

# *Between the Lines*



by Carrie

## Prologue

Pennants aren't won in the first month of the season. The true champions are found in the stretch drive. In the postseason, everything suddenly becomes bigger. The little plays that go unnoticed in the middle of May take on new significance and meaning. October is the month when heroes are made - or lost.

In baseball, it's often the little plays that win the game. The plays that don't make the highlight reels on Sports Center, the plays that are taken for granted, until they don't happen. The backbone of any good team are the players who do their job quietly, sacrificing personal glory for the sake of the team.

Some players are better at this role than others. Some prefer the spotlight. Some have the talent to make the highlight reels, but prefer to fade into the background.

The Seattle Mariners had their superstars, both on and off the field. The household names, the all-stars, the people in the spotlight who loved every minute of it. The Mariners also had their un-recognized players, those who the fans and media didn't dwell on as much, but who still went and did their job every day, making it look easy.

This is the story of one season in Seattle's sometimes spotty baseball history. When the team came into spring training, they had one game plan - the same as every other team in the major leagues. Go to the World Series. However, as the season played out, things took on a rather different focus.

Little did any of them know how this one season was going to change their lives.

## Chapter One

Statistically, the Mariners were looking good at the start of spring training. Upper management had been busy during the offseason. The big news in Seattle had come in mid January, when it was announced that the Mariners had negotiated a trade with the New York Yankees, receiving the Yankee's star rookie right fielder, Nick Carter.

Nick Carter had put together an amazing first year in the major leagues, winning the American League rookie of the year award, going to the all-star game and becoming the new hero of New York City. He was tall, he was blond, he was good-looking, and he was fairly articulate - for a baseball player. Best of all, he hit for both power and average. He looked like he was poised to become the next superstar of baseball.

Then he had been traded. If that wasn't a shock in itself, he had been traded to the Seattle Mariners, one of the second tier teams in the league. Sure, Ken Griffey Jr's career had been cemented there, but what else had the Mariners done in the last two decades? They hadn't even been to the World Series - ever.

No one was sure what had possessed the Yankees to deal their best hitter away for two pitchers and a minor league infielder. Nick's father, Bob Carter, had been a first baseman with the Yankees several years before and was now a color commentator for Yankees television broadcasts. Some said it was that the Carter family and temperamental Yankee's owner George Rubenstein didn't get along. Others claimed Nick was a problem in the clubhouse, that he didn't fit in with the rest of the team.

Whichever way you looked at it, veteran Mariner catcher Kevin Richardson wasn't especially looking forward to his new teammate. Kevin had been a Mariner for the last four years. He was the unofficial leader of the clubhouse and the official player representative. Kevin had bounced around the league enough to realize that Nick Carter was going to be trouble. How much trouble, that Kevin wasn't sure of, but trouble.

The other acquisition the Mariner front office had made in the offseason was trading for the Tampa Bay Devil Rays ace closer AJ McLean. The Devil Rays, in their customary fire sale at the first of the year, were willing to work out a reasonable deal, and now Seattle was in possession of a decent pitcher in the bullpen for the first time in almost seven years.

AJ was only 22 years old, and common sense said that his best years were still to come. He had only been in the major leagues for a year and a half, but already had an impressive reputation with opposing batters - including Kevin, who was thankful he wouldn't have to face AJ or his forkball anytime in the near future.

The bullpen in Seattle had been a running joke for the first few years, a steady stream of pitchers coming and going, usually leaving with their ERA twice of what it had been. The last two years, as the players and fans watched more and more leads slip away in the last innings, the bullpen was no longer funny. With the arrival of AJ McLean, there appeared to be light at the end of the tunnel. It would seem at times that it was a strobe light, but it was a light none the less.

On the first day of spring training, AJ had announced he thought the Mariner's bullpen was haunted, promptly whipped out a Ghostbusters T-shirt and proceeded to wear it under his uniform, even going as far as keeping a spray bottle of what he referred to as "ghost repellent" in his back pocket. The headline in the sports section of the Seattle Times the next morning read "Mariners Bullpen Haunted" with a picture of AJ

and his spray bottle. The season hadn't even started yet, and AJ was now one of the more popular players with the fans.

Pitchers and catchers reported to spring training two weeks before position players were required to report. Most position players showed up early anyway, eager for the season to get underway. The entire Mariners team was already present, slowly beginning workouts, and had been for almost two days - except for one. Nick Carter hadn't arrived in Peoria, Arizona yet. Technically, he still had another hour before he would be fined, but Kevin had already seen enough. His first impression of Nick Carter wasn't going to be good, no matter how it happened.

"Would you look at that." First baseman Scott Martin murmured from across the aisle, tipping his balding head towards the clubhouse door.

Kevin craned his head and looked. There, in all his rookie of the year glory, was Nick Carter.

"Love the clothes." Scott drawled quietly, referring to the expensive black shirt and pants Nick was wearing. Scott subscribed to the fashion school of "plaid shirt and jeans" which he would have worn to his own wedding, had his wife not put her foot down.

Nick pulled his sunglasses off and gave the clubhouse a long, slightly scornful look. His gray eyes stopped when they met Kevin's rather pointed stare. "Hey - so, can you tell me where to find Buddy?" He said with just a touch of arrogance - just enough to grate on Kevin's nerves.

"Over there." Kevin pointed slowly down the hallway at Mariners manager Buddy Williams office. "So, y'all must be Nick Carter."

Nick didn't even bother to affirm this rather obvious statement, running his hand through his carefully gelled and spiked hair instead. "Who're you?"

Kevin had the distinct impression that if Nick had been chewing gum, he would have snapped it at that moment. "Kevin Richardson."

"Yeah." Nick nodded disinterestedly, obviously not caring who Kevin was. "I think I remember playing you last year." He turned and sauntered towards Buddy's office.

"Friendly sort, ain't he?" Scott commented as the door to Buddy's office slammed shut.

"I've known him less than a minute and I already hate him." Kevin said in disgust.

## Chapter Two

This very moment, Nick hated the entire world. He hated George Rubenstein, he hated his girlfriend - well, now she was his ex-girlfriend - he hated the Yankees, he hated the stewardess on his plane flight, he hated Arizona, he hated that dark haired catcher who had greeted him when he came in the clubhouse door, and most of all, he hated the Seattle Mariners.

“Hello, Nick!”

Nick hated the smiling man in front of him, whoever he might be.

“Did y’all just fly in today?” He didn’t stop smiling either.

“Yeah.” Nick stared into his locker at his blue and silver uniform. No pinstripes for him this year.

“I don’t think we’ve ever met.” The smiling man held out his hand. “I’m Brian Littrell.”

“Hey.” Nick shrugged, purposely not shaking his hand to make a point. He knew who Brian was. In fact, he knew who the entire team was, just from playing them last year. Brian was the Mariner’s second baseman. He was a switch-hitter, and usually a threat to steal. He hadn’t hit a home run in five years.

“Excuse me.” AJ McLean shoved his way past Brian and stared at Nick over his round sunglasses. He whipped a small spray bottle from his pocket and carefully squirted the liquid in the bottle onto the front of Nick’s shirt.

“Hey, man!” Nick yelled, yanking his shirt away from his chest and staring down at it. “What are you trying to do?” Nick knew who AJ was too. AJ McLean wasn’t someone you forgot easily. He wasn’t someone you got a hit off of easily either.

“AJ.” Brian shook his head. “He’s not even a pitcher.”

“Oh.” AJ stopped, his eyes darting from Brian to Nick and back again. “Brian, you know what? You’re right! That is Nick Carter.” He said Nick’s name with just a touch of reverence, then reached over and rubbed at Nick’s shirt. “Sorry about that. You don’t need ghost repellent now, do you?” He wiped his hands on the side of his pants and darted back down the clubhouse aisle, no doubt looking for another victim.

“What was that?” Nick rubbed at his shirt again. It seemed like it was just water.

“AJ.” Brian shrugged. “Get used to him.”

“CUT IT OUT!” Kevin hollered from the other end of the aisle. “IF YOU SQUIRT ME WITH THAT BOTTLE ONE MORE TIME...”

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Third baseman Howie Dorough took in a deep breath, surveying the crowds filing into the stadium and milling around on the grassy knoll beyond the outfield. “You know what I love about spring training?” Howie asked, not directing the question at a certain person, just whoever happened to be listening.

“What?” Kevin was looking too, but not at the fans. Kevin had a tendency to stand and stare at the sky. His teammates attributed this to his left-handedness.

“The bikinis.” Howie said solemnly.

Kevin’s head swiveled downward to focus on the curly-haired infielder. “What?”

“Look - they’re everywhere.” Howie waved his arm, narrowly missing smacking Nick in the chest as he passed by, giving Howie a disgusted glance.

“Yep, they are.” Kevin scanned the crowd. “You’re right, Howie.”

“I think I’ll go flirt.” Howie started towards the foul line. “I mean... sign autographs!”

Kevin shook his head and pulled his mask down over his face. You had to give Howie credit for trying.

On every team, there’s always one player the fans love to hate. When things start to go wrong in August and the team starts to lose, the fans turn to that one player and blame him. Howie, unfortunately, was that player.

True, the fans had their reasons to hate Howie. Last season, he had managed to astonish not only his teammates and coaches, but baseball fans everywhere, when he single-handedly committed as many errors at third base as the entire Red Sox team committed in the entire season. Howie had even been a joke on The Tonight Show at the close of last season.

To hear Howie tell it, he didn’t mind, but Kevin knew for a fact that Howie had spent the offseason in Puerto Rico, playing winter ball, in an attempt to get the lead out of his glove. Howie wasn’t stupid - he knew if he didn’t field better, he wouldn’t be fielding at all.

“Hey.” AJ jogged up next to Kevin, wearing his warm-up jacket, hands shoved in the pockets.

“What are you wearing that for?” Kevin said in curiosity. “It’s ninety degrees out.” Kevin wasn’t the kind of person who warmed up to new teammates quickly, but he couldn’t help liking AJ. He might be weird, but Kevin had played with weirder. Besides, AJ was the sole hope for the relief pitching staff this year.

“It’s a dry heat.” AJ said solemnly. “I’m used to humidity. I’m cold.”

“You don’t have a water gun or something hidden under it?” Kevin said suspiciously.

AJ’s eyes widened behind his wire-rimmed sunglasses. “Hey - that’s a pretty good idea!” He flagged Nick down as the blond rookie wandered past again. “Nick! You’re from Tampa... c’mere a minute.”

Nick scowled. “How did you know that?”

AJ shrugged. “You’re Bob Carter’s kid.”

“So?” Nick said defensively.

“Do you think this is a dry heat?” AJ said in all seriousness.

Nick’s face went blank, then he blinked once. “Huh?”

“Compared to Florida?”

“Oh. I suppose.” Nick shrugged and continued back to the clubhouse, making it perfectly clear he wasn’t going to stand and make small talk with anyone.

“He’s Bob Carter’s kid?” Kevin said in amazement. Bob Carter had been the star first baseman for the New York Yankees almost a decade before. Kevin could remember watching him on TV when he was playing high school ball.

“Duh.” AJ stared at Kevin like he was from another planet. “WHERE have you been?”

“Here.”

“Frightening.”

### Chapter Three

“Did you know he was Bob Carter’s kid?” Kevin stabbed his fork in the air with each syllable of the Yankee first baseman’s name, ignoring the salad in front of him. At first, Kevin had disliked Nick because of his attitude, but now it was about to become deeper than that.

“Yes.” Brian said calmly, arranging his french fries on his plate.

“Why does everyone know that except me?” Kevin said in confusion. No one else seemed to be surprised with this news and it wasn’t like Kevin wasn’t aware of the goings on in baseball. How had he missed the arrival of Bob Carter’s kid in the big leagues?

“Well...” Brian inspected the slices of potato, and finally picked one. “I think everyone else is pretty aware that the reason Nick was traded over here is that Nick and Bob were having some... professional difficulties and Rubenstein was fed up with it. So he got rid of the problem.”

“Yeah?” Kevin didn’t care about that. “Bri, do you know what this means?”

“Rubenstein is a jerk.” Brian smiled angelically around his french fry. “He traded off the best hitter his team had in five years because his dad had been with the organization for twenty years.”

“Think about it, Brian.” Kevin snapped. “That kid never had to work for anything he’s got right now. He got his draft position because of his Dad, he was a Yankee because of his Dad...”

“And now he’s not a Yankee because of his Dad.” Brian finished. “Kevin. He won Rookie of the Year. It’s not like he’s can’t play. Give the kid a chance.”

“You’re missing the point here.” Kevin leaned forward, his elbow narrowly missing his salad plate. “It’s his attitude, Bri.”

“Well...” Brian selected another french fry, turning it over to make sure it was perfect, not committing to Kevin’s statement one way or the other.

“What?” Kevin smacked it out of Brian’s hand. “What are you DOING? Quit playing with your food!”

“Hey!” Brian picked it up off the table. “Now you ruined it. And that was a good one!”

“What makes a good french fry?” Kevin wondered.

Brian thought about it. “Grease, I guess.” He shrugged. “But, Kevin, to be honest, I don’t notice that much of an attitude.”

Kevin’s eyebrows rose. “Oh? Maybe because he’s nice to you? Have you ever noticed that, Brian? Everyone is nice to you.”

Kevin knew he wasn’t making a point here, he was just complaining now. He knew perfectly well the reason people were nice to Brian was he was nice to them in the first place. It was one of Brian’s more annoying personality traits, right after playing with his food, and right before his tendency to leave the volume of his radio just loud enough that you could hear the drums and nothing else.

“You’re not nice to me.” Brian smirked. “You ruined my dinner, remember?”

“Never mind.” Kevin stared back down at his salad. “I’m not going to discuss it anymore. It only serves to stress me out.”

“Kevin.” Brian said through his french fry.

“What?” Kevin glanced up. “Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

“Try being nice.”

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Nick scrunched down a little lower on the wicker couch. The sun had just finished setting and the lights surrounding the hotel patio had turned on. The fluorescent bulbs gave off the same glow as the light standards in any ballpark. Nick had spent a good part of his life under that bright blue-white light.

“Hey. Y’all waiting for someone?” Someone rested a hand on his shoulder.

Nick twisted around to see Brian. “No.” He almost hoped Brian would hang around for a while. Most of the players on the Mariners seemed nice enough, with a few exceptions, but Brian was the only one who came across as being genuinely friendly towards him.

“No date?” Brian circled around and sat down on the other side of Nick.

“Nope.” Nick didn’t bother to elaborate. To get a date would mean finding a girl, and that meant socializing. Nick didn’t feel like socializing. He felt like hating the world.

“Me either.” Brian ran his hand through his blond curly hair as a big smile spread across his face. “Nick, let’s just face it. We’re losers.”

“Speak for yourself!” Nick was mildly offended. Since when did some guy he hardly knew get to sit down and start insulting him?

“I mean, I saw Howie in the hallway.” Brian jerked his thumb back at the hotel. “He’s got a date. If Howie’s got a date, what are we doing sitting here?”

Nick shrugged. He knew what he was doing. He was still hating the entire world, and that included all single females. He intended to keep it up for a while too. However, Brian didn’t seem the type that would be very good at hating things, so Nick wasn’t even going to offer.

“Y’all don’t have a girlfriend, do you?” Brian said after a while, pausing in his methodical gum chewing.

“No.” Nick wasn’t going to elaborate on that one either, but his mouth didn’t seem to realize that. “We broke up.” What had possessed him to say that? Chelsea wasn’t something he really wanted to think about right then, much less get involved in a conversation about.

“With that singer?” Brian said incredulously. “Chelsea whats-her-name?”

Nick started getting suspicious. If Brian knew that he had been going out with Chelsea Powers, then why had he bothered to ask the question? “Powers.”

“Yeah. Chelsea Powers.” Brian nodded. “Like, everyone was so sure the two of you were going to get married. And you broke up over you getting traded?”

“How did you know that?” Nick was surprised. How could Brian possibly know why he and Chelsea had stopped seeing each other?

Brian shrugged his shoulders. “They all do. They don’t like it when you end up with another team. They don’t like it that you’re on the road three months out of the year. They don’t like it that you have to go to the ballpark every evening. The list goes on and on.”

Nick didn’t answer. The truth be told, his relationship with Chelsea had never been on the level that the media - and Chelsea - portrayed it to be. And now that he was out of the way, so to speak, Chelsea had wasted no time in calling it quits and hooking up

with someone else. She had her career and image to think of, and that had always been the most important item on her agenda anyway. Nick had known that all long, it was always there in the back of his mind, but he had chose to ignore that fact until the very end.

“Do you play golf?” Brian asked suddenly.

“In theory.” Nick was glad for the change of subject. He didn’t like sitting and thinking about his life. It never ceased to confuse him, when it wasn’t depressing him.

Brian laughed. “Okay! Y’all busy after the game tomorrow?”

Nick thought about it. He knew he wasn’t busy, he was just weighing his options. Either he could sit on the patio and hate the world some more, or he could go play golf with Brian and probably get his butt kicked. People assumed that if you were good at baseball, you would be good at golf. They were wrong and Nick was living proof of that.

“Yo, Nick.” Brian prompted.

“Sure.” Nick made his decision. Maybe he could hate the world while playing golf. Besides, it couldn’t hurt to have one friend on the team, could it?

## Chapter Four

The Mariners opened the season in Chicago, against the White Sox. As was usual, the Seattle Times ran a special section, profiling the players and speculating, what if the Mariners had a bullpen this year, and what if the Mariners made the World Series. They usually singled out one player to profile the most, and this year was no different. A large picture of Nick Carter in mid-swing graced the front of this one. Everyone in Seattle was thrilled with the idea that the Yankee's rookie of the year, by some strange chance of fate, had become their right fielder, and their clean-up hitter.

Right now, Seattle's budding new star was sitting sprawled in front of his locker, listening to manager Buddy Williams. The truth be told, he wasn't listening that much anymore, Williams had been talking for almost forty-five minutes, and Nick had pretty much tuned him out.

By the end of spring training, Nick had pretty much given up on hating the world. He did however, hate golf. Brian decided he liked playing golf with Nick after one game, when Nick accidentally managed to lose his club as it flew out of his hands like a missile.

Nick tuned back in. Buddy was glaring at him. For a moment, Nick wondered if he had missed something and was supposed to be answering a question. Then Buddy moved on, orating about the need for teamwork and working together. Nick slumped back down in his seat. That was all. Throughout the games in Arizona, things had grown more and more strained between Nick and Kevin. Nick would admit that he led Kevin on, though not to Kevin's face. He got almost as much of a kick out of antagonizing Kevin and watching his fists clench as he muttered under his breath as he had when AJ had doused the coaching staff with a Super Soaker 3000.

The clubhouse was now silent. Williams was bent over, hands on hips, glaring into the face of AJ. "McLean?"

"Yes?" AJ said meekly, folding his hands and putting his knees together primly.

"I was still talking."

"Sorry. I was just trying to help."

Nick had missed whatever AJ had said, not that it mattered. Buddy didn't appreciate interruptions in the middle of his speech.

"Well, shut your trap."

"Will do."

Williams turned back around, folding his arms over his rather ample, t-shirt covered stomach. "Now, as I was saying... what the hell WAS I saying before Sparky there interrupted me?" He glowered at AJ once again.

Nick zoned out again.

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"Can I make my speech now?" AJ wondered. Buddy had finished orating and had vanished back into his office. He was a good manager, but he wasn't known for getting up close and personal with his players. Nick kind of liked that. Townsend, the manager of the Yankees, was exactly the opposite, always involved with his players, always asking about their personal lives. Nick preferred to keep his private life private. True, he didn't have much of one, but the little he did was his.

"Speak freely." Brian waved his hand at AJ, urging him on.

“Okay... it’s almost game time, men. It’s time to go cleanse the bullpen.” AJ stood and began a rather uncanny impersonation of Buddy.

“Of what?” Backup catcher Lenny Krazelton wondered.

“Home runs, balks, wild pitches, doubles off the wall in center and pitches that just miss the plate.” AJ responded promptly, pulling his road cap out of his locker and putting it on over his orange and red mottled hair - backwards of course.

“So, you’ve named those ghosts now, huh?” Brian smirked. “Is the last one just called ‘miss the plate’ for short?”

“He’s so funny.” AJ squinted one eye and aimed the ever present squirt bottle at Brian’s head. “Just be quiet. A mere second baseman like you could never fathom the depths of a pitcher’s mind.”

“And you can say that again!” Brian agreed. Everyone laughed - except AJ.

“C’mon.” AJ started for the dugout and the bullpen, the other pitchers slowly straggling after him. “First item on the agenda, we perform a ritualistic dance.”

“What’s it called?” Steve Graves wondered.

“It doesn’t have a name. It somewhat resembles the macarena, but it isn’t. It’s actually something else.” The door banged shut as they left.

“Anyone got a camera?” Brian asked frantically. “Tell the press! Get it on Sportscenter! This is good stuff!”

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Kevin finished buttoning his gray road jersey - Seattle in blue across the front, Richardson and the number 9 on the back. Here it was. The start of another season. And he wasn’t getting any younger. Six months from now, he probably wouldn’t be able to walk, much less run the basepaths. Well, perhaps that was an exaggeration, but catching had taken it’s toll, especially on his knees. So far, thankfully, Kevin had managed to play his entire career without a serious injury. Six years before, while in Kansas City, he had pulled a hamstring. They had put him on the fifteen day disabled list and by the end of those two weeks, Kevin was stir crazy. He couldn’t stand just sitting on the bench watching. He had to be out there actually participating.

“Oops. Sorry.” Nick came dangerously close to stepping on Kevin’s foot as he walked past. He didn’t sound sorry in the slightest.

“Up yours.” Kevin returned calmly.

Nick ignored him, which pissed Kevin off even more. He knew what Buddy had said, and he intended to play by the rules, but one of these days, Nick was going to push him over the edge.

“Well, that was friendly of you.” Brian gave Kevin a big smile.

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“We go to the top of the seventh inning, the Mariners and the Sox tied 2-2 in this season opener.” The voice of the Mariners since they had formed in ‘77, Dave Niehaus, announced on the radio play by play. “First up for the Mariners, third baseman, Howie Dorough.”

Diehard Mariners fans said the games just wouldn’t be the same without Niehaus announcing them. Everyone else found it grating on the nerves to listen to him for more

than an inning at a time. He was getting older, it was getting harder for him to carefully comb his hair over his bald head, and he was starting to slip up at the microphone. No longer did he do the play by play alone for five innings while his partner did the TV broadcast. Now he had someone to trade with at all times, to correct his little slip-ups, to announce the correct batter at the plate. Charlie Chasez had been hired as the assistant announcer to Dave during all broadcasts halfway through last season.

Still, Niehaus' trademark home run calls were tradition in Seattle, and he was under contract with the Mariners for the next year. So he stayed in the announcer booth.

"The pitcher's set... the pitch to Dorough..." Niehaus' voice climbed to a feverish pitch. "That one is belted into DEEP left field, Nelson is going back towards the wall..." His voice returned back to normal. "And it's off the wall, and Dorough is at second with a double. Up for his third at-bat tonight, right fielder Nick Carter. Carter's 0-2 on the night with a strikeout." He turned to his assistant announcer, Charlie Chasez. "Charlie, he's a good-looking kid, isn't he?"

"He sure is, Dave." Charlie agreed, since he was the paid yes-man.

"Carter's in the box, slightly open stance, here's the pitch... BIG swing and a miss. He was pulling for the fences on that one." Niehaus chuckled quietly. "He's back up at the plate... and there's a single into right field, past the diving first baseman... Dorough's going to score easily on that play... the Mariners take the lead, 3-2."

## Chapter Five

Kevin flopped onto the bed in his hotel room and switched the TV on, all in the same motion. He wasn't ready to go to sleep yet, but it was either go back to his room or go with Howie and AJ. And if Howie was involved, then there would probably be a nightclub involved too. Kevin had nothing against that, he was hardly a stick in the mud, but it was better if he just stayed out of harms way.

He had been married for seven years now, and had every intention of staying that way.

Speaking of being married, Kevin rolled over and grabbed the phone. He hadn't seen his wife Karen or six year old daughter Rebecca since spring training had started. Becky was in school, so Karen and Becky were still in Seattle.

"Dahling, what's up?" Kevin asked when he heard Karen pick up the phone. He switched the TV over to ESPN and muted it.

"Oh, Kevin!" Karen said in delight, then sighed. Kevin winced. That meant something had happened. Karen was a very enthusiastic, outgoing kind of person. Unfortunately, that made her just a little accident prone.

"What?" Kevin said suspiciously.

"Honey, do you remember why you married me?" Karen started.

"What did you DO?" Kevin demanded.

"I mean, I remember why I married you, sweetie." Karen continued, ignoring his question. "You were this incredibly good-looking athlete, and I was just a secretary, and..."

"What happened?" Kevin interrupted, dead serious. She was trying to butter him up now. "Is it serious?"

"I'm just not going to tell you." Karen decided.

"Was it life threatening?" Kevin kept asking questions. Eventually she would slip up and tell him anyway, without meaning to. She always did.

"Oh no! It was just a little scrape!"

That sounded car related. Kevin relaxed a little. He had been worried for a moment that the kitchen had burned down or something serious like that. Every single road trip, he would come home to a list of everything that had gone wrong while he was away.

"So, you wrecked the car?"

"No. And it wasn't really my fault." Karen added distractedly. "I mean, you hit the button for the garage door and you expect it to OPEN, right?"

"Karen, you didn't."

"I didn't what? I didn't do anything. Everything's just fine here! So, that was a pretty good game tonight, huh?" She changed the subject.

Kevin laughed. "You're funny, you know that?" He would annoyed about the garage door if it wasn't so amusing. The same could be said for any of the other mishaps that happened to her while he was on the road. The time the upstairs bathroom toilet broke and flooded through the ceiling - well, that one hadn't been as funny. The time Karen had managed to lock herself out of the house - that one had been funny, but only because Kevin had been prepared and had a key hidden in the flower bed.

"You're going to be home in six days?"

"Uh-huh." Kevin rolled over, serious now. "I miss you."

"I hate spring training." Karen pouted.

“You wouldn’t hate it if you were down there.” Kevin yawned. Maybe he was a little more tired than he was willing to admit. It used to be that he could easily stay up until one in the morning, but no longer.

“But I’m up here, and it’s raining and it’s cold... you’d better go to bed. You sound tired.”

“I’m fine.” Kevin protested, stifling another yawn. “I haven’t talked to you in a while.”

“You can talk to me later. Go to bed.”: Karen ordered. “Okay? I love you.”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“What?” Now Karen was confused.

“Never mind.” Kevin shook his head. Karen might have been a master at rapid subject changes, but when it came to actually following one, she was completely lost. “I love you too. Say hi to Becky for me.” Kevin smiled. “And I’ll fix the garage door when I get home.”

“How did you know that?” Karen asked in shock.

“Well, in addition to being a good-looking athlete, I’m also pretty smart.”

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Nick stepped back out of the batter’s box and stalled for time, refastening his batting gloves. It probably wouldn’t make any difference. He’d still strike out. After his single in Game 1, Nick couldn’t buy a hit. And tonight, in the home opener against the Orioles, things weren’t about to change. Safeco Field was sold out, the fans into the game, even though their team was losing in the sixth inning. The retractable roof had been open at the beginning of the game, although now a light drizzle was beginning to fall, causing the Orioles to complain about the roof. The umpires would have to call time at the end of the inning and close it.

He stepped back in, swinging his bat across the plate once. All he needed was one good hit, just to get him going. The snowball effect applied to hitting, whether you were doing well, or not.

Nick swung at the pitch - and missed. He shook his head in disgust and stalked back to the dugout. The hitting coach was making notes on his clipboard. That meant Nick would be doing extra work at practice tomorrow. He might as well, it wasn’t as if there were any pressing social engagements. He hadn’t even found his house yet. The Mariners had provided a house for him, which was nice, since otherwise he’d be living in a hotel until he found an apartment.

He shoved his bat back into the rack and headed down the dugout to sit next to Brian.

“What’d y’all swing at that for?” Brian said innocently, smiling around his gum.

“The usual reasons.” Nick reasoned.

“Isn’t one of the ‘usual’ reasons because it’s a strike?” Brian wondered. “Or is that one of those National League theories?”

“Hey, in the National League, that WOULD have been a strike.” Nick protested, smiling. Looking back, Brian was probably right. It had been outside. But, hindsight was always 20-20. It didn’t change the fact that Nick was now 1 for 19.

“Nick, how about we take a look at some video tomorrow?” Sure enough, there was Jesse Hatfield, the hitting coach. He hadn’t wasted any time.

“Okay.” Nick shrugged. Nick had never needed to spend a lot of time in the video room before. He didn’t shirk his duties, but he didn’t spend any more time at them than he needed to. Some players would spend hours in the video room, studying their swing, studying opposing pitchers, or extra time at batting practice. Nick wasn’t one of those players.

Brian was. He was always one of the first to arrive at the park, and usually the last to leave. He might not have been the best player on the team, but it wasn’t for lack of trying.

“Hey, Brian?” Nick leaned back and watched as the Mariners tried to start a late inning rally. “Where’s Kirkland?”

“Other side of Lake Washington, I think.” Brian smacked his gum loudly. “Why?”

“I think I’m living there.”

“Ooooh!” Brian said in appreciation. “Nice! Um, let’s ask Kevin. He’s like one of those Expedia maps... he knows everything. KEVIN!”

Nick grabbed his ear just a little too late. Now it was ringing. Brian at close range could be painful.

“You bellowed?” Kevin wandered over, one shin guard on, the other half fastened and flapping around his knee.

“Tell us how to get to Kirkland?” Brian asked politely.

Kevin pursed his lips and thought. “Well, okay. From the parking garage, you turn right onto...”

Nick tried not to laugh out loud. He did sound like an Expedia map.

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Newsbit in The Seattle P.I. on April 8th.

*All that ghostbusting might be good for something. The Seattle bullpen has yet to give up a run. True, it’s only six games into the season, but at this time last year, the Seattle bullpen had a collective ERA of 32.56.*

*Last night, after both Arton and Graves finished up the middle innings in relief, the king of the ghostbusters himself, AJ McLean, came in to finish up the ninth inning, arriving to the strains of his signature song, “The Thong Song”. When asked why he chose Sisqo’s ode to women’s underwear, McLean responded, “I don’t know... it sounds cool on the PA system.” He thought for a while longer, then added, “Besides, it’s about women’s underwear, and it annoys the h--- out of anyone over the age of thirty five. You can’t go wrong with that.”*

*Those ghosts must be over the age of thirty-five.*

## Chapter Six

TV Review in the Seattle Times - April 8th

*The Boys of Summer are back, as you have probably noticed from the barrage of commercials flying at you from your television set. The Seattle Mariners started an ad campaign several years ago, making commercials that star the actual players. The commercials are the creation of Ned Gibson of Morris Marketing. Gibson admits to being a Mariners fan, and says he writes the spots with the personality of specific players in mind.*

*Gibson has done an excellent job with commercials in the past - who could ever forget Alex Rodriguez and Joey Cora turning the airsick bags on the plane into hand puppets? Or Jay Buhner swatting giant flies (yes, the insects, not the balls) into the outfield wall? And this year, Gibson has done it again. He's created five entirely entertaining commercials.*

*The first one expands on the story of Mariners pitcher AJ McLean and his alleged "ghostbusting" of the bullpen, featuring McLean and two of his bullpen friends, righthander Steve Graves and lefty Brad Arton, dancing and lip-synching to the Ghostbusters movie theme song. They cut to each of the pitchers on the mound, throwing balls everywhere but over the plate, and the commercial ends with McLean shaking his head and saying, "Okay, it didn't work that time. Let's do it again."*

*Catcher Kevin Richardson is featured in one, as Gibson took Richardson's reputation to be just a little detailed oriented. Richardson is shown counting the towels in the clubhouse, carefully rubbing off home plate, measuring the height of the grass in the infield, performing random locker checks in the clubhouse, and as the commercial ends, alphabetizing the video collection the players keep on the opposition. "Michener, Martin, Martinelli..."*

*Mariner announcers Dave Niehaus and Charlie Chasez give rookie of the year outfielder Nick Carter a little lesson in the culture of the Northwest, including a trip to the downtown REI, (where Carter actually did scale part of the rock climbing wall for the commercial shoot, still wearing his Mariners uniform, of course.) Niehaus also gives tips on how to multitask while stuck in traffic on I-5, how to differentiate between different kinds of salmon, and that standard Northwest staple, how to order at the drivethru windows at Seattle's Best Coffee. Carter seems awkward with the entire situation, which makes it all the more believable.*

*Scott Martin, the first baseman, is shown sneaking into the PA room and playing with the sound system, turning a deserted Safeco Field into his personal karaoke club.*

*And AJ McLean is featured again in the last one, when the Mariner Moose decides to shadow McLean. He's shown at various local landmarks, the Space Needle, Pioneer Square, on a ferry to Bremerton, etc. No matter where he goes, the Moose is always ten steps behind. McLean hams up the part perfectly, glancing back over his shoulder every few steps, staring over the top of his sunglasses as the Moose appears on the ferry dock, all the way to the end when McLean pops out from behind a pole in the Safeco Field parking garage, glances around, then disappears again.*

*Of course, the purpose of these commercials is to get people to come out to the games. And the Mariners are just as entertaining on the field as they are on TV.*

~\*~

*“And today’s Chevy Player of the Game, Kevin Richardson.” Charlie Chasez narrated as the highlights of the game flashed by on the TV screen. “3 for 4 with a home run, and this sliding catch into the dugout in the seventh, which is the Play of the Game. He also had a stolen base.” Chasez added in amusement.*

*“When was the last time that happened?” Niehaus wondered.*

*“He had two last year.” Chasez affirmed.*

*“That just about wraps it up from Safeco Field today.” Dave Niehaus announced, smiling broadly for the television camera. “The final score, Mariners 6, the Boston Red Sox, 2. Tomorrow a travel day. We’ll see you Friday from Yankee Stadium.”*

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Feature Article in the Seattle PI - April 10th

*The flight to New York was fairly quiet and uneventful, until sometime over the Midwest when a voice came over the loudspeaker. “Gentlemen, don’t be alarmed. The flaming ball of fire you see spewing from the engine on the right wing isn’t anything to worry about. The chances of us hurtling to the ground as a ball of flaming metal are quite slim. Thank you for your time.” Thirty seconds later, AJ McLean returned to his seat, smirking slightly.*

*You probably know him as the “ghostbuster”, the thin, tattooed pitcher that ran around Arizona fighting the ghosts in the Mariner bullpen with a spray bottle of water (which he also used liberally on his teammates). Regardless of whether or not there were ghosts involved, something has happened to the Mariners bullpen. They haven’t given up a run yet, and we’re into the second week of the season.*

*Manager Buddy Williams attributed this success to an attitude change more than anything else and the rest of the team seems to agree. “AJ comes into the game - when that YEEEEEEAAAHH comes over the PA system - the entire atmosphere of the game changes.” Second baseman Brian Littrell affirms, referring to the ubiquitous “Thong Song” played whenever McLean enters the game. “When he comes in, he’s totally in control, he knows exactly what he’s going to do.”*

*Kevin Richardson adds, “AJ comes in and the opposing offense loses their momentum. He’s offbeat enough to change the focus of the game, and by the time they’re back on track, he’s in charge.” Richardson thinks for a moment, then shakes his head. “And that’s a pretty scary thought.”*

*The secret to his success? McLean insists it’s not that special. “I just never take myself seriously.” Pitching coach Sam Ventrella agrees with the theory. “Pitching is mostly psychological. You can’t dwell on the last pitch you threw, on the last home run you gave up. And AJ is very good excellent at ignoring all that. He has the right personality to come in in a pressure situation and do his job.”*

*AJ will be the first to admit he’s not an overpowering pitcher. “I don’t actually have a pitch you can call my fastball. I have one that moves about funeral procession speed. I don’t go out there with the intention of blowing the ball past anyone. It’s all about outsmarting them. If you cross a hitter up, you can make them look really stupid.” He smiles happily.*

As for baseball itself, "I'm not into baseball for 'baseball'." McLean admits. "You know, when you go to Yankee Stadium and your teammate is like, 'Mickey Mantle played here!' and I'm like, 'Dude! That fan just chucked a dead rodent at my head!' Whether you like the idea or not, baseball is entertainment. I'm paid to entertain people - so that's what I do."

So how did he get started in baseball, if it wasn't something he was particularly interested in? "I was kind of an annoying kid." He shrugs. "My mom wanted me out of the house, so she signed me up for Little League. And I never really stopped playing. It was my senior year of high school in Tampa, and there was actually a major league scout there to see me... and that was when I started looking at this entire option seriously."

"I wanted to be an actor." McLean adds. "I was always really into costumes and characters and stuff."

That would probably explain the dramatic side. Major League Baseball requires players to wear a tie while traveling. AJ's wearing his tie. He's also wearing rust colored suede pants. And underneath that black silk shirt - he has thirteen tattoos. "I get bored in the offseason." He explains, enthusiastically pulling up his shirt to display the tattoo on his stomach.

That's one place where he does draw the line. "My personal life is totally separate from baseball. It's not any of my teammates business, it's not any of your business, it's not any of the fan's business. I know guys that have had their personal lives turned into a public spectacle, and I don't want that. So they stay separate. And I like it that way."

It's okay. Between fighting the ghosts and making announcements over the PA system, there's more than enough going on to keep everyone entertained. Littrell sums it up best, "Well, let's put it this way... when he's around, it's never boring!"

~\*~

Sidebar included with article

Name: Alexander James McLean

Number: 21

Position: Pitcher

Throws: Right

Bats: "Only when I have to."

Favorite -

Cereal: Fruit Loops

Cartoon Character: "Wile E. Coyote. I relate to the anvils and stuff."

School Subject: Drama

What CD is in your car? "Aw man. It's not cool or anything. It's like, Whitney Houston or something."

Costco or Nordstrom: "Huh? What's Costco?" (After having the options explained to him.) "Oh! Nordstrom! Why would I want to buy potato chips in bulk?"

*Check or Credit Card: "Credit, man!"*

*Arco or Texaco: "Um... does it matter? Which one's better?"*

## Chapter Seven

“And that pitch is hit deep into right field, Carter’s going back towards the wall... it’s off the wall, and it bounces right past him! Both runners are going to score!” Niehaus’ voice reached the takeoff point again as the play on the field escalated. “Center fielder Shingo Kinomoto is backing him on the play, he has the ball back into Littrell, holding Nelson at second. The Yankees now lead 7-3 with one out in the fifth.”

“That’s a single and RBI for Nelson, and an error on Carter.” Charlie interrupted.

“That’s got to be hard on him, coming back to New York and missing a routine play like that.” Niehaus began, ready to dramatize the error until something else exciting happened.

~\*~

Howie dropped onto the stool in front of his locker in the Yankee Stadium visiting clubhouse. That hadn’t been a good game. Losing was never good, but losing to the Yankees was always worse, and losing 14-3 was worst of all. It had been a very long game. The few reporters that had dared venture into the clubhouse for postgame interviews had dispersed quickly, as had most of the team. No one was particularly interested in talking.

Ever since the season started, almost two weeks ago, the Mariners had been playing poorly. Their record was only 5-8, but two of those wins were solely the credit of AJ McLean, who had saved them both with some incredible pitching and, Howie suspected, nerves of steel. To come in during the bottom of the ninth, bases loaded, no outs and the winning run on second base, with Kevin glaring at you from the pitchers mound and actually save the game was enough to earn respect in Howie’s book.

