherent thoughts? Can it comprehend language? I can understand everything you're saying; I just can't communicate back!*

"In that case, it's important to consider Brian's wishes," Rob continued. "What would he want, if there was little to no chance of him ever waking up or making a meaningful recovery?"

With a sinking feeling, Brian realized he was talking about turning off the life support machines. As much as he hated his new tracheostomy, he was totally dependent on the ventilator. Without it, he would stop breathing and die in a matter of minutes. He didn't want to die... did he?

"You don't have to answer that question right now," Rob said when Nick didn't respond. "It's just something you should be thinking about. Now put that mask back on and leave it there."

As Rob returned to his examination, Brian thought about what he had said. He and Leighanne had talked about their final wishes the last time they'd updated their wills, not long after Baylee was born. They had both agreed that they didn't want to be kept alive by machines if there was no hope of them getting better. But Brian had never imagined he would end up like this, with a brain that was fully conscious locked inside a body that was completely paralyzed. What kind of life would he have if he remained that way - bedridden or wheelchair-bound, breathing and being fed through tubes, totally reliant on other people to bathe him, change him, and take care of him, yet unable to communicate with his caregivers or loved ones? Could that even be considered living, or was it merely existing? Was such an existence even worth it? Brian didn't know - not that anyone had bothered to ask him.

“Please, Brian... please get better,” he heard Nick plead, his voice breaking. “Please don’t put me in that position. Don’t make me decide.”

Believe me, Nick, I’m trying! Brian wanted to call back to him. It terrified him to think of leaving his life in Nick’s hands. But there was nothing he could do about it now. A new heart could help Nick, but Brian would need a whole body transplant.

He felt a little like the main character of an old, black-and-white horror movie he’d once watched with Nick called *The Brain That Wouldn’t Die*. In the film, a mad doctor had tried to find a new body for the head of his wife, who’d been decapitated in a horrible car crash. The bodiless woman had begged her husband to let her die, but Brian didn’t wish for death, nor did he desire a different body. He just wanted his old body back.

Wake up! he wanted to scream as he fought to regain some function. He tried blinking his eyes... flexing his fingers... wiggling his toes. But in spite of his best efforts, he still couldn’t move a muscle. His eyes remained closed, his limbs frozen, his lungs fully dependent upon a machine to inflate them. As the ventilator forced air through the trach tube protruding from the front of his neck, he could feel his chest rise and fall involuntarily. Inside it, his heart beat on, pumping freshly-oxygenated blood to all the other parts of his paralyzed body. It seemed to be the only muscle that was able to move on its own.

Ironically, the part of Brian’s body that was still functioning was precisely what was failing for Nick, whose need for a new heart seemed more desperate with each passing day.

Chapter 24

Late that afternoon, as Rob’s shift ended, Elizabeth came in to check on Nick. “Dr. Rob told me you were having some trouble breathing this morning,” she said, looking at him seriously as she slipped her stethoscope into her ears.

Nick nodded. “Yeah, but it’s better now.” He wished he could say the same about Brian, but nothing had changed since the morning.

“Let’s take a listen.” Dr. Elizabeth slid the end of the stethoscope down the front of his gown. “Deep breath in...” she instructed, pressing it lightly to the left side of his chest.

He inhaled oxygen through the thin tubes in his nose, for which he had happily traded in the face mask as soon as Rob had let him, and held it until Elizabeth added, "...and out."

As he exhaled, Nick started to cough uncontrollably. He doubled over, gripping the bed rail tightly with one hand while he clutched his chest with the other. His broken rib and bruised sternum both cried out in protest as his body was wracked with painful spasms.

Elizabeth repositioned her stethoscope, bringing it around to his back. "Get him a glass of water, please," she told Dani, who had already begun to pour water from the plastic pitcher on Nick's bedside table into his cup. She held it under his chin as she guided the straw to his lips. Grateful, he took a tiny sip, followed by longer swallows, letting the liquid soothe his irritated throat.

Gradually, the coughing fit subsided, leaving him completely exhausted. Elizabeth removed the stethoscope as, eyes streaming, Nick slumped back against his pillows. His chest heaved as he tried to catch his breath, his heart pounding harder than if he had just performed a full show.

"His pulse ox is down to eighty-nine," he heard Dani say to Elizabeth, as an alarm went off on his monitor.

"Put him back on the mask," the doctor replied. Nick didn't even bother to argue before he felt Dani ease the cannula out of his nostrils and place the bulky face mask back over his mouth and nose. He took gasping breaths, feeling like a fish out of water as he greedily sucked oxygen from the mask. After a few moments, the monitor's frantic beeping stopped, as Nick's oxygen level returned to the normal range.

"Better?" Elizabeth asked. Nick nodded without speaking, wiping away the moisture that had leaked from his watering eyes. She lowered the front of his gown and listened to his chest for a few more minutes, a deep furrow appearing in her forehead as she moved her stethoscope from one side to the other. When she finally looked up, she was still frowning.

Nick's heart sank with disappointment. "What now?" he wondered, dreading more bad news.

"I'm not liking what I'm hearing," Elizabeth admitted. "The extra dose of diuretic Dr. Rob administered may have taken some excess fluid off the top, but your lungs still sound congested."

“It didn’t even get rid of that much,” added Dani. “He’s still retaining fluid like crazy. Look...” Nick leaned forward as she pulled back his blankets to reveal his swollen legs, which had ballooned to twice their normal size. They looked like two fat sausages stuffed into the casing of the white compression socks Dani forced him to wear. If Lauren could see him now, she would be able to throw every snarky comment he’d ever made about her pregnancy cankles right back in his face. But she wouldn’t... because if she could see him now, she would be way too concerned to laugh. Even Nick knew there was nothing normal about this.

“Is that from lying in bed too long?” he asked, staring down at his legs in dismay.

Dr. Elizabeth shook her head. “I’d like to do another echocardiogram to see if there have been any changes in your heart function. Dani, will you please get him prepped for the procedure?”

Nick stared at her. “Now?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Why, did you have something else planned for this evening?” When his face reddened, she smirked. “I didn’t think so. Don’t worry - it’ll be painless, I promise.”

That’s what you said last time, thought Nick grudgingly, remembering the drugs she had given him to make his heart race. He had almost passed out. He was in no hurry to repeat that experience.

As if she had read his mind, Dani offered him a reassuring smile and added, “It won’t be like the last one. That was a stress echo, where we were trying to simulate exercise to see how your heart responded. This time we just want to see how it well it’s pumping when you’re at rest.”

He nodded, feeling slightly less anxious. As Dr. Elizabeth rolled in the cart carrying the ultrasound equipment, Dani removed his hospital gown and helped him roll onto his left side, which was still somewhat sore from his ICD incision. He felt a rush of *deja vu* as Dani darkened the room, making the ultrasound monitor glow with a ghostly blue light.

Dr. Elizabeth applied a liberal amount of conductive gel to the transducer. “This may feel a little cold,” she warned, but Nick still winced when she touched his bare chest with it. Elizabeth laughed. “Sorry about that.”

“S’alright,” Nick muttered, his breath fogging up the oxygen mask.

“Try to lie still while I look for the best angle,” she added, as she moved the wand-like object slowly over his chest. It was more uncomfortable than he remembered it being before, mostly because of the black and blue contusions across his breastbone.

“Do you have to press so hard?” he asked, wincing again as Dr. Elizabeth dug the transducer into his tender skin. “You said this would be painless.”

“Sorry,” she apologized a second time. “It takes a good amount of pressure to get a decent picture, but I’ll try to be more gentle.”

“C’mon, tough guy, you’ve got this,” said Dani, clapping his shoulder encouragingly.

Nick knew he shouldn’t complain - this was nothing compared to the pain he’d already endured - but he was tired of being poked and prodded, tired of having his heart’s every impulse examined and analyzed. What could Dr. Elizabeth possibly be looking for that she hadn’t already found? His heart was failing, plain and simple. He didn’t need another test to confirm what they’d told him time and time again.

Elizabeth eased up a little before she finally settled over a spot on the left side of his chest. While she held the transducer firmly in place, he heard the faint whoosh of blood being pumped by his heart as it appeared on the screen. He was hit with another wave of *deja vu* as, just like before, the sound brought back memories of hearing his baby’s heartbeat during each of Lauren’s sonograms.

Except the last one.

A lump rose in Nick’s throat as flashbacks of that horrible appointment played in his head. He swallowed hard, fighting to hold himself together. He had to stay strong; he couldn’t afford to fall apart now.

“Try to relax, Nick,” said Dani, rubbing his shoulder. “Relax and breathe normally.” Only then did Nick realize he’d been holding his breath. He released it slowly and took another deep breath, relieving the tension in his body. “There you go. That’s better.” Her voice was soft and soothing in his ear, her hand warm and reassuring on his arm.

Not only was she a good nurse, but she would also make a wonderful mother, Nick realized. He suddenly pictured their roles reversed: she was in his place, lying on her back with her shirt pushed up, her little pregnant belly being probed by the ultrasound wand. He was standing beside the bed, his hand on her shoulder, as they both stared at the screen, mesmerized by the flickering motion of their baby’s heartbeat. It was such a

beautiful sight, it almost brought tears to his eyes, though it existed only in his mind. But it could become a reality in a matter of months, if Dani decided to keep the baby.

That was when Nick knew what he wanted - and didn't want - to happen. After losing Arya like he and Lauren had, he couldn't imagine making the choice to stop a healthy baby's heart, a baby who had the chance to be born alive. The next time Dani brought it up, he would tell her how he felt about it and hope she felt the same way.

When Dr. Elizabeth finished the exam, she set her equipment aside and turned to face him, her expression grim. "Well, Nick... I wish I had better news for you, but the echocardiogram confirmed what I was worried about," she said with a sigh, causing his stomach to lurch. "Your heart function has gotten considerably worse since your last echo a couple of weeks ago."

He swallowed hard, feeling like he could throw up.

Elizabeth kept talking, turning the ultrasound monitor toward him so he could see the blurry, black-and-white image of his heart frozen on its screen. "I used the ultrasound pictures to calculate your ejection fraction, which is the percentage of blood being pumped by the left ventricle per heartbeat," she explained, using her finger to trace the path of the blood flow. "A healthy heart has an ejection fraction of anywhere from fifty to seventy percent. Yours was around twenty percent last time, putting you in the low range - a common finding in patients with cardiomyopathy and congestive heart failure. It's since dropped to fifteen percent, meaning your heart is only pumping about a quarter of the blood it should be each time it beats."

Nick didn't understand how that was possible with as hard as his heart was pounding. Rolling over onto his back, he pressed his hand to the same part of his chest where Dr. Elizabeth had placed the transducer until he could feel his heart hammering against his palm.

"Are you okay, Nick?" Dani asked softly, looking down at him with concern.

He hesitated at first, not sure of how to answer. Finally, he nodded to indicate he wasn't in pain or any immediate danger, even though Dr. Elizabeth had made it clear that he was decidedly *not* okay.

Dani put her hand on top of his, rubbing it reassuringly as Elizabeth continued, "The edema you've been experiencing was caused by decompensated heart failure. Your heart has weakened to the point where it's not able to pump blood to the rest of your body fast enough, and it's beginning to affect the way your other organs are working.

The lack of blood flow to your kidneys has lowered your urine output and led them to overcompensate by boosting the production of a protein that causes fluid accumulation in order to increase your blood volume. This creates a vicious cycle: the blood gets backed up because your heart can't pump effectively, which raises the pressure in your veins and weakens the heart muscle even more, making the problem worse."

Nick lay back against his pillows, feeling light-headed. His enlarged heart was still pounding heavily in his ears. He pictured it like a water balloon, bloated with blood, being slowly squeezed by an invisible fist. Its walls would continue to weaken as they were forced to stretch thinner and thinner. At some point, the balloon would get too big and burst from the pressure. He wondered how long his poor heart could keep laboring the way it was before it, too, reached its breaking point and simply stopped pumping.

He took a shaky breath and let it out before he looked up at Elizabeth. "Is there anything you can do about it?"

"I'll have to make some more adjustments to your medication regimen," she replied, absently playing with the end of her long braid as she thought through her answer. "It's all about finding the right balance. You're already taking quite a few different drugs to reduce your heart's workload, lower your risk of arrhythmias, control your blood pressure, and prevent fluid retention. I'm going to prescribe another cardiac drug called digoxin, which will help your heart pump more blood in fewer beats by strengthening the force of its contractions. I'll also like to add a different diuretic to increase your urine output."

"Awesome," said Nick sarcastically, sighing. He already hated having to piss into a portable urinal and hand it to Dani to empty for him. Now he would have to do it even more often. But he supposed it was a small price to pay if it prevented him from drowning in his own fluid.

Dr. Elizabeth left Dani with instructions on how much of each medication to administer. As Dani prepared the first dose, she looked down at Nick. "How are you doing?" she asked quietly.

He snorted, fogging up the oxygen mask again. "I'm pretty sure you just heard how I'm doing."

She offered him a sympathetic smile. "No, I meant how are you doing emotionally? How are you dealing with everything Dr. Elizabeth told you?"

“Oh.” He shrugged and shook his head. “I dunno. I’m not, really... not yet. How does anyone deal with that kind of news?”

“Usually they’re in denial at first,” said Dani. “Then they get sad... and sometimes angry.”

Nick raised his eyebrows. He hadn’t expected an actual answer to what he’d intended to be a rhetorical question, but she had just described exactly what he’d felt since waking up in the hospital: denial, followed by depression. “Yeah,” he said, nodding. “I guess that’s pretty much how I’m dealing with it.”

“You’re normal then,” she said with a smile, squeezing his shoulder. “If you feel like talking about it, you know I’m here for you.”

“I know.” He forced a smile back from beneath his face mask. “Thanks.”

“You bet.” She went back to what she’d been doing before, drawing up a syringe of the new drug Dr. Elizabeth had prescribed.

Watching her work, Nick thought about the decision he’d made during the echo. “Actually, I do want to talk,” he said, taking the mask off so his voice wouldn’t be muffled. “But not about that.”

Dani set down the syringe and looked up. “Better leave that on for now,” she said, gently lowering the mask back over his mouth. “Your oxygen level is still on the low side.”

“But I’m not coughing anymore. Can’t I try the cannula again?” he begged, giving her his best puppy dog eyes.

She rolled her eyes and grinned. Nick recognized the look of a woman who found him irresistible. He smiled triumphantly to himself as she reluctantly replaced the face mask with a nasal cannula. “Only as long as your sats stay in the nineties,” she said with a warning tone.

He nodded, taking a deep breath through the thin tubes. “Much better. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” Dani replied, winking. “So... what did you want to talk about?”

“Well... I’ve been thinking. About the baby.”

She raised her eyebrows. “And?”

He swallowed hard. “Look, I know I might not be around nine months from now, so it almost seems selfish to ask this of you, but... I hope you decide to have it.” He held his breath while he waited for her reaction, watching her forehead wrinkle as her brown eyes widened and began to fill with tears. He let out his breath in a low sigh, feeling deflated. “I’m sorry,” he said quickly, before she could speak. “I don’t want to put any pressure on you. Like I said, it’s a lot to ask. If you don’t want this baby-”

“But I do!” Dani blurted, interrupting him. Her face broke into a tearful smile. “I do want this baby! I was worried you wouldn’t.”

Nick’s heart lifted. “After losing Arya, I would never wish another baby’s life away,” he said quietly, a lump forming in his throat. “As long as you’re okay with it, I want this one to be born. I may not be there to see it, but I’ll do whatever I can to support you both.”

Dani nodded. “Thank you,” she whispered, wiping away her tears. “Now if I could just figure out a way to tell Rob...”

Nick’s stomach lurched as he imagined how his wife would react when she found out he’d gotten another woman pregnant. Lauren put up with a lot, but she’d made it clear before she married him that infidelity was where she drew the line. Now that Nick had crossed that line, she would probably file for divorce. His indiscretion would destroy what was left of their marriage. Their little family would be fractured, their relationship ruined forever - and Rob and Dani’s right along with it.

“I don’t think it matters how I tell Lauren,” he said, shaking his head. “She’s never gonna forgive me for this.”

“Her loss,” replied Dani with a shrug. “You’re a good guy, Nick. And a great dad.”

He sighed. “Yeah, but I’m a shitty husband.”

“You’re human. You made a mistake. We both did. But it’s done. We can’t go back and change it. We have to keep moving forward,” Dani said frankly, her voice firm. “If Lauren won’t give you a second chance, then find someone who will. Any woman would be lucky to marry you.”

Nick snorted. “Yeah, right. The only kind of woman I could get to marry me now would be a golddigger looking for a nice, fat life insurance payout after I kick the bucket. I’d

just be a burden to anyone else. Who would want to deal with all this?" he asked, waving his hand around the hospital room.

Dani raised her eyebrows. "You'd be surprised," she replied with a smile. "Don't be such a downer. Like I told you before, we're *not* going to let you die - and once you've had your heart transplant, all this will be in the past." She picked up the syringe she had filled earlier and injected it into his IV line. "You just have to hang on until then."

Easier said than done, thought Nick, feeling his heart flutter. According to Dr. Elizabeth, it was barely functioning now. How long could he be expected to hang on before it stopped working altogether? He had no control over his own fate. His heart could falter again at any time, causing the defibrillator inside his chest to fire. When that happened, his life would be left in someone else's hands - though whether God's or Dani's, Nick did not know.

Chapter 25

The fifteenth day dawned the same as the previous fourteen. "Rise and shine!" Dani's voice rang out, rousing Brian from another round of restless slumber. Even though he had spent all day and night lying down in almost constant darkness, he found it surprisingly difficult to sleep in the ICU. Unable to roll over or reposition his body at all, he could never seem to get comfortable on the hard hospital bed, whose bleached sheets made his skin crawl, and the cacophony of noises from the equipment kept him from being able to relax. He would lie awake for hours, listening to the ventilator hissing, the monitors blipping, and the IVs dripping. Whenever he did manage to drift off, one of the nurses would inevitably come in to check his vitals and wake him up again.

He heard the sound of water sloshing around as Dani set down something heavy, then the rattle of her closing the curtain around his bed. A cloud of dread descended over him, for he knew what was coming next.

"It's time for your bath, Brian," Dani announced cheerfully, turning down his blankets. "I'm gonna get you all nice and clean."

I can't be that dirty after one day, he thought grudgingly. *Can't you just leave me like this?* But of course, he had no way to tell her so, and she couldn't read his mind. There was nothing he could do but lie there helplessly as she took off his hospital gown, exposing his naked body.

She dipped her washcloth into the warm water and wrung it out before she began wiping his face with it. She ran the washcloth over his forehead and into his hair, working the soapy water into a lather as she scrubbed his scalp. It felt good, but he wished she would use real shampoo. The soap dried out his skin and made his scalp itchy. It was torture to not be able to reach up and scratch it himself.

After rinsing with clean water, she continued bathing his upper body, washing his chest and arms before working her way down to his legs and feet. Brian could feel the lukewarm water on his skin, her gloved hands gripping his limbs as she lifted them up to get at the undersides, the tips of her fingers tickling the soles of his feet. He could feel everything, yet he couldn't move anything.

"I'm just going to get some fresh water," said Dani when she finished washing between his toes. "I'll be right back."

Brian wondered if she knew he could hear her, or if she spoke that way to all her patients, whether they were awake or not. As humiliating as this whole experience was, he appreciated being talked to like an actual person who could listen and comprehend what she was saying, rather than some inanimate crash test dummy. Still, he shivered as he waited for her to come back, his body lying unclothed and uncovered on the bed. He had never felt more vulnerable.

When Dani returned, she had her husband Rob with her. He held Brian's head steady between his hands while Dani removed the cervical collar from his neck and carefully washed the folds of skin underneath it, working around his tracheostomy. The site where the tube had been inserted was still tender, but according to Rob, the hole in his throat was healing well. Brian wondered what it looked like, but thought he was better off not knowing. He couldn't wait until he was able to breathe on his own again so they could take the tube out and let the hole close for good. He wanted them both gone. Brian enjoyed the brief break from wearing the bulky neck brace, but before he knew it, Dani was putting it back on, immobilizing his head once more.

Next, she and Rob worked together to roll Brian onto his right side. He was turned every few hours to prevent pressure sores from forming, a task which took two people in order to keep his spine properly aligned. Dani washed his back while Rob went to the other side the room to check on Nick.

"How you doing this morning, man?" he heard Rob ask.

“Not too great,” Nick replied. Brian could tell by the tone of his voice that he wasn’t feeling well; he could practically picture Nick grimacing in pain. “I’ve got this fluttery feeling in my chest that won’t go away.”

“Yeah? How ‘bout I take a listen?” Rob responded. He kept his voice light and casual, but Brian was concerned. It wasn’t like Nick to complain about the way he was feeling; normally, he was the type who tried to tough it out until he couldn’t take it any longer. Something really had to be bothering him for him to admit to being in any discomfort.

“I don’t hear anything different,” said Rob after a long pause, “but I do see some pacing spikes on the monitor, which means the pacemaker part of your ICD must be firing off impulses to regulate your heart rate. That’s probably the fluttering you’re feeling. It’s a normal part of having a pacemaker - nothing to worry about for now.”

Brian tried to relax and enjoy the sensation of Dani scrubbing his back with the warm washcloth. He did not enjoy the feeling of her gloved fingers prying apart his buttocks to wipe between them, nor did he appreciate her washing what was in front. His penis seemed to, though, for he felt it stiffen as she rubbed it with the cloth. It wasn’t the first time this had happened, and in some ways, it was actually a relief: at least there was one part of him that didn’t seem to be paralyzed. But mostly it was just embarrassing. He knew Dani, as an ICU nurse, probably thought nothing of it, but that didn’t make it any easier for Brian to endure. The only woman who was supposed to give him an erection was his wife.

Leighanne. What he wouldn’t give to hear her voice in his ear and feel her hands on his body instead. He missed her and Baylee so much, it hurt. When he had first woken up in the hospital, he’d wondered why they weren’t at his bedside, but by listening to Dani talking to Nick, Brian had learned that the Keys had all been evacuated and the airport closed not long after his accident. Even if they had flown down, they would have been forced to leave and wouldn’t be allowed to come back while Key West was underwater. He supposed that was why he hadn’t seen Howie there either. It made sense, but it didn’t make being without his family any easier. At least, for now, he still had Nick.

“I’ve been feeling so nauseous,” he heard Nick saying, as Dani dried him off and pulled the blanket back up over his body. “I barely have an appetite anymore, which is weird for me.”

“Yeah, but that’s pretty typical for a heart failure patient,” Rob assured him. “It can be caused by congestion from fluid building up around your liver and gut. You’ll feel a lot better once we get that under control. I see Dr. Elizabeth upped your dosage of diuretics. Did you notice yourself having to urinate more than usual during the night?”

Nick snorted. “Only, like, once an hour.”

Rob chuckled. “Sucks, huh? But hey, at least your kidneys are working. Your lungs sound less congested today, too.”

Listening to their conversation, Brian tried to keep his mind focused on the positives. The new medications Elizabeth had prescribed were working. Nick was doing better, even if he didn’t seem to feel any better.

When Rob came back to Brian’s side of the room, Brian hoped he would be able to see some signs of improvement in his own condition as well. But the exam started off as badly as it always did. “Hey Brian, can you open your eyes for me?” Rob asked, and of course, Brian could not. Bright light flooded his retinas, nearly blinding him, as Rob pried his eyelids apart anyway and shined his penlight straight into them. “Pupils are equal, round, and sluggish,” Brian heard him say, presumably to Dani.

Before he could lower Brian’s eyelids again, an alarm began to sound on the other side of the room. Brian’s heart leapt into his throat as he heard Nick let out a harsh cry of pain.

Dani reacted quickly, ripping the privacy curtain open as she left Brian’s bedside in a rush and raced across to Nick’s, Rob right behind her. “Nick, are you okay?” she called.

As his eyes adjusted to the light, Brian could see Nick lying on his back in bed, his mouth gaping open as he gasped for breath. His hands had curled into tight fists that clawed at his heaving chest. His eyes were half-open, but didn’t seem to be focused on anything.

“Talk to me, Nick,” said Dani as she leaned over him, pressing her fingers to the side of his neck. When Nick did not respond, she looked back at Rob. “I can’t feel a pulse.”

Rob’s eyes were fixed on the heart monitor, which was going haywire, a red light flashing while the alarm wailed. “He’s in V-fib,” he replied, lowering the head of Nick’s bed so that he was lying flat. “The ICD should shock him any second now.”

It seemed like the longest few seconds of Brian’s life, watching the doctor and nurse stand by and do nothing as they waited for the defibrillator inside his friend’s chest to fire. But sure enough, Nick’s body suddenly jerked, his fists flying up off his chest before falling limply to his sides.

Another second passed, as Rob studied the rhythm on the monitor. “No response,” he said after a moment’s pause, silencing the shrill alarm with the press of a button. “Starting CPR.”

No! Brian screamed without making a sound. He wanted to look away, but he couldn’t turn his head or close his eyes. He was forced to watch as Rob bent over Nick’s bed and began pushing vigorously on his chest. *Please, no*, Brian thought frantically, feeling his own heartbeat accelerate as Nick’s faltered. *Not again. Not now.*

“I’ll bag him,” said Dani, hurrying to the head of the bed. She hit a blue button on the wall to summon help before she grabbed an Ambu bag. Taking the oxygen tubes out of Nick’s nostrils, she tilted his head back and secured the mask tightly over his mouth and nose. She held it in place with one hand while she squeezed the attached bag with the other, giving breaths in between compressions.

C’mon, Nick, Brian begged, wishing he could say the words out loud. He remembered being on the receiving end of that resuscitation mask, relying on the nurses and doctors to hand-pump oxygen down his throat during the power outage. The only thing that had helped him stay calm was hearing Nick’s voice encouraging him to hang on, reassuring him that he would be all right. Brian wanted to return the favor, but the trach tube prevented him from being able to talk to Nick. He formed the words in his mind instead and hoped God would help get his message to Nick, one way or another. *Keep fighting, Frack; your family needs you. We love you, bro. Come on back to us now.*

After what seemed like an eternity, Dani asked, “Have you felt any more defibs from the ICD?”

“Now that you mention it... no,” replied Rob, breathing hard from the effort he was putting forth to keep blood flowing through Nick’s body. Beads of sweat had formed on the back of Rob’s neck, and his biceps bulged beneath the sleeves of his scrub top as his arms applied the pressure needed to force Nick’s heart to contract. “How long since the last shock?”

“About two minutes.”

Rob stopped and straightened up, sighing as he wiped the sweat from his brow. “Let’s see if it worked,” he said, looking up at the heart monitor overhead. Lying on his side, unable to lift his head, Brian couldn’t see the screen clearly, but he waited hopefully for a sign that Nick’s heart had started beating again. He felt a rush of relief when he heard Rob say, “Looks like he’s back in sinus rhythm.”

Dani reached down and pressed her fingers to the side of Nick's neck again. "I'm still not feeling a pulse," she said uncertainly.

Rob shook his head as he studied the monitor. "He's not registering an arterial blood pressure either. Must be pulseless electrical activity. Resuming compressions." Brian's heart sank as he saw Rob bend over to continue CPR.

"Do you want any drugs?" Dani asked.

"Yeah, but then who's gonna bag him?" Rob was practically panting now, his breath coming in short gasps as he kept pumping Nick's chest. The hospital bed rattled underneath his weight with the impact of each compression. "We could use another pair of hands in here."

"I hit the call button; Elizabeth should be here any minute. In the meantime... I can multitask." Dani squeezed the Ambu bag to deliver one more big breath to Nick's lungs, then darted around his bed and disappeared from Brian's line of sight. She was back in a matter of seconds, rolling the red crash cart to the head of the bed. Grabbing the Ambu bag, she gave Nick another breath, then opened the top drawer of the cart and took out a syringe. "Epi?" she asked Rob.

"You know it," he replied in between compressions.

Dani squeezed the Ambu bag again before she injected the drug into Nick's IV. "Epi's in. Need a break?"

Rob nodded. "Have at it, babe." They traded roles without missing a beat. The second Rob removed his hands from Nick's body and stepped back from the bed, Dani rushed forward to replace them with her own. She continued pumping Nick's chest from the opposite side of the bed, as Rob took her place at the head to bag him.

Brian had a better view of Nick now that Rob was no longer in the way, and he could see clearly just how bad Nick looked. His skin was ashen, as if all the life left in him had faded away. His left arm hung limply off the side of the bed, twitching slightly each time Dani pushed down on his chest. Brian could see the skull and crossbones inked on the inside of Nick's wrist. It gave him an ominous feeling. *Old habits die hard*, the inscription on his tattoo said. Nick was the type to die hard, too. *C'mon, you stubborn son of a bitch*, Brian silently begged, staring at his best friend's blank, colorless face. *Damn it, Nick, don't you do this to me now!* He desperately wished he could reach out and take hold of Nick's hand, give it a squeeze, and tell him to hang on.

Out of the corner of his eye, Brian could see his own hand lying on the bed beside him, but no matter how hard he tried to flex and curl his fingers, he couldn't move a muscle. His right hand remained useless and still, just like the rest of his body. It was agonizing to lie there and watch Rob and Dani work on his best friend, knowing there was nothing he could do to assist them. He had never felt more helpless. As the fear and frustration took hold of him, hot tears sprang into his stinging eyes. The room blurred as they clouded his vision, but he couldn't even blink them away. The tears overflowed, trickling freely down the sides of his face.

"Pause for a pulse check," said Rob after another minute or two had passed. He palpated the artery in Nick's neck, as Dani stopped pumping.

"Anything?" she asked, sounding hopeful as her eyes darted up to the heart monitor.

If Brian had been in control of his breathing, he would have held his breath as he awaited Rob's reply. *C'mon, Nick*, he kept praying, as his own heart pounded hard inside his chest. *Please...*

But Rob shook his head. "Nothing. Still PEA. Continue CPR."

The rhythm of resuscitation resumed as Dani went back to her compressions, the bed rattling with each artificial beat of Nick's heart. His chest rose and fell as Rob inflated his lungs with air from the Ambu bag and Dani's hands deflated them again. Having fully taken over his body's most basic functions, the two of them worked together in perfect sync to keep oxygenated blood flowing to Nick's brain.

"Another amp of epi in," said Rob as he injected more medication into the IV. "If we're ever gonna get a pulse back, we need to think about what else could have put him in cardiac arrest, besides the obvious. Reversible causes... Hs and Ts... go!"

"Hypoxia," replied Dani, raising her eyebrows as she glanced over at Rob.

Squeezing the Ambu bag, Rob shook his head. "He has good chest rise with ventilation, and he's gotten less cyanotic since we started giving him high-quality compressions and one hundred percent O₂. How about hypokalemia? I saw in your notes that he's now on a higher dose of diuretic. He could be low in potassium."

"If you'd read my notes a little closer, you'd know Elizabeth switched him to a potassium-sparing diuretic when she prescribed dig. If anything, he's *hyperkalemic*, in which case more potassium will kill him!" Dani argued, pumping Nick's chest harder. "He's getting plenty already; I've been bringing him bananas for breakfast."

“Okay... so maybe he needs calcium,” said Rob with a shrug, as he squeezed the Ambu bag again. Brian didn’t know how he could stay so calm and casual while Nick lay dying on the bed before his eyes. Of course, he was probably used to treating critically ill patients, but it bothered Brian that the doctor didn’t seem more concerned by his best friend’s lack of a heartbeat.

“You give him calcium now, and you’ll never get him back.”

Rob and Dani both looked up in surprise as Dr. Elizabeth entered the room. Brian’s heart skipped a beat, but he felt the slightest bit of relief. If anyone could bring Nick back, it was this woman, the “Queen of Hearts,” as he’d heard her called.

“Calcium is contraindicated in patients taking digoxin, as it can cause an irreversible condition known as ‘Stone Heart,’ which prevents the heart from contracting,” the cardiologist explained, opening another drawer of the crash cart and rummaging through its contents. “What was his last rhythm?”

“PEA, almost two minutes ago.”

Elizabeth emerged with a syringe and a small vial. “I’m going to administer two grams of magnesium sulfate,” she announced, as she drew up a dose of the medication and added it to Nick’s IV. When she was done, she turned to Dani. “Hold compressions so we can check for a pulse.”

“Who’s running this code, you or me?” asked Rob, scowling at her.

“I am,” answered Elizabeth coolly, slipping her stethoscope into her ears. “He’s my patient.” When Dani stopped pumping, the doctor put the end of the stethoscope where her hands had been and listened for a few seconds, frowning.

Meanwhile, Rob was feeling the side of Nick’s neck. “Still no sign of a pulse.”

Elizabeth nodded, looking at the monitor. “No electrical activity either. He’s in asystole,” she said matter-of-factly, as Brian’s stomach clenched. He didn’t have to be a doctor to know what this meant: Nick had flatlined. His heart was not even fibrillating any longer; it had come to a complete and perhaps permanent halt. Yet Dr. Elizabeth didn’t seem ready to pronounce his death. “Switch places and continue CPR,” she commanded, glancing up at the clock.

Rob moved to the side of the bed and began compressing Nick's chest again, as Dani went back to bagging. "How long are we gonna keep going like this?" he asked grudgingly.

Dani glared at her husband. "We're not giving up on him yet! He hasn't even been down that long!"

To Brian, it felt like an eternity, but he was grateful for Dani's determination.

"What is his down time?" Dr. Elizabeth asked.

Dani looked at the clock. "Almost eight minutes."

"And when was his last epi?"

"About three minutes ago."

"I'll give him another amp," said the cardiologist, taking a second syringe out of the top drawer of the red cart. "To answer your question, Rob," she added, as she injected it into Nick's IV, "we'll keep going long enough to give the meds a chance to work."

Thank you, thought Brian, feeling a faint glimmer of hope. All he could do was watch as they continued to work on Nick, pumping him full of oxygen and drugs in a desperate effort to restart his heart. Every couple of minutes, they would pause to check for a pulse, and when the waveform on the monitor remained a flatline, they would rotate roles and resume the process of trying to resuscitate him.

This went on for several more rounds, until Dani suddenly gasped, jerking her hands off of Nick's body as if she had just been burned. "Did you see him twitch?" she asked, her voice shrill. "The ICD tried to defib him; I felt it!"

"High-quality compressions can mimic a shockable rhythm," said Dr. Elizabeth, looking up at the heart monitor. "Hold compressions. Let's see what happens."

The room fell silent as the three of them froze, their eyes fixed on the monitor. Brian's eyes burned, unable to blink, as he watched and waited for one of them to speak again. Each second seemed to take an eternity.

Finally, Dani drew in another sharp breath, causing Brian's heart to skip a beat. "There!" she exclaimed. "That's a sinus rhythm!" She reached up and pushed a button on the monitor to turn the volume back up, and a series of slow, steady blips rang out

through the room. *Beep... beep... beep...* Brian had never heard a more beautiful sound; it was like music to his ears.

“But is it a perfusing one?” Elizabeth asked.

Rob pressed his fingertips to Nick’s neck once more. “I can feel a weak carotid pulse,” he confirmed.

Listening to Nick’s chest with her stethoscope, Elizabeth smiled and nodded. “Nice save, everyone.”

Fresh tears flooded Brian’s eyes as he watched Nick’s chest rise and fall. *Thank you*, he thought with relief. In that moment, it didn’t matter that he couldn’t move, couldn’t speak, couldn’t blink or even breathe. As long as Nick’s heart was beating, hope was still alive. It was all Brian had to hold on to, like a buoy bobbing in the waves of a stormy sea, a beacon of light burning through the darkness. He couldn’t let go.

Chapter 26

Nick remained in critical condition the rest of that day and the next, drifting in and out of consciousness while the doctors and nurses worked to stabilize him.

In his dreams, he was swimming in deep water again, searching for Arya. He didn’t see his daughter this time, but he could still hear her crying out for him. Her wail was like a siren’s song, beckoning him to follow her into the black depths below. His chest burned, his heart beating erratically between his breathless lungs, but he descended further, determined to find her this time or die trying. But before he could do either, he was blasted out of the water with the force of a bomb.

The next thing he knew, he was lying on his back in the bottom of a rowboat, which was bobbing up and down in the rough waves. Looking up, he recognized Rob and Dani looming over him. They each held an oar in their hands, but neither one was rowing. Nick could never have predicted what happened next.

Without warning, Rob raised his oar high over his head and brought it hammering down onto Nick’s body, hitting him so hard in the chest it knocked the wind right out of him. Nick barely had time to react before he took a second blow right to the sternum, this one delivered by Dani’s oar. Gasping for breath, he gaped up at her in disbelief, his vision

blurred by tears and pain. Unable to get up or to take cover, he could only lie there and try to brace himself against the blows that continued to rain down on him, as Rob and Dani took turns battering him with the wooden paddles. He heard a horrific crunching sound that could have been one of the oars or his own ribs splintering; he was in too much pain to tell. This was followed by even more crushing pain and pressure, as he felt both of his lungs collapse. The rowboat began to rock harder as Nick rolled back and forth in panic and agony, fighting for each breath. He was on the verge of blacking out when the boat suddenly capsized, spilling him back into the water.

As he plunged beneath the surface, he heard voices coming from somewhere above him. They had a distant sound, distorted by the waves, but his ears could decipher bits and pieces of what they were saying.

“...so you can flirt with him...” Nick recognized Rob’s voice, but it sounded spiteful and angry, a far cry from his usual friendly tone.

“...I don’t! I love you!” Dani’s voice drifted back, high-pitched and hysterical.

“...carrying his kid...” Rob continued. *“...obviously developed feelings for him, too...”* Nick couldn’t hear the whole rant, but it was enough to comprehend the fact that they were fighting about him. *“...so you two can ride off into the sunset together once he’s recovered...”*

Their voices faded as Nick sank further into the sea of unconsciousness. By the next time he resurfaced, he had forgotten all about them.

Even before he opened his eyes, he knew he was back in his hospital bed, where he had been the entire time. He could hear his heart monitor beeping and smell the distinct scents of disinfectant and plastic tubing. When his eyelids finally fluttered open, the fluorescent lighting filtered through his pupils, forcing him to squint. As his eyes adjusted, Dani’s face came slowly into focus.

“Hi, Nick,” she said softly. “Can you squeeze my hand?”

Nick felt like he was floating through a thick fog. It took him a few seconds to process her request, but as he became aware of the rest of his body, he realized her warm hand was holding his. He wrapped his fingers around hers, clenching them briefly before he relaxed his hand again.

Dani smiled down at him. “That’s it. You’re doing great.”

His head was gradually clearing, the foggy feeling dissipating as he descended from the clouds. He had a heaviness in his chest that made it hard to breathe, in spite of the oxygen cannula in his nose.

“How are you feeling?” Dani asked, sitting down on the side of his bed.

He groaned. “Like a steamroller ran over my chest.” As the dull ache intensified, he finally understood what had happened. “Did I get shocked again?”

She nodded grimly. “You were down for almost twenty minutes before we got your heart beating this time. Your electrolytes were all out of whack from the combination of medications we’ve been giving you, which made it even worse, but everything’s back to normal now. We’ve just been waiting for you to wake up to make sure you didn’t sustain any brain damage.”

He frowned, closing his eyes while he tried to collect his muddled thoughts. “How long was I out?”

“Over thirty-six hours.” Dani took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “It’s been a rough couple of days.”

Opening his eyes again, Nick took a closer look at her and realized how red and puffy her eyes were. Clearly, she had been crying. *Because of me?* he wondered. *Or because of something else?*

Quickly, he turned his head toward Brian’s bed, worried something had happened to his friend while he was unconscious. But Brian looked exactly the same as he had the whole time he’d been there, lying flat on his back with his neck in its brace, his chest rising and falling steadily as the ventilator breathed for him. “Is Brian okay?” Nick asked anyway, wanting some reassurance.

Dani nodded. “He still hasn’t come out of his coma, but he’s stable for now.”

“How about you? Are *you* okay?”

She smiled and shook her head, sniffing. “Why, do I look that bad?”

“You could never look bad,” he said, smiling back sympathetically. “I can just tell you’ve been crying.”

She took another shuddering breath. “Like I said... the last two days have just been really bad. First we almost lost you... then Rob and I had a fight.” She locked eyes with Nick. “He knows about us - and about the baby.”

Nick’s stomach lurched. “How did he find out?”

“He confronted me... accused me of flirting with you and having feelings for you. I had to come clean about what happened on Halloween.” She sighed, closing her eyes. “It’s probably for the best. I wouldn’t have been able to hide the pregnancy from him for much longer anyway.”

“How did he react to that?” Nick asked, licking his lips nervously.

“Not well.” When she opened her eyes again, they were full of fresh tears. “He left first thing this morning.”

Nick’s eyes widened. “Where’d he go?” he wondered, remembering that their home had been destroyed by the hurricane.

“Who knows? He could have made it to the mainland by now.”

Nick frowned. “But I thought you said there was no way off the island.”

“Not by road, but Rob has a boat,” she replied, sniffing, as the tears started to trickle down her cheeks. “He and his buddies go scuba diving whenever they get the chance.”

“I’m so sorry,” Nick offered, not sure what else to say.

Dani nodded, wiping her eyes with a tearful smile. “Me too. But mostly I’m just glad you’re okay,” she said, giving his hand another squeeze. “That’s all that matters now.”

He swallowed hard, suddenly hyper-aware of his heart throbbing inside his chest. “Thanks for saving me yet again.”

“You’re welcome. I was worried we weren’t going to get you back this time.” She shook her head, her eyes welling with even more tears. “You had me so scared.”

“I’m sorry,” he said again.

Dani flashed him another watery smile. "It's not your fault." Taking his face between her hands, she leaned over and touched her lips to his forehead. "You just focus on getting better."

The feather-light kiss left his skin tingling, distracting him from the horrible ache in his chest. "I feel better already," he said, forcing a smile back at her. He wanted to return the favor, so he reached up and tenderly brushed her tears away with his thumb.

"Thank you," she whispered. Without taking her eyes off his, she placed her hand over his and pressed his palm flat against the side of her face. He caressed her cheek, his fingertips tracing over the path of tearstains on her soft skin. Cupping her chin in the heel of his hand, he couldn't help but appreciate her beauty - for even with her eyes bloodshot and her face blotchy, she was still quite pretty.

As he gazed into her glistening brown eyes, he thought about how she had selflessly taken care of him over the past two weeks, putting herself in harm's way to stay at the hospital and see him through the hurricane. It was his turn to comfort her. "C'mere," he said, patting his chest, as he scooted over to make more room for her on the mattress. He extended his arm in an invitation to join him.

She hesitated only a second before she lowered the bed rail and lay down beside him, resting her head lightly on his shoulder so as not to hurt him. "I guess I've already broken protocol by kissing you," she said, snuggling into the crook of his arm as he curved it around her petite body. She fit perfectly there.

"Who cares about protocol at this point?" he replied, running his hand over her back and up into her hair.

"So you wouldn't care if I were to kiss you again?" she asked, her voice taking on a playful, flirty tone.

He smirked, pushing thoughts of Lauren out of his mind as he lowered his chin to his chest and looked down at Dani's upturned face. "No... I wouldn't care."

Propping herself up with her elbow, she tilted her head until it was at the right angle for her to reach him. Leaning in, she brushed her lips over his, lightly at first, then more firmly, sucking his bottom lip between her teeth. He tasted a hint of mint toothpaste on her tongue as he slipped it tentatively into her mouth. It had been many years since he'd kissed anyone but Lauren like this. He had almost forgotten how fun it could be and how good it could feel.

His heart beat faster as Dani deepened the kiss. In the background, he could hear the blipping of his monitor becoming more frenetic to match the rhythm of his racing pulse. “You’re not gonna make my heart start freaking out again, are you?” he murmured against her lips, slightly unnerved by the sound, but not enough to break the kiss completely.

As she caressed his face, tracing his jawline with her fingertips, she felt the side of his neck, where his pulse was pounding. “Don’t worry,” she whispered back after a few seconds. “What you’re feeling is a normal, healthy reaction to being turned on by a woman.” Her lips brushed against his again. “My heart’s pumping pretty hard too right now.” She took his hand and pressed his palm to her chest. “Can you feel it?”

Nick nodded. Through the crisp fabric of her scrub top, he could indeed feel her heart fluttering wildly beneath her left breast like a large butterfly beating its wings against her rib cage. He couldn’t resist wrapping his hand around her breast, kneading it with his fingers as he went back to kissing her. “You know, I was never really into the whole ‘naughty nurse’ fantasy until now,” he admitted when he resurfaced for air.

“This is no fantasy,” she replied, as she nuzzled against him. “This is for real. Rob was right: I do have feelings for you.”

Nick didn’t reply at first. He swallowed hard, a wave of guilt washing over him as he realized he felt something for her, too. How would his wife react when she found out what he had done?

“I like you, too, Dani,” he said, letting go of her breast. “I really do. But I also love Lauren.”

“Yeah, but does she still love you?” Dani asked, abruptly sitting back up. “Don’t forget, she could have flown down here before the hurricane hit, when she first found out you were in the hospital. She didn’t. You almost died, and she still didn’t care enough to come and see you.”

Nick winced as her words stung him. “It’s complicated,” he said with a heavy sigh.

Dani shook her head. “Don’t make excuses for her,” she snapped. “I don’t care how far away she is or how upset with you she may have been. That doesn’t change the fact that she broke the vows she made when she married you. ‘In sickness and in health’ - ring a bell? She should have been here. If it were Rob, I’d have hopped on the first plane as soon as I hung up the phone - and even now, I’m sure he would do the same for me if I

was sick or hurt. If you really love someone, you'd go to the ends of the earth to make sure they're all right."

Nick didn't say anything, but he had to admit, she had a point. It hurt that Lauren hadn't dropped everything to rush to his bedside, but did he blame her? He had left her, then betrayed her. He had broken his vows, too. He was no better than Lauren. In fact, what he'd done was a lot worse.

"I hope you can see how much I care about you, Nick," Dani continued. "I could have evacuated before the hurricane hit, but I stayed here for you. I could have lied about the baby; I could have gotten rid of it before anyone found out, but instead I ruined my marriage for you."

A lump rose in Nick's throat as he remembered the baby in her belly. His baby. "I hope you don't blame me for that," he muttered. "I appreciate everything you've done for me... but I never asked you to do any of it."

"I'm not blaming you for anything!" Dani replied quickly. "They were my decisions, all of them. But I made them because of you. Because you're the only thing that matters to me now - you and our baby."

She took his hand and brought it to her belly, pushing up the hem of her top so he could touch her bare skin. She placed her own hand on top of his and pressed it firmly against her flat stomach. Though it was far too early to feel anything moving within her womb, Nick did feel something stir inside himself. His heartbeat slowed as his guilt gradually dissipated, and a calming sense of peace came over him.

Despite his conflicted feelings for Dani, Nick already knew without a doubt that he would do anything for the son or daughter developing inside her. He would go to the ends of the earth, to the bottom of the ocean, or straight to Hell and back if he had to. He would die, if it came down to it. But he desperately hoped he would live instead.

Chapter 27

Brian woke in the middle of the night with the feeling that something was different. He knew it was still nighttime because the room was dark - no fluorescent light filtering through his eyelids. It was also eerily quiet, apart from the sounds of the ICU equipment.

He listened for the faint blip of Nick's heart monitor, wanting to make sure his friend was okay. His ears were able to distinguish it from his own by the difference in volume. The interval between blips was slightly longer on Nick's side, meaning his heart was beating more slowly than Brian's; he must have still been asleep. It sounded steady enough, and Brian felt reassured that Nick was all right, at least for now. Still, he couldn't shake the subtle notion that something had changed.

Relax, he told himself, trying to get back to sleep. *Everything's fine*. But it wasn't really; Brian's body ached, and he desperately wished he could roll over in bed. He was lying on his right side, where Dani and Elizabeth had left him, but he could feel pressure in his hip and a pins-and-needles sensation in his arm that told him he'd been in that position for far too long. It was past time for someone to come and turn him. *Where are you, Patrick?* he wondered impatiently.

Suddenly, his ears detected another beeping noise, distinct from the soft blip of the bedside monitors. With nothing else to do but lie in bed and listen to everything happening around him, Brian had become an expert at deciphering the different sounds made by the medical equipment. He had learned where each one came from and what it meant. This was an alarm on his IV pump, letting the nurse know his infusion had finished. Patrick was probably on his way with a fresh bag of fluid.

But minutes passed, and no one came. Brian's discomfort grew. He tried flexing his fingers, desperate to get rid of the tingly feeling in his right arm. Up until that point, every effort he'd made to move part of his body had failed, so he didn't actually expect it to have any effect. But to his astonishment, he felt his pinky twitch.

Brian's heart leapt with excitement. Focusing all of his concentration upon his little finger, he tried again to bend it. Again, it twitched. It may not have been much, but it was the first purposeful movement he had been able to make since the accident - to Brian, it was everything. It meant he wasn't fully paralyzed after all. If he could move a finger, perhaps he would regain function in other parts of his body, too.

His heart beat faster as he worked his way from head to toe, taking inventory of what he could control. He found that while he still couldn't open his eyes, he was somewhat able to wiggle his eyebrows. And although he didn't seem to be able to swallow, he could clench his abdominal muscles. Feeling his diaphragm move automatically as air was forced into his lungs, he fought against the ventilator for command over his own breathing. But the harder he tried to take or hold a breath, the more he felt like he was being suffocated. Instinctively, he tried to reach toward the obstructive trach tube, but

his hands remained at his sides, limp and still except for his right pinky, which managed another feeble twitch.

In the background, he heard another alarm go off, and he began to panic. His heart was pounding; his lungs felt like they were about to burst. But in the midst of his anxiety attack, he heard a familiar voice calling his name, trying to comfort him. “Brian? Brian! Hang on, bro. I’m coming...”

The next thing he knew, Nick was standing next to his bed.

Nick woke with a start. Having dozed off with his arms still around Dani, he was disappointed to find himself alone in his hospital bed. She must have slipped out of his embrace while he was asleep.

But he wasn’t really alone. Across the darkened room, he could hear the rhythmic hiss of Brian’s ventilator. The sound had become strangely reassuring to Nick, a reminder that Brian was alive, at least in the technical sense. He tried not to be troubled by the fact that Brian still required artificial respiration more than two weeks after his accident, telling himself that as long as air was flowing in and out of Brian’s lungs, as long as his heart was beating, there was still hope of him recovering.

That night, however, there was another noise that made Nick sit up and take notice. A high-pitched beep was coming every few seconds from some piece of equipment on Brian’s side of the room. His heart lodged in his throat as he looked over and saw a red light flashing. When he realized it was just the IV pump parked next to Brian’s bed, he relaxed and let out the breath he’d been holding. That thing was always sounding some sort of alarm. It probably wasn’t a big deal - perhaps the line had clogged, or the bag had run dry - but he pressed his call button anyway to summon a nurse.

While he waited for Dani or Patrick to turn up, Nick lay back down, but stayed awake, listening to the steady beeps and the whooshing sounds of the breathing machine. After awhile, he felt himself getting drowsy, his eyelids growing heavy as the white noise lulled him back to sleep.

Then another alarm went off. In an instant, Nick’s eyes snapped open again, and he sat bolt upright, his heart beating hard. He heard his bedside monitor react, blipping faster and faster as his heart began to race, but the alarm was coming from Brian’s side of the room. “Brian?” he said. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw that Brian’s chest was heaving, as if he was struggling to breathe. “Brian!”

Where the hell is the nurse? Nick wondered, smacking his call button again. He knew he wasn't supposed to get out of bed by himself, but this time, he couldn't afford to wait for help to arrive. Brian needed someone now. "Hang on, bro... I'm coming!" he called, ripping the oxygen cannula out of his nose.

Dani had raised his bed rail before she'd left, and in the dim light, Nick couldn't figure out how to lower it himself. Feeling a little like a baby stuck behind the bars of a crib, he scooted down toward the foot of the bed, where he could finally swing his legs over the side. Planting his feet firmly on the floor, he gripped the rail tightly to steady himself as he stood up for the first time in almost two weeks. His legs felt wobbly, and his heart was pounding so hard, it made him light-headed. *Please don't start freaking out on me now*, he pleaded with it, pressing his hand to his chest and giving it what he hoped was a friendly pat. He feared the defibrillator would detect an arrhythmia and fire off a shock at any second, knocking him off his feet. But nothing happened, and after he'd stood still for a few seconds, the dizziness subsided, and he felt his heart start to slow back down.

Easy does it, he told himself, as he carefully untangled himself from the web of tubes and wires attached to him. He expected one of the nurses to come running when he unplugged the cable that connected the electrodes on his chest to the heart monitor, setting off another alarm, but still, no one came to his aid. Nick left the cord hanging from the monitor and continued his quest, taking tentative steps towards Brian's bed. His legs were so weak, he had to lean heavily on his IV pole as he rolled it along beside him. Reaching out through the darkness, he found the bed rail and grabbed hold of it gratefully as he was rocked by another wave of dizziness.

Once he'd regained his balance, he looked down at his friend. Lying on his right side, Brian had gone rigid, his small body twitching slightly as it was wracked by spasms. His face was no longer a blank mask; instead, he was frowning, his brow furrowed with a look of pain. In the background, the monitor had begun beeping frantically as his heart raced. Not knowing what else to do, Nick rested his hand on Brian's shoulder and gripped it tightly to hold him still. "It's okay, Brian. Just relax and breathe."

That's Dani's line, he thought, realizing he sounded just like her. He didn't even know if Brian could hear him, but it was the only thing he could think of to say to help calm him down.

Reaching through the bed rail, he wrapped his other hand around Brian's and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "I'm right here, bro," he said, stroking the back of Brian's hand with his thumb. "You're gonna be okay."

All of a sudden, he felt something feather light move against his fingers. Startled, he looked down, loosening his grip on Brian's hand. It still felt limp and heavy in his own, but he was sure he had felt it move. Or was that wishful thinking? Maybe he had just imagined it because he hoped so desperately for it to happen.

There was only one way to find out. "If you can hear me, squeeze my hand, bro," Nick said, staring down at Brian's hand. Not only did he feel it for sure that time, but he definitely saw Brian's little finger twitch a fraction of an inch. "Yes!" he shouted triumphantly, squeezing Brian's hand back. "That was awesome, dude! Can you do it again?" He waited, watching, and again, Brian's pinky wiggled. Nick's face split into a wide grin. "Thatta way, Frick. Good job, man! You got this!"

Brian had started to relax - or, at least, his heart rate had come back down. He didn't seem to have control over the rest of his hand, so Nick wrapped his own little finger around his friend's, as if they were about to pinky swear. He squeezed Brian's finger and felt Brian squeeze back. It was almost like the first time Nick had felt his newborn son wrap his tiny fist around his finger, except Brian's grip was much weaker than baby Odin's had been. But that didn't matter. To Nick, this moment meant even more. It meant that Brian really was alive in there.

"You're gonna be okay," he repeated, moving his other hand from Brian's shoulder to his face. He brushed back his hair and stroked his forehead, trying to smooth out the furrows in his brow. As he traced one of the worry lines with his fingertips, he felt Brian's facial muscles working beneath them. Looking down, he saw Brian's eyebrows move, and his heart lifted with hope. "You're trying to open your eyes, aren't you?" he asked. "It's about damn time! C'mon, man, you can do it!"

Nick watched Brian's face closely. Brian's brow wiggled again as his eyelids began to flutter. Nick could tell Brian was fighting to lift them. "C'mon, Brian, lemme see those baby blues," he encouraged. "You're so close!"

Slowly, Brian's lids floated upward until they were fully open, and Nick found himself looking into a familiar pair of blue eyes. It took a few seconds for them to focus upon Nick's face, but once they did, Nick knew he had nothing to fear. Brian's eyes weren't clouded with confusion or dulled by brain damage. His gaze was as sharp and clear as ever. He locked eyes with Nick and didn't look away.

As Nick's features came into focus, Brian felt triumphant. After two full weeks of fighting to open his eyes, he had finally succeeded in doing it. It was worth the struggle just to see the excitement on Nick's face.

"Welcome back, Frick," he said hoarsely, his eyes filling with happy tears.

Brian couldn't talk, but tried to smile, hoping Nick would understand what he wanted to say. *Thanks, Frack.*

Just as he felt himself start to relax, the overhead lights flickered on. "What the hell's going on in here?"

Brian recognized the voice as belonging to Patrick, the night nurse. Looking past Nick, he saw a heavysset man standing at the foot of the bed, his pudgy arms folded on top of his protruding belly. It was the first time Brian had gotten more than a fleeting glimpse of Patrick. He wasn't what Brian had pictured, and yet, something about his appearance seemed strangely familiar, as if Brian had seen him before.

"Why are you out of bed?" Patrick asked, his eyes narrowing at Nick.

"I think Brian's having trouble breathing," Nick replied quickly. "His machines started beeping, and his chest has been heaving like he's gasping for air."

Patrick frowned. "Of course he can't breathe - that's why the vent's been doing it for him," he said dismissively, brushing Nick aside as he leaned over to look at Brian. When he saw that Brian's eyes were open, he jumped back like he'd been shocked. "Well, shit, no wonder he's having trouble. He's triggering the vent."

"What does that mean?"

"When coma patients start waking up, they try to breathe on their own and end up bucking the ventilator," Patrick explained, as he walked around to the other side of the bed and out of Brian's line of sight. Brian heard him open a drawer. By the dull sound of glass bottles clinking together, he could tell Patrick was rummaging around inside it. "I'm gonna have to sedate him so he doesn't hurt himself."

Brian's heart began to pound again as his panic returned. *No! Please don't,* he begged silently, still powerless to voice his wishes. The neck brace prevented him from shaking his head, but he opened his eyes as wide as he could, hoping Patrick would be able to read the expression in them.

“Wait, no!” Nick protested. “He’s finally awake! You can’t put him back to sleep!”

Thanks, Frack, Brian thought again gratefully. At least Nick knew how he felt.

“It’s ICU protocol,” said Patrick with a shrug as he came back into view, holding a small bottle and a huge syringe in his hand. “We keep ventilated patients lightly sedated to help them relax until they’re ready to be weaned from the ventilator. Otherwise they get upset and waste valuable energy fighting with it. It can be a really traumatic experience that gets in the way of recovery. The less stress we put on Brian, the better.” He filled the syringe with clear fluid from the bottle. “This will help him rest so his brain and body can heal faster.”

Nick hesitated. “Couldn’t we ask Brian what he wants?”

“He won’t be able to talk with the trach tube in. It takes a special valve to let air pass through his vocal cords,” Patrick replied matter-of-factly.

“Okay... well, maybe he could blink.”

Yes! Nick for the win! thought Brian, blinking slowly and deliberately to show them he understood.

But Patrick shook his head. “Like I said, it’s ICU protocol. Non-negotiable. Now go back to bed before I have to pick you up off the floor.”

He had a point with that last part. Up close, Nick looked terrible. It hadn’t been as noticeable in the dark, but now Brian could clearly see how unhealthy his color had become. Under the bright, fluorescent lights, Nick’s face appeared almost gray, and his lips had taken on a faintly blue cast. Brian saw them mouth the words *fuck you* as Nick glared at Patrick, flashing his middle finger at the nurse’s back.

It’s okay, Brian tried to tell his friend, brushing Nick’s little finger with his own as Patrick bent over him to administer the injection. *I’ll be okay.*

He felt the effects of the drug almost immediately. His eyelids grew heavier and heavier until he couldn’t hold them up any longer. As they began to droop, Nick’s face faded to black in front of him, and Brian drifted back into the dark.

“I’m sorry,” Nick whispered, watching the light flicker out of Brian’s eyes as his lids gradually lowered again. “Hang in there, bro. I know this is hard, but you’re only gonna get better from here.” He laced his fingers through Brian’s and gave his hand another squeeze. But this time, he didn’t get anything back from Brian.

With no reason to remain at his bedside, Nick shuffled slowly back across the room, walking with the gait of a ninety-year-old man as he wheeled his IV pole alongside him. Patrick followed closely behind to make sure he didn’t fall. “I don’t need any help,” Nick practically spat as he sat down on the side of his bed, breathing hard. The nurse lowered the rail and raised the head of the bed, then picked up the oxygen cannula off Nick’s pillow and handed it to him without a word. Not bothering to argue, Nick put it back in his nose and tucked the tubes behind his ears. He took a few deep breaths before he lifted his heavy legs onto the bed and lay back against the hard mattress. He could feel his poor heart pumping frantically, beating as fast as if he had just finished a five-mile run on the treadmill. *It’s okay - you can calm down now*, he told it, terrified of triggering another episode of cardiac arrest.