“Fourteen to THREE!” Kevin hollered.

Let the yelling begin. Howie busied himself with his shoes. For once in his life, he wasn’t the one being yelled at. Howie was responsible for the three runs the Mariners had scored, hitting a three run home run in the second inning. Things hadn’t fallen apart until the fifth inning, when Nick had misplayed a fly ball in right, resulting in the Yankees sending twelve men to the plate that inning before the Mariners managed to stop the bleeding.

“Kevin, stop.” Brian said quietly. “Just cut it out.”

“No.” Kevin spun around and glared at his cousin. “No, I will not cut it out! That was disgusting! I think there were minor league teams that played better than us tonight!”

Left-handed setup man Brad Arton raised his hand, ready to speak. “You’re right. I played my Triple A ball with Atlanta... they’re pretty good.”

Howie almost laughed out loud. AJ did, although he quickly stifled it.

“Shut up.” Kevin wrinkled his nose at the pitcher.

“It’s one game.” Brian didn’t back down. “It’s only April, Kevin. Calm down.”

Kevin ignored Brian’s request, turning to Nick instead. “That was a nice move you pulled in the fifth, Nicky.”

Nick didn’t even look up from his locker.

“Back off, Kevin.” Brian warned.

“Just shut up!” Kevin snapped, kicking one of his shoes in Brian’s direction. Brian raised one eyebrow.

Howie decided it was almost as entertaining to watch AJ observe the escalating argument than to watch the argument itself. AJ was watching with all the enthusiasm one would have following a tennis match. His head swerved from Kevin to Brian to Kevin and back again, his shirt half buttoned, forgotten in the excitement.

“Thanks to that so called ‘play’ they scored seven runs, Nick. SEVEN.” Kevin was taunting him now.

Howie was pretty sure Nick was aware of what had happened that inning. Howie had been in the place many times before. He did feel sorry for Nick, but at the same time, was thankful that finally, it wasn’t his fault they lost. Maybe his luck was finally changing.

Nick turned around slowly and stared Kevin right in the face. Much to Howie’s surprise, Nick didn’t appear angry, or even upset. Then again, Nick was hard to read.

“Well?” Kevin asked, the disdain in his voice evident.

“You want to blame tonight’s game on me, go ahead.” Nick voice was so quiet Howie could barely hear. “I don’t care.” Nick turned his back to Kevin again.

“Well, I DO care!” Steam was about to start pouring from Kevin’s ears. “Would you mind turnin’ around! I’m trying to talk to you!”

Nick paused just a hair too long before he turned and faced Kevin. Kevin snapped.

Howie was certain he saw Brian roll his eyes as Kevin swung at Nick. The punch glanced off Nick’s shoulder and AJ shook his head.

“Figures,” He mumbled. “He can’t throw to second base in a straight line, why should he be able to hit either?”

“Cut it out!” Brian hollered, as Nick swung back at Kevin and the two of them ending up wrestling on the clubhouse floor. “Nick! Kevin!” Brian hovered on the sidelines, not exactly sure how he was supposed to break this one up, seeing as how they were both quite a bit bigger than he was.

AJ took a swig from his water bottle and continued to watch with childish delight.

Howie sighed and moved in to help break it up. He and Brian grabbed Nick at the same time Scott Martin dragged Kevin away, his arms waving, still trying to get in one last swing at Nick. Nick backed off quietly, but Howie could feel him shaking.

“What the Sam Hill is going on out here!” Buddy Williams stormed out of his office. “I’ve never managed such a bunch of idiots in my entire life!” He stopped when he saw the two being restrained. “You know, I don’t even care. Take it somewhere else, you two. I mean it.” And with those words of managerial advice, Williams vanished back into his office.

There was silence for almost seven seconds, before it was broken by none other than AJ McLean. “Gentlemen, I give you our leader.”

“Let go of me.” Kevin shook Scott off his arms and stalked off down the tunnel.

“You okay?” Brian asked Nick quietly.

“Yeah.” Nick pulled his coat from his locker and started for the clubhouse door.

“Hang on a minute....” Brian started.

“I’ve got stuff to do!” Nick called as he disappeared down the tunnel.

“Day-um.” AJ shook his head. “That was impressive.”

“Well, you were no help.” Brian raised one eyebrow, not really mad at AJ.

“Hey.” AJ finished tucking his shirt in. “I don’t get involved.”

“Going to be a fun year.” Howie agreed with AJ’s first comment.

## Chapter Eight

Kevin jabbed his finger at the elevator button again. He knew it wouldn't make the elevator come any faster, but it gave him something to do while he waited. The doors finally opened.

"Brian?" Kevin was surprised to see his cousin already in the elevator.

Brian pursed his lips at Kevin skeptically and folded his arms across his chest.

"Oh, don't even start with me." Kevin pressed the first floor.

"I'm not."

Kevin waited for a moment, confused when that was all Brian said. He had been expecting a lecture. "What? No long complicated story that has some kind of moral behind it? No blatant 'Kevin, you were wrong'? No request for an apology? Not even any questions?"

The elevator stopped on the seventh floor.

"Kevin, I give up." Brian started out of the elevator, pausing and holding the door back with one arm. "I've got other stuff to deal with. My head hurts. I'm tired. I can't sit and fix your life anymore." He added, letting go of the door.

"Why?" Kevin mouthed mockingly at the closed door. "Too busy fixing Nick's life now?"

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Nick leaned his forehead against the glass of his hotel room window. When he had said he wanted a trade, why hadn't he said the National League, so he wouldn't ever have to come back to Yankee Stadium?

He turned back into the suite the Mariners provided for him, as stipulated in the contract his father's agent had procured. Why had he wanted a trade in the first place?

It had all started last September, when Nick, in a fit of mild rebellion - as much as he ever bothered to exert - had refused to participate in a father-son interview with his father on television. Yankee Owner George Rubenstein had thrown a fit and Nick had been pleased with the attention it created. Negative attention was still attention. During the offseason, the same idea had been raised again, Nick had again vetoed the idea, and Rubenstein almost had a brain aneurysm. He told Nick to either do the interview or leave the organization, and Nick, still pissed off, had chose to leave.

Now he wished he hadn't. If he had just gone along with their plans, both his parents and the Yankees, like he had been doing for the last fifteen years, he'd still be a Yankee, he'd still have some friends, he'd certainly have more fans than he had now, and best of all, he wouldn't be in the same clubhouse as Kevin Richardson.

Nick had been a "Yankee" for almost as long as he could remember. His dad had started his major league career before Nick had been born, and Nick had grown up in New York and Tampa, the spring training home of the Yankees, grown up in and around Yankee Stadium, grown up with baseball. Speaking strictly in terms of the game, Nick was good, and he knew it. Speaking in terms of the rest of his life, Nick was falling apart - and he knew that too.

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“You’re not old enough to drink.” Kevin said in somewhat slogged indignation, leaning heavily on the small table in the bar.

“I am too.” AJ shook his head in disgust. AJ wasn’t drinking, it was the principle of the situation. If he had FELT like drinking, he could have. He wasn’t going to let Kevin tell him what to do. You had to watch those catchers, once they got to tell you what to do on the field, there was no stopping them. They’d try to run the rest of your life as well. AJ was onto their little game.

“Wow, really?” Kevin smiled, happy for AJ. “That’s great.”

“This is where I begin to wonder if being seen in public with you is going to cause me embarrassment.” AJ glanced over his shoulder at the other occupants of the bar, who thankfully, weren’t paying any attention - yet. “I think you need to pay up and clear out, okay?”

“No.” Kevin shook his head and pulled his wallet from his pocket. “We’ll stay a little longer.”

“Then why are you paying?”

“See?” Kevin leaned over and pointed to the picture in his wallet, momentarily distracted.

“Yes.” AJ studied the picture for a moment. “She’s cute.” He added finally, for lack of anything else to say. He was assuming the little blond girl was Kevin’s daughter, although they looked nothing alike. She had frizzy ringlets and big blue eyes, behind little wirerimmed glasses.

“Yep.” Kevin stared down at his empty glass. “One more.”

“No.” AJ pulled the glass to the other side of the table. “No more. How old is she?”

“Becky?” Kevin hiccuped. “Six,” He stated, holding up one finger. He moved his finger down until it was pointing at the picture again. “You know, she doesn’t really look like me.”

“Oh great.” AJ propped his forehead on his hand. Kevin was now completely smashed. He raised his head again. “Actually, I did notice that. She must look like her mother, right?”

“Yep.” Kevin nodded emphatically. “Her mother is the most beautiful woman in the entire world.” He stared down at the table, his inebriated mind fascinated with something, probably the grain in the wood.

“How long have you been married?” AJ wondered briefly how much interesting information he could extract from Kevin’s brain before he passed out on the floor. Kevin had either been doing some serious drinking, or he couldn’t hold his liquor at all.

“Too long.” Kevin said slowly.

AJ chuckled. “Oh yeah?”

“No.” Kevin propped his elbows and leaned across the table. “I’ve been married almost seven years.” He whispered loudly.

“I see.” AJ leaned back in his chair, vowing never to go into a bar after a loss again. It wasn’t worth it.

“We met when I was playing in Kansas City.” Kevin gave up on sitting up and slumped down to the table, propping his chin on his folded arms.

Then again, maybe AJ would have a drink. Or two or three. It sounded like he was about to hear Kevin’s life story.

Nick had been expecting the boos when he came up to bat, when he went out to right field, when he moved in the dugout - that was standard for Yankee Stadium. Once you weren't on their side, you were hated, no matter what you had done for them before. Nick just wished he had played a little better. Ideally, he wanted to come back to New York and rub it in everyone's face that he could survive without them.

Maybe he couldn't. Nick unzipped the top of his bag. He was on his own now and that was an incredibly depressing thought. All he wanted to do was go to bed, stick his head under his pillow and preferably never wake up. He fished through the disorganization in his bag, finally emerging with an orange bottle. He shook the bottle once, then stopped, eyeing it thoughtfully. It was almost three quarters full.

## Chapter Nine

Nick had been staring down at the bottle of pills for almost twenty minutes when someone rapped sharply on his door. Nick jumped in surprise, his heart pounding. That was when he knew he wasn't going to do it.

"You don't even have enough nerve to kill yourself." Nick mumbled in disgust, running his hand through his hair and opening the door. "Brian?" Brian was the last person he would have been expecting to be standing outside his door. He would have expected Kevin to show up before Brian. True, if Kevin had, it would be to finish what he had started in the clubhouse earlier... but you never knew - Kevin might decide to try something like that.

"Y'all busy?" Brian asked, leaning to look in the room.

"Uh, no." Nick thought that was a rather dumb question. Of course he wasn't busy. He'd been staring at a little orange bottle for the last half an hour, one could hardly call that busy.

"I thought I heard voices." Brian said in way of explanation.

"Oh. I was talking to myself." Nick shrugged. "Come on in."

"That's a sign of insanity, you know." Brian stepped into the suite, his head craning in amazement. "Wow! This is cool." He stuck his head in the bathroom door. "I think that's about as big as my entire room. Y'all want to trade?" He added with an impish smile.

Nick shrugged. "The life comes with it. Package deal."

"No thanks." Brian had vanished into the bedroom now. Nick could hear him opening and closing doors.

"Yeah, that's how my day's going." Nick flopped into one of the leather chairs in the main room.

"Huh?" Brian appeared again, stopping to look out the window.

Nick winced. Brian had exceptionally good hearing. "I couldn't get rid of my life if I tried."

"I didn't mean I didn't want your life." Brian shrugged. "I just meant I kinda like mine." He took a flying leap into one of the other chairs, sliding into it as if he was sliding into third base, one leg tucked under him, the other extended in front of him. "What's so bad about your life?"

Brian had an annoying tendency to ask as many questions as a six year old. So far, he had quizzed Nick on why he was incapable of hitting a golf ball; why Nick didn't like getting up before ten in the morning; whether Nick liked BMW's or Mercedes better - not that it mattered, as Brian drove a rather weathered looking Civic; did Nick bother to separate his whites when he did his laundry - Brian was properly shocked when Nick said he did; and hundreds of other stupid, pointless little questions that Nick had never even thought of before and never intended to think about again. Half the time Brian didn't even bother to think up a question, he just followed a random statement up with "why?"

Nick scowled down at his hands. What was wrong with his life? "Name anything."

"Your multi-million dollar contract." Brian said promptly.

Nick didn't answer. Brian just didn't get it.

"Aw, c'mon, Nick." Brian said quietly, shifting around until he was sitting in the chair as people were intended to sit in chairs. "It was one game."

“It’s not the game!” Nick said in frustration. He could care less about the game. “It’s not the stupid game... I don’t care about that! It’s...” He broke off and stared down at the chair arm, following the print of the leather, wishing Brian would stop staring at him like that. This was the closest Nick had come to crying in at least three years. He must be even more messed up than he realized.

“It’s what?” Brian was sitting on the edge of his chair, elbows propped on his knees, still gazing intently at Nick.

“I don’t know... everything else.” Nick mumbled, swallowing hard. He had never lost it in front of anyone, and he wasn’t going to start now, no matter how nice Brian was being to him.

“By that, you mean Kevin?” Brian deduced.

“No. I mean, he doesn’t help matters any, but it goes... way, way beyond that.” Nick hoped to God that this wasn’t the time Brian decided to ask why. He had no idea why. It was one ordeal to live your life, it was another to try and understand it.

“If it makes you feel any better, he hated me for sixteen years.” Brian offered.

Nick stared blankly at Brian, confused by the rapid change of subject. “What?”

“He’d try to beat the crap out of me every single time my mother wasn’t looking.” Brian leaned back and laced his fingers together behind his head.

“Kevin did?” Nick was officially out of the loop. He had no idea what Brian was talking about.

“Yeah!” Brian stopped, holding one finger up in the air. “Wait... did y’all know he’s my cousin?”

“No.” Nick said slowly. That would explain a few things.

“Right.” Brian nodded. “Must have forgot to mention that detail. Anyway... he’d throw sticks in front of my Big Wheel when I wasn’t paying attention... and you know those little Hot Wheel cars? He’d pretend he was Godzilla and smash up the tracks.” Brian paused to think. “You know... I think he might have tried to drown me once, but I could never get substantial proof on that one. It might have really been an accident.”

Nick couldn’t help but laugh. The idea of Kevin stomping on Hot Wheels was entirely too funny.

“Course, I was no angel either.” Brian added. “I caught his hair on fire once. On purpose. A week before the junior high Christmas dance. He chased me with a bat. No wait, that might have been something else... the fire might have been a crowbar. I can’t remember.” He shrugged, palms turned upwards.

“Did he catch you?” Nick asked curiously.

Brian’s eyes widened. “No! I had thirty seven stolen bases last year! And I ask you, how many did Kevin have?”

“Um... I’d know.” What did Brian think he was - a statistician? “I’m guessing like, three or something.”

“My point exactly.”

“So...” Nick thought about what he had just been told. “The point of all this, is if Kevin ever decides to chase me with a bat, I can outrun him? Because last year - I had seven stolen bases.”

Brian snickered. “Well, yeah, but that wasn’t my point.” His face went blank for a minute. “I don’t remember having one. I guess I was just talking to feel the breeze on my teeth.”

Nick smiled. That comment almost had a Casey Stengel-esque quality to it.

“On the other hand,” Brian continued, as if there had never been a gap in his story. “Kevin’s very loyal to those that he harasses. We were swimming one summer, and this kid was threatening to throw me off the end of the dock - mind you, he was in fifth grade, and I was in seventh, so this was kind of embarrassing for me - but Kevin marched over and lit into him.”

“With a crowbar?”

“No. Left to the jaw, I believe.” Brian popped himself in the chin, demonstrating. “Then HE turned around and pushed me into the water.” Brian checked his watch. “Oh, look at that. It’s already 10:30, which allowing for the time difference is... 1:30 or something. I’m going to bed.”

“Did that part have a point to it?” Nick wondered. Brian’s long, rambling stories eventually got around to what he had intended to say in the first place. Sometimes you just had to hear the story of his first year in AA ball first. Nick still wasn’t seeing a point to this one.

“Y’all think about it.” Brian stood up, stretched, and headed for the door. “G’night, Nick. Get some sleep, tomorrow we have to kick some Yankee butt.”

## Chapter Ten

Karen rummaged through her bag. All she wanted was a hairbrush. And all she could see was junk belonging to her daughter. Becky's sweater - she wasn't wearing it now, but she'd want it as soon as the wind started blowing in off the water. The bleachers at Safeco Field could get quite chilly. Becky's rather strange looking doll was in the bag too. Gertrude went everywhere with Becky. Today Gertrude was wearing a long white dress. Karen wasn't sure if that meant she was getting married or if she was just an angel.

There was her hairbrush - stuck to the back of Gertrude's head, the bristles stuck in Gertrude's ragged blond yarn hair. Karen untangled it and ran the brush through her wavy, dirty blond hair quickly. One of the other players wives gave her a condescending glance. Karen wrinkled her nose and pulled her hair back into it's usual messy bun.

Usually three types of people sat in the players wives section.

There were the people like Karen, who showed up at the game in jeans and a t-shirt, usually with enough stuff in their arms to keep small children entertained for three hours.

There were the dates who would show up for one or two games. Karen had met several girls who came to the game with Howie Dorough. Howie had a new girlfriend every homestand. Sometimes he had two, if they were in town for a long time. There were other players who always had a date at the game. Alicea, the shortstop was another one. Karen didn't usually talk very much to them, but she suspected some of the other gorgeous women that appeared in the stands came with Nick Carter or AJ McLean. Neither the pitcher or the outfielder looked like the type who would sit home and let dust collect, so to speak.

Then there were the women like the one who had just been annoyed by Karen. Karen knew who the woman was. Her first name was Leah, and she was married to one of the starting pitchers. Probably the one starting the game tonight, or Leah wouldn't have come to the game. Leah was part of the group that came to the game in their expensive pantsuits, their hair was always perfect, they would applaud politely when their husband came up to the plate, but otherwise talked quietly among themselves. There were a few who ignored the game entirely, talking on cell phones instead. They were the ones that Karen hated the most.

"Mommy!" Becky bolted down the aisle, skidding to a halt in front of her seat. "The lineups are almost ready!" Becky's favorite part of the game was when she got to clap. She clapped for every player when they were announced in the lineup, she clapped at every Mariner pitcher strikeout, at every Mariner putout, even for the routine outfield catches.

"Be careful." Karen shook her head. Becky, in her mad dash to her seat, had managed to bang the lady sitting in front of them in the head with her arm, and then knock Karen's coffee over onto the floor. The woman in front of Becky was one of the third group. She was in her impeccable little red cashmere twinset and black pants, her curly dark hair perfectly in place.

"Sorry down there!" Becky hung over the back of the seat and apologized.

"It's okay." The lady reassured Becky. "No harm done."

"Sit down, Becky." Karen glared. She had never met the woman in front of them, but Becky talking her to death wasn't the way to start off. "The lineups are starting."

Becky cheered and jumped up into her seat.

“Batting eighth, the catcher, Kevin Richardson!” The PA guy announced.

Becky clapped especially hard.

Karen smiled to herself. She might not be the most put together person in the stands, but she was still married to the best looking guy on the team.

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“And that’s a base hit into left!” Niehaus yelled. “Alicea was running on the pitch, he’ll make third easily. Runners on first and third, two outs.” His voice returned to normal again. “Carter comes to the plate. He’s been in a slump so far this season. He’s 2 for 32 so far this season, and one of those hits was a bloop single that probably could have been caught. The pitch from Robinson, on the outside corner for a strike, 0 and 1.

“Pitcher’s set, runners take their leads, fake throw to third and a glance at first. Alicea was hanging out there just a little too far for Robinson’s liking. Now the set, and the pitch, Carter swings and misses. 0 and 2. He hasn’t had a hit in the last four games, and you know it has to be messing with his mind about now. He’s trying too hard for a hit.

“The set, and the 0-2 pitch, swiiiiiiiiing and a miss! Carter flings his helmet and bat towards the dugout, a little harder than usual. We go to the top of the eighth, no runs, one hit, no errors. It’s the Twins 5, the Mariners 3.”

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Nick flung the clubhouse door open, feeling a small glimmer of satisfaction as the door banged into the wall. Hitting coach Jesse Hatfield had stayed after the game and worked with Nick in the hitting cage for almost two hours, to no avail. It was one thing to hit a ball flung from a pitching machine, it was entirely another to hit it in a game.

“Hey, Nick!” Brian said cheerfully from his perch on the cinder block half-wall outside the clubhouse.

“Why are you still here?” Nick wondered, heading for the parking garage. As far as he was concerned, he couldn’t get out of the stadium fast enough. So far it had been a disgusting day, and it was only five o’clock. The day was hardly over. The good thing about weekend games was that they were held in the early afternoon. In some cities, that meant you were playing in the sun. In Seattle, it meant you played underneath the roof while another inch of rain fell. Rain was depressing. And that was fitting in with Nick’s mood perfectly.

“Waiting for you.” Brian caught up to him. “Whatcha doing this afternoon?” He added, neatly dodging around a cement pole in the garage.

“Nothin’.”

“You’re still bummed out, aren’t you?” Brian raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“Gee, ya think?” Nick snapped.

“Oh please, the sarcasm!” Brian held up one hand. “Spare me.”

“Yeah, well, you had a double today, so don’t go bugging me about being bummed out.” Nick retorted as he and Brian reached the private area of the Safeco Field parking garage. “I can’t even remember the last time I was on base.”

“Against the Yankees.” Brian announced promptly. “Whatisname threw at you and hit you in the shoulder.”

Brian was right. That had been almost a week ago. And getting on base because one of your former teammates threw at you intentionally wasn’t exactly what Nick was going for. He was 2 for 32 now. That translated to a batting average of .062. That was well below the Mendoza line. Maybe they could start calling the .100 benchmark the Carter line.

Nick hit the button to unlock his red Mustang convertible.

Brian whistled in admiration.

“What?” Nick turned, half expecting to see a blond in a short dress somewhere.

“Is that your car?” Brian said in awe.

“Yeah.” Nick had to admit, it was a pretty nice car. He had owned a Mercedes in New York, but had opted to just buy another one when he got to Seattle, rather than have his car sent across the country. He didn’t like it THAT much. It was just a car.

“I take back everything I ever said.” Brian circled around the car. “I want your life, okay?”

“Take it.”

Brian had opened the door and was inspecting the interior of the car. He pulled himself back out and turned around, a big grin on his face. “Okay. You know what... tonight, we’re going to totally forget about hitting and Kevins and Chelseas and...” He thought for a moment. “I don’t know. Watch Jim Carrey or something.”

“What?”

“Fine, we’ll do something else.” Brian shrugged. “But, y’all can’t just sit at home and dwell on your batting average, okay?” Brian glanced over at the car again. “Can I drive?”

“Uh-uh.” Nick shook his head. Knowing Brian, he’d start telling one of his stories and end up getting in a wreck. That would be the perfect ending to Nick’s day.

“Why not?” Brian begged.

Nick popped the trunk and dumped his equipment bag in, not bothering to answer Brian. He wasn’t in the mood to debate who got to drive the car. Then again, it might be a good idea if Brian did drive, since Nick still hadn’t managed to figure out where he was going in Seattle. He could usually get from his house to the stadium and back again, but that was it. Although one night he had ended up in a little city called Edmonds, which he was pretty sure was no were NEAR Kirkland, seeing as how there was a ferry dock. Lake Washington didn’t have ferries, just bridges. Nick’s house afforded an excellent view of one of them. Most of the time, the bridge was nothing but solid cars, so it wasn’t interesting to watch or anything, but he could see it from his house.

“Pleeeeeeease.” Brian wheedled.

“No.” Nick said again, growing more annoyed by the minute.

Brian ducked between Nick and the drivers side door. “Aw, c’mon.”

“Cut it out.” Nick reached around Brian for the door. Brian blocked it again. Nick gave up. He wasn’t in the mood to put up with any of this. “Fine! Drive the damn car, Brian! I don’t care!” He shoved the keys at Brian and marched around to the passenger side, slamming the door after he got in. He was so frustrated by now that his head was starting to spin.

“Hey.” Brian stuck his head in the drivers side door. “You don’t have to flip out. You can drive if you want.”

“Just get in the car.” Nick said through his teeth.

“You sure?”

“Brian! Are you TRYING to piss me off?” Nick gave him a dirty look.

“No.” Brian said in all innocence.

“Well, you’re doing a real good job.”

## Chapter Eleven

“Oh no. Those were three for a dollar. I saw it on the little sign.” The woman in front of Nick protested to the checker.

“Let me check.” The checker said in a bored tone.

This fit the description of his day so far. Nick would end up in the slowest moving checkout line, behind the lady in the mint green velour jumpsuit and the bright, unnaturally red hair. If there was a God, He was laughing at Nick right now, he was sure of it.

They had been at Brian’s apartment on Queen Anne hill for almost four minutes when Brian determined he had no food in the house and sent Nick off on a mission for junk food. The team had been home for almost three days now, and Nick didn’t even want to know why Brian didn’t have food in his house, but knowing Brian, he had just forgot to go shopping. Practicality wasn’t very high on Brian’s to-do list.

Nick stared at the magazines on the rack next to him while he waited. That wasn’t a very bright idea either. There had to be something wrong with your life if you couldn’t look at the front of People and see your ex girlfriend, smiling as she hung on the arm of her new boyfriend. At least it wasn’t the top story, it was one of the features at the top of the cover.

“Can I get some help out with this?” The red haired lady asked.

Nick bit his lip, trying very hard not to mouth off. She had two bags. That couldn’t be that hard to take to your pink Cadillac.

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Nick slipped his sunglasses on as he left the grocery store. He wasn’t a ‘connoisseur of sunglasses’ as AJ was - those were AJ’s words, not Nick’s - but he had grown used to wearing them last year. Brian called it his “Stealth Bomber” look. So far in Seattle, Nick didn’t have the problem with being recognized that he had in New York. The baseball cap and sunglasses weren’t necessary, but he still wore them.

He popped the trunk and dumped the paper bag in on top of his equipment bag, not especially caring if Brian’s corn chips were crunched into dust or not.

He was opening his door when a shopping cart appeared out of no where and smacked into the side of his car, bouncing back once, then coming to a rest against the back end of the Mustang.

Nick’s jaw literally unhinged. This was getting out of hand. His day couldn’t turn out any more ludicrous he tried.

“Oh, I’m SO sorry!” Nick assumed the woman who appeared was the alleged owner of the shopping cart. She was fairly young, in her early twenties, with long red hair and a British accent.

Nick remained in a state of shock, standing, mouth still hanging open. “That’s my car!” He snapped his mouth shut. “Lady, what were you DOING?”

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“Brian!” Nick announced, slamming the unlocked door behind him. “Your grocery store is seriously screwed up. And why don’t you lock your door? This isn’t a real great

area, in case you hadn't noticed." Nick was pretty sure he had seen a drug deal between two greasy looking guys in leather jackets as he walked up to Brian's apartment.

"Well..." Brian said absently, not alarmed in the slightest. "I knew you were coming back, so I didn't bother. And I know my grocery store is weird. That's why I sent YOU." Brian was kneeling in the middle of his living room floor, staring thoughtfully at the bookshelf in front of him. "It's here somewhere." He glared, before glancing up at Nick. "Stealth Bomber again, huh?"

Nick pulled his sunglasses off. "There's a lot of stuff here, Brian." Brian had to have the messiest apartment Nick had ever seen. The kitchen table was completely covered in stacks of newspapers and magazines. There was a mound of laundry on what Nick assumed must be a couch, because it was too long to be a chair. The actual piece of furniture itself was covered. There were more stacks of papers and books at various places on the floor. Some were in boxes, most were loose.

"The last time I watched it was... January, I think." Brian continued to think out loud.

"The TV?" Nick assumed that was what Brian was looking for, since he sure didn't see one anywhere.

Brian laughed. "No! I know where that is! It's in the closet there." He pointed down the short hallway.

"Why?" Nick asked cautiously, then wondered why he bothered. He was sure there was a reason, one which made perfect sense in Brian's mind. Nick was beginning to wonder about Brian's mind. The longer he knew him, the stranger he became.

"It was in the way." Brian stood up and pawed through the mess on the table.

"Brian? What is all this stuff?"

"My life!"

"Yeah..." Nick carefully stepped over a throw pillow on the floor, intending to head for the kitchen and stick the grocery bag - somewhere. In the cabinet would probably be a good idea. Nick was sure the cabinets hadn't seen food since the Regan Administration. "Okay, if living rooms are going to represent lives... then yours is a heck of a lot more messed up than mine."

Brian stopped rummaging, his head tipped to one side as he pondered that one. "Well, then that should make you feel better, right?"

"Yep." Either that or judging from Nick's living room, his life was pretty bare. That was probably the more accurate analogy.

"Hey! I know where it is! It's in the bathroom!" Brian vaulted a box of books and vanished down the hallway.

"Oh boy." Nick perched himself gingerly on the laundry pile and waited. "Hey, Brian!"

"What?" Brian yelled back.

"Some girl ran her cart into my car!"

A loud crash sounded and Brian came back down the hallway, holding the video in his hand. "She what? Did you get her number?"

"Um, yeah." Nick affirmed. She had given him her number, insisting she would pay for it, even though Nick didn't care about that. It wasn't as if he was starved for cash.

"Was she cute?" Brian opened the hall closet and dragged the TV out.

“Huh?” Nick was now confused. He hadn’t been talking about her. He’d been talking about his car. “Yeah, I guess she was. Redhead.” If Nick’s slightly shell-shocked mind served him correctly, she had actually been very cute.

“Then the day wasn’t a total loss.” Brian said happily.

“How do you mean?”

“Y’all got a cute redhead’s phone number out of the deal!”

“But... there’s nothing wrong with the car. The scratches rubbed off.” Nick said slowly.

“Who cares about the car!” Brian swept a pile of papers off the TV table onto the floor, then stopped and stared at them thoughtfully. “That right there, is why Kevin won’t come over here anymore.” He assumed a Kevin tone to his voice. “Brian, how can you live in this pigsty? You could have rats and not even know it. They might be sleeping in Mount Tide.”

“What?” Nick wrinkled his nose in confused. Mount Tide? What was that?

Brian shrugged. “Kevin calls my couch Mount Tide. Like the laundry detergent.”

“Oh...”

“So, you’re not going to call her?”

“No!” Nick exclaimed. He didn’t pick up girls in the parking lot of a grocery store.

“Wow.” Brian said in awe. “I guess those who are named to People’s 50 most beautiful list don’t have to resort to the same tactics as the rest of us, huh?”

Nick toppled over and smacked his head on Mount Tide. “Do we have to bring that up? I forgot about that one.” Nick had been one of the featured 50 when the magazine had come out the year before. At that point in his life, people outside the baseball world had been taking notice of him. Now they weren’t anymore.

“I’m Nick Carter, I’m the biggest thing since Cheese Whiz... girls fall all over me.” Brian grinned and ducked the wrinkled shirt Nick flung at him.

## Chapter Twelve

“And that’s strike three, two outs.” Niehaus paused, watching the TV monitor as Scott Martin walked back to the dugout, shaking his head slightly at the pitch he had just been called out on.

“Here’s the DH, Krazelton.” Chalez began. “He’s 1 for 1 today with a single in the second.”

“They’ve got quite the little meeting going on there.” Niehaus commented as a picture of the dugout was shown. Nick Carter, Brian Littrell, Howie Dorough and a couple utility infielders were all clustered at the far end, around the Gatorade cooler. “How much do you want to bet they’re not discussing baseball?” Niehaus added. “Or the theory of relativity, either.” He laughed, finding this comment especially amusing.

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“No!” Nick squawked in protest, shaking his head firmly. “Uh-uh!”

“I cannot believe you!” Brian was perched on the back ledge of the dugout bench, his feet resting on the bench seat.

“Yeah!” Howie agreed, carefully tucking a strand of long, wavy hair behind his ear. “I mean, it’s not like there’s something wrong about it!”

“Scott!” Brian hollered, as the first baseman came back into the dugout. “Question!”

“Yeah?” Scott sat down to the right of Brian’s feet and rested his elbows on his knees. “What problem can I solve for you fellows today?”

“Would you ask someone out you met in the parking lot of QFC?” Brian wondered.

“Well now.” Scott pondered the idea slowly, as he did most ideas. “I usually shop at Albertson’s, but... no, I can’t see myself asking someone out in a parking lot, but I suppose some people could pull it off. For instance, Nick there.” Scott smirked at this comment.

“Oh, shut up.” Nick glared, not really mad. So far, he had managed to get along tolerably well with Scott Martin. True, he was Kevin’s best friend, but at least he was civil to him in the clubhouse - which was more than could be said for the guy leaning on the fence at the other end of the dugout, intently watching the pitcher.

“This is like, so NOT a big deal!” Howie announced. “I mean, I pick up chicks in parking lots all the time! There is nothing to it!”

“I rest my case.” Nick shook his head as Brian broke into giggles. They could bug him about that girl in the parking lot all he wanted, he was not going to call her. Especially if that was how Howie got dates.

“Do you guys remember Pamela?” Howie brought up one of his many girlfriends. Howie literally had a girl in every single American League city, except Baltimore.

“What homestand was she?” Brian wondered.

“No, it was spring training, last year.” Howie picked his cap up off the bench and carefully placed it over his hair, adjusting a few strands to his satisfaction. “Great legs, green eyes, dark hair...”

“Was she the one with the BMW?” Scott interrupted.

Howie and Brian both turned, mouths hanging open.

“What?” Scott looked confused. “That was a nice car!”

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“That stuff stinks.” Kevin announced.

Nick stared down at the bottle of hair gel, contemplating whether he should squirt some down the front of Kevin’s shirt. It probably wouldn’t be a wise idea. They had won the game today, even though Nick was still hitless in his last eleven games. But today, that wasn’t the most pressing issue on his mind. Other things, more important things, and certainly better looking things had been occupying it since yesterday afternoon.

Kevin sniffed loudly one more time, then stalked out of the small room. Nick shrugged. He could care less if Kevin marched around with his hair plastered to his head - which Kevin did most of the time. Kevin lived in track pants and flip flops, except road trips, when he was forced to put on “real clothes”.

Nick’s mind wandered back to the same subject he had been pondering all day long. Brian and Scott could tease Nick about the girl in the parking lot all they wanted. He didn’t care. If the truth was going to be known, he had been thinking about her quite a bit in the last 24 hours.

Nick pointed at himself in the mirror with the bottle of gel. “This is stupid.” He muttered. “Just call her, and ask her out, already.”

The face in the mirror stared back at him skeptically, not quite convinced.

“People’s Fifty Most Beautiful and you’re being insecure?” Nick tried again.

“Excuse me, my friend.” AJ interrupted, wandering into the room. “You’re talking to yourself.”

“I am?” Nick jumped slightly. AJ had to quit skulking around the clubhouse. He needed a little bell, like a cat.

“Yes.” AJ paused in front of the floor length mirror to inspect his clothes. “You know, if I had a movie title for my life: AJ, The Man, The Moves, The Clothes.”

Nick bit his lower lip, trying very hard not to laugh.

AJ turned back around. “And while I have NO clue what you’re talking about, I say yes.”

“Yes.” Nick repeated.

“Uh-huh.” AJ bobbed his head up and down. “Go for it. What have you got to lose?”

“A small amount of pride.” Nick held up two fingers to demonstrate.

AJ looked askance. “You’re hitting .050 and you’re talking about pride?” He shook his head sadly.

“Yeah, okay.” Nick turned back to the mirror. He didn’t need people rubbing his current hitting inabilities in his face. That wasn’t going to help him any.

“Word of contemplation from the Cool Guru!” AJ announced. “The harder you try, the dumber you look.”

“What?” Nick’s head swiveled slowly. “The Cool Guru?”

“Yours Truly.” AJ whipped his sunglasses out of his pocket and put them on.

“Yeah, right.” Nick bent down and peered at AJ’s dark glasses. “Can you see with those on?”

AJ grasped at the various products scattered around on the counter, feeling the different bottles. “Perfectly fine, my foolish friend. Ah... what’s this?” He grabbed the hairdryer that Howie had been using earlier. “Hey! A loaded firearm!”

Nick shook his head. “Okay, have fun. I’ve gotta get going.” He was pretty sure he had left that girl’s phone number in his car.

“What is this?” AJ said as Nick left the room. “It’s a wall. Simply fascinating...”

## Chapter Thirteen

“Hello?”

“Um, yeah, hi. Is this Stacy?”

“Speaking.”

“Huh?” There was a fairly long pause on the other end of Stacy’s phone line. “Oh... okay. Um, this is Nick Carter.”

Stacy madly racked her brain. The name didn’t sound familiar, which meant she was going to have to fudge it until she figured out who he was. “Hi, Nick. How are you?”

“What? I’m fine. Um... I’m the guy with the car you decided to blitz with a shopping cart.”

Oh. It was that guy. Stacy rolled her eyes at the ceiling. He might have been good-looking - although it had been hard to tell behind those sunglasses - but he seemed just a little high strung. Flipping out over an invisible scratch... someone didn’t have their priorities in order.

“Are you... did you hang up?” Nick said in shock, his voice climbing upwards.

Stacy almost started laughing at the tone of his voice. “No, I’m still here. How’s your car?”

“Oh, it’s fine.” Nick dismissed that idea.

“Then exactly why are you ringing?” Stacy wondered.

“Ringing?” Nick repeated blankly.

“Calling!” Stacy corrected to the Americanized version.

“Oh. I’m calling for completely personal reasons.” Nick said confidently.

Stacy smirked. Not only was he high strung, he was arrogant too. “Are you, now?”

“Yeah.”

“I might as well let you know, I don’t usually go out with guys I meet in parking lots.” This was a policy Stacy had just made up on the spot. But, it might be a good one. You never knew what kind of nuts you could meet in parking lots. She’d have to remember this policy.

“Okay...” Nick said slowly. “So, where DO you meet guys?” He was smiling now. She could tell from his voice. “Name the place and time and I’ll meet you there.”

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Article in the Seattle PI - April 17th

*Mariners closer AJ McLean has a new nickname in the clubhouse. Players - and the occasional coach - have taken to calling him The Cool Guru. We did some exhausting, backbreaking research and found this out: No one knows why they’ve started calling him The Cool Guru.*

*Then right fielder, Nick Carter shed some light on the name. “Oh that?” he laughed when we asked him about the origins of The Cool Guru. “AJ named himself that.” But, of course. How else could something like that happen?*

*The Cool Guru wasn’t available for comment, but his secretary (who looks suspiciously like AJ McLean) assured us the name had been bestowed because of the utmost respect and reverence for The Cool Guru’s magnificent abilities. He also agreed to join the PI as an honorary member. Starting this Thursday, The Cool Guru*

*will be answering your questions free of charge on the Inside Baseball page of the sports section.*

*AJ would like to point out, "The Cool Guru answers questions about anything except how to throw a screwball, because he doesn't know to do that."*

*You can e-mail, fax or mail your questions to us at the Seattle Post-Intelligencer at...*

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Stacy was sitting calmly at the little round table in the cafe, reading over a report she had to turn in to her supervisor by the end of the week when someone rapped quietly on her tabletop. She looked up, more than just a little surprised to see Nick Carter standing there in khaki cargo pants and a hooded blue sweatshirt.

When she had told him about the cafe she usually went to on her lunch break, she hadn't actually expected him to show up. She had said it on a whim, something she seemed to be doing a lot lately. Packing up and moving halfway around the world had been on a whim too. That one had worked out quite nicely. Maybe she should be spontaneous more often. It could pay off.

"You're surprised to see me." Nick surmised, and quite correctly too.

"I honestly never expected you to show up." Stacy admitted.

Nick smiled and sat down across from her. Stacy found herself suddenly wondering if this entire situation might not be so bad after all. When he was actually in a good mood and his sunglasses were off, he was a nice looking guy. Blond, nice tan, good-looking face in a boy-next-door sort of way, and a great smile.

"You're gonna have to try harder than that if you want to get rid of me." Nick propped his elbows on the table, making it lean slightly to his side. "Even though I almost did get lost. The one way streets keep messing me up."

"How long have you lived here?"

Nick scrunched his nose up as he thought. "Almost a month."

"A month?" Stacy repeated in shock. And she had thought being in Seattle eight months made her a newcomer. "Where'd you live before?"

"New York." Nick shrugged and stared out the window behind her, not offering any more information.

"I moved here eight months ago from Calcutta." Stacy offered. "India." She added after a moment, noting the look of confusion on Nick's face.

"I knew it was over there somewhere." Nick defended, leaning back in his chair. "Why'd you come over here?"

"Well, I was offered a job... and just decided on the spur of the moment to take it. Don't you ever have one of the moments where this completely illogical idea pops into your head, and then common sense takes over and tells you you're nuts?"

Nick ran his hand through his hair. "I guess." It was obvious he had no clue what she was talking about.

"It was one of those, and common sense kicked in at the airport in Tokyo. Of course, by then it was too late." Stacy smiled.

"What kind of job?" Nick asked, leaning forward again, and picking up the recycled paper napkin on the table, started tearing it into little pieces.

Stacy sighed. "I'm a cytotechnologist."

As she had expected, Nick's jaw dropped slightly, before a big smile spread across his face. "A WHAT?" He had dimples when he smiled.

"Cytotechnologist." Stacy repeated slowly. "Researching cancer cells for a pharmaceutical company trying to develop a cure for cancer."

Nick blinked. "Do you always use big words like that?"

"Yes." Stacy retorted. "So, what do you do?" She had noticed he wasn't offering a whole lot of information about himself.

"Um..." Nick finished shredding the napkin and stirred the pile of paper with his finger. "Do you follow sports?"

"Not really." Stacy was being diplomatic. She had no clue about sports of any kind, especially American.

Nick nodded and rubbed the back of his neck. "That's kinda what I figured. Do you know who the Mariners are? The baseball team?"

Stacy shook her head slowly.

Nick seemed to relax a little. "Well, I'm a Mariner."

"I see." She didn't see at all. For all she knew, he could have been chasing turkeys around a mud pit. "I've never seen a baseball game."

"Really?" The dimples appeared again as he smiled. "That's so weird."

"Well, I beg pardon, but it's not especially popular where I grew up." She was flirting openly now, and rather enjoying it too.

Nick's face lit up. "Okay, I got an idea! Are you busy tonight?"

## Chapter Fourteen

Becky Richardson kicked at a piece of paper on the ground as she trudged back up to her seat. Her mother was talking to a very important person and had told Becky to please go sit down and stop interrupting her.

“Back so soon?” Felicia asked from the seat in front of Becky’s. Becky liked Felicia. Not just because Felicia’s guy was AJ McLean. Felicia also knew lots of stories about baseball players like Babe Ruth and Mickey Mantle, plus, in the sixth inning of one game, she had put Becky’s hair into pigtails. Becky’s mother never had the patience to try and put pigtails in her hair.

“Mommy said I was being distracting.” Becky flopped into her seat and yanked at her tights until they weren’t sagging around her ankles. Six was too young to have elephant ankles. “She’s trying to talk to the charity lady.”

The charity lady was the woman involved in one of the charities that Kevin donated to. They were in the process of planning a fund-raiser, and they knew if Kevin and Karen were there, they had the potential to receive a lot more attention. Becky knew what that meant. It meant her parents would go to a party, Brian would come over to baby-sit, and she’d get to go to bed two hours later than normal. Brian had a way of bending the rules like that and getting away with it. Becky wasn’t sure exactly how he did it.

“It’s cold tonight, isn’t it?” Felicia twisted around in her seat until she could see Becky sitting behind her.

Becky nodded solemnly. It wasn’t that cold, she wasn’t even wearing a jacket. Felicia was however, a big puffy white, downfilled one.

Becky reached over and poked it with one finger. She liked that jacket - it kind of looked like a cloud.

Felicia reminded Becky of a movie star from the forties. Her dark, wavy hair came down to her shoulders, where it curled under, and best of all, she had bright red lipstick. She had let Becky wear some one night. When Becky grew up, she was going to wear bright red lipstick too. However, she wasn’t sure if she’d really like a guy like AJ McLean. She might like Nick Carter better. He was her favorite player, after her father, of course. Nick was cute. Becky figured he must be pretty close to Prince Charming. She had mentioned that to her father one day, and he had choked on a corn chip. His face had actually turned purple. Becky assumed this was because her daddy was having a hard time dealing with her getting older. He was kind of funny that way.

“I’m going to get a coffee.” Felicia stood up and shoved her hands into her pockets. “Want something, Becky?”

Becky shook her head sadly. “No. I can’t have caffeine. Daddy says so. It makes me act like Brian.”

“Okay.” Felicia slipped past the red haired lady sitting next to her and disappeared down the aisleway.

Becky turned her attention back to the field. Brian and Nick were standing in front of the Mariners dugout, horsing around, as usual. Becky chortled. Nick had Brian in a head lock and was leading him around and around in circles.

Unfortunately, Becky and Nick’s fun was short lived. Kevin showed up within a matter of seconds and sent Brian and Nick back into the clubhouse, right after a rather

lengthy lecture that involved pointing at the crowd and the Diamond Vision several times.

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Stacy shifted in her seat and wished she had brought a warmer jacket. It was quite chilly when the wind started blowing in off the waterfront. It was now the eighth inning, whatever that meant, and people were starting to file out of the stands, trying to beat the rush at the end of the game. The Mariners were ahead 10-3, so the possibility of them losing the game seemed quite slim.

Stacy had already learned several things that evening, most of them courtesy of the woman sitting next to her. It was virtually impossible to follow what was happening with the ball, it was much easier to just watch the players - whichever direction they ran, the ball was usually there. In order to tell if a ball was a strike or not, you watched the count on the scoreboard until the orange numbers changed.

The batter for the Anaheim Angels stepped up to the plate. Stacy now knew what that was, thanks to the frizzy haired girl behind her, who upon learning that this was Stacy's first baseball game, had told her all about bases and the player positions, before proudly announcing that her father was the catcher and that her mother said he had the best a- - in the American League. She said this very matter of factly, so Stacy assumed it was a well known fact.

There was a sharp crack as the bat met the ball. Stacy was confused for a moment. The infield didn't move at all. Then she noticed Nick, in right field, bolting for the wall as fast as he could. He didn't stop when he reached the green padded barrier either, looking back over his shoulder, he timed his leap and with his waist even with the top of the eight foot wall, reached up and plucked the ball out of midair, right before it fell into the hands of the right field fans.

"OOOOOH!" Becky screamed, leaping from her seat and jumping up and down in delight, rather like the second baseman, who was jumping up and down in shallow right field. Stacy wasn't sure of his name. #12, his last name started with an L according to the back of his uniform.

Nick flipped the ball over his shoulder into the stands and jogged in to the dugout nonchalantly, as if that kind of catch was merely routine and he was used to ending the inning that way.

Next to Stacy, Felicia smirked. "Look at Mr. Cool." She laughed. "His Yankee arrogance is showing again. You can take the player out of Yankee Stadium, but you can't take the Yankee out of the player."

Stacy wondered exactly what that comment meant.

~\*~

Article in The Seattle P. I. - April 20th

*Ask The Cool Guru:*

*Cool Guru,*

*How do I impress a girl on our first date? I really have trouble getting the same girl to go out with me twice and I'm beginning to think there's a problem. - Loser in Lynnwood.*

*Loser -*

*First off, girls are not impressed if you can arm fart Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. (Just as a word of warning.) Second, instead of showing up in your Chevy Nova, I would really suggest borrowing your friends' Benz.. It never fails. I hope that helps, my friend.*

*Cool Guru,*

*How do you throw a screwball? - Curious in Ballard*

*Curious -*

*You just had to ask, didn't you, my friend? I'm going to let you in a little secret. Only un-cool people throw a screwball. One of my friends, Brad Arton, throws a screwball, and trust me, he's so un-cool he hasn't worn sunglasses since he was four years old. The truly cool survive on straight heat. (And since some of us don't have a pitch that is even lukewarm, we throw a pitch called a forkball, hence named because of the way it is gripped, with the ball held between the index and middle finger.) Remember, all you need to survive on the mound is great hair and a pitch that no one can hit.*

*Cool Guru,*

*I've noticed that during some games, it starts raining, but the roof remains open. Why is that? - Wet in Renton.*

*Wet -*

*How the heck should I know? I'm just The Cool Guru, my friend, not an umpire.*

*(Editor's note: The umpires do not close the roof unless they feel the rain will hinder the progress of the game. The roof cannot be closed during play, only at the completion of a half inning.)*

## Chapter Fifteen

“Since when do you always get the window seat?” Brian demanded, flopping into the plane seat next to Nick and loosening his tie.

“Since I didn’t spend half an hour standing at the other end of the plane talking to Shingo.” Nick pointed out, slipping his headphones down around his neck. Brian caught up on his social engagements - of which he had several - until thirty seconds before the plane took off, when he bolted to his seat.

“Fine, but I got dibs on the window on the next flight.” Brian folded his arms. “So, how was the date? Or is it dates?” He regarded Nick for a moment. “Aw, man, look at you. Y’all are hooked. Chalk up another loss for single guys everywhere.”

“I am not hooked.” Nick protested mildly.

“Are too. Like a fish.” Brian argued. “She’s been to four games now. If that isn’t hooked, I don’t know what is. So, what’s she like?”

“Wonderful.” Nick said without really thinking.

Brian raised one eyebrow. “Like a fish.” He repeated calmly.

Nick gave up on arguing. He was in too good of a mood to even bother and Brian didn’t give up until he won or was convinced he had won anyway. Stacy had come to both games that weekend, and afterwards they had just done stupid little stuff, like hang out at the waterfront. It had ended up being the most fun Nick had experienced in months. Right now he was so happy he would have given Brian the window seat, except Brian really didn’t care. He just wanted to argue about it.

“Are y’all just gonna sit there and look happy or are you gonna tell me about her?” Brian demanded impatiently. “What does she do? Is she smart? What kind of car does she drive? How good a kisser is she? C’mon, Nick, spill. I’m waiting.”

Nick couldn’t help laughing. Brian sounded just like a little old lady catching up on the latest gossip. “Okay... I can’t pronounce what she does, but it like, involves researching cancer or something like that.”

Brian thought about that one. “Hey, that is seriously cool. So, she’s what, five or six up on you in the brains department, huh?”

Nick scowled. Just because he was a blond athlete didn’t mean he was stupid. “Gee, thanks.”

“I’m kidding.” Brian waved his hand in the air. “Where’s she from?”

“Um, she grew up in India. Her dad’s, like, a doctor or something over there. And she’s not a big baseball fan, which is actually kind of cool.”

“Why?” Brian asked.

Nick rolled his eyes. There it went. The standard Brian question. “Um, you know. Like, it affects the way you kind of look at things.”

“Such as, ‘you’re Bob Carter’s son?’”

“Uh-huh.”

“Wow.” Brian said in awe. “I wish I was famous enough that I could experience that.”

“Are you making fun of me?” Nick narrowed his eyes.

“Who, me?” Brian face assumed a carefully innocent expression. “So, you really like her. Why?”

Nick’s smile got a little wider. “Brian, I can’t explain it. Okay?”

Brian pointed his index finger at Nick's face. "Y'all are cleverly evading the kissing question." He giggled. "Nick y'all are blushing."

"Am not!" Nick protested again. There was no way he was telling Brian if Stacy was a good kisser. She was, but Brian wasn't going to know that.

Brian attempted to look rational and logical, and failed miserably. "You are too!"

"Just shut up, Bri! Never mind! I'm not gonna tell you every little detail like Howie does."

"Howie was a pimp in a former life." Brian snickered again, thankfully latching onto the change of subject.

"Howie's a pimp in THIS life." Nick corrected in amusement.

"True." Brian stuck his head out and peered down the aisle. When it came down to the facts, Brian actually preferred the aisle seat - it was easier for him to keep tabs on everything else happening on the plane at that time. "He's acting awful weird."

"Howie?" Nick wondered. He didn't think so. Howie could still be heard over everything else on the plane, as usual. Every few minutes, Howie would yell something in his usual high shrill fashion, whether he was winning or losing at the card game he and several other players always had going at the back of the plane.

"No. AJ." Brian corrected, pulling his head back around the seat. "Very quiet. He must be drugged."

"Or for once, he isn't." Nick offered the more logical choice.

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"One out, runners on first and second for the A's. McLean's working from the stretch, as most relievers do whether there's a man on or not." Niehaus narrated. "Mariners are ahead 7-5 in the bottom of the ninth. Here's the stretch from McLean and the pitcher. Low and outside, ball two. 3-0, and the runners will probably be going on the next pitch." Niehaus stopped talking, the only noise on the radio that of the crowd, who was finally into the game now that it looked like their team had a chance at coming back.

"Here's the pitch, and that is BELTED into DEEP left field. That was a rocket! The A's win the game 8-7 and McLean stalks off the field in disgust. That's his first blown save this season, and only the third of his major league career. That wraps it up from Oakland, the A's win it 8-7 in the bottom of the ninth, on a one out homer by shortstop Miguel Lopez. We'll be back with the finals after this time-out."

~\*~

Kevin crouched down behind the plate and waited for the next pitch. It came in low and outside, almost bouncing in the dirt, more than just a little off from where it was supposed to be.

"Time." Kevin called over his shoulder as he jogged out to the mound. "Okay, buddy, wassup?"

"Obviously, not that last pitch." AJ was in a smartmouth mood. Then again, he always was.

"Uh-huh." Kevin shoved his mask up on top of his head. "Why?"

"Beats me." AJ shrugged and kicked at the mound with his cleat.

“Well, maybe you should try and figure it out.” Kevin never was very good at being diplomatic for long. “Because after that game you blew in Oakland, and now this one, obviously something ain’t right.”

“Just back off.” AJ waved his glove at Kevin. “I’ll handle it.”

“How?” Kevin snapped. AJ’s lack of focus was starting to piss him off. “With a SuperSoaker? This is important, AJ. We’re playing division rivals here.”

“I know who we’re playing.” AJ stepped in closer to Kevin’s face. “And this is not important, Kevin.”

“That’s your problem right there.” Kevin pointed out.

“Excuse me, fellas. Let’s wrap it up.” The home plate umpire came out halfway to the mound to break up the argument.

“That is not my problem!” AJ stabbed his finger at Kevin’s chest protector. “Just shut the hell up about problems! You don’t know anything about problems, okay?”

“Okay, let’s hold on here a minute.” Kevin turned around to the umpire, who was waiting. “Sorry, can we have just a sec?” He turned back to AJ, who had stalked down the back side of the mound and was playing with the rosin bag, raising a cloud of chalky, white dust. “AJ...”

“What’s goin’ on?” Brian jogged in the short distance from second to the mound.

“Just get back behind the damn plate and leave me alone!” AJ hollered at Kevin.

Kevin glanced over at Brian, who shrugged as he backpedaled towards second. Kevin headed back to the plate like AJ said. When pitchers got in their moods, they had to be pacified. AJ had been acting weird the last four games. This was moving beyond just a mood. Kevin didn’t feel like dealing with temperamental pitchers. Wasn’t having Nick Carter on your team bad enough?

## Chapter Sixteen

"I watch the ball fall to my glove,  
I feel a pressure make it stay.  
And I could swear that cloud at once,  
turned and bowed and flew away.

I've heard that guardian angels  
Watch over children every day.  
But I know mine did more than watch -  
He helped me start a double play."

"Read another one." Becky prompted eagerly.

"No." Kevin shut the book and set it back on the dresser. "That's four tonight. Your light should have been off seventeen minutes ago."

"That is my favorite poem." Becky said solemnly, hugging Gertrude tighter to her chest.

"Yep, I know." Kevin knew all too well. He'd been reading "The Little League Angel" for almost a year now. Becky had it memorized, and so did Kevin for that matter, but Becky still insisted on it being read every single night before she went to sleep.

Becky had two obsessions in her life. Angels and shoes, and not always in that order. She carefully planned what pair of her shoes she would wear to what events, and had been playing dressup with Karen's shoes since she could walk. As for the angels, there was Gertrude, who Becky insisted was really an angel, you just couldn't see her wings, Becky's book of angel poems, and numerous other little items around her room. She had little angel Christmas ornaments lined up neatly on her dresser, there were angel pictures hanging on her wall - most of them about three feet off the ground, since Becky had hung them herself. - and a pair of paper wings with silver glitter hung from her ceiling, left over from a Christmas play two years before.

"Now, for once in your life, go to sleep when you're supposed to." Kevin flicked the light off. Becky's nightlight was even an angel - it had a small stained glass angel attached to the front of it. "Don't let the bedbugs bite."

"Daddy, bedbugs only exist in third world countries." Becky said from the semi-darkness.

"No, there's strong evidence they survive in Brian's apartment." Kevin corrected wryly.

Becky giggled.

"Goodnight." Kevin closed the door three quarters of the way, as per Becky's wishes.

"Goodnight, Daddy!" Becky called through the semi-closed door. "I love you!"

"I love you too!" Kevin called back. "Now go to bed!"

"I'm going to bed now, Daddy!" Becky announced. "At least I'm going to try!"

Kevin shook his head and started back downstairs. Becky needed very little sleep. She was always up by six in the morning, even on weekends, and she was easily capable of staying up until ten every night. Kevin suspected she had the same gene as Brian. Brian slept an average of four hours a day. He'd go to bed at two, and decide to get up and appear at Kevin's house at seven in the morning. Brian had no concept of time. Six in the morning was the same to him as three in the afternoon. Kevin, on the other hand,

had a very good grasp on time. He wasn't to be disturbed before nine in the morning. Brian and Becky faithfully ignored this rule.

Elvis Presley was playing loudly on the stereo in the living room. That meant Karen was vacuuming. When she bothered to clean the house, instances which were few and far between, she listened to Elvis. She listened to Elvis the rest of the time too. Kevin couldn't quite understand how someone could like his music that much, but he tolerated it fairly well. There could be worse musical numbers rattling the pictures on the walls.

Kevin stopped in the entryway to the living room, leaned against the edge of the doorway and watched her for a minute. If one was going to be completely honest, there was a lot more dancing going on than there was vacuuming. Karen's hips were a lot more fun to watch than Elvis' had ever been.

Karen spun around and managed to dodge the vacuum cord at the same time, and upon seeing Kevin, gave him a big smile. Kevin shook his head in amusement. She was so enthusiastic about everything. That was what had attracted him to her in the first place. It was also the same reason other people couldn't stand her. As a general rule, Karen had love/hate relationships with people. You either liked her or you didn't. There was no middle ground.

"Let's just turn that down." Kevin crossed the room to the CD player and dropped the volume level so it didn't sound like a World Series crowd. Not that Kevin would know what that would sound like, he'd never been to a World Series.

"I couldn't hear it over the vacuum." Karen explained logically, shoving her hair back into the knot on the back of her head. "I think it looks pretty good in here." Karen was quite proud of her housekeeping skills while Kevin was on the road. Kevin just kept his mouth shut, and cleaned things correctly when he got home. He was already taking mental notes of the spots Karen had missed with the vacuum.

"Stop that." Karen scolded. "Who cares if the corners got missed?" She stood up on her toes and wrapped both her arms around Kevin's neck. "You're only here for six days." The Mariners were starting their shortest homestand of the season tomorrow night. Three quick two game series, and then they were back on the road again.

The CD player switched tracks, and "Can't Help Falling In Love" started playing. That song had always been one of the few Elvis songs Kevin could tolerate. More than likely, it had something to do with the fact it had been playing right before Kevin proposed to Karen, almost eight years ago.

Kevin pulled Karen up against him and leaned down, pressing his lips against hers, all thoughts of the homestand length gone from his head.

"I love you." Karen pulled back and smiled, leaning against Kevin's interlocked fingers.

"Even if I vacuum the corners?" Kevin smirked, kissing the top of her head. Karen's shampoo was raspberry scented. On anything else it would have been sickeningly sweet, but Kevin was used to her smelling that way, actually he would have missed it if it hadn't been there. The same could be said for Elvis, but Kevin wasn't about to admit that one.

"Someone has to do the corners." Karen ran her fingers through Kevin's hair and pulled his head back down, kissing him more enthusiastically this time. Kevin's hands were sliding underneath Karen's green t-shirt when they were interrupted.

"I see you two down there!" Becky hollered at the top her lungs. "Cut out the mushy stuff, you two!" Becky was perched at the top of the stairs, kneeling on the floor so she could see in the living room.

Kevin drew back in surprise, the mood effectively ruined. “What are you doing out of bed, young lady? Get back in there right now!”

## Chapter Seventeen

Nick leaned against the wall of the lobby and stared out through the floor length windows at the bicyclists and other bohemian “free sprits” heading up and down the sidewalk. Anyone who bicycled up and down the steep hills of Seattle was officially nuts in his book. There must be reported cases of bicyclists clad in black spandex flying down the hill and into Elliot Bay.

The door back into the “working” part of the building opened again. It was controlled by magnetic security ID cards worn by the staff and every time it opened or closed, it sounded as if the building was preparing for a nuclear shutdown. Pharmaceutical research was a very serious business. They weren’t about to let just anyone come in off the street and get into the building.

This time the door opened to let out a tall technician, still wearing his white lab coat. He disappeared out the glass front doors, unlocked his bike from where it was chained to the lamppost outside, and rode off down the street, his coat flapping in the breeze.

The door unlocked again and all thoughts of bicyclists, whether they be in spandex or lab coats, fled from Nick’s mind. Stacy always moved like she knew exactly where she was going, she just wasn’t quite sure why she was going there. As in the typical intellectual stereotype, part of her mind always seemed to be preoccupied with some larger problem. Her hair was starting to slip out of the clip holding it in a knot on the back of her head, and her shirttail was hanging out from beneath her gray sweater.

“Hey.” Nick stepped away from the wall and into her path.

Stacy looked up from the canvas bag she was pawing through, then jumped a good two inches off the tiled floor. “Oh my God! What are you doing here?” Then again, sometimes, all her mind was preoccupied.

Nick shrugged. “Nothin’. You’re on lunch, right?” What he really felt like doing was kissing her, but he had a sneaking suspicion that would be moving a little too quick. Their relationship hadn’t quite reached the stage of kissing in public yet.

“Yes.” Stacy gave up on searching. “How did you know that?”

Nick tapped the side of his head. “Good memory.” That and he could easily pull up pretty much any detail of any conversation the two of them had ever had in the last two weeks without even having to think about it. He reached in front of Stacy and shoved the door open. “Where’re we going?”

“This way.” She grabbed him by the hand and started down the street at three times the speed Nick was moving at.

“I discovered something this last week.” Stacy said in all seriousness when Nick regained his balance and caught up to her.

“Did you?” Nick wasn’t completely focused on the conversation. More than half his brain was occupied with the fact that she still hadn’t let go of his hand.

“Yep.” The light turned green and they started across the crosswalk. “If you listen to the game on the radio while you’re watching it on TV, you can actually follow along fairly well.”

Nick still couldn’t imagine not being aware of every little detail occurring on the field during a game, but he was kind of happy she had actually watched the road trip. It had been a good trip for Nick. He had officially snapped out of his hitting slump while in Anaheim. He had been 3 for 4 in the first game with a double, and by the time the trip

had ended in Arlington, Texas, Nick's home run tally had gone up by two and his batting average was heading back up to the .200's.

"And I have one question." Stacy stopped walking and turned around until she was facing Nick. "Who's Bob Carter? Because he comes up in the conversation quite often when they're discussing you."

Nick sighed. It never failed. "He's my dad."

Stacy let the subject drop while she studied the menu and ordered at the little sidewalk cafe/deli. "Right, then..." She said after they ordered. "That would make sense. So he played baseball? Let's sit outside."

"Yeah, he played." Nick obediently followed her out to the metal tables and chairs set up along the sidewalk. To just say 'he played' was a bit of an understatement. Bob Carter was in the Hall of Fame, which right there was enough to tell you he did more than just 'play'. However, Nick wasn't going to go into that if he didn't have to. "It's cold out here."

"It is not." Stacy shook her head. "The sun's out. I'm the one accustomed to equatorial temperatures. If I'm not cold, then you certainly can't be."

The sun might have been out, but it was still cold, unless you were sitting directly in the sunlight. It always seemed as if the wind was blowing in directly off the waterfront. Nick had survived so far by living in sweatshirts and layers. He wasn't about to argue with Stacy, however. It would do no good. She was always right, and even if she wasn't, she presented her argument in such logical fashion that Nick ended up believing she was right anyway. Nick pulled the sleeves of his sweatshirt down over his hands.

"Oh... I know what else." Stacy said around her sandwich. "The game tonight? Felicia called me earlier today, and she's not feeling well, so I'm going to her place and watching it with her there." Her gray eyes regarded Nick for a long moment, before she smiled. "You should see yourself. Don't let it completely ruin your day."

Nick drew in a deep breath. "No, it's okay. Um, it's just that... we're not even in town a week, ya know? I was just kind of hoping I'd get to spend more time with you. Who's Felicia?" He added, the rest of the conversation finally sinking in.

"Oh, what's the one pitcher's name?" Stacy waited expectantly for Nick to give it to her.

Nick turned his palms upward. "Gonna have to give me a little more info than that."

"The strange one... turns cartwheels in the outfield before the game?"

Nick laughed. "Well, that's either Brian or AJ, and since Brian's not a pitcher..."

"AJ McLean - that's him." Stacy nodded in affirmation.

"AJ's got a girl?" Nick was surprised to hear that one. When the subject of girlfriends came up in the clubhouse, as if often did when Howie and Brian were around, AJ had never been one in the middle of it. Nick had never realized that before, but when he thought about it, AJ didn't discuss his personal life at all.

"Well, they're together." Stacy shrugged. "I'm not sure about details or anything." She stared down at the wrought metal table, then looked up again, smiling. "Nick?"

"What?" Nick responded cautiously. She was smiling, which meant she was probably about to poke fun at him for something. Nick had fallen in love with her smile the first time he had seen it. It made her look like a little girl.

"I'll beat you home, by the time you get out of the clubhouse. Why don't you come over to my place afterwards, okay?"

That was possibly the best idea Nick had heard in days.

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Kevin relaxed against the bench in the bullpen. Back-up catcher Lenny Krazelton was starting tonight against the opposing team's left handed pitcher and Kevin was spending the game in the bullpen, not as much for the sake of warming up pitchers as he was for the entertainment. Brian was all fine and well for dugout entertainment, but he couldn't even begin to compare to AJ McLean. In the first two innings, AJ had managed not only to get one of the fans sitting above them to throw AJ his nachos, he had also attached several sunflower seeds to his face, by carefully opening the shells partway, then pinching them onto his face. That, Kevin would be the first to admit, was something even Brian hadn't tried.

"So," AJ sat down cross-legged on the bench next to Kevin. Kevin wondered briefly if it hurt to sit cross-legged while wearing cleats. AJ didn't seem to notice, or even care. "What made you come brave the perils of the 'pen? Was it the blow by blow description of how Howie seduced his latest woman, one too many mentions of Nick's new girl, who according to him, must be the greatest thing since microwave bacon, or was it just for the pleasure of my company?"

Kevin laughed. "All of the above." Since returning from their roadtrip, AJ's strange mood seemed to have disappeared, and now he was back in his usual form.

"How would you pitch that guy?" Kevin wondered, watching as the Twin's designated hitter just missed another pitch, sending it straight back at the screen behind home plate.

"What guy?" AJ said in confusion, looking around the bullpen, as if expecting to see someone with a bat.

"The one at the plate." Kevin pointed out dryly. The DH connected on the next pitch, sending it fair into the left field corner on two bounces, where it smacked into the wall with enough force that the sound was heard in the bullpen.

AJ sat calmly for a moment. "Well, apparently I wouldn't throw him that last pitch, would I? Geez." He dropped his paper Gatorade cup on the ground and leaned down to pick it up, still talking. "I'd pitch him hard inside." He straightened back up with the crumpled cup in his hand. "Nine times out of ten, he couldn't get it past third."

Kevin stared at AJ for a moment, before his gaze traveled over to the rest of the bullpen, who had dissolved in fits of laughter. "What is their problem?"

"You mean other than they have a combined IQ of 14?"

"Okay..." Kevin ignored the gigglefest and returned to the idea of pitching the Twin's DH. Strategy was one of his favorite subjects. And AJ was right, which surprised Kevin even more than three days ago when Nick had hit the game winning home run. Behind the facade of craziness, AJ knew what he was doing.

"Kevin..." AJ nudged Kevin with his elbow. "Um, your shoe?"

Kevin leaned over and looked at his shoe, to find that his shoelaces were burning briskly, although flames weren't quite licking at his feet yet. This was a game that relief pitchers the league over had found entertaining throughout the years. Pick some innocent sucker and set his shoes on fire without him noticing.

"S---!" Kevin put out the fire with his other foot, before turning and swinging one arm at AJ, who ducked away, laughing the entire time. Kevin narrowed his eyes. AJ

had distracted him with the idea of pitching inside. There was no accounting for the mind of a pitcher. They were always one step ahead.

“I am the KING!” AJ announced to the rest of the bullpen, doing a little victory dance atop the bullpen mound. “And you guys doubted that I could do it!”

“Congratulations.” Brad Arton said solemnly, stepping forward to shake AJ’s hand. “You win.”

“McLean!” Bullpen coach Jared Price interrupted from the recessed area that housed the phone. The job of the bullpen coach was to answer the phone - and if a major fire occurred as a result of AJ’s cigarette lighter - to put it out. “You have a phone call.”

Kevin watched the color drain out of AJ’s face. For a call to be put through to the bullpen in the middle of the game, it had to be an emergency.

## Chapter Eighteen

AJ slammed the door to his car and bolted across the parking garage towards the elevator. “Aw, c’mon, not now...” He muttered, when he punched the button and nothing happened. He had a special touch with all things mechanical. So far, he had been stuck in an elevator twice, which was one time too many for his liking. The first time it had been cool. The second was annoying. And right now the timing was not good for the third time.

He slammed his fist against the metal door of the elevator. That did no good either. It never did. Mechanical objects were out to get him. AJ hadn’t successfully used a microwave in years. The alarm to his car went off so frequently that if someone actually broke into it, he would turn the alarm off and think nothing of it.

The elevator door finally opened. Inside, it already smelled like a hospital. AJ hated hospitals, mostly because he was never there for a good reason, but also because the sterile, antiseptic smell made him nauseous.

He had known this was going to happen. It had been nagging at him for the last couple weeks, but he had tried to keep his mouth shut. Felicia hated it when he started getting, as she called it, “paranoid”. AJ preferred to think of it as showing a little common sense. Why hadn’t he done something?

“AJ?”

He was panicking now. He could tell. He had absolutely no idea who this woman talking to him was, but she knew him. How could he walk into the emergency room of a hospital and have people know him by name? He hadn’t even been to this hospital before. And what did this woman want? All he wanted to do was find his wife and find out what was wrong. Now was not the best time for him to socialize.

“We haven’t met. I’m Stacy Barnet. I came over here with Felicia.”

That made a little more sense, although there was still a missing piece somewhere. For some reason a Stacy with a British accent was supposed to ring a bell. He was pretty sure of that.

She was still talking to him, but AJ didn’t hear a word of it. He was completely focused on the scene in front of him. Felicia was lying on a gurney, her dark hair contrasting sharply with the white color of her face and the sheet she was lying on. She looked so small lying there. She was small, AJ reasoned with himself. Felicia just about reached his shoulder when she was wearing heels.

The EMT’s had oxygen hooked up, along with several other machines, blinking or beeping as they monitored various functions. AJ leaned against the wall of the emergency room. This wasn’t his life. This wasn’t happening to him - this couldn’t happen to him. The entire situation couldn’t be more surreal if he tried. He was teetering right on the edge of completely losing it.

AJ realized Stacy was standing, staring expectantly at him. He swallowed hard. “I’m sorry. What?”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. Never mind. Are you sure you’re okay?”

AJ found himself nodding. “It’s okay. This has happened before. It’s okay. Really.” AJ almost felt like he was having an out of body experience, listening to the words coming out of his mouth. This was not okay. Felicia had been admitted to the hospital before, that was true, but it had never been this serious. Something else was wrong.

One of the monitors starting beeping shrilly. AJ's heart sank. This had to be some kind of nightmare.

"Oh, God." Stacy said in shock. "Did she just flatline?"

This was not okay. This was as far from okay as AJ could get.

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"Wow." Nick said in awe when Stacy finished her narration of the evenings events. "So, is she okay?"

"I'm assuming she is." Stacy was curled up next to Nick on the couch, her head resting against his chest. "AJ, on the other hand... he's..."

"Weird." Nick finished.

"True." Stacy agreed. "But, you didn't see the look on his face when her heart stopped."

Nick's arms tightened around Stacy as he planted a kiss on the top of her head, the only place he could reach without moving. AJ would have been the last person on earth Nick would have picked to have problems. Of course, Nick never would have guessed that AJ was married either. That wasn't completely his fault, however. AJ had never hinted at anything about his personal life.

"Are you still working tomorrow?" Nick wondered. It had been close to midnight by the time Stacy arrived. Nick had been mad, since he had been waiting almost two hours, but now that the entire story was out, it didn't matter.

"That would be the general stratagem." Stacy said sleepily.

"You're using really big words again." Nick teased.

"Yes, I'm working." Stacy gave him the simple version. "Why?"

Nick shrugged, as much as he could with Stacy leaning on him. "You're gonna be tired." Stacy was up every morning by at least seven whether she was working or not, something else Nick couldn't even comprehend. As far as he was concerned, there was only one seven o'clock, and that was PM. He literally had to pry his eyes open before nine in the morning.

He stared out the window, not really paying attention to the twinkling lights outside the window, or their reflections in the dark water in the distance. This hadn't exactly been his plan for the evening, and he was a little surprised to discover that he didn't really care. Right now, he was completely happy. It seemed strange to him that all it took to make him happy was Stacy sleeping on his shoulder. Nick leaned over slightly to confirm that she was actually sleeping. She was.

Nick shifted slightly and rested his head on the back of the couch. Things were moving along a little too perfectly. There was no way this could keep up. It never did. As much as he'd like things to last, there was something about his life that managed to screw everything up, no matter how hard he tried.

## Chapter Nineteen

AJ opened his eyes to daylight reflecting off the white walls of the hospital room. He covered his eyes with one hand and winced. If he didn't know better, he would think he had a hangover. Sleeping in a chair with his head resting on the mattress of Felicia's bed hadn't done a thing to help him feel refreshed, in fact he felt worse than he had last night, and that took some doing.

He lay still for a moment, not quite awake enough to sit up yet. Right next to his head, Felicia was still sleeping. AJ could still smell her perfume, even with the hospital odor permeating the room. AJ had never been able to describe exactly what she smelled like, but he had thought about it before - several times, in fact. The closest he had ever come to pinning anything down, was if the color yellow had a scent, it would smell exactly the same.

Straightening up, he ran his hands through his hair. He was still wearing the navy blue sweatshirt that had been on under his game jersey, along with a pair of now rather wrinkled khakis and the suede jacket he had been favoring that week. No wonder he felt like crap. AJ propped his elbows on his knees and watched her for a few minutes. Last night had just about sent him over the edge. He wasn't going to go through that again, if he could ever help it, he didn't care how overprotective Felicia thought he was being. He wasn't going to lose her.

AJ yawned and stood up, stretching as much as his knotted muscles would allow. Maybe he'd head down to the cafeteria and get some coffee, probably have a cigarette too. AJ didn't smoke very often, the team wasn't impressed with the idea, and rather than have the front office breathing down his neck, AJ went along with their rules, but this officially qualified as a stressful situation.

He didn't even bother with the elevator, instead taking the stairs down the two floors to the cafeteria. Hospital food was some of the oddest substances on the planet, and the coffee was usually just as bad, but it was going to be a long, long day.

"AJ!"

AJ turned towards the voice. He might as well have worked here. For some reason, everyone seemed to know him. "Brian?"

"What are y'all doing here?" Brian cut loose with a cheery smile as he jogged up behind AJ.

"I could ask you the same thing." AJ said levelly, not giving out any information.

"I had an appointment." Brian said logically. "Everything okay?"

"No." AJ pushed through the people counter into the cafeteria, knowing Brian would follow him anyway. He did. That was just the way Brian was - a little too curious for AJ's liking.

"Kevin said y'all had a phone call last night..." Brian continued.

"Did he?" AJ snapped, paying for his cup of coffee. "Did the entire f----- team discuss it?" That was just what he needed - the entire team could talk about it, then the media would find out, and then there would be no stopping them.

Brian raised his eyebrows. "No! No one said anything, and it really pissed Buddy off because he didn't know what was going on." He stared at AJ's Styrofoam cup. "I hope that's decaf, man. Cause you seem a little stressed."

Stressed wasn't the right word. Completely out of control might start to describe the situation, but that would be an understatement.

“AJ, you’re not okay, give me that.” Brian grabbed the coffee with one hand and shoved AJ towards a table on the side of the cafeteria with the other. “C’mon, pull yourself together, buddy.” He sat down on the other side on the small square table and inspected the cup of coffee, carefully not looking at AJ.

AJ rested his head on his arms and tried to do as Brian said. He needed to get everything out of his system, but now was not the time, what with the entire hospital maintenance crew sitting two tables away, caught up in a noisy discussion of stock car racing while they took their break.

“Brian,” AJ said finally, raising his head. “Her heart stopped.” His voice broke on the last word, and AJ stared down at the gray speckled tabletop, willing himself not to fly into a million little pieces in the middle of the cafeteria. Two tables over, a loud argument broke out over the race taking place that weekend.

“Aw, AJ.” Brian said quietly. “I’m sorry.”

AJ stared over at Brian for a long moment. Most people said ‘I’m sorry’ out of habit. Brian said it and really meant it. AJ leaned back in the blue plastic chair. “She’s gonna be okay, though. She’ll be home in a couple days.”

“Just scared the living daylights out of you?”

“Oh, hell, yeah.” He paused for a minute, then decided he might as well jump in with both feet. “Every time I go on the road, it scares me to death - I keep waiting for some day when I’m in Baltimore or Toronto and I get a phone call, and there isn’t gonna be anything I can do. And then last night - it was like this incredibly awful nightmare.” AJ stopped running at the mouth and stared back down at the patterned formica table, the lump rising in his throat again.

“I have one question.” Brian raised his index finger. “Who is ‘she?’”

AJ almost laughed, the question was so absurd in a way. “My wife - Felicia.”

“Y’all are married.” Brian said it as a statement, not a question. AJ usually received a response similar to Brian’s whenever the subject came up. People looked at him as the ‘hard partying, willing to sleep with anything female’ type, which was understandable, since that was the image AJ usually went for.

“Well...” Brian smacked his hand on the table. “You’re never safe from surprise until you’re dead. You know,” he added, “Now that I look back, I have heard about her. Becky told me all about the red lipstick. She was quite impressed.” Brian said this with such solemnity it was funny.