As Nick tried to get comfortable, Patrick reconnected the heart monitor cable so that he could hear the rapid blip of his heartbeat. He waited for the nurse to comment on its rate or rhythm, but all Patrick said was, “You all right?”

Nick nodded at first, feeling too annoyed with Patrick to ask for anything. But then his anxiety got the better of him, and he heard himself ask hesitantly, “Can... can you just take a quick listen to my heart and make sure it’s, like...?”

“Not about to crap out on you?” Patrick finished for him, smirking. “Sure.” He put his stethoscope into his ears and stepped forward. Nick’s skin crawled as Patrick pulled down the front of his gown and pressed the cold end of the stethoscope to his bare chest. He fought to keep his face neutral when Patrick bent over him, breathing noisily through his mouth as he concentrated. Catching a whiff of his stale breath, Nick wrinkled his nose. He smelled like rotten meat.

“Does it sound okay?” he asked after a few seconds, hoping Patrick would hurry up and finish. The male nurse was making Nick nervous. He wished Dani were there to reassure him that everything would be all right.

Before Patrick could answer, another alarm went off on one of the monitors. Nick’s heart skipped a beat, and he braced himself to be shocked by his ICD. But nothing happened.

“Hold on,” said Patrick. Abruptly, he removed his stethoscope from Nick’s chest and rushed back to the other side of the room. Confused, Nick looked to his left and saw a red light flashing on top of the monitor over Brian’s bed. That was when he realized - it wasn’t his own heart that was in trouble this time. It was Brian’s.

“What’s wrong with him?” Nick demanded, as Patrick stared up at the monitor. The nurse didn’t answer. Nick saw him reach across Brian’s body to hit the blue button on the wall behind his bed.

It didn’t take long for Dr. Elizabeth and Dani to come running into the room. Nick could tell they had both been woken up: they were wearing wrinkled t-shirts with their scrub bottoms, and their hair was in tangles. Dani took one look at the monitor and rushed to Brian’s bedside.

Elizabeth rounded on Patrick, whose puffy face was white. “What happened?”

“He... he was starting to wake up and fight the vent, so I... I gave him some succs,” Patrick started, stammering over his words.

“How much?” Elizabeth demanded.

“Um... one vial?”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened. “The whole vial? That’s enough to stop the heart of someone twice his size!”

Upon hearing this, Nick’s jaw dropped. He stared at Patrick in disbelief, his irritation turning into pure hatred.

“Shit... I’m sorry,” muttered Patrick, holding up his hands. “I may have miscalculated-”

Feeling his pulse pounding in his temples, Nick fought the temptation to hop back out of bed and punch the nurse right in his fat face. Then Dani’s voice rang out over the others, temporarily suppressing Nick’s rage.

“I can barely feel a pulse!” Her fingers were pressed to the inside of Brian’s wrist, her eyes fixed upon the flashing monitor. “He’s bradying down - heart rate’s only twenty-five and falling.”

“Give him half a milligram of atropine, IV push, while I set up for external pacing,” Elizabeth ordered, pushing Patrick aside as she ran back across to Nick’s side of the

room to grab the red crash cart from the corner. “We’ve got to get his heart beating faster before he arrests.”

Nick’s own heart was racing. “Please tell me he’s gonna be all right,” he begged her, his voice rising with panic.

“I can’t promise that,” Elizabeth replied shortly, shaking her head, as she rolled the cart over to Brian’s bed.

Nick swallowed hard, his stomach lurching. As he watched them attach the pacer pads to Brian’s bare chest and back, he was overwhelmed by a sense of déjà vu. He remembered how uncomfortable it had been to feel the pulses of electricity firing through his skin every second, forcing his heart to contract. “Hang on, Brian!” he called out to his friend, his voice wavering. “Stay strong, bro!”

Dani and Patrick rolled Brian onto his back as Elizabeth adjusted the settings on the defibrillator. “It’s failing to capture,” she said, frowning as she studied the monitor. The green spikes were getting shorter and farther apart. “He’s about to flatline. Start compressions.”

Nick felt like throwing up. His eyes filled with tears as he watched the code unfold.

“Get the CPR board,” Dani barked at Patrick. She lowered the bed, laced her hands over Brian’s breastbone, and began pushing down repeatedly, while Patrick retrieved a rigid piece of red plastic from the side of the crash cart. Working together, he and Elizabeth rolled Brian’s body to one side so they could wedge it under his back while Dani did her best to keep compressing his chest.

“Start bagging him,” Elizabeth said to Patrick, as she opened the top drawer of the cart and took out another syringe. Patrick disconnected the ventilator hose from Brian’s trach tube, attached an Ambu bag, and began to squeeze. “One amp of epi in,” added Elizabeth, as she slowly injected the contents of the syringe into Brian’s IV line. “How you doing, Dani?”

“I’m all right,” she replied, her blonde hair falling into her face as she bent over Brian. Her arms moved like pistons, pumping his chest up and down with a surprising amount of force. It was almost painful to watch. Nick ran his hand absently over his aching ribs, remembering what it felt like to be on the receiving end of her chest compressions.

“C’mon, Brian,” he whispered, his heart pounding as adrenaline surged through his body.

An eternity seemed to pass before he heard Elizabeth say, “It’s been two minutes. Hold compressions so we can see if he has a rhythm.” Dani stopped pumping and straightened up, rubbing the small of her back as they both looked up at the bedside monitor. The green line had been going up and down in waves while Dani was doing CPR, but once she stopped, it went completely flat. Elizabeth shook her head. “Asystole. Give him another amp of epi. I’ll take over chest compressions.”

Tears poured down Nick’s cheeks as he watched the two women trade places and continue their efforts to restart Brian’s heart, while Patrick went on squeezing air into his lungs. Nick’s stomach churned with another nauseating wave of *deja vu*. The nightmarish scene playing out in front of him was nearly identical to the one he had seen before, when the previous occupant of Brian’s bed had passed away. Nick prayed it would turn out differently this time. Witnessing the woman die had been bad enough, but this was his best friend. The Frick to his Frack. If Brian died, Nick didn’t know how he’d be able to go on living. He couldn’t handle any more heartbreak.

“Please don’t let him die,” he pleaded desperately, as they paused again to check for a pulse and found nothing.

“We’re doing everything we can, Nick, but so far he’s not responding,” said Dani, looking back at him with sympathy before she resumed CPR.

Nick shook his head, refusing to give up hope. “Why don’t you shock him? You hooked him up to the defibrillator, and now you’re not even using it!”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Dr. Elizabeth interjected. “The defibrillator can’t restart a heart that has completely stopped. It can only stop and reset a heart that has gone into a disorganized rhythm. Right now Brian’s heart has no rhythm at all, so we’re giving him drugs to hopefully reverse the cause of his cardiac arrest and help stimulate his heart to start beating again.”

“There’s the cause right there!” Nick snapped, pointing straight at Patrick, who was still bagging Brian. Caught off-guard, the nurse glanced up with a guilty look on his face. “This is all *your* fucking fault!”

“That’s enough,” said Elizabeth firmly, holding up her hand to silence his outburst. “Now is not the time to have this conversation. I know you’re upset, but we need to be able to concentrate in order to save Brian. We can’t do that without Patrick’s help.”

Swallowing hard, Nick nodded. He held his tongue, but he was shaking from head to toe, his fury only intensifying his fear. Helplessly, he watched from his bed as they worked on Brian, inflating his lungs with air, flooding his veins with adrenaline, forcing his heart to contract with their hands to keep his blood flowing. Finally, he heard Dani exclaim, "I feel a faint pulse!"

Lifting his head hopefully, Nick looked up at the monitor and saw the line spike. His heart leapt as Brian's began to beat.

"He's back in sinus bradycardia," said Elizabeth with a smile, slipping her stethoscope into her ears. She leaned over to listen to Brian's chest. "A little slower than I'd like, but it's a nice, steady beat."

"So he's gonna be all right?" Nick asked, feeling his body start to relax. His own heart was still racing.

Elizabeth hesitated. "We'll need to run some more tests," she replied. "He's not out of the woods yet."

Nick nodded, but he wasn't worried anymore. As long as Brian's heart was beating, he was alive, and at that moment, nothing else mattered.

Chapter 28

"I'm really sorry about Patrick," Dani said the next day. She and Nick were playing cards to pass the time while they waited for Brian to return. Dr. Elizabeth had taken him to another part of the hospital to run the tests she had promised.

"After what happened last night, we need to reassess his level of neurological function," she'd told Nick. "It shouldn't take too long."

"Just promise me you won't let that nurse Patrick anywhere near him," he had muttered, still livid over the level of incompetence he had witnessed the previous night. If Patrick's near-fatal mistake with the medication prevented Brian from getting better, Nick vowed to make him pay for it. He planned on calling his lawyer to explore his options as soon as he had access to a working phone.

“I know you’re upset about what happened to Brian,” Dani continued, setting her cards down on the bed, “and I understand. I would be, too. But it was an honest mistake. Patrick’s still pretty new to critical care nursing; he’s only been working on this floor for a few months.”

Nick frowned as he laid his own hand aside. “Well, I don’t understand why you’re defending him. If he doesn’t know what the hell he’s doing by now, he has no business being here. Sorry, but you guys don’t have the kind of job where you can afford to fuck up like that. It’s not like me missing a dance step or forgetting a lyric. His carelessness almost killed my best friend!”

Dani bit down on her bottom lip. “I know, and I’m sorry that happened. But we’re only human, Nick. None of us are perfect. Even more experienced nurses mess up sometimes, especially when we’re tired and overworked,” she replied, rubbing her temples. “When we volunteered to stay at the hospital through the hurricane, I don’t think any of us thought we’d be stuck here so long.”

“At least *you* can leave if you want to,” Nick pointed out.

She snorted. “And go where? My house was destroyed, remember? Even if I did have somewhere else to go, I don’t know how I’d get there. Half the island’s still underwater, and Rob took the boat.”

“Right... I’m sorry,” said Nick, feeling bad for bringing it up. He still blamed Patrick for what had happened to Brian, but he hadn’t intended to take his anger out on Dani. It wasn’t her fault. In fact, if she hadn’t been there the night before, Nick had no doubt that Brian would have died.

“It’s okay,” Dani said with a shrug. “I would never leave anyway - not right now, at least. I have patients here who need me.” One corner of her mouth curled into a coy smile as she slowly met his eyes.

Nick couldn’t help but grin back. “Yes you do. One in particular.”

Her smile grew. “Hm... I think I may know which one you’re talking about.”

“Tall guy? Blonde hair? Kind of an asshole?” He smirked.

She raised her eyebrows. “Asshole? No. Not at all. He’s actually super passionate about protecting his friends.” Her eyes sparkled, and Nick nodded, knowing he was forgiven.

“Ah, yes,” he replied. “You’re right - he really does need you.”

“I know,” she said, a provocative little smile still playing on her lips. Some of her cards slipped off the bed and scattered across the floor as she leaned in and planted a tender kiss on his forehead. “I need him, too.”

“You missed,” he said as she pulled away, pointing to his mouth.

“Oh, did I? My bad.” Dani leaned back in and kissed his lips long and hard. Despite the guilt he felt for betraying Lauren, Nick couldn’t help but enjoy it. A guy in his condition had to have something to keep him going, and Dani was it - his only source of pleasure, entertainment, and comfort, all wrapped up into one pretty little package. He put his hands behind her head, letting his fingers tangle in her hair as he deepened the kiss. By the time they broke apart, he was out of breath. “Was my aim better that time?” she asked, wiggling her brows.

“Much better,” he murmured, lying back against the head of his bed. “Right on the mark.” He inhaled air through the tubes in his nose, letting the flow of fresh oxygen refill his lungs.

Dani’s flirtatious smile faded as she looked at him closely. “You okay?”

Nick nodded. He could feel his heart beating slightly harder than normal, but there was no pain or sense of impending doom accompanying it. A kiss like that could make any man’s pulse pound. “I’m all right,” he assured her. “How about you? How you been feeling?”

She smiled again, her face aglow. “Pretty good, actually. No morning sickness yet. My boobs are tender, though,” she added, scrunching up her face as she put both hands over her breasts and gave them a squeeze.

He chuckled. “Yeah, Lauren always complained about that, too.” The words came out of his mouth before he could stop them. “Sorry,” he said, looking awkwardly at Dani. He knew she didn’t want to hear about his wife, the mother of his other children.

She shrugged. “It’s okay.” But he could tell by the look on her face that she felt awkward about it, too. Their conversation came to an abrupt stop, as neither of them seemed to know what to say next. After a long pause, Dani finally asked, “What are you going to tell her? About us, I mean?”

Nick shook his head. "I honestly don't know." He had been rehearsing that conversation in his head, imagining all the different ways it could go. Even in his mind, it never went well. There was no good way to tell his wife he had gotten another woman pregnant. No matter how it went down, Lauren would be devastated when she found out. He was almost relieved the phone lines were still down; at least that gave him a good excuse to delay the inevitable.

When he didn't elaborate, Dani opened her mouth and then closed it again, as if reconsidering what she'd been about to say. Nick knew she must have had more questions she wanted to ask, but she decided to change the subject instead. "We should start a new game, now that you've seen half my hand," she said, ducking down to pick up her playing cards from the floor.

"Sure," said Nick with a shrug. "I'm kinda tired of Crazy Eights, though. Can we play a different game?"

"Of course. What did you have in mind?"

"I dunno. Strip Poker?"

She laughed. "You'd lose. You're wearing a lot less than I am, mister," she said, looking at his skimpy gown.

He smirked. "You underestimate my mad poker skills."

"Ha! Well, in that case... it might be a little awkward if Elizabeth were to come back and find me in my bra and panties, so let's take a rain check on Strip Poker."

"I'd pay to see that," said Nick, smiling at the visual of her in sexy underwear. "So what do you wanna play?"

"Hm... how about Hearts?" she suggested with an impish grin, adjusting the stethoscope around her neck.

Snorting, Nick shook his head. "Has anyone ever told you you have a sick sense of humor?"

She laughed. "All the time. It's so true."

"You'll have to remind me how to play Hearts; it's been awhile." He and the guys used to play cards together on the tour bus, back when they all shared the same one. That

was before they had wives and children to bring with them when they went on the road. Now they each had their own bus and barely saw each other between tour stops. Glancing at the space where Brian's bed had been, Nick found himself missing those good old days.

"No problem," replied Dani. "I can teach you all kinds of card games. We nurses have so much extra time on our hands to play cards, you know." She rolled her eyes, and he smiled, noting her sarcasm.

Dani had just started to deal when Dr. Elizabeth poked her head through the doorway. "Can you help me transport Brian back to the room?" she asked.

"Of course," said Dani, setting down the deck of cards.

"How did his tests go?" Nick asked.

Elizabeth's impressive poker face gave away nothing. "We'll talk about it later," she promised, leaving Nick with the nervous feeling that he wouldn't like hearing what she had to tell him. He waited anxiously while they went to get Brian.

When the two women wheeled Brian's bed across the room, Nick was disappointed to see that he was still unconscious, as he had been ever since Patrick's disastrous attempt to sedate him. He watched Dani and Elizabeth put Brian's equipment back into position, making sure all the machines and monitors were properly connected and plugged in. He waited until they were finished to ask, "When do you think he'll wake up again?"

Elizabeth and Dani exchanged glances. Nick got the impression Dani knew something he didn't, and his anxiety grew.

"Let me grab his tests results, and we'll go over them together," said Elizabeth, holding up her index finger in a "wait one minute" gesture. "I'll be right back."

While she was out of the room, Nick looked at Dani, wanting to know what Elizabeth had told her. His apprehension kept him from asking.

When Dr. Elizabeth came back, she pulled a stool up next to Nick's bed and sat down, resting a manila folder across her knees. "I'm afraid it's not good news," she began, confirming Nick's fears. "As you know, Brian suffered a severe closed head injury that caused swelling and contusions in his brain. He's been in a coma ever since."

“Until last night,” Nick interjected. “He woke up last night.”

Elizabeth gave him a look of sympathy. “What you witnessed last night was most likely a seizure caused by Brian’s traumatic brain injury. We’ve been keeping him on a constant drip of anticonvulsant drugs to prevent them, but Patrick admitted that he was late in changing Brian’s IV bag and accidentally let it run dry. This may have contributed to any muscle spasms or eye movements you observed.”

Nick had been shaking his head in denial the whole time she was talking. “He wasn’t having a seizure; he was *awake!*” he insisted. “He squeezed my hand when I asked him to. He opened his eyes and looked right at me! He was trying to breathe by himself; that’s why Patrick gave him the sedative in the first place - to stop Brian from fighting against the ventilator.”

“I’m sorry,” said Elizabeth, shifting her weight awkwardly. “I didn’t mean to discount your version of events. It’s just that no one else has ever noticed Brian exhibiting any signs of emerging from his coma.”

“Just because no one else noticed doesn’t mean it didn’t happen,” Nick snapped back, glaring at her. “So why isn’t he waking up now?”

Dr. Elizabeth took a deep breath. “In addition to the trauma, Brian’s brain was also deprived of oxygen during his cardiac arrest last night.”

“You mean the cardiac arrest caused by the overdose Patrick gave him,” growled Nick, his blood pressure spiking as his heart began to pound.

“Calm down, Nick,” Dani said softly, reaching for his hand. He shook her off, not in the mood to be comforted or coddled.

“Don’t tell me to calm down! I’m pissed off, as I have every right to be.” He looked directly at Elizabeth. “I heard you tell Patrick he gave him too much, so don’t even try to deny it. If Brian dies, this hospital’s gonna be hearing from our lawyers.”

“I understand,” said Elizabeth, speaking in the cool, composed voice she had been using the entire conversation. Nick didn’t know how she could stay so calm when she was being threatened with a lawsuit. He could feel a warm flush creeping up his face, as it always did when he was upset. “Unfortunately,” Elizabeth continued, “the oxygen deprivation, coupled with the diffuse axonal injury Brian sustained in the car accident, seems to have caused catastrophic, irreversible damage to his brain.”

Nick blinked in confusion, overwhelmed by what he had just heard. “What exactly are you trying to tell me? Can you ditch the fancy words and just fucking say it?”

“Nick, Brian’s brain dead.” It was Dani who finally spoke the words he had been dreading, simply and directly. Nick felt his stomach drop and his heart skip a beat as he stared at her in disbelief. She bit down on her bottom lip, her brow creased with concern as she looked back at him, reaching again for his hand. “I’m so sorry.”

Nick barely felt his hand on hers. His whole body seemed to have gone numb. “I still don’t understand,” he said, shaking his head. “You guys were giving him oxygen and doing CPR the whole time. How could he be brain dead?”

“Even the most effective CPR isn’t the same as a beating heart,” said Dr. Elizabeth sadly. “High-quality chest compressions only produce about twenty-five percent of normal blood flow to the brain and other organs. In Brian’s case, it may not have been enough to preserve what brain function he had left.”

Nick didn’t know what to say to that. He just kept shaking his head, struggling to process what she had told him, refusing to accept the grim prognosis. Brian couldn’t be brain dead. He couldn’t be.

“Let me show you something.” Elizabeth pulled several pieces of paper out of the folder in her lap. “One of the tests I ran was an EEG, which measures the electrical activity in the brain. This is what a normal EEG looks like.” She flipped over the first page, tracing her finger along one of the series of jagged lines that spiked across the front of the paper.

“This is the first EEG we did on Brian to assess his brain activity the day after his accident,” she added, setting the second page down next to the first so Nick could see the difference. “Do you notice how the waves are not as varied or pronounced as in the example?”

Wordlessly, Nick nodded. He already knew where this was going.

“And finally, this one,” Elizabeth went on, turning over the last page, “is from today.”

Nick swallowed hard, his eyes filling with tears as he looked at the evidence in front of him. All of the lines were flat.

“As you can see, Brian has no neurological function left,” said Elizabeth. “For all intents and purposes, he’s already dead. The only thing keeping the rest of his body ‘alive’ at

this point is the ventilator. If we were to turn that off, he wouldn't be able to breathe on his own. Without oxygen, his heart would stop beating in a matter of minutes, and the rest of his organs would shut down."

Nick didn't want to believe her. "But this is only one test. What if it's wrong? Can't you run it again?" he asked desperately.

Elizabeth offered a grim smile. "You bring up a good point. It's only one test. But it's not the only test I ran. I also did an echocardiogram to make sure Brian's heart hadn't been damaged during CPR. While I was monitoring his heart, I gave him a dose of a drug called atropine to see how it responded. In patients whose parasympathetic nervous system is intact, atropine dramatically increases the heart rate, similar to the dobutamine you received during your stress test a couple of weeks ago."

Nick shuddered, remembering the medication that had made his heart race out of control.

"But," Elizabeth continued, "the atropine didn't have any effect on Brian's heart. That means his heartbeat is being controlled only by his heart's built-in pacemaker and not by the part of his brainstem that normally regulates the heart rate. In other words, his heart is working, but his brain is not."

"Okay, so maybe his brain is damaged, but that doesn't mean it can't still get better," Nick argued, as Dani tightened her grip on his hand. "How do you know he won't wake up again?"

Elizabeth looked at him with sympathy. "This is different," she said gently. "I do need to examine him to confirm the diagnosis of brain death before we make any decisions. You can watch if you want, and I'll explain what I'm doing."

Nick gave a brief nod. His body still felt numb, and his mouth was very dry. He hardly noticed when Dani let go of his hand and got up to help the doctor.

Elizabeth walked over to Brian's bed and pulled back his blanket. "First I'll call his name and see if he responds to commands." Leaning over Brian, she said in a loud voice, "Brian, can you open your eyes for me?"

Nick propped himself up on his elbow to get a better view, watching his friend's face hopefully. *Come on, Frick*, he thought. *You can do it. Prove her wrong!* But unlike the previous night, Brian's eyes remained closed.

“Can you stick out your tongue, Brian?”

Brian had always made the best funny faces, but his mouth didn't even move.

“Squeeze my hand, Brian,” said Elizabeth, wrapping her hand around his. She waited for a few seconds, then shook her head. “No response to commands.”

Nick refused to give up hope, reminding himself that Brian hadn't responded to commands any of the other times Dani or Dr. Rob had tested him either. All they'd told Nick then was that Brian was in a deep coma - not that he was brain dead.

“Next I'll check his extremities,” Elizabeth continued. Still holding Brian's left hand, she lifted his arm a foot into the air and then let it fall. Nick frowned as Brian's arm flopped limply back to the bed. Elizabeth followed the same procedure with his right arm and both legs before she stated, “His limbs are all flaccid and areflexic. They don't move on their own or resist when I try to move them.”

“But couldn't that be because of his spinal cord injury?” Nick argued.

She nodded. “Yes, it could. That's why we won't rely on one test alone.” She moved back to the head of the bed. “I'm also going to see if he responds to painful stimuli. I'll try to make him just uncomfortable enough that he moves in some way.” She pinched Brian's brow, pressing her thumb against the top of his eye socket. Just watching made Nick wince, but Brian didn't move a muscle. “Most people would try to reach for my hand or at least roll away,” Elizabeth pointed out. “Brian didn't react at all.”

Nick felt a sinking feeling in his stomach as he watched Dani write the results down on a clipboard. He remembered what she had told him the day he first saw her do a similar assessment on his friend: *“Technically, even a dead body will score twenty percent.”* Brian had failed every test so far.

“I'm going to examine his eyes now,” Elizabeth said, taking a penlight out of the pocket of her white coat. “I'm looking to see if his eyes react to light or move in any way.” She pried one of Brian's eyelids open and shone the light into his eye, moving it from side to side as she observed the response. Then she swept a cotton swab across his eyeball. She repeated the same tests on the other eye. “Both pupils are fixed and dilated. His eyes don't move or react to light,” she explained. “His corneal reflexes are also absent. He didn't blink when I touched his eyeballs with the Q-tip.”

Nick knew that was a bad sign. He had only heard the phrase “fixed and dilated” used by doctors and detectives on TV when they were talking about dead bodies.

“Next I’ll test his gag reflex,” Elizabeth went on. “I’m going to use a tongue depressor to touch the back of his throat, which would make most people gag or cough.” She pulled down Brian’s lower jaw to open his mouth and inserted the flat, wooden popsicle stick.

Please, Nick prayed, but Brian didn’t move or make a sound.

“The last thing I need to check for is spontaneous respiration,” said Elizabeth. “That requires me to take him off the ventilator temporarily to see if he tries to take a breath on his own. If he doesn’t, I’ll reconnect the vent.”

Nick nodded, remembering how Brian had fought the ventilator the night before. There was still a chance he would do it again.

Dr. Elizabeth disconnected the ventilator hose from Brian’s trach tube. “During this test, I’ll keep an eye on his end-tidal CO₂ - that’s the level of carbon dioxide in his blood. The normal range is between thirty-five and forty-five. When it rises above fifty-five, a functioning brain prompts the patient to breathe. A dead brain doesn’t.”

They waited, watching the number on the monitor move from forty to fifty. Nick held his breath as Brian’s carbon dioxide level continued to climb. Fifty-four... fifty-five... fifty-six. *C’mon, man*, he begged. *Breathe*. But nothing happened. The number blurred before Nick’s eyes as they welled with fresh tears.

An alarm went off on the monitor, as a blue light began to flash. Without a word, Elizabeth reattached the hose to Brian’s trach tube. The test was over, and the results were just as dismal as all the rest. It took a few forced breaths from the ventilator to make the number go back to normal, but Nick knew that was only because there was a machine breathing for Brian. He wasn’t doing any of the work himself. This time, he wasn’t even fighting with it.

Nick exhaled with a sigh of defeat. “So that’s it, huh?” he said hoarsely. The tears had started to trickle down his cheeks, but he didn’t bother to wipe them away. “He’s dead.”

Dr. Elizabeth nodded, her expression solemn. “I wish there was something else we could do for him, but there isn’t.”

Dani came back to Nick’s bedside. She sat down on the edge of the bed and wrapped her arm around him, rubbing his shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Nick,” she whispered.

He swallowed hard. “So what happens now?” he wondered. He was thinking about Brian’s family and about the other guys. None of them had gotten the chance to say goodbye. He couldn’t even call them to let them know Brian was gone.

“Well... that depends,” said Dr. Elizabeth. “The life support machines will keep Brian’s body functioning for a little while, until you’re ready to let him go. But in the meantime, you have some important decisions to make.”

The tears were dripping from Nick’s chin and falling onto his chest, wetting his hospital gown. “What do you mean?” he asked dully.

Dr. Elizabeth sat back down on the stool next to Nick’s bed. “One way people are able to bring something positive out of a tragedy like this is by donating their loved one’s organs. Do you know if Brian wanted to be an organ donor?”

“I... I don’t know,” said Nick with a shrug. After twenty-six years, he’d assumed he knew everything about his Backstreet brothers, but suddenly, there was so much he wished he had thought to ask Brian. Now he would never get the chance.

“We could check his driver’s license,” Dani suggested. “There’s a bag of his personal possessions under his bed, everything he had on him when he was brought into the ER.”

Elizabeth got up and went back over to Brian’s bed. She reached underneath to retrieve a small bag and carefully emptied the contents onto the foot of the bed. Nick felt a pang of sorrow in his chest as she pulled out the clothes that had been cut from Brian’s body after the accident. It only got worse when he saw Brian’s wedding ring and the watch his wife had gotten blinged out as a gift last Christmas. What would Leighanne do without Brian? Nick wondered, a lump rising in his throat. He was her whole world.

“Here’s his license,” said Elizabeth, sliding a card out of Brian’s wallet. She brought it over to Nick’s bed so they could all look at it. Nick’s eyes focused first on Brian’s face, but Dani’s drifted down to the bottom right corner.

“He’s on the registry,” she replied, pointing out the word DONOR with a tiny heart beside it, both printed in red.

Nick nodded, not surprised. Donating his organs did sound like something Brian would do.

Elizabeth lifted her head slowly, a strange look in her eyes as they landed on Nick. “Did you know you and Brian have the same blood type?” she asked.

He raised his eyebrows. “No. Really?”

She nodded. “Really. That means his heart may be a match for you.”

Nick stared, his own heart thumping hard against his ribs. “No... no way,” he said, shaking his head as he realized what she was suggesting. “I can’t take Brian’s heart.”

“Why not? He won’t need it once we take him off life support. Don’t you think he would want it to go to you?”

Nick hesitated. “Well... yeah,” he admitted after a long pause, “but... I dunno.” His head was spinning; he felt dizzy and nauseous. “I don’t wanna think about this right now. It’s too weird. Too soon.”

“I understand,” said Elizabeth gently, “but if Brian is a suitable match, we’ll need to move fast. There is such a thing as directed donation, where the donor’s family can name a specific recipient they want their loved one’s organ to go to, but we would need to find a way to get in touch with Brian’s wife to make that happen. We would also have to bring in a special surgical team to perform the transplant.”

It sounded like an impossible task to Nick, who still wasn’t sure he even wanted it to happen. The thought of feeling his best friend’s heart beating inside his chest freaked him out. “You don’t even know if his heart would help me. I mean, he used to have a heart condition himself. Can it still be donated?”

Dr. Elizabeth nodded. “Actually, yes, it can. His heart looked perfectly healthy on the echo. The ventricular septal defect he had surgically repaired has healed well and shouldn’t have any effect on the heart after transplant. There’s nothing structurally wrong with his heart now. It’s in great shape.”

Nick’s own heart was fluttering like the wings of a moth, making him even more light-headed. He wanted to throw up. “I need some time to think about this,” he said faintly. “And I would want to talk to Brian’s wife before we do anything. It should be her making these decisions, not me.”

“Of course, Nick,” said Dani with a nod, giving him a reassuring squeeze. “We’ll do everything we can to get word to Leighanne and keep her in the loop. We can use the satellite phone to try to get in touch with her.”

Nick swallowed hard. “You need to do better than that. You need to get her and Baylee down here so they can see him before...” He shook his head, unable to bring himself to say the words out loud. What a nightmare. He wished he would wake up to find it had all been a bad dream. It seemed unbelievable that he and Dani had been talking about Strip Poker less than an hour ago. Now here they were making plans to transplant Brian’s heart into Nick’s body. It felt totally surreal.

“We’ll see what we can do,” said Dr. Elizabeth.

“I’m so sorry, Nick,” Dani added again.

Yeah, thought Nick, tears blurring his vision as he turned to look at Brian, who never would have come to Key West if it hadn’t been for him. *I’m sorry, too.*

Chapter 29

It had stopped raining by the time Howie landed in Key West. As the airplane taxied to the gate, he turned on his phone, anxious for news about Nick. He found a text from Brian, letting Howie know he had landed and was on his way to the hospital. “*Just landed too. Heading there soon. How’s Nicky?*” Howie texted back.

As soon as the cabin door opened, he pulled his suitcase out of the overhead compartment and was one of the first passengers off the plane. He followed the signs for ground transportation and got into a taxi outside the airport. “I need to get to Lower Keys Medical Center,” he told the driver.

The man looked at him through his rearview mirror. “Is emergency?” he asked in a heavy Cuban accent.

“I hope not,” said Howie, swallowing hard. He held his phone in his hand the whole way to the hospital, waiting for it to vibrate with Brian’s reply. It had been an hour since Brian’s flight had landed, so he should have been at the hospital with Nick by then. When he didn’t text back, Howie started to worry. What if Nick had passed away while he was en route, and Brian was waiting to break the news to him in person?

Don’t think that way, Howie scolded himself. *Nicky’s not dead.* But that didn’t make him feel any less nervous when he walked through the front door of the hospital.

He looked uncertainly around the lobby, half-expecting Brian to be waiting there for him, since he hadn't told Howie where to go. Howie took it as a good sign when he didn't see him. *He must be with Nick*, he decided. But Brian didn't answer when Howie called his phone, so he went to the front desk to ask where to find their friend.

"Hi, I need the room number for Nick Carter, please," Howie told the receptionist. She was young, and he waited to see if she would recognize him or Nick's name. If she did, she hid her reaction well.

"Sure, one second," she replied, typing something quickly into her computer. "Sorry, what was the name again?"

That confirmed it for Howie: she had no idea who they were. *Millennials*, he thought with amusement. "Nick Carter. Actually, his full name is Nickolas - with a K."

"Got it," the girl said, as her fingers flew over the keyboard again. After a few seconds, she frowned. "I'm sorry, sir, but I'm not seeing a patient by that name."

"Are you sure you spelled it right?" Howie asked. "It's N-I-C-K-O-L-A-S. Last name C-A-R-T-E-R."

"Yeah, that's how I entered it, but nothing's coming up. I'll try it again." The receptionist went more slowly this time, saying each letter aloud as she pressed the corresponding key. Then she turned her monitor to one side so Howie could see what she had typed. "Is this correct?"

He checked Nick's name carefully to make sure there were no mistakes before he nodded. "Yep, that's it."

"Okay." She swiveled the monitor back around and hit the enter key. "Still no results found," she said after another moment.

Now it was Howie's turn to frown. "He must be admitted under a different name. Have you heard of the Backstreet Boys?"

"Backstreet Boys?" she repeated, wrinkling her brow. "Yeah, I think my mom used to like them. Why?"

Howie tried his best to remain polite and patient, but it was getting harder by the second. "Well, Nick's one of them. He may have used an alias to protect his privacy."

“Okay... so what other name should I try?”

“Um...” Howie racked his brain, trying to remember some of Nick’s old alter egos. It had been so long since they’d been forced to use fake names for reservations, he couldn’t recall a single one. “I’m not really sure.” He felt like an idiot as he looked down at his phone, hoping to find a new message from Brian. But still, there was nothing. “Didn’t someone else ask you about him earlier? Short guy, blue eyes, sandy hair?”

The receptionist shook her head slowly. “No, I don’t think so. Are you sure you have the right hospital?”

Howie was starting to get irritated. “This is Lower Keys Medical Center, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Well, my friend Brian got a call from someone at this hospital, telling them Nick had been admitted to the intensive care unit here,” Howie explained impatiently. “Can you call the ICU and check with them?”

“Yeah, sure. Hang on.” The receptionist picked up the phone and punched a few buttons. “Hi, this is Emily from the information desk. I have a visitor down here who’s asking about a patient. Do you have a Nick Carter on the floor? I can’t find his name in the system, but his friend says he might have been admitted under an alias because he used to be famous or something?”

Howie turned his head so she wouldn’t see him roll his eyes.

After listening for a long time, the woman finally said, “Okay... well, thanks for checking,” and hung up. She looked up at Howie through narrowed eyes. “The ICU clerk said there are no Backstreet Boys on her floor, that she would know if there were, and that one of their fans must be playing a practical joke on me.” She raised her eyebrows as if to ask if that was the case.

“What? No, I’m not a fan; I’m in the band! I’m one of the Backstreet Boys!” sputtered a flustered Howie. Then a startling thought occurred to him. *Could* this all be nothing but a bad prank cooked up by Nick and Brian?

“Well, do you know the name of the person who called your friend?” asked the receptionist.

“No, but I can try to find out,” said Howie, stepping back from the desk. His hands were sweating as he fumbled with his phone, his heart beating fast. If it turned out Nick and Brian had just been messing with him the whole time, he was going to feel so stupid. But would they joke about something this serious? He didn’t think so. This was too over the top, even for the two of them.

He tried calling Brian again, but only got his voicemail. “Brian, it’s Howie. Call me back as soon as you get this,” he said shortly and hung up. He wasn’t sure what to do next. *Maybe Leighanne knows something*, he thought. He decided to try Brian’s wife.

Leighanne answered on the second ring. “Hi - Howie?” She sounded slightly confused and a little concerned.

“Hey, Leighanne. Yeah, it’s me. Listen, have you heard from Brian since he landed in Key West?”

“Yeah, he texted me from the airport about an hour ago, but I haven’t talked to him since. Why, what’s going on?”

“Well, I just got to the hospital and can’t get a hold of him, and no one can tell me where Nick is. The woman at the front desk can’t find any record of him. We’re trying to figure out who called Brian from here in the first place. Do you have their name, by chance?”

“That’s so weird,” said Leighanne, sounding even more worried now. “I know it was a woman who left the message on his voicemail, but I never heard him say her name. I can probably find out what it was, though. Let me do some digging, and I’ll call you back in a few minutes, okay?”

“Okay, thanks, Leighanne.” Howie hung up. Feeling the receptionist’s eyes on his back, he wandered away from the front desk to wait for Brian’s wife to get back to him. As a last resort, he tried calling Nick’s phone, not really expecting an answer. Sure enough, it went straight to voicemail. He left a message, even though he knew Nick might not hear it. “Hey Nicky, it’s me, Howie. You’ve got me really worried about you, man. I sure hope you’re okay.” He hung up, not sure what else to say. If this was just a joke, he hoped Nick would hear his voicemail and feel horribly guilty for making Howie think he was hurt or... worse.

As much as Howie hated being pranked, a part of him prayed he was on an episode of *Punk’d* because it was better than the alternative. He looked around, half-expecting Nick and Brian to jump out from behind a piece of furniture, shouting “Gotcha!” But

nothing happened. Still, Howie clung to the hope that it had all been some kind of mistake.

His phone started vibrating in his hand, startling him. He looked down, hoping to see Nick or Brian's name, but it was only Leighanne calling him back. "Hey, Leighanne," he answered.

"I tried calling Husband, but he's not answering me either," she said, sounding both anxious and annoyed. "But I know the passcode for his voicemail box, so I looked up how to access it from my phone and was able to play back the message. The woman's name was Danica Logan."

"Danica Logan?" Howie repeated.

"That's right."

"Danica Logan. Got it. Thanks, Leighanne, that's a huge help. I'll have Brian call you back as soon as I find him." Once he hung up, Howie went back to the front desk.

"Danica Logan," he told the receptionist. "That's who called my friend."

She frowned. "The name doesn't sound familiar, but I'll look her up in our employee directory." Howie waited, his heart still pumping fast as he watched her enter the information into her computer. After a few seconds, she shook her head. "I'm sorry, sir, but we don't have a Danica Logan working here."

Howie shook his head. "How can that be? Both my friend and his wife heard the voicemail she left saying Nick was at this hospital!" He felt sick to his stomach. Something was very wrong.

The receptionist looked sympathetic. "I wish I knew what to tell you, sir, but I don't know that I can help."

"Can you at least tell me where the ICU is?" Howie asked, feeling like he was grasping at straws. "Maybe I could talk to someone up there."

"Third floor," replied the receptionist, pointing to the elevator. Howie took it upstairs, his heart pounding the whole time.

When the doors slid open, he stepped out and followed the signs to the intensive care unit, where he went through the whole process of trying - and failing - to get information once again. The ward clerk had never heard of Danica Logan and was sure

she hadn't let Brian in to see Nick because Nick, she insisted, was not a patient there. And, oh yes, she told Howie, she knew who the Backstreet Boys were, but had always been more of an 'NSync fan herself.

Beyond frustrated, Howie turned and walked away. What was he going to do? How was he going to tell Leighanne her husband had disappeared?

That sounds crazy, he told himself. Brian didn't just disappear. We're in Key West, for crying out loud. It's a small island; there are only so many places he could be. I just have to find him.

He wondered if Brian had stopped by the hotel before heading to the hospital. Maybe he was there now, waiting for Howie. Howie decided to check there first before he called Leighanne back, not wanting to upset her for no reason.

He took an Uber to the hotel where Brian had made a reservation, but was told Brian hadn't checked in yet. This didn't make Howie feel any better about the situation. Reluctantly, he booked a room of his own and went up to drop off his bag.

Once inside the room, he sat down on the edge of the bed and checked his phone again. Still nothing from Brian or Nick. As a last resort, Howie decided to call Lauren. If there was anyone else who might know something about Nick's whereabouts, it would be his wife.

"Hi, Howie," Lauren answered, and Howie immediately felt awkward. The last time he had talked to her was just before the U.S. leg of the tour, when he had called to offer his condolences on the loss of her baby. It had been four months since then.

"Hey, Lauren. How are you doing?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm all right," she replied, though Howie thought he heard a hint of melancholy in her tone. "Some days are harder than others. How have you been?"

"Not bad." He took a breath before getting to the point. "Hey, I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm hoping you can help. When was the last time you talked to Nick?"

"Not too long ago. He texted me on Halloween."

Howie swallowed hard. It had been three days since Halloween. "And that's the last you heard from him?"

“Yeah, why?” She didn’t wait for an answer, her voice rising with concern as she realized something was wrong. “Howie, is Nick okay?”

“I don’t know,” he confessed. “Brian got a weird phone call about him this morning...” He filled her in as best he could, finishing, “...so now I can’t find either of them, and I have no idea what to do next.”

“Call the police,” was Lauren’s immediate response.

Howie raised his eyebrows. “You think it’s that serious?”

“Didn’t you just tell me Nick and Brian are both missing? Sounds pretty serious to me.”

“Yeah, but... don’t you think they might just be playing a prank on me?” Howie asked hopefully.

“Are you kidding? You really think Nick could convince Brian to call you and lie about him being in the hospital, plus get Leighanne to play along?”

Howie considered this. It didn’t seem likely, but... “You didn’t know Nick when he was best friends with Brian. You wouldn’t believe some of the pranks those two pulled off together back in the day.”

“Yeah, but we’re not talking about Nick as a teenager; we’re talking about Nick now. The Nick I know would never come up with something that cruel,” Lauren insisted. “And even if he did, there’s no way Brian and Leighanne would go along with it.”

“I know,” Howie admitted with a sigh, as he let go of the last hope to which he had been clinging. “I was kinda hoping you would think I was overreacting.”

“Believe me, I wish I did. But if you don’t call the police, I will.”

“No, it’s okay, I’ll call them,” Howie agreed quickly, not wanting to upset her any more than he already had. Then another thought occurred to him. “But you know, I haven’t even been to Nick’s place yet to see if he’s home. Maybe I should go knock on his door first and make sure-”

“Howie, if he’s not answering his phone, he’s not gonna answer the door either,” Lauren interrupted, sounding exasperated. “Just call the cops and ask *them* to go to his house for a welfare check.”

Howie nodded. “That’s a good idea. Why didn’t I think of that?” he wondered. “Do you know where he’s staying?”

Lauren gave him the address of Nick’s rental property, which Howie scribbled onto a piece of hotel stationery. “Please call me back after you’ve talked to the police,” she begged him.

“I will,” he promised. “Don’t worry, Lauren. We’ll find Nick and Brian, and they’ll both be fine. This is probably just some stupid misunderstanding that we’ll all laugh about later.” He was trying to stay positive for her sake, but he wished he actually believed what he was saying himself.

He heard Lauren let out a shaky sigh. “I really hope you’re right,” she said, sounding just as anxious as he felt.

After they hung up, Howie looked up the number for the local police department and dialed. As he listened to the phone ring, he sucked in a deep breath, mentally rehearsing what he would say when someone answered.

“Key West Police Department,” came a crisp voice in his ear.

“Hi,” Howie replied nervously. “I need to report a missing person.”

The minutes ticked by as Howie hung around his hotel room, waiting for word from the police. The dispatcher he’d talked to had agreed to send an officer out to Nick’s place for a welfare check and promised to follow-up with a phone call to let him know what was found. In the meantime, there was nothing for Howie to do but wait.

He had spent at least half an hour on the phone with the wives - first Leighanne, then Lauren, and finally his own wife, Leigh - to update them on the latest. Then he had killed more time by calling the other guys in the group, Kevin and AJ, to let them know what was going on. Everyone was worried about Nick and Brian, but nobody more so than Leighanne, who booked the first flight she could find to Florida while Howie was still on the line with her. “Something has to be wrong,” she kept saying. “Husband would never go this long without returning my calls.”

The others took a more calm and rational approach, but made Howie promise to keep them posted. “If the police don’t find them tonight, I’ll fly out tomorrow to help search,” Kevin offered, and AJ agreed to do the same. But they all remained convinced that

Brian and Nick would be located quickly. Key West, after all, was a small island with an area of less than six square miles. As Howie had thought earlier, there were only so many places they could be.

But that didn't mean it was impossible for people to go missing there. As he was flipping through the channels - most of them news stations - on the TV, trying to distract himself, Howie caught part of a local story on another missing person from the Florida Keys.

“Police are asking for the public’s help in locating twenty-seven-year-old Stephanie Gale, who was reported missing from Key West on October twenty-first. Gale was last seen outside a Duval Street nightclub in the early morning hours of October nineteenth, wearing a black crop top and denim miniskirt,” the newscaster reported, as the picture of an attractive young woman appeared on the screen. *“Stephanie Gale is five-foot-six and one hundred forty pounds, with dyed black hair, gray eyes, and a fair complexion. She has a skull and flowers tattooed on her left ankle and another tattoo of a caged bird on her right side. If you have any information on Gale’s disappearance, please contact the Key West Police Department at the number on your screen.”*

Howie swallowed hard as he looked from the woman's photograph to the phone number listed underneath, the very number he had called an hour earlier. The fact that this woman had been missing for two weeks without being found by Key West's finest made him feel sick to his stomach. He couldn't imagine not knowing where Nick or Brian were for another night, let alone two more weeks.

Suddenly, Howie's phone rang, startling him half to death. His heart pounded against his ribs as he rushed to grab it off the night stand. “Hello, this is Howie,” he answered, despite not recognizing the number on the screen. He assumed it had to be the police.

“Mr. Dorrough, this is Detective Overton with the Key West Police Department,” replied the voice on the other line. “I'm calling to follow up on welfare check you requested on your friend, Nickolas Carter.”

Howie's mouth had gone dry. “Did you find him?” he asked hopefully, holding his breath as he waited for the detective to answer.

“Unfortunately, no, Mr. Carter wasn't home. My officers were able to get a hold of the property owner, who granted them access to search the house. The good news is that they saw no signs of foul play or forced entry.”

Howie let out his breath in a low sigh. “But Nick and Brian are still missing.”

“Yes. That’s the bad news. I’m assuming you still haven’t heard from either of them?”

“No. Brian’s wife is on his way down from Georgia; she’s really worried. It’s not like either of them to disappear like this, but especially Brian. He’s really close with his family; he and his wife are practically attached at the hip. He wouldn’t go this long without calling her back.”

“Good - that’s the kind of information I’m going to need from you to get this investigation going,” said the detective. “Do you mind if I come ask you a few questions in person?”

“Of course not,” Howie replied, relieved that his report was being taken seriously. “Please, come over anytime.” He gave the detective the name of the hotel and his room number, then settled back down to wait.

Outside his window, the sky was already getting dark. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter 30

It was the middle of the night, but Nick lay awake, listening to the steady hiss of Brian’s ventilator with tears streaming down his face.

The guilt he felt was overwhelming. Brian was brain dead, and it was all his fault. If not for Nick, Brian never would have come to Key West, and he wouldn’t have been in that car when it crashed. If not for Nick, Brian would still be at home, alive and unharmed. *This is karma, Nick realized miserably. This is what I get for leaving my grieving wife and sleeping with another woman, for almost drinking myself to death over my stillborn daughter instead of staying healthy for my son. My best friend is going to die because of me, and I’m going to have to live with his heart beating inside my body.* The thought made him feel sick to his stomach. He knew he would never be able to forgive himself for what had happened to Brian.

“I’m sorry, bro,” he whispered through the darkness. “I wish it was me. It should’ve been me.” How many times had he been brought back from the brink of death in the past few weeks? Even now, he could feel his poor heart fluttering precariously in his chest. The monitor behind his bed began to beep faster, its rhythm syncopated by his

fluctuating heart rate. He rested his hand on his chest and took a deep breath, trying to help it relax.

Across the room, he could hear the slow, steady blip of Brian's monitor. *"His heart's perfectly healthy,"* he remembered Dr. Elizabeth telling him. *"It's in great shape."*

"It's not fair," Nick said aloud, shaking his head. "If I could take your place, believe me, I would. In a heartbeat."

If only there was a way to give Brian his brain, instead of taking his heart. *But then he wouldn't be Brian anymore,* Nick realized. *He'd be me, but with Brian's body.* The thought made his head hurt, but he knew he was right. The part of Brian that was responsible for his personality, his thoughts and memories, everything that made him the person he had been was dead. The body lying in his bed was nothing but a receptacle for his organs, which were being pumped full of oxygen and fluids to keep them functioning until they could be taken out and transplanted into other people. It looked like his best friend... but it wasn't Brian. Not really.

Nick knew there was no point in talking to a dead body, but he wanted to believe Brian could still hear him somehow, whether his soul was already in Heaven or still stuck inside the shell of his body. "I love you, brother," he said hoarsely, a lump swelling in his throat.

It might have just been Nick's imagination, but he could have sworn he heard Brian's heart monitor start beeping faster. He sat up, craning his neck so he could see the screen. He had to squint to make out the numbers, but after being hospitalized for so long, he now knew what they meant. Brian's heart had been beating sixty times per minute, which was at the low end of the normal range. But as Nick watched, Brian's heart rate suddenly rose to sixty-seven.

Maybe he can hear me, thought Nick with wonder. *What else would make his heart rate go up like that?*

He was afraid to get his hopes up, but he had to find out. "Brian?" he called across the room. "Can you hear me, bro?" And to his astonishment, Brian's heart rate spiked to seventy-one before his eyes.

Nick's own heart was beating faster now, too. "You *can* hear me, can't you?" He could hardly believe what he was seeing, but the numbers didn't lie. Brian's heart was up to seventy-nine beats per minute, even though he was still lying motionless in bed. It had to be reacting to something, and Nick was convinced it was his voice.

“Dr. Elizabeth thinks you’re brain dead,” he said, watching Brian’s heart rate climb above eighty. “But you’re not. I *know* you’re not.” He felt defiant, eager to prove Elizabeth wrong. But first he needed definitive evidence that he was right.

He punched his call button, but was too impatient to wait for one of the nurses - probably Patrick - to respond. He didn’t need help to get up anyway; he had done it the previous night with no problem. He repeated the process of unplugging or removing as much of the equipment as he could, freeing himself from the tethers that were attached to the wall. Ignoring the alarms he had triggered, he climbed carefully out of bed. His legs were still shaky, and he had to cling to the bed rail for several seconds before he found his footing. He reached for his IV stand, holding onto it to help himself stay balanced as he took baby steps towards Brian.

Moving at a sloth’s pace, Nick pulled Elizabeth’s stool up next to Brian’s bed and sat down. He was already breathing hard, his heart beating fast from the physical effort he had exerted. Feeling anxious, he pressed two fingers to the side of his neck, as he’d seen Dani do so many times before, and found his pulse. He felt it pounding firmly against his fingertips and decided it seemed steady enough. Dropping his hand, he reached for Brian’s. “I’m right here, Frick,” he said, squeezing Brian’s hand. “You still with me, man?”

He waited for Brian’s finger to twitch, watching his face closely to see if his eyelids would flutter. But unlike the night before, nothing happened - at least, not on the outside. Brian didn’t appear to move a muscle, but his heartbeat accelerated again. Nick’s breath caught in his throat as he stared up at the monitor, watching Brian’s heart rate rise in response to his presence. “Yes, you are. You are still in there,” he whispered, squeezing Brian’s hand even harder.

After watching him fail every one of Dr. Elizabeth’s tests, Nick didn’t understand how it was possible, but Brian definitely wasn’t brain dead. He was convinced Brian could not only hear him, but comprehend what he was saying - which meant he must still have some cognitive function after all. It may have defied medical explanation, but Nick didn’t care. Brian had long held a belief in miracles, claiming to have been healed by the Lord’s hands when he was five. Now Nick believed in them, too.

“I’m starting to think you’re immortal or something,” he told Brian, laughing through the lump that had lodged into his throat. “But then, you’ve always been a lot stronger than you look. Remember you told me about how you tried out for the high school basketball team, but got cut because you were too short? Hell, bro, you’re one of the best basketball players I know. I’ve got like six inches on you, and you’re still better

than me. You've always been the Jordan to my Pippen." He shook his head ruefully, blinking back the tears that had risen in his eyes. "I knew you wouldn't go down without a fight, dude," he added, gripping Brian's hand tightly. "You just gotta keep fighting, okay? Keep proving people wrong."

Swallowing hard, he glanced again at the monitor. Brian's heart was pumping at a rate of ninety-one beats per minute now, and there was not a doubt left in Nick's mind that he was listening. "Fuck what Dr. Elizabeth says," Nick declared triumphantly. "I can't wait to see the look on her face when she finds out you're still alive!"

He found Brian's bed controls and pressed his call button. Still, no one came. Dani and Elizabeth were most likely asleep by now, and Patrick was probably lying low, afraid of facing Nick after what had happened the night before. Nick felt annoyed; what if there had been an emergency? He knew he needed a witness, someone to observe the way Brian's heart was responding to his voice. He worried no one would believe him if he waited until morning to tell them. He couldn't trust them to take his word for it; he had to show them now, while it was obvious. He would just have to find one of them himself.

"I'm gonna go get someone so we can show them, okay? I'll be right back," he said reassuringly, patting the back of Brian's hand before he let go. Gripping the bed rail for support, he stood up slowly and shoved the stool aside. Then he shuffled back across the floor, wheeling his IV stand alongside him. He walked past his bed to the doorway, where he paused to catch his breath before continuing through it.

The hallway was empty. Nick looked left and right, wondering which way the nurses station was. He remembered his bed being wheeled to the right when he was taken into surgery to have his ICD implanted, so this time, he decided to turn left. He stayed close to the wall, hoping it would help break his fall if he were to faint again. He hadn't forgotten his ill-fated first attempt to walk to the nurses station, when he'd ended up on the floor. He could still feel his heart fluttering in his chest, but he wasn't as woozy as he had been before. Aside from the weakness in his legs, he actually felt all right. Nick didn't know if the drugs were finally working or if it was pure adrenaline that was helping his weakened heart pump hard enough to keep up with the demands he was putting on it. As long as it kept beating, he didn't care. All that mattered to him at that moment was Brian.

Nick made his way slowly down the dimly-lit hall, running one hand along the red stripe on the wall while he hung on to his IV pole with the other. Suddenly, he was struck by a wave of *deja vu*. In his head, he could picture Brian walking down a similar hallway, people running past him in slow motion. Then it hit him: he was remembering the

hospital scene from their music video for “Show Me the Meaning of Being Lonely.” The set had looked just like this hallway, with a red horizontal stripe painted across the white walls. No wonder it seemed so familiar.

He had a weird feeling inside that didn’t seem to have anything to do with his heart, but he kept walking, determined to find Dani, Dr. Elizabeth, or even Patrick so he could prove Brian wasn’t brain dead.

As he rounded the corner, Nick expected to see the nurses station ahead of him, but instead, there was nothing but a closed door at the end of the hall. He continued toward it. A sign on the door said *Preparation Room*. Through the small, rectangular window, Nick could see a wall of cabinets with a countertop and sink. Deciding this must be the staff’s break room, he cracked open the door and peeked inside.

He was expecting to find a table and chairs where the doctors and nurses could sit down to eat or do their paperwork, perhaps a couple of comfortable couches for them to lounge on. Nothing could have prepared him for what he saw instead.

The only piece of furniture in the small room was a stainless steel table, which was rattling rhythmically under the weight of the two people having sex on top of it. He recognized Patrick first: red-faced and sweaty, the nurse was panting hard as he humped the naked woman beneath him, his fleshy body flopping about like a beached whale. Nick’s jaw dropped, his eyes widening as they took in that which they would never be able to unsee. He wanted to back out of the room, but his feet remained frozen in place as he watched with equal parts fascination and repulsion. It was like passing by a bad car wreck: he knew he shouldn’t look, but he couldn’t bring himself to turn his head the other way.

At first, he thought the woman with Patrick was Elizabeth, but no, her hair was darker than his doctor’s, her complexion far too fair. Even compared to Patrick’s pasty coloring, his partner was distinctly pale. The arm she had draped over his shoulder was fish-belly white with bruise-like blue blotches, giving her skin an almost marbled appearance. Nick was just starting to wonder if she was part of the staff or another patient when Patrick suddenly shifted his weight. The woman’s hand slid off his back, her whole arm flopping straight down like a broken branch falling from a tree. There was something strangely familiar about the sight of it hanging limply over the edge of the table.

As Nick’s eyes moved across her nude body, he saw a marking that made his blood run cold: a caged bird tattooed beneath her right breast. That was enough to trigger his memory. In his mind’s eye, he could see Dani hovering over her body with her hands

planted between the woman's breasts, pumping her chest up and down. He could hear Rob's defeated voice saying, "*I'm calling it. Time of death...*" while the heart monitor wailed on in the background. He could remember being transfixed by the woman's expressionless face, her glassy gray eyes open but out of focus. He didn't have to see her eyes now to know without a doubt that this was the same woman he had watched die over two weeks ago - and, judging by her mottled skin, she was now in the early stages of decomposition.

His stomach lurched, its contents threatening to erupt, as Patrick went on defiling the woman's corpse. Nick drew in a sharp breath and held it as he ducked back into the hallway, afraid he would gag if he allowed himself to inhale again before he had closed the door.

Unfortunately, Patrick heard him gasp. The nurse's head snapped up, turning towards the source of the sound. His eyes grew huge as they locked with Nick's, looking both guilty and terrified.

Nick took another step backward and tripped over the base of his IV stand. He lost his balance and fell to the floor, landing hard on his tailbone and taking the IV stand down with him. The metal pole toppled over with a tremendous crash, and the bag burst, spilling clear fluid all over the tile floor.

The racket was enough to bring Dr. Elizabeth running. "Nick!" she cried, when she rounded the corner and saw him lying in a heap at the end of the hall. "What on earth are you doing all the way down here? You know you're not supposed to be out of bed!"

Nick was breathing hard, still stunned by what had happened. His mind raced as he tried to remember how he had ended up there in the first place. "Brian!" he gasped hoarsely, his heart pounding hard against his ribs. "He's not... he's not brain dead. I... I pressed my call button, but nobody came, so I went looking for a nurse... and I found..." He shook his head, unable to put into words what he had just witnessed. "...Patrick," he whispered, pointing to the preparation room. All Elizabeth had to do was look inside, and she would see the same horror Nick had seen.

Her eyes followed the path of his trembling finger, but she did not poke her head through the door. Instead, she looked back at Nick with a strange expression on her face. "I sure wish you hadn't seen that," she said softly.

While Nick was wondering what that was supposed to mean, he saw her reach into the front pocket of her white coat and pull out a syringe. "Wait... what are you-?" he started to splutter, but before he could get the words out, Elizabeth plunged the needle into his

neck. Ignoring Nick's protests, his cries of pain and confusion, she injected the entire contents of the syringe into his central line.

Light-headed and woozy as he was, Nick still tried to scramble to his feet, but found that he no longer had the strength to stand. The ceiling felt like it was spinning over his head, more like a funhouse than a hospital. His heart hammered frantically in his throat, forcing the drug through his veins. The hallway began to look like a dark tunnel, as blackness closed in on him from both sides. Even as his vision faded, the image of Patrick violating his former roommate's corpse remained clear in his mind until Nick finally lost consciousness and collapsed, his head hitting the cold floor.



PART IV: QUEEN OF HEARTS

Chapter 31

Ever since she was a little girl, Elizabeth had been fascinated by the human heart.

Her interest almost certainly stemmed from her twin brother, Patrick, who had been born with a congenital heart condition. All throughout her childhood, she had accompanied him to his doctor's appointments. She would watch with wonder as they hooked him up to wires that could somehow take a recording of his heart's rhythm and turn it into a graph of wavy lines, which printed out on a strip of paper. She marveled over the way they were able to display moving pictures of his heart beating on a monitor, simply by pressing a magic wand to his chest. She asked almost as many questions as her mother did, and the doctors and nurses were always willing to satisfy her curiosity with the answers she craved. "Looks like you may have a future doctor on your hands," they would say to her mother with a wink and a smile. Elizabeth supposed that was when she had decided to become a cardiologist.

When their stay-at-home mother enrolled in nursing school so she could provide home care for Patrick herself, Elizabeth had helped her study and practice her procedural skills. She had learned right along with her mother, becoming quite proficient at checking a pulse, auscultating with a stethoscope, and taking a blood pressure. It was a way of trying to bond with her mother, who was usually too busy doting on her sickly son to pay much attention to her perfectly healthy daughter.

Despite being twins, Elizabeth and Patrick were as different as could be. She had always been the serious one, the responsible one: intelligent, ambitious, and wise beyond her years. Meanwhile, Patrick had struggled, both socially and academically. His chronic heart condition had prevented him from participating in activities or forming the kind of close friendships most kids make through sports and clubs. He had missed so much school, he'd been held back a year, which had only made things harder for him. Before his heart transplant, when he had been too sick to get out of bed, he had withdrawn into the imaginary worlds offered by books, television, and video games. After the transplant, he'd had a hard time adjusting to life in the real world from which he had been isolated for so long. The side effects from the steroids he took to prevent rejection - a puffy face, severe acne, and an insatiable appetite - made it even more difficult for him to be accepted by his peers, especially girls. Besides being overweight, he was shy and socially awkward. While his pretty sister was being asked out on dates and invited to school dances, Patrick stayed at home playing on his computer. While Elizabeth looked forward to college and her future career in cardiology, her brother dropped out of high school and became a sort of hermit who worked for their father in the family-owned funeral parlor in exchange for food and a place to stay.