AJ did smile now. Red lipstick - Felicia had more tubes of it than AJ could even begin to count. They appeared everywhere, except at the exact place she was looking for one. He had found them under the seat of his car, in the laundry - which was never a pretty sight - there was even one in his coat pocket at that moment in the cafeteria. He couldn’t even remember how it had ended up there. His hand tightened around it, his thumb rubbing across the smooth surface of the case.

“How long have you two been married?” Brian asked.

“Two and a half years.”

“Does she get sick a lot?” Brian fired another question across the table.

AJ sighed. “Every few months. You ever heard of chronic fatigue?”

“Yeah.” Brian said slowly. That didn’t surprise AJ in the slightest. Brian was one of those people who knew just enough about everything to be familiar with it all, but not an expert on any of it. The same could be said for his play on the field. Brian could play anywhere in the infield, or in a pinch - the outfield - he could hit anywhere in the lineup,

except the power spots, in short, Brian was the player that managers loved to have on their team, because they knew they could use him almost anywhere and he'd get the job done.

"It's their way of saying they don't know what's wrong with her." AJ gave Brian a wry smile. "That's what's so annoying about all of this. I mean, they've said mono, they've said cancer, now it's this..." AJ was running at the mouth now, but he didn't really care, and Brian didn't seem to mind either, so he kept talking.

"She gets sick when she's stresses out... what with moving up here and all... and then she won't back off once she gets tired." AJ shifted around in his chair, trying to get comfortable, and finding it impossible on the hard plastic. "I keep telling her... and she never does." That didn't surprise AJ too much. No one ever listened to him. He didn't even listen to himself. If he had listened to himself, last night wouldn't have happened. He had known what was about to happen, but he hadn't done anything about it.

"Wow." Brian said firmly, nodding his head to punctuate his point. "If that doesn't make you step up to the plate and live in the moment, I don't know what does."

AJ nodded. "Yeah." What else could he say? He checked his watch, for the first time since before the game last night. It did him very little good as far as disclosing how long he had been sitting with Brian. It was almost 9:30 in the morning. "You know what? I'm gonna head back up there."

Brian rocked his chair back onto all four legs. "You probably should. And seeing as how I'm late anyway, I should get on with my day."

"Geez, Brian, if you were late, why didn't you say so?" AJ felt just the slightest bit guilty.

Brian waved his hand in dismissal. "I spend most of my life being late. Kevin got me one of those day planner thingies, and I lost the dumb thing." He stood up, ready to leave, before pausing, his hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans. "AJ? I'll be praying for both of you, okay?"

AJ raised his eyebrows. That was one he hadn't heard before. "Yeah, thanks." He appreciated the thought, but that was all.

"AJ!" Brian said sharply as AJ prepared to leave the cafeteria.

"What?"

"Your coffee?" Brian pointed at the untouched cup on the table.

"Oh yeah. Thanks." AJ retrieved the Styrofoam cup.

"Well, we'd hate to have that high quality sludge go to waste." Brian quipped.

"Nah, I meant... everything else." AJ said quietly.

"No problem." Brian smiled. AJ wondered if Brian ever hurt his face smiling like that. "I'll cover for y'all with Buddy, okay?"

"No..." AJ started.

"Don't worry." Brian assured him. "I'll be discreet."

Discreet wasn't the first word that popped into AJ's head when he thought of Brian.

"Y'all let me know if you need anything, okay?" Brian said in parting.

AJ stood by the door of the cafeteria and watched Brian weave his way down the hallway to the elevators to the parking garage. He held the elevator door open for a little white haired-lady in a bright purple polyester suit, a big smile on his face, mouth moving the entire time. She patted him on the arm.

AJ shook his head and started back for the stairs. He couldn't quite understand Brian.

## Chapter Twenty

“See you tomorrow, Becky!” The bus driver called as Becky jumped down onto the sidewalk, her Powerpuff Girls backpack banging against her back. Brian’s tired looking blue car was parked in the driveway - crookedly. Becky’s daddy was going to have a fit about that when he came home.

“Goodbye!” Becky called back to the bus driver, before bolting for the front door. Brian was over, and he was bound to have something fun to do. He always did.

“Becky!” Brian said happily, opening the door. “Whoooa!” He added. “Look at those shoes! Those are cool, man!”

Becky bent over and stared down at the shiny red boots on her feet. “I think they are too.” Right now, her shiny red boots were her favorite shoes. They made her feet happy. “Where are Mommy and Daddy?”

“Your mother is doing her story thing at the hospital.” Brian started ticking items off on his fingers. Twice a month, Karen volunteered at Children’s Hospital, reading several stories, complete with different voices for each character. Entertaining had always been something Karen was good at.

“And your dad... I think he had a meeting with the front office, which means he’ll be in a real bad mood tonight.” Brian finished, disappearing back into the kitchen. Becky stared at his shoes. Brian didn’t have cool shoes. Brian had a pair of sneakers that must have been at least as old as Becky. They looked like a dog had been chewing on them.

“Do you want a Pop-Tart?” Brian yelled as Becky carefully hung her blue jacket on her special peg in the coat closet.

“Yes, please!” Becky called back, taking her backpack in to the kitchen table. Becky always did her homework first thing when she got home. That way it wasn’t hanging over her head for the rest of the evening. That was another strategy her father had taught her.

Brian was standing at the kitchen counter, staring down into the toaster. “Have you ever seen toaster crumbs ignite?” He wondered.

Becky giggled. Brian could be pretty weird sometimes. While her father didn’t always appreciate Brian’s sense of humor, Becky did. She also appreciated the fact that Brian always noticed her shoes.

“You’re doing your homework?” Brian said in disbelief, this sight distracting him from the toaster crumbs.

“Yes.” Becky said importantly. She had a math worksheet to fill out. First grade was a lot more work than kindergarten had been. Becky couldn’t even begin to imagine the workload she would have in second grade. She would probably spend an entire hour and a half on homework. Becky couldn’t even begin to imagine such a thing.

“Y’all get a kangaroo on your homework?” Brian peered over Becky’s shoulder at the sheet of white paper. “I never got animals on my homework.” He sounded disappointed.

Becky shrugged and started work. They put animals on the homework to make it more kid friendly. Becky wasn’t a stupid child. She knew that. “Brian?”

“Yes!” Brian yelped, burning his hand on the Pop-Tarts as he took them from the toaster.

“I thought we were going to go to the zoo sometime.” Becky figured a gentle reminder couldn’t hurt. Last winter, when Becky’s class had gone on a field trip to

Woodland Park Zoo, Becky had come down with a cold. Brian had the flu at the same time, and he informed Becky that since they had both been sick, they'd just have to go another time. Becky wasn't sure how Brian arrived at that conclusion, since it was her field trip and not his, but if he said he was taking her to the zoo, she wasn't going to argue.

"I never said that." Brian denied around the Pop-Tart in his mouth. He dropped the other one on the table next to Becky's worksheet.

"You did too." Becky reprimanded, staring at Brian expectantly.

"Are you sure?" Brian questioned, before smiling widely around his mouthful of Pop-Tart. "I'm kidding... we'll go to the zoo, okay? I just don't know when. In case y'all haven't noticed, I kind of got a schedule to keep right now."

"I know." Becky said solemnly.

"We'll get there sometime." Brian rocked his chair back onto two legs. "Promise."

"Daddy doesn't like it when you do that." Becky reminded Brian. "It leaves marks on the floor." Her daddy complained about Brian a lot, but Becky was still pretty sure that he liked Brian. He just liked complaining too.

"If your dad has nothin' better to do with his time than look for marks on the floor..." Brian muttered, leaving his chair exactly as it was.

Becky concentrated on finishing the first row of math problems. That was when she remembered. She had something she wanted to talk to Brian about. "Brian... I was thinking about angels."

"Uh-huh." Not only did Brian always notice Becky's shoes, he was more than willing to discuss angels with her any time she wanted. For someone over the age of twenty, Brian was pretty cool.

"So, angels are here on earth to help us, only we don't know it." Becky started explaining her latest idea.

"That's one theory." Brian affirmed, standing up and unwrapping the foil from another two Pop-Tarts.

"Okay... I was thinking about that today." Becky set down her favorite blue sparkly pencil so she could concentrate. "And I'm not sure if that's entirely correct."

"Now you're rewriting the entire guardian angel doctrine?" Brian raised one eyebrow.

Becky shook her blond head firmly. "No. I still think that, but I also think that maybe we're supposed to help the angels too."

Brian chewed his cold Pop-Tart slowly, thinking. "How do you mean?"

"Angels have problems too." Becky insisted. Angels had to have problems - if they were perfect, then they would have been God. Even Becky could see that.

Brian dropped into the chair next to Becky, propping his elbows on the table and staring intently at her. Brian had very bright blue eyes. "You're a pretty amazing little kid. Where do y'all come up with these ideas?"

Becky shrugged. "I thought of this one on the school bus." Ideas came to her in strange places.

"Keep going." Brian waved his hand in circles. "I want to hear more of this."

“Here’s the pitch to Richardson, and it’s out of play behind home plate, 2-1.” Niehaus announced. “The M’s are looking for an insurance run here. AJ McLean left the team two days ago on personal business, and the bullpen faltered the last couple nights. Here’s the pitch... Kevin lines that into shallow left field, that’s a base hit, which brings up his cousin, second baseman, Brian Littrell, with one out and one on. In all probability, Littrell will be sacrificing here.” Niehaus paused for a moment. “Buddy Williams is sending Carlos Ramos in to pinch run for Richardson.”

“Brad Arton is up in the Mariners bullpen.” Charlie Chasez added. “It looks like he’ll be going for the save in the bottom of the ninth.”

“Here’s the pitch to Littrell.” Dave continued. “He squares around and drops a beauty of a bunt down the third baseline... “ His voice started to climb. “And the throw to first is... in time. He almost beat that one out. Ramos is sacrificed to second, and with two outs, here’s shortstop Luis Alicea. The pitch... he hits it sharply to second, and Miller throws him out easily. It’s hang on time. We go to the bottom of the ninth, Mariners 4, Tigers 3.”

## Chapter Twenty One

“AJ.” Kevin stopped on his way down the clubhouse aisle. “Nice to see you back. How’you doing?”

“Just peachy.” AJ said flatly. So far over half the team had stopped by to inquire how he was and poke their noses into his life. AJ’s temper was wearing more than a little short.

“You okay?” Kevin wondered, before elaborating. “Cause you look like crap, man.”

“Yeah, that’s my new look. Like it?” AJ retorted. Of course he looked like crap. He had spent the last two days of his life sitting in a hospital room. Felicia had gone home this morning, and was feeling well enough to inform AJ that if he didn’t leave the house and stop hovering, she was going to kill him. Since he had a feeling she was more than half serious, he had left for the ballpark. In the grand scheme of life, AJ was feeling a lot better. In the clubhouse - he was about ready to rip someone’s head off.

Kevin just raised one thick eyebrow at AJ’s response and moved on down the aisleway, heading out to supervise batting practice, no doubt. Kevin held illusions of being in charge, and the rest of the team - with the exception of Nick - let Kevin live in his happy little world.

“Brian!” Kevin was barking orders again. “Is Nick here?”

Brian rattled off a response that AJ didn’t even come close to understanding, but the meaning was clear. Nick was not there.

Kevin disappeared out onto the field, grumbling about young players and respect and rules.

AJ finished buttoning his jersey and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. What he felt like doing was grabbing a bat and beating the crap out of something until he felt better. - and if he was looking for a bat, he’d come to the right place.

Nick banged noisily through the clubhouse door, his equipment bag over his shoulder. Nick had three different looks - there was the Yankees rookie of the year, leather jacket, nice shirt and pants look; there was the snowboarder cargo pants and sweatshirt look and there was the Adidas pants and t-shirt athlete look. Today, Nick was an athlete.

“You’re late.” Howie said to Nick in way of greeting. “Kevin’s really pissed and stuff like that.”

“Yeah, well, Kevin isn’t the boss of me.” Nick retorted. “And they had the interstate shut down to one lane.”

There was silence after that, except for the sound of Howie’s feet as he headed for the dugout, the last to leave the clubhouse, except for Nick and AJ. AJ didn’t even look up. Nick was focused enough on himself that he just might leave AJ alone.

“Hey, AJ.”

Or then again, maybe he wouldn’t. AJ straightened up slowly. Nick actually looked concerned, which surprised him.

“How’s Felicia?” Nick asked.

AJ processed that comment. How exactly had Nick learned that? It must have been Brian. He should have known Brian wouldn’t be able to keep his mouth shut. “How did you...” He started, before two rather large pieces fell into place in his head. Stacy with the accent. The girl that Nick never shut up about. Now it made sense. “Let me guess...

it involves ‘Stacy.’” Too late, AJ realized that comment had come out snippier than he intended. In fact, it sounded downright vindictive.

A hurt look flashed through Nick’s eyes for just a moment, before it was replaced with the usual blank expression Nick wore around the clubhouse and on the field. “Fine, AJ.” He said quietly. “I was just trying to be nice.”

AJ watched Nick head back to his locker and start changing into his uniform, before staring back down at the blue carpet on the floor of the clubhouse. Today was really not going well. AJ’s week was not going well. He was pretty sure he couldn’t come up with a positive moment in the entire homestand. Well, he had set Kevin’s shoelaces on fire, but that didn’t account for much in the grand scheme of things.

“Nick...” AJ started.

Nick ignored him, bending over to tie his shoes.

AJ stood up and marched over to Nick’s locker. “Nick, listen to me.” Nick still didn’t say anything, but AJ figured he couldn’t help but hear him anyway. “I apologize for being a jerk, okay?”

Nick gave AJ a skeptical glance before he yanked his blue batting practice jersey over his head. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s NOT okay!” AJ swung his foot at the stool next to Nick, sending it out into the middle of the room, where it rolled into a table.

Nick’s jaw dropped slightly and he took a step backwards from AJ.

“Felicia’s doing a lot better.” AJ shoved his hands into the pockets of his jacket.

“Thank you for asking.”

Nick now looked thoroughly confused. “Okay... um... I’m glad she’s okay.”

Kevin stalked back into the clubhouse, stopping in his tracks, his green eyes narrowing, when he saw Nick. “Nice of you to show up.”

“Last I heard, you weren’t the manager.” Nick said evenly.

“Just get your a-- out on the field, Carter.” Kevin retorted, spinning around and marching back out of the room.

Nick flipped off Kevin’s retreating back. AJ couldn’t help himself, he had to laugh at that.

“What?” Kevin snapped, heading back again. He was going to wear a hole in the carpet if he kept this up. He glared at Nick. “Don’t go thinkin’ I don’t know what you just did.”

Nick didn’t say anything, staring at Kevin impassively.

“What was so funny, AJ?” Kevin’s interrogation changed focus.

“Well... you know that saying ‘Experience is the sinking feeling you have made this mistake before?’” AJ shrugged, saying the first thing that popped into his head. “I think that should be the bullpen motto.” That wasn’t a half bad idea, now that he thought of it. Inspiration could strike at some very strange moments.

Kevin rolled his eyes and departed again.

“Day-um.” AJ said in appreciation. “You’re incredibly good at pissing him off. That was beautiful.”

“Yeah...” Nick gave AJ a slightly crooked smile. “I figure if he’s gonna hate me, I might as well give him a reason.”

Kevin folded his arms across his chest protector and waited patiently. AJ was making his grand entrance... Sisco was blaring over the sound system, and AJ was taking his sweet time jogging in across the outfield grass.

Sam Ventrella, the pitching coach, shook his head and sighed. "I'm not sure if I'm glad he's back or not."

Kevin agreed with that sentiment wholeheartedly. It had taken AJ the first forty five minutes of batting practice to return to his usual whacked-out form. By the time practice was over, he was flipping cartwheels across the outfield and bouncing off the outfield walls in imitation of Nick going after a fly ball. The mood of the team had lightened considerably in the last four hours, but at the same time, AJ could be incredibly annoying to deal with.

AJ arrived at the mound, circled around it once, before marching up the backside and carefully placing both his feet on the rubber. "Well..." He said calmly, more to himself than the two other people watching him. "That was exhilarating."

"Well, bully for you." Sam said, handing him the ball. "Just save the game, okay?"

"Bully for me." AJ repeated vaguely, winding up, then stopping with one foot raised in the air. "Kevin? Why aren't you behind the plate?"

"Okay, I'm going..." Kevin turned and headed back to the plate, half expecting AJ to nail him in the back with the ball. That was just the sort of stunt AJ would find funny.

Thankfully, AJ had enough self control to hold onto the ball. Kevin reached home plate and turned around, shaking his head when he saw AJ still standing on the mound, halfway through his windup, looking somewhat like a pink plastic flamingo.

## Chapter Twenty Two

Stacy shoved her hair back from her face and stared up at the ceiling. The morning after was always an awkward situation. Maybe she should just leave now. She leaned over to look at the clock next to the bed. It was already nine thirty. Nick was completely buried under the covers next to her, just the top of his head visible, hair sticking up every whichway.

She sat up and reached for her shirt. Never, in her entire life, had she moved this quickly into a relationship before. The strange thing was, it didn't worry her in the slightest.

"Hey." Nick said sleepily from under the covers. "Where are you going?"

Stacy stopped guiltily. He hadn't been sleeping after all.

He poked his head up from under the blanket and flashed her an irresistible smile. "C'mon! It's Saturday morning! Come back here!"

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"Darn those infielders..." Brian greeted Nick as he flopped back onto the dugout bench. "They're always in the way, aren't they?"

Nick had lined a ball towards the hole at shortstop, almost positive he had a hit, until the shortstop dove for it and threw Nick out on a Sports Center worthy play. Right now, Nick could care less. In the last eight games, he was sitting slightly under .600. He knew the three hits a night pace couldn't keep up forever, but he was going to enjoy it while he could.

"Where were you this morning?" Brian added.

Nick shrugged and tapped the end of his bat on the dugout floor.

"Cause I called you, and you weren't home." Brian finished suspiciously. "I strongly doubt you were up and moving before nine, buddy."

Nick ignored Brian, staring up through the mesh fence at the field. Scott Martin was flailing away at the plate, fouling off pitch after pitch. Nick had been home, but Brian really didn't need to know that.

"The two of you are gettin' kind of serious, aren'tcha?" Brian observed.

"I guess."

"You guess?" Brian said in disbelief. "Geez, Nick! Has there been more than a three hour period where the two of you were separated?" Brian scowled. "I haven't had a date in two weeks."

"You had one two weeks ago? I didn't hear about that." Nick was surprised.

"Yeah, well, I don't exactly want to talk about it." Brian grouched. "Thanks, Howie!" He yelled towards the other end of the dugout.

Howie held up his fingers in a peace sign. "You're welcome!"

"He has no clue what I'm talking about. Never let Howie set you up with someone." Brian shook his head. "C'mon, Scott!" He hollered at the field, as Martin one off the wall in right center, and was heading for second. "Pick 'em up and put 'em down!"

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Felicia unsnapped the clip holding her hair up on the back of her head, letting her curls tumble down around her shoulders. As mildly upset as she had been, having to leave her life in Tampa, the house they had found in Seattle had made up for a lot of it. She could easily spend her entire life in this bedroom. The house was in an older area of Seattle, set back from the street, and surrounded by maple and oak trees.

Narrow windows made up the east side of the room, stretching from the ceiling to the window seat, the green leaves outside just a couple feet away from the glass.

“What? You spying on the neighbors again?” AJ wondered, appearing behind her and pulling one of the white curtains aside, looking out at the darkened landscape. It was impossible to see any neighbors from the windows, but that didn’t matter to AJ.

“Did you pack?” Felicia asked, leaning back against AJ’s burgundy and black shirt. Packing was always a several hour ordeal for AJ. Clothing for the next three cities had to be chosen carefully.

“Yeah.” AJ wasn’t happy with the idea of leaving tomorrow for the second longest road trip of the season, but Felicia thought he was handling it admirably well - for AJ. He had been in a mood for the last few days anyway. He wrapped both his arms around her, resting his chin on the top of her head. “Do you...”

“Yes.” Felicia finished. “I have a stack of phone numbers two inches thick. Besides, Stacy already said she would stop by.” Stacy and Nick had stopped by earlier that day, after AJ had already left for Safeco Field.

Felicia’s father was the ultimate Atlanta Braves fan and as a result, Felicia had grown up with baseball. She had seen a good portion of Bob Carter’s career, including his glory years with the Yankees, and heard more than enough about the Carter family, since they spent their offseason in Tampa. After Nick’s rookie season, she was impressed with his playing ability, although just a little disaffected by his attitude. Sometimes he was quite charming in interviews, but more often than not, he was the spoiled brat of the league.

Then, earlier that day, she had met Nick for the first time and was completely taken aback by the difference in personality. The first word that came to mind to describe him had been adorable. Off field, Nick had a very cute, sweet, slightly clueless charisma that didn’t show up on camera.

“Are you even listening to me?” AJ said testily.

“I’m sorry, what?” Felicia hadn’t heard a word he had said. She might be feeling better, but her mind was still a little fuzzy. One of the many prescriptions she was taking was supposed to help with that, but it didn’t seem to be operating at it’s full potential.

AJ let go of her waist and stalked back across the room. “Never mind.”

“Alex...” She started after him. “What is your problem?”

“My problem?” AJ repeated cynically, before he spun around and kicked the bedframe as hard as he could. “What? Was that supposed to be funny?” As his way of dealing with frustration, AJ kicked inanimate objects. Eventually, he was going to kick something concrete and break his foot, but so far the casualty list only included a few broken lamps and a small dent in the refrigerator door.

AJ sank down on the bed and rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. “You have no idea how tired I am of all of this.” His voice was so quiet Felicia could barely hear him.

“No, I know exactly how tired of it you are.” Felicia corrected him softly.

AJ's brown eyes stared at her for a long moment, before he shook his head slightly and flopped backwards onto the bed. "Lissie, I can't do this anymore."

"Can't do what?" Felicia perched next to him on the bed.

"All of..." AJ broke off, reaching up to pull her down next to him, burying his face in her hair. "I don't want to..." His voice broke. "I'm scared I'm gonna lose you." He whispered, before he wrapped his arms around her tightly and started crying in earnest.

Felicia hugged his skinny frame in return, since it was the only thing she could think of to do. AJ was always the one who was in control, not her. The tables had suddenly flipped on her and she wasn't quite sure what to make of the entire situation.

She lost track of time while they lay there, but eventually AJ's arms loosened and she could tell from his breathing that he had fallen asleep. He shifted slightly, lying on his side, one arm under his head. His eyelashes were still wet, making them look darker than usual, and there were still damp trails running down his face. Felicia reached over and brushed at his face carefully, trying not to wake him up. AJ didn't even flinch.

Fishing around behind her on the bed, her fingers found the woven throw blanket that usually sat at the end of the bed for decorative purposes. She pulled it up over both of them, before curling up against AJ's chest.

Her head fit perfectly in the niche between AJ's neck and shoulder. When she was laying there, nothing else mattered. It didn't matter if she was sick, it didn't matter if she was so tired she could barely move, all that mattered was she was with the one person in the world that she was meant to spend her entire life with, and everything was going to be okay.

AJ's right arm slipped protectively around her waist, pulling her in closer to him. Felicia closed her eyes and listened to him breathe for a moment. Everything was going to be okay this time too.

## Chapter Twenty Three

Baseball lasts for six months of the year, not counting the playoffs. After the first month, every game begins to look the same as the game before, they all blur together into one large collage of runs, errors, wins and losses. Then, before anyone realizes it, September looms on the horizon and the pennant race begins in earnest.

Although the Mariners had gotten off to a slow start, they had evened out nicely, and were keeping pace with and occasionally gaining a game on the division leading Oakland Athletics. Nick was back to his rookie of the year form, tearing the cover off the ball, although his off-field attitude had improved slightly. No one was sure if it was because he had matured, or if it was the fact he wasn't in New York, but Nick hadn't smarted off to a reporter since the beginning of May.

Howie Dorough was off to a career year start. He was with the league leaders in hitting, and for once in his life, was actually fielding balls that were hit to him. Everyone following the Mariners were shocked by this turn of events, and none more so than Howie himself. His wide, toothy grin had been on his face more than usual the last few weeks. If he kept this pace up for the rest of the season, he stood a good chance in the MVP standings, and the Mariners stood a good chance of making the playoffs.

Still, it was only the beginning of June, and several months too soon to make any sort of logical predications regarding the outcome of the pennant races. The Mariners were playing the Blue Jays in Toronto, two games away from wrapping up their second longest road trip.

Stacy was sitting in the middle of her living room couch, a bag of pretzels open next to her, watching the Mariners slaughter the Blue Jays rookie pitcher. It was the second inning, and the Mariners were up 12-0. There was no point to watching the game for the suspense, so Stacy was now watching just for Nick. He was on first base, skipping back to the bag every few moments, as the pitcher, rattled by the amount of runs he had already given up, kept throwing over to first in an attempt to stop Nick from stealing.

The television camera cut from the scowl on the young pitcher's face to Nick, who had taken a large lead yet again, and was staring in at the plate in concentration, his tongue clamped between his teeth, just the tip of it sticking out.

Stacy couldn't help but smile. It didn't matter what he was doing, as soon as Nick's brain focused, the tongue appeared. It was one of his more endearing little quirks. Managing to completely untuck every sheet and blanket on the bed in the middle of the night was not one of his better qualities. Stacy pursed her lips and concentrated on the TV again. Her mind was heading places it was better off staying out of.

On the field, left fielder Terrance Davis smacked a hit into left field, the ball bouncing sharply on the blue/green AstroTurf at the SkyDome. Nick rounded second and charged head on into third base, literally belly-flopping on top of the bag.

"That one had to hurt." The TV announcer said in amusement, as they replayed Nick's attempt at sliding, before panning to the Mariners dugout. Brian was standing on the top step, yelling at the field as loudly as he could. Everyone else was either laughing or smiling, even Kevin, who had a small smirk on his face.

Nick was standing on top of third base, bent over with his hands on his knees. The camera clearly caught his response as he straightened up. "Ow!"

"They're not going to let him forget that one for a while." The announcer finished, as the Blue Jay's pitcher finally recorded another out, and Kevin started for the plate.

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Becky carefully stirred the milk in her cereal bowl, watching as the little red Crunch Berries turned her milk pink. It was a very quiet morning. Her parents had been at a party the night before and Brian had come over to baby-sit. He was still asleep on the living room couch - Becky had checked very carefully, before pouring her bowl of Captain Crunch.

Her parents were still sleeping too. Becky knew that they never woke up before noon if they had gone to any semblance of a social function the night before. Her father had probably had too much to drink, as he normally did. Becky was slightly disappointed they had come home after she had fallen asleep. Her daddy could be pretty funny sometimes.

“Holy cow.” Brian muttered as he came in the kitchen, both arms up in front of his face to shield the sunlight streaming through the window over the kitchen sink.

“Good morning.” Becky said, calmly stirring her pink milk.

“I have the headache from hell.” Brian announced, resting his head on the fridge door.

“Don’t swear in front of children.” Becky said primly, giving up on her milk and carrying her bowl to the sink. There was nothing her father hated worse than waking up with a hangover and finding a dirty cereal bowl on the kitchen table.

“I wasn’t swearing.” Brian corrected. “I honestly meant it came from hell.” He straightened up, still squinting at the light, and patted Becky on the top of her head. “I’m going home. If there’s a fire or something, drag your parents outside, ‘kay?”

“Okay.” Becky said doubtfully, not entirely sure how she was expected to move either of her parents. Luckily, the chances of a fire were very slim. Her father did routine safety checks to assure the risk of fire was kept to a minimum. Of course, then her mother would do something unpredictable and leave a roll of paper towels on the kitchen stove. Maybe Becky should come up with a safety plan in case of fire.

“What are y’all staring at?” Brian waved his hand in front of Becky’s face. “Help me find my keys.”

“Daddy put them in the drawer so you wouldn’t lose them.” Becky opened the catch-all drawer at the end of the counter and handed Brian his keys.

“If he would just leave my stuff alone...” Brian grumbled. “I knew exactly where they were before he moved them...” Brian disappeared towards the front door, mumbling about couch cushions.

“Get better soon, Brian!” Becky called after him cheerfully.

The front door banged shut. Becky sighed. It was going to be a long boring morning if this kept up. She knelt on her chair and pulled a piece of paper and her crayon box towards her. Brian let her keep her art supplies on the table overnight. Her father would have made her put them away in the closet.

Becky carefully selected her best black crayon and carefully started drawing a floor plan of the house. She was almost finished outlining the first floor when she heard water running upstairs. That meant her mother was awake. That was good - now Becky would hear if her father had done anything silly last night.

“Good morning.” Becky said calmly, as her mother bounced into the kitchen, wearing sweatpants and one of Kevin’s t-shirts.

“Oh, how cute!” Karen squealed, looking over Becky’s shoulder at her drawing. “It’s a house, right, sweetie?”

“Yes.” Becky said solemnly. “I think we need a fire escape plan.”

“It’s probably a good idea.” Karen agreed absently. “You should hang it on the fridge when you’re done. Where’s Brian?”

“He went home because he had a headache.” Becky set aside the first floor and started work on the second.

“Oooh... that reminds me.” Karen winced. “It’s Sunday. Your father has to be at the ballpark in two hours.”

“That means you have to wake him up.” Becky finished.

“At times like these, I begin to wonder why I married him.” Karen said thoughtfully.

“I thought you married him because he was a hot, sexy hunk.” Becky said reproachfully. That was what her mother had always said before.

“Shhhhhh!” Karen waved her arms in the air. “Do you have to repeat EVERYTHING I say?”

## Chapter Twenty Four

Article in Seattle P.I. - June 8th

*With all the talk about AJ McLean and Nick Carter this season, it might seem at times that they were the only two players on the team. But, while Carter continues to make us wonder if he's worth all the fuss people make over him, and McLean continues just to plain make us wonder, some of their teammates have been putting together a stellar season.*

*Take veteran catcher, Kevin Richardson, for starters. Richardson has been in the majors for seven years, but this season he's hitting .272 with 15 home runs, just a month away from the All-Star break. His career season high total for home runs is 17. Not only that, but he hasn't bit a pitcher's head off all season long - at least not on the field. Teammates say Kevin's still his hotheaded self in the clubhouse. "He still wants things done a certain way, and they usually get done that way." Third baseman Howie Dorough says, calmly. "You don't argue with Kevin."*

*Speaking of Dorough, he's having a season to remember as well. Dorough is currently one of the top five hitters in the American League, sporting a batting average of .349. Everyone always knew he could hit, it was his defense that had been in question for the last few years - and this year, he's improved drastically in that area as well. Last year, he accumulated a career high 52 errors at third. So far this year, he only has 11 errors.*

*"I spent the offseason playing winter ball." Dorough explains. "It really helped a lot - plus, this season, things have kind of focused on other guys on the team, rather than on what I'm doing... it kind of took the pressure off me."*

*When asked about last season, and the way even the local fans turned on him, Howie just shrugs. "That's all behind me now... you can't sit and dwell on it. Last year was a terrible season for me, I probably deserved a lot of what people were saying about me. You just have to deal with it."*

*The person who was most vocal about the fans hostility toward Dorough last season, was Mariners second baseman Brian Littrell. Littrell expressed his displeasure with the local fans over their attitude several times throughout the course of the season, seemingly to no avail. Ask anyone on the team, and they'll tell you that Brian is the "nice guy" of the team. He's the one willing to stick up for anyone. He's the one with the perpetual grin on his face.*

*He's also the one leading the team in fielding percentage and comes in a close second in on base percentage, right behind lead off hitter Luis Alicea. For the last two years, Littrell has put in a solid defensive display at second base - one which goes largely unheralded. But, don't let that fool you. It isn't as if people aren't aware of the job Brian has been doing.*

*"He's Mr Dependable." says right fielder Nick Carter. "He's always in the right place at the right time, he does all the little stuff that doesn't get noticed - he's always backing someone up, or sacrificing someone over, all the little things like that."*

*Hitting coach Jesse Hatfield agrees with what Carter said, plus more. "Brian's the first player at the park in the afternoon, and he's the last to leave after the game. He puts in more work than a lot of the guys on the team combined."*

*Littrell has opinions of his own on the subject. "You know," he says, leaning back on the dugout bench, before the game, the ever present smile on his face. "When it comes down to it, what you do individually doesn't matter that much. Sure, it can get you into the Hall of Fame, but this is a team sport, and what matters to me, is what we do as a team. It takes twenty-five guys to get to the World Series, and that's my goal. I'm gonna have as much fun as I can along the way, but I want to go to the World Series, and I'm willing to do whatever it takes to get there."*

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Felicia paused behind the couch in the living room, staring down at her husband. It was times like these that she was both confused as to why she found him attractive, and at the same time, quite positive he was the most wonderful person on the face of the earth.

AJ was lying on the couch, his legs flung up over the back, his head hanging down off the cushions towards the floor, a three inch gap between his khakis and t-shirt exposing the 69 tattooed on his stomach. He was holding the remote in his hand; happily channel surfing, watching the pictures flash by - upside down.

"Alex?" Felicia had something fairly important to tell him, and she had a feeling he wasn't going to take it as well as she hoped he would. She hadn't been this happy in months, but AJ, being the chronic worrier that he was, wasn't going to look at the situation in the same light she did.

"Uh-huh." AJ said, still watching the channels speed by. "Whoa!" He said in delight, pausing for a moment. "Larry King looks even scarier upside down!"

"Are you listening to me?"

"Yep." AJ said confidently.

"Guess what!" Felicia prompted, a note of elation slipping into her voice. She slipped over the arm of the couch and sat down next to him, pulling her knees up to her chin.

"Give me a hint." AJ's voice said from the floor.

"Remember spring training?" She might as well start at the beginning.

"Oh yeah. It's warm, and you get to play golf all day. Helluva lot more fun than the regular season."

"I meant us, last spring training."

"Oh - that." AJ backtracked. "I remember that too 'cause there was lots of sex involved. And you had this bikini... I think it was pink, but you know, I'm not actually sure, because I didn't really spend a whole lot of time looking at the actual material..." He stopped channel surfing, the TV stopping on VH1, another story of a washed up child star blaring out through the speakers. AJ clicked the power button repeatedly until the TV finally turned black. "Geez, you sound giddy." He said slowly, still hanging upside down.

"Well, you were on the right track... only it has nothing to do with the bikini."

"That leaves sex and golf." AJ said thoughtfully.

Felicia rolled her eyes. "Must you reason everything out like this?"

"Yes!" AJ sat up straight, sitting Indian style on the couch. "This is how my mind works." He thought quietly for a moment, his eyes blinking owlishly. "I'm assuming the golf part is ruled out, since you never do anything but sit by the pool." His eyes

widened. “Oh wait. That would leave the...” His mouth dropped open. “You’re saying I’m pregnant, right?”

Felicia closed her eyes and tried very hard not to burst into laughter. He reasoned everything out, and that had been his conclusion. Only the mind of AJ.

“Stop laughing, Lissie, you know what I mean.” AJ grumbled.

“I’m due in November!” Felicia couldn’t contain her excitement any longer, flinging both her arms around AJ’s neck - a little too enthusiastically - as AJ toppled backwards off the couch onto the floor, pulling her with him.

“Holy s---!” AJ yelled. “No... wait...” He said slowly. “Actually, I think it’s okay. It’s only a collapsed vertebrae. It’s cool.”

“Sorry.” Felicia giggled, knowing he wasn’t really hurt. AJ was a tad accident prone - he’d fallen off furniture before.

“Hang on...” AJ grabbed her hand as she started to get up, pulling her back down on top of him. “Don’t get me wrong here - I really am thrilled, in fact, if it wasn’t for the excruciating pain in my lower back, my face might actually look happy - but, I think we need to have a little talk here, cause I’m assuming this is why you ended up in the ER. I really don’t like those heart monitors going off, okay?” His tried to pass off his last comment as a joke, but failed miserably.

“Alex, I’m going to be okay, I’ll be careful, I promise.” She meant it too. It had only taken her the last few hours to completely fall in love with the entire idea of having a child, and she was going to do everything in her power to make sure everything went smoothly.

“Okay.” AJ said finally, reaching up to tug at one of the curls hanging over her shoulder.

“That’s all?” Felicia said in surprise. AJ had never left anything at ‘okay’ before. He usually lectured her to death, no matter what she said. It could be sweet sometimes, but more often than not, Felicia found it somewhat annoying.

AJ tipped his head to the side and smiled faintly. “There’s not a whole lot else I can say. If you promise to take it easy, then... I’m cool.”

Felicia’s eyes widened. This was a first. “Who are you and what did you do with my husband?”

AJ sat up, not affected in the slightest by his rather abrupt connection with the floor. “Very funny. Very, very funny.” He leaned over, kissing her softly on the lips, before pulling away, a slightly crazed grin on his face. “This is gonna be so awesome! You know - we’ll get to buy those Baby GAP clothes and those cute little shoes!”

## Chapter Twenty Five

“We close in on the traditional halfway point of the season - the All-Star game.” Dave Niehaus waxed poetic, killing time while the pitcher and catcher conferred on the mound. “It feels like it takes forever to get to this point, but now that we’re here, it’ll be the playoffs before we even realize it. Of course, the Mariners have two players invited to this year’s Mid-Summer Classic. Neither were voted by the fans, but Cleveland manager Rob Walker selected both Howie Dorough and AJ McLean to this year’s All-Star team. McLean declined the invitation a few days ago, preferring to spend the break with his family, but Dorough will be traveling to the east coast tomorrow with the other All-Stars.

“As the first half of the season draws to a close, the Mariners have put together a strong drive, winning the last four games in a row, and eight out of their last nine. They’ve almost caught up to the division leading A’s, and since it is only early July, things are looking up for the Mariners. A lot can still happen in the next three months...” Niehaus trailed off as the game resumed. “Here’s the pitch to Kinomoto...”

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“You’re gonna hate me for what I did.”

Kevin jumped. Brian had suddenly appeared at his arm in the parking garage. Kevin hated it when Brian snuck up on him like that - and he suspected Brian knew, which was the reason he kept doing it.

“And what did you do?” Kevin inquired, making his voice as sugary as possible. He doubted it could be that bad. Even if it was, Kevin was in a good mood. He had the next three days off, and it was going to be a nice break. As much as he loved playing baseball, the grind could get to him after a few months.

“Well, y’all know the picnic?” Brian started.

Kevin did know the picnic. The last two years, over the All-Star break, some of the players and their families spent the day at a local park, consuming too much potato salad, and playing extremely competitive softball games. This year, it looked to be Brian; Kevin and Scott’s families; and AJ and his wife, whom Kevin had invited this year.

“What about the picnic?”

Brian crossed himself. “Father, forgive me, I think I sinned...”

Kevin rolled his eyes. “I ain’t a priest here.”

“I kind of invited Nick.” Brian said quickly.

“Kind of?” Kevin’s hands formed quote marks as he repeated the words. “How do you ‘kind of’ invite someone?”

Brian shrugged. “Okay, I invited Nick.”

There went Kevin’s All-Star break. He drew in a deep breath, scowling down at his cousin, who strangely enough, still looked happy. “What the f--- possessed you to do somethin’ like that?”

Brian arched one eyebrow at Kevin’s choice of words. “Nothing ‘possessed’ me, Kevin. I was merely being nice. I didn’t realize it was gonna be this big a deal to you.”

Kevin unlocked his SUV and shoved his bag in the backseat. “It’s not.” He said sharply. Actually, it was. There was something about Nick’s attitude that rubbed Kevin

the wrong way. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but it was something phony and almost hypocritical in a way about Nick. If there was one thing about people that Kevin couldn't stand, it was someone who pretended to be something they weren't, and he was getting more and more of a feeling that was his main problem with Nick.

"Just thought y'all might want to know." Brian bared his teeth in a cheesy grin and headed for his beater of a car. Kevin stood next to the door of his SUV and watched Brian march to his Civic, fiddling with the lock for a few moments until the key finally unlocked the door.

Brian had owned that car since he had graduated highschool, claiming he kept it because of emotional attachments. Kevin couldn't understand how Brian could be attached to a mechanical object that wouldn't unlock half the time, usually killed while going down hills, and had only one working speaker. But, Brian kept everything - as was evidenced by his apartment and the back seat of his car. So he chugged around in his little Civic, perfectly happy, his blue and red fuzzy dice still hanging from the rearview mirror from when he had played in Anaheim.

The Civic started, choked once or twice, killed, started again, and slowly putted out of the parking garage.

"Yeah..." Kevin muttered, starting his car. "Thanks for letting me know." Suddenly, he was feeling depressed.

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Newsbit in Seattle P.I. - July 5th

*Trade rumors have been flying the last few days, and Mariners general manager Joseph Wright has confirmed that they have received offers regarding the M's #1 starting pitcher Tim Casella and closer AJ McLean, but neither of them will be leaving the team. "We're looking to add to our pitching staff, not subtract from it. We are looking at several different deals, but Casella is not part of them, and McLean is certainly not an option."*

*The Mariners could part with third-baseman Howie Dorough. In past years, Dorough has been somewhat of a hazard in the infield, but he can hit, and this year is putting together a career season. The Mariners would miss his bat in the lineup, but now that Carter is swinging the bat well, holes could be filled in the offense if the Mariners were to get a good quality starter for the stretch run.*

*Rumor also has it that the Mariners are looking to trade right fielder Nick Carter. After being traded to Seattle, Carter never returned to his previous rookie of the year form. However, Carter's sometimes insolent attitude both on and off the field is earning him a reputation in the league, and other teams, while interested because of his playing ability, are shying away. First baseman Scott Martin is another option for the front office. Martin has been a good solid first baseman his entire career, but is expendable for the Mariners, provided they could acquire a good arm in the deal.*

*Unconfirmed sources with the San Diego Padres say there's a deal in the works that would send both Carter and Martin to the Padres for starting pitcher Doug Drusell and left-handed reliever Mark Wagner, but the Mariners front office denies the trade.*

## Chapter Twenty Six

“Well, look who showed up anyway.” Scott shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans as he watched the Mustang pull into the parking lot.

Kevin grunted impassively in response.

“Last warning.” Brian said firmly, marching up to the two men, his eyes narrowed in a rather pathetic attempt to look menacing. “NICE. That goes for you too, Scott, although I’m not as worried about you.”

“You’re not the boss of me.” Scott protested mildly, not as irked as Kevin that Nick was there. Scott got along with Nick tolerably well, when Kevin wasn’t around. Scott had even developed a small amount of respect for him. For his age and experience, Nick had an amazing amount of knowledge and skill. Nick was talented - Scott wasn’t denying that fact. The problem was that Nick knew exactly how good he was.

“Brian!” Becky screamed from where she was sorting through softball equipment along with Scott’s two children.

“I’m coming!” Brian hollered back.

Scott rubbed his ear and took a step away from Brian.

“You have been warned.” Brian pointed his finger at each of them in turn, then disappeared back over to the grassy field.

“He reminds me of that ship on Star Trek.” Scott said thoughtfully. “You know - it appears and vanishes at the speed of light.”

Kevin grunted again.

“I didn’t know Nick had a girl.” Scott added, noting the pretty redhead following Nick as they approached.

This time Kevin laughed. “Where have you been? He hasn’t shut up about her for two months.”

“Oh.” Scott didn’t pay a whole lot of attention to the clubhouse banter. “Um, am I supposed to know her name or something?” He added quietly.

Kevin raised one eyebrow skeptically; still standing with his feet spread apart, arms folded across his chest.

“Hey.” Nick said in greeting, not quite smiling, but not scowling either.

“This your girl, Nick?” Scott didn’t believe in beating around the bush. Kevin rolled his eyes at his friend’s blunt question.

Nick flashed a grin at his two teammates. “Yeah - this is Stacy. Stacy - Scott... and Kevin.”

“Nice to meet you both.” Stacy said politely, reaching over to shake hands. Kevin stopped the offended bodyguard pose and even turned on a very small amount of the Richardson charm; smiling and shaking hands as if he was actually happy to see both of them.

Scott frowned; she had a fairly strong British accent. “You from England?”

Kevin snorted in amusement and even Nick looked slightly askance at Scott’s questioning of the obvious.

“Um, Calcutta, mostly.” Stacy kept a perfectly straight face, winning her points in Scott’s book. “I went to school in England.”

“Nick!” Brian yelled, waving madly from the softball field. “C’mere!”

“Excuse us.” Nick rolled his eyes slightly at Brian’s enthusiasm and started over towards the field, leading Stacy by the hand.

“What the hell is Calcutta?” Scott said as soon as they left.

“Where.” Kevin corrected slowly, reaching up to scratch his head. “It’s a city. I think it’s in India.”

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“Can I have more Kool-aid?” Becky asked politely, holding up her red plastic glass.

“Here...” Karen refilled the glass halfway, knowing better than to give Becky a full glass of something that would stain.

Becky took a long drink, then smacked her lips in appreciation. Her eyes widened over the rim of her glass. “Look! Felicia and AJ are here!” She set her glass on the table, almost knocking it over, and trotted over to greet them as fast as her little legs could carry her.

Karen shoved a strand of hair back from her face and watched AJ greet everyone, his mouth never stopping, and his hands waving wildly to illustrate his conversation. Felicia stood quietly next to him, looking perfect, as usual.

It wasn’t that Karen didn’t like Felicia - she had talked to her on several occasions at the ballpark, mostly because of Becky’s fascination with her, and for a member of the ‘perfect crowd’, Felicia had been very nice - a little aloof, but still a nice person.

Karen perched herself on the edge of the table, next to the Kool-Aid container. It was eighty plus degrees in the shade. She hated it when it was so warm her shorts started sticking to her legs. She doubted Felicia had that problem. Felicia’s sundress was hanging perfectly, not even wrinkled from being sat on; her hair was pulled back into a cluster of curls on the back of her head, the Florida tan, red lipstick and cat-eyes sunglasses making her look like a movie star from the 1950’s.

Perfect people never had to experience their shorts sticking or looking down to find that buttons had mysteriously vanished from their shirt, or their hairclip suddenly breaking and flying away from their head with enough force to injure someone. They mysteriously went through life, their hair always in place, their clothes never wrinkled, just like both Felicia and AJ now. Karen wrinkled her nose. They were like houses where people took their shoes off and didn’t eat in the living room. How exciting could that be?

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“I was safe!” Brian protested, hands on hips, stomping his foot on home plate a couple more times for good measure.

“You were not, silly.” Becky said primly, waving her glove, which was almost as big as her head, at Brian. “You were out. Go sit back down and stop whining.”

“Kevin!” Brian hollered. “Your daughter is cheating again!”

“No, she isn’t!” Kevin yelled back from the pitching rubber. “You were out, Brian!”

“Who died and made you an umpire?” Brian demanded.

“Keep an eye on him!” AJ added from third base. “First he demands to pitch - now he’s umpiring, next thing you know, he’ll be playing all nine positions by himself, and it’ll be us - against Kevin.”

“You’re out.” Becky said firmly, pointing at the sidelines.

Brian stuck his tongue out at both Becky and her father and jogged back to the sidelines, flinging himself on the ground next to Stacy. "You haven't hit yet." He pointed out.

"No." Stacy said firmly. She had never held a bat in her entire life, and now was probably not the time to start. It was one thing to hit a baseball when you did it for a living, it was entirely another when you didn't, as evidenced by both Karen and Scott's wife, Ann, when they had come up to bat. Stacy preferred not to make a fool out of herself in front of people she had just met.

"Hey, Robby!" Brian's voice drowned out her mild protest, as he yelled at Scott's youngest son, who was stepping up to the plate. "Let Stacy hit! She hasn't come up yet!"

"No... really." Stacy protested again. "I've never done this before."

Brian's jaw dropped slightly, before his face broke into a wide grin. "You've never hit a baseball?"

"Why would I?" Stacy reasoned.

"Nick!" Brian jumped up and grabbed Stacy's arm, pulling until she climbed reluctantly to her feet. "How can your girlfriend never have hit a baseball?"

The actual game itself was moving along quite slowly, given that every few minutes, time was called for long, confusing arguments over who was playing what position, where the ghostrunners were, and exactly who was out on what play. For a game being played by a bunch of major leaguers, the rules were just a tad sketchy.

"C'mon." Nick suddenly appeared behind Stacy, his hands resting on her hips as he pushed her gently towards home plate.

"Wait a minute..." Stacy started. "Nick, hang on."

"Calm down." Nick bent over to whisper in her ear. "It's fun, okay? Besides, you're hitting off Kevin. It's not that hard."

Nick wrapped one arm on either side of her, placing her hands on the bat, and then his hands on top of hers, his chest pressed firmly against her back. "Watch the ball." Nick continued whispering in her ear. "Never take your eye off the ball."

Kevin rested one hand on his hip. "So, you think she's gonna help you hit, Carter?" He didn't say it in a mean way, in fact, he almost seemed to be teasing, but Stacy still felt Nick tense up behind her.

"Throw the ball! Throw the ball!" AJ yelled, jumping up and down on third base like a little kid. "This had got to be the slowest game I've ever played, and I was a Devil Ray!"

Kevin tossed the ball underhanded at the plate and Stacy found her arms moving as Nick took over and swung at the ball. The ball and bat connected, the vibration running up through her arms, as the ball headed straight back up the middle. Kevin dove for the ground, and the ball whistled past him, bouncing over second base into the outfield, where the Martin children chased after it.

"Did you do that on purpose?" Stacy hissed at Nick, before it dawned on her that it was highly unlikely Nick could send the ball exactly where he wanted it to go.

"Yeah, I did." Nick admitted, his lips accidentally grazing her ear as he leaned back in for the next pitch. At least, Stacy assumed it was accidental.

"You can do that?"

"Uh-huh." Nick pulled her hands back a little farther. "Ready?"

"Yeah." Stacy tried to concentrate harder this time, finding it harder and harder to do so the longer she stood there. She found herself concentrating on Nick's hands, on

the way his fingers wrapped around the base of the bat - over her hands. Nick smelled like a faint combination of soap and his hair gel, which had a strange pina colada twist to it.

Kevin stepped forward and tossed the ball towards the plate again, but as before, Nick was swinging at the ball before Stacy's reflexes had even kicked in. Bat and ball connected with a smack yet again, Nick leaving Kevin alone this time, and sending the ball towards first base. Stacy could learn to appreciate playing baseball. There was something strangely enjoyable about smacking a little white ball around. Then again, part of it might have been her teacher.

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Felicia stood quietly at second base, her arms folded across her chest. Another lengthy time-out had been called, while Kevin and Scott argued over the lineup and whether Karen or Brian was supposed to be hitting. To hear Scott tell it, Brian had mysteriously managed to switch teams. Felicia wouldn't be surprised in the slightest if he had. Brian always seemed to be in two or three places at once.

She turned her attention over to her husband of almost three years. AJ was sitting in the dirt at third base, happily engaged in drawing in the dirt with Scott's little boy. AJ was going to be a wonderful father, even if he didn't think so. He hadn't come out and said exactly that, but she knew what he was thinking.

The shouting match at home plate ended with Kevin kicking dust in Scott's direction, Scott putting Kevin in a headlock, and Karen threatening that if they didn't break it up, she was going to use her bat. Becky clapped her hands in delight at this idea, and Brian ran over to quickly pin Karen's hands to her side, ducking her elbow as it aimed for his head.

Karen never failed to entertain everyone. She was the one who blurted out exactly what happened to be on her mind, without thinking about it; she was the one who managed to dump the entire contents of her purse over a three row span at the game, scattering hair fasteners, keys, and ibuprofen across the cement tiers; she was the one that screamed the loudest whenever anyone hit a home run. Felicia admired her enthusiasm, although she couldn't imagine actually living with a person like that for more than a few hours at a time. AJ was obnoxious, but he was quiet about it.

Things were eventually sorted out, Scott retreated back to the sidelines, Kevin returned to the pitching rubber, shoving his hair back into place, and attempting to straighten his neck back out, while Karen stepped up to the plate, informing Kevin exactly which county she intended to hit his pitch to. She didn't quite follow up on her threat, but still smacked a solid hit towards third, which AJ stared at distractedly, reaching up to one hand it absently, still sitting in the dirt with Robby.

Felicia had to laugh. The indifferent way in which all major leaguers performed plays was always a source of amusement. They completed the easy plays automatically, and made the difficult ones look simple. Even today, all of them playing positions they didn't normally play, in an pathetic attempt to make the game fair, they made it look incredibly easy.

Stacy, batting by herself this time, sent a line drive flying past Felicia into right center field. Scott's daughter chased after it, the only kid left in the outfield. Either

Kevin was the world's worst pitcher, or he was intentionally allowing everyone to get a hit off of him.

"Lissie!" AJ said in shock, throwing his arms in the air. "Where's your competitive spirit?"

"It went the way of my athletic ability." Karen said dryly, sitting down on second base to tie her shoe. "Let me know if you find either." She stopped, staring down at Felicia's sandals. "Can you run in those things?"

"Not really." Felicia shrugged. "But my competitive spirit doesn't mind."

~\*~

"Nice hit." Nick greeted Stacy at first base as the ball shot past Felicia into the outfield, and AJ began squawking in protest.

Stacy returned the little eyebrow raise he had given her. "I had a good teacher."

"Damn straight." Nick grinned, reaching over and tugging on a strand of Stacy's hair.

Another argument broke out at home plate, as both Becky and Robby decided it was their turn to hit. Parents started moving in before someone was injured. Becky had her father's temper.

"You know what?" Nick moved in behind Stacy, pulling her back against his white t-shirt, his black glove hanging off his left hand. "I think I was about nine years old the last time I had this much fun playing a baseball game."

Stacy twisted her neck around so she could see his face, surprised by the tone of his voice and the expression in his eyes, trying to remember if she had ever seen Nick look quite that happy before.

## Chapter Twenty Seven

“She practically jumped me!” Brian was in the middle a rather detailed explanation of last night’s date. “I mean - I’m all for enthusiasm, if y’all get my meaning, but she was just a little scary.” He leaned back against the blue padding of the dugout bench, studying the game in progress before him. “How the heck did Kevin get on third base?”

“He ran. Very slowly.” Scott smirked. No one on the team missed a chance to make fun of Kevin’s base running abilities. He was easily the slowest player on the team - two of the coaches could outrun Kevin.

“So, you’re not gonna go out with her again, huh?” Nick wondered, still keeping one eye on the game. Kevin was the tying run on third and Kinomoto was at the plate, trying to bring him home.

“You bet I’m gonna go out with her again.” Brian unleashed a slightly wicked grin. “I know what to expect this time.”

“I’m gonna go join the other conversation now.” Scott stood up, shaking his head.

“Yeah, sure!” Brian hollered after him. “You guys go talk about trout fishing or whatever it is! That’s real fun!”

Kinomoto rapped a single into shallow left, the left fielder charging in, fielding it on one bounce, and firing it back towards home plate, all in one motion.

“C’mon, Kevin!” Brian screamed, jumping up and down and waving his arm, the same as the third base coach, who was waving Kevin towards the plate. “Slide!” Brian was starting to get some serious vertical air. Nick stepped away from Brian’s pin-wheeling arms.

The opposing catcher caught the ball, turning to block Kevin’s entry to home plate. Kevin - never the one to stand aside passively, took one last step, and flung himself into the catcher as forcefully as he could, cleats first. Both players tumbled over a couple times, before stopping in a heap in the dirt next to home plate.

Nick wrinkled his nose. Kevin had slid in there pretty hard. He had to be feeling that one.

“Uh-oh.” Brian said slowly, watching the action at home plate. “Kevin’s hurt.” He pulled himself up on the step next to the dugout fence, as close to getting out on the field as he possibly could, concern written over his face.

Buddy Williams and Rich Ankel, the team trainer, started out for the plate, where Howie was already bent over Kevin, still lying in the dirt, curled up, not moving.

Nick leaned against the railing next to Brian, curious as to if Kevin was okay, but not really wanting to watch. He had seen some serious injuries, most of them occurring at home plate, and they always scared him just a little.

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It had taken longer than Nick would have liked, but finally, the rain clouds disappeared from the Seattle sky, and the sun appeared. Nick had been a sun-worshiper his entire life. Some players complained when they had to wear sunglasses during day games in order to see the ball. Nick loved it. Sunshine added something special to a baseball game.

Stacy, fortunately, was as much of a sun-worshiper as Nick was. Every weekend Nick was at home, the two of them would end up outside somewhere, usually at a local park.

This weekend, they had ended up at a fairly deserted park near Nick's house. Stacy spent most of her spare time with her nose in incredibly thick books, and this day was no exception. She was lying on her back, using Nick's stomach as a pillow, her sunglasses shoved up on top of her head, completely absorbed in the page she was reading.

Nick wasn't a reader. He usually ended up with a headache after staring at printed text for too long. He preferred his headphones and Walkman.

The slightly wooded area of the park where they were was almost completely deserted, except for two teenage girls in skimpy little outfits and their dog, who was madly chasing the birds flying around the trees bordering the main grassy knoll. Nick must have dozed off, his Walkman had stopped, and the sun had shifted farther towards the west.

Stacy was still reading. From his angle, Nick could just see the side of her face. She had her hair pulled back into a high ponytail, like a little girl. Short little wisps had blown loose around her face. In the sunlight, her hair looked more gold than red. Nick was tempted to reach over and play with it.

"Did you have a nice nap?" Stacy inquired, not taking her eyes off her book.

Nick jumped, wondering exactly how long she had been watching him and been pretending not to. "Um, yeah. How long was I out?" He pulled his headphones off and set them on the grass next to him.

"About two chapters." Stacy rested the book face down on her stomach, hugging it slightly so she wouldn't lose her place. "Nick?"

"Hmm?" Nick did reach over and pull at the end of her long ponytail, wrapping a small section of it around his finger.

"If you weren't playing baseball, what would you do?"

Nick shrugged. "I have no idea. That wasn't ever an option." The fact that he could have ended up as something other than a major leaguer had never entered into his head. As long as he could remember, he had accepted the fact that one day, he was going to be in the major leagues.

"What if you hadn't made the majors?" Stacy continued. "I mean, what if you completely bombed at baseball, and couldn't hit if your life depended on it?"

"That wasn't an option." Nick repeated.

Stacy was silent for a moment. Nick knew she was reasoning through everything he had just said; comparing it to the other pieces of information she had, and was about to come up with another logical conclusion.

"Do you like playing baseball?"

Nick sighed. He had loved playing baseball when he was a little kid, but by the time he reached high school, he hated it. Now, it was mostly automatic, he didn't even think about it anymore. "I don't know." He said finally. "I guess I like it... I've never done anything else." He bit his lip, realizing suddenly that he had been about to embark on the entire story of he and his father's relationship.

Nick wasn't exactly sure why, but he kept finding himself telling Stacy stuff that he had never told anyone in his entire life. It freaked him out just a little. His head kept telling him to slow down and back off, that he was moving too fast, but the rest of him kept plunging headlong into their relationship. He loved talking to Stacy; loved being with Stacy, even if it was just doing stupid stuff like watching the otters at the aquarium,

or spending the day sitting on a slightly sunburned patch of grass, but still, at the back of his mind, there was a nagging little reminder that he didn't want to get burned again.

"Were you going to say something?" Stacy interrupted his train of thought.

Nick shook his head, but his mouth had other ideas. "You know, everyone seems to think that I'm another one of those kids that tries to get acceptance or love or whatever from their parents by doing whatever they want them to, but that's not how it is."

"So, what is it then?" Stacy sat up, setting her book next to her.

"It's..." Nick broke off, not quite sure how to phrase it. "It's like he's daring me to do something he hasn't... it's almost like a competition." He paused, knowing how weird that sounded. "I think my family's kind of messed up."

Stacy laughed. "Well, at least your mother isn't designing couches."

"That's what your mom does?" Nick said in surprise. He knew her parents were divorced, and her mother lived near London, but he had never heard what she did for a living.

"Last time I talked to her, yes, she was designing couches." Stacy affirmed. "But, she might be doing something else now. She's still trying to find herself."

"When you were little, what did you want to be?" Nick wondered.

"A doctor." Stacy said instantly.

"Like your Dad?"

"Right, except I didn't want to save the entire Deccan Plateau."

"So why didn't you?"

"I don't know." Stacy shrugged. "Some people just don't have a bedside manner, I guess. I'm probably better off in a lab."

"I don't have a problem with your 'bedside manner.'" Nick pointed out, right before Stacy socked him in the stomach - hard. "Ow!" He rolled away from her, trying to protect himself.

"Why did I know you were going to say that?" Stacy smacked him once more for good measure, on the back of the head, before checking the narrow gold watch on her arm. "It's almost eight. We should probably get going?"

"Okay..." Nick said, suspiciously peering over his shoulder at her. "Only if you promise to stop hitting."

"I only hit you if you deserve it." Stacy mock lectured, standing up and brushing off her khakis.

"Whatever." Nick stuck his tongue out.

Stacy shook her head in amusement and started towards the path that led back to the parking lot. Nick grabbed the Walkman and headphones with one hand and jogged after her.

"What?" Stacy feigned shock when he appeared next to her. "You're not racing me to the car this time?"

"Nope." Nick wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

"Why not?"

Nick shrugged. "Cause." He didn't feel like letting go of her right then.

## Chapter Twenty Eight

“The throw to first is in time, and that’s two outs. Next up is catcher Lenny Krazelton. He’s already 1-1 with a walk on the day - taking advantage of the playing time he’s gotten since starting catcher Kevin Richardson was placed on the fifteen day disabled list with a strained right knee.” Niehaus reported. “Team doctors are saying that Richardson shouldn’t be out for more than a week, but Buddy Williams was left with only one catcher on the team, so Richardson will be out for the next 12 days and the Mariners called up Jason Richards from Tacoma.

“Krazelton swings at the pitch and fouls it down the third baseline. Here on the 31st of July, just hours away from the trading deadline, we’re getting news regarding a trade made by the Mariners front brass.

“The pitch to Krazelton - and he hits that one hard into the gap in left center - it bounces to the wall, and Krazelton will pull up at second with his second double of the evening.”

Niehaus paused. “And the Mariners have made a trade. The Mariners have traded Scott Martin to the Toronto Blue Jays for starting pitcher Robert Grant. The Blue Jays also receive a player to be named later in the deal. The best of luck to Scott with his new team.”

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“You don’t understand!” AJ yelled at Lenny in the clubhouse, stomping his foot on the carpeted floor. “It’s the principle of the thing! Haven’t you ever seen a TV game? Do you have any idea where those cameras are positioned?” He flung himself onto his stool and crossed his arms, sulking.

“Center field.” Brian leaned over AJ’s shoulder and nodded at the blond catcher. “Most of the game action is shown from center field.”

“Exactly, my friend.” AJ held his hand out to acknowledge Brian’s genius. “And do you know what happens when the camera is in center field?”

Lenny raised one eyebrow. “No?”

“Everyone in the Pacific Northwest gets an excellent view of AJ McLean’s a--.” AJ finished. “It’s kind of important for my pants to be lookin’ good.”

“Well, I’ll remember that in the future.” Krazelton patted AJ on the shoulder, and headed for his locker, not impressed.

“He doesn’t get it.” AJ shook his head sadly. “Not that he needs to or anything.”

“What was wrong with your pants?” Nick wondered. He had absolutely no clue what AJ was flipped out over, and he figured Brian probably didn’t either, he was just playing along. In fact, he had a sneaking suspicion that even AJ wasn’t sure, he was just giving Lenny a hard time. Lenny was gullible.

“You didn’t notice?” AJ said in shock.

“Forgive us, AJ, if we don’t exactly check out your butt every time you come on the field.” Brian snickered. “Trust me, we got more important things to think about.”

“Hey guys.” Scott stopped in front of the group clustered in front of AJ’s locker. Scott had left the field in the sixth inning, when the trade with the Blue Jays had been finalized. He was already dressed in his standard street attire of plaid shirt and jeans.

“Aw, man.” AJ said in disgust. “This sucks.”

Scott shrugged, his hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans. "Well, I'll miss you guys, but it could have been worse, I suppose."

"Worse?" AJ scoffed. "Toronto has to have some of the ugliest uniforms in the league!"

"Forgive him." Brian rolled his eyes at Scott. "AJ's having a bit of a fashion crisis right now."

Nick drifted away towards his locker as AJ continued to grumble about his pants. The dugout had become quite somber after the news in the sixth inning, and Nick knew this was just AJ's way of stirring things up a little, in an attempt to keep the mood light. Scott was going to be missed - once he left, Kevin would roam the clubhouse unchecked by no one, except for Brian, who usually didn't bother to take Kevin on.

"Hey, Nick?" Scott had followed Nick down the aisle, leaving Brian and AJ to sit and snicker by themselves.

"Yeah?" Nick's voice was muffled as he yanked his blue sweatshirt off over his head. He didn't really want to do this. Nick wasn't good at good-byes.

"Well..." Scott started, in the slow drawl he always used. "I just wanted to say that when I first met you, man, I was pretty convinced you were a brat."

"Gee, thanks." Nick said wryly.

"I figured that you were just a spoiled major leaguers kid, who had some talent, made it to the majors on his father's connections and had a pretty lucky first year in the bigs." Scott continued. "Oh, you know, he's Bob Carter's kid, he even plays like Bob. And I apologize for thinking that because these last four months, I've come to realize that you don't. You have a serious gift - there have been times on that field where I have been completely blown away by your playing, most of the time it doesn't seem to me that you've only been in the bigs for a year and a half."

Nick sat speechless on his stool, not quite sure what to say. No one had ever said that to him before.

Scott rubbed the back of his neck once and smirked. "And then there's other times when I wonder why the hell you pulled such a dumb rookie mistake."

That was more like it. Scott had been worrying him for a moment.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is I've really enjoyed playing with you, and I honestly think that in a couple years I'm gonna be saying I knew Nick Carter when."

Nick opened and closed his mouth a couple more times, still not sure how to answer that.

"So..." Scott punched Nick on the shoulder in a I'm-a-real-man-so-I-don't-hug sort of way. "Let's hope we see each other in the playoffs."

"You bet." Nick said, finally able to answer. "Good luck in Toronto."

"Oh thank you..." Scott glanced back down at AJ's locker. "As tough as it will be to survive the uniforms, apparently."

Nick smiled. Trust AJ to come up with something weird.

Scott smacked Nick on the shoulder one last time, and moved on down the aisle to say his good-byes to the rest of his teammates.

"Well, things are gonna change around here a little." Brian sighed, plopping himself onto the stool next to Nick and bending over to unlace his cleats.

"Yeah..." Nick agreed, watching Scott slug a couple more guys on the shoulder.

"But, if the world was perfect, it wouldn't be." Brian finished shortly.

Nick raised his eyebrows. Brian was actually quoting Yogi Berra. Somehow, he wasn't surprised.

"I mean, people, look!" AJ hollered, effectively causing everyone in the clubhouse to turn and look at him. AJ was standing on his stool, wearing only his underwear and socks, holding one of his cleats up in the air. "WHY?" He demanded. "Can someone not design a good-looking cleat?"

## Chapter Twenty Nine

Another loud crash sounded from the bathroom. Kevin shook his head. Karen was having an especially clumsy morning. It sounded like the entire medicine cabinet had fallen into the sink. He was tempted to go check, but refrained, knowing it would only annoy her more if he showed up to inspect the mess she was making.

Eight more days until he was off the disabled list and would be able to play again. The team was on the road right now, Kevin staying behind to workout at Safeco Field. His knee felt fine now, but he knew he was still only at eighty or ninety percent. Sitting at home, watching the games on TV was slowly driving him insane. He wanted to be back out on the field.

Last week had been a bad week in general. First he ripped his knee apart at home plate, then his best friend had been traded to a different country. Things had gone from bad to worse. The only other person on the team that Kevin really hung out with was AJ, but AJ was just a little too strange for his taste. AJ was fine and well for comic relief, but as a friend, Kevin just wasn't too sure.

Brian was still there, of course. Brian was always there. He might be obnoxious, but he always showed up when you needed him, every single time, without fail. How Brian did that, Kevin didn't know, but he was grateful to him for it. Brian had been the one that showed up at the hospital and gave him a ride home after the team doctors finished running every kind of test imaginable on his knee. He was the one that took Becky to the park so she would stop playing "nurse". He was the one that pulled Karen out of the room when she was becoming hysterical over the entire situation and managed to make her calm down. Kevin still wasn't sure how he had done that. Even he couldn't talk Karen out of one of her outbursts.

Kevin was starting to mellow out. Either that, or his pain medication was affecting his mind. He had sat and watched the game last night; screaming advice at the TV until Becky asked him politely to please be quiet, her doll was trying to sleep, and during the seventh inning, realized something Brian had been saying for the last six months - Kevin was underestimating Nick Carter's playing ability.

This, in fact, wasn't the first time that Kevin had realized this about his teammate. Scott had dragged the blond outfielder in on a strategy discussion on the last plane flight, and Kevin had to admit that Nick knew his baseball. He would rather die before admitting that to anyone, especially Nick, but to himself, he grudgingly admitted, Nick could hold his own on the field.

Off the field, Kevin's opinion hadn't changed. If Nick would just drop the arrogant, cocky, I don't need the rest of the world, I can do it on my own act, Kevin could tolerate him just fine.

"Oh no!" Karen wailed from the bathroom, before loud pounding noises ensued.

Kevin scowled. It sounded like she was ripping sheetrock from the wall. It was time to approach the war zone.

"Karen?" Kevin stuck his head in the door as the pounding stopped. Karen was standing over the sink, staring down into the drain. "What are you doing?"

"It went down." Karen said dismally, before stepping back and kicking the cabinet under the sink as hard as she could.

"What did?"

“My contact!” Karen yelled, waving her arms in the air. “I refuse to wear glasses! They make me look like a dork!”

Kevin bit his lip, hard. To laugh now would be asking for a death sentence. The kicking would find a new target. “Well, you could always wear one and squint.”

“Oh, wait!” She said cheerfully, staring back down into the bottom of the sink. “I think I can see it!”

“Where?” Kevin leaned over to peer down the drain. “All I see is jellied soap.”

Karen leaned her head against Kevin’s shoulder. “This is going to be one of ‘those’ days.” She said gloomily.

“I’ll get it.” Kevin shook his head again, and kissed the top of her damp hair.

“How?” Karen wrinkled her nose, reminding Kevin of a wet haired rabbit.

“Take the sink apart.” Kevin said calmly. It wasn’t as if he had anything else to do with his day. The game wasn’t on until four, and besides, if it would make her happy, he was perfectly willing. Karen was the only friend he had left right now.

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“One has to wonder...” AJ leaned over and peered inside the whirlpool tub in the trainers room, disappearing from the waist up.

This was an opportunity that couldn’t be passed up. Nick stepped forward, ready to push AJ in all the way.

“Don’t even think about it.” AJ’s voice echoed from inside the empty fiberglass shell. “Touch my a-- and you die. I am so onto you, you little punk.”

“Aw man!” Nick snickered, sitting back down. He and AJ were killing time before batting practice. Usually, Nick hung out with Brian before games, but Brian was running late today. It was an hour before BP, and he still hadn’t shown up. So Nick hung out with AJ, even though he had a feeling it was going to get him into trouble.

“Do you think if I stuck my face right next to one of the jets, it would rip my skin off?” AJ raised his head and glanced around the room, no doubt looking for authority figures who would put a damper on his fun. The only person there, besides the two at the tub, was Kevin, still rehabbing his knee on the equipment set up at the far end of the room.

“Let’s find out.” Nick offered, reaching for the water tap.

“Hell no!” AJ jumped backwards. “I’ll turn the water on - you stick your head down there.”

“You’re the one that wants to know.” Nick argued.

“Okay... only make sure the water isn’t hot.” AJ decided. “I’d hate to have my freshly stripped face scalded.” He stopped and raised his eyebrows, staring across the room, distracted from the whirlpool.

Kevin had grabbed the blue plastic chair sitting against the wall and was slamming it repeatedly into the workout equipment as hard as he could.

Nick eyed the door. It might be better if he just left now. Kevin might decide to come after him with the chair. Kevin was always prone to going off and throwing a tantrum, but this was impressive, even for Kevin’s standards.

Kevin flung the chair in frustration, sending it clattering noisily off the metal framework. He stood quietly for a moment, rubbing his face, then turned and disappeared out of the room.

AJ turned around to face Nick. "Remind me to stay out of his way when he has a bat. Violent people shouldn't play this sport. The odds of them holding a dangerous weapon in their hands are way way to high. The police should be worried."

Nick smiled. He should have known AJ would make a smart comment about the entire situation. "Do you suppose he's okay?"

"Oh yeah." AJ nodded confidently. "There's nothing like a good temper tantrum to make you feel better."

"If you say so." Nick shrugged.

"Oh come on!" AJ's jaw dropped, before he shut it with a pop. "You mean to tell me that you've never completely flipped out and lost it and grabbed a bat and beat the crap out of a stereo or something?"

"No. I haven't." Nick said bluntly. "But, the fact that you do, should tell you something."

"It tells me that I'm not as much of a control freak as you are." AJ pointed out.

It was Nick's turn to unhinge his jaw. "A what?"

"Con-trol freak." AJ repeated slowly, leaning forward so Nick could read his lips.

"I am not!" Nick said in astonishment. He was no where near being a control freak. Nick was slightly above Brian on the slob scale. You couldn't get much farther from a control freak than that.

AJ waved his arm in the air. "I don't mean control freak like Kevin, where he has to count the number of towels in the dugout before each inning - I mean you get all wiggled out if you can't control every single little detail of your life."

"I..." Nick started, when Brian slammed noisily into the room, still in his street clothes.

"Running late today, Mr. Littrell?" AJ greeted him.

"Where's..." Brian broke off and stared distractedly. "Um... have you seen Kevin?"

"Went that way." AJ pointed at the door. "And he's pissed."

"How come you're so late?" Nick added.

Brian shrugged. "I had nine million stupid little things go wrong today. Where's Dr. Lange?" He added, referring to the team physician.

"Haven't seen him." AJ leaned over and stared back down into the whirlpool tub, looking up when Brian banged back out the door. "He's spazzing out." He said thoughtfully.

"He does that." Nick wasn't too worried. Brian had his absentminded days, when he would stare at Nick and Nick knew Brian didn't even remember his name, or when he would completely forget to do something, such as grocery shopping. Brian needed a girl, and an organized one at that.

"Now..." AJ hung back over the tub. "Let's test this sucker out!"

Nick sighed. He wanted to ask AJ exactly what he had meant by the control freak comment, but AJ had moved on to bigger plans, and the subject seemed to be forgotten.

## Chapter Thirty

Stacy propped her head on her hand and stared at the glowing computer screen. She still couldn't believe she was actually doing this. It was all Felicia's fault - Stacy was going to blame her completely. A few days ago, during the middle of an especially slow inning, they had started a discussion of press coverage, and Felicia had been completely shocked to find out that Stacy had never read any of the many articles that featured Nick. At the time, Stacy had emphatically declared that she wasn't going to look at any of them either. But, the very next time she was at the local library, she found herself looking at them anyway. Call it lack of willpower, call it curiosity, she was still interested.

It wasn't just the abundance of Sports Illustrated, ESPN, Baseball Weekly and other assorted sports magazines that were featured. There were several celebrity magazines that had followed his relationship with Chelsea Powers. The Carter family themselves were featured in many different articles as well. If Stacy was to sit and put it all into order, she could create a timeline of Nick's entire life.

There were pictures of Nick at age six (according to the caption) with brown hair, wearing a little pinstriped Yankees uniform and waving a bat; there were pictures of him and his father at Yankee Stadium for almost any age, six to twenty; pictures of him in high school, the hair now blond-blond and hanging in his face; just a couple pictures of him in the Yankees minor league system; and finally, once he reached the Yankees, the coverage became almost absurd.

It was when he reached the majors that the super professional photo shoots, usually featuring Nick alternately scowling or smiling at the camera appeared. The Sports Illustrated covers. The pictures from People's Fifty Most Beautiful. ESPN magazine. Beckett Baseball Monthly. The list went on and on. Stacy couldn't believe the amount of material floating around on him. This couldn't possibly be the same guy that showed up to meet her for lunch every day or let her fall asleep against his shoulder while they were watching TV. This was an ultra-slick facade of the person she knew, placed up on a pedestal by the press.

It wasn't as if Nick was completely unknown now - he was stopped quite often for autographs, and she knew he still had a large amount of press coverage, but she had never paid any attention to it before. Still, it was nothing compared to what Stacy was finding in the library archives.

She had gone through the magazine shelves and pulled out some of the most recent articles, including a couple that featured his break-up with diva-in-waiting Chelsea Powers. Nick was never quoted in any of the articles, but Chelsea was, and frequently. According to the tiny little platinum blond, they had both agreed that being separated for six months out of the year just wouldn't work and it was a mutual agreement to call it quits.

The story Nick had given her was slightly different. They had gotten off on a discussion of ex-boyfriends and girlfriends a few weeks back, and Nick had just two comments about Chelsea. "We didn't look at our relationship in quite the same light," and "she's even more messed up than I am." He didn't offer anymore information, and truth be told, Stacy wasn't really that interested in finding out any more. She had learned one thing about Nick over the last few months. It wasn't always what Nick did say, it was what he didn't say.

Over half of the sports magazine articles dealt with the relationship of Nick and his father. It was almost as if they couldn't mention Nick without bringing Bob into the discussion in some way. There were comparisons of the two's playing abilities, of their personalities, of their attitudes. There were essays on young rookies getting too much media attention and adding to their already inflated ego's, and still more articles on how growing up as the son of a major leaguer had managed to affect the way Nick saw reality. Stacy didn't even bother to read them. She didn't need some sportswriter offering up an opinion of what was going on in Nick's head. She had a hard enough time trying to figure that out on her own.

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Denise McLean reached over and pressed the doorbell again, more firmly this time. She had flown all the way up from Florida just to see her son and daughter-in-law, and she was going to ring that doorbell until one of them let her in. She checked her watch. It was 9:30 in the morning. It was time for them to get up anyway.

"Will you STOP?" AJ, wearing nothing but a pair of gray sweat pants and one sock, his hair standing on end, yanked the door open. "I will NOT convert to your religion, so just stop... oh... Mom. Hi." He had changed his hair color since the last time she had seen him. It was now blond, minus the roots, which were still dark. It made him look older. Or maybe he was just getting older and she hadn't realized it until now.

"Where were you?" Denise picked up her suitcase and stepped in the door. Felicia must have handled getting the house. It looked like something she would find - the oak and maple trees lining the streets, the little rose trellis in the side yard and the flowers lining the driveway. If AJ would have had his way, they'd be living in a condo overlooking downtown.

"It's six in the morning." AJ pointed out, none too nicely either. "Where do you think I was?"