Their father, a funeral director like his father before him, would have been best described as "distant." Though he had worked from home - his family lived in the second floor apartment above the funeral parlor - the long and odd hours his job required meant that he was rarely around. During a busy week, when the number of deaths was higher than usual, Elizabeth and Patrick would go days without seeing their dad. Even though they knew he was working right under their feet, the twins were forbidden from interrupting him while he was preparing for a funeral. But that didn't prevent Patrick from developing an unhealthy interest in dead bodies.

Perhaps it was because he had faced the prospect of dying himself that Patrick became fixated with death, or maybe it was simply that dead people had been kinder to him - or less cruel, at least - than the living. For whatever reason, while Elizabeth liked beating hearts, Patrick preferred them still. He enjoyed the company of the cadavers in their father's care - sometimes a little too much.

Elizabeth would never forget the day their father found Patrick fondling one of the bodies he had just finished embalming. She was halfway through the first year of her electrophysiology fellowship at Emory University Hospital in Atlanta and had flown home to Key West to spend her hard-earned vacation days with her family. It was just Patrick and their father living there at that point; after their parents' divorce, their mother had remarried and moved to Phoenix with her new husband. Elizabeth hardly ever heard from her. She had never been particularly close with either parent, but she maintained a tight bond with her twin. When their father flew off the handle and kicked Patrick out of the house, threatening to call the police if he didn't leave, Elizabeth couldn't help but sympathize with her brother.

"You don't know what it's like for me!" she had listened to him sob as she drove him up the Overseas Highway. She didn't have a destination in mind. All she knew was that she had to get Patrick out of the house and give her dad time to cool down and reconsider. She was also trying to understand why Patrick would do what their father claimed to have caught him doing.

Patrick didn't deny the accusation. Instead, he confided in his sister. "Every day since my transplant, I've woken up feeling like there's a dead boy trapped inside my body. I don't belong with the living. I belong with the dead!"

"Don't talk that way," Elizabeth had pleaded, picking up on the suicidal tone to what he had said. "You have so much to live for, Patrick. You were given a precious gift. You don't want to let it go to waste, do you?"

"No, I was given a *curse*," Patrick corrected bitterly. "You don't understand, Lizzie. I can't stop. I can't prevent myself from having these thoughts, and it's getting harder and harder to control my impulses when I'm surrounded by corpses all day long. I can't live like this anymore."

"Well, then maybe you *should* move out," she said. "Maybe this is the kick in the pants you need to get your own place and find a different job."

"Doing what?" Patrick scoffed. "I don't have a degree or any marketable skills. Who the hell would hire me?"

"You know a lot about computers," Elizabeth pointed out. "You could work in web design or tech support, something like that."

Patrick shook his head hopelessly. "I'm a thirty-three-year-old man with no previous work experience, except for an unpaid position at a funeral parlor that I'll never be able

to put on a resume - what if a potential employer called Dad to ask for a reference? And I'll never find a place to live with no credit and no way to pay rent. Face it, Lizzie - I'm totally fucked."

"You can come stay with me in Atlanta," she offered. "I'm sure I can help you get hired at Emory. They're always looking for custodians, orderlies, cafeteria workers, and that kind of thing."

It seemed like the perfect solution, and at first, it was. She put in a good word for Patrick at the hospital where she was finishing her medical training, and they took him on as an overnight custodian. He spent five nights a week mopping floors covered in blood and other bodily fluids and taking out trash bins filled with biohazardous waste. During the day, he slept on Elizabeth's couch in her studio apartment while he saved up for a place of his own.

But it only lasted a few months before Patrick was discovered down in the hospital morgue, molesting a female patient who had been pronounced dead earlier that day. Elizabeth didn't blame his supervisor for firing him. He was lucky the hospital kept the incident quiet; if the patient's family had found out, there surely would have been a lawsuit, possibly even a prison sentence. Instead, Patrick got to stay on her couch, free as a bird, and eat all the food in her fridge while she worked endless hours to keep it full.

After a year of living like this, Elizabeth was beginning to resent her brother. She was almost finished with her fellowship and would soon be looking for an attending position. If she brought Patrick to another city and allowed him to continue living with her, she knew he would never leave. As much as she loved her brother, she couldn't bear the thought of supporting him forever. She had worked hard to further her career, but one day she wanted to settle down, find a husband, and start a family. There had to be another way to help Patrick without sacrificing her own happiness.

The solution came to her shortly after she'd accepted a position at Lower Keys Medical Center in her hometown of Key West. Moving back meant it would be almost impossible for Patrick to avoid their father, who was still running the funeral parlor there. She was sure he would have retired by now if he'd had someone to take over the family business, but Patrick had been written out of his will. As their father's only remaining heir, Elizabeth stood to inherit the property, but had no interest in becoming a funeral director herself. Her passion was for hearts that were still beating - but she knew how to make them stop.

Her father had already been prescribed a particularly potent cardiac drug to treat his atrial fibrillation, a type of irregular heartbeat that was fairly common in older men. All

she had to do was crush up a few extra pills and dissolve the powder into his drink while she was over for dinner. When she left that night, there was no doubt in her mind that the toxic level of the drug building up in her father's system would be more than enough to trigger a lethal arrhythmia.

Sure enough, she got a call from the police the next day to notify her that her father had been found dead by one of his employees early that morning. She pretended to mourn, but in truth, she didn't feel much at all. She and her father had never been close.

After an autopsy, it was determined that Henry Gravel had died of cardiac arrest caused by an accidental overdose of his prescribed medication. No foul play was suspected, and Elizabeth became the sole beneficiary of both the funeral home and a substantial life insurance payout, which she was happy to share with her brother. Finally, Patrick had a place to live and enough money to support himself, at least until he found a way of earning his own income.

It was the perfect solution to their problem - and it had been all too easy to pull off.

Brian wished he could have warned Nick.

At first, everything had seemed relatively normal. Brian's day had started out the same as every other morning since the accident. He woke up in his hospital bed, grateful to be alive but disappointed to find he could no longer move his finger, nor open his eyes. Completely helpless once more, he endured the daily humiliation of having his broken body bathed by Dani and examined by Dr. Elizabeth.

Physical therapy usually came next. Brian had learned to look forward to these sessions, for the passive range of motion exercises Dani did with him each day were the only way he was able to stretch and work out his arms and legs. As an athlete, he appreciated her efforts to prevent his muscles from atrophying, even though they sometimes seemed pointless - he didn't know if he would ever be able to use those parts of his body again. Still, he wanted to maintain as much muscle tone and flexibility as he could.

But that morning, Dr. Elizabeth disrupted his routine. "We're going to take Brian down the hall for some tests," he heard her tell Nick, as she and Dani bustled around his bed, getting the equipment ready to be moved. "After last night, we need to reassess his level of neurological function. It shouldn't take too long."

“Just promise me you won’t let that nurse Patrick anywhere near him,” Nick replied none-too-politely. Brian didn’t know all of the details, but he had heard enough of Nick’s rant to realize how close he had come to dying the previous night.

“Don’t worry,” the doctor assured him, as she unlocked the wheels of Brian’s bed and began rolling it toward the door. “I’ll be doing the testing myself. Patrick’s not even working today.”

But this turned out to be a lie. When she wheeled Brian into another room, it was Patrick who helped her transfer him from his bed onto a hard table.

“Glad to see you put your girlfriend back in the fridge,” Brian heard her tell him in an undertone. “She’s not going to stay fresh much longer, you know.”

“I know,” said Patrick, sounding annoyed. “All the more reason to start planning for the next one. When are you gonna let these guys go?”

“When I’m finished with them,” Elizabeth replied waspishly. “You’ve had your fun; now let me have mine. A little privacy, please?”

Brian had no idea what they were talking about, but it made him feel uncomfortable. He heard the door close as Patrick walked out, leaving him alone with Elizabeth.

His apprehension only grew when she took off his gown. He expected her to put a blanket over his body, but she did not. Lying naked under the bright fluorescent light that filtered through his eyelids, Brian had never felt so exposed. He longed to be able to cover himself up or at least cross his legs to maintain some level of modesty, but he still couldn’t move a muscle. Goosebumps rose on his bare skin - for a hospital running on back-up power, the room was surprisingly chilly.

If Elizabeth noticed his discomfort, she didn’t do anything about it. She only made it worse when she started sticking additional electrodes to his body; the adhesive gel on the back of each was cool, and her hands were even colder. Having endured an electrocardiogram at each of his annual heart check-ups as a child, Brian recognized the pattern of the lead placement: a cluster of them along the left side of his chest, another on the right side, one on each of his arms, and one on each leg. He wondered why she was checking his heart when the problem seemed to be with his brain and spinal cord. Being a cardiologist, she wanted to cover all her bases, he supposed.

Dr. Elizabeth connected the leads, and Brian heard the EKG machine beep as it began to print out a recording of his heart rhythm. It was quick and painless, but he still felt anxious.

Afterwards, she peeled off the electrodes, painfully pulling out hair from his chest, arms, and legs along with them. He hoped she would cover him back up, but she didn't. Instead, she began slathering his chest with something cold and slimy. It felt like the gel used during an ultrasound, but the way her hands rubbed it almost sensually over his skin made it seem more like massage lotion. Brian's uneasiness grew. What was going on? He wished she would at least talk to him and tell him what she was doing, the way Dani always did. But Dr. Elizabeth didn't say a word until halfway through the exam.

As he had inferred from the copious amount of conductive gel, the next test was an echocardiogram. Like the EKG, Brian had had enough echoes done back in the day to know the drill. The most difficult part for him had always been lying still enough for the doctor to get a good look at his heart. This time, that wasn't a problem. He had no other choice but to lie perfectly motionless as Dr. Elizabeth moved the transducer over his chest. It didn't hurt, but it did bring back bad memories of being told by his old cardiologist that he needed open-heart surgery.

"Beautiful," he heard Elizabeth whisper, as she held the transducer in place.

Brian's blood ran cold, as it suddenly dawned on him why she was really running all these diagnostic tests. It wasn't about making sure he was okay. It was about seeing if he was a match for Nick. Nick desperately needed a new heart, and Dr. Elizabeth wanted to know if Brian's heart was healthy enough to be donated.

He heard the faint *whoosh* of his heartbeat on the ultrasound machine get faster and louder as his heart began to hammer inside his chest. Surely, Dr. Elizabeth would hear it, too, and realize he wasn't in a coma, that he could comprehend what was happening. But if she did, she didn't react.

His mind was racing as rapidly as his heart. Did he and Nick even have the same blood type? He knew his own type, but not Nick's. He wasn't sure if Nick even knew - not that it mattered; a simple test could tell the hospital both their blood types. He figured Dr. Elizabeth must have already found out that he and Nick did, in fact, share the same type, or she wouldn't have felt the need to test him any further.

But did she know about the holes in his heart? If she hadn't before, he supposed she would find out by looking at it from different angles. Both holes had been repaired

during his surgery over twenty-one years earlier, and he'd had no problems since, but he wondered if the defects would prevent his heart from being suitable for donation.

Brian felt deeply conflicted. On one hand, he wanted to help Nick. Nick was his best friend, the little brother he'd never had. He would do anything for Nick, or so he had thought. But would he die so that Nick could live? If saving Nick's life meant sacrificing his own, Brian wasn't so sure. It may have seemed selfish, but he wasn't just thinking about himself. What would his family do without him? He couldn't bear the thought of leaving Leighanne and Baylee behind.

But then, Nick had a wife and son, too, not to mention another child on the way. Were Lauren, Odin, and the baby any less important? Nick was not even forty years old yet; he had so much life left to live. Brian was only five years older; he still had a lot of life ahead of him, too, but did he want to spend it like this? He wasn't sure about that, either.

He didn't know whether to be relieved or disturbed by the fact that it wasn't his decision to make. At the end of the day, Dr. Elizabeth and his family would be the ones deciding his fate. His heart, his whole life, was in their hands. *God, please guide them in the right direction*, he prayed. He didn't know which direction that was - but he knew his Heavenly Father would. If it was God's will for him to die in order to save Nick, just as His son Jesus had died to save the world, then Brian would do it. Because of his Savior, he didn't fear death, for he knew his soul would go on to a better place when he passed away. He was just afraid of what it would do to his family here on Earth.

As Brian's mind wandered with increasingly dark thoughts, Dr. Elizabeth continued the echocardiogram. It seemed routine at first, just like the ones he'd become accustomed to as a little kid. But then, as the doctor held the probe in place with one hand, her other hand drifted down his body, below his waist.

Brian's heart skipped a beat as he felt her fingers close firmly around his flaccid penis. If he had been in control of his breathing, he would have gasped, but he couldn't do anything to indicate his shock or displeasure as she began to pull and squeeze. In fact, his body reacted the opposite way, the organ stiffening in response to the stimulation. As it rose to its full length, the rest of him remained limp and still, unable to resist. Only his heart reacted, skipping around inside his chest as it raced.

He could tell she was watching it on the screen by the way she pushed the transducer deeper into his sternum, as if she wanted a better picture. Was this part of the test? Somehow, he didn't think so.

He felt betrayed - betrayed by the doctor who was doing this to him, betrayed by his body for letting it happen. Tears filled his eyes as she went on tugging, working him almost to the point of release. But before he reached his climax, he heard the table rattle, creaking beneath their combined weight as she climbed on top of him.

No! he wanted to cry, as she lowered herself onto his erection. Against his will, he felt himself enter her. She was warm and wet, but he experienced no pleasure from penetrating her, only shame and horror. As she began to grind against him, thrusting her hips to drive him deeper inside her, his stomach churned with nausea. He desperately wanted to push her off him, but he was utterly powerless to stop what was happening.

The pressure on his chest was lifted as she let go of the ultrasound probe. Seconds later, he felt the familiar round disc of her stethoscope sliding over his skin. *What the hell?* he thought, his heart beating frantically beneath it. Was she getting off on hearing it pound while she humped his paralyzed body? Judging by the sound of her ragged breathing, it was a pretty safe bet. Brian felt sick.

The tears leaked out from under his eyelids, trickling unchecked down his cheeks as she went on assaulting him. His only way of escaping the pain and humiliation was to try to go somewhere else in his mind. *Leighanne*, he thought, forcing himself to focus on his wife's face. *I love you so much, baby. There ain't no place like you.*

He wished he could click his heels and wake up in his own bed with his wife on top of him instead. But like Nick before him, Brian knew there was no easy way out.

If only he could have warned Nick of what was to come.

Elizabeth had lost count of how many hearts she had listened to over the years. Healthy hearts, diseased hearts, dying hearts. Hearts that fluttered and hearts that stuttered. Hearts that raced and hearts being paced. Galloping hearts, ambling hearts, and every kind of heart in between. But none had brought her as much excitement as listening to Brian Littrell's heart beat.

It had long been a dream of hers, ever since her college days, when his poster had hung on the wall of her dorm room. She had become a fan of the Backstreet Boys just a few months before the start of her freshman year. From the beginning, Brian had been her favorite. It was hearing the news of his need for open-heart surgery that had first drawn her to him, and the more she learned about his medical history - from the heart defect

he'd been born with to the endocarditis that had almost killed him when he was five - the more she fell in love with him. She liked his music, but more than anything, she wanted to listen to his heart and hear it murmur through her stethoscope... then lay her head on his chest and listen to it thrum in her ear as she felt it throb beneath her cheek. She would even practice on his poster when her roommate wasn't around, playing heartbeat sound clips on her computer and pretending they had come from him. The human heart made the most beautiful music she had ever heard.

It had taken her twenty-one years to turn her fantasy into a reality, but finally, she found herself living out her dream. The EKG had given her a striking piece of art, a priceless souvenir - perhaps she'd even frame the rhythm strip and put it on her wall so she could gaze at the perfect waveform of Brian's heartbeat whenever she wanted. The echo had been mere foreplay, a way to get herself aroused as she watched his heart pump with tantalizing force on the ultrasound screen. Then came the main event. Her own heart hammered erratically as she writhed on top of him, feeling his pulse between her legs as his heart pounded through the earpieces of her stethoscope.

She paused to watch the waveform on the monitor, satisfied to see that she had brought his heart rate up to one hundred beat per minute - pretty impressive considering he was just lying there passively while she did all the work. She wondered if he was getting as much pleasure out of it as she was.

She paused to wipe the ultrasound gel off his chest so she could see the thin sternotomy scar running down its center more clearly. His surgeon had obviously taken great care to suture his incision neatly, and the scar had healed well over the years. It was hardly noticeable now, yet Elizabeth could not take her eyes off it. She had been waiting so long for this opportunity. Her breath caught in her throat as she traced her fingers lightly along the faint, white line, her body trembling with desire.

Pulling the stethoscope out of her ears, she set it aside and changed positions. Still straddling his hips, she leaned forward until she was lying on his stomach. She lowered her chin and touched the tip of her tongue to the top of his scar. She let it linger there for a few seconds, savoring the taste of him, before she slowly licked the length of the incision. Then she lay her head on his chest, turning it to one side so she could feel the warmth of his skin against her cheek and hear the beat of his heart in her ear. It was enough to take her breath away, bringing her to the point of orgasm. She tried to stifle her moans of pleasure, not wanting them to overpower the most beautiful sound she had ever heard.

She could have stayed that way all day, feeling Brian's chest rise and fall steadily beneath her as the ventilator breathed air into his lungs, listening to his heartbeat slow

back down to its resting rate. But long before that happened, she felt his stomach lurch and heard a horrible retching sound.

Realizing he was about to vomit, she sat bolt upright and regretfully hoisted herself off of him. She hurriedly pulled her scrub pants back on as she stumbled over to the aspirator, knowing she needed to suction out his esophagus before his stomach contents went into his airway. As long as he was paralyzed, he lacked the protective reflexes necessary to prevent himself from aspirating. Thankfully, Brian hadn't been fed solid food in two-and-a-half weeks, so there wasn't anything for him to throw up but bile.

"If you were trying to turn me off, you got your wish," she sighed, as she stuck the suction tip down his throat and sucked his vomit up into the tube. She supposed it had been presumptuous of her to think he would experience the same level of pleasure as she had.

But no matter. It was almost time for her to take Brian back to his room and break the news to Nick that he was brain dead. In another day or two, she would have him all to herself again.

Had she known Nick would go wandering that night, she might have done things differently.

Chapter 32

Nick woke up slowly, one sense at a time. First his ears became aware of the faint blipping of the heart monitor in the background. Next his nostrils detected the distinct, chemical smell of the oxygen cannula, plastic tubing combined with disinfectant. Then he turned his head and felt the soft, cool pillowcase brush his cheek. Parting his cracked lips, he ran the tip of his tongue along the back of his teeth to work up some saliva before he swallowed, trying to get rid of the bitter taste in his parched mouth. Finally his eyes fluttered open, and he found himself squinting up at the fluorescent light hanging from the plain white ceiling over his hospital bed.

Blinking, he lifted his pounding head and looked to his left. Brian was lying in the other bed, his body motionless but for the subtle rise and fall of his chest. Feeling relieved to know his friend was still alive, Nick turned his head to the right and found Dr. Elizabeth sitting next to his bed.

“Good morning,” she said with a smile that didn’t quite meet her eyes.

All at once, memories from the night before came flooding back into Nick’s befuddled mind, making him wonder whether they were real or imagined. He could picture Patrick on top of the dead woman’s body... but surely that had just been another nightmare, not something he had actually seen. As for Elizabeth sticking a needle into his neck... he must have had another cardiac episode, another near-death experience, and now he was confusing her real-life efforts to resuscitate him with what had happened in his head.

“Did I code again?” he croaked.

Elizabeth shook her head. “Not this time. You just passed out.”

Nick frowned. *Because I really did leave my room and walk all the way down the hall?* he wondered, still feeling confused. As he became more aware of his body, he realized he was completely naked underneath the covers. What had happened to his hospital gown? Before he could ask, he cleared his dry throat and swallowed with difficulty. Turning his head the other direction, he tried to reach for the pitcher of water on the tray beside his bed, but something held his hand back.

Looking down, he saw that his left wrist had been bound to the bed rail by a thick strap. His heart began to race when he realized his right arm was also in a restraint. He couldn’t see his legs beneath the blanket, but when he tried to raise his knees, he was met with resistance around both his ankles. His mouth dropped open as he looked back up at Dr. Elizabeth. “Why did you tie me down?” he demanded, giving her an accusatory glare.

“We didn’t want you pulling out your tubes or trying to get out of bed again,” she replied, raising her eyebrows at him. “You could have seriously injured yourself last night.”

So it really *had* happened. Nick’s mind reeled, remembering everything from the previous night. “*You’re* the reason I passed out!” he protested. “What the fuck did you inject me with?”

“Just a mild sedative to help you sleep,” said Elizabeth, maintaining her thin-lipped smile.

Nick scoffed. “Oh, a mild sedative, huh? Like what that freak Patrick almost killed Brian with?”

Elizabeth's nostrils flared, but she kept her composure. "You've been through so much," she said softly, "what with Brian-

"BRIAN'S NOT BRAIN DEAD!" Nick shouted over her, his neck straining as his head popped up off the pillow again. "You didn't even give me a chance to show you last night. He can hear us! His heart rate went up when I talked to him!"

The doctor looked down at him with sympathy. "You may notice more and more fluctuations in his heart rate as his body begins to shut down and his heart loses the ability to regulate its rhythm. It's a normal part of the dying process and doesn't change his prognosis."

Nick shook his head, refusing to accept this explanation. "You don't believe me? Well, guess what - I don't believe you either." He flopped back against his pillow, breathing somewhat harder than usual.

Dr. Elizabeth blinked, as if taken aback by his response. "Regardless of whether you believe me or not, I stand by the diagnosis I made yesterday: Brian is brain dead," she replied matter-of-factly. "The sooner we proceed with organ donation, the better."

Nick's bedside monitor beeped rapidly as his heart hammered against his ribs. "You can't take his organs without consent, and I *don't* consent," he spat, still glaring at her.

"Actually, we don't need your consent to harvest his organs," said the cardiologist gently. "By enrolling in the donor registry, Brian has already authorized the removal of any organs or tissues we deem suitable for donation. We're only trying to reach his wife as a courtesy, not to ask for her consent. If you decide you don't want his heart, it will go to another recipient."

Nick's mouth dropped open. "You can't do that!" he cried, using all of his core strength to pull himself back up into a sitting position. "Brian's not dead!" A warm flush was creeping up his neck and into his face. He could feel the veins in his forehead protruding as his pulse pounded and his blood pressure spiked. *Calm down*, warned a voice in the back of his head. Nick knew he needed to get his heart rate under control before it set off his ICD again, but at that moment, he didn't care. "You know who is, though?" he continued, his voice rising. "That woman I saw Patrick with last night! Can we talk about that for a second? Do you even care about the fact that one of your nurses is a goddamned necrophiliac who fucks the corpses of dead patients?!"

Elizabeth heaved a sigh and hung her head. “I had hoped the sedative would help you forget what you saw last night,” she admitted quietly.

Nick stared at her in disbelief. “*Forget?* How the hell could I ever forget seeing something like that?! Trust me, I wish I could, but I’ll never be able to unsee it.” He shuddered.

Dr. Elizabeth didn’t say anything back at first. The longer she stayed like that, looking down at her lap in silence, the more disturbed Nick became by her apparent lack of concern over Patrick’s depraved behavior.

“How can you sit there and act like it’s no big deal - like *I’m* the one who has a problem, not him?” he asked incredulously. “What he did was perverted and *disgusting*, not to mention completely inappropriate, unprofessional, and probably illegal. You need to *do something* about it! I mean, what kind of hospital allows this to happen?!” He was breathing even harder now, his chest heaving as his heartbeat echoed like a bass drum in his ears. “You guys are gonna hear from my lawyers as soon as I get out of here - and that better fucking be soon. I don’t care about the risks of being transferred; I want *both* me and Brian moved to a different hospital. Do you hear me?”

“Oh, I hear you,” said Elizabeth, surveying him coolly beneath her arched brow. “You’re not exactly in a position to be making demands, though, are you?”

Stunned by this response, Nick felt his mouth drop open again. “I want a different doctor,” he declared. In spite of his effort to sound assertive, his voice wavered. He was starting to realize something was very wrong.

Elizabeth smiled in a way that made his blood run cold. “I’m afraid that’s impossible,” she replied. “Now that Dr. Rob is gone, I’m the only physician here.”

“**THEN MOVE ME SOMEWHERE ELSE!**” Nick shouted. “Hurricane or not, I still have rights as a patient - and as a human being! You can’t keep me tied to a fucking bed like I’m some kind of prisoner!” He yanked at his restraints, rattling the bed rails.

“Relax,” said Elizabeth softly, extending her hand toward him as if to hold him back.

“Don’t touch me!” Nick hissed, as she put her palm in the center of his bare chest. His skin crawled, prickling with goosebumps. He tried to pull away, but the straps around his wrists and ankles prevented him from scooting out of her reach. “Take these off me! Now!”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I can’t do that while you’re so agitated. You might hurt yourself.”

“I won’t pull out any fucking tubes or try to get up again! I promise!” Nick pleaded, as tears sprang to his eyes. “Please, just take these off!”

“Oh, Nick,” sighed Elizabeth, still shaking her head sadly. “If you had only stayed in bed like a good little patient in the first place, this never would have happened. But no... you just *had* to go wandering. Now we’ll never be able to let you out of these restraints.”

Nick’s heart was thumping so hard, he was sure she could feel its vibration beneath her hand. “What are you talking about?” he asked hoarsely, his breath catching in his throat. “What the hell is going on here? Where’s Dani?” He knew Dani would understand he had only been trying to help Brian. She would take off the heavy straps that were holding him down and listen when he told her about Patrick. She would be horrified when she heard what he had witnessed.

“I let her sleep in,” said Elizabeth. “She’s been working so hard. She deserves a break, don’t you think? Today *I’m* going to give you your bath... your breakfast... your morning medication...”

He swallowed hard, his stomach turning at the thought of this unhinged doctor washing his body while he was tied down. What else had she done besides undress him while he was unconscious? Nick wondered with a shudder. He had never felt so violated.

Drawing in a deep breath, he called for Dani as loud as he could. “DANI! *DANI!!!*” As he bellowed her name, he fumbled for the remote control to his bed. He didn’t expect to find it within reach, but Dr. Elizabeth had left it lying on the right side of his mattress as usual. It was difficult to maneuver with his wrists strapped to the bed rail, but he managed to hit the call button with his thumb.

“Don’t expect her to respond to that.” Elizabeth took her hand off his chest and rose from her stool. “I told you, Dani’s not on duty today,” she said, as she walked across the room and opened one of the supply cabinets along the opposite wall. “It’s my turn to take care of you.”

When she came back over to Nick’s bed, she had a small bottle and a syringe in her gloved hands. “What is that?” he asked warily, his heart skipping a beat. “Lemme guess - another ‘mild sedative’ to knock me out so I won’t cause any more trouble?”

“Oh no, this is part of your prescribed medication regimen,” replied Elizabeth with a smile, showing him the label on the vial of clear liquid. “Digoxin. One of the oldest cardiac drugs still in use today. It comes from the foxglove plant, *Digitalis lanata*, which is highly toxic - so toxic, in fact, it can be used to stop a fetus’s heart during late-trimester abortions.”

Nick’s own heart flip-flopped painfully in his chest as he thought of Arya.

“However, in therapeutic doses, digoxin is an effective antiarrhythmic drug that can be used to treat both irregular heartbeats and congestive heart failure,” Dr. Elizabeth continued, filling the syringe with fluid from the vial. “It slows down the heart and slightly increases its contraction power, leading to improved circulation.”

“Who the fuck cares?!” he snapped.

Elizabeth actually looked surprised by his harsh reaction. “No need to be rude about it, Nick. I thought *you* might care to know something about the medications we’ve been using to keep your heartbeat under control.”

“Well, I don’t,” muttered Nick, rolling his eyes. “It obviously doesn’t work that well, or I wouldn’t still be getting shocked all the time.”

The doctor raised her eyebrows. “You didn’t let me finish. I was just getting to the interesting part,” she said, as she inserted the needle into the IV port in his neck. “Paradoxically, while digoxin is used to *treat* heart problems, it can also *trigger* them. The therapeutic range is quite narrow, you see, so it doesn’t take much to overdose.” She put her thumb over the plunger of the syringe, pushing it down slowly as she spoke. “The symptoms of digoxin poisoning are very similar to those of heart failure: fatigue, nausea, loss of appetite, swelling of extremities, shortness of breath, and arrhythmias - which, in severe cases, can even cause cardiac arrest.”

As she finished injecting the contents of the syringe into his central line, Nick felt a rush of cold. His racing heart began to pump even faster, forcing the drug through his veins before he had fully realized the implications of what she was telling him.

Dr. Elizabeth removed the syringe and dropped it into the sharps container on the wall. “I didn’t get a chance to ask how you were feeling this morning,” she said conversationally as she came back to his bedside, slipping her stethoscope into her ears. “Any pain or palpitations?”

Nick winced when she applied the cold end of the stethoscope to his chest. He wanted to twist away, but with his arms tied to the sides of the bed, he couldn't go far. He had never felt more powerless than he did sitting there, watching Elizabeth's face as she listened to his heart pound. He was used to seeing her frown through these examinations, but this time, her lips curved into a sinister smile.

"I'm hearing some extrasystoles," she announced, her eyes alight with a look of anticipation. "The monitor's showing PVCs, which means you're probably having palpitations. Maybe a fluttering or pounding feeling in your chest, like your heart's skipping beats?"

Nick stared at her in horror, but said nothing, not wanting to give her the satisfaction of confirming that he could feel his heart hiccuping out of control. His chest felt heavy and increasingly constricted, making it harder and harder to move air in and out of his lungs.

Relax and breathe, he could hear Dani's reassuring voice in his head. He closed his eyes, fighting back feelings of panic and claustrophobia so he could concentrate on his breathing. He tried to take slow, deep breaths, inhaling air through the cannula in his nose and letting it out through his mouth, but even with the flow of supplemental oxygen, he felt like he was suffocating.

"You seem to be in some respiratory distress," added Dr. Elizabeth, sliding her stethoscope from the left side of his chest to the right. "Are you having trouble breathing?"

Nick still didn't answer. He was hyperventilating now, his breath coming in short, shallow gasps as his heart galloped uncontrollably beneath his rib cage. He had broken out in a cold sweat, and he felt like he was about to be sick. His eyes flew open. The fluorescent lights were blinding. The whole hospital room appeared to have taken on a bright, yellowish hue. He blinked, trying to clear his vision, but it didn't help. Light-headed, he leaned forward. "I need a bowl or something," he blurted. "I think I'm gonna-"

Before he could finish, an alarm went off on his monitor. Nick wilted back against his pillow, as another wave of dizziness and nausea washed over him. His heart was pounding wildly, its rhythm once again out of whack.

"You're tachycardic, Nick," he heard Elizabeth tell him, as his eyesight began to blur. "Your heart's beating too fast." She took hold of his clammy right hand, her fingers clamping firmly around his wrist, and turned it palm up. "So fast, in fact, your heart

hardly has time to refill with blood between beats.” He felt her fingertips press against the artery on the inside of his wrist. “Your pulse is weak, which means your heart is barely pumping enough blood to the rest of your body.” She let go of his hand. “If you’re lucky, you’ll pass out from lack of blood flow to your brain before your ICD detects an arrhythmia and delivers a shock. But I doubt it.”

Nick had only seconds to absorb what she was saying and anticipate what was coming next, but there was no way to brace himself against the bomb that was about to go off inside his chest. He tried to prepare himself for the pain, but he couldn’t prevent the primal cry that howled from his throat when the defibrillator finally detonated, bucking his upper body off the bed with the force of the shock. A burning pain seared beneath his breastbone, as if his heart was on fire. He couldn’t seem to catch his breath. In the background, his heart monitor was going haywire.

I’m going to die here, thought Nick in despair, as darkness closed in on him from the corners of his eyes. The yellow lights were dimming now, the room fading away. He would never get to see his family or the guys again... never hold his newborn son or daughter.

He felt another explosion of pain as the ICD fired off a second shock, and then... nothing. Blissfully, Nick blacked out before he fell back onto the bed.

When he woke for the second time, it was Dani’s face he saw first. “Welcome back,” she whispered, brushing his hair back off his forehead.

Before Nick could respond, a rush of cool air flooded his mouth and nose. He began to cough as it was forced down his windpipe by a bulky mask that covered the bottom half of his face. Although his lungs inflated, he felt as if he were being suffocated.

A shock of cold followed, as a stethoscope was applied to his bare chest. “He’s breathing on his own now,” he heard Elizabeth say. “You can stop bagging and switch him to the non-rebreather.”

A pair of pudgy hands replaced the Ambu bag with an oxygen mask, slipping the elastic strap behind Nick’s head to hold it tight over his mouth and nose. *Patrick*, thought Nick with immediate distaste. He wanted to protest, but he felt too tired to talk, too weak to turn away. When Patrick touched him, Nick’s stomach turned with nausea, and his coughing fit gave way to uncontrollable gagging.

“He’s going to vomit!” Dani cried suddenly, but she was too late. Before she had time to tear the oxygen mask off Nick’s face, he felt the familiar burn of bile bubbling up into the back of his throat. He tried to turn his head, but there was no point - the puke had nowhere to go but into the mask. He started to choke as it splattered over his face, filling his mouth and nose.

“He needs suctioning before he aspirates,” Elizabeth said sharply.

“Hang on, Nick,” said Dani, as she eased the mask over his head. A moment later, she stuck the suctioning wand into his mouth and sucked the vomit out of his airway. “Will you get me a wet washcloth to wipe off his face?” she asked Patrick as she finished. To Nick, she said, “You’ll be all right now. Just relax and breathe while I get you cleaned up, okay?”

Nick knew he was far from all right, but he took a few breaths of fresh air, and the suffocating feeling slowly began to fade.

Patrick brought back a cool, damp cloth, which Dani used to remove the rest of the vomit from Nick’s face. “You had another arrhythmia,” she told him, dabbing at his upper lip, “but your ICD did its job. You were only down for a couple of minutes before it shocked your heart back into sinus rhythm.”

But I still could have died, thought Nick, convinced that he would have if Dani hadn’t come to his rescue. The realization was enough to make him start retching again, as another wave of nausea washed over him. Thankfully, there was nothing left in his stomach to come back up.

Dani raised the head of his bed and held a basin under his chin until he stopped dry-heaving. Then, making sure his nostrils were clear, she slipped an oxygen cannula into them. “There... that’s better,” she said, tucking the tubing behind his ears. “How do you feel?”

“Like an elephant’s been sitting on my chest,” muttered Nick. That wasn’t all he wanted to say, but he didn’t dare tell Dani the truth in front of Dr. Elizabeth or Patrick. He would have to wait until he had a moment alone with her to explain what was really going on.

“I know,” replied Dani sympathetically, rubbing his shoulder. “Just try to relax. We’re taking good care of you.”

Yeah, right, thought Nick, trying hard not to roll his eyes. He watched Elizabeth and Patrick circle his bed like a pair of vultures, playing their parts as they pretended to “take care” of him, while secretly waiting for him to code again. His skin crawled whenever one of them touched him, but he kept quiet and played along, fighting panic as he allowed Patrick to take his blood pressure and Elizabeth to check his pulse. He wondered if they could tell how he really felt by the way his heart was racing, his blood pressure rising.

“I need to draw some blood now, Nick,” said Dani, inserting another syringe into his central line. This made Nick nervous, but he knew she would never hurt him. When she withdrew the syringe, it was full of dark red blood. He watched her transfer it into a test tube, which she labeled with his name and the date, November twenty-third. Nick’s heart skipped a beat as he realized he had been stuck in this hospital bed for nearly a month.

“Can you take these off me?” he begged Dani, tugging at his restraints.

“Not right this second,” she replied apologetically, holding up his blood sample. “I have to get this to the lab.”

“No, wait!” he protested, as she started to leave. Both Elizabeth and Patrick looked up, but Nick ignored them. “I need to talk to you. Right now. In private.” *Please*, he thought, staring directly into Dani’s eyes. He hoped she would see the desperation in his. *Please don’t leave me alone with them.*

Dani seemed to understand. “Okay, sure. No problem. Patrick, will you take care of this for me, please?” She handed him the test tube. To Elizabeth, she said, “Can you give us a few minutes?”

Nick expected Elizabeth to come up with an excuse for why she couldn’t leave Nick alone with Dani, but after a moment’s hesitation, the cardiologist nodded. “Of course. Keep a close eye on his vitals, and come get me if it looks like he’s going to crash again.”

You wish, he thought, swallowing hard as his heart leapt into his throat.

“Will do,” Dani replied. She waited until Dr. Elizabeth had left, then sat down on the edge of Nick’s bed, twisting her body toward him. “What’s up?” she asked.

Nick took a deep breath, knowing he didn’t have time to beat around the bush.

“Elizabeth tried to kill me,” he blurted. “She gave me an overdose of one of my meds to make my heart stop. Dig... digi-?”

“Digoxin?” Dani supplied, raising her eyebrows.

Nick nodded. “Yeah. And that’s not all.” He paused to take another breath before he proceeded, “Your friend Patrick? He’s a necrophiliac. Last night I found him fucking that woman who died here a few weeks ago.”

“What?!” Dani’s eyes widened at first, then narrowed as she frowned. “Nick, you’re not making any sense,” she said, cocking her head to one side. “Are you sure you didn’t just have another nightmare?”

“No!” he insisted, shaking his head emphatically. “I know what I saw - and they both know I know. Why else do you think they would strap me to the bed like this? Elizabeth drugged me last night to knock me out, and now she’s trying to kill me!”

“Why would she do that?” asked Dani. She sounded surprisingly calm, a stark contrast to how Nick felt. He stared at her, stunned and disappointed. Why didn’t she believe him?

“I dunno - to stop me from suing the hospital? To shut me up before I tell people about Patrick?”

Dani arched her brow again. “But why would Patrick want to fuck a dead body?”

“What does it matter why-?” Nick stopped mid-sentence, his heart dropping into his stomach as it suddenly hit him why Dani seemed so unbothered by his accusations.

It wasn’t that she didn’t believe him. It was because she already knew.

Chapter 33

The day after Brian and Nick disappeared, the rest of the Backstreet Boys sat around Howie’s hotel room, staring at each other in stunned disbelief.

After a frantic exchange of phone calls the previous night, Kevin Richardson and AJ McLean had hopped onto a red-eye flight from Los Angeles to Miami and made it to Key West by noon. They rented a car and spent the afternoon driving around, searching for their missing brothers. Howie had vacationed in Key West with Nick before and knew

all his favorite haunts, but no one at any of the bars or restaurants they stopped at had seen him in the last few days. They went to the marina where Nick kept his boat and were disappointed to find it docked there; Howie had been hoping maybe Nick had gone sailing and was simply out of cell phone range, although that still would not have explained what had happened to Brian. They walked up and down the beach, but found nothing.

When it got dark, they decided to go back to the hotel, where Detective Overton and her partner had spent the last few hours interviewing the missing men's wives. Leighanne and Baylee had arrived late the night before, while Lauren had flown in first thing that morning, having left Odin at home with her father. Both women were beside themselves by the time the detectives left and barely ate a thing at dinner in the restaurant downstairs. Neither did Howie, Kevin, or AJ. Afterwards, they all went back upstairs to turn in for the night, agreeing to meet early the next morning for another search of the island.

"Kinda feels like old times, huh fellas?" asked Kevin, as they undressed for bed. "We haven't shared a hotel room in over twenty years."

In their hurry to get to Key West, he and AJ hadn't bothered to make a reservation before leaving L.A. and had arrived to find the hotel where Howie was staying fully booked. Howie didn't mind sharing his room; in fact, until they found out what had happened to Nick and Brian, he didn't think any of them should be alone. Leighanne and Baylee had taken Brian's reserved room and were letting Lauren crash with them, as Nick's place was now being considered a potential crime scene. The police were in the process of conducting a more thorough search of both the house and Nick's boat for clues as to his whereabouts.

AJ shook his head. "It'll never feel like old times without Nick and Brian," he replied gruffly.

Kevin couldn't argue with that.

"We'll find them," said Howie with a sense of assurance he didn't feel. "They couldn't have gone far."

"You don't know that. They could be in Cuba by now - or halfway to Mexico." AJ seemed to be under the impression that Nick and Brian had been abducted by drug smugglers or human traffickers. Howie thought it unlikely that two middle-aged men would be targeted by such types, but he didn't have any more plausible theories to explain their sudden disappearance.

“C’mon now, we can’t think like that,” Kevin chided, as he turned back the covers and climbed into one of the two beds. “We have to stay positive.”

“Do you think they’re together?” asked Howie, taking the other bed. “I mean, how would Brian have been able to find Nick if he wasn’t in the hospital? Where else would he have gone?”

“Maybe he went to Nick’s house, and something happened there,” AJ suggested, sinking into an armchair by the window. “Or maybe Nick was taken first, then Brian. You can’t tell me their disappearances aren’t related somehow. It would be way too much of a coincidence otherwise. Two members of the Backstreet Boys going missing in the same week? There must be some kind of connection.”

“You’re probably right,” Howie agreed, “but who would want to hurt Nick or Brian?” Detective Overton had asked him the night before if either of them had enemies. Howie couldn’t come up with a single name. Sure, there were ex-girlfriends, former associates, and Nick’s crazy family, but no one he would consider an actual *enemy*.

Kevin raised his eyebrows. “Melissa Schuman?” he said wryly.

Howie’s eyes widened as he considered the possibility. Melissa Schuman was a washed-up popstar who had been waging a very public Twitter war against Nick for the past two years after posting a blog that claimed he had once raped her. Nick had always denied the allegations, and the district attorney had declined the case, but Melissa continued to call him her “abuser.”

“I didn’t even think of her,” Howie admitted. “Do you really think she would do something that extreme?”

“Not really,” replied Kevin with a shrug, “but she does have a reason to want revenge on both Nick and Brian.” Brian had defended Nick, telling TMZ he was being targeted by a “fame seeker.”

“Yeah, but it may not be an enemy at all,” AJ pointed out. “If this wasn’t some random kidnapping or a robbery gone wrong, it could be crazy fans.”

“Crazy fans?” Kevin snorted. “Someone’s been reading too much fanfiction.”

Howie laughed. “Oh, c’mon, Kev, everyone knows you’re the only one who’s read any fanfiction. Why, do people really write about crazy fans kidnapping us?”

“Yeah - at least, they used to,” Kevin answered seriously. “But that’s why it’s called *fanfiction*. I don’t see anything like that happening in real life.”

“Hey, you never know,” AJ insisted. “Stranger things have happened.”

“It still doesn’t give us much to go off of, unless you can think of any crazy fans that happen to live in the Florida Keys,” said Howie.

“Who says they have to live here? They could have come down here because they knew Nick was here.”

Kevin shook his head. “That doesn’t help, AJ.”

“I actually think the crazy fan theory makes more sense than it being a random kidnapping or something like that,” said Howie thoughtfully. “There was nothing random about this. Someone called Brian and told him Nick was in the hospital to lure him down here. Since we know Nick’s *not* in the hospital, and he’s also not home, that had to have been a lie. Whoever took Brian must have already had Nick.”

Kevin nodded, looking grim. “What did Leighanne say the woman’s name was again?”

“Danica Logan,” replied Howie, “but Detective Overton doesn’t think it’s her real name. She’d have to be pretty stupid to give her full name if she were going to commit a crime, wouldn’t she?”

“You never know,” AJ said again. “If she’s a crazy fan, she may not be thinking logically. Has anyone tried looking her up?”

Howie’s eyes widened. “You mean like googling the name?” Why hadn’t he thought of that?

AJ shrugged. “Sure - why not?”

Howie grabbed his phone off the night stand and typed the name Danica Logan into the Google search bar. The first few results were porn sites. Following those were social media pages for a Danica Logan who worked for the Canadian government, as well as Danica Logans who lived in Australia and Indonesia. Howie couldn’t see a crazy fan coming all the way across the world to abduct a Backstreet Boy, and the thought of Nick and Brian’s captor being from Canada was almost funny. Too bad he didn’t feel like laughing.

“Anything?” asked Kevin, leaning over to look at Howie’s phone.

Howie shook his head. “Just a lot of porn.”

“Porn?” AJ’s eyes lit up. “Lemme see!” He sprang up from his chair and practically dove across Howie’s bed, landing on his stomach.

“No!” protested Howie when AJ held out his hand. “You’re not using my phone to look at pornography.”

“Why not? It’s for investigative purposes!”

Howie rolled his eyes. “Because I don’t want my wife to find it on my phone.”

AJ raised his eyebrows. “Leigh checks your phone?”

Howie was getting flustered. “Well, no, not necessarily, but-”

“Dude, chill,” AJ laughed. “It’s not a big deal. I’ll look it up on my phone, you prude.”

Howie felt his face getting warm. AJ retrieved his own phone from the table and coozied up next to Howie on the queen bed. Curious, Kevin came around to the other side so that they were sitting three across, their backs against the headboard.

“Whoa, there’s some kinky stuff,” snickered AJ as he scrolled through the search results. “Anyone here have a foot fetish?”

No one answered him.

“Ooh, what’s this one?” AJ wondered aloud, clicking on a site called *Arresting Beauties*.

Howie leaned over to look. Before the webpage could load, a large white box popped up on the screen with big, bold text that stated, “**You must be 18 years old to visit this site.**” Disappointed, he shook his head. “Don’t, AJ, it’s just another adult site.”

“So what? We’re over eighteen, aren’t we?” AJ entered his birthdate without hesitation and clicked to proceed. “C’mon, it could give us a clue!”

Howie rolled his eyes. “You just want an excuse to watch porn.”

AJ wrinkled his nose. “Not this kind of porn...”

“Huh?” Howie couldn’t help but sneak another peek. He was disturbed by what he saw. The full site featured still frames of beautiful, topless women in hospital beds with electrodes taped to their exposed chests and oxygen masks over their heavily made-up faces. Many of them appeared to be in the midst of receiving CPR or being defibrillated. “What the...?”

“Fuck,” Kevin finished for him, frowning as he stared at AJ’s phone. “Is this, like, medical fetish porn or something?”

“Looks like it,” said AJ, as he scrolled through the site.

Howie shook his head again in disgust. “This is weird. Go back, AJ.”

“Are you kidding? This site came up in our search results, and it’s medical-themed. Danica Logan claimed to be calling from a hospital. You don’t think there’s a connection there?”

“I dunno...” Howie was doubtful, but he couldn’t deny that AJ had a point. He didn’t protest when AJ continued to explore the porn site.

“See if there’s a search bar anywhere,” Kevin suggested.

AJ scrolled back up and found one at the top. He typed the name Danica Logan once again and tapped the search button. “Jackpot,” he whispered when the results loaded. A long list of titles appeared, each with an accompanying cover photo. He clicked on one called *Bro Code*, which featured a blonde woman bending over a bare-chested man. More photos loaded, along with a brief synopsis. “*Chad is found in full cardiac arrest after collapsing at a college frat party,*” AJ read aloud. “*While his frat brothers panic, beautiful nursing student Sarah comes to his rescue, performing chest compressions and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Can she keep Chad alive until the paramedics arrive?*”

Kevin let out a low groan of disapproval. “Jesus... sounds pretty depressing for the plot of a porno.”

“I think that’s the point. Some people must get off on this shit,” said AJ with a shrug, as he scrolled down. “Look, there’s a trailer.” He pressed the play button on a video. Howie and Kevin couldn’t resist leaning in to watch.

The trailer was nothing but a series of brief vignettes: a dark-haired man in a backwards baseball cap chugging from a beer bong, then crumpling to the floor... his beer-bellied frat brother shaking him and calling his name... the young blonde woman tearing off his tank top to expose his toned torso... a close-up of her hands pushing down on his hairless chest... her lips covering his as she blew into his mouth... her voice crying "C'mon, Chad, breathe!" as the screen faded to black.

"Wow," said Howie, shaking his head in disbelief. "Do people really get turned on by watching a dude pretend to die of alcohol poisoning?"

"I dunno about that, but the girl giving him CPR was pretty hot," AJ admitted.

He was right, but Howie refused to agree with him. "Do you think that's Danica Logan?" he asked.

"Probably," replied Kevin. "I guess we'd have to download the full video to get the credits."

"No way, we're not giving these people \$19.99 to watch more of this freaky stuff!" Howie protested. "The police can pay for it if they want it."

AJ laughed. "Yeah, for that price, the girl better be the one without a shirt."

"Go back to the search page," Kevin suggested. "See if the same actress is in the other videos that came up."

AJ pressed the back button and scrolled slowly through the search results. They pored over the pictures, recognizing the faces from the first video in many of the others. The woman who played "Sarah" wasn't always blonde; she wore a variety of wigs in different colors. "That has to be her," Howie concluded.

"Dude, look at this one," AJ said suddenly, pointing at the screen.

Howie saw the picture first. It showed the same woman walking topless on a treadmill, all wired up with electrodes. Then he noticed the title, and his eyes widened. "*Shape of Her Heart?*"

"Click on it," said Kevin.

AJ read the synopsis: "*Becky's doctor has recommended a stress test to make sure her heart is in tiptop shape before she begins training for a marathon. After the doctor*

attaches the EKG leads to monitor her heartbeat, Becky starts walking on the treadmill. The doctor gradually increases her pace until she reaches a full-out run. Sweat pours from Becky's body as her heart pounds faster and faster. When she begins to feel sharp pains in her chest, the doctor stops the test, but it's too late - Becky collapses in sudden cardiac arrest! The doctor rushes to resuscitate her with CPR and shocks from the defibrillator. It's now a race to save Becky's life. Can the doctor restore her heartbeat before time runs out?"

He tapped on the trailer. Howie didn't want to watch, but morbid curiosity kept him from looking away as the actress began jogging on the treadmill, her perky breasts bouncing. The video cut to a shot of her breathing hard and clutching her heaving chest. The next moment, she was lying on the floor with her brown eyes rolled back into her head. A woman in a white coat was leaning over her. "Breathe for me, Becky!" she shouted as she began compressing "Becky's" chest, making her boobs jiggle even more.

"This is sick," Howie whispered, watching the woman arch her back off the floor as the "doctor" pressed a pair of paddles to her bare chest. "I don't understand how anyone could be aroused by this."

"It's a sick world we live in, my friend," said AJ. "But she does have a nice rack."

"Gross, AJ," replied Howie, wrinkling his nose. "Have some respect."

AJ laughed. "Howie, you know this isn't real, right?" he asked, as he went back to the search results. "How could this woman have starred in all these other videos if she had actually dropped dead?"

"It's disrespectful towards people who really *did* die this way," said Howie, his eyes flashing at AJ, "not to mention their family members who may have watched it happen. Would you have said my sister had a nice rack if you were in her hospital room while they were trying to resuscitate her?"

All the color drained from AJ's face. "Dude! Fuck no, no way. You know I didn't mean it like that, right?"

"I know." Howie sighed. It had been a low blow to bring up Caroline, but he'd gotten his point across. "Sorry if I overreacted. I'm just saying... have some respect for people who have been through the real thing."

AJ nodded. "You're right, bro. I'm sorry, too."

Kevin cleared his throat. "Can we get back to what brought us to this fucked-up website in the first place? Danica Logan. This woman calls Brian, claiming to work in a hospital; then we find all these weird medical fetish videos featuring an actress by the same name, one of which has almost the same title as our song. Coincidence or not?"

"Could be... but probably not," replied AJ.

Howie nodded. "There has to be a connection," he agreed.

"I think we need to show the police," said Kevin. "It could be a lead."

Howie reached for his phone. "I'll call Detective Overton right now."

The lead detective seemed less convinced that there was the connection between the mystery caller and the woman on the medical fetish website, but she agreed to look into it. In the meantime, she had been following other leads.

Two days after Brian's disappearance, she summoned his family and friends to the police station to look at a piece of "potential evidence" she had found.

"We've been weeding through surveillance footage from the airport's security cameras to see if they captured Brian leaving," Detective Overton explained, opening a video on her computer. "We finally found something."

The group of six - Howie, Kevin, AJ, Leighanne, Baylee, and Lauren - exchanged glances as the detective turned her monitor toward them. She pressed the play button, and they all leaned forward to get a better look.

"This first clip comes from inside the terminal. The camera picks up Brian when he gets off the plane at Gate 2." She pointed out Brian's blurry form, pulling his carry-on bag behind him. "We can see him approach this man, who appears to be waiting to pick him up." She paused the video so they could get a better look at a large man in a dark-colored suit. "Do any of you recognize him?"

Howie squinted at the screen, but it was hard to make out the man's features in the blurry image. "No," he said, as the other shook their heads. "Should we?"

Detective Overton offered a grim smile. "We don't know who he is either. That's why I'm asking you."

Leighanne spoke up. “Brian said the woman who called him offered to have someone from the hospital pick him up and bring him there. He even called her back after he’d booked his flight so they’d have the information.”

“That’s helpful,” replied the detective, writing it down in the notebook that lay open in front of her on the desk. “That supports our theory.”

“What theory?” asked AJ.

“That this man is responsible for Brian’s - and possibly also Nick’s - disappearance.”

Howie’s heart beat faster as he looked back at the computer screen, desperately wishing the image were clearer.

“Based on the text messages Brian sent shortly after landing, we know he was heading straight to the hospital,” Detective Overton continued, “but he never made it there. We’ve also looked at the security footage from Lower Keys Medical Center. Brian doesn’t show up on any of it, and no one we interviewed at the hospital remembered seeing him there that day. So something must have happened between Point A and Point B.”

Leighanne let out a little snuffle, her blue eyes filling with tears. Wordlessly, Baylee put an arm around his mother.

“You have tried tracking their phones, haven’t you?” asked Kevin.

“Of course,” confirmed Detective Overton. “That’s typically one of the first things we do, but it didn’t help us in this case. Both of their phones are turned off, and the last place they pinged was here in Key West, which we already knew. Unfortunately, it’s impossible to pinpoint an precise location on the island with the information we have.”

Kevin nodded, heaving a sigh as he raked his hand through his hair.

“Going back to the surveillance footage... the best shot we got of our suspect was when he walked out of airport.” Detective Overton skipped ahead to a frame of Brian following the stranger out the door. They were closer to the camera, but the image was still grainy.

“Can’t you zoom in or make it any clearer?” asked Leighanne.

“I wish we could, but unfortunately, the kind of technology you see in crime shows on TV doesn’t exist. We can’t just magically improve the picture quality with the click of a button,” the detective replied apologetically. “Even if we could, it wouldn’t do us much good if none of you knows who he is anyway. But what we *can* do is put his picture on TV, share it on social media, spread it far and wide until someone who *does* know him comes forward.”

Kevin nodded. “Do it.”

“We’ll do even better than that,” added Detective Overton. “We also have a decent shot of his car.” She fast forwarded through footage that showed the two men hurrying through the parking lot, their heads bowed together beneath a black umbrella, and paused on a frame of a silver sedan pulling out of the lot. They could just barely see Brian’s blurry face peeking out the back window.

“Do you have the license plate?” Lauren asked hopefully.

“Unfortunately, no. The camera was at the wrong angle to get a clear picture of it. But we do know the make and model. It’s a Toyota Corolla. I’m not sure how much that will help us, considering the Corolla is one of the world’s best-selling cars and silver is in the top three most popular exterior paint colors. It will be difficult to track down this exact silver Corolla when there are so many others just like it driving around the Keys. But it’s start.”

Howie could tell she was simultaneously trying to offer them hope without getting their hopes too high. For every positive, there was a negative. For every potential lead, a dead end. But at least they were on the right path. He prayed the police would be able to follow the few clues they had and find Brian and Nick before it was too late.

The next break in the case came nearly two weeks later.

It was mid-November by now. It had been thirteen days since Brian’s disappearance, sixteen since anyone had heard from Nick. The rest of the Backstreet Boys remained in Key West, wanting to be there when their brothers were found.

The media had flocked to South Florida once word got out that two of the Backstreet Boys were missing. The group had released one official statement through their publicist, offering a substantial reward for information leading them to Nick and Brian, and filmed a personal video begging for their bandmates’ safe return. All the major

news outlets had picked up the story, the video had gone viral, and Howie, Kevin, and AJ had spent every day since dodging bloodthirsty reporters and distraught fans.

Wanting to get away from the crowded hotel, Howie had rented a beachfront condo big enough to comfortably accommodate all three of them, plus the two wives and Baylee. But they were no longer free to come and go as they pleased or participate in any physical searches for Nick and Brian. For their own safety, both the police and the Backstreet Boys' security team thought it best they stay put.

That was why, instead of asking them to come to the station, Detective Overton came to see them. "Why don't you all have a seat?" she suggested kindly, as they gathered together in the condo's kitchen.

Howie's heart pounded with trepidation as he sat down with the others around the dining room table. "Please, just tell us... did you find them?" he asked, dreading the news that a dead body - or both bodies - had been discovered.

"No," Detective Overton replied quickly, setting her laptop down on the table. "But we do have a promising new lead. A woman who works at a bar on Duval Street came forward a few days ago, claiming to have served Nick on Halloween night."

Lauren's eyes widened. "That means she may have been the last person to see him before he disappeared! Why are you just now telling us about this?"

The detective raised her eyebrows. "If I told you everything, it could compromise the investigation. Plus, with all the press this case has received, we've been getting a lot of tips lately, and it takes time to follow up on each one. Most turn out to be bogus, but every once in a while, we do get a legitimate lead. I wanted to make sure we could substantiate this woman's claim with actual evidence before I gave you false hope."

"So you do have actual evidence then?" Kevin asked, leaning forward.

Detective Overton nodded, opening her laptop. "We have footage from the bar's security camera," she said, clicking through a series of still frames of a man in a plain white t-shirt sitting at the bar. In most of the shots, he had his head down, bent over his drink or his phone, but Howie recognized both his Tampa Bay Buccaneers cap and his body language, the way the camera had caught him rubbing his head and wiping his nose. There was no denying it was Nick.

"You can see his face in this one," added the detective, stopping on a photo where Nick was finally looking up. "It's him, isn't it?"

They all nodded in agreement.

“He appears to be alone at first,” said Detective Overton, “but after a while, he moves down to the end of the bar and strikes up a conversation with this couple.” She showed them a picture of two people in coordinating Halloween costumes: the woman was dressed like a slutty nurse, while the man was wearing a blood-stained hospital gown. “From what the bartender told me, they had recognized Nick and bought him a drink earlier, which he reciprocated before joining them.”

Howie barely heard a word she said. He was staring hard at the screencap of the dark-haired man and blonde woman, his mind focused on their medical-themed costumes. “That’s them,” he said suddenly.

Everyone looked at him in surprise. “Who?” asked Detective Overton eagerly, her pen poised over her notebook.

“Danica Logan. The girl from that fetish site. And-”

Leighanne’s eyes grew large. “Baylee, go to your room,” she said abruptly, before Howie could finish.

“But Mom-” Baylee began to protest.

“Go!” she snapped. Baylee kicked his chair backwards and stomped upstairs, muttering something about not being a little kid anymore. “Sorry,” apologized Leighanne, her face now bright pink. “He’s still only sixteen. I don’t want him hearing about sexual deviants.”

“Technically, they didn’t have sex in any of the videos we-” AJ started, then suddenly stopped, his mouth dropping wide open as he looked back at the laptop screen. “*Wait a second*. Is that *Chad*?” He pointed at the dark-haired man. “Frat Boy Chad’s alive?!”

“That’s what I was trying to tell you!” Howie exclaimed.

“Who is Chad?” asked Detective Overton, frowning.

Howie rolled his eyes. “Well, I doubt that’s his *real* name; AJ’s just trying to be funny. But I do think it’s the same actor who was in one of the, uh, adult film trailers we watched on that website. He was a muscular guy with dark hair. And the girl... she looks like one of the actresses.”

Detective Overton minimized the folder containing the camera footage and opened a new internet tab on her computer. "Can you show me?"

"I thought you already went through the website when we first told you about it," Kevin said, his brow furrowing.

"I did," replied Detective Overton, "but that was before we discovered this footage."

"Yeah, back when you didn't believe it was important," muttered AJ.

"C'mon, guys, don't give her a hard time," said Howie. "She's been doing everything she can. We didn't know for sure that it had anything to do with their disappearance either."