Ooops. Denise had forgotten about that little time zone change. "I'm sorry, honey. I didn't mean to wake you up."

AJ closed the door and thumped his head on the wood a couple times. "You didn't."

Denise rolled her eyes. AJ's sense of logic had always been a little different. "Is Felicia sleeping?"

"Yeah." AJ said weakly.

"What's wrong?" Denise said suspiciously. That was the main reason for her visit. She hadn't seen Felicia in seven months, and Denise had every intention of making herself at home for the last trimester of Felicia's pregnancy and taking charge. She knew AJ was considerably more capable than people gave him credit for, but he was out of town half the time.

"Nothing's wrong." AJ turned around, leaning against the door. "She's... she hasn't been feeling good, and so now she's not sleeping, so I'm not, and I'm kind of crabby."

Denise slipped her jacket off and set it on the back of the couch. "Then why don't you go back to bed? I'm fine - everything's under control."

AJ raised one eyebrow. "Did I just hear that come out of your mouth? You - the same woman that single-handedly caused me to miss the school bus every single day of second grade?"

"I've matured since then." Denise corrected.

A small smile appeared on AJ's face. "That'll be the day. What're you doing up here anyway?"

"I was bored. I had frequent flyer miles." Denise shrugged.

"Yeah, well, we missed you too." AJ smirked, stepping over to give her a quick hug. "I'm goin' back to bed. Try not to snoop through every drawer in the house this morning, okay?" He pulled away and started back up the stairs.

"Who, me?" Denise said innocently.

"Mom?" AJ paused halfway up the stairs.

"What?"

"I'm glad you're here. You've got perfect timing, you know that?"

## Chapter Thirty One

September dawned, and the pennant race began in earnest. The Mariners were two games out of first place, closing in on the division leading Oakland Athletics. They had one goal in mind - take first place, and hold onto it. If one was to analyze the stats, it would appear that the Mariners were poised to run the A's into the dust. Howie was leading the league in batting average, and was second in both home runs and RBI's. AJ had a career high total of 39 saves, solely because the year before, his personal stats had been severely limited by Tampa Bay's win-loss record. Nick was making up for his slow start with a second half that matched his rookie of the year prowess, tearing the cover off the ball.

More importantly, the Mariners were together as a team mentally. The little differences and confrontations that had taken place in the first half of the season were gone, in the clubhouse and off the field. The Mariners were ready and waiting to overtake Oakland.

The Athletics, however, were holding their own, winning just as many games as the Mariners did. It was going to be a close race for the last month. It was just a matter of which team cracked first.

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Stacy shoved her hands deeper into the pockets of her coat and scrunched her neck down behind the collar. September had been a nice month weatherwise, until that afternoon, when a storm front had moved in and now drizzle was falling. The roof had been closed over the field, but it didn't block the wind whipping in from the waterfront. It was going to be a miserable night to watch a baseball game.

This was the first game Stacy had been to this homestand. She had been putting in overtime at work. It was one of the disadvantages of working for a private company. They had agendas, and right now everything was revolving around a conference being held in Minneapolis next month. Stacy had been mandatorily 'invited' to travel to the Twin Cities and present the results she and her co-workers had found regarding proteins. If it went well, she was looking at a promotion, something that occurred rarely to females in the line of work she was in. If it didn't go well - she might as well go back to school and become a doctor.

"I lost her again." Felicia announced, slipping into her seat and glancing over her shoulder at the aisleway. "She was there thirty seconds ago - I turn around, she's gone. I swear, that woman is ten times worse than Alex."

"Who?" Stacy was confused. She hadn't talked to Felicia in the last few days, partly because she had been incredibly busy, and partly because Felicia hadn't been feeling well the last week or so. Stacy didn't know if that was just because of her pregnancy, or if it was more serious, but whatever it was, Felicia looked fine tonight. Even at seven months pregnant, she still managed to look incredibly put together and beautiful.

"His mother." Felicia checked one last time. "She'll show up eventually. Her son inherited her shopping skills - I have a feeling she got distracted. Wait and see - she'll show up in the middle of the third inning and blame me for not keeping track of her."

Clattering, followed by loud shouting, sounded from the aisleway.

“Karen and Becky must be here.” Stacy didn’t even have to look. Destruction and chaos seemed to follow Karen wherever she went, much in the same way it followed Nick. Nick was similar to having a St. Bernard running amok through Stacy’s little apartment. If he hadn’t already knocked it over or broken it, it was bound to happen soon. The motor skills that allowed him to hit a ball traveling at ninety miles an hour were conspicuously absent off the field.

“Felicia! Stacy!” Becky squealed, charging down the aisle, her shiny black patent leather shoes clicking on the cement. “You came tonight!” She flung both arms around Stacy, squeezing her waist as hard as she could, her face smushed up against Stacy’s coat, then turned to give Felicia a hug too, sighing as she pulled away. “I can’t give you a good hug anymore. That baby gets in the way.”

Felicia laughed. “You’re not the only person complaining about that.”

Two of the pitchers wives, both dressed in expensive brands Stacy didn’t pay any attention to, slipped back into the seats below Stacy, one of them wrinkling her perfectly sculpted nose in Karen’s general direction. “God, I don’t believe that. Her husband isn’t even playing anymore, and she still comes. Why?” She said it to her friend, but just loud enough that Karen could hear it.

“Excuse me.” Felicia interrupted, startling Stacy. She had been expecting Karen to lash right back at them, not quiet, little Felicia. “Some of us are actually here because we enjoy watching the team.”

“Okay.” The pitcher’s wife said disinterestedly, slightly taken aback that Felicia, who didn’t usually socialize in their little group, but still looked the part, had spoken up.

“Thank you!” Karen said, patting Felicia enthusiastically on the shoulder. “I have a feeling that went over better than ‘up yours, b----.’” She mouthed the last three words, partly so Becky wouldn’t hear, and partly so the women wouldn’t hear.

“Oh, how cute!” Becky said in delight. She was sitting in the seat next to Felicia, her legs sticking straight out in front of her, studiously going through Felicia’s bag in search of the lipstick tube. She held up a small stuffed rabbit. “Why is that in there?”

“Where did you find that?” Felicia said in surprise.

“In there.” Becky pointed, before diving into the bag one last time and emerging triumphantly with the small gold tube.

“Alex must have stuck it in there.” Felicia decided, putting the little rabbit in her coat pocket. “That was sweet of him.”

“Why?” Stacy asked. AJ had his little quirks, but as far as she knew, stuffed animals weren’t one of them.

“Did you ever read ‘The Velveteen Rabbit?’” Felicia inquired. Stacy shook her head.

“I read it!” Becky shouted. “Well, actually, I didn’t really read it, Mommy read it to me.”

“Well, that was what Alex proposed with.” Felicia explained softly.

Becky wrinkled her nose, clearly not understanding.

“Oh my God!” Karen shrieked, clearly understanding. “The part about being real?”

“Yeah.”

“What part? What did it say?” Stacy interrupted, tired of being lost in the conversation.

“It’s when the Rabbit is asking the Skin Horse about becoming a Real Toy.” Felicia explained. “And the Skin Horse tells him, ‘It’s when a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become Real... It takes a long

time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you're Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you're Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

"That is so sweet." Karen sighed.

"It was one of his better moments." Felicia agreed.

It didn't surprise Stacy at all. The entire quote summed up the perfect relationship that AJ and Felicia had. It could have been annoying, if they weren't so incredibly cute together.

Nick never had, and never would even come close to saying something like that. Stacy had gotten a 'well, I kinda like you' out of him once, but that was pretty much it. Nick wasn't someone who used words to convey affection, Stacy had figured that much out. She just wasn't sure what he did use.

## Chapter Thirty Two

Kevin scowled down at the grain in the kitchen table. The only thing worse than being in a bad mood was when that bad mood woke him up at eight in the morning. It only served to put him in a worse mood.

Becky had just caught the school bus. He could hear Karen coming back in the front door, talking to herself under her breath.

“You’re up early.” She greeted him, walking into the kitchen in her faded t-shirt, sweatpants and fluffy slippers. Her slippers had always reminded Kevin of a longhaired cat, dyed bright green, one on each foot. They had to be the ugliest footwear in the entire world, but she still wore them faithfully. It might have been because they were ugly that she wore them.

“You know what pisses me off?” Kevin started.

“Oh... it’s one of THOSE mornings.” Karen nodded. “Does someone need coffee?”

“He just marches right in and takes my position!” Kevin smacked the table for emphasis. “He’s hitting twenty points above me - and in two weeks, they give him the starting job.”

Karen stared down at Kevin, her eyebrows raised.

“But I can understand that.” Kevin continued ranting. “What I can’t understand is how they can let him sit out there and call a game. He just picks a random pitch and calls it! The concept of strategy never even enters into his little head!” That was what got him the most about Lenny. He was like the random track on a CD player - he picked a pitch, and that was what the pitcher threw. It never failed to make steam pour from Kevin’s ears in the dugout. He had been fuming over it the entire homestand. He was sure he’d still be mad about it on the road trip tomorrow too.

“Oh, leave him alone.” Karen sat down sideways on Kevin’s lap, and wrapped her arms around his neck, her slippers brushing against his foot. Not only were they ugly, but they also tickled. “You’ll get your chance.”

Kevin scowled. He wasn’t so sure. He wasn’t getting any younger. He had been having a career year until that stupid injury at home plate.

“You know what...” Karen said slowly. “Becky’s gone for the next six hours.”

Kevin didn’t answer, still thinking about the lack of strategy being shown on the field. Maybe he should talk to Buddy about it again.

“I think I’m going to take a shower.” Karen finished, climbing back to her feet and scuffing out of the room.

Kevin sat for another moment, until what she had just said filtered in between the thoughts of strategy running through his head. A smile appeared on his face, the strategy topic suddenly forgotten. Karen’s idea was the best one he had heard in quite a while.

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“AJ! Enough with the music already!” Howie screamed. AJ had been messing with the clubhouse stereo for the last hour. He kept playing the trendy music that no one on the team would admit they had ever heard, or much less actually listened to. Howie had remained quiet at first, but at the sixth Chelsea Powers song played, he couldn’t take it anymore.

“What?” AJ protested, turning the music up. “She’s hot!” He yelled over the noise. “Yeah, so look at her then!” Howie yelled back. “You don’t have to listen!”

The music abruptly died as Kevin took control of the CD player. “Okay, guys...” He announced calmly, flipping through the pile of CD’s. “I think it’s time for some ‘real’ music.”

AJ’s eyebrows raised over his sunglasses. “Real music?” He mocked, doing an uncanny impersonation of Kevin’s drawl.

Half the clubhouse began to applaud as the Top Gun theme blared out from the speakers.

“Aw, man!” Brian yelled, flinging a towel in Kevin’s general direction. “I hate that movie!”

Appropriate looks of shock and disgust were beamed in Brian’s general direction from over half the team, excluding AJ and Nick, both of whom still looked slightly confused.

“You hate that movie?” Kevin repeated slowly, a smile on his face at the absurdity of Brian’s comment. “Geez, Brian.”

“Oh come on.” Brian defended. “What kind of a movie is that? The good guy dies!”

“No, no, no!” Kevin yelled over the shouts of protest coming from the rest of the team. “The good guy is Tom Cruise. He doesn’t die.”

“I don’t think so!” Brian easily matched Kevin for volume. “He’s not the good guy! He’s the screwed up one, who finds himself after the good guy gets killed!” Brian stopped and frowned. “It’s a dumb movie. Nick - do you agree with me on this one?”

Nick glanced up guiltily. “Haven’t seen it.”

“This is something worthy of punishment in Kangaroo Court.” Kevin announced, after pulling his jaw back up off the floor. “What are we going to do about this?”

“Hey!” Nick protested. “That was WAY before my time, guys.”

“Make him wear a dress.” Howie suggested.

“Nah...” AJ protested absently. “That’s actually not that humiliating.” He stopped, watching as everyone stared at him. “What? It was for high school. We did a M.A.S.H. skit once.”

“How about singing in public?” Brad Arton offered.

“Now that’s a good one.” Kevin acknowledged, thinking it over.

“No good.” Brian dismissed the idea. “He dated a singer. That gives him an unfair advantage.”

“What singer?” Left fielder Terrance Davis laughed. “He dated the little b---- that AJ was playing earlier. Oh... um... no offense, Nick.”

“None taken.” Nick waved his arm. “Wasn’t going out with her for her singing abilities.”

Howie and Brian both cracked up at this comment, giggling and smacking Nick on the shoulder.

Kevin shook his head and turned the music up louder.

“Dude - are those real?” AJ held Chelsea’s CD jacket up to Nick.

Nick shook his head. “Nope! Her hair isn’t either!” He added.

AJ’s jaw dropped. “That’s not her hair?”

“What?” Howie leaned over. “God, who cares? It looks good on her.”

“Thank you.” AJ smacked Howie on the back. “So can we put the CD back in?”

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New York Times - September 7th

*Doctors are conducting tests to determine whether or not a mass found near Seattle Mariners infielder Brian Littrell's pineal gland could be malignant. The pineal gland is a small gland near the center of the brain. A team official, on the condition that he not be identified, said Littrell has known about the situation for several months now. Mariners physician Wesley Lange had no comment when asked about the tests. Littrell could not be reached for comment.*

## Chapter Thirty Three

Howie always read the paper first thing when he reached the clubhouse. He didn't read the entire paper, of course, just the sports section, and if it was an especially slow day, the business section. It was always more interesting to read the paper on the road, and see what other cities were saying about the team, and namely, Howie himself. There wasn't a whole lot in the Times that day, just the usual recap of yesterday's game, which the Mariners had won 7-5 and a tiny little blurb about Brian. That, however, was the kicker. Howie didn't believe it. There was no way something like that could end up in the paper without someone on the team knowing about it first.

This couldn't possibly be true. Brian would have let them know before this. That was the kind of person he was. Last season, Brian had been one of the few players who even bothered to hang out with Howie in the middle of his defensive crisis. Howie didn't blame the rest of the team for their lack of concern. If it had been another player having the same problems, Howie knew he probably wouldn't offer to help. That was what had impressed him about Brian.

Brian had been the only one who spoke up to the media about their constant picking on Howie, and had been the only one who had taken extra time out of his day and hit fungoes to Howie at third base. The coaching staff had been there too, but that was different. They had been getting paid to figure out how to get Howie to catch the ball again. Brian had been there as a friend.

"Wassup!" Kevin greeted Howie as he came in the clubhouse door. Howie raised one eyebrow in reply. For Kevin, that was almost giddiness.

"Not much." Howie set the paper down. Obviously the paper was wrong. Kevin didn't seem to be acting like anything serious was happening.

The clubhouse door smacked open, smashing into the wall and ricocheting back into Nick's face as he stalked into the clubhouse. Nick flung the door back again, then threw his equipment bag in the general direction of his locker. It missed by a good twenty feet.

"Having a good day?" Kevin said cheerfully.

"He's an a-----." Nick returned calmly, picking up his bag and slamming it into his locker. "I wish he'd go call Braves games or something. Then our paths wouldn't have reason to cross."

"Your dad?" Howie guessed.

"Yeah, well..." Kevin slipped back into lecture mode, something he was good at. "Nick, you should be grateful you still have a father."

Nick stopped shoving at the equipment bag, and turned around to face Kevin. "You want my Dad? Take him." He shoved at the bag one last time.

"Nick - it ain't gonna fit in there." Kevin pointed out mildly.

"So what?" Nick muttered, giving up and sprawling across his stool. "Who cares?"

"Where's Brian?" Kevin asked, leaving Nick alone for once.

"Haven't seen him." Howie shrugged. "Kevin? This stuff in the paper? What's up with that?" If anyone was going to know what was really going on, it was Kevin. He and Brian were cousins.

"What stuff?" Kevin reached for the section Howie was holding out to him, reading it slowly.

"What's the big deal?" Nick stopped stewing over his father and stood up to read over Kevin's shoulder.

“I love New York!” AJ yelled at the top of his lungs, almost skipping through the clubhouse door. “I’ve got to figure out a way for the Yankees to sign me so I can go shopping every day.”

“AJ, once you hit free agency, it’s not like you’re gonna have to beg anyone for a contract.” Brian pointed out, following him in the door.

“Yeah, but you might want to be a Met.” Nick added. “Yankees have a image thing. You’d have to hide the tattoos and get rid of the facial hair and stuff.”

“Really?” AJ said in shock, appalled at the idea of someone restricting his freedom of expression. “They do that? Isn’t that illegal?”

“No facial hair, no long hair, no tattoos, no piercings...” Nick ticked them off on his fingers. “You have to agree to that if you want the prestigious honor of being a Yankee.”

“And the prestigious honor of getting your butt kicked by US!” Brian added, taking on the role of cheerleader for a moment.

“That sucks.” AJ grumbled. “What if I shaved my head?”

“You have to ask first.” Nick was perfectly serious.

“Um, Bri?” Kevin held up the newspaper. “You seen the paper today, man?”

“Don’t read it.” Brian shrugged.

“You might want to today.” Kevin threw it at him. “Where’d that come from?”

Brian stared down at the page, the color slowly draining from his face. Howie started to get a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Nick let go of AJ’s hair as the two stopped wrestling and straightened up, silence falling over the clubhouse as everyone stared at Brian. Half the team wasn’t even aware of what was going on, but they could tell from the mood that something was seriously wrong.

“So where’d that come from?” Kevin prompted again.

“I don’t know.” Brian said finally, sinking down into the nearest chair. “I don’t know.”

“Is it true?” Howie had to confirm that.

Brian nodded, not meeting anyone’s eyes.

“How long have you known this, Bri?” Kevin said quietly.

“December.” Brian’s voice was barely audible. “Kevin...” he added, glancing up at his cousin. “I can explain this.”

“You can explain this?” Kevin repeated, his voice growing angrier with each word. “Explain what, Brian? You’ve known about this for ten months and you never said a word to anyone? Your parents don’t even know!”

“I know that!” Brian screamed back, standing up and stepping towards Kevin. “This wasn’t intentional, okay?”

“Sure.” Kevin snapped. “If you had it your way, no one would know about it at all. Until when, Brian? Until you were in the hospital with a week to live? Or would you even bother then?” Kevin was shouting now.

“Kevin...” Brian pleaded. “Listen to me...”

“No!” Kevin yelled. “It doesn’t matter! You should have told me months ago! You should have told your parents months ago! This isn’t fair to any of us! I already went through all of this once - I don’t want to do it again!”

Brian flinched. “I know.” He said quietly.

Kevin stood silent for a moment, his eyes glittering angrily. Howie stepped forward, hoping to grab Kevin before the inevitable happened. He was too late. Kevin lunged for his cousin, knocking him to the ground with a left to the jaw.

Howie started forward to grab Kevin, then stepped back, not wanting to get hurt. Brian was fighting back just as hard as Kevin, but was getting the worse end of the deal. Kevin was bigger and angrier than Brian.

“Okay, that’s enough!” Terrance Davis announced, stepping into the middle of the fray and grabbing Kevin. Davis was 6’4”, 235 pounds. He restrained Kevin fairly easily. That didn’t stop Kevin from struggling as Terrance pulled him away from Brian. Brian didn’t move, still sitting on the floor, holding the right side of his face with one hand, the same shocked look in his eyes that had appeared when Kevin had told him he didn’t want to do this again.

“F--- you!” Kevin screamed at Brian, his voice breaking on the last word, before shaking himself loose from Davis’ grip and disappearing down the tunnel to the dugout.

Davis started after him, until AJ grabbed his arm, holding him back. “Leave him alone.”

Nick knelt down on the floor next to Brian. “You okay?” He reached over and pulled Brian’s hand away from his face. “You’re gonna have a shiner there.”

Brian shoved Nick’s hand away and climbed unsteadily to his feet, reaching up to feel the bruise forming along his right cheekbone.

“Brian...” Nick started again.

“I’m okay.” Brian waved him back, then finally raised his eyes to the rest of the team, all of whom were still watching silently. Howie wasn’t one for showing emotion, but the look on Brian’s face made tears spring into his eyes. Brian looked hurt, confused and above all, very very alone.

## Chapter Thirty Four

Nick stepped into his darkened house, quietly shutting the door behind him. The team flight from New York was supposed to arrive at Boeing Field around eleven that evening. However, the flight had been delayed out of New York for over four hours. It was now three in the morning and pouring down rain. Nick's hair was dripping just from walking from the car to the house. He could have pulled into the garage, but that would have required thinking. Nick's brain had shut down several hours ago.

Stacy's little Mazda was parked in the driveway, but she must have gone to bed by now. That was all he really wanted to do - go to bed and try to forget the events of the last eighteen hours for as long as he could. He was cold, he was so tired his eyes could barely focus, and most of all, he was still shocked at what had happened in the clubhouse in New York earlier. Why did everything always go wrong in New York?

Inside, the house was almost balmy, compared to the temperature outside. Stacy had done her best to recreate a sub-tropical Indian climate with Nick's heating system. He shrugged out of his jacket, dropping it on the floor next to the door.

The lights were still on in the living room. Nick detoured to turn them off, stopping when he found Stacy, curled up on the couch asleep, her book still lying open next to her. She looked so innocent and peaceful lying there like that, her hair spread out across the black of the couch, one arm tucked under her head. Her shoes were lying on the floor next to the couch, and she had pulled one of Nick's sweatshirts on over her white button-down shirt. He reached down and carefully tugged the book away, dog-eared the page, then reached to turn off the light.

"Nick?" Stacy murmured sleepily. "Where have you been?"

"I thought you were asleep." Nick whispered back, leaving the light on.

"Not really." She sat up, shaking the sleeves of the sweatshirt down until her hands appeared, pushing her hair back from her face. "What time is it?"

"3:17." Nick flopped onto the couch next to her, shoving his feet up on the coffee table. "They delayed our flight." Stacy was wearing a gray wool knee length skirt. She must have had another meeting at work today. Nick stared down at her long, thin legs for a moment, idly wondering why she didn't wear skirts more often, then distracted himself with the book in his hands, flipping through the first few chapters. "You're actually reading this?" The pages were nothing but tiny little print. It gave Nick a headache just looking at it.

"No," Stacy said calmly. "I'm looking at the pictures."

Nick flipped some more. "There aren't any." He frowned.

"Point taken."

Nick almost smiled. He would have, if it didn't require so much energy. But, if he could still laugh over something stupid like that, maybe things weren't quite as bad as they had seemed on the flight home. Sitting at the airport waiting had been four of the longest hours of Nick's life. After the fighting in the clubhouse, the team had divided down the middle in a sense. There were those who were on Kevin's side, mad that Brian hadn't said anything, and there were those who were on Brian's side. By the time the game was over, and they were sitting in the airport waiting room, the tension could have been cut with a knife.

Kevin had sat stonily the entire time, talking to no one. Brian hadn't said a whole lot either. AJ had attached himself to Brian's side at about the two hour point, and sat and

babbled about anything and everything that came into his twisted little head. Before AJ had sat down, most of the team had been avoiding Brian. Nick felt bad about that one. He knew he was Brian's friend, but he had no idea what to say to him. Things had lightened up a little after AJ started a running monologue on the fans in New York, vending machines in men's restrooms and the fact that he really didn't like the pants he was wearing, in that order.

"You okay?" Stacy slipped one arm around his shoulders and kissed him on the jaw.

"Uh-huh." Nick didn't feel like going into any of it right now. He'd tell her everything later. "I'm gonna go to bed." He added, grabbing her hand and pulling her up with him.

Her arm slipped back around his waist as they headed down the hallway. Nick impulsively turned and hugged her as tight as he could. This was what he hated most, the way reality smacked him without any warning. His life was spiraling out of control again, and he couldn't do anything about it.

"You sure you're okay?" Stacy reached up and pushed his hair back from his forehead.

"Yeah." Nick managed a small smile as he sank down onto the bed. "Just the two by four of reality hitting me upside the head. I'll be okay."

Stacy shook her head in amusement at his analogy, ruffled his hair with her hand and disappeared into the bathroom.

Nick kicked his shoes off, threw his shirt and pants on the floor and crawled under the covers, pulling them up over his head in an attempt to finally warm up.

"Is someone cold?" Stacy pulled the covers off his head and peered down at him. Nick opened one eye. She was just wearing the sweatshirt now.

"Yeah." He affirmed, grabbing her arm before she headed for the thermostat again. "Leave the heat alone - how do you afford your heating bill, anyway?"

"I sacrifice." Stacy wrinkled her nose at him. "I buy generic peanut butter." Nick had complained on several occasions that Stacy needed Skippy in her kitchen. There was a difference between it and the store brand that only he could taste and Stacy loved to bring it up every chance she got.

Nick did laugh this time. What was it that people said about if you couldn't cry, you laughed? He couldn't remember. It didn't matter. All he wanted to do now was go to sleep. He moved over and snuggled up next to Stacy, resting his head on her chest and closing his eyes. The last thing he remembered was listening to her heartbeat before he drifted off.

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The theme music that had been played on Mariners radio for the last seven years cued in after the commercial, running through a couple bars before the voice of Dave Niehaus began speaking.

"Today's guest on the pre-game show is second baseman Brian Littrell. Brian, you've been on this show many times before over the course of the season, but not under these circumstances. I have to say, I think pretty much anyone following the Mariners was shocked by the news in yesterday's New York Times. I know I was, and so was the rest of the team."

“Actually, I was kind of shocked too.” Brian sounded the same as he always did. The southern accent, the tone of his voice - it was obvious he was smiling just from listening to him. Brian always sounded as if being on the pre-game show was the most excitement that had happened to him in years. “I wasn’t quite ready for this to come out to the media yet, but it’s done with now. Can’t really go back.”

“For those who haven’t heard the news yet... Brian was diagnosed a few days ago with a malignant brain tumor.”

“It was actually diagnosed last December.” Brian corrected gently. “And I found out... it was the end of August, if my memory serves me correctly, that it’s spreading.”

“So how does this affect your playing time?”

“It doesn’t.”

“You’re not going to be...”

“It’s inoperable... and any chemo or radiation... they’re not sure how much good that would do. So I’m holding off right now, at least until the end of the season.” Brian laughed. “Which will be mid October, of course!”

Niehaus laughed too. “That’s what we’re hoping for! Brian, I know you’re going to get asked this a lot in the next month, but - is this going to affect the mental side of the team?”

“I hope not.” Brian’s voice turned serious. “That was exactly what I didn’t want to do. The last thing we need right now is something like this coming up. I’m not a big media person you know, I leave that stuff to AJ and Nick. I really don’t want to make a big deal out of this. I didn’t want to begin with, but someone let it leak out.” Brian paused for a moment. “It’s a little suspect, right in the middle of the stretch drive like this, but I’m not gonna point fingers.”

“You think the Mariners might want to play this up for the publicity?”

“They can do whatever they want. It’s my life - and I’m not going to do that. I have one thing on my mind right now, and that’s winning the division.”

“Let’s talk about the team for a minute.” Niehaus had always been very professional about keeping the interviews on a strictly baseball basis, and today was no exception.

“You guys are a half game back of the A’s.”

“Hopefully that’s gonna change tonight!” The smile was back in Brian’s voice. “If we keep playing the way we have been the last couple weeks... I don’t think there’s too much to worry about.”

“There’s been some talk floating around about Howie Dorough being a candidate for most valuable player.”

“Amen to that. I think he deserves it. He’s having a great year... Howie’s kind of left out of the spotlight most of the time. He deserves the credit he’s getting.”

“Before we run out of time - your call on the division series matchups? Or will that jinx it?”

Brian laughed again, something between a laugh and a giggle. He and Becky laughed the same way. “I say Mariners and BlueJays and Yankees - White Sox.”

“We have you on tape saying this, you know.”

“Aw, man, y’all are gonna hold me to this? Can I change... nah, I think it’s gonna come out that way. We’ll see if I’m right.”

“Brian, as always, it’s a pleasure to have you on the show, it’s been nice talking to you, and might I speak on the behalf of fans all over the Northwest when I say that our thoughts and prayers are with you.”

“Thank you. And as always, it was a pleasure being on the show, Dave.”

## Chapter Thirty Five

Whenever Kevin was stressed out, he started cleaning. He hadn't always been that way. In fact, he hadn't started doing that until he met Karen. It may have been something about the way she could walk through a room and leave a wake of destruction behind her, but it didn't really matter. What mattered was that Kevin was upset, and he was cleaning the upstairs bathroom within an inch of its life. If he was concentrating on tile grout, he didn't have to think about what was going to happen and how it was going to change his life, and worst of all, how it was going to change his little girl's life. It really wasn't working, he was still thinking about it. This wasn't something that he could just forget.

"Hey, Kevin."

Kevin jumped and glanced over at the bathroom door. Brian was standing hesitantly in the hallway. Kevin turned his attention back to the shower wall. Brian had some serious explaining to do, and even then, all the explaining in the world wasn't going to change anything. Unless it was a good explanation, it wasn't even going to change Kevin's mind.

"Karen said you were up here." Brian perched himself on the freshly scrubbed counter, swinging his feet against the cabinet door below and watched Kevin for a minute. "I know you're mad at me."

Kevin didn't even bother to dignify that with an answer. Of course he was mad at Brian. He hadn't spoke to him since their fight in the New York clubhouse. It hadn't been hard. Brian had been avoiding him as well.

"You have to realize a couple things." Brian started. "That wasn't supposed to be in the paper yet. I was gonna tell you, okay?"

"Were you?" Kevin flung at him. Much to his disappointment, Brian didn't look hurt. He wanted Brian to feel as bad as he did over all this. "Ten months is a long time to wait, Bri."

"Kevin, if you're gonna be an a-- about all this, I'm not gonna bother." Brian sighed. "I was gonna tell you when I first found out, but I kept chickening out. I'm sorry."

Kevin flung his sponge in the sink and leaned against the wall across from Brian. "Did you know my Mom didn't tell me my Dad was sick until a month before he died?"

"No. I didn't." Brian did look hurt now. It didn't make Kevin feel any better. In fact, it made him feel worse. He hated the fact that Brian could do that to him. He didn't even have to say anything, it was this feeling that appeared in the room. Brian could lay a guilt trip on someone just by looking at them.

"So, what're you gonna do?" Kevin changed the subject.

"Nothing." Brian shrugged.

"You're just gonna sit there and die?" Kevin said in disbelief. "Way to go, Bri."

"Hey!" There was a certain look that Brian would get in his eyes when he was mad, that never failed to make Kevin feel a little uneasy. It wasn't quite there this time, but it was close. "I don't have much of a choice here, okay?" He frowned, pulling the baseball cap off his head and running his fingers along the brim. "I've had some time to think about this now. Ten months, actually. And I can either go for chemo or something and live... longer, but be miserable most of that time. Call me selfish if you want, but I'd prefer to just enjoy the time I have left."

"How long is that?" Kevin asked quietly.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Brian...”

“I’m not gonna tell you. It doesn’t matter. I don’t need people writing me off as dead already, cause I’m not!” Brian’s voice rose, and he stared back down at his hat after that speech. Kevin stood quietly for a minute, not sure how to address that. That had been very unlike Brian.

“I haven’t talked to Becky yet.” Kevin brought up what was bothering him the most about all this.

“I did.” Brian shoved his hat back on. “She wanted to know if I thought angels could get cancer.” He smiled, happy again.

“Becky and her angels.” Kevin shook his head.

“Hey - don’t go dissing angels.” Brian warned teasingly. “They’ve helped you out more than once.”

“You know I don’t believe that.”

“Doesn’t matter if you believe it or not.”

“You’re worse than she is, you know.”

“Yep.” Brian shoved himself off the counter. “I’ve gotta go. I’m...”

“Late. I know.” Kevin waved his hand at him. “If you’d just pay attention to the details, Bri...”

“I don’t have time for details.” Brian gave him his standard response. “See you tonight.” Kevin heard the thump as Brian slid down the railing of the stairs, as usual, and heard him yell good-bye to Karen, before the front door slammed.

Kevin rinsed the sponge off. He didn’t have the faintest idea why, but he was feeling better now. He shouldn’t be, but he was.

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The television screen showed AJ McLean standing on the mound, staring down at home plate with the usual expression of surprise, confusion, disbelief, amusement and superiority that he always showed while waiting for the sign. He shook his head, and the entire cycle was repeated for the fourth time. The left side of AJ’s hair was a strange red-orange color, the right was bright blue. The full effect was lost with his hat on, but the ends still showed.

“The Athletics lost tonight to Anaheim.” Niehaus filled the dead air time while AJ messed around on the mound. “The Mariners magic number is down to two games. With a win tonight, they could be one win - or one Athletic loss - away from going to the playoffs for the fourth time in team history.”

On the screen, AJ shook his head again, then raised one eyebrow in surprise at the sign Lenny gave him that time, smirking. Finally, he agreed on a pitch, and threw towards the plate.

“And that’s hit into... diving stop by Littrell... underhands to Alicea at second...” Niehaus watched as Alicea threw the ball onto first. “4-6-3 double play, and that’s the ball game. McLean earns his forty first save of the year. The Mariners are one game away from clinching the west. You know, Charlie, I can’t think of a team that I’d like to see in the playoffs more.”

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The Mariners beat the Texas Rangers 15-4 the next day, winning the American League western division, and proceeding onto the playoffs, where they would play either the Toronto Blue Jays or the Oakland Athletics, who still had a chance in the wild card berth. The champagne was waiting in the plastic covered clubhouse afterwards, and the team wasted no time in cranking the stereo and drenching everything in sight, including cameras, reporters, Buddy Williams and the team owner, who although he smiled, was not happy with AJ McLean dumping a bottle of champagne over his head.

“Won what?” AJ yelled over the music, leaning down towards the reporter trying to get interviews. “We won something? I thought we were just having a party! We won the division?” He turned and grabbed Kevin as he wandered past. “Kevin! Did you know there’s a reason for all this?” Kevin proceeded to spray AJ in the face with champagne.

“That was so uncool!” AJ hollered, now looking something like a wet cat. “You’re DEAD, my friend!”

“Move move move move move!” Brian bolted into the middle of the scene, ducking behind AJ. “Nick’s on the warpath!”

Kevin dumped the rest of the bottle over Brian’s head and shook up a fresh one, spraying Nick head on in the face.

“Geez!” Nick yelped, wiping at his face furiously. “That stuff smarts! Cut it out!”

“What do I think our strongest asset is?” AJ repeated the reporter's question. “Our maturity level, no doubt.”

“Serves ya right!” Brian taunted, leaning out from behind AJ and sticking his tongue out at Nick. “Betcha can’t get me!”

“I would if I could see you.” Nick wiped his eyes with the hem of his division champions t-shirt. He banged into the camera, snickered, then gave the camera a ditzzy smile. “Sorry! I actually can’t see anything right now.” He turned back around. “Where’s Brian?”

AJ frowned at the spray all around him. “Okay, I’m wondering. Exactly why is all this alcohol going to waste again?”

## Chapter Thirty Six

“PLEASE!” AJ flung himself on his knees in front of the TV in Kevin’s family room. “Please let the Blue Jays win! I cannot play against the A’s! My brain can’t handle it! White shoes after Labor Day is just too strong a weapon for me to handle!”

“I thought you said the Blue Jays had ugly uniforms too.” Nick laughed from where he was sprawled across the couch.

“Yeah, well, Oakland is ten times worse, my friend.” AJ flopped over onto the floor. “They actually hurt to look at. The colors... the shoes.... it’s just not a good thing. The Cool Guru would like to proclaim at this time that the A’s shouldn’t be allowed to play after September. I don’t think I can watch this game.”

The regular season was over, but the Oakland Athletics and Toronto Blue Jays finished the season in a dead tie for the wild card position. Today, they were playing a one game playoff in Oakland to determine who would advance to the playoffs - and play the Mariners. The Mariners themselves were rooting for the Blue Jays. They had a history of playing better against the Blue Jays, Scott Martin was on the team, plus, as AJ pointed out, the Blue Jays didn’t have white shoes.

“You sound like you need alcohol.” Kevin sympathized from the kitchen doorway.

“All right!” Brian clapped enthusiastically from where he was sitting next to Felicia on the couch. “Are we gonna have one of those contests to see who can get drunk the fastest again?”

“No!” Kevin said sharply, glaring at Brian. “We are not!”

“Kevin would win anyway.” AJ said from the floor. “So what’s the fun in that?”

“The fun is in watching him.” Brian argued. “It’s not a party unless Kevin gets sloshed!”

“Thank you, Bri.” Kevin flung a bag of chips across the room at Brian, smacking him in the chest. “Fill your mouth and stop talking.”

“I don’t like the barbecued ones... do you have any with the ridges?” Brian requested, then started giggling at the look of shock on Kevin’s face.

“Be quiet!” Karen screamed. “It’s starting!”

“We don’t need to hear it.” AJ’s voice sounded from the floor again. “This is a room of fully grown major leaguers. We’re capable of following a baseball game without the sound.”

“Denise!” Brian hollered, waving madly at AJ’s mother as she came in from the kitchen. “Sit with me! Huh? Please?”

Denise laughed and shook her head. “I can’t. I already told Nick I would.”

“Naaah!” Nick stuck his tongue out at Brian. “She likes me better than you!” He grabbed Denise and gave her a big hug as she sat down, sticking his head right next to hers and grinning cheesily at the rest of the room.

“Want a potato chip?” Brian offered politely, holding the bag out to Felicia, ignoring Nick.

“Watch that woman.” AJ warned Nick. “She’ll steal your wallet if you’re not careful.”

Denise shut AJ up with a well placed throw pillow to the head.

“Okay! Quiet!” Kevin yelled now, waving his arms in the air. “There’s the lineups! Look at the lineups! And stop throwin’ stuff, people!”

There was silence for a moment as everyone stared at the graphic on the screen.

“Okay...” Brian said finally, around a mouthful of potato chips. “That was fascinating. Why did we shut up for that?”

“Did you see how they have Lopez batting fourth instead of second?” Kevin started. “That changes the way the Blue Jays have to pitch to the entire top of the...”

“Fill your mouth and quit talking.” Nick grabbed the chip bag from Brian, eliciting a muffled shriek of protest, and handed it over to Kevin.

“Fastball inside!” Kevin yelled as the first batter stepped up to the plate, ignoring the chip bag.

“I just changed my mind.” Nick decided. “I think I’m gonna want beer after all. If he’s gonna call the entire game like that...”

“I need one too!” AJ added. “Damn those shoes...”

“You can’t have any!” Kevin glared at Nick’s back as he vanished into the kitchen. “You’re underage!”

“Where’s your girl?” Brian asked Nick as he came back in the room.

“Workin’, dude.” Nick vaulted the back of the couch, landing next to Denise.

“Don’t do that...” Kevin said absently, still watching the screen.

“How does that work?” Denise wondered. “She gets off and you have to go the ballpark? When do you guys ever see each other?”

“Weekends, pretty much.” Nick held the beer can out at arms reach, away from Kevin’s grabbing hands. “Back off, Kevin!”

“Oh no!” AJ yelled.

“What?” Kevin turned his attention back to the screen. “What happened?”

“He fouled off a pitch.” AJ shrugged. “My bad. Leave Nick’s beer alone.”

“Are you guys livin’ together?” Brian wondered.

“Nope.” Nick shook his head, then grinned again. “I just kinda spend a lot of time at her place.”

“No!” Kevin ordered. “Don’t throw him a slider! Don’t do it... I’m warnin’ ya...”

“Have I met your girlfriend?” Denise wondered.

“Yes!” Felicia interrupted. “Stacy - the redhead. You met her seven or eight times.”

“That’s your girl...” Denise leaned back and stared at Nick thoughtfully. “How did you get her? She’s way better looking than you are.”