"But we thought it did - and if she had taken it seriously two weeks ago, we might have found them by now!" argued Kevin, his voice rising.

"Can one of you just show her the fucking website so we can get back to the footage from the bar?" Lauren asked, raking a hand through her hair. "I want - no, I *need* to see what happened to my husband."

Exchanging guilty looks, the guys all nodded. AJ told the detective what he had typed into Google to find it, and she followed his directions. "It could be the same people," she acknowledged finally, studying the screen. "The man definitely has a similar look. It's harder to tell with the woman; her hair's a lot different."

"She either dyes it or wears different wigs in most of these videos," said AJ. "I bet that's her real hair at the bar."

Detective Overton went back to the footage from the bar, where the woman's hair was short and blonde. "You're probably right," she agreed. "So watch: they chat with Nick awhile; then the woman gets up and goes to the restroom." She fast forwarded the video to that point, where they could see the woman walking away. "While she's gone, the man gets a notification of some sort on his phone - most likely a text message." They watched the man take out his phone, frown as he looked at it, and start texting furiously, his thumbs flying over the screen. "The woman comes back, there's a brief exchange between the two, and then the man leaves the bar."

"Leaves?" Lauren said in surprise.

Detective Overton nodded. “He definitely walks out the front door of the bar and heads southeast down Duval Street. Unfortunately, once he goes off-camera, we have no way of knowing where he went or what kind of vehicle he may have been driving. The city’s in the process of having outdoor security cameras installed in high-traffic areas, but they’re not up and running yet.”

“Are you trying to tell us this tiny woman kidnapped Nick all by herself?” asked AJ, arching a brow.

“Not necessarily. Just watch what happens next.” The detective forwarded through a few more minutes of the video. “Nick excuses himself and goes to the restroom. While he’s gone, the woman orders him another drink. As soon as the bartender sets it down, she looks over her shoulder to make sure he’s not coming back right at that moment,” Detective Overton narrated, as the action played out on her computer screen. “When she sees that the coast is clear, she takes a tiny tube out of the front pocket of her dress—” She paused the video so they could see the woman uncapping the small container. “-and pours the contents into Nick’s drink.”

She pressed play, and their mouths dropped as they watched the woman do just what the detective had described, using a swizzle stick to stir the drink before Nick returned.

“Didn’t anyone ever tell that dumbass not to touch a drink that’s been left unattended?” Lauren asked, shaking her head in disbelief when she saw her husband sit back down and take a sip. Her choice of words would have been funny, but Howie’s laughter died on his tongue when he saw the tears in her eyes.

“That’s what women are taught, but us guys never worry about anyone spiking our drinks,” AJ responded quietly. “I guess we should, huh?”

“It doesn’t hurt to be cautious,” agreed Detective Overton. “You see what can happen?” She forwarded further through the footage. “He’s feeling the effects of whatever she mixed with the alcohol now. See how he’s starting to sway on his stool?”

Howie swallowed hard. “What was it that she gave him?”

The detective sighed. “We may never know for sure, but my guess would be GHB, otherwise known as the date rape drug.”

“Oh god,” Lauren whispered, as Kevin groaned. With a sinking feeling, Howie watched Nick down the rest of his drink.

“They get up to leave at the same time,” Detective Overton pointed out, as the video played on. “He stumbles, and she steadies him.” Howie felt nauseous when he saw the woman grab Nick’s arm and pat his shoulder. “Then they walk outside together.” A wide shot showed Nick staggering after the woman, weaving back and forth as he followed her out of the bar.

“Is that all there is?” Kevin asked, his brow furrowing as the video cut to black. “Where did they go?”

“We have one more video taken from the camera mounted outside the entrance to the bar,” said Detective Overton, pulling up a different file. “It shows the two of them getting into a car. A silver Corolla.”

Leighanne gasped. “The same car that picked up Brian?”

Detective Overton nodded. “We can’t know that for sure without seeing the plates, but it seems probable that it’s the same one.”

Indeed, an identical-looking sedan pulled up to the curb where Nick and his companion were waiting. Lauren’s face crumpled as she watched her husband climb awkwardly into the back seat with the woman who had drugged him. The car drove away quickly, disappearing from view.

“Did you get a plate number this time?” AJ asked eagerly.

“Sadly, no,” said Detective Overton. “With the angle of the camera and the fact that it was dark, it’s impossible to tell.”

“What about the driver?” he pressed. “Was it Frat Boy Chad or the fat guy from the airport?”

Detective Overton shook her head. “It was too dark to see who was driving.”

They all sighed. “What good are cameras if you can’t get any identifying information off them?” AJ grumbled.

“AJ, we just got a good look at the woman who did this to Nick!” Howie exclaimed. “All the police have to do is share her face with the public, and surely someone will recognize her. This is a great lead! It’s gonna help us find them both.”

“We also have the website,” added Kevin. “Can’t you use that to track her down?”

“That may be more difficult than it sounds, but we’ll certainly try,” said Detective Overton. Once again, Howie could tell she was attempting to manage their expectations; she didn’t want them to get their hopes too high. But for the first time since Brian and Nick disappeared, Howie felt truly optimistic. With all the information the police had, it was only a matter of time before his brothers were found.

He just hoped they would be found alive.

Chapter 34

Why?

It was Nick’s turn to ask questions, but he couldn’t seem to form the words. He just stared up at Dani, not wanting to believe she could be involved in whatever was happening here.

“Nick?” Dani frowned, her face contorting into a contrived look of concern. “You okay?”

“No,” Nick croaked, as hot tears welled from the corners of his eyes. “Of course I’m not okay. You know I’m not.”

Dani nodded. “You’re very sick, Nick,” she said softly, stroking his forearm. “But you’re going to get better. Once you have your heart transplant, you *will* be okay.”

“*Bullshit!*” he hissed, fighting to hold back his tears. “I don’t know what the *fuck’s* going on here, but I think you’re all full of *shit!*”

Dani’s dark eyes widened. “Poor baby,” she whispered, her hand drifting up his body. His skin crawled as she pressed her palm to the side of his face. “Do you know how paranoid you sound?” She patted his cheek. “But I don’t blame you. You’re on a lot of drugs right now. Your brain’s been deprived of oxygen. You’re not thinking clearly.”

“Don’t patronize me,” he spat, wrenching his head away from her. “You people are the ones who’ve been messing with my mind!”

“You feel warm,” she continued, as if he hadn’t spoken. Deep creases furrowed her brow as she rested the back of her hand against his forehead. “I think you may have a fever.”

“I think you may be making shit up,” Nick mumbled, shaking her hand off him again.

Dani reached for the thermometer behind his bed. “Better hold still,” she warned him, as she bent down by his head. “You don’t want me to accidentally puncture your eardrum, do you?”

Knowing he had no choice but to comply, Nick took a shaky breath and held it as she slid the thermometer into his ear. He closed his eyes so she wouldn’t see him cry, but a single tear slid out from under his eyelid. He felt so confused. Frustrated. Betrayed.

What are you doing here, Dani? he wondered desperately. *What the hell is this?* He didn’t know what to believe anymore. Did he really need a heart transplant? Was he even sick at all? Or had they deliberately been keeping him that way with overdoses of drugs whose side effects mimicked the symptoms of severe cardiomyopathy? He had seen firsthand how Dr. Elizabeth could induce an arrhythmia with just one injection, forcing his defibrillator to fire. Had she implanted the ICD in his chest to help him or to hurt him?

A sudden, high-pitched beep made Nick flinch, his heart skipping a beat. As it fluttered frantically in his chest, he braced himself for another shock.

“Relax,” Dani said as his body stiffened, resting her hand on his shoulder. Only then did Nick realize the beeping noise wasn’t coming from his heart monitor, but from the thermometer. He released his breath in a sigh of relief as Dani removed the device from his ear. She was right about one thing: He *was* being paranoid, but only because they had made him that way.

“101.4.” Dani’s frown returned as she read the thermometer. “No wonder. You’re burning up!”

“Show me,” said Nick. He tried to reach for the thermometer before he remembered his wrists were still in restraints. Dani turned it around so he could see the numbers on the display. She seemed to be telling the truth about his temperature - it really had registered at 101.4. Nick was surprised he hadn’t noticed he was running a fever, but he had felt sick for so long, it didn’t seem to make much of a difference.

“I need to tell Dr. Elizabeth,” Dani said, as she put the thermometer back on the wall. “She’ll want to add a blood culture to your lab work, in case you have an infection. I’ll be right back.”

Nick felt even more confused as he watched her rush out of the room. Was she really going to get the doctor, he wondered, or was she back to lying again? He wanted to trust her, but he couldn’t. Not anymore. Not after she’d made him feel delusional when he had told her about Dr. Elizabeth and Patrick. Whatever they were doing to him, he was convinced she was in on it. And if she had been lying about his heart condition, what else had she lied about? The hurricane? Her pregnancy?

His eyes prickled with fresh tears as he felt his heart sink. There was no baby. She had probably made that up, too. He doubted they’d even slept together, though that didn’t matter much now. He had definitely kissed her, and that still made him a cheater. Lauren had every reason to hate him.

Lauren! Nick’s eyes opened wide as another thought occurred to him. For the first few days of his hospitalization, he had believed Dani when she told him Lauren wouldn’t call back and wasn’t coming to see him. He was willing to bet his wife didn’t even know he was in the hospital.

Was he in the hospital? He was starting to doubt that, too. His surroundings certainly looked like a hospital, but now that he thought back through the duration of his stay there, he had never been seen by anyone except Dani, Rob, Elizabeth, and Patrick, even before “Hurricane Melissa” hit. If there *had* been a hurricane, would two high-profile patients really have been left behind to die in an understaffed, storm-ravaged hospital? Nick didn’t think so. Surely, he and Brian should have been evacuated by now.

Brian. Nick looked across the room at his best friend. Brian wasn’t brain dead. Nick was even more convinced of that now. But had Brian ever really been in a coma? Was he actually paralyzed, unable to move or breathe on his own? Or were they just keeping him that way with more drugs?

“Brian!” Nick hissed. “Can you hear me, bro?”

He heard the beeping of Brian’s heart monitor accelerate, just as it had the night before, and his own heart leapt. Brian’s eyes remained closed, but Nick knew he was awake and listening.

“Look, dude, I don’t think you’re in as bad of shape as they’ve been saying you are. I don’t think I am either.” His mind raced. What could he say to reassure Brian, who

must have been even more frightened and frustrated than he was? “I’m gonna get us both out of here,” he vowed. “I’m not sure how yet, but I’ll think of some way to get help. Just hang on, okay?”

While Dani was out of the room, Nick worked at the restraints around his wrists. He had blown his chance the night before, but if he could just get out of his bed again, he would make a break for it. He didn’t care if he had to run around naked; he would do whatever it took to get far away from the people who had imprisoned him here. But no matter how hard he tugged at the thick straps, they wouldn’t budge. He tried to force his hands through them, squeezing his fingers together to make them as narrow as possible. The painful effort didn’t pay off. The restraints were pulled too tight around his wrists; there was no way his hands would ever fit through.

He attempted to free his feet, thinking maybe he could use his legs to move the bed or at least fight back against his captors. The thought of being able to kick one of them right in the face almost made him smile. But it was just a fantasy. There was no use in wasting his energy on trying to escape. He already knew there was no way out.

By the time Dani came back, Nick had given up. He lay on his back in defeat, drenched in sweat and breathing hard, listening to the rapid beeping of the bedside monitor as his heart thumped against his ribs.

“What on earth have you been up to?” asked Dani, raising her eyebrows as she looked from his heaving chest to the monitor above his bed. “You’re diaphoretic, your resps are up, your heart’s racing, and your blood pressure’s through the roof! You haven’t been trying to get out of bed again, have you?”

Nick didn’t answer.

“Naughty Nicky,” she scolded, wagging her index finger at him as she walked up to the head of the bed. Another wave of nausea turned his stomach when she touched him, pressing her fingertips to the side of his neck to feel his pulse pounding. “You need to take it easy. You don’t wanna trigger another arrhythmia, now do you?” she added in a warning tone.

“There’s nothing wrong with my heart!” Nick cried, rattling the bed rails as he yanked at his restraints. “You’ve just been telling me that to keep me in this fucking hospital bed! Well, I’m not gonna lie here and take it anymore! Let me go! Now!”

“Oh Nick,” sighed Dani, shaking her head. “You poor thing. That fever is really fucking with your head, huh? Well, never fear - help is here!” She whipped out a syringe from

the front pocket of her purple scrub top, and Nick's heart skipped a beat. "Dr. Elizabeth said to go ahead and start you on a course of antibiotics in case you do have an infection. Consider this your first dose."

"No... no, please don't give me anything," Nick protested, as she waltzed around to the other side of his bed, where his IV bag hung from its pole. Until that day, he had never questioned what was in it and whether it was helping to manage his symptoms or making them worse. Now he knew at least one of those answers.

"Just lie back and relax, Nick," Dani said soothingly, as she injected the drug into his central line. "Let the medicine do its job."

There was nothing Nick could do to stop it from entering his body. With his hands tied down, there was no way to pull the IV out of his neck. He had no other option but to lie there helplessly and wait for it to take effect. The fluid was cooler than his core temperature, and he could feel it flowing into his jugular vein, which would carry it to the vena cava and straight into his heart.

His heart was hammering even harder than before, and he couldn't seem to catch his breath. His whole body was covered in cold sweat. Was he still feeling the effects of the physical effort he'd exerted in his failed attempt to free himself? Or were these warning signs that he was about to crash from another overdose of digoxin?

When his vision began to blur, yellow halos appearing around the bright lights overhead, Nick had his answer. Yet even in those last seconds of consciousness before his heart stopped beating, he still couldn't help but wonder *why*.

Why?

It was a question Dani had often asked herself, and she didn't have an answer. As a nurse, she could diagnose most medical problems before the doctor just based on a patient's history, but mental health conditions were often more complicated and much harder to explain.

She supposed it had started that day at the beach, when she was twelve years old. She had been wading with one of her girlfriends, laughing as the waves washed over their legs, when she'd heard the lifeguard's shrill whistle. "Watch out!" a voice cried from behind her, and she was pushed out of the way as a group of people went splashing past,

nearly knocking her down. Following their path with her eyes, she spotted a man floating facedown in the water.

She and her friend Kayla had stood there in shock, watching a pair of lifeguards and a few strong swimmers fight through the waves to reach the drowned man. They flipped him over onto his back before pulling him out of the water. Dani would never forget seeing his gray face as they dragged his lifeless body onto the beach. He was young and fit-looking, likely in his late teens or early twenties.

The two girls followed the group of rescuers, joining the crowd of people who gathered around them. They watched as the two lifeguards took over, one of them lowering his head to the man's chest to check for breathing while the other one felt for a pulse. When they didn't find any signs of life, they began giving him CPR. "Oh my god!" Kayla gasped softly, as she started to cry.

Dani didn't cry. She just stood there and stared, captivated by the sight of the shirtless lifeguard performing compressions, his strong arms glistening as they pumped the other guy's bare chest. Foamy water was gushing profusely from the man's open mouth, making it almost impossible for the other lifeguard to give him any rescue breaths. She attempted to anyway, pinching his nose and putting her mouth over his. Dani wondered what his lips tasted like. Saltwater?

Watching the two lifeguards work together to resuscitate the man, she felt something stir inside her. It was a sensation she'd never felt before, a weird sort of tingling in between her legs. There was no discomfort, like when she needed to pee - in fact, it was almost pleasant. But there was a sense of urgency all the same. It was like a hunger that didn't come from her stomach, a craving she couldn't satisfy.

The feeling only intensified when another woman came forward, calling, "I'm a nurse! I can help!" The male lifeguard looked like he was getting tired, so she dropped to her knees next to the drowned man to take over. Dani couldn't help but notice the nurse's cleavage as she bent down in her bikini to do CPR. Her breasts bounced with the force of each compression. Twelve-year-old Dani, still flat as a board on top, put her hand on her own chest until she could feel her heart fluttering through the thin fabric of her bathing suit. Watching the woman massage the man's heart, her breath caught in her throat. She wanted to *be* that woman. She wanted to know what it felt like to literally hold someone's life in her hands.

Two decades later, Dani knew. After six years as a lifeguard and nearly ten as a nurse, she knew what it was like to bring people back from the brink of death. She also knew what it was like to push them over the edge.

Nick was getting dangerously close to teetering on that narrow precipice. His heart rate was already dropping, destabilizing as his blood pressure plummeted. Premature ventricular contractions had begun to appear on the bedside monitor as his rhythm became more and more chaotic, the result of the massive dose of digoxin she had pushed through his central line. He was still conscious, groaning in discomfort as the pain in his chest grew, but another cardiac arrest was imminent. Knowing she would need backup when he coded, Dani went ahead and punched the blue button on the wall behind his bed, which would signal the others to hurry downstairs and help her resuscitate him. But before Elizabeth and Patrick came to play, she wanted to have a little fun by herself.

“What are you doing?” Nick asked hoarsely when she fetched the crash cart from the corner. She could hear the fear and anxiety in his voice. By now, he knew what was happening to him.

“Don’t you worry,” she replied as she rolled the cart over to his bed, wanting to reassure him. “I’m gonna get you through this, Nick. You’ll be all right.”

“You *caused* this!” he coughed, his breathing becoming labored.

Dani didn’t deny it. She missed the days when he had trusted her, but she had always known they wouldn’t last. They never did. Just as she had outgrown playing with dolls as a little girl, Dani understood she would have to get rid of her Backstreet Boy toy someday - probably sooner rather than later. Rob had told her as much.

The last time they had resuscitated Nick together, she could tell her husband had wanted to call it quits. But Dani wasn’t ready then, and thankfully, neither was Elizabeth. In spite of Rob’s protests and poor attitude, they had persisted until they achieved ROSC - a return of spontaneous circulation.

Afterwards, Rob had followed Dani out of the room. He waited until they were in the privacy of the hallway before he rounded on her. “You wanna tell me what the hell that was all about?” he demanded.

The performance high Dani had from executing another successful resus faded quickly. “What do you mean?” she asked, frowning.

Rob gave her an exasperated look. “You know what I’m talking about.” He lowered his voice, leaning closer to her as he whispered, “That was our chance. We should have just let him die.”

Dani recoiled. “What?! No way!”

“If not now, then when?” he challenged her, crossing his arms over his chest. “How long are we gonna let this little charade go on? The police know about us now; our faces are on the news and all over the internet! If they track us down and find them here, we’re fucked.”

Dani thought he was overreacting. “Relax,” she said. “They don’t even know our names, and even if they did, they’re not gonna track us here.”

“You don’t know that.” Rob sighed, raking a hand through his dark hair. “I’m sorry, babe, but we’ve gotta get rid of them both.”

“Get rid of them?” Dani repeated, raising her eyebrows. “I thought you wanted to hold them for ransom!”

Rob shook his head. “That was a stupid idea. It might have worked if we’d been able to talk to the other Backstreet Boys before they went to the police, but trying to make demands now will only get us caught.”

“Does that mean the video idea’s out too?”

“Dani, it would never work! It would have to be watched thousands of times to make the kind of money we-”

“It would be!” Dani insisted. “They’re the best-selling boyband of all time, Rob! Do you know how many fans they have? People all over the world would pay big bucks for a resus film starring one of the Backstreet Boys! And we have two of them!”

“Yeah, sure, people would watch - and then go straight to the police to report what they saw! We’re not talking about our usual clientele, Dani; we’re talking about women who don’t want to see their precious Backstreet Boys being hurt! I don’t care how many safeguards Patrick has in place - if he posts a video of them on our website, it’ll lead the police straight to us.”

Dani didn’t want to admit it, but he was probably right about the website. She sighed. “Well, I’m not ready to get rid of Nick yet.”

Rob rolled his eyes. “Of course you’re not. You wanna keep him around so you can flirt with him while you’re fucking with his heart and his head. I’m sure you’d like to fuck his dick, too.”

Dani bristled, feeling her face flush. “No I don’t. You’re the only one I wanna fuck, and you know it.”

“Do I?” He arched his eyebrows. “You did an awfully good job of convincing him you’re carrying his kid. I mean, crying on command and everything. Your acting ability has come a long way, dear. It’s almost like you had even convinced yourself it was true. Or maybe you just wish it was.”

His words were like a slap in the face to Dani. “Of course I don’t!” she cried, tears starting in the corners of her eyes. “I love you!”

Her husband’s scathing expression softened into a sad smile. “I don’t doubt that. But you’ve obviously developed feelings for him, too. Otherwise, you would have had no problem letting him die like the rest.”

Dani didn’t know what to say to that. She wanted to deny his accusation, but she couldn’t come up with another reason why she was so keen on keeping Nick alive. She looked down, avoiding Rob’s eyes.

He reached for her, taking her chin between his thumb and forefinger and tilting her face up, forcing her to look at him. “You know he has to die at some point, don’t you?” he said. “We have to kill them both and cremate the bodies before the police can find them. That’s the only way this ends without us in prison.”

Dani shook her head stubbornly. “It doesn’t have to end that way.”

“How else is it going to end?!” Rob suddenly exploded, his voice rising again as his anger returned. “What, you think you can make him fall in love with you and get you pregnant for real? Convince him that he’s really had a heart transplant so you two can ride off into the sunset together once he’s ‘recovered’? Cause you know you can’t hold him hostage here forever, right? Sooner or later, he’s gonna figure it out. That’s if you don’t accidentally kill him first.”

Tears fell from Dani’s eyes. “I know we can’t keep him here forever,” she admitted, hugging herself tightly. “I’m just having a little fun with him while I can. Why is it okay for you to do that but not me?”

“Because I don’t fall for the women we bring back here to fuck with!” Rob replied. “I knew this would be a problem for you, Dani! I knew you’d have a hard time separating your fandom from your goddamn fetish! I told you this was a bad idea; I should have never let you talk me into taking a fucking Backstreet Boy!”

“Well, *fine!*” Dani hissed. “You want out? Go!” She gave him a half-hearted shove. “Get out of here!”

“Come with me,” said Rob, extending his hand to her. “We can both get out of here. Let Liz and Pat take care of the problem.”

She shook her head. “No. I’m not leaving.”

Rob shrugged. “Suit yourself. But you better not call me to bail you out when you get caught, ‘cause I’ll be long gone by then.”

Dani decided to call his bluff. “Well, I guess it’s goodbye then,” she replied with forced casualness. She didn’t think Rob would really walk out. But when she woke up the next morning, he and his boat were gone.

She missed her husband more than she wanted to admit. But he would be back someday. They were meant for each other - soulmates, some would say. He couldn’t stay away from her forever. Sooner or later, he would start to miss her, too, and come crawling back to beg for her forgiveness.

But in the meantime, she had Nick.

“Relax,” she told him, resting a hand on his heaving chest. His heart was pounding, and his pale skin was slick with perspiration. She could practically smell the panic oozing from his pores. It aroused her even more. Rob was right, she realized. She did want to fuck him.

“How am I supposed to relax?” Nick panted. “My heart’s not beating right... I can barely breathe. Help me... please...” His face had taken on a gray pallor that reminded her of the boy at the beach, and his lips looked bluer than ever, thanks to the hypoxic blend of breathing gas flowing through his oxygen cannula. Dani didn’t know what they would do when the last tank ran out - Rob was the only one with the certification required to order it through the dive shop.

“I know a way to help you relax,” she told Nick, smiling, as she turned down his covers. She had seen his naked body plenty of times before, but she had always maintained an

air of professionalism as she helped him bathe, change, and do his business. Now that he knew the truth about Elizabeth and Patrick, she didn't see the point in pretending anymore. She was going to get as much pleasure as she could out of her Backstreet Boy toy before they broke him beyond repair.

She took a tube of electrode gel out of the top drawer of the crash cart and squirted a liberal amount into her palm. The conductive gel was normally used to improve the flow of electricity through defibrillator pads or electrodes, but it would also work as a lubricant. She rubbed it around in her hands to warm it before she reached between Nick's legs.

He let out a loud gasp when she grabbed him, wrapping her hand around his penis. "What the fuck are you doing?!"

Dani giggled. "Helping you relax, silly," she replied with a wink. She heard his heart rate shoot right back up as she squeezed and tugged. With his breathing as rapid and shallow as it was, she could almost pretend he was panting in pleasure instead of pain. In spite of his distress, it didn't take long at all for her to give him an erection. That was a relief, for they didn't have much time left. The pacing spikes on Nick's monitor told her his ICD was sending impulses to his heart, trying to stabilize its rhythm, but the device couldn't counteract the toxic effects of the digoxin indefinitely.

She pulled off her shoes and socks, then loosened the drawstring waist of her purple scrub bottoms so she could lower them along with her panties. She took off her top, too, but left her black push-up bra on. No longer flat as a board, Dani liked the way it made her cleavage look.

"Please... don't..." Nick pleaded faintly, as he watched her undress in front of him. Tears were pouring down his pale face. He looked so pathetic, she felt a fleeting surge of pity for him. But it wasn't enough to prevent her from satisfying her own impulses. She had waited long enough for this opportunity.

"Hold still now, baby," she whispered, as she boosted herself onto the bed and straddled his hips, planting her knees on both sides of his body. He let out a groan of pain as she pointed his erect penis between her legs and lowered herself onto him, forcing him to penetrate her. She moaned with pleasure as she went down further and felt him deep inside of her. Watching the monitor, she rocked her pelvis to the unstable rhythm of his heart as she waited for it to stop.

She had always wondered what it would feel like to fuck someone with an ICD while it went off. She had heard Elizabeth tell her patients it was perfectly safe to have sex with

an ICD, that it wouldn't harm their partners if it discharged during the act, but Dani imagined the other person would still be able to feel the flow of electricity. She wanted to experience the sensation herself.

When the monitor began to wail, its waveform swooping wildly up and down as the QRS axis alternated its direction with each labored beat of Nick's heart, she knew it was only a matter of seconds before she got her wish. Her own heart fluttered with anticipation as she leaned forward, putting both hands flat on his chest to brace herself for the impending shock.

Just before Nick's eyes rolled back into his head, he let out a harsh cry. His body jerked, jolting Dani backwards like a bucking bronco. She dug her nails into his flesh, drawing in a sharp breath as she felt a strange tingling sensation shoot through her body and into her fingertips. It was no more painful than a static electricity shock, and it left her feeling energized, heightening her arousal.

Meanwhile, her partner had lost consciousness, and an alarm was going off on his monitor. Recognizing the chaotic rhythm as ventricular fibrillation, she realized the cardioversion had failed - Nick was now in full cardiac arrest. Her heart leaped into her throat as she leaned forward, lacing her fingers together to start CPR. She could still feel him inside her as she compressed his chest, forcing his heart to contract. Closing her eyes, she imagined the blood being pumped to every part of his body, from his brain to his penis, by the power of her own two hands. Her pleasure peaked. As a second shock from the defibrillator flickered from his body into hers, she felt herself climax. She threw her head back, her whole body shuddering with pure ecstasy.

"Am I interrupting something here?"

Startled, Dani turned to see Elizabeth standing in the doorway, a wry smile on her face. She took a shaky breath before answering. "No... I could use your help. Nick coded again; he needs oxygen." She paused just long enough to pull his blanket up around her waist to cover herself before she continued compressions.

"Yes, I can see how it would be a bit hard for you to bag him from that position," Elizabeth replied sarcastically, slipping behind Nick's bed to retrieve the Ambu bag. She secured the mask over his mouth and nose and squeezed the bag. "How long has he been down?"

"Not long - maybe a minute?"

"And you already had an orgasm?" Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "You're quick."

Dani shrugged, doing her best to keep pumping Nick's chest hard and fast, even though her arms now felt like spaghetti. "When you know exactly what turns you on, it doesn't take long."

Elizabeth smiled and nodded. That was what Dani liked about the doctor - she always seemed to understand. With as much as they had in common, including a longtime love of the Backstreet Boys, it was no surprise that they had become fast friends, going from colleagues to partners in crime in the few years they'd known each other.

"Did you give him more dig?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yeah," Dani admitted. "I had to do something to shut him up. He was shouting at me."

"Understandable. I'll get Patrick down here to help us so we can administer the antidote." Elizabeth hit the code button on the wall again. Dani hoped her worthless brother would take his cue to come down and help. Rob would have been there in a heartbeat; he had always gotten off on running codes.

Patrick shuffled in a few minutes later. By that point, Elizabeth had convinced Dani to trade places with her, so Dani was standing at the head of the bed in her bra and panties, delivering breaths while Elizabeth pumped Nick's chest. "Did you get hot in here or something?" Patrick asked Dani with a smirk, his eyes panning up and down her body.

She smirked back. "Something like that. Come here and bag him so I can get the Digibind going."

Once Patrick had taken over ventilating Nick, Dani opened the second drawer of the crash cart, where they kept vials of digoxin immune fab, a drug used to treat digoxin toxicity. "You need to get some more of this next time you go to work," she told Elizabeth, as she prepared the first vial for injection, mixing its contents with four milliliters of sterile water in a syringe. "If I give him the normal dose, we're gonna be running low."

"Go ahead and push ten vials like usual," Elizabeth instructed in between compressions. "I took a shift at the hospital tomorrow night; I'll bring more back then."

"Got it." Dani held the syringe up to the light to make sure the Digibind had dissolved before she injected it into Nick's central line. "One down... nine to go."

“Don’t you girls ever get tired of torturing the same guy over and over again?” Patrick asked, stifling a yawn as he squeezed the Ambu bag.

Dani and Elizabeth exchanged glances over Nick’s body before agreeing in unison, “Nope.”

They were so busy working to keep oxygenated blood circulating through Nick’s body while they waited for the antidote to take effect that none of them noticed the tears trickling down Brian’s cheeks as he lay in the next bed over, listening to every word they said and wondering *why*.

Chapter 35

As a Christian, Brian believed in both good and evil. He had always known there was evil in the world; he had seen it on TV and heard about it in the news. But never in his life had he experienced true evil firsthand - until the day he witnessed a nurse by the name of Dani torture, rape, and nearly kill his friend Nick.

He was thankful he didn’t have to see it happen, but hearing the noises was bad enough - Nick’s gasps of pain, mixed with Dani’s moans of pleasure, didn’t leave much to the imagination. It brought Brian back to the previous day, when his own body had been abused by Dr. Elizabeth. Somehow, having to lie there and listen to it happening to his little brother was even worse.

He knew it wasn’t his fault, but he still felt guilty for not being able to warn Nick or protect him from suffering a similar fate. Brian hated being so helpless. It was dehumanizing, having to depend on the depraved people who had hurt both Nick and him for his every basic need. He felt a bit like Pinocchio, but in reverse: a real boy who had been turned into a mere puppet, unable to speak or move any part of his body unless it was being manipulated by someone else. The longer he remained imprisoned inside his paralyzed body, the less human he felt.

When he heard Nick flatline, a frightening thought passed through Brian’s head: *If he dies, I don’t want to live*. It wasn’t just that he couldn’t imagine a world without Nick in it. It was that he dreaded being left alone in the living Hell his world had become. *Please, Frack*, he begged, as his eyes flooded with tears. *Please don’t leave me like this! I need you!*

The tears leaked out from under his eyelids and down down his face as he remembered the promise he had heard Nick make to him not half an hour earlier: *“I’m gonna get us both out of here. I’m not sure how yet, but I’ll think of some way to get help. Just hang on, okay?”*

No, you hang on! Brian urged him. *You have to fight for your life now, Nick! Don’t let them take it from you!*

He didn’t understand it. Dani and Dr. Elizabeth had each given Nick drugs to stop his heart, but they were both now trying to get it beating again. He could hear Nick’s bed creaking as they did chest compressions, the Ambu bag deflating every few seconds as they forced air down his throat, the drawers of the crash cart opening and closing as they administered more and more medication. *Why?* he wondered. Why would they want to bring Nick back after what they had done? Were they trying to play God, trying to prove they could control whether a person lived or died? Or was the point just to torture him?

“Tenth vial’s in,” he heard Dani say, after what felt like forever. “I’ll take over compressions now. You’ve gotta be getting tired.”

“Have at it,” replied Elizabeth. The rhythm of the bed rails rattling was briefly interrupted when they traded places. Then the bed began to creak again, as Dani went back to pushing on Nick’s chest.

Brian’s own heart was pumping even faster than her hands were forcing Nick’s to. He wondered how many minutes they would wait to see if the medication worked. If Nick’s heart didn’t start beating on its own again soon, how long would they keep going before they decided to give up on him?

Perhaps it was Brian’s high heart rate that prompted Elizabeth to approach his bedside. His stomach clenched when he heard her familiar footsteps coming closer, his anxiety increasing tenfold with each click of her heels on the tiled floor.

“You’re a little tachy over here, Mr. Littrell,” she remarked, tugging down the top of his gown so she could listen to his heart with her stethoscope. He wanted to cringe when the cold metal touched his bare chest, but of course, he couldn’t move. Goosebumps erupted on his skin, every hair standing on end. He was tormented by memories of her mounting him, laying her head on his chest, and licking his scar. The thought of her slimy tongue tracing the thin line of tissue left over from his long-since-healed incision made him feel like throwing up again. “Have you been listening to what’s happening to Mr. Carter?”

Of course I have, you freak! Brian wanted to yell at her. *I've heard everything!* But he realized she already knew that. She knew full well he wasn't brain dead. She hadn't even bothered to run any real tests on him - whatever results she had pretended to go over with Nick were as fake as the rest of it. Up until today, everything she had told him was a lie.

Elizabeth didn't seem to be worried about the fact that Brian had heard both her lies and the truth. To him, this meant one of two things: either she didn't believe he would ever be able to tell anyone about what he had witnessed, or she wasn't planning to let him live long enough to try.

"Ah... I can see you're crying," she said, wiping his tears away with her fingertips. "I can't say I blame you. Nick's been clinically dead for almost twenty minutes now. We may not be able to get him back this time."

Brian's stomach dropped. *No! Please, no,* he prayed.

"Would you like to watch the action?" Elizabeth asked, prying open his eyes. As they adjusted to the light, her face came into focus, smiling sadistically as she hovered over him. "Here... let me help you." Leaving his eyelids raised, she rolled him onto his right side so that he could see across to Nick's bed. That was when he realized they didn't just want to torture Nick. They were trying to torture him, too.

The sight of Dani bent over Nick's lifeless body in nothing but her bra and underwear disgusted Brian. He had never seen such an outwardly beautiful woman with so ugly a soul - if she even had a soul at all. Brian was beginning to doubt that she did.

One thing had become obviously clear to him: he and Nick were not the sick ones - the two women were. He hoped they both burned in Hell for what they had done.

While Nick was on the brink of death, his loved ones sat down with the detective who was leading the investigation into his disappearance.

Having ruled them out as potential suspects early on, Detective Overton had promised to keep the other Boys and both wives informed on any new developments in the case. When she called to see if she could come out to the condo that day to talk to them, Howie's mind immediately jumped to the worst possible reason why.

“Please, just tell me... are they dead? Did you find a body?” he asked, his voice shaking over the phone.

“No,” Detective Overton replied so firmly, he was forced to believe her. “Don’t worry - it’s nothing like that. If anything, it’s good news. We have another lead I’d like to share with you before it gets out to the public.”

“Oh, thank God,” sighed Howie, sagging with relief. “Yes, please, come on over any time. We’ll be here.”

When the detective arrived, the adults all gathered around the dining room table again. Poor Baylee had been forbidden to come downstairs until Detective Overton was gone. “I’ll decide what to share with my son after she leaves,” declared Leighanne, who was obviously still worried about one of them bringing up the topic of fetish pornography in front of her teenager.

“As if he’s not up there listening from the landing right now,” AJ muttered in an undertone as he sat down next to Howie. He rolled his eyes, and Howie smirked, deciding AJ was probably right about Baylee eavesdropping. He would have done the same thing if it had been his dad who was missing.

“So what’s this lead you wanted to tell us about?” Kevin asked, getting down to business right away.

Detective Overton cleared her throat and opened her computer. “We’ve identified the couple from the bar,” she began, showing them a pair of side-by-side photos. At first glance, they appeared to be mug shots, but the fact that the man and woman in them were both smiling suggested they may have been driver’s license photos instead. Looking more closely at the faces, Howie recognized the blonde woman as both “Becky” and “Sarah” from the videos they had watched on the medical fetish site. As for the man...

“Frat Boy Chad!” AJ cried triumphantly, pointing a finger at his photo.

The detective nodded. “We’ve compared them with the actors on the Arresting Beauties website, and they do appear to be the same people. Plus, now we know their real names. Meet Dr. Robin Henault and his wife, Danielle.”

“Danielle?” repeated Leighanne. “Not Danica?”

“It seems she uses Danica as her stage name,” said Detective Overton. “The last name, Logan, was her maiden name before she married and took her husband’s name.”

“Wait... you said ‘doctor.’” AJ’s brow was furrowed. “You telling us Frat Boy Chad’s a fucking *doctor*? For real??”

“For real,” she replied, her lips curving into a grim smile. “Or, at least, he used to be. He lost his medical license five years ago.”

“Why?” asked Lauren suspiciously.

“Good question,” said the detective. “He was fired from a hospital in Miami after the nurses working in his ward noticed an unusually high number of complications and deaths among his patients. He was never formally charged with a crime, but the state medical board revoked his license for gross negligence.”

Kevin frowned. “Was he killing patients on purpose?”

“Not that anyone has been able to prove,” replied Detective Overton delicately. Howie could tell by her tone that she suspected he had been doing just that. “His wife, Danielle, was employed as a nurse at the same hospital. She resigned from her position after her husband’s dismissal, and they moved to Key West, where she got another nursing job at Lower Keys Medical Center.”

Leighanne gasped. “So she *does* work there?”

“She did. Not anymore. She was let go in September for allegedly stealing supplies from the hospital.”

“For her little video shoots, probably,” said AJ, and Detective Overton nodded.

“Most likely. My team of investigators was able to trace the Arresting Beauties site to Mr. Henault through a credit card in his name that was used to renew the domain registration. As they were digging deeper into the website, they also found videos appearing to feature several missing women from this area.”

Howie drew in a sharp breath and heard everyone around him do the same. “I saw a story on the news about a missing woman the night Brian disappeared. Do you mean her?”

Detective Overton nodded. “Stephanie Gale is the most recent one, but there have been a string of others over the past year or so. Most of them were reasonably attractive young women on the outskirts of society - drug addicts, prostitutes, illegal immigrants - in other words, the kind of people who either wouldn’t be missed or whose families might be afraid to contact the police,” she explained. “Nick and Brian are much more high profile and male, which doesn’t seem to fit their M.O. But based on the footage from the bar, Robin and Danielle Henault may have been the last two people to see Nick that night, which makes them persons of interest in his disappearance, as well as the others. We’ve secured a warrant to search the Henaults’ home and bring them both in for questioning. My officers are on their way over to their house as we speak.”

Howie sat up a little straighter. “Do you think Nick and Brian are there?” he asked hopefully.

“It’s possible,” the detective replied, although she didn’t sound nearly as optimistic. “Even if we don’t find them there, we may find evidence that will lead us to them.”

“When will we know what they found?” Kevin wondered.

“One of the officers will call me with an update once they have the suspects in custody,” said Detective Overton. “Until then, we just have to wait.”

As Dani worked to resuscitate Nick, she thought about Rob.

She had met her husband during a code at the hospital in Miami where they had both worked before moving to Key West. It was the first week of Rob’s internship in emergency medicine. Dani, just twenty-two, was fresh out of college and still learning the ropes herself, having been employed as an ER nurse for only a month. When the elderly patient she was caring for suddenly crashed, the dashing Dr. Henault had been the first to respond. They worked together to administer CPR while they waited for a more experienced physician to come in and intubate the woman. Watching Rob perform deep chest compressions, his biceps bulging through the sleeves of his scrub top as his big hands pushed down forcefully on the patient’s frail chest, Dani was instantly attracted to him. She wondered what it would be like to feel those hands between her breasts, pumping her own chest.

It was a fantasy she kept to herself until they had been dating exclusively for a few months. When she finally confessed what turned her on, Rob was willing and eager to roleplay with her. He loved to be her rescuer, ripping off her shirt to massage her heart,

breathing the life back into her through mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. They would have sex afterwards, and often, she would return the favor with a blow job.

Soon they began filming these roleplay sessions. At first, the videos were just for their own personal pleasure, but eventually, Dani convinced Rob to start posting them online for the rest of the resus community to enjoy. That was how their website, Arresting Beauties, came to be created.

It was an amateur, low-budget affair until after they had married and moved to Key West, where Dani met Elizabeth while working in the Cardiac Cath Lab at Lower Keys Medical Center. The two women initially bonded over a shared love of the Backstreet Boys, but later learned they had even more in common. As it turned out, Elizabeth had a bit of a medical fetish herself, and when she joined Arresting Beauties, their production value increased dramatically. Elizabeth had inherited a funeral home and a large sum of money after her father passed away, and she invested some of it into transforming part of the defunct funeral parlor into a realistic-looking hospital set for them to film in. They brought her tech-savvy brother, Patrick, on board to produce the videos and maintain the website. Before long, business was booming - for an independent adult entertainment company catering to a small corner of the internet, at least.

The next challenge they faced was creating enough new content to keep their clients coming back for more. At first, Dani, Rob, and Elizabeth had starred in all the videos themselves, rotating the roles of doctor, nurse, and patient. But as the website grew, they began to branch out, hiring different actresses to play the parts. Dani was never fully satisfied with their performances, though - the resuscitation scenes simply didn't look realistic enough when they had to fake most of the procedures, so as not to hurt any of their actresses. It would be so much better if they could do it for real.

Yes, thought Dani, glancing at Nick's ashen face as she gave him CPR, *it's definitely more exciting when it's real*. Like Rob, she relished the adrenaline rush of a resuscitation, the god-like power of determining whether a person lived or died beneath her hands. Of course, she and the others didn't always get to decide - often their "patients" died, despite their best efforts to save them. But they had gotten a lot better at bringing people back to life.

"C'mon, Nick," she panted, as she continued to pump his chest. He had been without a pulse for the better part of twenty minutes, and though she had administered a large dose of the antidote to the digoxin she'd injected earlier, he hadn't responded. She was beginning to worry their luck had run out. Maybe this was the time they wouldn't be able to bring him back.

“It’s been two more minutes. Pause for a rhythm check,” said Elizabeth.

Dani stopped and straightened up, breathing hard as her eyes moved to Nick’s monitor. “Still asystole,” she sighed, watching the waveform flatten out.

Elizabeth frowned, squinting at the screen. “Looks more like fine V-fib to me. Let’s try shocking him with the external paddles. Do you want to do the honors?”

Dani’s heart leapt with excitement. “You bet I do!”

“Charge to two hundred,” Elizabeth advised, as she took over chest compressions.

While the defibrillator was charging, Dani squirted some more conductive gel onto the paddles. She could still feel Nick inside her, the coolness of the gel mixed with the warmth of him making her tingle. A part of her felt bad for betraying Rob, but it was only a small part. After all, Nick had been her free pass - and besides, Rob had betrayed her first by running and leaving her behind. Everything they had built together was beginning to fall apart - but Dani was bound and determined to keep it together for as long as she could.

The defibrillator beeped to signal that it had finished charging. “Clear!” she called, and both Elizabeth and Patrick backed away from the bed.

“Be sure to stay at least ten centimeters away from the pulse generator,” Elizabeth warned, as Dani went to press the paddles to Nick’s chest. She kept the one in her right hand low on the left side of his chest, avoiding the bulge under his collarbone where the ICD had been implanted. She pushed the buttons to administer a shock and watched with pleasure as his body bucked beneath the paddles. Elizabeth immediately went back to pumping his chest as they waited to see if it worked.

As Dani put the paddles back, she looked up and saw Brian staring at her from his bed. The steady drip of Pavulon they had kept flowing through his veins for the past few weeks prevented him from being able to move his facial muscles or any other part of his body, but she could perceive the emotion in his blank expression. His intense blue eyes blazed with hatred towards Elizabeth, Patrick, and her. Behind that, fear for Nick. Because of her, he was losing his brother, his best friend. Feeling those eyes on her even as she looked away made Dani even more desperate to bring Nick back.

She watched the clock, waiting for the two minute mark, when they would pause again to check for a pulse. “C’mon, Nick,” she murmured again, clasping her hands together tightly as Elizabeth continued compressions. “Come on back to us now.”

The minutes ticked by as Howie and the others sat around the dining room table with Detective Overton, waiting for one of her officers to call with an update.

The tension in the room was practically tangible. No one was talking now. Howie found the silence unnerving, but he had nothing to say. Not even AJ seemed to be able to come up with a wisecrack to ease their collective anxiety.

When the phone rang, they all jumped. The detective answered it immediately with a crisp, “Overton.” They waited with bated breath, watching her face as she listened to the voice on the other end of the line. “Okay. Keep me posted,” she said finally and hung up.

“Well?” asked Leighanne hopefully, her eyebrows arching high on her forehead. “Did they find them?”

Detective Overton took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. “Unfortunately, no. The house was empty. We’re going to assign a couple of plain-clothes officers to stake out the place in case they come back, but my colleague said it didn’t look like anyone had been living there in a while.”

Howie didn’t know whether to be disappointed or relieved. Nick and Brian were still missing... but at least they hadn’t been found dead. That meant there was still hope. Yet he had watched enough crime shows to know that the longer they remained missing, the less likely it was that they would be found alive. Despite his best efforts to stay hopeful, Howie couldn’t shake the feeling that their time was running out.

After two more minutes, Elizabeth halted the resuscitation efforts to reassess Nick’s heart rhythm.

When the doctor removed her hands from Nick’s chest, Dani watched the wavy line on his monitor flatten and felt herself deflate. But before she could say “Asystole,” it suddenly spiked. She drew in a sharp breath and held it. Was that a beat? The line dipped and went flat for several more seconds before it spiked again.

“Sinus bradycardia,” Elizabeth declared, and Dani let out her breath in a sigh of relief. It seemed luck was still on their side, after all. “Does he have a pulse?”

Pressing two fingers to the radial artery in Nick’s wrist, Dani felt a faint fluttering beneath her fingertips. “It’s pretty weak, but it’s there all right,” she replied.

“Good. Give him point-five of atropine; I want to get his heart rate up.”

“You got it.” Dani opened the top drawer of the crash cart and took out a syringe filled with the drug. As she bent down by Nick’s head to inject it into his central line, she brushed his blond hair back off his forehead and smiled. He was still unconscious, but some of the color was starting to come back into his face. “Welcome back again, Nick,” she whispered into his ear. “You were wonderful.”

Chapter 36

Nick was alive, but not well. Rather than bouncing back from his latest brush with death, as he had so many times before, his condition began to deteriorate over the next day. He drifted in and out of consciousness, delirious from his dangerously high fever.

“He definitely has an infection,” Elizabeth told Dani after she had finished examining him. “Whether it’s from his central line, his arterial line, the ICD, or something else, I don’t know. It could take a few more days to get back the blood cultures from the sample you took yesterday, but I’ll try to snag some broad-spectrum antibiotics from the hospital after my shift tonight so we can start treating him. In the meantime, replace the administration set on his central line and take out the a-line. You can monitor his B.P. manually.”

Dani carried out her instructions, relieved that Elizabeth didn’t seem ready to let nature take its course and kill Nick for them. Perhaps she wanted to keep him alive so she could continue to torture him in front of Brian, or maybe she meant to orchestrate his death herself. Dani didn’t always understand the doctor’s intentions, but this time, she didn’t question them. She wasn’t ready to get rid of Nick yet either.

Around 7:30 that evening, Elizabeth left for her graveyard shift at the hospital. She had taken an intermittent family medical leave of absence from work under the pretense of “caring for her chronically-ill brother,” which allowed her to be available to watch over

Brian and Nick while picking up the occasional shift so she could continue to procure supplies from the hospital.

Dani told Patrick to take the night off, not trusting him to take care of Nick while his condition was so precarious. Patrick had learned just enough to look like he knew what he was doing while posing as a nurse, but she wasn't about to leave Nick's life in his hands. Instead, she remained by Nick's bedside, monitoring his vitals herself as he slept.

Although she had refrained from giving him any more digoxin, Nick's heart raced, the occasional PVC appearing on the monitor as its rhythm fluctuated. When she listened to his chest with her stethoscope, she heard a murmur that hadn't been there before. What worried her even more was the rattling sound of rales, a sure sign that fluid was accumulating in his lungs. His breathing had become labored; she watched his chest heave as he took rapid, shallow breaths, practically panting for air. She had taken him off the hypoxic breathing gas they'd been using to lower his oxygen saturation level and put him on pure oxygen instead, but it hadn't seemed to help. His respiratory rate was still high, and his sats remained low. She wondered what she would do if he went into respiratory failure and required mechanical ventilation. They only had one ventilator, and it was already being used by Brian.

I'll just bag him if I have to, she decided. She had done it before with Brian, when they had shut off the power. She could do it again to keep Nick alive.

But she was tired. So tired...

Dani dozed off in her chair and woke with a start to find herself doubled over with her head on Nick's bed. Sitting up, she wiped her bleary eyes and blinked up the bedside monitor, squinting to make out the numbers. Nothing appeared to have changed much.

She stood up and stretched her body before slipping behind the bed to grab the blood pressure cuff. She wrapped it tightly around Nick's arm and inflated it, listening to the faint sounds of blood flowing through his brachial artery with the bell of her stethoscope as she let the air out slowly. She didn't like what she saw on the sphygmomanometer: his blood pressure had dropped since the last reading, which had already been low.

Replacing the cuff, she reached for the digital thermometer next and eased it into Nick's ear. When it beeped, the number on the display was no better: Nick's fever had risen to a frightening 104 degrees. His face was flushed and sweaty, and when she placed her hand on his forehead, Dani could feel the heat radiating from his skin. Despite this, his body was racked by chills.

Swallowing hard, she realized he was showing signs of septic shock. The numbers didn't lie: Nick was critically ill, for real this time. If she didn't do something soon, he was going to die. At the rate he was declining, she doubted he would even make it through the rest of the night.

In the back of her mind, she could hear Rob saying, *"He has to die at some point. Kill him and be done with it."*

Dani knew he was right. The police were already onto them both; their names and faces were all over the news. Patrick was such a recluse, he had yet to be recognized from the airport surveillance footage they had been showing, but it was only a matter of time before he was identified, too. That would lead the police straight to his family's former funeral parlor, where they would find Nick and Brian - unless she got rid of them first.

She didn't even need drugs. With Nick in restraints and weakened by the infection ravaging his body, all she would have to do was hold a pillow over his face and smother him to death. Brian would be even easier to kill. Paralyzed by Pavulon, he was unable to breathe on his own. If she simply unplugged the ventilator, he would succumb to respiratory arrest in a matter of minutes. She and Patrick could put their bodies in the cremation oven, burn all the evidence to ashes, and be rid of them both, just as they had done with their other "patients." Problem solved.

But as she looked down at Nick, Dani realized she didn't want him to die. She had never really intended to kill him; she had only stopped his heart so she could have the pleasure of bringing him back to life. But now he needed more help than she could give him. Nick needed to be in a real ICU, not an understaffed film set filled with secondhand equipment. How could she get him to one without getting herself caught and arrested?

She weighed her options. She could call 911, ask for an ambulance to be sent to the funeral home, and run away, as Rob had... but then she would be leading the authorities straight to Patrick and Elizabeth. She didn't particularly care about Patrick, but she wouldn't sell out Elizabeth like that. Elizabeth was still a practicing cardiologist, a respected member of the community, and the only one who hadn't yet been connected to either Nick's or Brian's disappearance. Dani was determined to protect her friend's reputation if at all possible. That meant she had to remove Nick from the funeral home herself.

If she tried to take him to the hospital, she was likely to get caught. Even if she just dropped him off outside the emergency department, she would surely be seen by security cameras and possibly other people. She wouldn't have much of a head start

before the police came after her, and as there was only one way out of the Keys, they would inevitably catch up to her at some point. They wouldn't even have to chase her; they could simply set up a roadblock further up the Overseas Highway to apprehend her as she tried to flee to the mainland.

Dani decided her only option was to dump Nick somewhere else and hope he would be discovered by a Good Samaritan, who could call for help or take him to the hospital. It wouldn't be easy to move him by herself without being seen, but she had to try. If she didn't, Nick would die, and this time, there was nothing she could do to stop it.

It was four o'clock in the morning when Dani wheeled a stretcher alongside Nick's bed. Nick was sound asleep - unconscious, more likely - and didn't so much as stir when she removed the tubes and wires that were attached to his body and unstrapped the restraints around his wrists and ankles. She used his bedsheets to slide him slowly off the bed and onto the stretcher.

She rolled him down the back hallway and into the garage, where a gleaming black hearse was parked. It had once belonged to Elizabeth and Patrick's father. She loaded the stretcher into the back, using the locking mechanism to secure it before she slipped behind the wheel. She knew she was taking a risk in using it to transport Nick, as a hearse wasn't exactly inconspicuous, but it would make it much easier for her to move him by herself. Besides, she couldn't drive her own car - not only was it too small, but the police had her license plate number. They were also still looking for a silver Corolla, which meant she couldn't take Patrick's car either. The damage from Rob rear-ending it the day they had picked up Brian would probably attract even more attention than the hearse would. She just had to hope that anyone out at this hour on a Saturday morning would be too drunk or preoccupied to pay any attention to a hearse driving past them.

As an extra precaution, aware that there could be surveillance cameras near where she planned to dump Nick, Dani had put on a pair of baggy sweatpants and a huge, black hoodie of Patrick's to hide her figure. She tucked the ends of the long, brown wig she had secured over her own short, blonde hair into the sweatshirt and pulled up the hood to obscure her face before she turned on the ignition. On the floor of the passenger seat sat a bag packed with as many clothes and supplies as she could carry. Neither Patrick nor Elizabeth knew it yet, but Dani wasn't planning on coming back.

Her heart beat fast as she drove slowly towards a stretch of beach she thought would be deserted at this time of day. As she pulled off onto the side of the road, she was relieved to see that she was right. There were no other cars in the narrow parking lot, and just

past it, the beach appeared to be empty. She backed the hearse into a space and shut off the engine. Pocketing the key, she climbed out of the car.

Outside, it was dark and quiet. The moon was a mere sliver in the sky overhead as Dani hurried around to the back of the hearse and opened the door. It was hard to maneuver the stretcher all by herself, but she managed to slide it out far enough to lower the wheels, which bore most of Nick's weight.

Moving the stretcher across the beach was even more difficult. When the wheels sank into the deep sand, Dani gave up and decided she would have to drag Nick the rest of the way. She lowered the stretcher to the ground and rolled his naked body off of it. Grabbing him by the ankles, she hauled him toward the water, hoping to make it look like he had washed ashore with the high tide. She thought she heard a weak groan as his head bounced roughly over the rocky sand, but when she looked back, his eyes were still closed.

She left him lying on his stomach a few feet from the water, his head turned away from the waves so he wouldn't get water in his mouth or nose. With any luck, he would be found by an early-bird jogger or fisherman when the sun rose in another two hours. By then, she would be well on her way to the mainland.

Before she headed back to the hearse, Dani knelt down next to Nick's head, knowing it would likely be the last time she ever saw him. "I'm sorry," she whispered, brushing his blond hair back from his face. His skin no longer felt warm and clammy, but cool and dry. She frowned, moving her fingers to the carotid artery in the side of his neck. She couldn't find a pulse.

Her heart leaping into her throat, she rolled Nick over onto his back and lowered her head to his bare chest to listen for heart and lung sounds. She heard nothing. Somewhere along the way, his heart had stopped.

When? she wondered frantically, as she debated what to do. Should she call 911 and drive away or stay and try to resuscitate him herself? He couldn't have been down for more than a few minutes; he was still breathing when she took him out of the back of the hearse. Had his ICD discharged while she was dragging him across the beach? With all the jerky movements she had been making, she wasn't sure she would have noticed if it had. But one thing was clear: if she didn't get oxygenated blood circulating through his body again immediately, Nick would be brain dead by the time help arrived.

With a heavy sigh, she pulled her phone out of the front pouch of Patrick's hoodie and dialed 911. She put it on speaker as she bent over Nick's body to begin CPR.

“Monroe County 911,” a dispatcher answered.

“I need an ambulance right away.” Dani described her location the best she could as she did chest compressions. “I was just walking by the beach when I found this man lying on the ground, unresponsive. He’s not breathing. I’ve started CPR. Please hurry and send help as soon as possible.”

Still pumping Nick’s chest with one hand, she ended the call before the dispatcher could ask her any questions. She knew she was being recorded; the fewer personal details she provided, the better. It was bad enough that she had been forced to use her phone. She had planned to get rid of it on her way out of town so it couldn’t be used to track her, but now the police would be able to trace the 911 call to her number. They would know she was the one who had placed it.

Dani tried not to think about that now, tried to keep her mind focused on the task in front of her. As she put her left hand back on top of her right, using both hands to push down repeatedly on Nick’s chest, she heard her phone ring in the background. It had to be the 911 dispatcher calling her back, assuming they had been accidentally disconnected. Dani ignored it, knowing she had given the dispatcher just enough information for the first responders to find her.

After thirty compressions, she tilted Nick’s head back to open his airway and gave him two rescue breaths. Tasting the briny tang of sand and sea air on his cracked lips, she was reminded of that day on the beach when she was twelve and had watched the drowned man being resuscitated. But she found no pleasure in giving Nick mouth-to-mouth, not this time. Far from a fantasy, this was turning into a nightmare.

“C’mon, Nick,” she panted as she continued compressions, pumping the oxygenated blood to his brain. “Don’t you do this to me now. Breathe, damn it!”

She finished five cycles of CPR before she paused to check for a pulse. She hadn’t felt a single shock from the ICD, which meant one of three things: either he was back in normal sinus rhythm and no longer in need of a shock, he was still in cardiac arrest with a rhythm that hadn’t responded to defibrillation attempts while she was dragging him across the beach, or he didn’t have a shockable rhythm at all. She hoped for the best, but feared the worst as she pressed her fingers to his carotid artery.

Still no pulse.

With a sigh, she went back to work on him. She was already getting tired, as the sleepless night caught up to her. Her breath came in short gasps, and sweat dripped between her shoulder blades as she began to overheat in the bulky sweatshirt. Her arms felt weak, but she kept pumping his chest as hard and fast as she could, singing “Quit Playing Games” in her head to help herself keep up the pace. “Help will be here soon,” she said aloud, more to assure herself than Nick, who was probably beyond hearing.

She knew if she left now, she might just be able to drive away before the ambulance arrived. But how long would it take the paramedics to find Nick in the dark? Those precious few minutes could make the difference between life and death... a complete recovery or permanent brain damage.

Despite the risk of being caught, Dani couldn't bring herself to leave him. She was still doing CPR when she heard the sirens approaching. She didn't stop until a paramedic dropped down to his knees on Nick's other side and pushed her hands away. “I'll take over now,” he said, placing his own hands where hers had been. “You did great.”

She wanted to laugh at the absurdity of his statement. If only he knew what she had done to Nick.

Dani stayed long enough to repeat the lie she had told the 911 dispatcher about how she had stumbled onto Nick's body. Then, as the paramedics were working on him, she slipped away and snuck back to the hearse. She knew they would hear the roar of the engine as she started the car and see her red taillights disappearing into the darkness, but she hoped they had been too busy trying to reach the scene to remember any identifying details about the vehicle that had been parked there when they pulled up.

As she raced up the Overseas Highway, keeping a close eye on her rearview mirror, she turned on the radio. She hoped to eventually hear a breaking news report on Nick's condition.

It was then that she remembered Brian, who had been left behind without anyone to give him more medication. His IV bag would be running dry soon. The Pavulon would probably start wearing off before Elizabeth got home from work.

“Not my problem,” muttered Dani with a shrug, hurling her cell phone out the window and into the sea as she drove on toward the mainland.

Chapter 37

Howie was woken up well before dawn by the sound of his cell phone ringing. He rolled over in bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes as he reached for the phone.

His stomach dropped when he saw Detective Overton's name flashing on its screen. She had given him her personal number to plug into his contacts and told him to call her any time, day or night, if he thought of anything else that might help her track down Nick and Brian. He had asked her to do the same, knowing she would never abuse the privilege. Howie didn't know what time it was, but judging by the darkness outside his window, it may as well have been the middle of the night. There was only one reason the detective would call him so early: Brian, Nick, or both of them had been found.

"Hello?" he croaked, his voice thick with phlegm.

"Howie?" asked Detective Overton.

He cleared his throat before answering, "Yeah, it's me. Did you find them?" His heart raced as he waited to hear her response.

"I don't want to get your hopes up or cause you any alarm," the detective replied carefully, "but a man matching Nick's description was discovered on one of the beaches about fifteen minutes ago. He's being taken to the hospital by ambulance."

Howie's breath caught in his throat. "So he's alive?"

Detective Overton seemed to hesitate. "Yes, but from what I understand, he's in pretty bad shape. I normally wouldn't call you before making a positive identification myself, but under the circumstances, I thought you guys might want to get there as soon as possible in case it is Nick."

"Of course," said Howie, already climbing out of bed and fumbling around for clothes. "Which hospital did you say it was?"

"Lower Keys Medical Center."

"For real this time?" Howie couldn't help but ask.

Detective Overton chuckled. "For real. I'll meet you in the emergency room."

“We’ll be there soon,” Howie promised. He hung up, then hurried to wake up the others.

Ten minutes later, he was speeding towards the hospital in his rental car with Lauren riding shotgun, Kevin and AJ in the back seat. Leighanne and Baylee were right behind them in a second car.

Howie followed the signs for the emergency room and found a place to park. He heard three sets of seatbelts unbuckle before he had even turned the car off. He and the rest of the group rushed toward the entrance, reaching it just as an ambulance pulled up with its lights flashing and siren wailing.

They stood back and watched as a paramedic hopped out of the front and ran around to the back, where she was met by a pair of people in scrubs who had emerged from the hospital. “This the cardiac arrest?” Howie heard one of them ask.

The paramedic nodded as she flung open the back door. “We found him in full arrest, being given CPR by a bystander. No idea how long he had been down before that,” she explained, as she helped a second paramedic pull a stretcher out of the ambulance. “We achieved ROSC after about ten minutes at the scene and spent another ten or so trying to stabilize him before we transported, but he arrested again in the rig. Last rhythm was asystole.”

As they lowered the wheels of the stretcher and Howie got his first good look at the patient lying on it, his stomach lurched.

It was Nick.

Howie first recognized him not by his face, which was strangely bloated and so pale it almost appeared to be blue, but by his shoulder tattoos. The lower half of his body was covered by a blanket, but the top half was unclothed. Both his arms had been strapped to the sides of a big, scary-looking contraption that arched over his torso. In the center was a cylinder with a suction cup attached to the bottom which was moving up and down like a piston, compressing the middle of Nick’s chest with a disconcerting amount of depth and force.

Watching the device at work, Howie felt nauseous. He had never seen anything like it before, but he understood what it was doing. The machine was mechanically contracting Nick’s heart, making it continue to pump blood through his body, even though it had stopped beating. It looked incredibly painful, but Nick probably couldn’t feel it. He appeared to be unconscious.

“Oh my god... Nick!” gasped Lauren. She took one step toward the stretcher before her knees buckled. Kevin and AJ caught her by the arms as she started to collapse. They helped her inside and forced her into a chair while Nick was whisked away.

Howie tried to follow the stretcher, but a nurse held him back. “I’m sorry, sir, but you need to wait here while we’re working on your friend,” she said. “One of us will come find you as soon as we have an update on his condition.”

Before Howie could protest, Detective Overton hurried over. “Howie! Did you have a chance to see him?” she wanted to know. “Is it Nick?”

Howie nodded, still reeling from what he had just witnessed. “Yeah. It’s definitely Nicky all right.” Hot tears rose in his eyes as the realization hit him hard: “He’s dying.

The detective gripped his shoulder. “You don’t know that. Let’s try and focus on the positives here. Nick’s been found. He’s not with those people anymore. He’s in good hands here at the hospital, and those doctors and nurses are going to do everything in their power to help him. We just have to hope and pray it’s enough.”

Howie nodded again, knowing she was right. He needed to stay strong and have faith, not only for Nick, but for Lauren and the others. As he looked back over his shoulder to make sure Nick’s wife was okay, Leighanne approached the detective. Her blue eyes shone with tears as she asked the next question on all of their minds: “What about Brian?”

Brian had woken up as Dani was wheeling Nick away. *Where are you taking him?!* he wanted to shout, remembering the horrors he himself had endured the last time Elizabeth took him out of the room. He had already witnessed Dani doing unspeakable things to Nick right there in front of him. What else would she do when she was alone with him? Just thinking about his brother being raped or tortured again made Brian shudder, but the worst part was knowing there was nothing he could do to prevent it. He was still completely paralyzed and utterly powerless.

But as the minutes passed without Dani or Nick returning to the room, an astonishing thing happened: Brian’s body began to awaken.

At first, it was only his little finger, like before. The movement was so subtle, he wasn’t even sure it was really happening. Maybe it was all in his head. But as more time went

by, the subtle twitch became a full-on finger curl. Feeling the tip of his pinky touch the palm of his hand, he knew he wasn't imagining it. He really was regaining control over his right hand.

Before long, the left side followed. It wasn't just his hands either - as he flexed his fingers, he found that he could also wiggle his toes. To Brian, this proved what he had been suspecting for a while: his paralysis wasn't permanent. It wasn't the result of a spinal cord injury, either. And the best part was that whatever drugs they had been using to immobilize his body and make him think it was seemed to be wearing off. As more time passed, more muscles began to respond to the commands his brain was giving them.

The ones in his face were among the last to wake up. When he finally managed to open his eyes on his own again, it felt like gulping down a tall glass of cold water after walking for days in the desert. He stared up at the stark white ceiling tiles over his head, drinking in every detail. He was almost afraid to blink, terrified he wouldn't be able to lift his heavy eyelids again if he let them fall back down. But after a few seconds of his eyes watering beneath the blinding fluorescent lights, he was forced to shut them. To his relief, they fluttered open without as much effort the second time.

The stiff cervical collar around his neck prevented him from turning his head, and though he tried hard to sit up, his abdominal muscles were too weak to pull himself into a sitting position. Fumbling around, he found the controls to his bed and managed to raise the head until he was upright for the first time in weeks. After lying flat for so long, even being at a forty-five degree angle made him feel dizzy. His head was swimming. He leaned back heavily against the hard mattress and stayed like that for a few more minutes to let his body adjust before he attempted to move again.

Looking down, he was able to see a long hose hooked up to his tracheostomy tube. He would have to disconnect himself from the ventilator if he had any hope of escaping. He wasn't sure how well he would be able to breathe without it, but he had to try. There was no telling where Dani had taken Nick, but he knew she could come back at any time. He kept his eyes trained on the door and his ears tuned to the hallway, expecting to hear her or one of the others approaching any moment. Meanwhile, he tried to take a breath on his own, fighting the flow of oxygen from the ventilator. Pressing his hand against his abdomen, he felt his diaphragm move downward as his lungs expanded. That was all the proof he needed. Saying a quick prayer in his head, he held onto the trach with one hand to keep the tube in place as he tugged at the hose with the other. With a pop, it pulled right off the end of the tube. He heard a hissing sound as the hose snaked to the floor, oxygen still flowing through it.

For a few seconds, Brian felt like a fish out of water. It was as if his whole airway had been sealed; he couldn't seem to inhale through his mouth or nose. Thoughts of suffocation flashed in his mind as he fought for his first breath. But once fresh air entered the opening in his neck and filled his lungs, his panic began to subside. The trach tube made it feel like he was trying to breathe through a straw, but at least he could finally do so on his own.

Emboldened by his success, Brian carefully unstrapped the bulky neck brace and took it off. After wearing it for so long, he felt strangely vulnerable without it. His neck was stiff and sore from being immobilized, and his head had never seemed so heavy. He was as helpless as a newborn baby, barely able to hold up his own head. At first, it felt like it was about to flop over and fall right off his shoulders. But after a few more minutes, he had adjusted to its weight and was able to lift his head off the mattress.

He found he could still move the parts of his body below the neck, too, even without the cervical collar to keep his spine in alignment. This was further confirmation that they had been faking the spinal cord injury he had supposedly suffered in the car crash. He felt sick to his stomach at the realization that he'd been held hostage in a hospital bed and subjected to unnecessary medical procedures for no reason, but it made him even more determined to run and find help for both Nick and himself.

He unplugged the IV line from the access point in his left arm and reached under his gown to pluck the electrodes off of his chest. Hearing an alarm ring on his heart monitor, he hurried to remove the rest of the equipment that was attached to his body before someone came in to check on him.

Soon all that remained was the urinary catheter he could feel protruding from the tip of his penis. He was afraid to pull it out by himself, but it was either that or haul a bag of his own urine around with him as he made his break for freedom. The second option disgusted him so much, he decided he had to try and take it out. He peeled off the piece of tape securing a length of tubing to the his inner thigh. Pinching the thin tube firmly between his thumb and forefinger, he sucked in a deep breath through the hole in his neck, squeezed his eyes shut, and tugged. He was met with pain and resistance, but his desperation made him more reckless than he would normally be. He yanked harder and felt something rip inside him as the tube slid out into his hand.

As a fiery pain blazed from his bladder into his penis, Brian opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came out. Clutching himself, he writhed in agony for what felt like forever, too terrified to open his eyes and look down. When he finally did, he saw blood between his legs, but it wasn't as much as he had been imagining.

Once he had managed to convince himself he wasn't hemorrhaging to death, Brian braced himself for his next feat: getting out of bed. Finally free from all of the tubes that had tethered him there, all he had to do was put his feet on the floor and pray his legs were still strong enough to support him. He fumbled with the side rail until he figured out how to lower it, then slid his legs slowly off of the bed, turning his body so that he was sitting on the edge. He stayed like that for a few seconds, getting his bearings before he tried to stand. Yet in the back of his mind, he knew he had to hurry - one of his captors could come bursting into the room at any moment. He was surprised he hadn't already been caught trying to escape. Where was everyone? he wondered. Brian couldn't believe his luck.

It's not luck, he told himself. It's divine intervention. The Lord was on his side. He didn't understand why he had been forced to suffer what he had in this place, and perhaps he never would, but still, Brian put his faith in his Heavenly Father, as he always had before. His belief in God gave him the strength he needed to stand.

His skinny legs were as weak and wobbly as a newborn foal's, but they did not buckle beneath Brian's weight. With his heart beating fast and his whole body trembling, he felt like he had just finished running a four hundred meter sprint - when, really, he was still on the starting block. Fueled by the burst of adrenaline flowing through his veins, he took one shaky step, followed by another. *You can do this*, he coached himself, forcing his feet to shuffle forward. *You need to do this... not just for yourself, but for Nick. Do it for him.*

His determination to free himself and find help for his dying brother kept Brian moving toward the door. The further he walked, the stronger he felt. By the time he made it into the hallway, he was able to move faster. He had no idea which way to go, so he turned to the right, clinging to the red stripe on the wall as he rounded the corner and crept up the empty corridor.

At the end of the hall was a closed door. Cautiously, Brian opened it a sliver and put his eye to the crack, peeking through it. He saw what appeared to be another passageway, though it looked nothing like the one he was in. Its floors were carpeted, its walls covered in wooden paneling. He pushed the door open wider to confirm that it was unoccupied before he crossed the threshold. His feet squished into the plush, yet faded, rose-colored carpet as he walked over it. *What is this place?* he couldn't help but wonder.

Rounding another corner, he found himself in a huge, open room. There were rows of chairs all facing the same direction, but nothing to see up front but a few dusty wooden tables and plant stands. He hurried past them, breathing hard through his trach tube as

he tried to pick up the pace. His head was spinning, but he didn't dare stop to rest. He continued down another corridor into the next room, which looked like a lobby or reception area. He could see a large front door on the opposite side. To Brian, it represented freedom.

If he had possessed the strength and coordination to run to it, he would have, but he could only stagger stiffly in its direction. Clumsily, he closed his fingers around the doorknob and tried to turn it. Of course, it was locked. Fumbling with the latch, he unlocked it and tried again. This time, to his relief, the knob turned easily in his hand. He tugged on it, and the door opened with a loud creak. Praying no one was around to hear the sound, he crept out onto a covered porch and closed it carefully behind him.

Turning around, he took a moment to scope out his surroundings. A set of steps would take him down to the sidewalk, which led to a quiet street. A large, wooden sign on the overgrown lawn said, in fading letters, *Gravel Funeral Home*. *What the hell?* thought Brian, frowning, as a chill went down his spine.

He didn't stop to dwell on it. Stumbling down the steps, he headed toward the street. It was almost dawn, but the windows of the nearby houses were still dark. No one was outside. He considered knocking at the house next door, but decided he had better put some distance between him and the place where he had been imprisoned before he sought help, in case one of his captors came looking for him.

He hurried around the corner and continued on down to the next intersection, hoping for a car to drive by so someone would see him hobbling barefoot in a hospital gown, clearly in need of help, and come to his aid. He knew he couldn't keep going much longer; his weakened body was already on the verge of collapse.

His prayers were answered when he heard the rumble of an engine growing steadily louder. He looked up hopefully as a car rounded the corner, coming in his direction. Raising a hand over his head, Brian tried to wave it down. The headlights shining directly into his eyes made it impossible for him to see the driver, but to his relief, the red coupe made an abrupt turn in the middle of the street before pulling up to the curb beside him.

The driver's side door opened, and a heavyset man hopped out. "Hey, where you headed?" he asked, and Brian's blood ran cold. It wasn't until he heard the man's voice that he realized his mistake.

It was Patrick.

Chapter 38

Howie kept watching the clock as he and the others waited for word on Nick. With each minute that crawled by, he couldn't help but wonder if, somewhere else in the emergency department, a doctor was pronouncing Nick's death. It was a morbid thought, but once it crept into his mind, it wouldn't go away.

"God, when is someone gonna give us an update?" stewed Kevin, breaking the stunned silence, as he stalked back and forth across the tiled floor like a caged lion.

"They must still be working on him," Leighanne said softly. Casting an anxious glance at Lauren, she added, "That's a good thing. It means they're not giving up."

Lauren nodded, hugging herself tightly. To Howie, it looked like she was literally trying to hold herself together. He wished he could offer Nick's wife some words of comfort, but he didn't know what to say. He settled for wrapping his arm around her and rubbing her shoulder, hoping it would help her some.

Desperate as he was for news, Howie almost dreaded seeing a doctor walk through the door of the private waiting room where they were sitting - or, in Kevin's case, pacing. Like Leighanne had implied, as long as they were left there to wait and wonder, they could continue to hope and pray that Nick would pull through. But in a matter of seconds - and with only a few words - someone could come in and crush their hopes forever.

When the closed door finally opened, Howie's heart dropped. The woman who entered the room wore a white coat, green scrubs, and a grim expression. "I'm Dr. Oussoren," she introduced herself, closing the door behind her. "I've been taking care of Mr. Carter."

"You can call him Nick," said Lauren hoarsely, looking up. "I'm his wife. How is my husband?"

"He's alive," the doctor answered, "but in critical condition."

Howie felt his heart lift when he heard the first two words, the heavy sense of dread that had been weighing him down slowly dissipating. The latter part didn't worry him as much as it probably should have. In his mind, it didn't matter how badly Nick had been

hurt - as long as he was alive, they would be able to help him... heal him. As long as he was alive, there was still hope.

“Nick was in cardiac arrest when he came in,” Dr. Oussoren went on, “but we were able to get his heart beating again.”

“Thank you,” whispered Lauren, as tears of gratitude streamed down her face. Howie tightened his grip around her, hugging her to his side. “Thank you for saving him.”

“He’s not out of the woods yet,” the doctor warned. “We’re don’t know how long his brain was deprived of oxygen before CPR was started. He could have significant neurological damage.”

Howie’s heart sank.

“We need to run some tests to assess his condition and find out what caused his heart to stop,” Dr. Oussoren continued. “I’ve consulted with one of our cardiologists, Dr. Gravel, who’s going to take over Nick’s care. In the meantime, I’d like to ask you a few questions, Mrs. Carter, so we can find out more about your husband’s medical history.”

“Of course,” Lauren agreed with a nod, wiping her tears away. “Whatever you need to know.”

“Well, for starters, how long has Nick had his ICD?”

“His what?” asked Lauren, giving her a blank look.

“ICD - implantable cardioverter-defibrillator.” When Lauren continued to look confused, the doctor added, “Or maybe you’ve been calling it a pacemaker? It has that function, too.”

Frowning, Lauren shook her head. “Nick doesn’t have a pacemaker.”

An awkward pause followed, in which Dr. Oussoren just stared at her. Finally, the doctor replied, “I don’t mean to contradict you, ma’am, but he does have an ICD. I saw the outline of it myself on the chest X-ray we took just a few minutes ago.

“I don’t understand...” Lauren looked around at Howie and the others, as if asking if they knew something she didn’t. But Howie felt just as confused. Could Nick have had a pacemaker put in at some point and not told anyone? After being diagnosed with cardiomyopathy over a decade ago, Nick had kept his heart condition to himself for a

couple of months, needing to deal with it on his own before he confided in the other guys, but Howie couldn't imagine him hiding something like that from them now. These days, Nick was an open book. It didn't make any sense.

"Those people must have done it," growled AJ, speaking for the first time. Seven pairs of eyes suddenly focused on him, all widening with surprise.

"What people?" asked Dr. Oussoren, her brow knitting in bewilderment.

"The people who kidnapped him: fucking Frat Boy Chad - or Dr. Robin whatever the hell his real name is - and his fucked-up wife!" There was a hatred burning in his brown eyes that Howie had never seen there before. "Pardon my French," AJ muttered, but if the doctor was offended by his profanity, she didn't let it show.

"You believe the ICD was implanted against Nick's will?" she asked incredulously.

Feeling his stomach drop, Howie looked from AJ to Detective Overton, wondering what she would think of his theory. Was it possible for a doctor who was no longer practicing medicine to put in a pacemaker? Howie supposed it was possible, provided he had the necessary equipment - and judging from the videos posted on their website, the Henaults had plenty of medical equipment.

"Doctor, do you have any indication of how long this device has been in Nick's body?" Detective Overton asked. "There must be some sort of scar."

Dr. Oussoren nodded. "The incision hasn't fully healed yet, so it hasn't been there long - less than a month, I would guess, but it's hard to say for sure. That's why I was asking."

"Oh my god!" gasped Lauren, her mouth dropping in horror. "What the fuck is wrong with these people?! Why would they do something like that?"

Kevin shook his head, his hands balling into fists as his brow furrowed. "They're freaks - that's why."

The doctor frowned, looking more and more disturbed by what she was hearing. "If the ICD was implanted in anything less than sterile conditions, it could have caused a serious infection," she said.

Howie swallowed hard as he looked around at the others. They all seemed just as stunned as he was.

Dr. Oussoren cleared her throat. “There’s something else I wanted to ask you about,” she continued. “Did Nick suffer a fall or sustain any injuries just before his disappearance?”

Lauren shook her head. “Not that I’m aware of, but I wouldn’t necessarily know if he had.” Her face reddened as she went on to explain, “We were separated, living on opposite sides of the country.”

“I talked to Nick a few times before he went missing,” Howie added. “He never mentioned anything about getting hurt. Why?”

“Well, the chest X-ray also showed a series of rib fractures,” said Dr. Oussoren, shifting her weight awkwardly. “Some of them may be the result of the mechanical CPR device that was used on him, but others had to have been sustained prior to today - they appeared to be partially healed already.” She hesitated before adding, “I also noticed some old bruises on his chest. It looks like he may have been beaten by his captors.”

“Oh god,” murmured Lauren again, as fresh tears filled her eyes.

Leighanne shook her head, her own eyes wide with horror. “Poor Nick,” she said softly. Howie knew she wasn’t just thinking of Nick, but of her own husband, too. Brian was still out there somewhere, possibly being abused by the same people... or worse.

The inside of the car’s trunk was dark and stuffy. Beads of sweat dripped down Brian’s body as he lay on his side in the cramped space, curled into the fetal position with his knees wedged against his chest.

Besides being uncomfortable, Brian felt utterly defeated. He couldn’t believe how quickly he had been recaptured by Patrick. He should have been able to outrun the overweight man, but in his weakened state, Patrick had caught up to him and overpowered him easily. Brian’s head pounded from hitting the pavement when Patrick had wrestled him to the ground. He could feel blood trickling down the side of his face from a gash near his right temple. His brief taste of freedom had turned bitter on his tongue.

It had only been a couple of minutes, but already, it was getting hard to breathe inside the hot trunk. Brian tried to take slow, deep breaths through the trach tube, knowing he needed to conserve what little oxygen he had within the confined space, but he struggled to get enough air. As panic set in, he began to hyperventilate.

Calm down, he told himself, his body sliding painfully across the carpeted bottom as the car took a corner too fast. *He's probably just taking you back to the funeral home. At least you'll be out of the trunk in a few more minutes.* But the thought brought him no consolation. He would rather suffocate inside this trunk than be drugged and imprisoned in the hospital bed he had worked so hard to escape.

I have to fight back, he decided. *I'll die before I let him do that to me again.* Determined, he managed to roll over onto his left side so that he was facing the front of the trunk. He felt around for an escape latch, but couldn't find one. Scooting as far back as he could, he tried to peel up part of the carpeting to search for a tire iron or jack hidden with the spare underneath, any sort of tool he could use to either pry open the trunk lid or hit Patrick over the head.

Before he had gotten very far, Brian felt the car slow to a stop. His mind raced, knowing he had only seconds to plan his next move before Patrick popped the trunk. He had to be ready. He pictured himself springing out of the trunk with his fists flying, planting his foot into Patrick's face with a roundhouse kick like Bruce Lee. It wasn't very practical, considering the condition he was in, but just imagining it gave him a grim sense of satisfaction.

Minutes went by without anything happening. The car wasn't moving, but neither was Patrick. Brian hadn't felt the car rock as he climbed out of the driver's seat or heard the door close - not that he could hear much from inside the trunk except the sound of his own labored breathing. Maybe Patrick was planning to leave him there until he passed out from lack of oxygen. Once Brian was unconscious, Patrick would have no problem bringing him back to his bed and administering more of the medication to paralyze him so he would never be able to leave it again.

Panic-stricken once more, Brian started banging on the trunk. *Let me out!* he tried to scream, but no sound came out. The trach tube in his throat prevented him from being able to speak. He doubted anyone would hear him anyway, but he had to try to make as much noise as possible in hopes of attracting the attention of someone who could help him. He rocked his body back and forth, using his weight to make the trunk bounce. He smacked the lid with his hands and kicked the side with his feet.

When the trunk suddenly popped open, Brian's heart leapt into his throat. As the lid lifted, he looked up, expecting to see Patrick leering down at him, and prepared himself to start punching and kicking. But to his astonishment, the man standing behind the trunk was wearing a dark blue police uniform. Brian blinked as his eyes adjusted to the bright sunlight, hardly able to believe what he was seeing.

“Holy shit,” he heard the officer swear under his breath, his eyes widening as he stared down at Brian. Behind him, Brian saw a squad car with its lights flashing. Suddenly, the officer’s eyes shifted to the left, and he shouted, “Hold it right there! Don’t move!” as he reached for the handgun holstered at his hip.

Brian froze, but he realized the officer wasn’t talking to him when he took off running, drawing his firearm as he disappeared from Brian’s sight. Brian sat up, his stiff muscles protesting every moment he made as he hauled himself painfully out of the trunk. He was afraid his cramped legs were going to give out on him when he stood up, leaning heavily against the back of the car. He could see the police officer chasing Patrick up the street on which he had pulled him over.

For a fat guy, Patrick was faster than Brian would have thought possible, his arms pumping at his sides as he ran at full speed. Still, the policeman caught up to him quickly. After a brief struggle, Patrick fell forward, faceplanting on the pavement. The officer pinned him to the ground and handcuffed his wrists behind his back. His knees weak with relief, Brian sank to the curb before he collapsed.

A second police car pulled up to the scene less than a minute later, its lights flashing and sirens blaring. A female officer jumped out. She ran ahead to assist her colleague before she came back to check on Brian. “Are you all right, Mr. Littrell?” she asked, as she knelt on the pavement in front of him. “Are you hurt?”

Brian usually hated being recognized in public, but for once, he was relieved that she already knew who he was. It would save him some time trying to explain what had happened. He shook his head in response to her question, then pointed to his trach tube, trying to convey that he couldn’t talk. He held up his left hand and pretended to write on his palm with his right, hoping she would understand what he wanted. His miming must have made sense to the officer, who brought over a notepad and pen. As quickly as he could, Brian scrawled across the paper, “*That guy Patrick & 3 others (Elizabeth, Rob, Dani) have been holding me & Nick hostage at Gravel Funeral Home.*” His hand was shaking so hard, he didn’t know if the officer would be able to read his writing, but to his relief, she nodded.

“Mr. Carter was located a couple of hours ago and taken to the hospital, where he’s currently being treated. You’re both safe now,” she assured him.

Brian felt as if the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. *Thank you, God*, he thought. He didn’t know what Dani had done with Nick, but as long as he was

away from her, he would be all right. He had to be. *“Is he OK?”* Brian wrote on the notepad.

The officer hesitated. “I’m sorry; I don’t know his condition,” she answered, but Brian couldn’t help but notice the way she was suddenly avoiding his eyes. He knew then that Nick was not okay.

Chapter 39

Two hours before the end of her shift, Elizabeth was catching up on paperwork when she was paged to the emergency room.

“Someone call for a cardiology consult?” she asked the ward clerk when she went downstairs.

“I did.” One of the ER residents, Dr. Oussoren, was waiting near the desk. “Thanks for coming down so quickly, Dr. Gravel,” she said, shaking Elizabeth’s hand. “I have a 39-year-old male patient who was brought in by ambulance in full asystolic arrest. We achieved ROSC after almost thirty minutes of resuscitation, but the patient has yet to regain consciousness. He’s hypotensive with a pressure of 85 over 40, pulse 115, and febrile with a temp of 103.”

Elizabeth frowned. “Any other signs of systemic infection besides the fever? It sounds like septic shock to me,” she said matter-of-factly, as she walked alongside Dr. Oussoren on the way to the patient’s room.

The resident nodded. “I agree. The reason I called you down here is that he also has a history of alcoholic cardiomyopathy and was recently implanted with an ICD. I’m still waiting on lab work, but based on his symptoms, I suspect sepsis caused by a cardiac device infection.”

Her description sounded eerily familiar. Elizabeth began to feel uneasy. “I don’t think I caught the patient’s name,” she said, trying to play it casual. “Could you please repeat it?”

“I didn’t mention it for a reason,” Dr. Oussoren replied, stopping outside the room. She lowered her voice to a whisper as she added, “He’s a high-profile patient, and I didn’t want anyone to overhear.” Opening the door, she ushered Elizabeth inside. Elizabeth’s

heart dropped when she saw who was lying in the bed. “It’s Nick Carter, one of the members of the Backstreet Boys who’d been missing for the past few weeks. He was found unresponsive on one of the beaches early this morning.”

How?? Elizabeth wondered. Her heart was racing, but she kept her face impassive, forcing herself to remain calm and composed on the outside. “I see,” she said, as she removed the stethoscope from around her neck and slipped it into her ears. She pressed the diaphragm to the center of Nick’s chest and pretended to listen, but she could barely hear his heartbeat over the panicked voice inside her head. *How in the hell did he get out? There’s no way he would have been able free himself from those restraints, let alone make it all the way to the beach in his condition. Someone had to have helped him.*

She had a pretty good idea of who that had been, and it certainly wasn’t her brother Patrick. Dani must have dropped Nick off at the beach, knowing he would be found and brought to the hospital. She had been so determined not to let him die. But now that he was here, Elizabeth couldn’t let him live. If he woke up, he would tell the police everything, and she, Patrick, Dani, and Rob would all do prison time. She would lose her license to practice medicine; her career as a cardiologist would be over. She had to make sure Nick never regained consciousness.

Repositioning her stethoscope, she forced herself to focus on the sound of his faint, fluttering heartbeat. Based on what she heard, he wasn’t far from the brink of death. It wouldn’t be difficult for her to nudge him over the edge without attracting suspicion. Septic shock had a mortality rate of forty percent, so a fatal outcome could be explained by any number of unfortunate but not unforeseen complications of an already life-threatening condition.

“I’m admitting Mr. Carter to the ICU,” she told Dr. Oussoren after she’d finished examining him. “We’ll do an echo and proceed with lead extraction if it looks like the ICD is the source of the infection. Would you please put a rush on his labs and send us the results as soon as they come back?”

“Of course,” the resident promised. “Thanks again for being so responsive.”

“My pleasure,” replied Elizabeth, forcing a smile onto her face. She kept her composure as she hurried off down the hallway, her heels clicking purposefully across the tiled floor as her heart raced inside her chest. She waited until she was in the privacy of the women’s restroom to place a frantic phone call home to Patrick. “Come on... pick up!” she muttered impatiently as she listened to the phone purr in her ear.

“Hello?” her brother finally answered on the fourth ring, sounding like he had just woken up.

“What the *hell* is going on, Patrick?” Elizabeth hissed. “I just came from a consult in the emergency room, and guess who the patient was? Nick Fucking Carter.”

“Huh?” Patrick sounded completely confused. “Wait, how could that be? Nick Carter’s-”

“Not in his bed, is he? He can’t be, because he’s *here*, at *my* hospital! That bitch took off with him, didn’t she?”

“Who... Dani?” She could hear Patrick panting as he pounded down the stairs, presumably to see for himself that Nick was no longer in the house.

“Yes, Dani!” Elizabeth cried in exasperation. “Who else would I be talking about? She dumped him on the fucking beach so he would be found!”

“Well, shit,” Patrick swore, finally seeming to understand why this was a problem. “What do we do now?”

“I’ll take care of Carter,” Elizabeth promised. “I just need you to make sure Brian stays paralyzed until I get home. Can you do that for me?”

After a pause, Patrick replied, “Um... no.”

“No?” Elizabeth repeated, her voice rising. “What do you mean, no?”

Her brother took a huge breath and let it out with a heavy sigh. “You’re not gonna like this, Lizzie, but... Brian’s not in his bed either.”

“What?!” Her mind was now racing as fast as her heart. “Okay... stay calm,” she said, speaking more to herself than to him. “If he had been on the beach with Nick, he would have been brought to the hospital already, right? But I don’t think he’s here in the ER, or this place would be crawling with cops by now. So... think. What else would Dani have done with him? He couldn’t have gotten very far on his own, not in his condition. His muscles have been wasting away for almost three weeks; he would be too weak.”

“Do you want me to drive around and look for him?” Patrick offered.

“You damn well better!” snapped Elizabeth, as she clutched the phone to her ear. “And so help me god, Patrick, if you don’t fucking find him before the police do, we’re both gonna be in huge trouble. Go *find him!*”

After she had hung up on her brother, Elizabeth forced herself to forget about Brian for the time being and went back to work. She made arrangements for Nick to be transported to the third floor, where she would meet him for more diagnostic tests. *Looks like I’ll be working overtime today*, she thought, massaging her temples wearily as she rode the elevator upstairs. She was exhausted, but she knew she could not leave Nick in anyone else’s hands. She had to take care of him herself.

“Mrs. Carter?”

Lauren looked up as a nurse came into the waiting room. “Yes, I’m Nick’s wife,” she said apprehensively. “How is he? Can I see him now?”

The nurse nodded. “He’s being admitted to the intensive care unit. We’re about ready to take him up. If you and your family want to follow me, you can go with him.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you.” Lauren stood up, slinging her bag over her shoulder. “C’mon, guys,” she added, as she beckoned to the rest of the group.

Howie felt grateful to have been included as part of Nick’s family. He and the other guys may not have been blood relatives, but they were brothers just the same. They walked a few steps behind as the nurse led Lauren to a room near the end of the hallway. Before they went in, she stopped them outside the door, blocking it with her body, and said, “Just to warn you, he’s hooked up to a lot of equipment, but don’t let that scare you. You can touch him if you want to - and talk to him. He’s not conscious, but he may still be able to hear you.”

Lauren nodded. “Thanks for the heads up,” she said, as the nurse stepped aside to let her through the door. Howie held back, allowing Lauren to go in first. Wanting to give her a minute alone with her husband, the three guys watched from the doorway as she approached Nick’s bed. “Nick... I’m here, honey,” they heard her say, as she took his hand in hers. “I’m right here.”

There was no response from Nick, as far as they could tell. Howie took a tentative step into the room to get a closer look. He was relieved to see that the CPR device had been removed, but the nurse hadn’t been exaggerating about the equipment. There was a

breathing tube sticking out of Nick's mouth and IV lines in both arms. A bundle of wires was attached to the electrodes on his bare chest, connecting them to a monitor that displayed his heartbeat and other vital signs. Between the electrodes, Howie could see traces of the bruising Dr. Oussoren had talked to them about. He also noticed a raised, red incision below Nick's left collarbone and, barely visible beneath it, a round disc the shape and size of a large watch embedded under his skin. *Dear God, Nicky, Howie* thought, staring down at his little brother in dismay. *What did they do to you?*

Nick was out cold, his eyes closed, his mouth hanging open around the breathing tube. Had the situation been less serious, Howie would have taken a picture of him looking like that as payback for all the photos Nick had snapped of him sleeping over the years. He only hoped they would be able to look back on this and laugh someday - or at least not cry.

"God, he looks like shit," said AJ in a low voice as he stood next to Howie.

"Well, what do you expect, AJ? He was drugged... kidnapped... beaten... and left for dead. He's lucky to be alive at all," replied Howie, swallowing hard.

"Well said, D," Kevin agreed, as he walked up to the bed. "Let's try to stay focused on the positives here, fellas. Nick needs all the prayers and good vibes we can give him." He bent down and planted a kiss on Nick's forehead. "Stay strong, brother."

"Love you, man," added AJ, his voice sounding even raspier than usual. He pulled a pair of sunglasses out of the front pocket of his t-shirt and put them on to try and hide the tears in his eyes. Howie was not fooled for an instant.

Turning his attention back to Nick, he tried to think of something heartfelt to tell him, but his mind had gone blank. "Hang in there, bro," he managed to say, rubbing the back of Nick's hand. "You've gotta get better, all right?" He realized they still didn't even know what was wrong with Nick. Was an infection making him sick, as Dr. Oussoren had suspected, or had he just been beaten to within an inch of his life?

A brief knock on the door interrupted Howie's thoughts. He looked up to see Detective Overton escorting an orderly into the room. "I'm here to take Mr. Carter up to the third floor," said the orderly, showing them his hospital ID badge before he bent down to unlock the wheels of Nick's bed. Then he and the nurse rolled Nick out the door.

The rest of the group followed them down the hall to an elevator. When the doors opened, Howie saw that it was hardly big enough to hold all of them. "You go with him, Lauren," he told Nick's wife, nudging her forward. "We'll wait for the next one."

“Thanks,” she whispered, flashing him a tearful smile as the elevator doors slid shut.

Once they were alone in the hallway, AJ heaved a sigh. “God, that was a lot to take in. Have I told you guys lately how much I hate hospitals?”

Kevin laughed humorlessly. “We know. You’re gonna have to suck it up and deal it, though. Nick needs us to stay strong for him.”

AJ sighed again. “Yeah. I know. I was just saying...” He trailed off awkwardly, as they waited for the elevator to come back down. “Do you think he’s gonna be okay?”

Howie nodded. “He has to be,” he said stubbornly, refusing to consider the alternative. He had known Nick for twenty-seven years. He couldn’t imagine a world without him.

“He will be,” Leighanne agreed, hugging Baylee to her side. “God’s watching over him - *and* Brian. We just have to keep praying for them both.”

The elevator arrived with a ding, and they piled inside. On the silent ride up, Howie did just what Leighanne had said: he bowed his head, closed his eyes, clasped his hands together, and prayed that God would heal Nick and protect Brian, wherever he was.

Howie felt a sense of *deja vu* as he stepped off the elevator on the third floor and followed the signs to the intensive care unit. He had been there before - but this time, Nick was really there, too.

Once the nurses had gotten Nick settled into his new room, he was allowed to have visitors, two at a time. Again, they let Lauren go in to see him first. “Do you want some company?” Howie asked. “Or would you rather be alone with him?”

“I would love some company,” said Lauren with a sad smile, offering him her hand. He took it, and they walked into Nick’s room together.

Nick was wearing a hospital gown, which hid the bruises on his chest, but Howie couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed by all the tubes and wires that were attached to his body. They seemed to be everywhere, snaking up the neck of Nick’s gown and sticking out from underneath his blanket. Careful to avoid the equipment, Howie and Lauren sat down on either side of Nick’s bed and watched him sleep awhile. It was weird to see him lying so still. Nick had always been a bundle of energy, full of life. Now he was on life support.

“This is all my fault,” said Lauren out of the blue, her bottom lip trembling as she stared at Nick with tears in her eyes.

Howie turned his head to look at her. “What are you talking about?” he asked, frowning. “This is nobody’s fault except the people who did this to him. It’s definitely not yours.”

“He wouldn’t have been down here by himself if it wasn’t for me,” argued Lauren. “When he came home from tour, I wouldn’t even let him back in the house. I was still so angry at him for leaving after we lost Arya, I wanted to punish him, make him hurt as much as he hurt me. But I shouldn’t have pushed him away like that.” She shook her head with regret. “I should have let him stay so we could have started to work through everything. Now we may never get the chance.”

“You could never have known something like this would happen,” said Howie. “Don’t beat yourself up about it. Just be here for him when he wakes up. Knowing Nick, your face is the first one he’ll want to see.”

Lauren managed a tiny smile through her tears. “I hope so. Thanks, Howie.”

Before he could reply, there was a rap on the door. They both looked up as a tall, slim brunette woman in a white coat walked into the room.

“Good morning. I’m Dr. Gravel, the cardiologist,” she introduced herself, shaking each of their hands. “I examined Nick briefly in the ER. I’m not sure how much Dr. Oussoren explained to you, but we’re concerned Nick may have contracted an infection from his ICD. Mrs. Carter, I’ll need your permission to do a diagnostic procedure called a transesophageal echocardiogram. It involves putting a probe down Nick’s throat to take pictures of his heart. Once I have a better idea of what we’re dealing with, I’ll be able to determine our next steps.”

Lauren nodded. “Whatever you need to do. Please, just help him get better,” she pleaded.

Dr. Gravel went over the risks of the procedure with Lauren and had her sign a consent form. “I can do the echo right here in Nick’s room, but I’ll need the two of you to step out,” said the doctor. “It should only take half an hour or so.”

Howie could tell Lauren wasn’t comfortable with the idea of leaving Nick alone. “Come on,” he said, putting his arm around her. “Let’s go get a cup of coffee or something.” Reluctantly, Lauren allowed him to lead her out of the room.

They went back to the ICU waiting area, where they filled the rest of the group in on what was happening with Nick before they headed downstairs to find the cafeteria. Howie bought as many coffees as he and Lauren could carry, and they brought them back up to drink while they waited.

It wasn't long before Dr. Gravel came in to talk to them. At first, Howie was worried something had gone wrong. It had barely been half an hour since he and Lauren had left Nick's bedside, and he was used to doctors running behind, just like Backstreet Time. But Dr. Gravel smiled and said, "I just finished with the echocardiogram. There were no complications; Nick came through with flying colors."

"Thank god," sighed Lauren with relief. "Were you able to get a good look at his heart?"

The doctor's smile faded. "Yes - and unfortunately, I found evidence of a very serious condition called endocarditis, which is an infection of his heart's inner lining. It's become an increasingly common complication of cardiac device implantation. Basically, some bacteria got into Nick's bloodstream and set up shop inside his tricuspid valve, which connects the right atrium of the heart to the right ventricle. We can treat it with antibiotics, but we'll need to be aggressive - if left untreated, endocarditis is almost always fatal."

Howie felt sick to his stomach upon hearing that. Beside him, Kevin let out his breath in a low sigh. "Endocarditis... that's the same thing Brian had as a little boy," he said, looking at Leighanne and Baylee. "It almost killed him, too."

"But it didn't," Leighanne countered. She turned to Lauren and added with confidence, "Brian got better, and I know Nick will, too."

Lauren nodded. "Nick's a fighter. He would want you to be aggressive," she told Dr. Gravel. "Do whatever it takes to get rid of the infection."

"I'd like to remove the ICD right away," the doctor replied. "The risks of leaving it in outweigh the risks of extracting it."

"Good," Lauren agreed. "Take it out. He doesn't need it anyway."

"Will that require surgery?" Kevin wanted to know.

"In most cases, it's a minimally invasive procedure," said Dr. Gravel. "I'll go in through the same incision that was used to implant the device. As long as there's not too much scar tissue built up around it, I should be able to pull it right out."

It sounded simple enough. After listening to Dr. Gravel go over a list of possible complications, Lauren signed another consent form. “Take care of my man,” she said as she handed it back.

The cardiologist smiled and nodded. “Of course, Mrs. Carter.”

Chapter 40

The cardiac cath lab at Lower Keys Medical Center was like a second home to Elizabeth. It was much nicer than the makeshift lab she had set up with secondhand equipment in her family’s defunct funeral home. Despite her efforts to maintain a sterile environment, she wasn’t surprised to discover Nick had contracted an infection there.

No matter. It provided her with the perfect opportunity to remove the device, destroy the evidence, and orchestrate Nick’s demise in the process. This hadn’t been part of the original plan, but as a physician, Elizabeth had become adept at improvising.

“It’s good to see you back at work, Dr. Gravel,” said one of her nurses, Suzanne, as they prepared Nick for the procedure. “How’s your brother doing?”

“Not well,” Elizabeth lied. “Patrick still has his good days now and then, but the bad days are definitely becoming the norm. His heart has started to fail, but he doesn’t want another transplant. He went through hell with the first one, but I keep trying to convince him his life is worth it. He doesn’t want to listen. He’s depressed, which I think is partly due to the fact that he doesn’t feel well. It’s been rough, watching his health decline.” She heaved a dramatic sigh, secretly enjoying the looks of sympathy her colleagues were giving her.

“That sounds horrible,” said Suzanne, shaking her head. “I’m so sorry. If there’s anything I can do...”

“Thank you,” Elizabeth replied, pulling on a pair of surgical gloves over her freshly scrubbed hands. “Prayers are always appreciated. I’d rather not be reminded of Patrick right now, though. I need to focus on the patient.”

“Oh, of course. Sorry for asking,” Suzanne apologized, blushing. As she bent over Nick’s body, swabbing the left side of his chest with betadine, she added, “I can’t believe we’re

about to operate on a Backstreet Boy. My daughter would die if she knew. She was such a big fan back in the day.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I know what you mean. I always liked their music myself.” She helped Suzanne unfold a sterile drape over the surgical field. “Hopefully he’ll be back to making more of it soon. Ten blade, please.”

“I hope so,” Suzanne agreed, handing her a scalpel. “He sure looks like he’s been through a lot. I heard someone say this ICD was implanted by the same person who abducted him. Is that true? Because if so, that is absolutely insane!”

“I have no idea,” Elizabeth lied again, as she ran the scalpel right over the original incision underneath Nick’s collarbone, “but I don’t think we should be spreading rumors like that around the hospital. Let’s do our part to protect Mr. Carter’s privacy and leave the rest for the police to figure out.”

Suzanne nodded, using a gauze pad to wipe away the blood and pus that oozed out of the incision. “You’re right. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize,” said Elizabeth, as she peeled back a thick flap of skin to expose the device pocket she had created in Nick’s chest well less than three weeks earlier. Dissecting down to the pulse generator was the easy part, as not enough time had passed for a significant amount of scar tissue to develop around it. Pulling out the lead that she had threaded through his subclavian vein into the right ventricle of his heart would be more difficult.

She inserted a stylet into the lead and advanced it to the tip, locking it into place. The stiff wire would make it easier for her to maneuver the lead later. The X-ray technician helped her position the fluoroscope so she could visualize the pertinent parts of Nick’s vascular system on a screen as she placed a sheath over the lead.

Suddenly, an alarm sounded on the heart monitor. “He’s throwing PVCs,” observed the anesthesiologist who was monitoring Nick’s vital signs during the procedure.

Elizabeth nodded. “I’m in the right ventricle,” she replied, studying the screen. “They should stop as I start to extract the lead.” Using the sheath to provide countertraction, she slowly pulled back the lead, rotating it left and right to break up the fibrous bands that had formed around it. The fluoroscope allowed her to watch its progress as it retreated from Nick’s right ventricle, through his tricuspid valve, and into the right atrium. “So,” she said casually, as the end of the lead entered the superior vena cava, “what’s everyone doing for Thanksgiving next week?”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the other members of her team exchange glances, taken by surprise. None of them had ever heard her make small talk during a procedure before; normally, the cardiologist was all business and rarely participated in such conversations, let alone initiated them. Of course, Elizabeth had counted on this. As she pretended to listen to each of them describe their plans or lament having to work on a holiday, she paid attention to where they were looking. While they were all sufficiently distracted, she gave the lead a sharp but subtle tug. One twitch of the wrist was all it took to tear the second largest vein in Nick's body.

Elizabeth saw the dark blood leaking into the space around his heart on the fluoroscopy screen, but she proceeded as if nothing had happened, her eyes fixed on the length of lead in her hand. She didn't look up again until she heard another alarm go off, as Nick's already low blood pressure began to fall.

"Waiting is the worst," groaned AJ, as the guys sat around the waiting room with Lauren, Leighanne, and Baylee. Detective Overton had stepped out to take a call.

"You're preaching to the choir," Kevin agreed.

The cardiologist had told them the procedure to remove Nick's ICD could take anywhere from two to six hours, which Howie thought was quite a wide range. He worried there was a higher risk of complications than she had let on to Lauren. Why else would she have allowed for such a large window of time?

"Anyone need anything?" he asked, as he looked around at the others. "More coffee? Or how 'bout some breakfast, maybe?"

Lauren shook her head. "No thanks, Howie. I'm not hungry, and the last thing I right now need is more caffeine." She offered a humorless laugh. "My nerves are shot already. That just might send me over the edge."

"I know the feeling," Leighanne agreed, giving Lauren's leg a squeeze. Howie didn't know which of them had it worse - Lauren, whose husband might not make it, or Leighanne, whose husband was still missing. He was worried about both of his brothers, but at least his wife was safe at home.

"I could eat," said Baylee out of the blue, surprising them all.

AJ chuckled. “Thatta boy. C’mon, I’ll take you down to the cafeteria. I could use another cup of coffee myself - or a cigarette.”

“Stick with the coffee,” said Kevin.

“Especially around my son,” added Leighanne, giving AJ a look.

“Yeah, yeah, I know... secondhand smoke kills.” AJ rolled his eyes and grinned at Baylee behind his mother’s back as they both stood up to leave. But before they could get out of the room, Detective Overton came barreling back in, nearly knocking Baylee down.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she demanded.

Baylee looked like a deer in headlights. “Uh... to get food?”

“Not right now, you’re not. You’re going to want to hear what I have to say first.” She paused, her formidable expression relaxing into a rare smile. “It’s good news, I promise.”

Howie’s heart lifted with hope as he looked up at the detective.

“Your dad’s been found,” she told Baylee. “Alive.”

The waiting room erupted with cheers as everyone reacted at once. AJ grabbed Baylee by the shoulders, jumping up and down like he was still just a kid himself, while Lauren hugged Leighanne, who wept with happiness. “Thank God,” Kevin kept repeating, as tears of relief rolled down his cheeks. “Thank God.”

“Is he okay?” Howie was the first one to ask, wanting to know more details before he celebrated with the rest of the group. He couldn’t forget how bad off Nick had been when he was brought in to the emergency room; the image of his little brother lying lifelessly on the stretcher, receiving CPR from a machine, would haunt him for the rest of his life. “Alive” didn’t mean “all right.”

“Brian is reported to be conscious and communicating,” Detective Overton assured them. Holding up her phone, she added, “That was one of our deputies. He was out on patrol duty when he spotted the red Honda Civic registered to Danielle Henault - same license plate number and everything. He pulled it over, but didn’t find Danielle or her husband behind the wheel. It was a different man. While he was questioning the driver, Deputy Martinez heard banging sounds coming from the back. He did a search of the car and discovered Brian in the trunk.

“Oh my goodness!” Leighanne gasped, looking horrified. “Poor Husband...”

“But he’s gonna be okay?” Kevin asked again, his brow creasing with concern.

The detective nodded. “Martinez said Brian will need medical attention, but doesn’t appear to have any life-threatening injuries. Another officer is bringing him to the hospital now.”

Leighanne jumped up from her chair. “Let’s go downstairs,” she said, grabbing Baylee by the hand. “I want to be there when he gets here.”

“Wait a second, Mom,” protested Baylee, pulling his hand out of hers. He turned back to the detective. “What happened with the driver? Did they arrest him?”

Detective Overton nodded. “The driver’s in custody. Deputy Martinez is taking him straight to the station for questioning.”

“Was it the same guy from the airport?” Baylee asked. The detective seemed hesitant to provide any more details, but Baylee continued to press her for information, looking remarkably like Brian as his nostrils flared with anger. “Come on, please... I wanna know who did this to my dad!”

“According to the deputy, it does appear to be the same man we saw on the airport surveillance footage,” Detective Overton confirmed. “His name is Patrick Gravel. His family used to run a funeral home here in Key West. That’s where Brian said he and Nick had been held hostage for the past few weeks.”

“Gravel?” Kevin repeated, frowning.

Howie’s mind raced. He knew without asking what Kevin was thinking: that name sounded familiar to him, too. And then it clicked: “Gravel... as in *Doctor Gravel*?” he asked. “The cardiologist?”

Lauren’s head suddenly snapped up, her eyes growing huge as she looked at Howie in horror. “Oh *god!*” she cried. “Nick!”

In the cath lab, Nick’s condition was rapidly deteriorating.

“His pressure’s dropping, seventy over thirty,” the anesthesiologist alerted Elizabeth. “Heart rate is tachy at one-ten.”

“There’s blood in the pericardium,” said the X-ray tech, pointing out the effusion on the screen.

“Damn,” Elizabeth swore, shaking her head. “Something must have nicked the vein.”

The nurse palpated Nick’s wrist. “I can barely feel a pulse!”

Elizabeth slipped her stethoscope into her ears and auscultated Nick’s chest as she studied the fluoroscopy screen. The accumulation of blood was compressing his heart, preventing it from beating properly. “Diminished heart sounds. He has cardiac tamponade,” she diagnosed. “Suzanne, set up for pericardiocentesis.”

“Should we notify the cardiothoracic surgeon on call?” asked the anesthesiologist.

“Not yet. Let’s drain the blood from his pericardium first and see if he stabilizes,” said Elizabeth. “Then we’ll be able to better assess the damage and decide if it warrants surgical repair.”

She inserted a needle through Nick’s chest wall into the sac surrounding his heart and withdrew a syringe of blood.

“I’m seeing ST elevations on the monitor,” the anesthesiologist warned her. “You might wanna back off; I think you’re making contact with his myocardium.”

That’s the plan, thought Elizabeth, smirking behind her surgical mask, but she pretended to pull the needle back a few millimeters.

Meanwhile, Nick’s blood pressure continued to plummet as more blood poured from his vena cava into the pericardial space, making it harder and harder for his heart to pump. “He’s crashing!” barked the anesthesiologist, as the numbers on the monitor reached critical levels. “I’m calling for surgical back-up right now.”

“I can’t feel a pulse!” Suzanne cried, her fingers clamped over Nick’s radial artery.

Elizabeth looked at the waveform on the wailing heart monitor. It was still showing evidence of electrical activity, but without perfusion, it didn’t matter - Nick would be brain dead from lack of blood flow in a matter of minutes. “He’s in PEA. We can’t wait for the cardiothoracic surgeon; we need to crack his chest now!” she announced, her

own heart rate increasing as adrenaline coursed through her body. “Set up a thoracotomy tray.”

As Suzanne readied the surgical equipment, Elizabeth started CPR. She had no intention of saving Nick this time, but she knew it had to appear like she was doing everything in her power to resuscitate him if she was to avoid a malpractice suit. She pumped his chest hard and fast until Suzanne finished preparing for the emergency procedure. Then they traded places, the nurse taking over compressions while Elizabeth picked up her scalpel. A thrill went through her as she made a long incision down the center of Nick’s chest, using a cautery pen to quickly dissect the layers of skin and flesh. Since she had chosen to specialize in electrophysiology, rather than cardiac surgery, she rarely had the privilege of cutting her patients open like this.

“The surgeon’s on her way,” said the anesthesiologist as he hung up the phone on the wall.

“Good. You can assist me until she gets here,” replied Elizabeth, reaching for the sternal saw. With a loud buzzing sound, the blade sliced cleanly through Nick’s breastbone. “Rib spreader,” she requested, and the anesthesiologist handed her a retractor to separate the two halves. As she cranked them apart, widening the opening in his chest cavity, she could see the pericardium bulging from the collection of blood inside. She used the cautery pen to cut the thin membrane open before it could rupture. Blood began to spurt from the small hole, obstructing her view as it filled Nick’s chest. “I need suction!” she shouted. “Hang two units of O-neg before he bleeds out.”

The nurse scrambled to start a transfusion while Elizabeth sucked the excess blood out of Nick’s chest. She pulled back the edges of the pericardium to expose his heart, which was twitching in a feeble sort of way, without enough force to pump the blood that had pooled in its chambers. “Starting internal massage,” she said, as she took the precious organ between her hands and began to squeeze.

All of a sudden, the door burst open. Elizabeth looked up, expecting to see the surgeon. The woman standing in the doorway wore a surgical gown over her gray pantsuit, but she was no doctor.

“Detective Overton, Key West Police Department,” she introduced herself. The mask on her face may have obscured her mouth, but it didn’t hide the fact that she was glaring at Elizabeth. When the two women locked gazes, the intense look of disgust in Detective Overton’s eyes was more than evident. “Dr. Elizabeth Gravel?” she asked.

Elizabeth's heart dropped into her stomach, but she didn't let her panic show, maintaining her poker face behind her own mask. "That's me," she replied coolly and decided to play dumb. "May I ask what you're doing in my cath lab?"

"I need you to come with me right now, Dr. Gravel," the detective said curtly. "I have a few questions to ask you."

Elizabeth bristled. "Excuse me? I'm in the middle of emergency surgery here!" she exclaimed, nodding towards the table, where her hands were buried inside Nick's chest. "Surely this can wait?"

"No, it can't. Step away from the patient," ordered Detective Overton, her voice rising sharply.

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "Are you really sure you want me to do that? I literally have his heart in my hands right now. If I let go, he'll die."

"Not if I can help it!" A second woman rushed into the room, fully gowned in sterile garb over her surgical scrubs. Elizabeth recognized Dr. Webber, one of the hospital's most respected cardiothoracic surgeons. "Go with the detective, Dr. Gravel. I've got this," she said, as she reached into Nick's open chest from the opposite side of the table.

Elizabeth had no choice but to relinquish her hold on his heart, knowing if she didn't, she would face disciplinary action anyway for defying a senior doctor. As she reluctantly allowed the detective to escort her out of the cath lab, she could hear Dr. Webber's voice calling out desperate orders. "There's a rupture in his superior vena cava! We need to put him on bypass to preserve his brain function while I repair the tear. Come on, people, let's get those lines placed; we're losing him!"

It didn't look good for Nick. Elizabeth suppressed a grim smile as she stripped off her blood-soaked gloves and gown. *They'll never be able to get him back now*, she assured herself. *It's too late. He's already gone.*



PART V: BATTLE SCARS

Chapter 41

The group of six were huddled just inside the emergency room entrance like a flock of frightened sheep.

“What the heck is taking so long?” moaned Leighanne, hugging herself tightly as she rocked back on her heels.

“Relax,” said Kevin, wrapping his arm around her. He rubbed her shoulder reassuringly. “The detective said they were on their way. Brian should be here any minute.”

Howie felt for Leighanne. He was antsy himself, waiting for her husband to arrive, wanting to see with his own eyes that Brian was really all right. At the same time, he worried about Nick. They had heard nothing on his condition since Detective Overton had gone into the cath lab to detain Dr. Gravel. “Go back downstairs,” she had urged them beforehand. “Be there for Brian. One of us will come find you and fill you in when we can.”

No news is good news, Howie reminded himself, trying to stay hopeful, but AJ had said it best: waiting was the worst.

Lauren seemed to be having the hardest time. After standing by the door for a while, she wandered away and sat on the floor with her back against the wall and her knees drawn tight to her chest, her head in her hands. Although she had followed the others down to the emergency department to wait for Brian, Howie knew her heart was still upstairs with her husband.

He went over and knelt in front of her, resting his hand on her knee. “I know you’re scared right now,” he said softly. “I am, too. But I really think Nicky’s gonna be all right. He’s resilient. Like a cockroach. You could cut off his head, and he’d still keep

crawling around and driving everybody crazy.” Lauren laughed through her tears, and Howie allowed himself a grin. “Seriously, Nick’s had to deal with a lot of crap in his life, but he always seems to come out on top, stronger than before. Why should this be any different?”

Lauren nodded. “I know,” she said, sniffing. “But it *does* feel different. Nick’s never been through anything like *this* before. As much as I want to believe he’ll be fine, I just can’t shake the feeling that he’s already dead.”

A chill ran down Howie’s spine. “Don’t say that!” he hissed, shaking his head. “Nick’s not dead.” But her dire premonition had planted seeds of doubt in his mind.

Before he could dwell on them, Howie heard Leighanne gasp. “Here comes an ambulance!” He looked up as the emergency vehicle pulled up to the ER entrance, its lights and sirens turned off. Leighanne hurried out to meet it, Baylee right on her heels. After a moment’s hesitation, the rest of the group followed them.

“Come on,” he said to Lauren, taking her hand. She allowed him to pull her to her feet, and they walked outside together.

Howie held his breath as he watched a pair of paramedics unload a stretcher from the back of the ambulance. After the way Nick had arrived, it was a relief to see Brian sitting upright against the raised head of the stretcher. At first glance, he appeared to be unharmed. He was already wearing a hospital gown, which was drenched with sweat, and his greasy hair was plastered to his pale forehead, but Howie didn’t see any blood or bruises. Before he could get a good look, Leighanne ran to the stretcher and hurled herself at her husband. She buried her head in Brian’s chest and began to sob hysterically. He wrapped his arms around her, stroking her hair as she clung to him.

“Are you okay, Dad?” Howie heard Baylee ask as he came up alongside the stretcher. “Did they do that to you?”

It wasn’t until Leighanne finally let go that Howie saw what Baylee was talking about. Around Brian’s neck was a white collar with a tube sticking out of the front, right at the base of his throat. Howie’s heart skipped a beat when he realized it was a tracheostomy tube. *What the hell?* he thought, staring at it with wide eyes.

Brian nodded without speaking and briefly closed his eyes. When he opened them again, there were no words needed. Howie could clearly see three weeks’ worth of pain built up in Brian’s watery blue eyes. It broke his heart. Whatever had happened to

Brian in the twenty days since the security cameras had caught him walking out of the Key West airport would haunt him for years to come.

“Excuse me, everyone, but we need to get him inside now,” one of the paramedics said, as Brian’s family and friends began to gather around him. “Out of the way, please.” They stepped back to let the paramedics push Brian into the emergency room, following behind the stretcher as it was whisked straight back to an exam room.

Howie, Kevin, AJ, and Lauren waited in the hallway while Leighanne and Baylee went in with Brian. “So help me god, if I get my hands on any one of the sick fucks who did this to him and Nick, I’m gonna fucking eviscerate them and then strangle them with their own intestines,” AJ growled, as he paced up and down the hall.

“Gross, AJ,” replied Howie, giving him a look of disgust. Despite his reputation as the “bad boy” of the group, AJ didn’t have a violent bone in his body, so when he started threatening disembowelment, Howie knew he was beyond angry. Not that he blamed him.

“But delightfully descriptive,” added Lauren, smirking at AJ. Howie was sure she would be happy to help him commit homicide, if it came to that. He wouldn’t blame her, either.

“Excuse me... Mrs. Carter?”

The crooked smile faded from Lauren’s face as she turned around to find a woman in scrubs standing behind her. “Yes?” she asked with a little quaver in her voice.

“I’m Dr. Webber,” the woman introduced herself. “I was called in to assist with Nick’s procedure. We just finished up a few minutes ago, and Nick is resting comfortably in the recovery room.”

“So he’s alive?” said Lauren, sagging with relief. Howie felt his heart lift, as if a heavy weight had been removed from his chest.

Dr. Webber nodded. “If you’ll come with me, I can fill you in more on his condition.”

“Yes, of course.” Lauren, Howie, and AJ followed her down the hall to the same private waiting room where they had been before. The doctor shut the door and invited them to sit down. That was when Howie knew not all the news on Nick was going to be good.

Dr. Webber took a deep breath as she turned to face them. “Unfortunately, there was a complication during the ICD extraction,” she began. Howie heard Lauren draw in a sharp breath herself. He put his arm around her, bracing himself for the bad news. “As Dr. Gravel was pulling out one of the wires that went into Nick’s heart, it tore a small hole in his vena cava, the vein that returns deoxygenated blood to the heart. Blood began to leak into the sac surrounding Nick’s heart. The accumulation of fluid compressed his heart and kept it from being able to beat properly, which caused him to go into cardiac arrest again.”