Brian collapsed in a fit of laughter on the couch arm.

“Yeah, well...” Nick defended. “Look at AJ. Felicia’s better lookin’ than him.”

“Hey!” AJ twisted around to glare at Nick. “Just because Lissie happens to be one of the FEW people in the world who is more attractive than I am doesn’t mean you have to diss me! Just because you’re jealous of the hair!” He patted his wiry curls carefully and flopped back down on the floor.

“That is attractive hair, AJ.” Karen agreed, keeping a perfectly straight face. “Love the way the orange and blue clashes.” She turned to Felicia. “Do you actually let him go out in public like that?”

“If I’m with her, I have to wear a hat.” AJ complained. “She’s too damn conservative. I’m working on her though.”

“Would you please be quiet!” Kevin snapped. “How can I be expected to follow this with all this yapping going on?”

“What’s there to follow?” AJ wondered. “Kevin - it’s the bottom of the first. Oakland has a guy on first with one out... oh look... Twinkletoes is gonna try for second. Damn, I bet they can see those shoes in L.A.”

## Chapter Thirty Seven

“Hey, Brian!” Scott called, catching up to the blond infielder in the tunnel at Skydome in Toronto. “Got a minute?” He hadn’t had a chance to talk to Brian the last couple days.

“Yep!” Brian announced cheerfully. “Now, Scott - I don’t want you taking the last two games personally or anything...”

Scott gave him a sour smile. The Mariners had come into town and humiliated the Blue Jays in front of their home crowd during the first two games. They had lost the first game 10-3 and the second 4-0. Things were not looking good for the Blue Jays. They were flying to Seattle tomorrow, where if they didn’t win on Friday, the season was over. As much as Scott liked his former teammates, especially Brian, he didn’t have any intention of going out without putting up a fight. That fight was just being won by Mariners pitching, and rather easily too.

“You wait until Friday.” Scott threatened mildly. “So...” he added. “I heard about...” He stopped, not quite sure how to phrase it. ‘I heard you’re dying,’ didn’t quite sound right. Even for Scott, that was a little blunt.

“Yeah.” Brian agreed pleasantly. “That was a big mess.”

“Kinda got the family mad at you?”

“Kevin gave me a black eye.”

Scott laughed. “Yeah, well, there’s overreacting and then there’s Kevin.”

“I caught my parents before they heard it on the news though.” Brian’s face turned serious for once. “That made me feel a little better.”

“So how’re you doing?” Scott inquired. He had been shocked when he heard the news on ESPN. Not just the fact that Brian was dying, the fact that for six months before he moved to Toronto, Brian had been dying and no one knew it. He never would have guessed something like that was going on. It was strange to realize.

“I’m good.” Brian smiled again.

“You feel okay?”

“Pretty much.” Brian shrugged. “Headaches sometimes... it’s not too bad. They say it’s gonna get worse.”

“How long do you have?”

Brian scowled. “Not long enough, let’s put it that way.” He leaned against the wall and shook his head. “I’ve got all this stuff I still want to do - and I don’t know how much longer I’m gonna have to do it, ya know? I’m standing here, staring the rest of my life right in the face. It’s kinda weird.”

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Article in the Seattle Times - October 5th

*The Seattle Mariners, after their sweep of the Toronto Blue Jays on Friday, will get the next three days off, before traveling to either New York or Chicago, pending the outcome of the remaining division series. The Yankees are leading that series, two games to one. Until next Tuesday, the Mariners can sit back, relax and wait to see what happens next on the hopeful road to the World Series. The team is looking forward to the next couple days off.*

*“It’ll be good for us.” Manager Buddy Williams says. “Things have been a little tense the last month. We can have a couple days to just relax, then come back and take on whoever wins the White Sox-Yankees matchup.”*

*Of course, Williams was referring to the fact that second baseman Brian Littrell was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor five weeks ago. Littrell has kept playing, and team doctors confirm there’s no reason why he shouldn’t be playing. Littrell was one of the main components in the offense that knocked the Blue Jays out of the playoffs. He was 10 for 13 in the three games against the Blue Jays, with two doubles and a triple.*

*Third baseman Howie Dorough, this years winner of the American League batting title, is keeping up the same pace into the postseason, providing most of the offensive pop in the series. It’s Dorough’s first time in the postseason, as it is for Littrell as well, but he doesn’t seem to be feeling the pressure. Four doubles and one game winning home run into the postseason, Dorough looks like he’s been doing it all his life.*

*The one drawback the Mariners experienced in the division series was the loss of starting catcher Lenny Krazelton. Krazelton ripped a tendon in his left ankle in game one, and will be out for the rest of the playoffs. Back-up catcher Kevin Richardson is 0-14 in the playoffs so far with an error and a passed ball, something Richardson hasn’t had since he played for Kansas City three years ago.*

*The pitching for Seattle stepped it up a notch in the playoffs, holding the Toronto offense to only 4 runs with a team ERA of 1.04. Closer AJ McLean has yet to let a man on base in the postseason. When asked about the Mariners chances in the League Championship Series, McLean had this to say. “Right now - I don’t know of another team that can touch us. We’ve got everything working, everyone’s connected, and they can’t stop us.”*

## Chapter Thirty Eight

“Good morning!” Brian hollered from the entryway.

Becky almost knocked her cereal off the table. Brian was there very early for a Saturday morning. “Hi!” She called back.

“Got plans today?” Brian inquired, poking his head in the kitchen, the smirk on his face telling Becky that he had plans. Becky smiled back around her mouthful of Captain Crunch. Brian always had good plans.

“No.”

“Cool. We’re goin’ to the zoo.”

Becky squealed in delight. “Really?” He hadn’t forgotten after all. She should have known he wouldn’t.

“Yep. Go put your zoo shoes on.”

“You’d better tell Daddy.” Becky warned, before running for the stairs and her closet as fast as she could. She could hear Brian yelling at her parents bedroom door while she put on her favorite tennis shoes.

“Kevin! I’m taking Becky to the zoo! Yeah! No... I don’t think so. Okay... Yes, I’ll make her wear a jacket! I promise! Fine, I’ll wear one too! You two have fun... uh... that was NOT what I meant, Karen!” He appeared in Becky’s doorway. “Your parents scare me. I’m surprised you’ve remained an only child as long as you have.”

Becky wrinkled her nose. “What do you mean?”

“Never mind.” Brian shrugged as they started down the stairs. “You have to wear a jacket or your dad will string me up by my eyelids, okay?”

“It’s probably a wise idea.” Becky agreed, pulling her pink raincoat off its peg. “It might rain.”

“So...” Brian added, as Becky crawled over into the passenger seat of his little car. The passenger door didn’t open most of the time. It was usually easier to just crawl in the other side. “I was talkin’ to a certain friend of mine, and he decided going to the zoo was a pretty cool idea, so he’s comin’ too, okay?”

“Who?” Becky wondered. Brian had a lot of friends. She hoped it was someone she liked.

“A certain number 5... plus his girlfriend.” Brian nodded, attempting to start the car.

“Nick!” Becky clapped her hands. She knew the numbers of every player on the team. “I like Nick!”

“Yeah, so do I.” Brian agreed, the car finally starting with a loud rattling noise. “So, tell me. What’re the important spots to hit?”

Becky thought for a moment, trying to remember what her classmates had told her about the field trip she missed. “The elephants, the lions, the ponies, and the butterflies. Oh, and the snakes.”

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“You know who it looks like?” Brian said finally. “AJ.”

Becky stared up at the mountain goat perched on the rock formation on the other side of the railing. Maybe it did a little. AJ had highlighted his hair platinum silver in honor of the playoffs, and that was almost the same color as the goat’s fur.

“It does not.” Nick protested. He was wearing his standard khakis and sweatshirt, but had added a navy blue stocking cap pulled down over his ears, complaining that his head was cold. Becky had decided it made him look like a fisherman - a nice looking fisherman.

“Does too.” Brian argued mildly. “Look at it - it’s even rocking back and forth. It’s neurotic.”

“And that would be AJ.” Stacy finished. Becky liked Stacy’s sweater. It was long, with a turtleneck and looked snuggly. Snuggly was good today - it wasn’t quite raining, but everything was still wet. It was a good thing Becky had worn her raincoat.

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“Okay, the snakes were bad enough.” Stacy complained as Nick forcibly dragged her through the door of the Nocturnal House. “But I hate bats even more.”

“Geez... they’re behind nets and stuff.” Nick wrinkled his nose. “And the snakes were behind glass. What’s so horrible about that?”

Becky didn’t hear Stacy’s reply as she followed Brian down the darkened ramp. She couldn’t see anything for a moment, then her eyes adjusted, and she could see the reflectors twinkling on her shoes. There was one blue light at the end of the ramp illuminating an arrow that pointed out the hallway into where the animals were.

“Ow!” Stacy yelped.

Nick cackled with delight. “Oops! Sorry.” He didn’t sound sorry in the slightest.

“Wait a minute...” Brian stopped right before he and Becky entered the main room. “Where’d they go?” He glanced back up the ramp, then shook his head. “Yeesh.”

Becky looked. Nick and Stacy were kissing again. Becky sighed. If they weren’t kissing, they were holding hands. The only time they hadn’t been was when Nick had lifted Becky up so she could see the zebras.

“Excuse me, you guys.” Brian hissed loudly. “Get a room?”

“Been there, done that, got the t-shirt.” Nick retorted, letting go of Stacy’s waist.

Becky frowned. She didn’t understand that, but Brian kept telling her there was a lot she would finally get when she was older. That must have been one of them. “Can we go look at the bats now?”

“No, let’s not.” Stacy shook her head.

“Oh come on.” Nick slung his arm around her shoulder. “I’ll stop them from dive bombing your head.” He winked at Becky as Stacy smacked him on the chest.

Becky smiled back. Nick was in a pretty fun mood today. Becky couldn’t wink though. She had tried it before, and all she ended up doing was blinking.

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“That one’s pretty.” Becky pointed at the picture of the butterfly. They were all pretty, and Becky had made that same comment about each and every one of the different little pictures. It had stopped raining as they finished their pizza, and they had stopped to see the butterflies before Becky got her pony ride.

“That one looks like angels wings.” Becky continued.

“I thought angels didn’t have wings.” Brian pointed out.

“I meant in the traditional sense.” Becky corrected. She knew that Brian knew that angels didn’t have wings, but she had to correct him anyway. If angels DID have wings, they would look like the butterfly.

“Do you believe in angels?” Brian was talking to Stacy now.

Stacy raised her eyebrows. “If you’re talking about an actual celestial being - no, I don’t.”

“What about you, Nick?”

Nick stared distractedly at Brian, his mind still on the butterflies. “Huh?” He scrunched his face up. “Didn’t we already talk about this before?”

“I don’t remember.” Brian shrugged.

“Well, I guess I do.” Nick frowned. “I think I’d kind of like to believe there’s something like that.”

“Do you believe in angels?” Stacy threw the question back at Brian.

Brian’s face turned serious. “I believe in something. When I was five years old - I was in the hospital, the doctors thought I was going to die - and I know I saw something. They were trying to restart my heart and it wasn’t like it was a person or anything - it was more of a presence... call it whatever you want. I think it’s angels.”

Becky knew exactly what Brian was talking about. He had told her the story before, but Becky had seen the same thing. She didn’t know why, and it didn’t bother her in the slightest, for her it was a perfectly normal experience. She only felt it around certain people at certain times, and she was pretty sure it had something to do with what Brian was talking about. Becky knew she could see angels.

## Chapter Thirty Nine

Stacy leaned against the counter in her little kitchen, staring down into the sink. She loved it when Nick was happy and bouncing off walls and everything else in sight, just not when she had a headache. It had been one thing while he was outdoors at the zoo, she was pretty sure he had more fun running around than Becky had, but once he was back inside, confined to a small space, he was getting on her nerves.

At the moment, she wasn't entirely certain what he was doing, but the music was blaring full blast in the living room. Everything Nick listened to was loud. Stacy wasn't a music person, she had no idea who half the bands were that Nick loved so much, but he always had music on - in the car, at home - and everywhere else, the Walkman was always with him.

"Whatcha doin'?" Nick arms appeared from behind her, wrapping around her shoulders.

Stacy shook her head, then turned to face him. Nick had long arms and wide shoulders. Aside from the obvious - that he looked good in t-shirts - he gave incredibly good hugs. That was, if he stood still and didn't dance to whatever obnoxious group was rattling the walls.

"What say we turn down the music?"

"What?" Nick cupped his hand to his ear. "Can't hear you!" He found this comment especially amusing, sticking his tongue out as he laughed.

Stacy pulled herself free from his grasp, marched into the living room and switched the stereo off.

"Geez, okay!" Nick relented. "Aren't you the touchy one!"

Stacy opened her mouth, then snapped it shut before she said something she'd end up regretting later. She could have said plenty about him being 'touchy', but the short while it would make her feel better wouldn't make up for the longer result of hurting his feelings. She had already figured that one out - the hard way. There were certain subjects that had to be treaded carefully with Nick, and being 'touchy' was one of them.

She left him standing in the eating area next to the kitchen, still looking surprised, and headed for the bedroom. This wasn't a good time for her to get sick. Stacy didn't get sick to begin with, and especially not when she had two weeks until the lecture that would make or break her career. She had too much to do, and it made her head hurt even more just thinking about it. She dropped down on the bed and pulled the pillow over her head.

"Stacy?" Nick followed her. She knew he would. "You okay?" He sat down on the bed next to her. Stacy wondered if that was a good sign that he hadn't cannonballed into the middle of it. He learned quickly.

Stacy ignored him, partly because she was still annoyed, and partly because she was hoping if she didn't say anything he would go away. That didn't seem to be happening. He was quiet, but even then, he couldn't manage to stay still. Nick would sit quietly for no more than a minute, then his foot would start vibrating. It was unintentional on his part, he did it without thinking about it, but now the entire bed was vibrating.

"Nick, stop it." Stacy gave up and pulled the pillow off her head.

Nick frowned. "Stop what?"

"That." She grabbed his foot.

"Sorry." Nick propped his elbows on his crossed legs. "It's cause we're not playing."

“So you’re going to be like this until Tuesday?”

He gave her his most charming smile, his dimples appearing. “I’ll get worse.”

“Oh, marvelous.” Stacy sighed, shifting over to her side and closing her eyes.

“I know I am.” Nick agreed.

He was quiet after that. If Stacy hadn’t known better, she would have thought he hadn’t been in the room at all. As much as she would have preferred to fall asleep, her mind wasn’t letting her. For once, she wasn’t thinking about work, she kept going back to when Brian had been talking about being in the hospital and his near death experience. She had seen the look on Nick’s face when Brian was explaining it to her, and she had the sneaking suspicion there was a lot Nick hadn’t told her.

She opened her eyes to find Nick, sitting quietly, his chin propped on his hand, watching her. It was slightly unnerving, and at the same time, it made her feel better. He gave her a half smile when she made eye contact, his good mood suddenly gone.

Once she started watching him, he moved, shoving the pillows up against the headboard and flopping over on his back. “C’mere?” He offered, patting the bed next to him.

Stacy scooted over next to him, pillowing her head on his sweatshirt. He didn’t say anything else, just lay there quietly, one arm wrapped around her, the other hand absently playing with the ends of her hair.

She was just about to bring up the angel discussion at the butterfly exhibit, when Nick finally said something. “I really don’t want to go to New York.” He sounded slightly panicked.

“Why?” Stacy would have looked up at his face, had she not been so comfortable lying where she was.

Nick sighed, thinking again. “It’s just... ya know.” He stopped, expecting her to fill in the blanks. This was how Nick operated. He wouldn’t say what he was thinking, but if she said it, he’d agree. Somehow it was different if it came out of her mouth.

“Going back against the Yankees?”

“Well, yeah, I guess.” Nick allowed. “But, I don’t know - something always happens there, and it’s never good.”

“You’re only going to be there three days.”

“I suppose.” Nick dropped the subject again, reaching over to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “Stacy?”

“Hmm?”

“You know what Brian was saying earlier?”

“Which bit?” She knew which bit. So he had been thinking about it too.

“About the... whatever you want to call it.”

“The near death experience?”

“I guess.” Nick sounded skeptical.

“You guess? It was classic, Nick. A bright white light...”

“It’s not white.” Nick interrupted. “It’s invisible but you know it’s there.”

Stacy did sit up and look at him now. “You too?” Her suspicions were now confirmed, she just didn’t expect him to admit it so readily.

Nick flinched. “Yeah... I think so, anyway.” He said finally.

“When?”

Nick shrugged. “I was, um, in the hospital when I was fifteen.” He broke eye contact and stared at the wall.

“And you think it was an angel?” Stacy switched back to the first subject, recognizing she was heading into forbidden territory.

“I guess.” Nick repeated. “I don’t know what it was... I’d just like to think it was. You know? I’d like to think that there something out there that’s watching out for me.”

## Chapter Forty

The Mariners continued their perfect playoff streak into the League Championship Series against New York, winning the first two games at home. The hype was building as they headed to New York for at least two, possibly three games.

It wasn't just the fact the Mariners were unbeaten in the playoffs - the New York sporting world was positively dizzy that Nick Carter was coming back to play his former team in a playoff atmosphere. He had been their rising star, until he had demanded to leave, and now there was nothing Yankees fans would like to see more than Nick Carter lose a shot at the World Series at the hands of their team. The irony would be too great.

The Mariners knew what they were up against, especially Nick. He knew everyone in the Big Apple was just waiting for him to crack. He knew the fan reaction would be ten times worse than the other two trips to New York. Most of all, he knew this was something his father was taking very seriously.

Once the playoffs started, Fox Sports employed Bob Carter as a color commentator for their exclusive telecasts of all major league baseball playoff games. Working for a national TV network, Carter was supposed to be unbiased in his calling of the games, but anyone and everyone knew that Bob was a Yankee, and he was rooting for the Yankees. The fact that his son was playing on the opposing team was creating controversy that the New York media was lapping up.

Nick had seen his father on TV when the Mariners arrived in New York. The host was asking Bob if he had a choice, would he prefer to see the Yankees in the World Series, or Nick in the World Series, and Bob had answered instantly, without even thinking about it, "The Yankees."

It wasn't a friendly competition. Nick had every intention of going to the World Series, just to prove his father wrong. It wasn't about beating the Yankees - it was about beating one former Yankee.

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"Wow..." Howie craned his neck and peered out of the dugout at the sold out stadium of Yankees fans, all of them booing Nick as loudly as they could. "It's nice to know when someone hates you, huh?" He was just glad it wasn't him. Even though he knew it was more of a compliment when the road fans booed, he didn't like the feeling. He wondered briefly if it bothered Nick at all. Some players enjoyed being booed on the road. Howie wasn't one of them.

"Dang, I wish people would boo me on the road." Brian complained laughingly.

Kevin smirked slightly - a major achievement, given the mood he had been in the last few days. It was the fifth inning and the Mariners were losing 4-0. When Howie took that into account, suddenly Kevin's mood looked pretty good. It could be a lot worse.

Nick swung wildly at the pitch at home plate, missing it completely.

"Yeah, that's the way to show 'em, buddy." Brian said dryly.

"You just shut up, Mr. 'I'm hitting .700.'" Kevin retorted. "We don't need your goody two shoes-ness right now."

Brian batted his eyelashes. "Goody two shoes-ness? What's with that - jet lag? You're makin' up words, Kevin." His gaze traveled from the dugout up to the field as Nick's bat and the ball connected loudly enough that it was heard through the crowd

noise, and Brian jumped from the dugout bench onto the littered floor, arms flying, yelling at the top of his lungs. “Good hit! Good hit!”

The rest of the dugout rose to their feet as well, watching the ball sail out towards the left field wall, finally landing in the bleachers. The crowd booed even louder, if that was possible, and assorted garbage, programs and beer cups began to fly onto the field as Nick rounded the bases, high fiving Luis Alicea at home plate.

“Awesome!” Brian couldn’t just greet Nick with the standard high five - he had to body slam him in the chest as hard as he could.

Nick stepped back in surprise, then patted Brian on the shoulder. “Okay... calm down now.”

Kevin reached up for his high five. “What kind of pitch was that?”

Howie sighed. Kevin always had to know what kind of pitch it was. There was such a thing as over-analyzing and Kevin had reached that point long ago.

Nick shrugged and sprawled across the dugout bench next to Kevin. “I don’t know. Some kind of breaking pitch that didn’t break, I guess.”

“Do you think it was a slider?” Kevin said with great interest.

“Yeah.” Nick leaned back and rolled his eyes at Howie from behind Kevin’s head. “It must have been, Kevin.”

“That’s funny...” Kevin pondered. “Cause Weber’s never thrown a slider before...” Brian snickered. “Lighten up, Kevin.”

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“We go to the top of the ninth - the Yankees are still leading 4-2.” Niehaus started off the ninth inning. “First up for the Mariners is catcher Kevin Richardson. He’s 0 for 3 tonight, and 0 for 13 in the series. Here’s the pitch, and it’s low and outside, ball one.

“The big story of tonight’s game is Nick Carter. Coming back to New York, against his former team, he’s 3 for 4 tonight with a home run and a double, and both RBI’s. The pitch to Richardson - swung on and fouled down the first baseline.

“Second baseman Brian Littrell is on deck. If the Mariners win this series, Littrell has to be the strongest candidate for MVP. Here’s the pitch - Richardson sends a ground ball to shortstop, Gaines throws him out easily, one out.

“Littrell steps up to the plate, and that’s exactly what he’s done for the Mariners in both the division series and the LCS. That’s the beauty of the playoffs - it’s not always the superstars that get to be the heroes. Given everything else Brian’s going through right now, I’m completely amazed that he’s playing the way he is. One would think it would distract him from the game, but he’s back stronger than ever.

“Here’s the pitch, and... that one got away from Weber! Littrell leaps back out of the way, ending up on his backside in the batters box, and the ball skips back into that large foul area behind the plate. Brian’s okay, the Mariners bench is giving him a bad time about his... rather ungraceful bail out.” Niehaus chuckled. “He’ll hear about that one for a while.

“He’s back up at the plate again. The 1-0 pitch... lined into right field, and Littrell racks up another hit.”

## Chapter Forty One

AJ slouched lower in the folding chair outside his locker and scowled. Even the fact that he was sitting in the clubhouse wearing just his underwear and socks wasn't making him feel better, like it usually did.

Brian was half perched on the table in front of AJ's locker, reading through a pile of fan mail. Since the news in September, the amount of fan mail Brian received had jumped dramatically. Right now, he was third only to Nick and Howie.

"Nick's late." Brian said calmly, not looking up from the paper he was scanning. "I predict..." He glanced up, holding one finger in the air. "Now."

AJ raised one eyebrow, waiting.

"Where's Nick?" Kevin's voice rose above the clubhouse clamor.

Brian held his hands up in the air in victory.

AJ had to admit, Brian timed it perfectly. If Kevin wasn't so predictable, it would have been amazing. But, Kevin was, so it wasn't.

Brian returned to his mail, and AJ briefly considered putting on a shirt, then decided it would require too much energy.

"How's Felicia doing?" Brian addressed the question without looking up.

AJ shrugged. The truth be told, that was what had put him in the mood he was in. He hated being on the other side of the country, even if it was only for three days. Over the last few weeks, there had been no middle ground with Felicia. She was either fine, or she was completely miserable. He had called her last night, and she had been the latter. He wasn't worried, he knew she was going to be fine, but it still frustrated him. The closer to her due date, the more AJ disliked being away from home. He kept feeling like he was missing out on something.

"I'm taking your silence as a 'not too good.'" Brian swung around until he was sitting on the table, facing AJ.

"She's okay." AJ raised his eyes to Brian. He couldn't quite understand how Brian could be going through what he was, and still sit there in the clubhouse, reading mail and asking how other people were. AJ couldn't do that right now, and he was far from the situation that Brian was in.

"Okay..." Brian left the subject alone, turning back to his pile of mail.

"You're actually gonna read ALL of that?"

"Well, yeah." Brian said logically. "If they cared enough to actually send me something, the least I can do it read it."

Nick blew in through the clubhouse door, looking like he had ran the entire length of the tunnel to the clubhouse. "How... late am... I?" He gasped, dropping into the chair next to Brian and collapsing across the table, knocking letters everywhere.

"Just late enough." Brian stared down at Nick, then glanced over at AJ, his eyebrows raised. AJ shrugged, not seeing whatever Brian was seeing.

"So, where ya been, bucko?" Brian continued, smirking.

"You will never guess... who... showed up today." Nick announced, possibly the biggest smile AJ had ever seen from Nick spreading across his face.

"Oh, GUESSING games!" Brian said in delight. "Let's see - judging from the look on you face, the hickey on your neck, and the fact that your t-shirt is on inside out..." Brian reached over and flicked at the tag on the outside of the shirt with two fingers, "I'm guessin' she must have been good, huh?"

AJ sat up straight. Nick wouldn't possibly... if Nick ever tried anything that was going to screw up his relationship with Stacy, AJ would string Nick up himself. He had been around both of them enough that he could clearly see they were meant for each other, and if Nick couldn't see that, or wouldn't admit it, AJ would make him.

"We were beginning to wonder if you got lost." Kevin greeted Nick, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Nick turned the same smile on Kevin. "I didn't mean to! Stacy flew in today for the weekend... so I kinda lost track of time. Big deal."

It all fell into place in AJ's head. If Stacy was in New York, then that was okay. He wasn't worried anymore. About them anyway - he was still worried about Felicia, but he was always worried about her.

To AJ's great surprise, and possibly Brian's as well, Kevin laughed.

"Nick?" The clubhouse manager interrupted. "They're asking if you're ready to do the interview for ESPN?"

"Yeah, I'm comin'!" Nick pulled himself upright, wrinkling his nose at the three teammates in front of him. "Time to go be Bob Carter's son for half an hour."

"Hey, Nick!" Kevin yelled after him as Nick headed for the field and the press cameras.

"What?"

"Put your shirt on the right way - Bob Carter's son doesn't have his tag sticking out in back."

Nick raised his middle finger in Kevin's direction before pulling his shirt off and putting it on the right way as he headed out the door.

"Well, isn't that nice..." Kevin smiled happily at Brian and AJ, then vanished back over towards his locker and the stat sheets he was inspecting.

Brian's jaw dropped. "He's snapped. The stress of the series got to him or something. Kevin has completely flipped!"

AJ had to admit, a happy 'isn't that nice' in response to being flipped off wasn't usually Kevin's way, but he wasn't surprised. It was just that at the moment, Nick was so genuinely happy you couldn't help but be happy with him. AJ leaned back and craned his neck so he could see the clock on the wall. He had time for one quick phone call home. He suddenly felt like calling Felicia.

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"Well, Mariner fans have been waiting a long time for this." Niehaus announced on the postgame show following game four. "One game away from a trip to the World Series - this is a special moment. The Mariners beat the New York Yankees 2-1 and take a 3 games to 1 game lead in the series. We'll be back in a moment with clubhouse reaction. The Mariners win game four 2-1."

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"You've been seeing each other for six months?" Jane Carter repeated in disbelief, her head swiveling from her son then back to Stacy again. "What else haven't you told me, Nick?"

Nick shrugged petulantly.

Stacy didn't like the way this was turning out. After what he had said about not wanting to go to New York, she didn't need to think too long before deciding to fly to New York for the weekend. Now she was beginning to wonder what the point was. As soon as his mother had appeared after the game, Nick's good mood had vanished. He was answering her the same way he answered reporters in the clubhouse, with answers that technically answered the question, but said nothing. She knew Nick and his parents weren't on especially good terms, but it still seemed a little childish to her.

Jane turned towards Stacy, seemingly unfazed by Nick's attitude. "Well," She said cheerily, a bright smile appearing on her face. "If that isn't just like a man! Now, the two of you have to come have something to eat with us tonight - I think we have some catching up to do here."

"Of course." Stacy accepted. She was tired, but not that much, besides she was curious about Nick's parents, especially Bob, whom she still hadn't seen.

"Gee, THANKS!" Nick mouthed at Stacy from behind his mother.

"Let me go find Bob." Jane decided. "I can only wait for him so long."

Nick watched as his mother disappeared towards the press box, her heels clicking on the cement floor. He turned to give Stacy a disgusted look. "Nice. Very, very nice."

"Oh come on." Stacy rolled her eyes, stepping over to wrap her arms around his neck. "Stop being a brat and be nice for an hour. It won't kill you."

Nick sighed. "I'm tired. I don't feel like being nice. It's already past eleven - I want to go to bed."

"So tell them that." Stacy shrugged, rubbing his shoulders.

"Oh no." Nick said with a short laugh. "That makes me the bad guy. And I'm not doing that. I can't back out now." He circled his arms around her waist, bending her over backwards and leaning down in her face. "However..." He added impishly, giving her a quick kiss. "You get to take full responsibility for whatever happens."

## Chapter Forty Two

Stacy shifted in her seat, crossing her left leg over her right. Things had gone along smoothly for the most part, Jane had done most of the talking, sticking to basic, safe topics like Stacy's family, her career, growing up in India and Nick's childhood. But, soon enough, as was expected, the talk around the small table changed to baseball.

It started off general, then the tension level started to rise as it narrowed to the Mariners versus the Yankees. Stacy was only half following the conversation, and Jane appeared to be bored as well, but Bob and Nick weren't stopping. They were playing some kind of mind game that Stacy couldn't quite figure out. She had no idea who was winning, but neither of them were backing down.

Stacy stifled a yawn. She was tired now. They had been sitting there for over an hour. Under the table, she felt Nick's hand find hers, his fingers intertwining with hers as he gave her a tightlipped smile.

Bob was in the middle of a tirade about the publicity being given to the championship series and how one team was always played up to become the fan favorite. "It's because of Littrell." He pointed out.

"Why?" Nick said mildly. "Cause he's got a postseason average of .700?"

Bob shook his head. "No, not because of his average. Because of his head." He tapped on his own as he spoke. "It's about sympathy. If you guys manage to pull out another win - he's going to be MVP. They wouldn't dare NOT let him be MVP. It's a great story. It doesn't get any better than that - he's dying, but he's not going to let that stop him, he leads his team to the World Series. He does his interviews and smiles and says things about how he's going to beat this, and the fans all relate and sympathize with him and it generates interest in the team winning."

"Bob, don't be so blunt." Jane admonished quietly.

Stacy had to agree with her. Bob was looking at Brian's situation in an incredibly cold, almost cynical light. It wasn't fair to Brian or Nick, and most of all, it wasn't true.

Nick sat quietly for several seconds, staring at his father. "Okay." He said finally. "You win."

"What?" Bob asked.

"You win." Nick repeated flatly. He glanced over, his eyes meeting Stacy's. It wasn't the expression on his face that worried her; it was the lack of expression. "C'mon, it's getting late." He pushed his chair back, crossed over to kiss the general area next to Jane's cheek, then headed for the glass doors of the restaurant.

Stacy hurriedly said her good-byes, mentally cursing Nick for putting her in this entire awkward situation - it wouldn't have killed him to wait ten seconds - grabbed her coat and headed for the door.

"Well, wasn't that fun?" Nick said with forced cheerfulness as soon as they were outside. "I love my parents. They're so... alienating. C'mon, the hotel's around the corner. We can walk."

Stacy had to admit, Nick's parents made her mother's career hopping look almost normal. Jane was nice enough, a little too sugary sweet perhaps, but Bob - she couldn't quite put her finger on him. He was in a league of his own.

"I didn't think it was that bad." She tried to be diplomatic about the evening. "Maybe the end was a little... alienating, to use your word, but other than that..."

“He’s right.” Nick said shortly, shoving his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket and walking faster.

“No, he’s not.” Stacy protested. “That was a completely cynical outlook on Brian and everything he’s going through right now.”

“I know that!” Nick stopped, almost yelling. He lowered his voice, a little sheepishly. “Look, I know that, and you know that, but to anyone that doesn’t actually know Brian - they look at it just like my dad was saying. They see this guy that’s incredibly positive about everything, even though he’s gonna die, and he’s gonna keep playing, and he’s not gonna let a little thing like a brain tumor stop him.” He stopped for a moment, rolling his lips between his teeth. “And they don’t see all the other stuff going on. They don’t see Brian and Kevin fighting over all of it. They don’t see Kevin crying in the video room. They don’t see the days when Brian can barely move ‘cause his head hurts so bad. They don’t see him sick in the trainers room until ten minutes before game time. All they see is the stupid front he’s putting on about all of this - and that pisses me off more than my dad trying to get to me like that tonight.”

Stacy stood in stunned silence, completely unable to respond to what Nick had just said. All she ever saw was the front Brian put forward, just like everyone else. She had no idea that any of what Nick had just said was happening. Things were much more serious than she had thought. Now she was more thankful than before that she had come to New York after all.

“Stacy?” Nick whispered. “I don’t think he should still be playing.”

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“Nick?” Stacy said, her voice right next to his ear.

“What?” Nick tightened his arms around her. She had only been in New York for 25 hours and that wasn’t long enough for him.

“You can let go now.”

He pulled away, looking down at her. She was laughing at him, he could tell from her eyes. Let her laugh. Who cared if he was being immature about the entire situation. He really didn’t want her to leave, even if he’d be back in Seattle himself the next day. Everything made so much more sense when Stacy was there. When she had called and said she was at the airport, he had actually thought he was going to start crying. He hadn’t realized until then exactly how much he depended on her now.

“Nick!” Stacy interrupted his train of thought. “I’m going to miss my flight.”

“Yeah, okay.” Nick sighed, clasping her hands in his and pulling her up against him again. “You have no idea how glad I am you came.”

She did smile that time. The happy feeling that had been lodging itself in Nick’s chest for the last few weeks was back again. He leaned down and kissed her one last time, then stepped back. “Okay, you’d better get going. I...” He snapped his jaw shut so fast his teeth hurt, shocked at what had just been about to pop out of his mouth. Had he really been about to say he loved her?

“What?” Stacy asked as she climbed in the cab.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” Nick finished.

Stacy shook her head. “Alright. Good luck tonight.”

Nick shoved his hands in his pockets and watched the cab pull away, his mind still reeling at the realization that he was in love. Or was he really? Nick still couldn't bring himself to completely open up to her, and that was starting to frustrate him.

"Nick! Nick!" AJ hollered, bolting down the sidewalk to greet his teammate. "I have to show you. C'mere." He grabbed Nick by the elbow and propelled him into the lobby, pushing him over to one of the ornate couches along the wall. "Check it out!" He rummaged in one of the many shopping bags he was holding and emerged triumphantly with a tiny little baby sized leopard print dress. "Isn't that awesome?" He grinned at it proudly.

Nick tried to pay attention. "AJ? What if you have a little boy?"

AJ frowned. "He's gonna feel like an a-- wearing it." He shoved his sunglasses up on his head. "What's your problem?"

"Nothing." Nick defended, a little too quickly.

AJ raised his eyebrows. "Stacy left, huh? That's too bad; she would have appreciated my shopping abilities."

Nick lifted one shoulder in response. Stacy wasn't a shopper, but then, there was something about baby clothes that caused every female within a 500 foot radius to stop and coo over them.

"You'll see her tomorrow, Nick." AJ pointed out, tucking the dress back in its bag.

"I think I'm in love." Nick said in confusion, not really thinking about what he was saying.

AJ burst out laughing. Nick frowned, slightly hurt. He had been perfectly serious. He was getting more and more freaked out by the entire idea, and AJ was laughing at him.

"What's so funny?" Nick said defensively.

AJ took a deep breath. "You just figured this out? Damn, Nick, I could have told you months ago." He chuckled a while longer, then wiped the smile off his face. "Sorry."

"Yeah, thanks. You're a big help." Nick sighed. Let AJ laugh at him, he had his happy little relationship with Felicia - or did he? AJ probably knew more about love and trust than Nick realized. If Nick had been in AJ's shoes, he never could have done it.

"Don't use that head too much, Nick." AJ interrupted wryly. "Brains have to be broken in, you know."

"So what happens when everything backfires in your face?" Nick ignored AJ's smart mouth remark.

"You just pick up the pieces and move on."

That was what worried Nick. So far throughout his life, he had been more or less incapable of picking up the pieces.

## Chapter Forty Three

The commercial ended, and the smiling faces of Stan Morgan and Bob Carter appeared on the screen, a brightly lit Yankee Stadium visible as a backdrop behind them.

“Welcome back to Fox baseball, for game five of the American League Championship Series as the Seattle Mariners take on the New York Yankees in the bid for the World Series. I’m Stan Morgan, joined by Hall of Famer Bob Carter. Last night, the Mariners beat the Yankees 2-1 with some incredible pitching and defense. Tonight - the Yankees last chance. They hope to hang on and take the series back to Seattle.”

Bob took over. “This series is hardly over. You can’t just write off an offense like the one the Yankees have this year - and the Mariners know that.”

“Of course, the big story this series has been Brian Littrell, but for a moment, let’s talk about some of his teammates.” Stan took his turn. “AJ McLean for instance - he has yet to give up an earned run in the postseason. It’s hard to believe at times that he’s only in his second year in the big leagues.”

“You have to love his attitude.” Bob agreed. “He’s weird, but you can’t help but like the guy.”

“Let’s talk about Nick Carter for a moment. He got off to a slow start with the Mariners this year, after being traded from the Yankees, but picked up the pace in the second half of the season. He’s had a good series against the Yankees, hitting .600 with a home run and 5 RBI’s.”

“He’s coming back in here to prove something.” Bob pointed out. “You have to play well against your former team, especially in the playoffs.”

“Do you feel it’s worked better for the two of you with him playing for a different team? Less tension, between father and son, maybe?” Stan was hinting at the rumors that Nick had left the team because of his disagreements with Bob.

“Well, that was his choice.” Bob wasn’t going to commit one way or the other. “It was his choice to leave the team. He’s not a kid anymore and he has to make his own decisions. It seems to have worked out well for him. We had a nice visit last night, he’s happy with the team he’s with, he seems to be happy in Seattle, he’s going out with a nice girl, things seemed to work out just fine.”

“Well, it sounds like it worked out for the best for both of you then.” Stan decided it was time to move on. “Tonight’s starting pitchers...”

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“And we go to the bottom of the ninth, the Mariners leading the New York Yankees, 3-2.” Niehaus’ voice had been steadily climbing throughout the entire game, until by the ninth inning, he was in full blown fevered pitch. If he grew any more agitated, he was going to go into orbit around the announcers booth. “McLean is coming in from the bullpen. One would like to THINK it’s over, but stranger things have happened. Three more outs and the Seattle Mariners go to the World Series for the first time in their history.”

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Kevin was waving the infield in towards the mound. Howie jogged towards the middle of the infield. Three more outs, AJ was in the game, why did Kevin feel the need to call a conference now? Things were looking good.

“Is everyone straight on everything?” Kevin started off, as soon as Brian, Alicea, and Richards appeared on the mound.

“Perfectly straight.” Brian assured him with an angelic smile. That same smile had been on Brian’s face all day long. He was the player responsible for the offense again tonight, scoring two of the Mariners three runs.

“We’re gonna clinch a World Series berth in Yankee Stadium.” Kevin shook his head. “How weird is that?”

Everyone except AJ nodded slowly, agreeing with that one. The booing was growing louder, the longer they stood on the mound. Howie had goose bumps. If someone had told him at the beginning of the season the Mariners were going to beat the Yankees in the LCS, he would have laughed. How had they gotten this far?

“You know what?” AJ said suddenly, participating in the discussion for the first time.

“Yes?” Brian asked, raising one eyebrow.