“Holy shit,” AJ swore softly, as Howie’s own heart seemed to sink back into his stomach. He had known as soon as he’d made the connection between the man who had kidnapped Brian and the cardiologist operating on Nick that something was going to go wrong. Detective Overton must not have gotten there in time to prevent Dr. Gravel from trying to kill her patient.

“But he’s alive, isn’t he?” asked Lauren in a high-pitched voice. Howie could feel her whole body shaking against his. “You said he was alive.”

“Yes, he is alive,” Dr. Webber confirmed, “but in critical condition. We had to open up his chest in order to repair the damage and restore circulation. This involved putting Nick on cardiopulmonary bypass - a heart-lung machine - to pump oxygenated blood through his body while we worked on his heart.”

“Were you able to fix the problem?” Kevin wanted to know. He spoke calmly, but his face was very pale. Deep creases appeared in his forehead as he frowned in concern.

Dr. Webber nodded. “We patched the hole, drained the blood from the pericardium, and removed the device as planned. But we haven’t been able to get Nick’s heart beating well enough to wean him off bypass yet. We’re giving him medication to help it pump better, but so far, his heart hasn’t responded. It’s been weakened by the infection and will need time to rest and recover.”

Howie swallowed hard. “So he’s on life support?”

“Technically, yes, but bypass isn’t intended to be used outside the operating room. We can’t leave him on the heart-lung machine for longer than six hours or so because of the risk of complications,” the surgeon explained, “but I’ve called in a team from Miami to hook him up to a special type of bypass machine called ECMO, which stands for extracorporeal membrane oxygenation. Basically, it works the same way as bypass, but can be used for much longer, up to a month. This will hopefully allow Nick’s heart to heal while his body fights the infection.”

Lauren took a shuddering breath and let it out slowly, looking down at the floor as she absorbed everything the doctor had told them. She didn't say anything, but Howie imagined she was thinking the same thing he was. Nick still had a long, hard road ahead of him. Far from the happy reunion they had hoped for, his return felt like the start of another nightmare.

"Why Miami?" Kevin wondered. "Is that not something y'all can do here?"

Dr. Webber shook her head. "We're a small community hospital; we don't have the capabilities to perform ECMO at our center. As soon as Nick is stable enough to be transferred, the team will fly him by air ambulance back to Miami, where they can provide the more advanced care he needs."

They nodded, exchanging worried glances. "When can we see him?" Lauren was the first to ask.

The surgeon seemed to hesitate. "We don't normally allow visitors into the recovery room, but under the circumstances, I'll let you come back with me for a few minutes, Mrs. Carter."

"Thank you," Lauren replied softly, raking her long hair away from her face as she rose to her feet.

As the others started to stand, too, Dr. Webber held up her hand and added, "I'm sorry, but the rest of you will have to wait until he's been stabilized."

"That's okay," said Kevin, catching first Howie's and then AJ's eyes. "We can go check on Brian while Lauren's with Nick."

The other guys nodded in agreement. "Give Nicky our love," Howie told Lauren, pulling her into a tight hug. "Tell him we're praying for him."

"I will," she said, sniffing. "Will you pass along the same message to Brian for me?"

He smiled and nodded, patting her back before he let her go. "You bet." Then they parted ways, Lauren disappearing around a corner with Dr. Webber, while Howie, Kevin, and AJ walked back up the hall to Brian's room.

After the news about Nick, Howie felt heavy-hearted, yet hopeful. *The worst is over now*, he told himself, trying to think positive thoughts. *Nicky may not be out of the*

woods yet, but at least he's away from those people. He's safe here, and he'll be in good hands in Miami. He's going to get better. He has to.

Chapter 42

In the emergency room, Brian endured a head-to-toe examination from a female physician who introduced herself as Dr. Oussoren. She seemed nice enough, but after everything he had been through, he was wary of doctors. When she put her stethoscope into her ears and pulled down the front of his hospital gown, his heart began to beat faster. She had barely touched him with the chestpiece when he felt himself flinch involuntarily, as if he had been burned.

Dr. Oussoren looked up at him in surprise. "I'm sorry - was that too cold?" She removed the stethoscope and rubbed the round, metal disc against her palm to warm it before she placed it back on his body. "Better?" she asked.

Feeling embarrassed by his overreaction, Brian forced himself to nod. But his skin crawled as she slid the stethoscope across his bare chest.

"Deep breath in, please," the doctor instructed. Brian did his best to inhale through the trach tube and hold his breath until she told him to release it. "In... and out," she repeated each time she repositioned the stethoscope, listening to both sides of his chest and back. When she was finished, she replaced the stethoscope around her neck and said, "Your heart rate's a little high, and your lungs sound congested, Mr. Littrell. Have you been sick lately?"

Brian shook his head. Besides the pain in his penis from pulling out the catheter, he felt fine - from a physical standpoint, at least. Emotionally, he was much more fragile. It was taking every ounce of strength he could muster just to hold himself together; he didn't want to break down in front of Leighanne and Baylee, who were both hovering in the background.

"His temp's normal, 98.3," said the nurse who had taken both his temperature and blood pressure. "But his B.P. is elevated, 140 over 90."

"Thanks, Nancy. Let's put him on a monitor so we can keep an eye on his vitals." As the nurse bustled around Brian's bed, attaching electrodes to his chest, Dr. Oussoren turned

to Leighanne. “Mrs. Littrell, has your husband ever been diagnosed with hypertension - high blood pressure?”

Leighanne shook her head, looking pale. “No, never! Brian has a very healthy lifestyle.”

Dr. Oussoren offered her a reassuring smile. “It could just be white coat syndrome - anxiety around doctors. He does seem a little jumpy,” she acknowledged. “We’ll get a repeat B.P. in a bit and see if it’s gone down.”

“Poor baby!” Leighanne exclaimed, jutting out her bottom lip as she approached Brian’s bed. She picked up his hand and held it tightly in hers. “You’re safe now, baby. No need to be nervous.”

If you only knew what I’ve been through, thought Brian, but he nodded, not sure he wanted her to know anyway. Living through it the first time had been bad enough, but reliving it in front of his wife? No way. Leighanne and Baylee would be better off not knowing.

“When will you take that thing out so he can talk?” Leighanne asked anxiously, looking at the trach tube with aversion. For the first time since the painful procedure to insert it, Brian felt self-conscious.

“Not until we know he can breathe normally without it,” Dr. Oussoren replied, taking a pen light out of the pocket of her lab coat. “I’m ordering a chest X-ray so we can take a look at his lungs, and then I’ll have a respiratory therapist come down here to evaluate him.”

Leighanne frowned, clearly unsatisfied with this answer. “I can tell you now, he doesn’t need a trach! He’s never had trouble breathing. This had to have been done to torture him. Right, Husband?” She looked at Brian, who nodded again, surprised by his wife’s insight. Maybe she knew more than he had realized. “See?” said Leighanne, raising her eyebrows. “I want it removed right now.”

Go, babe! thought Brian, flashing her a grateful smile. Leighanne could be a bulldog when she wanted something, and she was used to getting her way.

Dr. Oussoren shook her head. “I’m sorry, but I can’t do anything until I’ve consulted with someone from respiratory. I’ll call as soon as I’ve finished examining your husband.” She leaned in and shined her light into his eyes, reminding him again of Rob and Elizabeth.

Leighanne heaved a heavy sigh, glaring at the doctor behind her back as she was bent over Brian. He gave her hand a squeeze, as if to say, *It's all right, baby.*

“You have a pretty nasty scalp laceration here,” said Dr. Oussoren, turning her attention to the cut on his head. “That had to hurt. Any dizziness? Blurred or double vision?”

Brian shook his head slowly. It was still throbbing, but the dizziness had subsided.

“Well, I don't think it will need stitches - a few steri-strips should do the trick,” the doctor decided as she examined the wound. “I'm going to send you for a CT scan, just in case. It looks like you hit your head pretty hard.”

He nodded, the pain of being tackled by a two-hundred-fifty-pound man still fresh in his mind.

“I wish he could tell us what happened to him,” said Leighanne, her eyes welling with tears. “We've been so worried, wondering where he was these last few weeks...”

Hearing that broke Brian's heart. Of course, he had known his wife would be worried sick about him, but seeing her tears really brought it home. Even though he knew it wasn't his fault, he felt guilty for what Leighanne and Baylee had gone through while he was being held captive in a hospital bed.

“I've got an idea, Mom,” Baylee interjected, holding up his phone. “I downloaded a text-to-speech app. Dad can type into it, and it'll talk for him.”

Leighanne brightened. “Aww, Bay, that's a great idea!” she gushed, as he gave her the phone. “Here, babe... give it a try.” She handed it to Brian, who typed the first thing that popped into his head:

“I love you both.”

A high-pitched, female voice read his words out loud, and Leighanne and Baylee both laughed because it didn't sound anything like Brian, except for when he was making fun of how Nick had talked on the day they'd first met, before puberty happened.

Nick.

While Leighanne was wiping away fresh tears, trilling about how much she loved Brian, too, he started typing again, his fingers fumbling clumsily over the keypad. “*Have you seen Nick? How is he?*” the phone asked for him.

The light faded from Leighanne's eyes. "We only saw him for a few minutes before they took him into surgery. I'm not gonna lie to you, babe - he looked pretty bad."

Brian's eyes widened, as his heart dropped. *Surgery??* He wondered what Nick would need surgery for. What else had Dani done to him?

Reading his bewildered expression, Leighanne explained, "They found something implanted inside his chest - sort of like a pacemaker? It had gotten infected, so they're going to take it out."

Good, thought Brian with grim satisfaction. "*Is he still in surgery?*" he typed.

Leighanne nodded, but said nothing else. Brian got the impression she knew more than she was telling him, but before he could ask any other questions, Dr. Oussoren interrupted the conversation with another question of her own. "Do you have pain anywhere else, Mr. Littrell?" she asked, as she finished cleaning and dressing the cut near his temple.

He started to shake his head, then hesitated, remembering his discomfort down below. He didn't want his wife and son to hear all the gory details, so he typed into Baylee's phone, "*Why don't you guys go grab some food while the doctor finishes up?*"

Baylee and Leighanne exchanged glances. Brian hoped his wife, at least, would get the message without him having to spell it out for her. Thankfully, after a moment's hesitation, she replied, "Sure, babe. Bay was actually about to get breakfast before they brought you in." She turned to their son, ruffling his curly hair. "Let's see if the guys and Lauren want anything and give your dad some privacy, okay?"

Brian was glad to hear Lauren was there. Nick would be so happy to see her when he came out of surgery. "*See you soon,*" he typed to Leighanne and Baylee. "*Love you.*"

"Love you too, Dad," said Baylee, hugging him gingerly. "Want us to bring you back anything?"

Solid food - even hospital food - sounded amazing to Brian, but before he could answer, Dr. Oussoren shook her head. "He shouldn't eat anything until we're done here. We may need to run some tests."

Brian made a face behind her back, which made Baylee smile. *Sorry*, he mouthed, shrugging at Brian.

“Come on, Bay,” said Leighanne, putting her arm around him and steering him out the door. She blew a kiss back to Brian before she left, closing the door behind her.

Once they were gone, Brian did his best to explain his problem in as few words as possible. The doctor winced when she heard that he had pulled out his own catheter. Brian winced when she pulled up his gown to take a look. Besides the pain, he was reminded of the way Elizabeth had assaulted him, and he felt ashamed. But Dr. Oussoren was professional and exceedingly gentle. After she had finished examining him, she said, “There’s some minor bleeding from your urethra, but I don’t think you did any serious damage. Just to be on the safe side, I’d like to collect a urine sample and consult with a urologist, who can determine if we need to do any more tests.”

Brian nodded, telling himself anything was better than being trapped in that hospital bed another minute. Whatever damage he had done and the discomfort it had caused were worth his freedom any day.

Dr. Oussoren drew some blood and had him pee into a cup. It burned, but it beat using a catheter bag - at least he could control his bladder again. “I’m going to take these samples to the lab, order some tests, and call for those consultations,” said Dr. Oussoren. “I’ll be back to check on you later. In the meantime, Nancy here is going to start an IV to give you some fluids. If you need anything, let her know.”

Brian nodded again. After the doctor had left, he held out his left arm to show the nurse the IV catheter that was still embedded in it. “*Do you have to stick me again, or can you just use this?*” he asked her.

Nancy inspected the IV site. “It doesn’t look like it’s infiltrated or infected, so I don’t see why not,” she said. “Whoever put it in did a good job.” She gave him a curious glance, and he could tell she was hoping he would start spilling his guts about what he had gone through. But Brian knew better - he wasn’t going to give her something else to gossip about at the nurses station. What had happened to Nick and him was going to be a huge story when it got out, but he needed to tell his family and friends before he talked to anyone else. He didn’t want them finding out the details on social media or TV; they deserved to hear it from him first. Trying to avoid having to answer any more awkward questions on the text-to-speech app, he lay back and closed his eyes as the nurse connected a length of tubing to the catheter and hung a fresh bag of fluid from his IV pole. She seemed to get the point.

Just as Nancy finished with the IV, there was a knock on the door. Brian opened his eyes, expecting to see Dr. Oussoren or one of the specialists she had called down to examine him. Instead, Kevin poked his head around the door. “You decent, cuz?”

Unexpected tears prickled in the corners of Brian’s eyes at the sight of his cousin. “C’mon in!” he tried to call back before he remembered he couldn’t speak. He beckoned to him instead, and in came Kevin, followed closely behind by Howie and AJ. Brian’s tears overflowed as they gathered around his bed.

“Damn, it’s good to see you, Rok!” AJ exclaimed, gripping his hand tightly.

Howie went in for a warm but gentle hug, obviously worried about hurting him. “We missed you, man. How are you doing?” It was a sign of how serious the situation was that he passed on the opportunity to say “Howie doing?” instead.

Brian typed into Baylee’s phone, *“Can’t talk with this thing in my throat, but I’m ok... Happy to see y’all too.”*

The guys exchanged glances. Brian could tell they were uncomfortable, wondering what to say to him. Kevin was the first to gather up the courage to ask, “What the hell happened to you and Nick?”

Brian held up his index finger, as if to say, *“Wait one minute. This may take me awhile.”* Then he began typing frantically on Baylee’s phone, which recounted the harrowing experience for him. *“We were held captive in a funeral home set up like a hospital by people who pretended to be doctors and nurses. They made Nick think he needed a heart transplant. They put a defibrillator in his chest and gave him drugs to mess with his heart so it would shock him.”*

Hearing the abuse Nick had endured narrated by a perky, high-pitched voice didn’t make it sound any less horrifying. Kevin, Howie, and AJ all looked appalled.

Brian continued, *“They told him I was in a coma after a car crash, that I had brain damage and a spinal cord injury. They gave me drugs to completely paralyze me so I couldn’t move... couldn’t open my eyes... couldn’t breathe. That’s why they did this to me.”* As the phone talked, he pointed to his trach.

“Jesus,” hissed AJ, shaking his head in disbelief.

“I don’t even know what to say,” admitted Howie, his brown eyes wide. “I’m so sorry this happened to you, Brian. I wish I had gotten here sooner. We could have met at the airport, and maybe then-”

“Don’t you dare blame yourself,” Brian typed adamantly, forcing the phone to interrupt him. *“If you had been with me, they may have gotten both of us.”* He gave Howie a fierce look, hoping to assuage his guilt. *“I’m gonna be fine. Have you heard anything on Nick?”*

The other guys exchanged glances again, and Brian saw with a sinking feeling that the expressions on each of their faces were equally grim. “He’s out of surgery,” said Kevin, “but not out of the woods yet. They’re flying him to Miami for more intensive treatment.”

“What do you mean?” Brian frowned, still not fully understanding what Nick needed treatment for. Now that he was finally away from Dani and Elizabeth and the torture device they’d implanted him with removed, he should be on the road to recovery. There was nothing really wrong with his heart, was there?

“He has a serious infection in one of his heart valves from the ICD,” Kevin explained, fixing Brian with a significant stare. “The doctor called it endocarditis.”

Brian’s heart skipped a beat. *“That’s what I had... when I was 5,”* he wrote with fingers that suddenly felt numb.

Kevin nodded, now blinking back tears. “I know. But you got better. So will Nick.”

His cousin spoke with such conviction that Brian felt compelled to believe him. But he couldn’t forget how close he had come to dying from the same condition. According to his mother, the doctors had all but given up on him, telling his parents to start making funeral arrangements, when the hand of God had reached down and touched him. Only then had his heart started to heal. *“It took a miracle to make me better,”* he typed, the words blurring before his eyes as they filled with tears.

When he looked up, he found Kevin staring back at him, a glint of steely determination in his green eyes. “Then we’d better start praying hard,” he replied, reaching his hands out to the others. Without hesitation, Howie and AJ each took one. A lump rose in Brian’s throat as he put down the phone and joined hands with them, completing the small prayer circle around his hospital bed. They bowed their heads, just like they did each night before they stepped onstage. But this time, they weren’t just a band of

singers praying for a safe and successful show. They were a band of brothers praying for the life of one of their own.

Whether this ritual would be enough to save Nick or not remained to be seen, but it seemed to have a positive effect on Brian. The next time Nancy checked his blood pressure, it had gone back down to normal.

“You think Rok’s gonna be okay?” asked AJ, as he, Howie, and Kevin sat at a small table in the corner of the cafeteria, sipping coffee and picking at plates of rubbery scrambled eggs and bacon. They had come to find Brian’s family while he was having X-rays taken, but Leighanne and Baylee had since finished their breakfast and gone back to Brian’s room to wait for him to return.

Howie nodded. After talking to Brian, he felt better about their bandmate’s state of mind than he had before. Brian had been tortured and traumatized, but he was not broken. “Brian’s tough,” he told AJ. “It may take a little while, but like he said... he’s gonna be fine. His faith and family will help him get through this.”

“I hope so,” said AJ, still looking uncertain. “I mean, he seemed okay, considering what he went through, but I can’t help but think maybe it hasn’t fully hit him yet - you know what I mean? He’s obviously happy to be free and back with his family, but how’s it gonna be when he goes home?”

“Yeah, it could get worse before it gets better - but whatever happens, we’ll just have to be there to love and support him through it,” said Kevin in his calm, rational way. “I think Howie’s right, though - Brian’ll be okay. Truth be told, I’m a lot more worried about Nick at the moment.”

Howie swallowed hard as his thoughts turned back to their youngest brother. They had heard nothing from Lauren since she had gone to see Nick in recovery, which he took to be a good sign, a sign that Nick was stable for now. Still, he wondered when the team Dr. Webber had mentioned would arrive to transfer him to the mainland. “What are we gonna do when they take Nick to Miami?” he asked the other two. “I know Lauren will want to go with him, but are we gonna go there, too, or stay here with Brian?”

“I think you guys should go with Nick,” replied Kevin right away. Howie could tell he had already thought this through. “Lauren’s gonna need some support. I’ll stick around for Leighanne and Baylee until Brian’s ready to be released, and then we’ll meet the rest of you in Miami.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said AJ, nodding in agreement as he glanced at Howie.

Before Howie could say anything, his phone began to buzz on the table top. Looking down, he saw Lauren’s name flashing on the screen, and his stomach clenched. “Hey,” he answered the call.

“Hey,” Lauren replied. “They’re getting ready to move Nick now. Where are you guys?”

“We’re in the cafeteria, but we can come find you,” said Howie, giving the other guys a look. AJ and Kevin were already cleaning up the table, collecting all their trash onto one tray. Lauren told Howie where to go, and they hurried off to meet her.

As they were heading back toward to the emergency room, Howie heard a voice call his name. He turned to see Lauren waving at him through a large group of people pushing a gurney up a long corridor. “Can you please stop up here and give us a minute?” he heard her asking as they approached. “Those are my husband’s brothers. They’ll want to see him before we go.”

“Fine, but just for a minute,” replied a man near the foot of the gurney. The back of his navy blue jumpsuit said *Flight Nurse*. It wasn’t until he stepped aside that Howie got his first glimpse at Nick. His heart flip-flopped painfully in his chest as he looked down at his little brother.

Nick had been strapped tightly to the narrow stretcher, his body covered by a blanket. Howie could see a tangle of tubes coming out from under the blanket, connected to various pieces of equipment that were being carried or pushed by the other medical personnel who had accompanied him. The sight of dark red blood flowing through the thick tubing made him feel woozy, so he tried to focus on Nick’s face instead and ignore the rest. “Hey, Nicky,” he said hoarsely, a lump in his throat. Nick was unconscious, but Howie knew he might still be able to hear him. Howie cleared his throat and continued, “We love you, bro. Hang in there, okay?”

AJ and Kevin echoed the same sentiments before the flight nurse said, “Sorry to rush your goodbyes, but we really need to get going. The helicopter's already running outside. We’ve got room for one person to ride with him, if you want.”

They all looked at each other, caught off-guard. “You go, Lauren,” said AJ. “Kev’s gonna stay here with Brian, but D and I will run back to the condo, pack our bags, and then hit the road. We’ll meet you in Miami, okay?”

Lauren nodded. Her face looked pinched and pale, but she managed an appreciative smile. “Thanks,” she said. “I’ll see you guys soon.” Turning to Kevin, she added, “Tell Brian I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to talk to him.”

“He’ll understand,” Kevin assured her. “He knows you’re with Nick.”

Howie gave her a hug. “Take good care of him until we get there,” he told her. “Let us know if you need anything.”

“He’s all I need right now,” she replied huskily, holding Nick’s hand through the stretcher’s side rail.

Howie, AJ, and Kevin followed the procession as they pushed Nick down the hall to a pair of double doors, which opened to the emergency parking lot outside. Off to one side of the lot, Howie could see a paved helipad, where a helicopter was waiting.

“You’ll have to stay here,” the flight nurse warned him and the others. “It’s personnel only past this point.”

They stood and watched through the glass as Nick’s gurney was wheeled across the pavement and carefully loaded into the aircraft. Keeping her head low, Lauren climbed in after him, and the door was quickly closed. Howie could see her face looking out the small window.

Another lump lodged in his throat as the helicopter gradually lifted off the ground, hovering in mid-air for a few seconds before it began moving forward. When it finally vanished from his view, he swallowed hard. He couldn’t help but fear he had just seen Nick alive for the last time.

Chapter 43

All his life, Brian had been told that his voice was a gift from God. Growing up, he had heard it from his family, his pastor at church, and his choir director at school. Throughout his career as a professional singer, he had been praised for his vocals by record executives, producers, fellow artists, and fans. But after almost two decades in the music business, Brian’s “gift” was abruptly taken back.

He didn't blame God for the loss of his voice. Muscle tension dysphonia and dystonia: those were medical diagnoses made by doctors, not curses cast upon him by a vengeful deity. But that didn't mean he hadn't struggled to come to terms with it. Brian had gone through all five stages of grief while coping with his loss; years of denial, bargaining, anger, and depression had preceded his finally accepting that he had a problem and seeking help. Since then, he had worked hard to get better, spending endless hours in therapy, doing vocal drills and breathing exercises, even getting Botox injections into his vocal cords. And now, just when he was beginning to hear results, Brian was right back at square one, rendered speechless.

"Where did the other guys go?" he had Baylee's phone ask for him when he was brought back to his room and found only family there.

"They're on their way to Miami," said Kevin. "The helicopter left with Nick a little while ago. They let Lauren fly with him, but Howie and AJ have to drive there."

With a sinking feeling in his stomach, Brian nodded. He was glad to hear Nick was apparently stable enough to be airlifted to another hospital, but he wished he had been able to say goodbye beforehand. He didn't know when he would be able to see Nick again, and that bothered him. After being stuck in the same tiny room together for almost three weeks, it felt strange to be separated. Brian's only source of comfort during his confinement had been hearing Nick's voice and knowing he was just in the next bed. Now that comfort was gone.

Brian's face must have betrayed the anxious way he was feeling because Kevin added apologetically, "I wish you could have seen him first, but they didn't want to wait any longer than they had to."

Forcing his frown into a smile, Brian waved his hand to one side, as if to say, "*It's okay. I understand.*"

"He wasn't conscious anyway," Kevin went on, "so he wouldn't have even known you were there."

You never know, thought Brian bitterly, remembering the frustrating feeling of being fully aware when everyone claimed he was in a coma.

After a while, his doctor and nurse came back, accompanied by a blonde woman who was wearing pale blue scrubs. "Good news, Mr. Littrell," Dr. Oussoren announced. "Your head CT came back normal: no sign of a skull fracture or brain bleed. You could

still have a simple concussion - they don't always show up on CT scans - but nothing to be too concerned about."

Brian nodded, but his relief was bittersweet, as he remembered one of the last things Nick had said to him: "*Look, dude, I don't think you're in as bad of shape as they've been saying you are...*" He wished Nick were there to hear that he had been right.

"Your chest X-ray did show some congestion in your lungs, which isn't surprising, considering how long you were kept lying in bed," the doctor continued, pressing her lips into a thin line of disapproval. "It could be the beginnings of ventilator-associated pneumonia. I'd like to admit you for observation and start you on a course of IV antibiotics to clear up any infection."

Brian felt his heart sink. The last thing he wanted was to spend another night in a hospital bed.

Leighanne was thinking along the same lines. "How long will he need to stay here?" she asked anxiously.

"Hopefully just for a day or so," said Dr. Oussoren. "Once we know he's able to swallow and keep liquids down, we can switch him to an oral antibiotic. Then, if he's doing well, we'll be able to discharge him."

Leighanne seemed satisfied with that answer, but Brian was not. *Give me a glass of water, and I'll swallow as many pills as it takes to prove it to you right now*, he wanted to say, but it took too long to type. Before he could get the words out, the doctor had turned to introduce her colleague.

"Tracy here is one of our respiratory therapists. She's going to take a look at your trach and try to clear out your lungs so you can breathe a little easier."

The woman in the blue scrubs smiled. "Good morning, Mr. Littrell," she said, as she approached his bed.

"*You can call me Brian*," he typed into the app, tired of all the formality. He just wanted to be treated like a person again, not a patient.

"Ah, that's a clever way to communicate!" exclaimed Tracy. "But after I'm done with you, Brian, you should be able to speak with your own voice again."

That was music to Brian's ears. He smiled with relief, warming to the respiratory therapist. *"Are you going to take it out?"* he asked, touching the end of the trach tube.

"Not right now. We need to make sure you can breathe well enough without the trach before we remove it," Tracy told him.

But I never needed it in the first place! Brian thought, feeling the smile fade from his face. *I can breathe fine! In fact, I'll be able to breathe a lot better without it!*

"We'll monitor your oxygen levels for twenty-four hours, and if all goes well, we can take it out tomorrow."

Brian didn't want to wait that long. He looked desperately at Leighanne, waiting for her to jump to his defense again, but she didn't argue this time. Giving him an apologetic glance, all she said was, "That sounds like a good plan."

Brian tried to be patient as Tracy took her turn to examine him. He was tired of being poked and prodded, even though he knew it was necessary. "This is a cuffed trach," Tracy said, as she inspected it. "It's normally only used in patients who need mechanical ventilation. The tube inside your trachea has a balloon that's been inflated around it to prevent any air from getting past it. When you were hooked up to the ventilator, it helped make sure the oxygen went into your lungs and didn't leak out through your mouth and nose. But now that you're no longer dependent on the vent, you don't need it anymore - all it's doing is blocking the upper part of your airway. Once I deflate the cuff, you should be able to breathe normally again."

Brian nodded eagerly.

"I'm going to use this to draw the air out of the cuff," Tracy said, brandishing a big syringe. "At the same time, Nancy is going to suction your airway, which will make you cough. It may be a bit uncomfortable, but it's necessary to clear out the mucus so you can breathe."

Nodding again, Brian lay back and tried to brace himself as they both leaned over him. He couldn't see what they were doing beneath his chin, but when he felt the suction tube snake down his throat, he began to cough and choke. "Almost done," said Nancy soothingly, as he gasped for air. "You're doing great." As soon as she withdrew the tube, the suffocating sensation went away, and he could breathe again, better than before.

Tracy placed her stethoscope on the side of his neck. "Can you blow, Brian?" she asked, holding her hand near his mouth. It no longer felt like he was trying to breathe through

a straw; he was able to take a deep breath in through his nose and blow it out through his mouth. “Good,” said Tracy, giving a satisfied nod as she listened to the airflow. “Now I’m going to cover the end of your trach tube with my finger, and I want you to try counting to five for me.”

Brian swallowed hard before he attempted to speak. “One...” His voice was so weak, he could barely whisper. “...two... three...” He tried to talk louder, but he still sounded hoarse and breathy. “...four... five.”

“Yay!” exclaimed Leighanne, clapping her hands in excitement. The room erupted with a burst of applause, as Baylee and Kevin both joined in.

“Nicely done,” said Tracy, smiling, as she removed her stethoscope. “Deflating the cuff also allows air to flow through your vocal cords so you can finally talk again.”

“Thank you,” Brian croaked, though he cringed at the rough quality of his voice. It brought him right back to the day he had finally received a diagnosis for his vocal condition, reminding him of the way he had sounded at his worst, when he could barely speak, let alone sing. He feared this would be another setback, another battle to fight in his decade-long war against dysphonia and dystonia.

Catching his eye, Kevin seemed to understand. “How long will he sound like that?” he asked.

“He may be hoarse for a few days as his vocal cords recover. They haven’t been used in a while, so they’re weak right now, but as they get stronger, so will his voice,” the respiratory therapist reassured them. “In the meantime, we’ll try putting a cap on the end of the tube. This will prevent air from leaking out through the trach and hopefully make it a little easier for Brian to talk. It’ll also allow us to make sure he can maintain his oxygen saturation without it.” She picked up Brian’s left hand, showing them the probe that had been placed on the tip of his index finger earlier. “This is a pulse oximeter; it measures the level of oxygen in the blood,” she explained and pointed to a number on the monitor next to Brian’s bed. “Anywhere between ninety-five and one hundred percent is normal, so as long as the reading remains in that range, we should be able to remove the trach tomorrow.”

“There you go, baby!” said Leighanne enthusiastically, giving him an encouraging grin. “All good news!”

Brian forced himself to smile back. He felt a little bit better at hearing that his hoarseness was only temporary, but it was hard to be happy knowing he had to spend at

least one more night in the hospital. Not knowing how Nick was doing in Miami only made it worse. He wanted to be there with his brother, not stuck here in a hospital bed.

“I brought some paperwork for you to fill out,” said Dr. Oussoren, placing a packet of forms in front of Brian. “Once we finish processing your admission, you’ll be taken to a different room and assigned to another doctor. I’ve also arranged for a urologist to see you upstairs.”

“Urologist?” repeated Kevin, raising his brow in confusion.

Brian felt his face redden. Shaking his head, he replied in his raspy voice, “You don’t even wanna know.”

By that afternoon, Brian had been admitted and moved to a private room on the third floor of the hospital.

As Dr. Oussoren had promised, he was seen by a urologist who, after more poking and prodding and another round of X-rays, determined he hadn’t done any permanent damage by pulling out his catheter. To Brian’s relief, it had caused only a tiny tear in his urethra, which would not require surgical repair.

“You may have some discomfort for a few days, especially when urinating, but the injury should heal on its own,” the urologist said. “For future reference, never try to remove a Foley catheter without first being trained on the proper way to do it.”

Brian forced himself to chuckle. “You don’t have to tell me twice, Doc,” he muttered, trying to hide his humiliation with a weak attempt at humor.

Kevin quickly came to his defense. “Spare him the lecture,” he snapped at the doctor. “Do you have any idea what he went through? Desperate times call for desperate measures. He did what he had to do to get himself out of a horrible situation. How dare you give him a hard time about it?”

The urologist apologized and left in a hurry. Afterwards, Brian looked at his cousin in amusement. “Dang, Kev - you sure let him have it.”

Kevin shrugged. “He was being a dick,” he replied matter-of-factly. “No pun intended.”

Brian snorted. “That must be why he went into urology. He already had plenty of personal experience.”

His comment cracked Kevin up. Hearing his cousin laugh like that, Brian couldn’t help but join in. It felt good to laugh for real, rather than having to force it. As their laughter faded, Kevin looked at him fondly. “At least your sense of humor seems to be intact,” he remarked.

“I hope so,” said Brian, feeling the muscles in his face working hard as he smiled back. After everything he had been through, it felt weird to joke around as if nothing had happened, especially while Nick was still hovering between life and death.

Howie had called Kevin an hour earlier to let him know he and AJ had made it to Miami. “Nicky’s not good,” he had confessed, his voice cracking through the speaker as Brian, Leighanne, and Baylee all listened in, “but he’s where he needs to be right now. He’s got a whole team of nurses and doctors who are taking great care of him. All we can do is keep praying.”

Brian prayed Nick really was being taken care of this time, not tortured by more people who meant to exploit him for their own sick pleasure. His trust in the medical community had been badly shaken by what he and Nick had endured.

When a knock came on the closed door of his hospital room, he expected it to be another doctor or nurse wanting to assess his breathing or check his blood pressure again. He was so sick of being examined, his stomach actually lurched as Leighanne jumped up to answer the door.

“Detective!” he heard her exclaim. “Come on in!”

Brian looked up as a brunette woman wearing a gray blazer and slacks walked into the room, carrying a large briefcase. She set the case down by the foot of his bed as she approached it slowly, her hand outstretched. “Hello, Mr. Littrell,” she said. “I’m Detective Overton, with the Key West Police Department.”

“Detective Overton was the lead investigator in your disappearance,” Leighanne explained.

“I still am, actually,” added the detective, as she showed Brian her badge, “only it’s not a missing persons case anymore. Now it’s become an investigation into a pair of kidnappings and an attempted murder.”

Brian sat up straighter in his bed. “Nice to meet you,” he said, shaking the detective’s hand. His voice was still scratchy and weak, but it didn’t waver as much as it had earlier in the day.

“Not as nice as it is for me to meet you,” replied the detective with a crooked smile. “I wish I could shake the hand of everyone whose name crossed my desk, but sadly, that isn’t always the case. I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you alive, Mr. Littrell.”

A chill went down Brian’s spine as he considered her words, his blood running cold with the realization of how close both he and Nick had come to dying. He knew he was safe now, but Nick was not yet out of danger. Nick could still die.

“How are you doing?” Detective Overton asked.

Brian swallowed hard. “Okay, I guess,” he answered. Compared to Nick, he was in good shape. He couldn’t complain.

“I’m glad to hear that. Are you up for answering a few questions about what happened to you and Mr. Carter? I would love to gather some more information while it’s still fresh in your mind.”

“Like I could forget,” scoffed Brian. “But yeah, go for it.”

The detective nodded, looking at him with sympathy. “Would you like your family to stay with you, or is it all right if they wait outside while we talk?” she asked, giving Leighanne, Baylee, and Kevin a sidelong glance.

Brian understood what she was getting at. It would be easier for him to give a detailed account of what he had gone through without his wife and son around. “Why don’t y’all go downstairs and get something to eat while I talk to the detective?” he suggested.

Leighanne frowned, looking slightly offended by the implication that he wouldn’t want his family with him during the interview, but she didn’t complain when Kevin escorted her and Baylee out of the room.

In the meantime, Detective Overton had taken a digital recorder out of her briefcase. “Do you mind if I record our conversation?”

Brian dreaded the thought of hearing his hoarse voice being played back in a courtroom or on the news one day, but he was willing to do whatever he could to ensure the people who had done this to him were prosecuted and convicted for their crimes. “No... that’s

fine,” he forced himself to say. While the detective got set up, he poured some water from the plastic pitcher on his bed tray into his cup and took a tiny sip through the straw. His nurse had warned him to take it easy with the water, as his digestive system needed time to adjust after going almost three weeks without eating or drinking anything by mouth, but the cool liquid felt so good going down his dry throat. He couldn’t get enough.

In the meantime, Detective Overton had pulled up a chair next to his bed and sat down, placing the small recording device on the tray between them. Brian’s stomach rocked with queasiness when he saw her press the red button. “This is Detective Karen Overton,” she stated in a crisp, professional tone, “interviewing Brian Littrell at Lower Keys Medical Center on November 23, 2019.”

His eyes widened when he heard the date. Despite his best efforts to keep track of the time during his ordeal, Brian had never known for sure what day it was or exactly how long he had been in the “hospital.” He had flown to Key West to see Nick on November third. Now it was the twenty-third. That meant he had lost twenty days of his life trapped in that bed.

The realization made him angry at first... then grateful. His son’s seventeenth birthday was in three days, and Thanksgiving would follow five days later. He had almost missed both occasions, but now that he was free, he had all the more reason to celebrate. He thanked the Lord for that.

Detective Overton crossed her legs and leaned back in her chair. “Let’s start at the beginning, Mr. Littrell. Can you describe the phone call you received on the morning of November third?”

Brian nodded, taking a deep breath to calm his nerves before he spoke. “Let me tell you the story ‘bout the call that changed my destiny,” he began, totally deadpan. Then he paused, looking up at the detective to see if she recognized the lyrics. It really wasn’t the right time for jokes, yet when the perfect opportunity to quote a line from one of his songs presented itself, Brian Littrell felt obligated to take advantage of it. But Detective Overton didn’t laugh or even crack a smile, remaining straight-faced as she waited for him to continue. *Must not be a Backstreet fan*, he determined, slightly disappointed by the lack of a reaction. If this recording did ever get released to the public, he hoped someone would appreciate his quick wit and perfect sense of comedic timing.

Clearing his throat, he continued, “I was back home in Alpharetta, in bed with my wife, Leighanne, when my phone rang. I didn’t recognize the number, so I didn’t answer at first - I let it go to voicemail. The caller left a message. When I listened to it, it was a

woman who claimed to be calling from a hospital in Key West. This hospital, actually - Lower Keys Medical Center.”

“Did the woman leave a name?” Detective Overton asked.

He nodded. “Yeah... Danica Logan. She said my friend Nick was here and asked me to call her back. When I called the number she gave me, I was told Nick was in intensive care.”

“Do you know who answered when you called that number?”

“It was the same woman. Danica Logan.”

“Did she tell you what happened to Nick?”

He shook his head. “No, she wouldn’t say. All she told me was that he was in critical condition. She kept saying she couldn’t give me any other details over the phone. So I decided to come down here and find out for myself. I booked a flight, then called my friend Howie... Howie Dorough. He was going to meet me here later that afternoon.”

“So you flew to Key West that same day,” said Detective Overton. “What happened when you arrived at the airport?”

Brian thought back to that afternoon, twenty days ago. “I was met by a man I thought the hospital had sent to drive me there. I forgot to mention, Danica Logan said they would do that, so I’d given her my flight information.” In hindsight, he had been stupid for blindly trusting a stranger to take him to the hospital. He had been in such a hurry to get to Nick, he hadn’t even bothered asking to see any type of identification. His naivety had nearly cost him his life.

“So you didn’t know the man who picked you up?”

He shook his head. “Not then, but I know his name now. It was Patrick.”

“Patrick Gravel?”

“I guess,” said Brian, shrugging. “I never heard his last name, but the place he took me to was called the Gravel Funeral Home, so that would make sense.”

“Did you know at the time that’s where you were being taken?” the detective asked.

“No...” Brian hesitated. Here was where his memory began to get a hazy. “The last thing I remember was riding in the back seat of his car. It was raining, and I was just sort of staring out my window, not really paying attention, when he suddenly slammed on the brakes. I guess I must’ve forgotten to put on my seat belt, because I went flying forward into the seat in front of me, and then I felt something hit us hard from behind. The next thing I knew, I was waking up in a hospital bed.”

“So you never saw what hit you?”

He shook his head. “No. Do you know?”

Detective Overton seemed reluctant to answer at first, but finally, she said, “We found a pick-up truck with front-end damage registered to a man named Robin Henault at his residence. Does that name mean anything to you?”

Brian frowned. His first response was “No,” but then he realized: “Wait... that must be Dr. Rob’s real name. Right?”

“When you say ‘Dr. Rob,’ you mean...?”

“The man who pretended to be treating me, when really he just wanted to torture me,” replied Brian, his heart accelerating as he relived the trauma of Rob slicing open a hole in his trachea without any anesthesia. At the time, he had thought the doctor must have made a mistake with the drugs and didn’t realize his patient was awake during the procedure. Now he knew Rob had done it on purpose, putting him through that fiery pain and fear purely for his own sick pleasure. “He must have helped Patrick kidnap me, too, huh?” he asked hoarsely.

Detective Overton nodded. “His truck’s exterior does match flecks of paint found on the dented rear bumper of the silver Corolla belonging to Patrick Gravel, which was located in the garage of the former Gravel Funeral Home after you were found. This gives us reason to believe Mr. Henault purposefully hit Mr. Gravel’s vehicle, then aided him in the plot to abduct you.”

Brian swallowed hard. “Why me?” he wondered. “And why Nick?”

“I wish I could tell you, but the truth is, we may never know,” was all the detective would say. “Now let’s go back to when you woke up. What was that like?”

Brian took a deep breath and let it out slowly before answering. "It was terrifying," he admitted, his voice cracking as his eyes filled with tears. "I couldn't move. I couldn't speak. I couldn't open my eyes. I couldn't even breathe on my own - there was a machine doing that for me. But I could still hear, and I could still think. They told Nick I was in a coma and that I might never wake up, but I was conscious the whole time. I was aware of everything that was happening around me; I just couldn't do anything about it."

"That must have been horrible," said Detective Overton softly, looking at him with sympathy in her eyes. "I hate to make you relive it now, but I need you to describe what you observed happening. You said you overheard them telling Nick about your condition. Was he nearby the whole time?"

Brian nodded as he took another sip of water. "They kept us in the same room. It looked like a hospital room. His bed was right next to mine."

"And by 'they,' you mean..."

Brian's blood ran cold when he thought of his captors. He remembered their voices more than anything, but he had seen enough of their faces to be able to picture them clearly in his mind. "Rob and Patrick... plus two women. One of them was Danica Logan, but she went by the name Dani. The other one was called Dr. Elizabeth. I don't know her last name; she never used it."

"What did they do to you and Nick?" the detective wanted to know.

Sucking in another shaky breath, Brian began to recount all that he could remember. He told her how he'd heard Elizabeth filling Nick's head with lies about needing a heart transplant and an ICD. Haltingly, he spoke of having to helplessly listen to Nick's heart monitor flatline repeatedly and the frantic efforts to resuscitate him that had followed. He didn't want to describe Dani raping Nick as he lay dying, but he did anyway - Dani deserved to be punished for what she had done, and in order for that to happen, the detective needed to know the whole story.

The only part he left out was the relationship that had developed between Dani and Nick before Nick knew what was really going on. Though Brian doubted Dani was really pregnant with Nick's baby, Nick must have had his reasons for believing her. Brian didn't know if Nick had actually done anything more than make out with Dani or if she had made the rest up, but it wasn't his place to divulge those details. It would be up to Nick to decide what to tell the police. If he had been unfaithful, Lauren deserved to hear

it from her husband first, not find out about it in a police report or courtroom. And if, God forbid, Nick did not survive, then the truth would die with him.

Instead, Brian talked about the hurricane and how he had nearly suffocated during the power failure. He wasn't surprised to hear there had been no bad storms while he and Nick were missing. He had already suspected their captors had faked that, too, just to further traumatize them.

Reluctantly, he described the other sadistic things that were done to him: Dani stripping him down each day to subject him to the unnecessary humiliation of having his naked body bathed by a stranger... Rob doing the tracheostomy without anesthesia... Patrick stopping his heart with an overdose of sedative... and Elizabeth sexually assaulting him.

"Then she took me back to the room and told Nick I was brain dead," Brian told Detective Overton, as tears poured down his cheeks. "She did a bunch of tests to 'prove' it to him, which was total bullshit because I was completely paralyzed and couldn't respond in any way. She claimed we both had the same blood type and tried to convince Nick to consent to having my heart transplanted into his body."

The detective raised her eyebrows. "Clearly, that's not what happened, but do you think they would have really tried to perform a heart transplant in that place?"

Brian hesitated, wiping his eyes as he considered the question. "Probably not," he finally answered, his voice flat, almost matter-of-fact. "I bet they would have just killed me or hidden me away in some kind of sex dungeon. Then they could have cut Nick open, sewn him back up, and told him he had my heart beating inside his chest - he would have had no way of knowing whether it was true or not. That may have been their plan all along, but he found out about them before they could carry it out."

"How did he find out?" asked Detective Overton.

Brian recalled the heated conversation he'd overheard Nick having with Elizabeth, in which Nick had accused Patrick of necrophilia and Elizabeth had responded by describing the properties of the drug digoxin as she administered a near-fatal overdose. "That was the same day Dani raped him," he said. "Nick almost died twice, and there was nothing I could do except lie there and listen to it happen. Actually, no, I take that back - Elizabeth pried my eyes open and rolled me over so I had to watch while they were resuscitating him." The words tasted bitter on his tongue. He spat them out like venom, hoping it would help him feel better.

“Just let it all out, honey,” his mother had always told him as a child, when he was sick with the stomach flu and fighting the urge to vomit. *“No one likes throwing up, but you’ll feel a lot better once you do.”* For Brian, talking to the detective about what he had been through was very much like vomiting. He didn’t want to do it, but he knew he needed to get it over with in order to start feeling like himself again.

By the time he finished, Detective Overton was staring at him intently, clearly disturbed by what she had heard. “How did you escape?” she asked in a hushed tone.

He swallowed hard. “After Dani took Nick away, no one ever came back to check on me or change my IV bag. It must have run dry because the drugs they’d been using to paralyze me wore off. As soon as I could get out of bed, I made a break for it. I didn’t get far, though - Patrick caught up to me a couple blocks from the funeral home. I was so weak, he overpowered me and put me in the trunk of his car. That’s where I was when the police officer pulled him over and found me.”

Detective Overton nodded. “That red car was registered to Dani - Danielle Henault is her real name. We’ve been trying to locate Ms. Henault and her husband, Rob, for several days now. There was an APB sent out about them - that’s why Officer Martinez pulled the car over in the first place.”

“So you haven’t found them yet,” said Brian, disappointed.

“Unfortunately, no. Both Dani and Rob are still are large... but we do have Patrick in police custody, along with his twin sister, Dr. Elizabeth Gravel.”

Brian raised his eyebrows. “Twin sister?” he repeated, taking a second to absorb this revelation. “That explains a lot.”

“You’ve explained a lot, too,” said Detective Overton, offering him a grim smile. “I spent all morning trying to interrogate the Gravels, but neither of them would talk without an attorney present - and when their lawyer finally did arrive, they still wouldn’t give much information. Thank you for filling in the gaps for me by opening up about what must have been an awful, traumatic experience.”

He nodded, wiping the last of the tears from his eyes. “Whatever I can do to help y’all put these people behind bars, I’ll do.”

“I appreciate your cooperation, Mr. Littrell.” The detective rose from her chair and leaned over to shake his hand again. “I’ll let you get some rest now, but if you think of

anything else, please don't hesitate to call me, day or night," she said, handing him a card with her phone number on it.

Brian thanked her and watched her walk out of the room. Once she was gone, he leaned back against the head of his bed, both physically and emotionally drained. But despite everything, his mother had been right: he did feel better after getting it all out.

Chapter 44

Brian was discharged from the hospital the next day. He walked out on his own two feet with a bottle of antibiotics, which he was to continue taking for the next ten days to help his lungs clear, and a large gauze bandage taped across the front of his neck to cover the gaping hole where the tracheostomy tube had been.

After the trauma of having the trach put in in the first place, the procedure to take it out had seemed surprisingly anticlimactic: one pull, and the tube had slid right out into the respiratory therapist's hand. It hardly even hurt.

Brian had been slightly disturbed to hear they wouldn't be stitching up the hole in his throat. "We don't want any air getting trapped inside the stoma," the respiratory therapist explained as she went over his discharge instructions. "It should close up on its own in the next couple of weeks without sutures. Until it's fully healed, you'll have to keep it covered at all times to prevent foreign particles from getting into your airway. Change the dressing once a day. You should wash the skin around the stoma with soap and water before you put on a new gauze pad." She gave him a packet of information on how to care for the wound and sent him on his way.

It felt weird walking around with a hole in his neck, but Brian supposed it was a small price to pay for his freedom. He was lucky to be leaving Key West with his family and an otherwise clean bill of health. As he rode up the Overseas Highway in the front seat of Leighanne's rental car, he kept running his fingers absently over the bandage. The area underneath was still tender, but each twinge of pain reminded him he was alive.

He gazed out the open window, his eyes lingering on the ocean waves like he had never seen water before. He savored the warmth of the sun on his skin and the balmy sea breeze blowing through his hair. It had been three weeks since he'd gotten to enjoy fresh air and daylight; he didn't take either for granted.

“Are you getting too warm? Do you want me to turn on the air?” asked Leighanne from the driver’s seat, glancing over at him. Brian knew his wife was still worried about him; she had been walking on eggshells around him all day.

“I’m fine, honey,” he assured her, holding his hand over the dressing on his throat. The respiratory therapist had told him to cover the tracheostomy hole with his finger whenever he talked or coughed until it was closed. “The fresh air feels good.”

“Well, let me know if you need anything or want to stop somewhere,” said Leighanne.

Brian nodded. “Thanks, baby, but I’ve got everything I need right here.” He reached out and patted her knee, then turned around to smile at Baylee, who was riding in the back seat with Kevin. Between the two of them, he had been able to borrow enough clothing to get through the next few days, since he didn’t know what had happened to the bag he’d brought with him to Key West. His wallet, watch, and wedding ring were also missing, but none of that seemed to matter much at the moment. “I just wanna get to Miami so I can see Nick.”

“I know. I’m going just as fast as I can, Husband,” she replied, mistaking his anxiousness over Nick for impatience with her.

“You’re doing great, baby,” said Brian. “I’m just worried about him, that’s all.”

Leighanne bit her bottom lip, sucking one side between her teeth. “Me too,” she agreed, and he felt the car accelerate as she adjusted the cruise control.

As they sped across the Seven Mile Bridge between the Lower Keys and Marathon, Brian heard Kevin mutter to Baylee, “I bet you sure missed listening to all this lovey-dovey stuff between your mom and dad, huh, kiddo? ‘Husband’ this and ‘baby’ that...”

Baylee laughed, but answered back, “Actually... yeah, I kinda did.”

A lump rose in Brian’s throat as he looked over at his beautiful wife, admiring the way her blonde hair shone like spun gold in the sunlight. Without a word, Leighanne took one hand off the wheel and reached across the center console for his. As her right hand found his left, he laced his fingers through hers. It was such a relief to hold her hand again, he didn’t want to let go.

In spite of the hole in his neck, his heart had never felt fuller. Brian knew then that he was going to be just fine.

Nick, on the other hand, was not fine. In fact, he was about as far from fine as it was possible to be.

When Brian and his family finally made it to the hospital in Miami, Howie was waiting for them outside the intensive care unit. “We can only visit two at a time,” he explained. “Lauren had to fight just for us to be able to go in at all - at first, they were only allowing immediate family.”

“We *are* Nick’s family,” insisted Kevin.

Howie nodded. “I know. That’s what Lauren told the ward clerk. It took some convincing, but she finally let AJ and me through the doors. She knows us now, so we should be fine.”

“You guys go in first,” Leighanne urged Brian and Kevin. “Bay and I will wait here.”

“Thanks, baby.” Brian kissed her on the cheek before he followed Howie and Kevin up to the front desk. They showed their visitor badges to the woman behind the plexiglass window, and she buzzed them through the ICU doors.

“How’s he doing?” Kevin asked in a hushed voice, as Howie led the way down the hall to Nick’s room. Brian brought up the rear, moving slowly, for his leg muscles were still weak from being bedridden for so long. He didn’t have the strength to walk very fast or the stamina to walk very far. He knew he was lucky to be walking at all.

“Hard to say,” was Howie’s hesitant answer. “They’re keeping him in a medically-induced coma until he recovers enough to come off the ECMO machine, so he’s not conscious. He looks awful with all the tubes and stuff coming out of him, but at least he’s alive.”

Brian’s heart beat faster as he followed Howie. Kevin had filled him in on Nick’s condition as best he could, but having been in Key West for the past day, neither of them had a clear picture of just how critical it actually was.

As they passed other patients’ rooms, Brian couldn’t help peeking curiously through the clear glass doors. He caught glimpses of people who appeared to be asleep or unconscious, many of them tethered to breathing tubes and other pieces of equipment. The sounds of the machines and monitors mixed with the faint smell of disinfectant

made his blood run cold, for it brought him right back to the funeral home where he and Nick had spent the past three weeks.

They stopped outside a door at the end of the hallway. Taking a deep breath, Howie turned and said, "Before you go in, there's something you else you should know."

Brian and Kevin exchanged anxious glances.

"When they put Nick on bypass while he was in surgery, they hooked the tubes up to his heart," Howie went on to explain. "Since they weren't able to take him off it at the end of the operation, they had to leave the tubes in... so they couldn't close his chest all the way."

Brian felt a swooping sensation in his stomach as it suddenly dropped. Kevin was staring at Howie in dismay. "You mean his chest is still *open*?"

Howie nodded grimly. "It's all covered with gauze and a sterile dressing so you can't see inside or anything, but... yeah. The nurse said we can touch him, but don't, like, jostle him and stuff like that."

"Oh, damn - there goes my plan to jump on top of him and bounce on his belly till he wakes up," joked Brian, pretending to be disappointed. "Just kidding," he added quickly when Kevin gave him a look of horror.

"Not the best time to joke around, cuz," Kevin said quietly, shaking his head.

"I don't think Nicky would mind Brian joking," countered Howie. "He'd want us to act normal around him."

Kevin sighed, dragging a hand through his dark hair. "There's nothing normal about this."

No one could argue with that.

Brian took a deep breath before he and Kevin walked through the doorway and into the dimly-lit room, trying to brace himself for what he was about to see inside.

He noticed Nick's wife first. Lauren was sitting in a chair next to her husband's bed, holding his hand in her lap. When she turned her head and saw them standing there, she stood up, set Nick's hand down neatly at his side, and hurried over to greet them.

“It’s so good to see you, Brian,” she said graciously, giving him a warm but gentle hug. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me too,” he replied, plugging his hole with one hand while he patted her back with the other. “How ya been holdin’ up?”

She let out a humorless laugh. “Um... barely? How about you?”

Brian shrugged as she released him. “I’m okay. Better off than Nick, anyway,” he said bitterly, rubbing the bandage on his neck. “I’m so sorry, Lauren. I wish I could have done something to help him, but-”

“I know.” She nodded, looking at him with sympathy. “Howie and AJ told me what they did to you. I can’t even imagine what you must have gone through. I’m just glad you were able to get yourself out of there.”

“Nick gave me the strength I needed to do it,” said Brian, swallowing hard as he glanced past her to the bed where his best friend lay. “Honestly, he’s the reason I’m here right now. Hearing him talk to me, telling me to hang in there... that’s the only thing that kept me from giving up or going insane in that place. I hope I can return the favor for him.”

Lauren nodded again, her eyes full of tears. “Trust me, he needs all the strength he can get,” she said shakily. “His heart is so weak from the infection, it’s barely beating, and now they’re worried his kidneys have started to fail, too. These machines are all that’s keeping him alive right now.” She turned and made a sweeping gesture toward the equipment that surrounded Nick’s bed.

“He just needs to rest and recover,” said Kevin in his calm, soothing way. But Brian couldn’t help but think his cousin was trying to reassure himself as much as Lauren. “Sure, it’s gonna take him some time to gain his strength back, but isn’t that what all this is meant for? To buy him more time until he gets better?”

“That’s the goal,” agreed Lauren, sniffing as she wiped away her tears, but behind her brave face, Brian could tell she was terrified of losing her husband. He understood. He was scared, too. “Listen, I’m gonna go use the ladies room and let you guys spend some time with him. I’ll be back in a little bit.”

“Take your time,” Kevin told her. “Get yourself some food or a cup of coffee or something. Howie’s outside in the hall if you want him to go with you.”

Lauren forced a smile. “Thanks. I just hate to leave Nick for too long.” She looked back at her husband’s bed. “He’s so heavily sedated, it’s not like he’s gonna wake up while I’m gone, but still... I don’t want him to be alone.”

“He won’t be alone,” Brian said hoarsely, holding his bandage as he shook his head. “We’re not goin’ anywhere. We’ll stay with him until you come back.”

“Thanks, guys. You’re the best,” replied Lauren, misty-eyed once more. She hugged them both, but before she left the room, she returned to Nick’s bedside and picked up his hand again. “Brian and Kevin are here,” Brian heard her murmur to him. “They’re gonna sit with you while I go to the bathroom, but I’ll be back. I love you, babe.” She planted a tender kiss on Nick’s knuckles, cradling his hand between hers before she put it back down.

When she finally forced herself to walk away, Brian and Kevin stepped forward to take her place next to Nick’s bed. “Sit down, cuz,” said Kevin, offering Brian the chair, but Brian just stood beside the bed, staring down at his little brother in disbelief.

If Nick had looked bad before, it was nothing compared to how he looked now. His body was bloated from fluid retention and lost beneath a complex tangle of tubes that had been inserted into his chest, neck, mouth, nose, arms, and places Brian couldn’t see beneath the blanket that was covering his lower half. He felt queasy at the sight of two thick tubes protruding from the center of Nick’s chest, dark red with the blood being pumped in and out of his body by the ECMO machine. The area around the tubes was packed with gauze pads, tinged pink with traces of blood, and covered with a clear dressing that looked almost like plastic shrink wrap. Brian didn’t want to see what was under the gauze. The mere sight of the thinner drainage tubes placed at the base of Nick’s breastbone reminded him so much of his own heart surgery, it made him break out in cold sweat. The sound of the ventilator hissing as it forced air into Nick’s lungs was another trigger, taking Brian back to the funeral home and the feeling of not being able to breathe on his own.

His fingers fiddled with the bandage on his neck as his eyes drifted to the bedside monitor that displayed Nick’s vital signs. He didn’t know what all of the numbers meant, but he recognized that while Nick’s oxygen level was within the normal range, his blood pressure was still low. The wavy line that represented his heart rhythm was irregular, rising and falling at random intervals. In between these brief spikes of electrical activity, the line went flat.

“If you’re not gonna sit down, I will,” Kevin said suddenly. Brian looked over at his cousin as he lowered himself into the chair beside the bed. Kevin’s face was as white as a sheet, and his hands were shaking.

“Hey, you okay?” Brian asked in concern, patting Kevin’s back. He could feel cold sweat seeping through the thin fabric of his t-shirt. “Don’t you go passing out on me, man.”

Kevin put his head in his hands, grabbing fistfuls of his hair with his fingers. “I know Howie tried to prepare us, but... *damn*. It’s just hard to see him like this,” he muttered. “It’s almost as bad as it would be if it were one of my kids, you know? I mean, we watched him grow up. We practically raised him, in a way.”

Brian nodded, a lump rising in his throat. “I know. You don’t have to look if it bothers you. Just being here is enough. It helped me to know Nick was nearby when we were both trapped in that place. At least we were together. Like I told Lauren, he kept me calm... kept me from losing my mind.” Holding his bandage, he swallowed hard. “We just need to talk to him and let him know we’re here. Even though he’s not awake, he may still be able to hear us.”

Kevin took a shuddering breath and let it out slowly. “Why don’t you go first?” he suggested. “I’ll be fine; just give me a minute.”

“Okay.” Brian cleared his throat as he picked Nick’s hand up off the bed, like he had seen Lauren do before. In spite of his fever, Nick’s swollen fingers felt surprisingly cold. Brian rubbed Nick’s hand between his two, trying to warm it. “Hey, buddy... it’s me, Brian,” he said softly. “You’re safe now, Nick. We both are. We’re at a real hospital, with doctors and nurses who want to help you, not hurt you.”

He watched Nick’s face carefully as he spoke, but of course, there was no sign Nick had even the faintest awareness of him. Still, Brian continued as if Nick could comprehend everything he was saying, the same way Nick had done for him during his “coma. Brian had hung on to every word. For all he knew, Nick was, as well.

“Kevin’s here, too,” he added, looking back at his cousin, “and Leighanne and Baylee... Howie and AJ... and, of course, Lauren. We all love you so much.” He gripped Nick’s hand tightly. “Hang in there, man. Just like you told me to. You were right all along - I wasn’t really in a coma, and I could hear you talking to me the whole time. Hopefully you can hear me, too.”

He glanced again at the heart monitor, remembering how Nick had seen his heart rate rise when he was talking to him, but Brian didn't notice any difference in Nick's barely-there heartbeat.

"If you can, I don't want you to worry," he went on anyway. "You're in real good hands, and you're gonna be all right. You just need to rest so you can fight off that infection and focus on getting better. I'm gonna be here to watch over you and make sure you're being taken care of. I won't let anyone hurt you this time."

He gave Nick's hand another squeeze as his eyes shifted back to his blank face. It was pale, almost ashen, but the blue tinge Brian had noticed around his lips before was gone. "You know, Kev, his color actually looks a lot better than it did back in that place," said Brian, trying to focus on the positive. "I don't know what they did to deprive him of oxygen, but his lips were practically blue. They're back to light pink now. That's gotta be a good sign, right?"

Kevin nodded. "Probably," he agreed. His own pallor had improved as well.

"Wanna places with me?" Brian asked him, setting Nick's hand back down on the bed. "My legs are getting tired."

"Oh, yeah, of course," said Kevin, scrambling up from his chair so his cousin could sit.

Brian leaned back in the surprisingly comfortable chair and let Kevin take Nick's hand and talk to him awhile. He listened with tears in his eyes as Kevin whispered his own words of love and encouragement to their little brother, but it wasn't until Lauren came back and he and Kevin left the room that Brian allowed his tears to fall.

Chapter 45

When visiting hours ended at nine o'clock that night, everyone except Nick's wife went to a nearby hotel, where Howie and AJ had reserved a block of rooms. In spite of their best efforts to convince Lauren to come with them so she could get some rest, she refused to leave Nick's side, insisting on spending the night on a cot next to his bed.

In the morning, the other four Boys went back to the hospital, arriving as visiting hours began at nine a.m. Lauren met them in the hall outside Nick's room, looking like she

had barely slept. She tried to put on a brave face in front of them, but her eyes were puffy and red-rimmed from crying.

“Nick’s having a procedure done right now,” she told them. “There’s a little family waiting room up the hall. Walk with me, and I’ll fill you in.”

Exchanging worried glances, the guys wordlessly followed her.

In the privacy of the small lounge, Lauren broke down. “So... Nick flatlined last night,” she said tremulously, as fresh tears filled her eyes. “We don’t know what happened - his heart just gave out. They’ve tried everything they can think of to get it going again, but so far nothing has worked. It’s been hours, and he still doesn’t have a heartbeat.”

Howie’s own heart skipped a beat. “But... he’s not...?” He couldn’t bring himself to say the words.

“He’s not dead, thank god,” Lauren confirmed, wiping away her tears, “but he would be, if it weren’t for the ECMO machine. The doctor said he’s not in any immediate danger as long as it keeps doing the work of his heart and lungs, but he can’t stay on it indefinitely. The longer he’s hooked up to it, the higher the risk of blood clots or other complications. They’re putting some kind of pump in his heart now to prevent blood from pooling in the ventricles.”

“A pump?” Kevin repeated faintly. His face looked pale.

“Damn, Lo, you sound like a freaking doctor,” said AJ, raising his eyebrows. “You been reading medical textbooks to pass the time or something?”

That made her crack a smile. “No, just listening to the real doctors talk and asking lots of questions. I’m probably driving them crazy.”

“Don’t ever feel bad about asking questions,” said Brian seriously. “You’re Nick’s wife; you deserve to know what’s going on with him. If something doesn’t make sense, keep asking until you get answers you actually understand. You have to be an advocate for him. He didn’t have anyone watching his back before, and look what happened.”

She nodded. “I know. Thanks for the advice.”

“So does the doctor have a plan besides this pump thing?” Kevin wanted to know. “How’s he gonna get Nick’s heart beating on its own again?”

“Well, *she* thinks the cardiac arrest could have been caused by an electrolyte imbalance, fluid buildup, or both. His body is so swollen because his kidneys have basically shut down and are barely making urine, so there’s no way for it to get rid of the extra fluids they’ve been giving him to keep his blood pressure up. He’s overloaded with fluid, and his potassium levels are all out of whack, which can both have an effect on the heart,” Lauren explained. “I was in the room while Dr. Brenner and the rest of the team were doing their rounds this morning. They decided to put him on a dialysis machine to do the job of his kidneys. It’s part of the ECMO circuit now - his blood gets taken out of his body, oxygenated, filtered, and pumped back in. The hope is that once his fluid and electrolyte levels are balanced, his heart will start beating again.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t ask that. I’m not sure I’m ready to hear the answer.”

Howie reached for her hand, giving it a sympathetic squeeze. “Do you have any *good* news to report?” he asked hopefully.

Lauren thought for a second before replying, “Dr. Brenner did say the dialysis is probably only temporary, that Nick’s kidney function should get better once his heart does, but I also heard her use the phrase ‘multisystem organ failure.’ I made the mistake of looking that one up. It scared the shit out of me.” Her bottom lip quivered as she struggled to hold back more tears.

AJ shuddered. “Never google medical terms. It’ll just give you new things to worry about - as if you weren’t worried enough already.”

“I know, right?” Lauren sighed, raking a hand through her long hair. “What a nightmare. I keep hoping I’ll wake up and find myself in my own bed with Nick sleeping next to me, perfectly fine, and this will all turn out to be nothing but a bad dream.”

Howie hoped for the same thing, but he knew it was only wishful thinking. This may have been a waking nightmare, but it was no dream. The reality was that Nick was dying, and if the doctors couldn’t help him, there wasn’t a thing any of them could do to stop it.

Nick was sinking in a deep, dark sea.

The pressure on his chest was crushing and incredibly painful. His lungs burned from holding his breath. Down here, the darkness was so impenetrable, he couldn't see his own hand in front of his face. But he could still hear the baby crying somewhere below him, and so he kept going, following the sound. He kicked his legs and paddled his arms frantically, trying to propel himself faster through the water so he could catch up to her.

Suddenly, through the seemingly endless expanse of black, he saw a glint of light. He swam toward it, knowing instinctively that it would lead him to his little girl. As he got closer, the faint glow grew bigger and brighter, signalling him like a beacon at the bottom of an abyss. It gave Nick hope.

With a fresh burst of energy, he kicked harder, fighting through the pain and pressure as he continued his descent. He kept his eyes focused on the widening expanse of light as it emerged from the darkness and slowly took shape. Soon he could make out the sharp spires of many tall turrets, the gracefully sloping lines of domed roofs and arched doorways and windows. The golden light was coming from a gleaming castle.

It looked like a scene out of *The Little Mermaid*, a movie he had watched too many times to count when he was a child. His younger sisters, especially Leslie, had loved the story of Ariel, princess of the sea. Here was where he would finally find his own little princess, Arya. It may not have made much sense, but Nick had never felt more sure.

He drifted toward the door of the castle as if he already knew where he was going. "Welcome home! Come inside!" it seemed to be calling to him, even though he had never been there before. The closer he got, the better he began to feel. The intense pressure on his chest lifted... the burning pain lessened... and the craving for oxygen went away. He no longer needed to breathe. His body felt feather-light and free as a bird - or, rather, a fish.

The door opened effortlessly for him, and he floated inside. He was greeted by a colossal, golden staircase, which he began to climb, gradually ascending out of the water. At the top of the stairs was a wide hallway, adorned with intricately carved walls and high, vaulted ceilings. His footsteps echoed as he walked across the gleaming stone floor. When the infant began to wail again from somewhere nearby, Nick broke into a full-on run.

Rounding a corner, he found himself facing a closed door. He could hear her crying on the other side. He flung the door open and rushed across the room to a pedestal, upon which was perched a large, pink seashell. The plaintive cries were coming from inside. Prying apart the clamshell, he lifted the top half away. In the bottom lay a newborn baby, prettier and more precious than any pearl.

“Arya...” Nick breathed her name, gazing down at his daughter in adoration and awe. He didn’t understand how it was possible, but she had come back to him. He drank in the sight of her angel face, her rosebud lips, her ten tiny fingers and ten little toes. She was wiggling around like crazy inside the curved shell that served as her cradle, still crying at the top of her lungs. But the second he reached down to pick her up, she stopped. He felt her small body go limp in his arms as she blinked up at him, tears clinging to the ends of her wispy lashes. Her blue eyes looked just like his. “Daddy’s right here,” he whispered, as he rocked her back and forth. “I got you, baby girl. I’m never gonna let you go again.”

“I got you, babe,” Lauren whispered, as she rubbed the back of Nick’s left hand. “I’m right here, waiting for you to get better. I’m not going anywhere.”

Watching the two of them together, Howie felt almost like an intruder. He and the other guys had taken turns sitting next to Nick’s bedside for ten minutes at a time, rotating in and out, while Lauren rarely left the room. They didn’t want her to be alone, but Howie hated imposing on the precious time she had left with her husband. Unless his condition turned the corner soon, Nick’s days were numbered. He couldn’t linger like this for much longer, they knew, even if they didn’t want to admit it.

Howie’s eyes drifted to the heart monitor mounted on the wall over Nick’s head. Where there should have been a waveform, there was nothing but a flat line. The reading for his heart rate was a flashing red zero. Even with the alarm sounds silenced, everything about it screamed, “*EMERGENCY!*” Yet the numbers for the rest of Nick’s vital signs hovered near the normal ranges, thanks to the machines and medications that were controlling his breathing, blood pressure, and other bodily functions. He had a whole team of people who were doing everything they could to keep him alive, pumping him full of powerful antibiotics to combat the bacteria that had invaded his body. Now it was up to Nick to fight for his life.

“C’mon, Nicky,” Howie murmured, taking Nick’s right hand and giving it a squeeze. “You can do this. Come back to us now. Lauren and Odin need you. We all need you.”

Lauren nodded, sniffing and swiping at her eyes. “Thanks,” she said when he handed her a tissue from the box on Nick’s bedside table. She blotted away her tears and tucked the tissue into the front pocket of her t-shirt.

As she started to lower her hand, Howie saw her fingers move instead to the solid gold ring she wore on a chain around her neck - Nick's wedding band. Absently, she fidgeted with it while her other hand brushed over the bare strip of skin where that band was supposed to be. Nick's fingers had become so swollen from the buildup of fluid, his nurse had been forced to remove the ring before it cut off his circulation. In spite of their strained relationship, the fact that he had been wearing his wedding ring up until that point - and that Lauren had been wearing it ever since - showed Howie how much they still loved each other. As long as Nick lived through this, he and Lauren would be just fine.

"Did you hear Howie?" Lauren asked Nick, still stroking his hand. "He's right. We do need you. Odin has missed you so much, and so have I. We just want you to come home."

"I know how much he missed you guys, too," Howie told her. "The last time I talked to Nick, about a week before his disappearance, he sounded terrible. Drunk... depressed. He was lost without you."

"I was pretty lost myself," Lauren admitted, taking the tissue out of her pocket as fresh tears filled her eyes. "I wanted to call him so badly and beg him to come home, but I was too proud... too stubborn. I thought *he* should be the one to come crawling back and apologize for leaving me in the first place. But all I did was deprive my son of time he could have spent with his daddy. If Nick dies, I'll never forgive myself for that."

Howie shook his head. "This is *not* your fault," he reminded her, "and I'm sure if Nick could talk, he would be the first to agree. But if you feel like apologizing for the falling out you had with him, you can do it right now. Nick won't even be able to argue with you - he'll actually have to listen for once."

Laughing through her tears, Lauren nodded. She laced her fingers through Nick's so their palms were pressed together, then bowed her head and lifted his hand to her lips, planting a row of tender kisses across his knuckles. "I'm so sorry, baby," she told him softly. "I never should have made you leave. I was hurting then, but the thought of losing you hurts so much more. I don't want to be a single mother anymore - or a widow."

A lump rose in Howie's throat as he watched Lauren weep, the tissue in her hand forgotten as tears flowed freely down her face. His heart broke for both Nick's wife, who was facing the loss of her husband, and their son, who might never see his father again. Yet he knew that of all the things in Nick's life that were worth fighting for, his family was number one.

“Keep talking to him,” Howie encouraged her when she fell silent. “I know it’s hard, but he needs to hear your voice so he can follow it back to us.”

Lauren leaned forward, her tears falling onto Nick’s bedsheet as she bent down close to his ear. “I still love you, Nick,” Howie heard her whisper. “I never stopped.” She clutched his hand tightly to her chest, holding it over her own heart. “Please, baby,” she begged. “Please come back home.”

Inside the secluded castle hidden under the sea, Nick felt perfectly content. His little princess, once lost, was finally back in his arms, and all was right with the world again. He had forgotten about the fear and anguish he had left on land. Those negative feelings were behind him now, and he was never going back.

As he cradled Arya close to his heart, absorbing some of her warmth, the baby snuggled into his bare chest. The skin-to-skin contact brought comfort to both of them. He bowed his head and inhaled the sweet scent of her hair as he brushed his lips across her baby-soft skin, planting a light kiss on her pink forehead. In this place, he could hold her like this forever and never have to put her down. There was no pain or heartbreak here, only peace and love.

“She’s got eyes of the bluest skies,” he sang softly, seeing his own face reflected in his daughter’s shining, sapphire eyes, *“as if they thought of rain. I hate to look into those eyes and see an ounce of pain. Her hair reminds me of a warm, safe place, where as a child I’d hide... and pray for the thunder and the rain to quietly pass me by.”*

He hadn’t been able to protect her before, but she was safe now. They both were.

“Whoa-oh-oh, sweet child of mine...”

No one could take her away from him this time. No one would ever hurt him again.

“Whoa-oh-oh-oh, sweet love of mine...”

He would stay here with his baby girl, rocking her for the rest of eternity.

But as he continued his lullaby, Nick gradually became aware of another voice, besides his own, coming from somewhere beyond the castle walls, far above the surface of the water. It was calling his name.

“Nick...”

Lauren. He had practically forgotten about his wife, but when he heard her familiar voice calling to him, he was able to picture her face clearly in his mind. He saw her standing in bright sunlight, holding their son.

Odin. For the first time since he had found Arya, Nick felt a pang of sorrow in his chest. In being here, he had chosen to leave his other child behind. If he stayed in this place, far from the rest of his family, he would never see his wife or son again - or, at least, not for a very long time.

He fell silent and listened to the faraway sound of Lauren’s voice telling him she loved him, begging him to come back home. It broke his heart to hear her cry. She was clearly distraught by his absence, and he desperately wanted to comfort her. But if he went back to the surface, he would be forced to endure more physical pain and emotional agony, for he would have to leave Arya alone in this place. Instinctively, he knew he could not take her with him. As much as he wished they could all be together, it wasn’t meant to be. Lauren and Odin were supposed to stay in the sunlit world above water, but little Arya belonged in a kingdom beyond.

Nick found himself caught in the middle, floating between the two realms, torn over whether to remain with his daughter or return to his wife and son. It was an impossible decision, but one he would inevitably have to make. Lauren’s voice was already fading, sounding farther and farther away. The longer he waited, the less likely it was that he would be able to find his way back to his family. If he didn’t leave soon, his indecision would seal his fate, and he would lose his chance to reunite with them. Then he would have no choice but to stay here with Arya forever. But that was what he wanted... wasn’t it?

Nick didn’t know anymore. He no longer felt content. His chest hurt, as if his heart was being ripped in half. No matter what happened, he would have to leave a piece of it somewhere else. Either way, his heart would never be whole again.

But then, neither was Lauren’s. She, too, had lost a little piece of her heart when they’d lost Arya, and if Nick chose to stay here, she would lose another. He hated to leave her brokenhearted like that. But at least she would still have Odin. If he left Arya, she would be all alone.

Or would she?

In the back of his mind, he remembered Dani saying, “*You don’t think her grandpa and aunt are taking good care of her?*”

“*Yeah,*” he had replied, “*of course they are.*”

Suddenly, he became aware of the sound of footsteps approaching on the stone floor. He turned around and saw his little sister Leslie standing the doorway. Just behind her, smiling over her shoulder, was their father, Bob.

Nick’s jaw dropped in disbelief as they drifted toward each other. He didn’t remember the last time he had seen either of them, only knew that it had been a long time. “What are you guys doing down here?” he asked happily, hugging his sister first, then his father.

“We were about to ask you the same question, son,” said his dad, arching an eyebrow. “What are *you* doing down here?”

Nick avoided the question. “I want to introduce you to my daughter!” he said excitedly, showing them the baby in his arms. “This is Arya Reign Carter.”

Leslie burst out laughing. “Oh, Nick. Did you honestly think I wouldn’t have met my niece by now? Or that she doesn’t already have Dad wrapped around her little finger? Trust me, he’s way more devoted to his precious granddaughter than he ever was to any of us.”

“Hey now,” said Bob in a warning tone. “I know I may not have been the world’s best father, but I loved all of you. I still do.”

“Wait...” Nick was struggling to understand. “So you’ve both been down here with her this whole time?”

“Well, we weren’t going to let her be *alone*,” said Leslie. “Are you worried we’re going to screw her up like the rest of the family?”

Nick swallowed hard. “No... it’s just... you’re *dead*.”

“No shit, Sherlock.” Leslie snorted with laughter. “So is she.”

Nick felt a cold, sinking sensation, as if he had just swallowed an ice cube. “Does that mean I’m dead, too?”

“Depends on your definition of ‘dead.’ Legally? No... not yet. Clinically? Well... your heart hasn’t been beating for a few hours, but you’re still breathing, and your blood’s still circulating through your body somehow, so...” She shrugged. “I dunno, it’s all very complicated. I don’t really understand it either.”

Nick raised his eyebrows. “So... I’m *not* dead?”

“Not *yet*,” Leslie repeated. “But you’re dangerously close. If you stay down here much longer, you will be, just like the rest of us.” She slung her arm over their dad’s shoulders. “If you wanna live, you’re gonna have to get going soon.”

Nick hesitated, then shook his head. “I don’t wanna leave her.”

“There’s nothing worse than losing a daughter,” his dad said knowingly, wrapping his arm around Leslie’s waist. “But you’ll see her again someday.”

“I don’t know what it’s like to lose a child,” added Leslie, “but I know what it’s like to leave one behind. I don’t want you to end up like me, Nick, and I won’t let you do that to my nephew. Go home to Odin. I’ll take care of Arya until it’s time for you to come back here.”

Tears filled Nick’s eyes at the thought of leaving his little boy fatherless, his wife a widow. He didn’t want to be like Leslie either, but he couldn’t bring himself to hand his baby over to her.

“Listen to your sister. She’s right,” said Bob. “Don’t you want to be around to help raise your son?”

Nick nodded, wiping his eyes. “Of course I do.”

“Well, you can’t have it both ways. You’ve either gotta fight for your life, or you give up and let Odin grow up without his father. What’s it gonna be?”

“You’re asking me to choose between my children,” said Nick desperately. “I can’t do that.”

“No, I’m telling you to choose between life and death,” his dad declared. “You’re lucky you even *have* a choice. I didn’t. It all happened so fast, I had no idea what was happening. One minute I was falling asleep in my bed, and the next thing I knew, I was waking up here.”

“Where is ‘here,’ anyway?” asked Nick, looking around. “Are we in Heaven?”

“We’re wherever you want us to be,” said Bob with a shrug. “But like I was about to say... if I’d had a choice in the matter, I would have given anything for one more day with my wife and kids. A chance to say goodbye, at least.”

Nick remembered being blindsided by the phone call from Aaron, telling him the news of their father’s sudden passing. Besides his grief, he had felt a great deal of guilt over not being there. “I’m sorry I didn’t get to see you before-”

His dad held up his hand to silence him. “No need to apologize, Nick. I know why you distanced yourself from us. I’m not saying it didn’t hurt, but you did what you had to do for your own health and wellbeing. I see that now.” His lined face split into a wide grin. “I’m proud of you, son,” he said as he pulled Nick into a hug, slapping his back. “You’ve become a better man and a far better father than I ever was.”

“Thanks, Dad,” whispered Nick, a lump rising in his throat.

“You bet. Now go back to your own boy. Let Les and me watch over your little girl for a while. We’ll be right here waiting for you when you’re ready to reunite with her.”

Nick swallowed hard. Knowing how much it had hurt to lose his father, he couldn’t fathom purposefully putting Odin through that pain, especially at such a young age. He wanted to live a long life and be there to watch his son grow up, get married, and have children of his own. He wasn’t ready to die.

“All right,” he finally agreed. “I’ll go back.”

Leslie grinned. “Good choice, bro.” She gave him a hug, then held out her hands for Arya.

Nick felt as if an invisible fist was squeezing his heart as he brought his lips down to his daughter’s angelic face, kissing her soft forehead, each of her eyelids, her plump, pink cheeks, and her little rosebud mouth. “Goodbye for now, baby girl,” he whispered. “Daddy and Mommy both love you so much. We’ll see you again someday.”

Just as he had forced himself to hand over his baby’s limp body to the nurse in the hospital after he and Lauren had finished holding her, now Nick reluctantly surrendered his daughter to his dead sister, placing Arya in Leslie’s open arms while their father watched with a smile.

Saying goodbye to all three of them for the second time was somehow even harder than the first, but before Nick knew it, he was in the water once more. It felt much colder this time. He looked back once, trying to catch another glimpse of the castle, but he couldn't see a thing through the blackness. Thankfully, he could still hear Lauren's voice calling him from somewhere far above his head. He followed the sound, fighting through the burning pain in his chest as he kicked frantically for the surface.

Howie had fallen into a stupor as he sat next to Nick's bed, watching his bare chest rise and fall with the rhythmic hiss of the ventilator that was breathing for him. When he heard a knock on the door, he nearly jumped.

"Time's up, bro," said a hoarse voice, and Howie looked up to see Brian standing in the doorway. Had it been ten minutes already? He released his grip on Nick's hand and rose from his chair as Brian approached the bed. "Any change?" Brian asked hopefully before glancing up at the heart monitor.

Howie shook his head. "Not yet. Keep praying," he said, patting Brian on the back as he passed by him. Brian took his place at Nick's bedside, and Howie headed for the hallway, deciding he would see if AJ or Kevin wanted to go down to the gift shop with him and get something for Lauren. He thought she might appreciate having a book or magazine to help her pass the time. The ICU was a pretty boring place.

He was two steps away from the door when he suddenly heard Lauren gasp. Startled, he whirled around to find her eyes glued to Nick's monitor. "Did you guys just see that?!" she asked, looking from Brian to Howie. "That was a beat!"

"What??" Howie hurried back over to the bed to get a better look at the monitor overhead. He was disappointed to find that the line recording Nick's heart rhythm was just as flat as before. "Where?"

"I swear, the line spiked a little," Lauren insisted, looking back at the monitor.

Brian shook his head. "Sorry, I must've missed it," he said, frowning.

"Well, just wait... maybe it'll happen again." Nick's wife wasn't ready to give up hope. "It was just one small wave, but hey, that's better than nothing, right? It has to be a good sign."

Howie wanted with all his heart to believe her, but he suspected that after hours of sitting by her husband's hospital bed, waiting and praying for any sort of positive sign, Lauren's tired eyes were starting to play tricks on her. Still, he stayed and watched the monitor with bated breath, hoping it would prove him wrong.

"Come on, Nick," Lauren begged, squeezing his hand between both of hers. "I know you're still with us, babe. If you can hear me, give us another sign."

Nothing happened.

Howie was about to leave when the line on the heart monitor abruptly went up and then down again, leaving a lone hill on an otherwise flat horizon. "Whoa... I saw that one!" he announced, feeling elated as he looked over at Lauren. Her eyes were shining with optimism.

Brian nodded. "I saw it too that time. Should we tell someone?"

"Yeah, hit his call button - it's on your side of the bed," said Lauren.

Howie hung around while they waited for Nick's nurse, Christina, to come check on him. It didn't take her long to respond to the call. "How we doing in here?" she asked as she walked into the room and looked around. Howie wondered if she would say anything about the fact that there was one more than the allotted two visitors, but she didn't.

"Fine," answered Lauren. "Better than fine, actually - Nick's heart just started beating again. Well, sort of. It's not consistent, but we've seen a couple of spikes on the monitor."

Christina raised her eyebrows as she glanced at the monitor, which had gone flat again. "Really? Well, that's good news! Let me take a listen." She pulled on a pair of gloves, put her stethoscope in her ears, and pressed the end to Nick's chest. Howie held his breath and watched her face as she moved it around, frowning in concentration. Finally, Christina removed the stethoscope and said, "So, I'm not hearing any heart sounds, but if there have been waves on the monitor, it means there's at least some electrical activity happening inside his heart. It's just not organized enough to generate a rhythm. I'll let Dr. Brenner know; she may want to examine him herself."

"Does this mean he's starting to recover?" asked Lauren. Howie admired her refusal to abandon hope.

“It could,” Christina answered carefully. “He still has a long road ahead of him, but it’s an encouraging sign.”

Brian caught Howie’s eye, and they both smiled. That was all they needed to hear.

Chapter 46

The spikes of electrical activity increased overnight, becoming less sporadic and more organized, and by the next day, Nick’s heart was beating on its own again, slowly but steadily.

His recovery followed a similar course, as slowly but steadily, his condition began to improve. One by one, the signs of infection faded away. His fever broke. His blood pressure stabilized. His heartbeat strengthened. His kidney function started coming back.

With Nick finally out of the woods, Howie, Kevin, and AJ all flew home to spend Thanksgiving with their families, while Brian invited Lauren to celebrate the holiday with him, Leighanne, and Baylee. It was far from a normal Littrell family Thanksgiving, but they had never been more thankful.

The following week, Dr. Brenner began to talk about trying to wean Nick off the ECMO machine. “His blood pressure’s been holding steady without the high doses of drugs he was requiring before, his heartbeat has stayed in a normal sinus rhythm, and his native cardiac output has increased. The daily echoes we’ve been doing to monitor his heart have shown a dramatic improvement in his ejection fraction, which is a measure of well his heart’s working,” she explained one day during her usual morning rounds. “I see no reason why it wouldn’t be able to keep pumping his blood by itself. He’s ready for a weaning trial. If he passes, we’ll be able to remove the cannulas, close his chest, and reduce the sedatives to bring him out of his coma. Once he regains consciousness, we can take him off the ventilator.”

The weaning trial turned out to be a simple matter of progressively turning down the flow of the ECMO machine and monitoring Nick’s blood pressure as his heart became the primary pump. Nick passed the test, and Dr. Brenner arranged to have the tubes taken out of his chest the very next day.

Brian sat with Lauren while Nick was in surgery. “Hopefully this’ll be the last one for a long time,” he said, as they settled into the surgical waiting room.

Lauren nodded in agreement. The last four weeks had taken a toll on her. Under the harsh fluorescent lights, her face looked pinched and pale without makeup. Her unwashed hair, pulled back into a messy bun, was limp and flat. She appeared to have been wearing the same pair of black leggings with a different oversized shirt for the past few days, but her baggy tops didn’t hide how much weight she had lost from barely eating. Leighanne had offered to take her shopping or out to dinner just to get her away from the hospital, but Lauren was still hesitant to leave Nick’s side. Brian prayed Nick’s condition would continue to improve, for his wife’s wellbeing as much as his own.

He turned his attention to the TV mounted on one wall of the waiting room. It was tuned to one of the morning news shows, the volume on low. Lauren ignored it, but Brian watched, intrigued by how much he had missed during the three weeks he’d spent imprisoned in a hospital bed - and how much had stayed exactly the same. Public hearings had begun in the impeachment inquiry against the president, but he doubted the Democrats would get the results they wanted with the Republicans in control of the Senate. Climate change and gun violence were still very real problems plaguing society - or greatly exaggerated for political reasons, depending on which party you asked. Gas prices were still too high - everyone could agree on that.

One of the show’s anchors was in the middle of interviewing a bestselling author who was promoting his latest book when Brian suddenly heard her say, *“I’m sorry to interrupt, but my producers are telling me we have some breaking news out of Miami. We’re going to cut to Craig in the newsroom now.”*

Lauren looked up as a man appeared onscreen. *“Thanks, Savannah,”* he said. *“We’ve just learned that a married couple at the center of a two-week manhunt has been apprehended.”*

“Turn it up,” she told Brian, who reached for the remote to adjust the volume.

“Robin and Danielle Henault, wanted for the abduction and attempted murder of Backstreet Boy Nick Carter, were arrested early this morning at a small marina located on Key Biscayne, a barrier island off the coast of Miami,” the newscaster reported, as a pair of photos popped up in the top left corner of the screen. Brian’s breath caught in his throat when he recognized the faces of Dr. Rob and Dani.

His hand moved automatically to the bandage that covered his healing tracheostomy. By now, the hole in his neck was almost completely closed, but he would always have a

scar there to remind him of how Rob had cut him open unnecessarily and without anesthesia. On the contrary, the scars Dani had left him with were all inside his head. He couldn't look at her picture without hearing her disgusting groans of pleasure as Nick lay dying underneath her or seeing the disturbing image of her standing over his lifeless body in nothing but her lace panties and push-up bra, smiling delightedly as she pressed the defibrillator paddles to his chest.

Brian felt Lauren grab his free hand and give it a squeeze, snapping him back to the present. He gripped hers tightly, but refused to take his eyes off the television screen, which was now showing an aerial shot of the marina.

"The two fugitives were found hiding on a small fishing boat owned by Mr. Henault. Authorities believe they were attempting to flee the country by sailing to the nearby Bahamas."

"So they've been *here* this whole time?!" gasped Lauren, shaking her head. "I can't believe it took this long for them to be caught. The police should have been searching this area from the start - I mean, they used to *live* here, for crying out loud!"

"They did?" said Brian, surprised he hadn't heard anyone mention that tidbit of information before.

"Yeah... Detective Overton told us they both used to work at a hospital in Miami before they moved to Key West. Of course they would come back to an area they're already familiar with. They probably have family or friends here that were helping them avoid capture until they could escape."

Brian thought she was probably right, although another, more disturbing possibility had occurred to him. "That, or they came back here to kill me... or Nick... or both of us."

Next to him, Lauren shuddered. "Thank God they were captured before it came to that," she murmured.

Brian nodded. In the background, he could hear the newscaster saying, *"The arrest comes just over a week after the couple's alleged co-conspirators, Patrick and Elizabeth Gravel, were taken into police custody after Carter's missing bandmate, Brian Littrell, was located in the trunk of a car being driven by Mr. Gravel. Patrick Gravel has since been charged with one count of kidnapping and is currently being held without bail in the Monroe County, Florida jail while he awaits his first court appearance. His sister Elizabeth, a Key West cardiologist, is also facing prison time for her suspected involvement in the plot to kidnap and torture the two pop stars."*

As the siblings' mug shots appeared side by side on the screen, Brian broke out in a cold sweat. His heart began to race as he remembered being trapped inside the stifling hot trunk... immobilized on the hard hospital bed... exposed atop the freezing cold examining table. The sight of Elizabeth's smug face brought back the horrific memories of lying flat on his back beneath her, unable to move as she assaulted his naked body, forcing him inside her, and he felt ashamed.

"Can we turn this off?" he said suddenly, finally tearing his eyes away from the TV and forcing himself to look at Lauren. "I don't wanna hear any more about it."

"Of course," she replied without hesitation, giving his clammy hand another reassuring squeeze.

"Here," he said, handing her the remote. "Put on anything else. I don't care what."

Lauren flipped channels for a few seconds, then shrugged and set the remote aside, leaving on a game show which neither of them watched. "Are you okay?" she asked after a long silence, looking back at Brian.

He nodded. His heart was already slowing back down, the sweat evaporating from his skin. *I'm safe now... and so is Nick*, he reminded himself as he stared at the blank wall of the waiting room, bringing himself back to reality. *They'll never hurt us again. We'll both be all right.* But he couldn't relax until he knew Nick was out of surgery.

When the surgeon came to talk to them, Brian and Lauren both sat up straighter, their bodies tense - but as it turned out, they had no reason to worry. "The decannulation procedure went as planned, and Nick's resting comfortably in the post-op room," the doctor told them. "I can take you back to see him now, if you'd like."

"Thank you so much," said Lauren, her eyes shining with tears of relief as she rose to shake his hand.

Seeing Nick in recovery brought back more memories for Brian. He remembered being the one in the hospital bed after his own heart surgery, with a breathing tube in his mouth and a big white bandage taped over the middle of his chest. He was sure he hadn't looked any better than Nick did now. But at least Nick no longer had tubes sticking out of his chest. His chest had been closed, and he could finally start to heal.

As Brian reached out to take his hand, he noticed that both of Nick's wrists had been bound to the bed rail with a pair of soft restraints. "Excuse me - can you please tell me

why you have him tied down?" he asked the nurse who was monitoring Nick, trying to sound polite as he inwardly seethed.

"It's just a precaution to prevent him from pulling out any of his tubes or popping his sutures as he comes out of the anesthesia," said the nurse apologetically. "Some patients wake up pretty agitated."

No wonder, thought Brian, knowing all too well the panic associated with waking up in a strange place, unable to move. He remembered how Nick had reacted to being restrained before: Brian had heard him pleading with Elizabeth to remove the straps from around his wrists and ankles, thrashing about in a frantic but futile attempt to free himself in some of his last lucid moments. "Yeah, these will make him agitated all right," he remarked, frowning.

"When do you think he'll wake up?" Lauren wanted to know.

"We have to keep him lightly sedated as long as he's on the ventilator to help him tolerate being intubated, but the heavy stuff should start wearing off soon," said the nurse. "As he regains consciousness, he's going to be really groggy and confused at first. Just talk softly to him, and keep it simple - now is not the time for long conversations. He needs to rest and concentrate on recovering."

Lauren nodded. "Will he be in pain?" she asked apprehensively, her eyes lingering on the long dressing that ran down the center of Nick's chest.

"Don't worry - we're giving him plenty of morphine to manage it," the nurse replied, motioning to one of the IV bags hanging from a pole at the head of Nick's bed. "He may still be in some discomfort, but if it gets to be too much, I can always ask the doctor to prescribe a higher dosage or a different drug."

Nick's wife seemed satisfied with that answer, but when the nurse walked away, she turned to Brian. In a low voice, she said, "Okay, level with me here: What was your recovery like? How bad was the pain really?"

It had been so long since Brian's surgery that the days following it felt like a blur, but he tried his best to think back and answer honestly. "It hurt," he admitted. "The drugs do help to dull the pain, but they try to wean you off them as soon as possible so you don't get addicted. The worst part was probably when they took out the breathing tube. It felt like they were pulling it all the way from my big toe, and it made me cough, which hurt like heck..." He put his hand on his chest, remembering how the pain had radiated along his incision every time he coughed, laughed, or moved the wrong way. "They get

you up and walking right away too, which feels really weird at first. I was afraid I was gonna rip my sutures and my chest would split wide open, like a busted seam, and my heart would just - *ploop* - fall out onto the floor,” he recalled, using his hands to pantomime his insides spilling out of his rib cage.

Lauren shuddered. “Wow... that’s really disturbing,” she said, looking slightly nauseated. “I kinda wish you hadn’t shared that.”

“Sorry,” said Brian with a sheepish grin. “You did ask.”

“I know.” She shook her head ruefully. “Maybe I shouldn’t have.”

He put a hand on her shoulder. “I didn’t mean to freak you out, Lauren. Honestly, it wasn’t much fun, but it also wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. I was sore for a few weeks, and it was scary doing things for the first time afterward, but I healed pretty fast. Heck, I was back to performing full shows two months later - not that I would recommend that for Nick. I’ll be the first to put my foot down and make sure we take as much time as he needs - as we both need - to fully recover before we even think about getting onstage again. But he’s gonna be fine... eventually.”

“That makes me feel a little better,” said Lauren, managing a brief smile. “Thanks, Brian.”

Brian returned the smile, but it quickly faded as he refocused his attention onto the restraints around Nick’s wrists. Turning first to make sure the nurse was out of earshot, he muttered, “We need to take these off him before he wakes up.”

Lauren raised her eyebrows. “Really? I dunno... what if he does try to tear out his tubes? We don’t want him to hurt himself...”

“Trust me, it’ll be worse if we leave them on.” Taking a deep breath, Brian added in a hushed voice, “The last time he woke up, before he got so sick, they had him tied to a bed like this. They tortured him... You don’t even wanna know the details, but it was bad. Really bad.”

Her eyes filled with tears as Brian continued, “When Nick wakes up, he’s not gonna know where he is at first. We need to reassure him that he’s all right, that he’s safe now. Leaving him in restraints is not the way to show him that. Let’s just hold his hands instead. If he does start to freak out, you and I can handle him. He’s Nick, not the Incredible Hulk.”

Lauren laughed through her tears. “Yeah, okay,” she agreed finally, nodding. “If that nurse gets mad at us, though, I’m gonna tell her it’s all your fault.”

Brian held up both hands. “I’ll take full responsibility for removing these,” he said, already unstrapping the restraint from Nick’s right arm. Lauren loosened the left side. Once his hand was free, she laced her fingers through Nick’s and leaned forward, watching his face.

Brian gripped his other hand, giving it a squeeze. “We’re right here with you, Frack,” he whispered, “just waiting for you to wake up.”

To his amazement, he felt a weak squeeze back.

Even before Nick opened his eyes, he knew he had been dreaming. He felt like he was still floating in deep water; there was a heavy pressure pushing down on his chest, yet his head was swimming. But he could hear the beep of the heart monitor and the hiss of the breathing machine, which meant he had to be back in his hospital bed.

A dark cloud of dread descended over him as he realized he had awoken into a nightmare. He fully expected to find Dani or Elizabeth hovering near his bed, waiting for him to regain consciousness. He wasn’t ready to face them, wasn’t ready to endure another round of torture at their hands, so he kept his eyes closed, hoping they wouldn’t notice he was awake.

And then he heard Brian’s voice.

“We’re right here with you, Frack, just waiting for you to wake up,” it said softly, as someone squeezed his hand. At first, Nick felt confused. He hardly recognized the hoarse, raspy voice, but there was only one person who would call him by that name. He followed the sound, his leaden eyelids fluttering as he struggled to lift them.

When he finally opened his eyes, it was Lauren’s face he saw first. As the fog of confusion cleared and her familiar features came into focus, he felt his heart lift, a light sense of relief replacing the heaviness in his chest. He had feared he would never see his wife again, but there she was, looking weary, but still beautiful. *Lauren.*

“Welcome back, baby,” she whispered, beaming at him. Her blue eyes were shining with tears.

He tried to answer her, but found himself unable to talk. There was a tube in his throat, just as there had been when he had first awoken in Dani's hospital of horrors. That was when he started to panic. His eyes welled, as frightened tears trickled down the sides of his face. He fought to free himself from the tube, but his head felt too heavy to lift, and the slightest movement made his chest hurt.

"It's okay, Nick," Lauren tried to soothe him, putting her hand firmly on his left shoulder to force him to stay lying flat. "Look at me." She leaned over him so he could only see her face. "You're all right now. You're all right," she kept repeating, but the words wouldn't compute with Nick, who felt like he was suffocating.

"You're in a real hospital this time, Nick," Brian told him, appearing on his right side. "You just got out of surgery."

Surgery?! Nick thought through the thickening haze, not understanding what Brian meant. He couldn't have had the heart transplant because Brian was standing right next to him... unless he had been given someone else's heart? But then, he hadn't really needed a transplant, had he? He didn't know what to believe anymore, what was real and what was not.

"They'll take out the breathing tube soon," Brian was saying, "but until then, you need to try to relax. I know it's tough, buddy... Trust me, I've been there." There were tears in his eyes, too.

Nick stared at him in confusion, struggling to comprehend what had happened while he was unconscious. The last time he had seen Brian, he'd been flat on his back in a hospital bed with his neck in a brace and a trach tube in the base of his throat. But he looked fine now - the brace was gone, and the only evidence of the tracheostomy was a bandage taped over the front of his neck. *How long was I out?!* Nick wondered, starting to get the sense that a significant amount of time had passed since then.

"Ah, Mr. Carter, you're awake," said another voice, as a nurse appeared behind Brian. "And I see your family members have already taken the liberty of removing your restraints." She looked accusingly at Brian, her smile fading into a frown.

"He doesn't need them," Brian replied, his raspy voice firm. "He's not gonna freak out - right, Frack?" Nick felt him squeeze his hand, Brian's intense blue eyes boring into his. He understood the meaning behind this look: if he seemed too distressed, they would tie him down. Nick didn't want that, so he forced his body to lie still. He stopped fighting the machine that was filling his lungs and let it breathe for him, focusing on the steady sound of air flowing in... and back out. In... and out. In... and out.

“All right,” the nurse finally relented. “Let me do a quick neuro check to make sure he’s fully conscious and able to follow commands. He has to be able to protect his own airway before the doctor will even consider taking out his breathing tube.”

Brian stepped back so the nurse could come closer. Taking his place next to Nick’s bed, she said, “Can you blink your eyes for me, Mr. Carter?”

Slowly, Nick closed his eyes and opened them again.

“Good. Now squeeze my hand, please.” She picked up his right hand, and Nick wrapped his fingers around hers, feeling the smooth latex of her gloves instead of bare skin. “Very nice,” she said with a nod. “I’ll go get Dr. Graeber.”

While they waited for her to come back with the doctor, Lauren looked down at Nick and smiled. “I love you so much,” she whispered, stroking his hair.

It was too hard to smile around the tube sticking out of his mouth, and he couldn’t talk with it in, so Nick settled for sign language instead. He arranged his fingers into the sign for “love” and held up his hand for Lauren to see.

“Aww, Frack, I love you too,” gushed Brian, grinning at him. “Glad to have you back, man.”

Nick still didn’t understand where he had been or how he had gotten there. He wasn’t exactly sure where he was now either. All he knew was that he was glad to be away from Dani and Elizabeth and grateful to have both his wife and his brother with him. He pointed to himself, then held up two fingers. *Me too.*

Chapter 47

After the breathing tube had been removed, Nick was wheeled out of recovery and back to his own room in the ICU, where he was shocked to learn he had been admitted for over a week already. It was there that Lauren and Brian began to fill him in on what had happened during the past ten days. Nick listened with tears in his eyes as they told him about the ill-fated procedure to remove his ICD and the infection that had nearly killed him.

“You had the exact same thing I had as a kid - bacterial endocarditis,” Brian explained.

“I guess I’ll have the exact same scar now, too, huh?” said Nick hoarsely, as he lowered his chin to look down the front of his hospital gown at the gauze dressing in the center of his chest. He wasn’t ready to see the incision hidden underneath it.

“Yeah... copycat.” Brian smirked. “You always did wanna be just like me. Now there’s one more thing we’ll have in common.”

“I’d rather have matching tattoos than matching scars,” grumbled Nick, stifling a cough.

“Remember to squeeze your pillow,” Lauren put in helpfully, patting the red, heart-shaped pillow they had given him in recovery to hold against his chest whenever he coughed or sneezed. Nick clutched it now as he coughed harder, his eyes watering as shockwaves of pain radiated through his chest. “You okay?” his wife asked when the coughing fit subsided, looking at him in concern.

Nick nodded, wiping his streaming eyes. “Could I have some more of those ice chips?” he choked out.

“Of course.” Lauren grabbed the styrofoam cup off his bed tray. “Here you go, babe,” she said, placing a piece of ice on his tongue.

“Thanks.” Nick sucked on it, savoring the coolness on the back of his sore throat.

Brian picked the conversation right back up where they had left off. “Scars are a lot like tattoos, though,” he pointed out. “They all come with a story. You know how self-conscious I used to be about my scar, but I’ve come to embrace it. It’s part of me now... just another chapter in my story.” He pulled down the neck of his t-shirt to show Nick the top of his own incision scar. “Besides,” he added, running his finger over the thin, white line, “it’s faded so much over time, it doesn’t really bother me anymore. I’ll get you some of that good cream I used to help mine heal.”

Nick nodded, forcing himself to smile as he replied, “Hey, chicks dig scars, right?”

He was trying to look on the bright side, but he saw a dark shadow cross over Brian’s face before Lauren chimed in, “You bet, babe. Battle scars are sexy.” She wiggled her brows, offering him a flirtatious smile, but Nick was watching Brian frown, a faraway expression on his friend’s face. He wondered what that was all about.

“How did *you* get away from those freaks?” he asked Brian, and that brought him back. Nick listened as Brian told his side of the story, starting from the beginning and finishing with his escape. Several times, Nick’s eyes filled with tears as Brian described being awake, but unable to move or respond in any way. “I knew you could hear me,” he told Brian, gripping the sides of his cough pillow tightly in his fists. He was filled with guilt and regret. “I should have realized what they were doing to us sooner. I could have disconnected the fucking IV drip and gotten us the hell out of there a lot sooner. God, I can’t believe how gullible I was to believe all the bullshit they fed me.”

“It’s not your fault, Nick,” said Brian, putting a hand on his shoulder. “You weren’t the only one they fooled. Heck, they had me convinced I really *did* have a spinal cord injury - and that you needed a heart transplant, too. How were either of us supposed to know otherwise when they were drugging us the entire time?”

Nick shook his head. “The whole thing’s my fault! You wouldn’t have flown to Key West in the first place if it wasn’t for me.”

“Don’t you dare start beating yourself up over this!” Brian’s tone was surprisingly sharp. “Dani called me to come down there, not you. This was all her doing, and she’s the one we should blame,” he said firmly. “Besides, I’m fine. I clearly don’t have a spinal cord injury or brain damage, so no permanent damage done.”

But Nick knew that wasn’t true. “What about that?” he asked, pointing to the bandage at the base of Brian’s throat. “I’m the one who gave them permission to do that to you.”

“What, this?” Brian peeled back the bandage to show Nick the hole they had cut into his neck. The wound appeared to be healing well; it had completely closed on the inside, but the outside was still open, the skin around it bright pink. It looked painful, but Brian pretended like it didn’t bother him. “Just another battle scar,” he said with a crooked smile.

Nick swallowed hard, his own throat hurting from the breathing tube. “I’m so sorry, Bri,” he whispered. “I wish you hadn’t been dragged into this.”

“I wish neither one of us had been dragged into this,” Brian replied, “but I believe everything happens for a reason. God must have had a plan for us, Nick. Maybe He wanted to bring us closer together, or maybe He just meant to test us and make us stronger.”

Nick had never been particularly religious, but he had always admired Brian’s faith. He had learned a lot from Brian over the years, and he was listening to him now.

“We may not know the reason why until we meet Him in Heaven,” Brian went on, “but in the meantime, what’s done is done. There’s no point in dwelling on the past. We can’t change what happened. All we can do now is focus on the future, on getting better and moving on from this, stronger than we were before. I know it’s not gonna be easy, but I’m gonna be here to help you.” He gave Nick’s shoulder a squeeze. “We can get through this together.”

Nick finally nodded, but for the first time since he had woken up, he was hit with the full weight of what Elizabeth and Dani had done to him. It rested heavily on his chest, which was starting to hurt more as his pain medication wore off. The floating sensation he had felt before was gone now; his feet were firmly back on the ground. As the fog around him lifted, he began to get a clearer picture of where he was and what he would be facing in the coming days and weeks. He felt overwhelmed as he realized what a long road of recovery lay ahead of him, not only physically, but emotionally as well. He knew how lucky to have someone to walk that road with him. “Thanks,” he said, a lump rising in his throat as he looked from Brian to Lauren. “Thank you both for being here.”

“You bet, buddy,” replied Brian.

Lauren offered him a tender smile. Softly, she said, “I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.”

As he met her misty blue eyes, Nick felt another wave of guilt wash over him. There was a lot left unsaid between him and his wife, things they still needed to talk about and work through together. He wasn’t sure whether Lauren had forgiven him for leaving her to go back on tour or was simply choosing to forget about their fight for the time being, in light of what had happened to him. But he had to wonder, would she still stand by him if she knew what had had done with Dani? Would she take him back when she found out he had been unfaithful to her?

Brian must have noticed the way Nick and Lauren were looking at each other because he suddenly stood up and stretched. “I’m gonna go take a little walk, give the other guys a call to tell them how you’re doing, and let you two have some time alone,” he told them. “Y’all need anything before I leave?”

Nick shook his head, knowing there was nothing Brian could do to relieve his pain. For that, he had to rely on his PCA pump, a computerized device that was programmed to deliver a dose of morphine through his IV with the push of a button. Picking up the controller his nurse had given him earlier, Nick pressed the button and waited for numb, floaty feeling to return.

“Thanks, but I think we’re okay for now,” Lauren said, beaming up at Brian.

Are we? Nick wondered, glancing again at his wife. Had his brush with death brought them back together for good, or would things be different once he got better?

“All right. I’ll be back soon,” said Brian. “Hang in there, bro.” As he leaned in to give Nick a light hug, he whispered into his ear, “Don’t worry... she doesn’t know anything about you and Dani.”

Nick felt his face redden as Brian drew back. His best friend had always been able to read him like a book. “Thanks, Frick,” he replied softly. He felt as if Brian had just given him permission to keep his little fling with Dani a secret from his wife... but was that what he wanted to do? Lauren was one of the few people in his life he trusted completely, and she trusted him, too. He had never kept secrets from her before. Starting now didn’t seem like the best way to fix his marriage, but telling her the truth could ruin it forever. He didn’t know what to do.

While Nick was contemplating this, his nurse, Christina, came in to check on him. “How are you feeling?” she asked as she looked at his monitor, making notes on the tablet she carried around with her.

“I think my pain meds are starting to wear off. I’m pretty sore,” he admitted.

“On a scale of one to ten, how bad is the pain?” the nurse wanted to know.

Nick never knew the right number to say. “I dunno... like a six, maybe?”

“Have you been using your PCA pump?”

He nodded. “I just pushed the button a few minutes ago.”

“Good,” said Christina, looking up from her tablet with a satisfied smile. “No need to be a hero. Pain will only lead to setbacks and slow your healing, so go ahead and push that button whenever you start to feel it. It’s impossible for you to overdose - the pump is programmed to only deliver a certain amount of morphine at a time. Once you hit the maximum dose, it won’t give you any more for a while, no matter how many times you push the button.”

Nick nodded again. She had gone over all of this with him earlier when she had first given him the controller for the pump.

“Where exactly does it hurt?” she asked next.

“My chest, mostly, but my back and shoulders are sore, too.” He wanted to roll his shoulders to work out the tension, but knew it would tug too much on the muscles in his chest.

Christina pursed her lips as she considered his answer. “Let’s try raising the head of your bed to sit you up a little bit,” she said after a moment. “The change in position might help relieve the pain in your back and shoulders by taking some of the pressure off them. You’ve been lying on your back in this bed for a long time.”

“Okay,” Nick agreed. He was willing to try anything to alleviate his discomfort.

Christina pushed a button on the side of his bed to adjust the settings, and he felt it begin to move beneath his upper body, slowly inclining until he was at a forty-five degree angle. “How does that feel?” she asked.

Nick was light-headed, but it felt good to be on the same level as Lauren again, to be able to gaze into her eyes without her having to look down or lean over him. “Not bad,” he answered. “I’m a little dizzy, but my back does feel better.”

“Let me check your blood pressure to make sure it didn’t drop too much,” said Christina, strapping a cuff around his arm. She sat down on a stool next to his bed and took his hand in hers, turning it palm up. Slipping her stethoscope into her ears, she pressed the end to the inside of his elbow and inflated the cuff until it was tight around his arm.

Nick was triggered by the sound of her squeezing the bulb to pump up the cuff. He took a deep breath and tried to stay calm, imagining his blood pressure skyrocketing as he was reminded of Dani. It was hard for him to put his trust in a new set of nurses and doctors after what he had been through, but he told himself this time was different. Lauren was here now, and he knew she would never let them do anything to hurt him.

Christina let the air out of the cuff, listening in concentration as it deflated. “One hundred over seventy - right in the normal range,” she said with a smile, unstrapping it from his arm. She seemed nice enough, but then, so had Dani. “The rest of your vitals look good, too,” she added, as she recorded his latest blood pressure reading on his chart. “You’re doing great, Nick. Let me know if you need anything, okay?”

He nodded. “Thanks.”

After the nurse left, Lauren looked at Nick. “I hate to see you hurting,” she said sympathetically, stroking his hand. “Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?”

“Just having you here helps,” he told her truthfully. “You can take my mind off it. Talk to me. Tell me more about what’s been going on. How’s Odin? Is he back home?”

She nodded. “My dad’s staying at the house with him. We FaceTime every night before he goes to bed. It’s been hard for him, not having me there, but Dad says he’s doing okay. I don’t know if I made the right decision or not, leaving him behind,” she admitted, raking a hand through her hair. “I didn’t want to disrupt his whole routine by bringing him out here with me, but I had no idea when I left how long I would be gone. It’s been a whole month since I’ve seen him in person. I miss him so much...”

Nick wished he had the strength to reach up and wipe away the tears that had welled up in her eyes, but the slightest movement made the muscles in his chest wall scream with pain. “Me too, but think you made the right decision,” he reassured her, though a lump rose in his throat as he thought of his son. He hadn’t seen Odin since he had left for the North American leg of the tour, which felt like a lifetime ago. “As much as I wish he was here, it’s probably better that he’s not. I wouldn’t want him to see me this way, with all these wires and tubes. It would only scare him.” He swallowed hard. “I just hope he hasn’t forgotten me.”

“Are you kidding? Of course he hasn’t forgotten you,” she assured him with a rueful smile. “He asks about you every time we talk.”

“What have you been telling him?” Nick wondered.

“Well, while you were missing, I just pretended you were still on tour,” said Lauren, shrugging sheepishly. “I didn’t know how to tell him his daddy disappeared without scaring him. But once you were found, I started giving him a watered down version of the truth. He knows that you’ve been in the hospital because you’re sick and that I’m going to stay in Florida until you get better and can finally come home.”

“Come home?” he repeated hopefully. “You mean that?”

“Of course I do,” she replied, rubbing the back of his hand. “You’re gonna need someone to take care of you while you recuperate.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Is that the only reason?”

Lauren returned his questioning look with a crooked smile. “No. I *want* you to come home. I love you, Nick. I never should have told you to leave.”

“I never should have left,” he admitted. “Going back on tour like that after you begged me not to... That was a mistake. I know that now. You were grieving, and I should have been there for you so we could go through it together.” Turning his hand over so that their palms were touching, he laced his fingers through hers. “I’m so sorry, Lauren.”

She shook her head. “No, *I’m* sorry,” she said, gripping his hand. “I shouldn’t have asked you to stay home. Yes, I was grieving, but so were you. It wasn’t just about me.” She paused as Nick started to cough again, clutching his pillow to his chest. She waited until he was finished, then handed him the cup of ice chips so he could help himself.

“Thanks,” Nick rasped, his eyes streaming. He popped another ice chip into his mouth to moisten his irritated throat and lay back against the pillow beneath his head, in pain and exhausted.

Lauren leaned closer to him. “I knew what I signed up for when I married you, Nick,” she continued, looking him in the eyes. “I knew how much you were willing to sacrifice to make your fans happy, but I also knew how happy it made *you* to perform for them - and how cathartic it could be. I should have known you needed to get back to work and stay busy just as much as I needed to stay home and wallow for a while before I was ready to face the world again. We’re two different people, and we dealt with the same grief in different ways. I just didn’t understand that at the time.”

“I don’t blame you, baby,” said Nick. “You don’t need to apologize for anything. I’m the one who should be apologizing.”

“You already did,” argued Lauren. “It’s done.”

But Nick knew that it was not done. Taking a deep breath, he said, “No, you don’t understand. There’s something else I need to tell you.”

Lauren cocked her head to one side, looking at him in confusion. Nick cleared his throat, trying to summon the courage he needed to continue.

“The woman who did this to me, Dani... I met her at one of the bars on Duval Street on Halloween. I was there by myself; she was there with her husband, Rob. They recognized me, bought me a drink, and invited me to join them, so I did. They seemed harmless,” he said, shaking his head as he realized how wrong he had been. “We had a nice conversation about horror movies. Then her husband got called into work and had

to leave, or so he said. He told his wife to stay and have fun and asked me to make sure she got a ride home, so I said I would. When we were ready to leave, she ordered an Uber that we ended up sharing. The last thing I remember was riding in the back seat with her. I was so tired, I just wanted to rest my eyes for a minute, and the next thing I knew, I was waking up in what I thought was a hospital room.”

“She drugged you, Nick,” Lauren said, shaking her head. “The detective showed us surveillance footage from the bar. That bitch put something in your drink while you went to the bathroom.”

Nick nodded, not surprised. “I don’t know what happened after we got in that car together. She told me we went back to my place, I invited her in, and we... we hooked up.”

“Bullshit!” Lauren spat. “That’s not what really happened, and you know it, Nick.”

“But that’s just it: I *didn’t* know. Not for sure, anyway,” said Nick. “I woke up with no memory of the rest of that night, so I had to take her word for it. According to Dani, I collapsed while we were having sex and went into cardiac arrest. She called an ambulance and kept me alive until it came.”

“Well, *obviously* that’s not true because if it was, they would have taken you to a real hospital.” Lauren rolled her eyes. “That’s just what she wanted to happen because she’s a *freak* who gets off on that stuff. Seriously, she and her pervy husband have a whole medical fetish porn site full of videos of hot people having heart attacks and giving each other fake CPR.”

“What?” Nick gasped. This was new information to him.

“I shit you not,” said Lauren. “Seriously, you don’t even wanna know. But that bullshit story she fed you? That was nothing but her own sick fantasy. She never had sex with you, Nick. All she did was drug you and take you back to their little hospital porno set to play out that fantasy in real life.”

Nick thought Lauren was probably right, but there were parts of the story she still did not know. “Well, she got what she wanted. I was naive enough to swallow the bullshit she fed me,” he admitted with a heavy sigh. In hindsight, he felt stupid for falling for Dani’s farfetched story, but at the time, he’d had no reason to doubt her. “She and Elizabeth made think I was dying. They gave me drugs to make me sick so I would believe them.”

“That must have been so scary,” said Lauren softly, stroking the back of his hand. “I don’t blame you for believing them, baby. Brian told me what it was like... what they did to you...”

“He didn’t tell you everything.” Nick took a shuddering breath. “He didn’t tell you about me and Dani.”

Lauren’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean? What about you and Dani?”

He swallowed hard. “Well, first of all, you have to understand how much she manipulated me. I was kept in this windowless room, connected to all this scary equipment, and I couldn’t leave my bed without some alarm going off. The first couple times I tried, I almost passed out, probably from the drugs they were putting into my IV, but I thought it was because of my heart, and that kept me from trying again. There was no phone, no TV, nothing to do but lie there and listen to the monitors beeping. I was scared, and I was bored, and I was lonely. Dani was the only one I had to talk to. She kept me company... took care of me... distracted me from thinking about the fact that I was dying, or so I thought. I didn’t know then that she was the one doing this to me. She played her part well: this perky, sweet, pretty nurse who genuinely seemed to care about me. We got... close. It felt like a friendship at first, nothing more than that, even though I knew we had supposedly hooked up. But then she told me she was pregnant and that the baby had to be mine because Rob was sterile. And I believed her.”

He paused and looked up at Lauren, who had tears in her eyes. “Just say it, Nick. Did you sleep with her?” she asked quietly.

“No.” He shook his head. “But I did kiss her.”

Lauren arched her brow. “Is that all?”

He hesitated. “We may have made out once or twice... but I swear, it never went any further than that. I’m so sorry, Lauren. Believe me, you were always on my mind... always. I never stopped loving you, but Dani made me think you didn’t love me anymore, and somehow I developed feelings for her, too. I don’t have them anymore, obviously, after what she did to me, but I won’t deny that I found her attractive then.”

Stop talking, Nick, said a little voice in the back of his mind, but he feared the damage had already been done. Perhaps he shouldn’t have been *quite* so honest. He had really put his foot in his mouth now. His wife was never going to forgive him.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered again.

Deep lines had appeared in Lauren's forehead, and tears were streaming slowly down her face. What she said next took Nick by surprise: "Dani made you think I didn't love you anymore?" She sounded more hurt than angry.

"She told me she called to let you know I was in the hospital, but that you weren't coming," he explained. "She knew we were separated, and she used that to her advantage to try and drive us further apart."

"Did you really think I wouldn't come when you were in the hospital?" asked Lauren, still frowning at him.

"Of course I thought you would. That's why it hurt so much when you didn't." Nick paused before adding, "I'm not blaming you; I know now it's because Dani never called you in the first place... but at the time, it felt like you just didn't care enough to come."

"Oh Nick..." Lauren shook her head, looking at him sadly. "I would fly to the ends of the Earth for you. Do you know how many days I drove around Key West looking for you after you disappeared? How many sleepless nights I spent curled up in this damn chair next to your hospital bed because I couldn't stand to leave your side? How many weeks I've gone without seeing my son because I didn't want to go home without you? If that's not love, I don't know what is. I'm sorry I made you doubt my feelings for you."

Nick's eyes were swimming with tears now, too. "You didn't," he said. "She did."

"No, I obviously did, too, or you wouldn't have believed her. I really am sorry, Nick. Sorry for kicking you out and causing you to question our relationship."

"Well, I'm sorry for being so stupid," Nick replied with a sheepish smile. "I'll never question it again."

Lauren finally cracked a smile in return. "You better not. But I forgive you."

"Really?" he asked hopefully.

"What else am I going to do?" she said with a shrug. "I didn't come all this way to ask you for a divorce. These last few weeks have been the scariest of my life. I almost lost you, Nick. I hope I never have to go through that again. I want to make our marriage work. Without forgiveness, it never will."

Nick nodded, wiping his eyes. “I want it to work, too,” he relied earnestly. “I love you, Lauren.”

Rising from her chair, Lauren leaned in, took his face in her hands, and tenderly kissed his lips. “I love you, too,” she whispered back.

The morphine was kicking in now, and Nick felt better, as if a weight had been lifted off his chest. The pain and pressure were gone. The floaty feeling had returned. His head felt like a hot air balloon, rising slowly through a thickening layer of fog.

“You and I both have a lot of healing to do,” Lauren added, as she sat back down. “But, you know, maybe Brian was right with what he said about everything happening for a reason. Maybe this was meant to bring us back together.”

He nodded again and reached out his hand to her. “I hope so. I’m gonna need you, babe... now more than ever.”

“I know,” she replied, wrapping her hand around his and squeezing it tightly. “But for now, you just need rest. You look so tired...”

“I *am* tired,” he admitted. “That morphine’s working wonders, but man, does it make me drowsy.”

“Then close your eyes and go back to sleep,” she coaxed him. “You heard the nurse - you don’t have to be a hero. I’ll still be here when you wake up.”

He flashed her a weary smile. “You better be.”

Lauren pushed the button to lower his bed back down until he was lying almost flat and fluffed up the pillow behind his head, helping him get as comfortable as possible. When he finally closed his eyes, Nick fell asleep almost instantly. And when he opened them again, he was comforted by the sight of his wife sitting patiently beside his bed, just as she had promised him she would be.

Chapter 48

Having survived his near-death experience and reconciled with his wife, Nick simply wanted to go home. He felt like Dorothy again, desperate to find a way back to Kansas -

or, in Nick's case, Nevada. But it wouldn't be as easy as clicking his heels. His yellow brick road to recovery would be long and hard, but he had to follow it in order to leave the land of ICU.

Nick's first step came later that day, when his nurse helped him sit up on the side of his bed. Brian had warned him it would feel like his insides were about to fall out onto the floor, and it did. Besides being scary, it hurt, too. But after being forced to lie in bed for so long, it also felt good to get his feet back on the floor.

After that first taste of freedom, Nick was eager for more. Each day, he pushed himself a little further. The day after surgery, he was able to get out of bed and shuffle across his room to a recliner, and by the third day, he was taking slow walks up and down the hallway.

It was weird seeing winter holiday decorations on the walls. It had been Halloween the last time he'd set foot outdoors, and now it was already December. Nick had spent the whole month of November in a hospital bed and completely missed Thanksgiving. But the festive wreaths and garlands gave him a new goal: to be home by Christmas.

He threw his whole heart into his rehabilitation, doing the deep breathing exercises the respiratory therapist had recommended to keep his lungs clear, even though it made his chest hurt, and pushing through the pain of physical therapy to help his muscles recover from a month of bed rest. Lauren and Brian became his biggest cheerleaders, providing him with the support and encouragement he needed to make it past each milestone.

His emotional recovery did not follow the same linear path as his physical recovery. There were ups and downs, breakthroughs and setbacks. On his good days, Nick felt grateful to be alive and hopeful for the future, but then there were bad days, when he was overwhelmed by depression and anxiety. Sleep didn't come easy, but on the nights when he did manage to drift off, he had recurring nightmares about what Dani and Elizabeth had done to him and would wake up drenched with sweat, panic-stricken to find himself in a hospital bed. It always took him a few minutes to remind himself that he was in a real hospital this time, being taken care of by people who were not out to hurt him. Still, he maintained a certain degree of suspicion, demanding to see the label on every drug he was given and asking Lauren to look up the side effects online. He knew he was probably being paranoid, but after what he had gone through, no one gave him a hard time about it. The counselor who came to see him daily told him this was normal and encouraged him to keep talking about the trauma he had endured.

Talking about it was hard, but it did seem to help. Two days after Nick regained consciousness, he was introduced to Detective Overton, who drove all the way from Key

West to interview him about his experience. By then, Nick was being weaned off the morphine, and the fog in his brain had lifted so that he was clear-headed once more. Haltingly, he described his memories of what had happened to him, beginning with meeting Dani and her husband on Halloween night and ending with his realization that she was in on the scheme to fake his heart failure. Afterwards, he felt a sense of relief, as if the weight of what she had done to him had been lifted off his chest. Like a bird released from its cage, his heart was finally free.

It also helped having friends and family around him. After spending a week at home with their own families, Howie, Kevin, and AJ flew back to Miami for a visit. All three of them burst into Nick's room at once, ignoring the ICU's "two visitors at a time" policy. If Nick's nurse noticed, she didn't say anything.

"Nicky-Nicks!" exclaimed AJ, as he strode up to the recliner where Nick was sitting. He started to lean in for a hug, then hesitated and reached for Nick's hand instead. "I'd hug you, but I don't wanna hurt you, dude," he said.

Nick nodded, holding the heart-shaped cough pillow protectively over his chest. "Yeah, maybe wait another week or two for that hug, bro - but thanks anyway."

"It's good to see you, Nicky," said Howie with a smile, giving Nick's hand a squeeze. "You look a hell of a lot better than last time."

Nick forced a laugh, clutching the pillow tighter to keep his rib cage contained. "Yeah, I bet."

Kevin's eyes were bright with tears when he finally came forward. "You know, Nick, I'm gonna have a lot more gray hairs now 'cause of you," he teased, his voice trembling as he tried not to cry. He put his hand on Nick's shoulder. "You sure gave us a scare, little brother."

A lump rose in Nick's throat. "I know," he said. "I'm sorry."

"You don't need to be sorry for anything," said Kevin, shaking his head. "You survived, and that's all that matters. *We're* sorry for what you went through."

Nick nodded, but he felt embarrassed about getting himself into such a bad situation and guilty for bringing the rest of the group into it, too - especially Brian. He knew it wasn't entirely his fault, but still, he had been a fool to fall for Dani's lies and believe her and Elizabeth for as long as he did.

“I hope those freaks fry for what they did to you and Brian,” said AJ savagely, shaking his head. “Have you been watching the news? The police found the body of a woman who had been missing for a few weeks in the funeral home, so now they’re considering adding first-degree murder to the list of crimes they’ve already been charged with.”

Nick’s blood ran cold as he remembered the woman with the bird tattoo, his one-time roommate. When he closed his eyes, he could still see Patrick on top of her naked corpse. He tried to block that memory, only to have it replaced by one of the woman’s bare breasts flopping around as Dani and the others took turns pumping her chest in their failed attempt to resuscitate her. Now he wondered how hard they had actually tried. *They killed her*, he realized, *just like they almost killed me*. He could have easily ended up just like that poor woman.

“Florida does still have the death penalty, you know,” AJ went on. “Personally, I’ve never been a big believer in it, but this may have changed my mind. I mean, anyone who fucks with my brothers the way they did deserves to-”

“Enough, AJ,” Kevin warned with a wary glance at Nick. “We’re not here to talk about those people. Let’s try to keep things positive and focused on Nick, okay?”

“Sorry, man - didn’t mean to bring up bad memories,” AJ apologized, patting Nick’s knee. “You okay?”

Nick nodded, forcing the images out of his head. “I’m fine,” he lied, but he could tell by their concerned faces that they didn’t believe him.

“How are you feeling?” Howie wanted to know.

“A little better every day,” was Nick’s answer, but that wasn’t entirely true either. Without morphine, his physical pain was worse than it had been the day he’d woken up, while his mental anguish came and went in waves. He was happy to see the rest of the guys, but their presence reminded him of how far removed he felt from his former self.

Three months ago, he had been performing a two-hour show nearly every night, singing and dancing and playing around on stage, making fans scream with a strategically-placed pelvic thrust or crotch grab. Now he could barely get out of bed to go to the bathroom by himself or move to his chair without help, and the mere thought of jumping or dancing or taking a deep breath to belt out a high note made his chest hurt. How was he ever going to get back into the kind of shape he needed to be in to be “Nick Carter of the Backstreet Boys” again?

Brian did it in two months, he reminded himself. You can too.

They were supposed to start the South American leg of their world tour at the end of February, which gave him more than two months to recuperate, but Nick had a hard time imagining himself being ready by then, physically or emotionally.

“You don’t have to be,” said Kevin when Nick admitted this to the group. “We can take off as much time as you need.” He looked around at the others, who were all bobbing their heads in agreement. “We’ve talked about this, and we were already planning on postponing the rest of the tour until you’re ready to go back on the road. We were just waiting to get the final word from you before we made an official announcement.”

Nick nodded with relief. “Thanks, guys,” he replied, feeling less anxious, as if another weight had been lifted off his chest. “I really appreciate that.”

The guys stayed in Miami for two more weeks, as Nick continued to recover. After a few days, he was moved first to the step-down unit and then finally to a regular room, where he was free from most of tubes and wires he had been tethered to in the ICU. Without all the noisy machines and monitors surrounding his bed, Nick slept better than he had in weeks. But he still couldn’t wait to go home and sleep in his own bed with his wife beside him.

“When are you coming home, Daddy?” Odin asked him every day as they talked over FaceTime on Lauren’s phone.

Each time, Nick was forced to give his son the same vague answer: “Soon, I hope, buddy. Real soon.”

Two days before Christmas, Nick got his wish, when he was finally discharged from the hospital with a clean bill of health. He would have happily flown home that same day, but with it being such a busy time of year for air travel, all the flights back to Las Vegas were fully booked. He and Lauren spent the night in a nearby hotel instead.

As much as he missed Odin, Nick had to admit, it was nice being able to spend some time alone with his wife outside of the hospital before they went home. They enjoyed a relaxing evening together, ordering room service for dinner and watching a Christmas movie on TV as they ate, then turned in early, for they had reserved the last two seats on the first nonstop flight out of Miami the next morning.

At first, the king-sized bed in their hotel room really did seem fit for royalty compared to the hospital beds Nick had been sleeping in for the better part of two months. As he slipped between the crisp, cool sheets and stretched out next to Lauren, Nick looked forward to finally getting a good night's sleep, uninterrupted by nurses coming in at all hours to check his blood pressure or change his IV bag. But while his wife fell asleep quickly, curled up in the fetal position on one side of the bed, Nick lay awake for a long time on the other. He couldn't get comfortable. Forced to lie flat on his back because his breastbone hadn't finished fusing together, he found himself missing the adjustable hospital bed that could elevate him to any angle with the push of a button. He fluffed up the pillows behind his head and fought the urge to toss and turn, knowing he would only cause himself more discomfort if he tried. Finally, he drifted into a fitful doze.

He woke with a feeling of dread. He was drenched in sweat and breathing hard, his heart hammering inside his heaving chest. A dull pain was radiating up and down his arms, across his back, and beneath his rib cage. It came and went in waves that seemed to escalate, each one more powerful than the one before. His breath caught in his throat as he was rocked by a particularly intense wave of pain, and he let out a strangled cry.

It was enough to wake up his wife. "What's wrong, baby?" he heard Lauren mumble as she stirred beside him. When he didn't answer, she reached up and switched on the light. "Nick?" she said, rolling over to face him. "Are you all right? Did you have another nightmare?"

He shook his head.

"What is it?" she asked more urgently, her voice rising. "Talk to me, Nick; you're scaring me."

The pain was coming from the left side of his chest. He put his hand there and felt his heart pounding frantically against his palm. Finally, he said faintly, "I think I'm having a heart attack."

"A heart attack?" Lauren repeated, raising her eyebrows. "Or a panic attack? Are you sure you didn't have a nightmare?"

Nick nodded. He knew it wasn't a panic attack. In spite of his sense of impending doom, a strange calmness had come over him. He sat quietly, holding his chest, as Lauren snatched her cell phone off the bedside table and announced, "I'm calling 911." He could hear her in the background, talking to the dispatcher. "I need an ambulance. My husband just had heart surgery three weeks ago, and now he's having chest pains."

Her voice seemed to fade in and out as she relayed the name of their hotel and their room number, sounding like she was far away instead of right beside him...

...only, suddenly, he was no longer sitting next to her, but floating somewhere above her. He looked down and saw his body slumped over in the bed. Somehow, he had left it behind. Lauren was shaking him by the shoulders, screaming his name, but Nick could not respond.

No! he thought when he realized what was happening. He watched with despair as she bent over his lifeless body to attempt CPR. *No, it's not my time yet! I was supposed to stay here and help raise my son. I was supposed to grow old with my wife.*

“Please, Nick... please don’t leave me!” Lauren sobbed as she pushed down on his chest. It looked like it hurt, yet Nick felt no physical pain, only the emotional anguish of seeing his wife so distraught.

I don't want to leave. I'm not ready, he pleaded, but this time, he was powerless to stop what was happening to him. He could only hover and watch as the hotel room filled with paramedics in bright orange uniforms. They lifted his body off the bed and lowered him to the floor, where they huddled around him, cutting off the wifebeater he had worn to bed and attaching sticky pads to his bare chest while a pair of hands performed continuous compressions to keep his blood pumping.

Still in her pajamas, Lauren stood in the background, rocking unsteadily on her heels. Her hands were clasped together tightly, and she was holding them in front of her face. Whether she was praying or just trying to prevent herself from watching, Nick wasn’t sure. He wanted desperately to console her, but there was nothing he could do. He no longer had control over the body that was lying on the floor.

Helplessly, he watched the paramedics load him onto a stretcher. The smallest medic climbed on top, straddling his body so she could continue CPR as they whisked him away to a waiting ambulance.

Then his whole world went black.

With a jolt, he awoke in the back of the ambulance. “Welcome back, Nick,” said a voice that made his blood run cold. “We missed you.” He opened his eyes, blinking in confusion as Dani’s smirking face came into focus. He was still strapped down to the stretcher, and she was hovering over him, holding a pair of defibrillator paddles in her hands.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, his voice muffled by the oxygen mask that had been placed over his mouth and nose. “I thought you were behind bars.”

“We busted out,” said a second voice, and his eyes darted to the left to see Elizabeth sitting on the other side of the stretcher, her trusty stethoscope in her ears. She and Dani were dressed in identical orange prison jumpsuits, which he had mistaken for paramedic uniforms. “Aren’t you glad?” she added, as she pressed the end of her stethoscope to the center of his chest. “We just saved your life.”

“You almost killed me!” Nick protested. “You did this to me; you put me here!” How had they managed it this time? he wondered. Had they broken into his hotel room? Poisoned the food from room service? Injected him with something while he was asleep?

“Your *heart* put you here,” said Elizabeth, pursing her lips as she listened. She took off the stethoscope and replaced it around her neck. “I’m not liking what I’m hearing, Nick. It’s high time you had that transplant we talked about. We’re going to give you a gift you’ll never forget: a nice new heart for the holidays! How does that sound?”

Terrified, Nick shook his head. “No, please... I don’t need a new heart; the other doctor said my heart is fine now! Please, just let me go home!”

Elizabeth ignored his desperate pleas. “Scalpel,” she said, and Nick saw the gleam of shiny stainless steel as Dani passed her a surgical tool. He began to squirm, twisting his body this way and that as he tried to free himself from the straps that were holding him in place on the stretcher. But it was no use - they were too tight. “Hold still now,” Elizabeth warned, brandishing the sharp blade. “This will hurt a lot more if you move too much and make me miss my mark.”

As she brought the blade down and sliced through his skin, Nick began to scream. “Oh, don’t be so dramatic,” Elizabeth scolded him. “This is nothing compared to what’s coming next.” His nerves fired, sending frantic pain signals to and from his brain as she ran the scalpel slowly over his surgical scar, reopening the old incision in the center of his chest. “Now that wasn’t so bad, was it?” she asked with a sadistic smile, wiping away the blood that oozed between the separated flaps of skin. “The next part will be much worse. Would you like to do the honors, Rob?”

Dani’s husband seemed to appear out of nowhere. Nick hadn’t noticed him earlier, but suddenly, he was standing next to the stretcher. “I’d be happy to,” Rob replied. Before Nick could even begin to brace himself, Rob reached out and stuck his fingers into the fresh incision. Nick felt pain first, followed by intense pressure, as Rob dug deeper and

started to pull the two halves of his sternum apart. All it took was one sharp tug, and Rob split Nick's rib cage wide open with his bare hands.

Nick felt cold air on the outside of his lungs as his screaming crescendoed. "Shh," said Dani, rubbing his shoulder. "It's okay, Nick. Just relax and breathe."

Reaching into his chest cavity, Elizabeth wrapped her hand around his beating heart and began to squeeze. Bright red blood spurted like a fountain, splattering onto the front of her orange jumpsuit, as Nick screamed and screamed. In the background, he could hear Dani repeating, "It's okay, Nick... You're all right." But he was far from all right. He felt Elizabeth's fist close fully over his heart, her claw-like fingernails tearing through the tissue surrounding it. Then, all of a sudden, she ripped it right out of his chest.

He stopped screaming long enough to stare in horror at the sight of her holding his heart over her head like it was some kind of trophy. *This can't be happening*, he thought. *This can't be real. I have to be dreaming...*

Nick sat bolt upright in bed, the blankets falling off him. He looked down, expecting to see a gaping hole in his chest where his heart had been, but beneath his sweat-soaked wifebeater, the skin was intact, the healing incision still closed. He was breathing hard, his rib cage expanding and contracting rapidly as he gasped for air. Putting a hand on his heaving chest, he could feel his heart hammering against his palm.

"Nick?" he heard Lauren ask, as she rose onto one elbow in the bed beside him. "Are you all right? Did you have another nightmare?"

This time, he nodded. Now that he was awake, he knew that was all it had been, yet it had felt so real. His chest hurt. His heart was still racing.

Lauren reached for him, resting her hand on the small of his back. "It must have been scary," she said softly, as she rubbed his back in slow circles. "You were screaming."

Nick nodded again. "It was."

"Aww, baby..." She sat up and scooted closer, wrapping her arms around him from behind. He leaned back into her embrace, letting his body go limp. "I'm so sorry you're going through this," she murmured, as she held him. "When we get home, we're going to find a therapist who specializes in PTSD, someone who can help with that part of your healing process."

He swallowed hard before he said hoarsely, “Sounds like a plan.” As much as he hated to admit he needed professional help to move past this, he knew Lauren was probably right. Dani, Elizabeth, Rob, and Patrick may have been behind bars, but they still haunted his dreams almost every night. He was desperate to make the nightmares stop.

“Do you want to try to go back to sleep?” asked Lauren.

Nick looked at the clock on the table next to the bed. It was already five in the morning. They needed to be at the airport by seven. “Nah,” he said. “I’m just gonna get up now and grab a shower.”

“Okay...”

He could feel Lauren’s eyes on him, watching with concern as he climbed slowly out of bed and padded barefoot into the bathroom. He turned on the light and closed the door before he took off his wifebeater.

Catching sight of himself in the mirror, he stopped to stare at his reflection, standing in front of the sink in nothing but his boxers. He ran his finger lightly over the long, raised, red line in the middle of his chest - his battle scar, as Lauren had called it. The first time he had seen it when they took off his dressing in the hospital, it had freaked him out. He was starting to get used to it by now, but he knew that although it would fade with time, it would never fully disappear. He would wear that scar forever... and he would never be the same as before.

Chapter 49

When he and Lauren finally boarded the plane that would take them back to Las Vegas, Nick had never been so happy to leave Florida. He hoped he would be able to leave behind the bad memories of what had happened to him there, but he feared his nightmares would follow him home.

Nick normally preferred the aisle seat so he could stretch out his long legs, but this time, he sat next to the window and spent the whole flight staring out it. As the plane gradually ascended into the air, he watched the sparkling water of the Atlantic give way to an endless sea of fluffy white clouds. The blue sky above had never been more beautiful, nor had the sun ever seemed so bright. Other passengers pulled down their window shades to block its harsh rays, but Nick kept his all the way up, savoring the

warmth on his skin. After spending the past two months inside, he was looking forward to lying out by his pool and absorbing as much sunlight as he possibly could. He needed to get some color back into his pasty complexion. Perhaps a tan would improve the appearance of the ugly red scar running down the center of his chest.

When the plane landed, it was Lauren who pulled their carry-on bags out of the overhead luggage compartment, for Nick was not allowed to lift anything heavier than ten pounds for another nine weeks, until his breastbone was fully healed. He felt worthless walking alongside his wife through the airport, as she handled both of their bags by herself.

“Now you know you’re not supposed to pick up Odin,” she reminded him before they approached the baggage claim area, where she had arranged for her father to meet them. “Don’t you dare let him con you into doing it anyway. I don’t want you hurting yourself.”

“I won’t,” Nick grudgingly agreed. As much as it killed him not to be able to hold his son, he knew she was right. Three weeks after surgery, his chest was still tender. He didn’t want to do anything that would worsen the pain or slow the healing process. But when he saw Odin standing next to Lauren’s dad, Larry, it took all of Nick’s willpower not to run right over and scoop him up.

“Daddy!” he heard Odin shout. Smiling, Nick knelt down and let his son run to him instead.

Next to him, he heard Lauren draw in a sharp breath as Odin came hurtling toward him. “Careful with Daddy now,” she warned. “Be gentle.” But Nick wasn’t worried. He pulled Odin into his open arms, crushing him against his chest. The pure joy of hugging his child put a damper on his pain.

“Daddy missed you so much,” he murmured as he rubbed Odin’s back and kissed the top of his blond head, breathing in the scent of him. He had never been away from his little boy for so long, and the realization of how close he had come to never seeing him again brought tears to Nick’s eyes. “I love you, Odin.”

“Love you, Daddy,” echoed Odin as he clung to him, his head on Nick’s shoulder. They stayed that way for a long time, until Odin finally let go and went to hug Lauren.

Larry reached out a hand to Nick as he stood up with difficulty. “How you doing, son?” he asked, clapping him lightly on the shoulder.

Nick smiled as he wiped away tears. In spite of his discomfort, he had never felt happier to be home with his family. "I'm doing just fine now," he replied.

"Good," said his father-in-law, his lined face splitting into a wide grin. "We're sure glad to have you back."

Nick nodded. "Thanks. I'm sure glad to be back."

Larry helped Lauren with the luggage, while Nick held Odin's hand the whole way out to the car. He rode back to the house with his cough pillow wedged between his chest and the seat belt to keep it from being too tight. "You don't have to take it this slow, you know," he told Lauren, who was driving like a little old lady in the right lane as other cars raced around her.

"Yes I do," she replied, reaching for his hand across the center console. "I'm carrying precious cargo."

A lump rose in Nick's throat. "Don't worry," he assured her. "I won't break."

As they took a cautious left turn and passed through the gates of their community, Lauren patted the back of his hand. "I know."

When they pulled into the driveway, Nick smiled at the familiar sight of the house he and Lauren had lived in for the last three years. "There's no place like home," he sighed, as Lauren parked the car.

She and Larry unloaded their luggage while Nick went inside with Odin. He was surprised to find a fully-decorated Christmas tree set up in the living room with a few wrapped gifts already sitting underneath it. "Did you and Grandpa do all this?" he asked his son.

Grinning, Odin nodded.

"Wow... good job, buddy. It's beautiful!" Nick exclaimed. The tree made it feel more festive inside the house, but he still had a hard time accepting that it was actually Christmas Eve.

It didn't really hit him until later that evening, after he'd sung several rounds of "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" and read "Twas the Night Before Christmas" to Odin as he tucked him into bed.

Once Odin was asleep, Nick crept back out to the kitchen, where his wife was busy cleaning up the mess they had made decorating Christmas cookies for dessert. “I can’t believe it’s already Christmas Eve,” he said with a sigh, sitting down on one of the bar stools. “Seems like Halloween was just yesterday.”

“Yeah, well, time flies when you’re in a coma,” replied Lauren, flashing him a crooked smile. “Not for me, though - these last few weeks have been the longest of my life. It was worth it, though, to have you home for Christmas.” She set down the dishrag she had been using to wipe off the countertops and reached for his hand across the kitchen island.

Nick smiled back as he took her hand, but inside, he felt like crying. He had missed so much... and Odin would only be this little for so long. He couldn’t afford to miss another moment. Clearing the lump in his throat, he said, “So... Odin’s asleep. Do you think Santa will come soon?”

“Hm... you know, I think I hear some reindeer hooves on the roof right now,” replied Lauren, her eyes twinkling. “You up for helping him deliver the presents?”

Nick was tired and sore, but not too tired or too sore to play Santa for his son. “Sure I am,” he said. “After everything you’ve done already, it’s the least I can do.”

He remembered the moment of panic he’d had in the hospital upon realizing it was already December and he’d done nothing to get ready for the holidays. “What are we going to do about Santa?” he had asked Lauren, imagining how disappointed their son would be if he woke to find no new toys under the tree. Odin was finally old enough to understand and look forward to Santa Claus coming; they couldn’t let him down. “We haven’t had any time to shop.”

“Uh, speak for yourself,” Lauren had laughed. “What do you think I was doing while I sat around the ICU, waiting for you to wake up? Shopping online, duh!” Then she’d proceeded to show him everything she had already bought for Odin. “Dad’s been hiding all the packages for me as they arrive at the house.”

Now, as Lauren took Nick into her closet to show him the neatly-stacked tower of shipping boxes hidden behind one of the clothes bars, he turned to her and beamed. “Have I told you lately what an amazing wife and mother you are?”

Lauren smiled back. “Maybe, but I never mind hearing it again.”

“Well, then lemme tell you... you’re amazing,” he said, leaning in to kiss her lips. “I love you, baby.”

“I love you, too,” she replied, wrapping her arms around his waist.

He carried the lightest boxes back out to the living room, reluctantly leaving the heavy ones for her to handle. Then they went to work, Nick cutting each package open from the comfort of the couch while Lauren crawled around on the floor, arranging Odin’s gifts underneath the tree. By the time they finished, they were both worn out, but finally, it felt like Christmas. Exhausted, Lauren collapsed onto the couch next to Nick, and they polished off the plate of cookies Odin had left out for Santa Claus.

Long after the last cookie had been eaten, Nick was lying with his head in Lauren’s lap, looking at the tree, when he heard her say quietly, “Santa was supposed to bring toys for two kids tonight.”

As he pictured the mountain of presents beneath the tree piled even higher with boxes full of brand new baby toys, Nick felt a pain in his chest that had nothing to do with his surgery, a pain Tylenol could not take away. “I know.”

Had Arya been born alive, the past three months of his life would have been much different. He would have been welcomed home from the tour by his wife with open arms; he would never have gone to Key West. He would have spent Halloween at home with his kids; he would never have been in that bar by himself. He would have gone to bed with Lauren that night; he would never have met Dani. But there was no point in dwelling on what could have been. Clearly, it wasn’t meant to be.

As Nick continued to gaze at the Christmas tree, wondering what he could say to comfort Lauren, a particular ornament caught his eye. It was painted with a nativity scene, but the depiction of baby Jesus lying in the manger reminded him more of little Arya curled up in her clamshell cradle.

Taking a deep breath, he tipped his head back to look up at Lauren and said, “Baby, I want to tell you about something.”

“What?” she asked, as she softly stroked his hair.

He swallowed hard. “When I was unconscious, I had a... well, I dunno if it was a dream, exactly, or some kind of near-death experience... but I saw her. I saw Arya.”

He heard Lauren draw in a sharp breath. “You did?” she said, her voice sounding strangely high-pitched.

“Yeah.” He struggled to find the words to explain what he had experienced. “I was... drowning in the depths of the ocean. The water was dark and cold, and I couldn’t breathe. It hurt so bad, but I could hear her crying from somewhere below me, calling out for me to come and find her... so I kept sinking further and further down.”

He closed his eyes as he continued, “Then I saw this light through the darkness. I followed it, and it let me to this castle at the bottom of the ocean... kinda like Ariel’s palace in *The Little Mermaid*, you know?” The more he talked, the clearer his memory became. In his mind’s eye, he could still see that gleaming, golden castle, rising out of the seabed like some kind of mirage.

“I went inside, and that was when I saw her. She was lying inside of a seashell, like this perfect little pearl. Her skin was pink and... Lauren, she was *alive*,” he breathed, as tears sprung to his eyes. “And she was so beautiful. I picked her up and held her for the longest time. I was so happy just looking at her and singing to her, I could have stayed like that forever. I never wanted to leave that place. But then I heard your voice, begging me to come back home.”

At that point, he felt something wet hit his face, and he opened his eyes to look up at Lauren again. Tears were trickling down her cheeks and dripping off her chin. “That part wasn’t a dream, Nick,” she said, her voice trembling. “I did beg you to come back. I talked to you all the time while you were in your coma.”

He nodded. “I know. I mean, I could hear you some of the time. It was kinda like a radio frequency that’s almost out of range - your voice would cut in and out. Sometimes it was clear, and other times it sounded faint and far away. But I knew you were nearby. I thought about you and Odin... and how I didn’t want to leave you two behind. But I also didn’t want Arya to be all by herself down there.”

His wife sniffled and wiped her eyes.

“That was when I saw my dad,” Nick went on, his heart squeezing painfully as he thought of his father.

Lauren froze, her fists hovering near her face. “You saw your dad?” she asked incredulously.

He nodded again. “And Leslie.” Lauren’s eyes widened further. “They were both at the castle, too. They came in and told me they would take care of Arya while I was gone. They’re the ones who convinced me go back.”

“Oh Nick,” she whispered, as fresh tears filled her eyes. “What a gift they gave you.”

He shrugged, feeling sheepish. “I know it was probably just some crazy coma dream, but it’s nice to think our daughter’s not alone... that she’s with them somewhere, and we’ll be able to see her again one day.”

“I don’t think it was a dream at all,” said Lauren, shaking her head. “I think you did have an out-of-body experience.”

Nick was not entirely convinced. “I dunno... I wasn’t, like, hovering over my hospital bed, watching them work on me,” he replied, recalling the nightmare he’d had in the hotel room. “I didn’t ‘go into the light’ or anything like that. One minute I was in the water, and the next, I was waking up in the recovery room. I don’t remember much else from in between.”

“That doesn’t mean it didn’t really happen, even if it was all in your head,” Lauren insisted, as she ran her hands through his hair. “Either way, thank you for telling me that. It helps.”

He was glad to hear that. “It may be too soon to ask this, but... do you think you’ll ever wanna try for another baby?” he asked, looking back at her.

Lauren raised her eyebrows. “It’s definitely too soon. Remember what the doctor said: no sex for at least six weeks.”

“I know. I didn’t mean right *now*,” replied Nick, smirking. “I’m too tired tonight anyway. But maybe we can try for that rainbow baby again someday... when we’re both ready. What do you think?”

The twinkling white lights were reflected in Lauren’s luminous eyes as she stared at the tree, a faraway look on her face. She didn’t answer at first, but when she finally spoke, she whispered the words he had been hoping to hear. “I think we should. Another baby... that would be the best gift you could ever give me.”

For the first time since they had lost Arya, Nick went to bed feeling hopeful, his heart full of possibility. For the first time since the end of the tour, he lay down next to Lauren in the bed they had picked out together. For the first time since his surgery, he was

finally able to find a comfortable position. Although he was looking forward to morning, he closed his eyes and fell asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.

As midnight came and Christmas Day dawned, Nick slept peacefully. If he had any more bad dreams, they were forgotten by morning.

Chapter 50

Nick closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to calm his racing heart. Everything in the room around him was a trigger: the sharp smell of antiseptic mixed with the metallic stench of blood, the shrill sounds of the monitors beeping in the background, and the feel of the sheer surgical cap covering his head. Together, it all brought him right back to being awake on the operating table as Elizabeth and Dani implanted the ICD inside his chest.

Even without knowing they intended to use it as a torture device, Nick had been terrified. And despite knowing the defibrillator had been taken out more than ten months ago, he still felt the familiar fear of being shocked each time his heartbeat accelerated, even when it was a perfectly normal and healthy reaction to whatever he was doing - working out, rehearsing, playing with his son, making love to his wife. All the doctors had assured him there was nothing physically wrong with his heart and, thus, no reason to worry, yet his debilitating anxiety had made it difficult for him to get back to doing the things he loved. With the help of therapy, he had found ways to cope without letting it completely overwhelm him, and most days, he managed it just fine. But in stressful situations like this one, when his heart started racing while his emotions were already running high, it was hard for Nick to reign it back in.

“You okay?” he heard Lauren ask softly. He opened his eyes again and saw her lying on the table in front of him. She was gazing up at him with tears in her eyes and a look of concern on her face - not for herself, but for him.

“I’m fine,” he said quickly, feeling embarrassed to have been caught on the verge of freaking out. He couldn’t fall apart now, not when his wife needed him. *Get it together, Carter*, he scolded himself. He was supposed to be the one comforting her, not the other way around. “How you doing, baby?” he asked, stroking her head through the gauzy surgical hat she wore over her hair. She had been so strong for him during his hospitalization. Now it was his turn to be strong for her.

“This feels so weird,” she murmured, frowning at the blue sterile drape that hung right in front of her face. It was moving back and forth with the flurry of activity happening behind it.

Nick nodded, knowing what she meant. Again, he was reminded of the implantation procedure. He remembered being flat on his back, pleasantly numb enough not to feel pain but still fully aware and able to feel the pressure of Elizabeth pulling and poking around inside him. It was a strange and unsettling sensation.

Lauren’s whole body was trembling, but whether it was from fear or the anesthesia or merely the force of what was being done below her waist, Nick wasn’t sure. He didn’t dare look behind the drape. The nurse had told him to stay at the head of the table and help keep his wife calm, so that was what he did.

“Hey, look in my eyes,” he said as he continued to caress Lauren’s forehead, forcing her to focus on his face. He could hear metal instruments clanging around, but he tried to block out the sound for them both. “Aren’t you happy?” he asked her in a bright, cheerful tone, even though, in the back of his mind, he was terrified. “You made it! You did it!”

Lauren nodded, her lips curving into a crooked smile. The last nine months had been full of highs and lows for both of them, but the best moment had been finding out on Nick’s fortieth birthday that they were expecting another rainbow baby. For Nick, who had barely made it to forty, getting the news that he was going to be a father again was the most amazing gift he could have asked for. He looked to Lauren’s due date like the light at the end of a long, dark tunnel. It kept him moving forward, made him even more determined to climb over every roadblock that stood in the way of his recovery. He wanted to be healthy and whole again for his new son or daughter.

From the beginning, everything about this baby had seemed like a miracle. Considering that a mere seven weeks before her conception, her father had been fighting for his life in the ICU, it was incredible that she had even come into existence. After what Lauren had gone through with her last two pregnancies, she and Nick were cautious with this one. They waited a long time to tell their family and friends, even longer to share their good news with the world. They went into every prenatal appointment with guarded optimism, afraid to get their hopes up in case something had gone wrong. But although Lauren’s pregnancy was considered to be “high risk” due to her age and previous losses, it progressed normally with no major complications. As they made it to each milestone, breathing a sigh of relief whenever they heard their baby’s heartbeat or felt her move inside Lauren’s belly, they began to let their guard down and allow themselves to look forward to their little girl’s arrival.

With the help of her midwife, Lauren had planned for another home birth, like she'd had with Odin. Neither she nor Nick wanted to spend another night in the hospital, and given how nervous he was around doctors and nurses, they had decided it would be best for them both if she delivered their daughter in the comfort of their own home. Unfortunately, it hadn't worked out the way they had planned.

At Lauren's last appointment, they had found out the baby was in the breech position. "Given your history and the increased risk of complications associated with vaginal delivery of breech babies, we'll have to do a C-section," Lauren's obstetrician had told her. "I'm sorry; I know you had your heart set on a natural childbirth, but this is the safest way to bring your little one into the world."

All Lauren and Nick really cared about was having a healthy baby, so they reluctantly agreed to the Cesarean section. "Look on the bright side," Nick had said to Lauren. "At least you won't have to go through labor again." After holding her hand through the grueling twelve hours it had taken her to deliver Arya, he was relieved that it wouldn't be like the last time. And, of course, they were both hoping for a different outcome.

Nick tried to remain calm and positive for Lauren's sake, but inside, he was a bundle of nervous energy, barely in control of his own panic. He couldn't relax until he heard the cry that meant this baby had been born alive.

"It's a girl!" the doctor announced suddenly. Nick's breath caught in his throat as he looked up, craning his neck to catch a glimpse of his daughter over the drape. He couldn't hear her, but he saw that her skin was bright pink, not dusky blue as Arya's had been.

He looked back down at Lauren to see tears trickling out of the corners of her blue eyes. "You did it, baby," he told her, as his own eyes welled with tears. "You did it."

As if on cue, the baby began to cry. It was blessed music to Nick's ears, the most beautiful noise he had ever heard. "That's her!" he exclaimed, as Lauren smiled and turned her head toward the sound. "She's alive!"

"You wanna come see her while we get her cleaned up and checked out, Dad?" called one of the nurses. "We'll bring her back in just a minute so Mom can hold her."

Nick looked uncertainly at Lauren, who gave a nod. "Go make sure she's okay," she murmured. Still, he hesitated, reluctant to leave her side. He was remembering the nightmare he'd had about her dying in childbirth. Although he had never told Lauren

about that, she seemed to understand his internal struggle. "I'll be fine, Nick - go see her," she urged him.

He swallowed hard. "Okay," he finally agreed and patted her on the head. "I'll be right back, baby." He felt bad for leaving his wife, but he was eager to get a better look at their newborn daughter.

The baby had been taken to a smaller table off to one side of the operating room, where the pediatrician was examining her while the nurse dried her off with a towel. "Is she okay?" Nick asked nervously as he approached the table.

"She's perfect," replied the pediatrician, smiling up at him. "Congratulations!"

Nick's heart felt a lot lighter as he looked down at his daughter, counting her ten tiny fingers and ten little toes as she flailed her limbs. "You made it!" he cried, not sure whether he was talking to her or to Lauren or to himself. Triumphant, he thought, *We all made it.*

Watching the doctor and nurse take such good care of his baby girl while the rest of the team tended to his wife, Nick was overcome by gratitude. "Thank you, everybody. Thank you," he kept repeating, raising his voice so the whole room could hear it. "Thank you so much." Then he turned back to his newborn, who was still crying on the table. "It's okay, baby, you're out now," he told her. "Everything's gonna be okay."

After a few minutes, they brought the baby back over and lay her on Lauren's chest so she could snuggle her as she was being sewn up. "Can you see her?" Nick asked Lauren. "She's absolutely beautiful - looks just like her mama."

Lauren nodded, tears pouring down her cheeks as she planted a tender kiss on their daughter's face.

Nick bent down and kissed his wife's forehead. "I'm so proud of you, baby," he whispered. "You did it."

"I couldn't have done it without you," she replied hoarsely, as she stroked the baby's head through the knit hat the nurse had put on her. "I love you, Nick."

"I love you both," he said back, feeling happier than he had been in a long time. "My two favorite girls..."

“Do you guys have a name picked out yet?” the nurse wanted to know before she took the baby to the nursery to be weighed, measured, and bathed.

Nick looked at Lauren, who nodded, giving him permission to announce the name they had agreed on. “Saoirse,” he said, swallowing the lump that had risen in his throat. “Saoirse Reign.”

“Saoirse?” the nurse repeated with a smile. “I like that. It’s pretty.”

“Thanks,” said Nick, smiling back. But they hadn’t picked out the name because it was pretty. They had picked it because it was powerful.

It meant “freedom.”

Hours later, as Lauren rested in her hospital room, Nick rocked in a recliner next to her bed, holding baby Saoirse against his bare chest. The skin-to-skin contact was supposed to help her bond with him, but Nick was certainly benefiting from it, too. When he cuddled her warm little body close to his heart, he felt comfortable for the first time since he and Lauren had arrived at the hospital that morning. His heart rate came down, his breathing slowed, and he was finally able to relax.

He didn’t want to ruin the moment by turning on the television, but he felt compelled to watch his captors’ sentencing hearing, hoping it would bring him the sense of closure he needed. Fatefully, it had been scheduled for the exact same day as his wife’s C-section. He kept the volume low so as not to wake Lauren as he flipped through the channels.

It wasn’t hard to find a live feed - due to the high-profile nature of the case, most of the major news and entertainment networks had provided extensive coverage of it over the past few months. Both Nick and Brian had been hounded by the media, inundated by requests for interviews. Their standard response had been to insist they couldn’t comment on an ongoing investigation or pending litigation, but time had run out on that excuse. To their relief, the trial had ended several weeks earlier with guilty verdicts for each of the four co-defendants. Once Dani, Elizabeth, Patrick, and Rob received their prison sentences, Nick hoped the media coverage would die down so he and Brian could move on with their lives and leave their nightmare behind.

As the camera panned across the courtroom, Nick clutched Saoirse tighter, knowing he was about to see his captors on the TV screen. Even now, almost a year later, the sight of their faces and the sound of their voices still made his blood run cold and his heart

beat faster. It had taken every bit of courage he possessed to sit on the stand across from the people who had terrorized him and testify against them during the trial, but both he and Brian done it, forcing themselves to relive their experience in front of a full courtroom while the rest of the world watched on TV. As the only surviving victims of “The Key West Four,” as the media had dubbed them, the two Backstreet Boys’ testimony had been critical in securing a conviction.

“Daddy helped put the bad people behind bars,” he told his daughter in a hushed voice, stroking her back. “If this hearing goes the way it should, they’ll never be able to hurt anyone again. The world will be a little bit better place for you to grow up in, baby girl.” He kissed the top of Saoirse’s head, breathing in her sweet, new baby scent.

When he glanced back up at the TV, his heart skipped a beat, for the screen had been filled by a close-up shot of Dani’s face. Her Florida tan had faded over the ten months she had spent in the Monroe County jail, and without makeup, she looked pale and haggard. Her golden highlights had grown out, leaving dark roots that went halfway down the length of her lank, dishwater blonde hair. The sparkle was gone from her brown eyes as they stared straight ahead, dull and soulless. Looking at her now, it was hard for Nick to understand how he had ever been attracted to her.

“Bitch,” he heard his wife whisper from her bed.

“Hey,” he said, turning toward her with a smile. “You’re awake.” Despite the fact that she had just had major abdominal surgery that morning, Lauren looked fresh-faced and far more beautiful than Dani had ever been - at least in Nick’s eyes. “How you feeling, baby?”

“Tired and sore,” she admitted, but she smiled back as her eyes fell upon Saoirse. “How’s our little one?”

Nick folded down the top of the blanket that covered the baby so Lauren could get a better look at her. “She’s absolutely perfect,” he replied, running his hand over her head of sleek, dark hair. “Do you wanna hold her awhile?”

Lauren shook her head. “I’ll wait until she gets hungry again. She looks pretty happy right where she is.”

Smiling down at their sleeping daughter, Nick nodded. “She does, doesn’t she?”

“How about you? How are *you* doing?” asked Lauren. She tipped her head toward the TV. “Are you sure you wanna watch this?”

He nodded again slowly. “I’m all right... and it’s not that I want to watch it. I need to.”

“I know,” said Lauren with a sigh. Despite being pregnant, she had spent most of the summer with him in Florida for the trial, braving the heat to accompany him to the courthouse day after day without complaint, never once questioning why he felt compelled to be there. She had provided Nick with much-needed moral support, sitting by his side as the case against his captors played out in front of the jury, holding his hand while the prosecutors presented evidence of the pain and suffering they had caused him and Brian. When the defense team tried to argue that mental illness was to blame for their actions, the cameras had caught Lauren glaring across the courtroom, shooting daggers at Dani and Elizabeth in particular. A gif of her death stare had since gone viral, earning her almost as much media attention as her husband. Like Nick, she couldn’t wait until it was finally over. “I’m sorry we couldn’t be there in person today,” she added.

“I’m not,” Nick replied without hesitation. “There’s nowhere I’d rather be than right here.” Holding onto Saoirse with one hand, he reached out his other hand to Lauren, and she took it. “Besides,” he said, squeezing her hand, “Brian’s there to represent us both.”

They turned their attention back to the TV, where the judge was saying, “At this time, the court will hear from any victims who wish to make a statement.” Addressing the district attorney directly, he added, “I understand you have one individual present who intends to speak?”

“I do, Your Honor,” confirmed the prosecutor with a nod. “I call upon Brian Littrell to come to the podium.”

The courtroom buzzed with excitement as the camera cut to Brian, following him as he approached the wooden podium in front of the judge’s bench. He was wearing a pair of dress pants, a button-down shirt, and a sport coat. Nick noticed he had left the top two buttons of his shirt undone to let the small, round scar on his neck show - a calculated move, no doubt. He could have concealed it by buttoning his collar and wearing a tie, but instead, Brian had made sure it was clearly visible as a reminder of how he had been victimized by the people sitting before him.

As he took his place behind the podium, Brian cleared his throat and swallowed hard, his adam’s apple bobbing in his throat, before he began to speak. “I’m making this

statement on behalf of both myself and my friend, Nick Carter,” he said into the microphone, his voice cracking. Nick could tell he was nervous.

C’mon, Frick, you got this, he thought, wishing there was a way to send positive vibes through the airwaves.

“Nick couldn’t be here today because his wife just gave birth to a healthy baby girl,” Brian continued, a flicker of a smile crossing his face. As he gained confidence, his voice grew stronger. “Thankfully, he was there to welcome his daughter into the world - a world that will be a better place without these four monsters walking free.” His icy blue eyes narrowed, fixing them with a piercing stare. “When they imprisoned us both inside that torture chamber they called a hospital, they didn’t just take two men or two members of the Backstreet Boys. They took two fathers away from their children. They took two husbands away from their wives. They took our freedom, and they almost took our lives. They also took away our trust - the trust we had in doctors... and in nurses... and in people in general.”

As Nick nodded from his chair, far away from the Florida courtroom, Brian paused behind the podium, taking a deep breath before he continued. “Personally, I’ve always had a lot of respect for medical professionals. I was taught to trust doctors and nurses at a young age. See, I was born with a congenital heart condition, so I saw a cardiologist annually from the time I was five on. When I was twenty-three, I had to have open-heart surgery to close the hole in my heart. It was a scary experience, but I knew I was in good hands. I trusted my surgical team, and the staff at the Mayo Clinic took excellent care of me. Twelve years ago, when my son Baylee was hospitalized with what turned out to be Kawasaki Disease, I again put my trust in the medical community to make my boy better. The doctors didn’t have all the answers then - it took them almost two weeks to correctly diagnose Baylee’s condition - but I never had any doubt in my mind that they were doing their best to help him.”

Here Brian paused again and looked down at the podium. Nick could tell he was starting to get emotional. *Stay strong, bro*, he tried to encourage him.

Clearing his throat, Brian went on, “So when I was lying in that hospital bed, listening to these doctors and nurses telling Nick I was in a coma, that I had a brain and spinal cord injury, I believed them.”

At that point, the broadcast switched to a split screen, showing Brian behind the podium on one half while, on the other, a second camera recorded the criminals’ reactions as they sat with the rest of their defense team on the opposite side of the courtroom.

“Even when Dr. Henault here was cutting a hole in my throat,” Brian continued, rubbing the round scar on his neck as he spoke, “and I could feel everything, I just assumed he had made a mistake with the anesthesia, that it wasn’t working. It never even occurred to me - not then, at least - that a doctor would put his patient through that kind of pain on purpose.” Brian’s blue eyes bore into Rob like a pair of laser beams, but Rob stared determinedly down at the table in front of him, refusing to meet them. “In my experience, doctors and nurses were good, trustworthy people. I had no reason to doubt them.”

Nick nodded again, his eyes on Dani. He wanted to see her squirm, but she was sitting as still as a statue beside her husband, her head bowed as if she were deep in thought or possibly prayer. *Probably praying she gets off easy*, he thought with disgust.

Brian glanced down at the piece of paper he had perched on the podium in front of him. “Nick grew up differently than I did. His parents didn’t trust doctors. He tells this story about one time when he cut his knee open as a kid, and instead of taking him to the hospital for stitches, his dad just sewed it up himself - Nick has the scar to prove it.”

Nick smiled ruefully, remembering his father. A lump rose in his throat as he ran his hand over Saoirse’s back and held her a little tighter. He liked to think that, in a different realm, his dad was doing the same with Arya.

“I don’t think he’d ever spent a night in the hospital before all this happened, at least not since he was born,” Brian was saying. “Unlike me, he never had any health problems until he was an adult. Then, when he started having problems, it took him a long time to work up the courage to go see a doctor.”

Nick swallowed hard as he thought back to all those nights he had lain awake on his tour bus, hyper-aware of his own heartbeat thumping heavily in his chest. He had known there was something wrong, but he’d been afraid to find out what it was.

“When he finally did, that doctor referred him to another doctor, a cardiologist, who diagnosed him with cardiomyopathy. And despite how hard Nick worked to get healthy again, *this* doctor - *this* cardiologist - convinced him that his heart was failing.” Brian glared at Elizabeth, who sat stone-faced, staring straight ahead. “And Nick believed her. Why wouldn’t he? After all, doctors are among the most respected professionals in our society. We depend on them to help us stay healthy and to heal us when we’re sick. Even when they can’t cure us, we count on them to keep us comfortable. We expect them to help. At the very least, we expect them to follow the Hippocratic Oath they took when they became doctors and do no harm.”

“Preach it, Brian!” Lauren cheered from her bed, watching with a look of admiration on her face.

On the TV screen, Brian’s eyes flashed with a steely glint of fury. “But these doctors *did* harm. They harmed our bodies, and they harmed our souls,” he said, putting his hand over his heart. “Nick and I both have physical scars from what they did to us-”

Nick glanced down at the small mark beneath his collarbone, all that remained of the ICD that had once been implanted there, and he pictured the much larger, raised, pink line upon which Saoirse lay. His scars had healed well over the past ten months, but they would always be a part of him, visible reminders of the pain he had suffered and the trauma he had survived.

“-but those are nothing compared to our emotional scars, the ones we wear on the inside. Those scars will never fully fade. They’ll stay with us forever. Because of these four monsters, we’ll have a much harder time trusting medical professionals. We’ll always wonder, *What’s their ulterior motive? What are they trying to get out of this? What are they trying to take from us?*”

Brian wasn’t exaggerating. In spite of how wonderful the staff working in the maternity ward had been and how well they had treated his family, Nick still felt a twinge of anxiety every time one of them walked in to check on his wife or baby. He had refused to let them take Saoirse back to the nursery, insisting that she remain in the room with Lauren and him at all times. He knew he was being overprotective and paranoid, but he didn’t want to risk something bad happening to his little girl. He had already lost one daughter. He couldn’t lose another.

“The only thing that will make Nick and me breathe a little easier is knowing these monsters are behind bars, that they’ll never hurt anyone else the way they hurt us. So I’m asking you,” said Brian, now looking back at the judge with tears in his eyes. “No, I’m *begging* you to please give them the maximum sentence, punish them to the full extent of the law, and prevent them doing any more harm. Thank you, Your Honor.”

When he walked away from the podium, Lauren turned to look at Nick. “Wow,” she said softly. “That was powerful. Did your publicist write that for him, or-?”

Nick shook his head. “No. I’m pretty sure he did it himself.” He, too, was impressed with Brian’s statement. But would it work?

Before the judge handed down his sentence, he offered the four defendants an opportunity to address the court. “Your Honor, Mrs. Henault would like to speak on behalf of Mr. Gravel, Dr. Gravel, Dr. Henault, and herself,” said the lead defense lawyer.

The cameraman came in for another close-up of Dani as she stood up in her shapeless orange jumpsuit. She was shaking like a leaf, her hands trembling as they clutched the piece of paper on which she had prepared her statement. She cleared her throat, then started to speak.

“Good afternoon, Your Honor. On behalf of my husband Rob, my friend and former colleague Elizabeth, and her brother Patrick, I want to say we are deeply sorry for what we have done.”

“They don’t look sorry to me,” said Lauren, rolling her eyes. Nick nodded in agreement. Next to Dani, Elizabeth sat with her arms folded over the front of her matching orange jumpsuit and the same smug expression she had worn on her face the entire time Brian was talking. Patrick and Rob sat at either end, still staring down at the table. Dani was the only one to show any emotion.

“It may be hard to believe, but we’re not bad people,” she insisted. “At one point or another, we all dedicated our lives to taking care of other people, dead or alive. Rob and Elizabeth became doctors so they could heal those who were sick or hurt. Patrick helped his father tend to people who had passed away, as well as the loved ones they left behind. And I pursued a career in nursing, providing critical care to people who needed me. I loved being a nurse, Your Honor, and I was good at it. My patients appreciated me. When they were afraid or in pain, I put them at ease. When they were dying, I helped them transition into the next world with comfort and dignity.”

Nick shook his head in disgust, remembering the woman who had needlessly died in the bed next to his. He now knew her name: Stephanie Gale. While Patrick had been found guilty of abusing her dead body due to the discovery of his semen inside her during the post-mortem examination, there had been no way to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Dani or one of the others had murdered her. By embalming her body, Patrick had ensured that all traces of toxins in her system were washed down the drain, which left behind only circumstantial evidence - not enough to secure a conviction.

“I never meant to hurt or kill anyone,” Dani continued, her forehead creasing as she arranged her face into a look of contrition. “After I lost my last nursing job, I felt like my life was meaningless. I just wanted to have a purpose again. I wasn’t planning on kidnapping anyone, but when Nick Carter walked into the bar that night, I saw a perfect opportunity to fulfill my need to be needed... and I took it. I didn’t intend to do any

lasting harm to him; I just wanted to get closer to this guy I'd been a fan of for so long. I wanted him to depend on me. I wanted to become not just his caretaker, but also his friend. But I went too far. The inner demons I've been dealing with for a long time took over and compelled me to do things I now regret. What began as harmless fun turned into a much more dangerous game. I acknowledge that my actions almost cost Nick his life, and I apologize for that."

"Yeah, you sound real sincere, evil *bitch!*" spat Lauren, struggling to sit up straighter in bed.

"You need some help, babe?" Nick offered, reaching out to her.

Lauren waved his hand away. "Nah, I'm all right. Just irritated. The judge better not be buying that steaming pile of bullshit she's trying to sell. 'Harmless fun,' my ass! She just admitted she hurt you for her own sick amusement. That is so fucked up!"

Swallowing hard, Nick nodded. "I know."

"But I would like to remind the court that my actions are also the reason Nick is still alive today," Dani was now saying. "I could have left him to die. If I had, his body likely would have been cremated and never discovered. But instead, I sacrificed my own freedom to set Nick free. I brought him to safety. I called the authorities. I kept him alive until help arrived. I did those things because, at the end of the day, I cared about him, and I didn't want him to die."

"Oh yes, what a hero you were, dragging my half-dead husband down to the beach to make it look like he'd magically washed ashore," Lauren snapped back at the TV, her tone biting and sarcastic.

"You tell her, babe," Nick said with a smirk, loving his wife even more.

The camera zoomed in closer on Dani's face, capturing the tears that were glistening in her dark eyes as she continued tremulously, "I hope you will take these acts of repentance into consideration, Your Honor, as you decide my sentence today, and I respectfully and humbly ask you for leniency. I don't deserve to spend the rest of my life behind bars. I am a nurturing, compassionate person at heart, Your Honor, and there's a lot I can contribute to society. Please give me the chance to do some more good in this world to make up for my crimes," she pleaded, clasping her hands together. "And, finally, to Nick and Brian: While I know there are no words that can take away the pain I have caused you, I pray that you will find it in your hearts to forgive me someday."

Nick snorted through his nose, knowing it would take him a long time to reach a place of forgiveness.

“Thank you, Your Honor. That’s all.”

When Dani sat back down, Lauren shook her head. “So much for speaking on behalf of all of them,” she muttered. “She barely even mentioned the other three; that was all about her. What a self-centered cunt. If he doesn’t give her a life sentence, I’m gonna lose my shit.”

In spite of the anxiety Nick felt watching the hearing, he couldn’t help but laugh. “It’ll be okay, babe,” he assured his wife. “I don’t think any of them are gonna get off easy.”

Sure enough, when the judge handed down his sentences, Nick was not disappointed.

Rob, who had successfully fled to the Bahamas only to be caught coming back for his unfaithful wife, had been convicted of two counts of aiding and abetting a kidnapping, false imprisonment, and practicing medicine without a license. He now faced forty years behind bars - the maximum prison sentence for his particular crimes, but still the shortest of the four.

Patrick was sentenced to fifty years in prison to pay for his crimes, which included kidnapping, false imprisonment, and abuse of a dead human body. If he lived long enough to serve the entire sentence, he would be ninety by the time he was released.

To both Nick and Brian’s relief, Elizabeth was given a life sentence for attempted murder. Yet even as the judge condemned the so-called “Queen of Hearts” to spend the rest of her years behind bars, her face betrayed no emotion. She shed no tears and showed no signs of remorse, remaining stoic until the bitter end.

Finally, it was Dani’s turn to hear her fate. As she stood before the judge, he stared down at her from his bench and said, “Mrs. Henault, I have been doing this job for a long time. In my career, I’ve presided over more criminal cases than I can count, and I’ve just about heard it all. Nothing much fazes me anymore. But every once in awhile, a case comes along that manages to shock me. Congratulations - yours is one of those cases.”

“Ooh, baby, he’s gonna let her have it,” said Lauren gleefully, leaning forward with a look of anticipation, her eyes fixed upon the television.

“I am, quite honestly, shocked and appalled that a nurse, someone who, according to your definition, dedicated her life to taking care of people, could be so callous and cruel,” the judge continued, frowning at Dani over the top of his wire frame glasses. “By your own admission, you used your medical expertise to torture Mr. Carter for ‘fun’ and entertainment, never once considering his feelings. A simple apology is not enough to make up for the physical and emotional trauma you and your co-defendants inflicted upon him and Mr. Littrell, nor can any number of good deeds undo the damage you have done.”

“Damn straight,” muttered Nick, looking down at the scars on his chest, where his newborn daughter was still sound asleep.

“You had the gaul to call yourself a compassionate person who can make positive contributions to society. Well, guess what? I don’t believe you,” the judge said bluntly, causing Lauren to laugh. “You’re a pathological liar, Mrs. Henault. You lied in my courtroom when you told me you never intended to kidnap anyone the night you met Mr. Carter at the bar. No normal, law-abiding citizen carries around vials of drugs capable of subduing people to the point of unconsciousness. The fact that you did demonstrates premeditation. Maybe you weren’t planning on kidnapping *Nick Carter* that night, but you and your husband were obviously planning to abduct *someone*.”

Nick placed his hand flat on his chest next to Saoirse’s head, feeling his heart pound as he thought about the role fate had played in what had happened to him. Had he not gone into that particular bar on Halloween night, he probably never would have met Dani. He had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. One bad choice, one chance encounter, had changed everything.

“You’ve been found guilty of kidnapping, which carries a maximum sentence of thirty years in prison, plus false imprisonment, for which you may serve up to five more years,” the judge summarized, “but your conviction for the attempted murder of Mr. Carter trumps all the other charges. I therefore sentence you to life in prison, with the possibility of parole.”

As tears poured down Dani’s cheeks, Lauren applauded. Sitting next to her, Nick didn’t know how to feel. A part of him was relieved that it was finally over, yet another part of him knew it would never really end. Even if his captors were never granted parole, they would continue to pop up in his nightmares and creep into his waking thoughts whenever he let his guard down.

But he couldn’t keep dwelling on what had been done to him. Yes, he had almost died, but he had also been given another chance at life. He couldn’t take it for granted by

letting the past get in the way of his future. He knew he needed to put it behind him, let go of the pain, and move on with his life, not only for his own mental health, but for the sake of his family. Odin and Saoirse deserved better than a father who was haunted by his own demons.

“Hey, are you okay?” asked Lauren, her smile fading as she looked over at him. “You haven’t said anything yet.”

“I don’t really know what to say right now,” Nick admitted with a shrug, “but yeah, baby... I’m good.” He reached out his hand, and she wrapped hers around it, giving it a reassuring squeeze. Together, they watched as Dani, Elizabeth, Patrick, and Rob were escorted out of the courtroom in handcuffs. Then the camera cut to Brian, who was being hugged by Leighanne and Baylee. *I’ll call him later*, thought Nick, knowing Brian would best understand how he was feeling. But that call could wait until Saoirse woke up.

As his newborn daughter sighed in her sleep and nestled deeper into his chest, Nick glanced down and smiled. Beneath her warm weight, his heart felt whole again.

The End