“I just remembered another store I should hit before we leave town. Do you think I’ll have time tonight?”

Kevin shoved his mask back onto his head in annoyance. “Damn it, AJ! Could you just FOCUS for once?”

AJ waved his glove at Kevin. “Get back behind the plate. Let’s get this over with.”

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“The runner on first takes his lead, here’s the pitch to the plate, SWIIIIIIIIING and a miss at a forkball in the dirt, strike one.” Niehaus had grown even more excited, if that was possible. “One out here in the bottom of the ninth for the Yankees, they tying run on first, the winning run at the plate. McLean stares in towards the plate, he has the sign... he steps off the rubber and fakes a throw towards first. Typical McLean move - the more crucial the situation, the more he tries to throw the opposing team off balance. He’s back up on the mound, kicking at the top of the mound, here’s the set, and the pitch...”

“That’s hit towards the shortstop... Alicea has it... quick flip to Littrell at second...  
THETHROWTOFIRSTISINTIMEANDTHEMARINERSAREGOINGTOTHEWORLDSE  
RIES!”

People would wonder after that call why Niehaus hadn’t spontaneously combusted. Half the radio listeners hadn’t even been able to understand what he had said, they just knew because he was screaming, the game had been won.

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“I could get used to this winning thing!” AJ yelled over the music blaring in the clubhouse, as he madly shook another bottle of champagne, his eyes seeking out Brian as a target. The Fox TV camera crews were setting up to broadcast the presentation of the MVP trophy. There was no question - Brian was going to be MVP, and AJ had every intention of getting Brian, and getting him good on live TV.

Nick started screeching from the other end of the clubhouse again. "Howie! Aw, man! Don't!" He pulled his arms up over his head so Howie couldn't spray him in the face. Howie, not one to let little obstacles deter him, dumped the rest of the bottle down the back of Nick's shirt, laughing with delight when Nick started hollering again.

The lights behind the cameras flashed on, one of the crew members grabbed a soaking wet Brian and pulled him over in front of the camera, and Bob Carter started the presentation ceremony.

AJ circled around, trying to figure out exactly when the best angle and time would be. These kind of things had to be planned carefully. If you didn't put the effort required into it, it just didn't work.

"AJ! You wouldn't!" Nick whispered in shock from behind him.

AJ turned around, frowning. "Damn right I would. Watch." It was almost time. Bob had just finished his speech, listing Brian's achievements, and of course mentioning he was fighting a malignant brain tumor, which caused a flash of mild annoyance to cross Brian's face, before it was replaced with the usual ear to ear smile.

Brian took the trophy from Bob and opened his mouth to speak. "Thank you..."

AJ moved in for the kill, laughing maniacally in delight when the champagne hit Brian full on in the face.

Brian sputtered once or twice, then wiped his eyes and glared at AJ. "Thank YOU, AJ!"

"No trouble at all!" AJ inspected the now half full bottle. Bob Carter looked awfully pristine, standing there in his white dress shirt and perfectly combed hair. Bob needed some champagne. AJ caught Nick's eye, holding up the bottle, then tipping his head towards Bob.

Nick's eyes widened, before he shook his head vehemently.

"You know, I don't really know what to say. I'm very honored, but at the same time, I know we wouldn't be where we are right now if it wasn't for a whole bunch of other guys..." Brian was downplaying himself and focusing on the rest of the team, as usual.

AJ jumped in and dumped the rest of the bottle over Bob's head. That was better. Now he looked like everyone else. Soaking wet - and more than just a little annoyed.

Someone handed Bob a towel.

AJ circled around to stand next to Brian and make faces at the camera as Brian finished his speech. He knew he was irritating Bob, having his presentation screwed up, but AJ was getting a kick out of it. Bob was more fun to annoy than Kevin was.

"Lastly, thank you for your thoughts and prayers." Brian finished. "It means a lot to me - I really appreciate the support people have shown the last two months."

## Chapter Forty Four

Nick tapped the end of his bat on the concrete floor, not really paying attention to Brian hitting in the batting cage in front of him. So this was the life of a baseball player outside of New York. Even on off days - they ended up at the batting cages. Maybe there were players in New York that did the same thing, Nick had just never hung out with them. Now, instead of going out on the town like Howie, he was sitting in a warehouse full of batting cages with Brian and Kevin. It was strange to think how much his life had changed in the last eight months.

Kevin was standing to the side of the cage, critically eyeing Brian's swing. If Nick had been hitting like Kevin was, he wouldn't have been critiquing anyone else, but Kevin was strange that way. The weird thing was, Nick didn't mind Kevin's constant criticism anymore.

"Kevin, don't you have to get Becky today?" Brian asked absently, concentrating on his hitting.

"S---!" Kevin yelped, staring at his watch. "Since when are you on top of things, Bri?" He added.

"This is my new MVP leaf." Brian grinned, stepping out of the cage. "I'll see you Friday, 'kay?"

"What? We're just taking tomorrow off?" Kevin neatly packed his bats away into their bag, his green eyes raising to Brian's.

"Nah..." Brian wrinkled his nose. "I've got doctor appointments tomorrow. They have to hook me up to all those stupid machines again."

Nick frowned. Everything would be going along smoothly, and then Brian would say something like that. He was sure Brian didn't do it on purpose, but it always put a damper on Nick's day. Nick could pretend everything was fine, until Brian made a little offhand comment, either about doctor's appointments, or painkiller or something similar, and Nick would be hit with the now all too familiar sickening feeling that his best friend was dying.

"Don't look at me like that." Brian glared at his cousin. "Mental note to self: Don't tell Kevin anything..."

"It's not that." Kevin protested. "It's just weird when you say something like that, because half the time I keep forgetting something's wrong."

"Nothing's wrong." Brian corrected. "It's just a routine checkup, Kevin. Don't go and flip out on me here, okay?"

Kevin still looked skeptical, which was exactly how Nick felt. "Okay..." Kevin said finally, hoisting his equipment bag. "I'm gonna be late, and then Becky'll be mad."

"Tell me about it." Brian laughed.

Kevin flashed a peace sign at Brian and Nick in parting, and strode off towards the parking lot.

Brian smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Holy crap. I've gotta watch what I say around him. He worries too much."

"Can't you say s--- like a normal person?" Nick wondered idly.

Brian giggled, then sat down on the bench next to Nick, sitting cross-legged with his elbows propped on his knees. He was quiet for a moment, but not very long. Brian couldn't just sit in silence. "Nick?"

"What?" There was a serious conversation in the wings. Nick could feel it.

“You know, sometimes I wonder what the point is.”

“To what?”

“Everything.” Brian shook his head. “What’s the point of me going through all of this?” He was silent for a moment. “Nick?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you believe God has a plan for everything?”

Nick shook his head slowly. “If he does, he’s out to screw me, that’s for sure.”

“Oh, aren’t we cynical this afternoon!” Brian teased.

“So you think your tumor is some kind of plan?” Yes, Nick was feeling cynical. So sue him. He had a right to.

“Well...” Brian said slowly, thinking out loud. “I always did, but now... I don’t know.” He sounded as if he was begging Nick for some kind of reassurance, and Nick had no idea what to say to him. Nick wasn’t the one that dished out advice - that was Brian’s department. Things were changing, and Nick didn’t like it one bit.

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“When was the last time I painted my toenails?” Felicia asked.

AJ set down the Sports Illustrated article he had been scanning. Felicia was sitting next to him on the couch, sticking her bare feet out in front of her and eyeing them critically.

“Well...” AJ patted her stomach. “I’m gonna say it’s been a while.”

“They look terrible.” Felicia shook her head.

“Why does it matter? You can’t even see them.” AJ reasoned, going back to his article. AJ wasn’t a sports freak. The only reason he was even reading Sports Illustrated was because there was yet another article about the Mariners playoff chances, and he wanted to see what adjective they used to describe him. ‘Off the wall’ - well, it wasn’t the best he had ever seen. ‘Crazy but harmless’ had been a good one. So had ‘whacked out, but still owner of the lowest ERA in the league’. AJ was proud of his whacked out status. His ERA - he didn’t care as much about that.

“Other people can see them.” Felicia pointed out.

“I’m not going to paint your nails.” AJ said mildly, flipping the page. Basketball - big fat deal.

“Why?” Felicia countered primly, giving him her best pouting face.

AJ forgot to breathe for a moment, the magazine forgotten on the couch next to him. Even without makeup, and her hair clipped back from her face haphazardly, she was the most beautiful person he had ever seen. He leaned over, wrapping one arm around her neck, and kissed the tip of her nose.

Felicia laughed. AJ smiled in response. It was nice to hear her laugh again. She’d been more than just a little moody lately. He reached down, running his other hand along her cheekbone, then, tipped her face up towards him, barely brushing her lips with his.

The Sports Illustrated magazine bopped him on the back of the head. “Okay, I want to see daylight between the two of you RIGHT now!” Denise barked, doing her best imitation of a chaperone breaking up a junior high makeout session.

“Geez, Mom!” AJ yelped, glaring up at her. “Go away!”

“I wish I had the camera.” Denise sighed. “You two are so cute together.” She disappeared into the kitchen, still commenting on how cute they were.

“Please tell me she’s not getting the camera.” Felicia giggled.

“She can’t. I kind of, um...” AJ coughed. “...hid it. After she starting taking pictures at dinner the other night.” He leaned back over, ready to pick up where he had left off.

“Alex?” Felicia stopped him.

AJ smirked. “What color?”

“Red.” Felicia said instantly.

Of course she was going to say red. Why had he even bothered to ask? “Red it is.” He took the short way to the stairs, climbing over the back of the couch. “I love you.” He added, patting the top of her head.

He knew what she was going to say to that one too. Every single time - she said the exact same thing.

“I love you more.”

## Chapter Forty Five

“Tonight - power versus finesse. The best offense in the major leagues facing off against one of the best pitching staffs in the American League.”

Pictures flashed across the screen - highlight shots of Dodger hitters swinging; of Mariners pitchers striking batters out; Nick climbing the wall in right field to take away a home run; Brian pivoting at second to throw the ball towards first base.

“Fox Sports brings you game one of the World Series - the Los Angeles Dodgers against the Seattle Mariners.”

The theme music cued once again, and the camera cut from an overhead helicopter shot of Dodger Stadium to the announcer booth and Stan Morgan and Bob Carter.

“Welcome to Chavez Ravine, as the Los Angeles Dodgers take on the Seattle Mariners in game one of the World Series.” Morgan started. “Tonight, it will be Greg Bloat starting for the Dodgers, against Tim Casella, the Mariners number one starter.”

The statistics for each pitcher flashed up onto the screen, each accompanied by the usual terrible team mug shot taken in spring training. Bloat looked slightly crazed, as left-handers were prone to look, and Casella just looked bored.

“Both fifteen games winners during the regular season.” Bob Carter jumped in. “Bloat’s ERA may look a little on the high side, especially for the National League, but with the way the Dodgers have scored runs this year - it’s been enough for him to win anyway.”

“So, what’s in store for game one?” Morgan asked. “Let’s take a look.”

The screen cut to yet another montage of highlights, this time accompanied by soaring, Olympic-esque music. Fox Sports spared nothing in the drama department. A head shot of Ryan Christiansen, the Dodgers all-star first baseman, appeared, Christiansen staring across the field, head raised, the lighting shining up from behind giving him an heroic appearance, both offensive and defensive highlights playing along the background while Bob Carter started his voice-over.

“Power... strength... controversy...” The picture changed to one of the often volatile Christiansen screaming in an umpire’s face over a call. “Tradition...” Jackie Robinson appeared, then Kirk Gibson’s limping home run trot around the bases in the now famous game one of the 1988 World Series.

Now a head shot of Brian came onto the screen, his eyes staring intently at the camera from beneath his navy hat brim. “Determination... perseverance... enthusiasm...” The video highlights changed to one of Brian’s leaping, arm waving, cheerleading fits in the dugout as a team member rounded the bases. “Personality...” AJ, standing in the bullpen during the championship series, yelling something at a fan in the Yankee Stadium bleachers, followed by AJ’s triumphant champagne spraying of Brian during the MVP ceremony. “Tragedy...” The video ended with a dugout shot of Brian, sitting on the bench, bent over with his head in his hands, Kevin’s arm across his shoulders.

“We’ll be back with the lineups and the national anthem after these messages from your local station.”

Kevin stood along the baseline, arms folded, staring up at the crowd in front of him. The PA announcer was finishing the end of the Dodger lineup, and soon the national anthem would start.

It was only five in the evening, the sun was setting just enough to cast shadows from the light standards across the field. Kevin had been playing professional baseball for ten years, but he had never experienced a feeling quite like the one he was now. There was an electricity on the field that he had never felt before. The grass looked greener than usual, the crowd was louder, everything had a distinct aura to it that Kevin knew he could never forget. This was his ultimate dream, he was actually living it, and how many people were able to say their dream had come true?

He wouldn't be standing there, on the field at Dodger Stadium, moments away from the start of the World Series, if it hadn't been for Brian. Sure, baseball was a team sport, Kevin was more than aware of that fact, but it was the little extra spark that Brian had given the team in the championship series that had pushed the Mariners to where they were today. If Brian hadn't been playing - it would be an entirely different situation. Kevin would be sitting in his family room at home, watching the Yankees play the Dodgers.

Kevin leaned forward slightly, looking down the row of gray uniforms at his cousin. After his play in the LCS, Brian was now batting leadoff. Brian was standing quietly next to Buddy Williams, looking serious for once.

The lineups finished, a musician Kevin had never heard of in his entire life came out to the microphone set up behind home plate and the national anthem started. Kevin pulled his hat off with the rest of the players, feeling tears prick at the back of his eyes. He actually had a lump in his throat. He still couldn't believe this was happening.

## Chapter Forty Six

“We’re back with the postgame show.” Niehaus announced after the commercial break. “The Mariners take game three of the World Series 6-3, and now have a 2-1 lead in the series. Strange things always seem to happen in the postseason, and you have to admit, tonight’s game had it’s share of memorable moments.

“The Dodgers led 3-0, until the fifth inning, when with a man on third and one out, catcher Kevin Richardson, hitless through out the postseason so far, beat out a slow grounder to shortstop for an infield hit. His cousin, Brian Littrell followed that abnormality with one of his own - a three run homer into the seats in left field. Littrell hadn’t hit a home run since August of last season, but what a time to pick his next shot. That tied the game, until the eighth, when the Mariners pulled ahead for good following back to back doubles by Dorrough and Carter.”

Niehaus chuckled for a moment. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen Kevin run that fast before, and I doubt we ever will again. We’re going to pause for station identification, and then we have player comments from the clubhouse. The Mariners take game three - 6-3.”

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“Hi, Stacy!”

Stacy looked up to see Brian beaming at her. “Brian - how are you?”

Brian shrugged, still smiling. “Okay. Y’all waiting for Nick?”

Stacy nodded. It was at least an hour and a half after the game. Most of the fans had cleared out of the stadium, save a few diehards waiting along the barriers to the parking garage, hoping for an autograph. She leaned back against the brick wall and observed Brian for a moment. When she thought of athletes, she usually pictured men bigger than herself. Brian was shorter than her by a good two inches. Either he was getting thinner, or he was just tired. His face looked more drawn than usual. Still, he was standing in front of her with that irresistible, eye crinkling smile.

She had never gotten to know Brian that well. True, she saw him all the time, since Nick practically worshipped the ground Brian walked on, but the conversations between her and Brian were few and far between.

“He’ll probably be a while.” Brian leaned against the wall next to her, making himself comfortable. “He, Bob and the rest of Fox Sports are in a big fight over interviews.”

“Oh, honestly.” Stacy rolled her eyes.

“They’re heading for a big blowout.” Brian added absently.

“Do you suppose they’ve always been that way?” Stacy wondered, referring to Nick and Bob.

“Well... I guess five years now.” Brian said thoughtfully. “You’d probably know more than I would.”

“Oh, right.” The sarcasm was evident in Stacy’s voice.

Brian tipped his head to the side, staring at her. “What did that mean?”

“I have no idea.” Stacy shook her head. Apparently she was being left out of the circle again. There was a sort of emotional wall Nick had put up around himself, and

she couldn't get through it. It seemed that Brian had, and the truth be told, it didn't surprise Stacy in the slightest.

"Yeah, well... just give him time." Brian patted her arm. "He'll come around once he stops freaking out."

Stacy smiled. She strongly doubted that Nick would ever stop freaking out. He spent the greater part of his life doing that, whether it was over something serious, or over a completely trivial subject, like his car, or the lack of cheese in the refrigerator.

"You know what?" Brian flashed another smile at her. "He's changed a lot since he met you. The beginning of the season - he was a brat, hands down, no other way to say it." Brian scowled. "Well, there is another way to say it, but I don't use words like that." He laughed at this comment, then continued. "You might not believe it right now, but you're the best thing that ever happened to him - and I think he knows it." Brian shrugged and shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "Hang in there - he'll come around eventually."

Stacy felt like hugging him. Brian had an incredible ability for saying the right thing at the right time and making people feel better.

Brian leaned back against the wall again, silent for a moment. "You ever heard of pineoblastoma?"

"Yep." Stacy wasn't a tumor specialist, but she was still fairly familiar with them. She did know they were inoperable, and fast growing.

"Just wondered how up on your tumors you were." He grinned. "Can you spell it?"

"Yes."

His eyes widened. "Really? 'Cause I can't. I can barely say it." Brian pursed his lips, thinking. "Just think - if this was happening twenty years from now, y'all would have already figured out how to cure all this."

There wasn't really anything Stacy could say to that.

"You know what I hate about this?" Brian said suddenly. "I don't care that I'm dying - that doesn't scare me. What I hate about all of this is it ended up hurting so many people. I hate what it's doing to my parents, and to Kevin, and to Nick..." Brian's voice was climbing towards hysteria. "... and Becky. That's what gets me the most about this entire thing... and I have absolutely NO idea why I'm telling you all of this - I'm sorry." He rattled the last sentence off in one long panicked breath.

This time Stacy did hug him. She couldn't help herself. Brian had overwhelming odds stacked up against him, and he was going through all of it without anyone to lean on, because everyone was depending on him. Stacy had a tendency to mother people, something she had always found a little strange, since it wasn't a quality she tolerated very well in other people. Right now, she wanted to fix everything for Brian, but she knew she couldn't.

Brian hugged her back, then stepped back, looking slightly hesitant. "I'm sorry I flipped out like that."

"No, don't be." Stacy cut him off.

"There's Nick." Brian nodded his head towards the aisleway. "He must have won the interview battle."

"You're still here?" Nick shook his head at Brian as he joined them. "Do you ever go home?" Nick's hair looked slightly damp, and was hanging down over his forehead. It made him look younger.

Brian smirked, all traces of his earlier mood gone. "I felt bad, leaving your girlfriend here all alone while you threw television cameras around the clubhouse."

"Nick!" Stacy said in shock.

"He's exaggerating." Nick rolled his eyes, shrugging his shoulders. "I threw a microphone. I didn't even throw it AT him, which is what I wanted to do."

"Nick wins the battle, the war rages on." Brian quipped.

"Shut up!" Nick retorted. "I didn't need someone giving me a lecture on what I did wrong at the plate tonight in the middle of an interview!"

"We did win the game." Brian pointed out. "Two more, and we're the champions." He began a convoluted dance in the middle of the aisle, shaking his hips and waving his hands in the air.

Nick snickered. "Brian - go home. You're scaring me."

"You're just jealous of the moves." Brian smirked.

"Yeah... well..." Nick couldn't think quickly enough to come up with a comeback.

"See y'all tomorrow." Brian beat feet out of the stadium before Nick's brain cut in and he came up with a retort. Stacy watched him stop along the barrier to sign autographs, his mouth moving the entire time, chattering away.

"Sorry I kept you waiting." Nick draped one long arm around Stacy's shoulders. "He's just really good at pushing my buttons."

"And you're always so calm and collected to begin with." Stacy turned to face him, running her finger along the Nike logo on the front of his shirt. "Imagine someone actually making you flip out."

"Very funny..." Nick wrinkled his nose. "Make fun of the screwed up people - that's big of you." He leaned over and gave her a messy kiss, before yanking on the back of her hair. "C'mon. Let's go get something to eat. I'm starving."

Nick grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the parking garage, ignoring the fans behind the barrier, which didn't matter, as Brian was entertaining them anyway.

He glanced over the convertible top at Stacy, raising two fingers on his right hand in a V. "Two games."

## Chapter Forty Seven

“Hold it! Hold it!” Kevin hollered, waving a piece of white paper in the air, trying to quiet in the noisy din in the clubhouse. “Will y’all just shut up and listen to me for a minute! Kangaroo Court is now in session!”

“SHUT UP!” Brian hollered, putting his lungs to good use once again as the clubhouse fell silent.

“Thank you... I think.” Kevin gave his cousin a disgruntled glance, before continuing on. “First item on the agenda - AJ? Pitching an entire inning with your fly down? Five dollar fine.”

“That’s absurd!” AJ said in shock from his perch on the table next to Kevin. “I didn’t do it on purpose!”

“Which is why you’re being fined.” Kevin nodded.

“Does this make sense to anyone else?” AJ pleaded.

“No.” Nick shook his head.

“Nick?” Kevin haughtily inspected his teammate. “In game two, you were 3 for 3 with a walk, correct?”

“Yeah?”

“Ten dollar fine.” Kevin decided.

“WHAT!” Brian yelled. “I got dinged twenty dollars for the same thing in July!”

“Yes.” Kevin agreed mildly, inspecting the paper in his hand. “You were. And now, as per clubhouse tradition, we have some highly respected awards to hand out here, and after that, we’re gonna cut down the largest tree in the forest - with a herring.”

“We will do no such thing!” Brad Arton gasped in shock as everyone in the clubhouse broke into laughter, save Nick, who just looked confused.

AJ shook his silver highlighted head sadly. “Nickolas, Nickolas, Nickolas... you’ve never watched Monty Python either, have you?”

“No?” Nick said hesitantly. “Should I?”

“This would probably be a good time to announce that the winner of the award for most clueless - is Nick.” Kevin made a large show out of handing Nick a baseball scrawled on in black Sharpie marker.

“Shut up.” Nick glared. “I got better things to do than watch TV, dude.”

“I just want it in on the record that I came in a close second!” AJ yelled, pounding his fist on the table. “It was a long and hard fought battle, and I harbor NO hard feelings towards Nick for his victory!”

“Most improved... Howie.” Kevin smirked, tossing a ball at the third baseman.

“Yeah, whatever, Kevin!” Howie wrinkled his face up good-naturedly.

“I came in a close second!” AJ piped up. “I know it’s hard to improve perfection - and ultimately... well... that’s why Howie won.”

Kevin continued handing out baseballs, managing to come up with a category for everyone on the team, AJ announcing he came in second every single time.

“Most obnoxious...” Kevin raised one thick eyebrow. “AJ.”

“I came in a close second on that one too.” AJ nodded, accepting his baseball.

“Yes, you did.” Brian agreed, laughing.

“Now... the moment we’ve all been waiting for...” Kevin continued. “The annual results of the wives poll. Scott, our wonderful clubhouse manager, was kind enough to organize this again, and as the reigning champion for the last two years...” Kevin

paused to flash the rest of the team a fake smile. "It's time to announce the best looking guy on the team - according to the women." He held up the manila envelope the clubhouse manager handed him, before carefully opening it, staring in confusion at the card inside. "What the..."

"Face it, Kevin." AJ said lazily. "I am more attractive than you."

"Up yours..." Kevin retorted. "Fine, there's no accounting for women's taste - but... this year's winner of the jockstrap... is Nick." He threw the equipment at Nick, who living up to his award, looked clueless.

"What - did you rig it or something?" Brian wondered, punching Nick in the shoulder.

"No!" Nick said in confusion. "I didn't even know there was such a thing. What the hell did they base it on?"

AJ coughed. "Well, usually it's who looks best in their pants. At least that's what I hear."

Nick's eyes traveled from the jockstrap in his hand to Brian, then to AJ. "Aw, you guys are messin' with me."

"No... it's actually a poll." Brian nodded. "They all have great fun discussing the 'options' in the stands." He giggled. "Nick, y'all are blushing."

"Am not." Nick protested.

"Are too." AJ smirked.

"Before I lose your attention here - we got one more award." Kevin interrupted, still annoyed at having lost his best looking status. "This is a new one this year, but it's pretty important." He pulled another ball out of the box. "Brian - we couldn't exactly agree on what to call it, so this is a most cool, or most inspirational, or most admired, call it what you want, but... I'm not very good with words here..."

"This is 'cause of the admiration we have for you, for everything you're going through right now, we're damn impressed with the way you're dealing with it all, plus on top of it all you're a freakin' cool person, and we luv-ya, man." AJ interrupted. "What?" He added, raising his eyebrows at Kevin. "It was the best I could come up with on the spot!"

"No... that was good." Kevin nodded, handing Brian the baseball.

"Wow." Brian turned the ball over, inspecting it. He raised his eyes up, scanning the clubhouse. "Did all of you sign this?"

"Yep." Kevin said quietly.

"It wasn't easy, either." Nick leaned over, pointing. "Howie writes really big, so the rest of us didn't have any room."

Brian laughed. "Thank you, Nick." He stood, still turning the ball around in his hands. "Guys... seriously, this means a lot to me. I appreciate all of you putting up with this the way you have." He stepped over to hug his cousin.

"Aw, man!" Nick exclaimed as Brian moved on, hugging AJ. "Is he gonna hug everyone in the clubhouse? This is gonna take forever!"

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Stacy glanced down at her hands. She actually had her fingers crossed. Feeling slightly foolish, she tucked her hands into the pockets of her jacket. It was the top of the seventh, Mariners ahead 3-1, and the Dodgers were trying their best to stage a late inning rally. They had runners at first and third, with only one out.

“Give up the run... go for the double play.” Denise waved her hand at the infield, shaking her head. Stacy had thought Felicia was obsessed, the way she knew every single little thing happening on the field and seemed to be able to watch four different players at once, but Felicia paled in comparison to her mother-in-law. If Buddy Williams ever needed a replacement, Denise was ready and waiting to take the job.

Arton stepped onto the rubber and stared in at the plate, squinting at the sign Kevin was giving him.

“I think I’m going to pass out!” Karen announced dramatically.

Arton stepped off the rubber and threw the ball over to first, forcing the Dodger’s left fielder back to the bag.

“Oh please!” Denise sighed, crunching her empty Pepsi cup with one hand. “That guy’s built like a freight train - he’s not going anywhere. I bet the ground shakes when he runs.”

Becky chortled at Denise’s last comment.

Arton carefully adjusted his pants, and stepped back up onto the rubber.

“Throw the ball already.” Felicia muttered darkly. Stacy agreed completely, if Arton kept stalling much longer, she was going to be screaming as loud as Karen was. She glanced out at right field - Nick was standing in the middle of the outfield grass, staring up at something above his head - either the crowd, the closed roof of the stadium, or the birds flying underneath it - slowly blowing a pink bubble, appearing to pay no attention to the game. Stacy would have laughed at him, if her nerves weren’t rattled by the situation on the field in front of her.

Maybe it was less nerve-racking to be on the field playing than it was to sit and watch. She strongly doubted it. Nick had a supremely confident attitude about baseball. World Series - no big deal. Interview on national television - whatever. His picture in People Magazine - perfectly normal.

The batter swung at the pitch, sending it sharply towards shortstop. Karen and Becky both screamed at the top of their lungs, jumping up and down.

“Double play!” Denise hollered and Felicia’s hand came up to her mouth in shock.

Stacy was confused. The infield had turned a double play and ended the inning, but the players weren’t moving back towards the dugout. “What happened?” She turned to Felicia.

Felicia pointed towards second base, where Brian and the Lawton, the Dodger’s left fielder were both sprawled out flat on the dirt around second.

“How did that happen?” Karen demanded, dropping back down into her seat.

“Lawton slid into second and ran right over the top of him.” Felicia didn’t take her eyes off the field.

“Brian!” Becky yelled. “Get UP!”

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Nick took a deep breath. Brian still wasn’t moving. Lawton was up and slowly heading back to the visiting dugout, apparently only suffering the wind being knocked out of him. Brian, on the other hand, appeared to be out cold. Nick hadn’t even seen what happened, he had been heading over to back up the throw to first base. He wished they would replay the collision at second on the video screen, but they wouldn’t. Unless they knew it wasn’t a serious injury, they wouldn’t replay it.

He couldn't even see Brian, what with the trainer, Buddy and Kevin all hovering over him. Kevin had to be in the middle of things, as usual. Nick reminded himself to breathe again. He just wanted Brian to move.

## Chapter Forty Eight

Kevin unlatched the door of the hospital examination room, not really wanting to go inside, but knowing he had no other choice. "Hey, Brian."

His cousin was perched on the end of the examining table, slumped over with his head propped in his hands. Brian mumbled something without opening his mouth at Kevin in response.

"How'ya feeling?" Kevin inquired.

Brian raised his head, squinting at Kevin. "Like I got hit by a truck?"

"Probably about equivalent." Kevin agreed. Lawton was one of the bigger men in the major leagues, and he had crashed into Brian like a pile driver. Kevin had watched the replay in the clubhouse four or five times after the game, and it made him wince every single time. They had both gone down hard, and Lawton had sent Brian's head flying back into the dirt.

"Rick says you can go home." Kevin added, after a moment. The team trainer had been worried about a concussion, but after he and the doctors ran some tests, they decided to just drug Brian up and send him home.

"Are you driving me?" Brian said slowly.

"Yep."

"Good. Because I don't know what they gave me, but it's working REALLY well." Brian blinked a couple times. "I feel like I'm drunk."

The nurse, a heavyset woman in her early forties, pushed a wheelchair in through the door. "Okay, cutie, let's get you out of here."

"I don't need that!" Brian said in shock. Kevin bit his lip, trying not to laugh. He had only seen Brian drunk once, and that had been years ago, but there was a similarity.

"I'm not going to argue with you. Get in the chair." The nurse retorted, grabbing Brian by the arm. "Go get your car." She added over her shoulder at Kevin. "We'll meet you at the main entrance."

Kevin slowly started for the elevator and the parking garage. Brian looked completely wiped out, and it was starting to worry him. Maybe it was just the drugs, but maybe it wasn't. He had a feeling in the pit of his stomach that Brian probably shouldn't be playing. On the other hand, maybe he was just worrying too much, as usual. Brian wasn't stupid enough to risk his health. He was just tired. The entire team was tired. The extra three weeks added onto their season took their toll - but it was worth it.

"Who won the game?" Brian mumbled once he was in the passenger seat of Kevin's 4-Runner.

"We did. 3-1." Kevin confirmed.

"Awesome." Brian almost smiled.

"I never thought I'd see myself one game away from winning a World Series." Kevin admitted.

Brian didn't answer. Kevin glanced over - it had taken Brian two city blocks to fall asleep, his head leaning up against the window.

~\*~

Buddy Williams stared down at the statistics sheets on his desk, trying to figure out what he was going to do with his lineup tonight. He'd just lost his leadoff hitter and it

was putting a major kink in his plans. He didn't care what kind of argument Brian put up - he was not going out on the field at the beginning of the game. He might put him in later, depending on the situation, but Brian wasn't going to start. It was just a precautionary measure - that had been a nasty whack Brian had taken last night, and logic told Buddy, Brian wouldn't be playing at 100% that evening.

"Hey, Buddy?" Brian stuck his head in the office door, the blinds on the window rattling noisily.

"C'mon in." Buddy grunted. "I've got to talk to you anyway." He glanced up, surprised that Brian was still in street clothes. It was almost time for batting practice and Brian was usually the first player out there.

Brian shoved his hands in his pockets and stared fixedly at the little bobbing head player on the corner of Buddy's cluttered desk. "I can't play."

That made things ten times easier for Buddy. He didn't want to argue with Brian over it. Brian was one of the few players on the team he genuinely liked. "Well, I'm glad we're in agreement there, because I'm starting Ramos at second tonight." He looked up at his second baseman again. "If this goes back to LA - and if it does, I'm going to kick someone's a-- - but if it does - I'll start you, okay?"

"No." The firmness in Brian's voice surprised Buddy. "I didn't mean just tonight."

Buddy scratched the back of his head, stalling. This wasn't exactly what he wanted to hear right now. All they needed was one more game. Brian was the spark plug of his team - Buddy had told the media that many times already during the stretch run and the playoffs, and he'd probably say it again tonight. If news suddenly came out that Brian couldn't play - Buddy knew it would throw his team off, and that was the last thing he wanted.

"You sure about that?" Buddy figured he might as well check.

"Yeah." Brian's gaze traveled back down to the plastic baseball player on the desk. "I'm sorry, Buddy." He sounded like he was holding back tears.

"You don't have a damn thing to be sorry about." Buddy informed him gruffly. "This is your choice here, but can you suit up anyway? It'd just be a lot easier if everyone thought you were taking the game off 'cause of last night."

Brian smiled faintly. "I was gonna say the same thing."

~\*~

AJ slowly wandered back up the tunnel from the clubhouse, humming off-key to the song blaring over the PA system while the Mariners finished up batting practice. He paused, eyeing the end of the dugout. Brian was sitting on the end of the bench, next to the green Gatorade cooler, his bat in hand, tapping it on the floor of the dugout. AJ changed direction and headed that way. He'd rather talk to Brian than stand in the outfield and shag fly balls any day.

"Wazzup, my friend?" He greeted Brian. "How come you're not out there with the rest of the ego-ridden hitters, trying to see who can park the most in the upper deck?"

As if on cue, Nick sent a ball flying into the upper level in left field, the rest of the team applauding and whistling in false appreciation and awe.

"I'm not playing tonight." Brian didn't look up.

“Buddy won’t let you?” AJ was assuming. He hadn’t seen the play last night, but he’d seen them take Brian off to the hospital for more tests, and that was never a good thing.

“No, I told him I wasn’t.”

That was the most depressing thing AJ had heard all day. Maybe he would have been better off catching fly balls after all. “That bad, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that sucks, Brian.” AJ was now sure he should have gone and caught fly balls. Brian was going to start crying, AJ could tell just from looking at him, and he would prefer to be anywhere than where he was when it happened.

“Do you think I’m giving up?” Brian raised his head, finally meeting AJ’s eyes.

“Hell, no!” AJ said in shock.

“Cause that’s what I feel like I’m doing.” Brian swiped one hand across his eyes. “I just can’t do this anymore.” The look in Brian’s eyes was what worried AJ the most. Before, Brian was the one that nothing got to, the one that held everything together, the one that kept pushing everyone else on, because if he was doing it, there was no reason why they couldn’t - and now - Brian was right. He had given up - AJ could see it.

“Well, we can win without you.” AJ pointed out. “No offense.”

“I’m not talking about the game.” Brian said quietly.

That was what AJ had been afraid of.

~\*~

Howie’s cleats clattered nosily on the concrete floor of the tunnel as he jogged back down to the clubhouse. His other batting glove must still be in his locker. Most of the team was out on the field, but Brian and Nick were hanging out over by Brian’s locker, AJ was carefully inspecting the back of his head with two hand held mirrors, and starting pitcher Tim Casella was changing into his cleats.

Howie pawed through the mess at the bottom of his locker, noting in the back of his mind that he should pick it up before Kevin saw it and fined him in Kangaroo Court. Not that it mattered now, this was the last game they were playing in Safeco Field this year, no matter how the Series turned out.

“But you KNEW, Brian!” Nick’s voice rose up over the music from the stereo over Kevin’s locker. “That wasn’t fair!”

“Would it have mattered?” Brian retorted sharply.

“Yes!”

“Then why would I have told you?”

“Cool it, you two!” Tim interrupted. “I have to pitch in forty minutes and I don’t need to hear your crap right now.”

“F--- off.” Nick flung at Tim. Howie bit his lip to keep himself from laughing. Nick had all the tact of an Army tank.

Tim ignored him, heading for the clubhouse door, his glove in hand.

“Hold up a minute, dude!” AJ bolted after him, his hair forgotten. Howie didn’t blame him. He didn’t especially want to be in the clubhouse right now either.

“F--- you too.” Nick added at Brian, stalking out the door after Tim and AJ.

Howie found his batting glove - it had gotten caught beneath his shoes. He shoved it into his back pocket, the fingers sticking out.

“Does everyone hate me today?” Brian wondered.

“I don’t!” Howie piped up. He wasn’t sure if Brian was asking a hypothetical question or if he was actually serious, but he figured he might as well answer anyway.

Brian laughed. “Thanks, Howie. That’s big of you.”

“You okay?” Howie asked.

“Yeah.” Brian sighed. “He’s just being Nick. It’ll blow over. C’mon Howie - the biggest game of our careers is starting in half an hour.”

~\*~

The Mariners lost game five 5-3, the Dodgers taking the lead in the sixth inning on a two out error by second baseman Carlos Ramos and the Series moved back to Los Angeles.

## Chapter Forty Nine

Stacy opened all the drawers of her dresser and stared down, wrinkling her nose. She hated packing. Felicia should have come over to help her. Stacy had to look professional for the next four days. Professional was not an image she did. Half the time her socks didn't even match.

She heard the front door slam shut, and seconds later, the stereo started playing. Nick must have vaulted the couch in order to reach it that quickly. Nick had been drafted after the game to do an interview and she had taken the bus home after the game. It was nice of him to stop by before she left - four days was starting to seem longer and longer, the more she thought about it.

Matchbox Twenty was blaring out of the speakers this time. Stacy shook her head and started pulling underwear out of one of the drawers. 'Bent' would always remind her of Nick, and not because he had played the song into oblivion. It was the lyrics - she suspected it was one of the reasons he listened to it, though of course, he wouldn't admit it.

"Hi!" Nick piped cheerily, ricocheting into the room and tossing his coat, hat and a pile of assorted junk from his car onto the middle of the bed.

"Good interview?" Stacy wondered.

"The usual." Nick lifted one eyebrow. "They ask me a bunch of stupid s---, I fudge around without really saying anything, they thank me for being so..." He scrunched his face up in thought. "I can't remember the word..."

"Congenial?"

"No... yeah, well, it doesn't matter. Your word is good." Nick shrugged.

"What's the mess?" She wrinkled her nose at the bed.

"Cleaned out my locker." Nick explained.

"What's this?" Stacy held up a spiral bound notebook, the 99 cent, 120 pages kind that could be bought at any drugstore.

"It's mine!" Nick lunged across the bed, yanking it out of her hands.

"Top secret information, no doubt." Stacy raised her eyebrows.

"It's just stuff I mess around with on road trips." Nick shrugged. "Drawings and stuff. It's kind of personal, okay?"

"Fine." Stacy let it drop. He could have his notebook full of pictures, it didn't really surprise her he wouldn't let her look at it anyway. It was yet another door he slammed in her face, as soon as she got in too close.

"What are you doing?" Nick wondered, watching her pull clothes out of the closet.

"Packing." Stacy critically eyed both of the suits she owned. She would have preferred to just wear khakis and her beat up sweater.

"Why?"

Stacy turned, half amused, half annoyed. Nick's capacity for functioning in normal society was almost nil. "I'm flying to Minneapolis in six hours, remember?"

From the look of complete shock on Nick's face it had slipped his mind. "You have to?"

"Yes."

"I figured you were gonna come to LA." Nick said quietly, sinking down on the edge of the bed.

"Believe you me, I would prefer to go to LA." Stacy muttered shortly.

“Then why don’t you?” Nick sounded as frustrated as she was.

“Because I can’t.” Stacy could barely keep herself from yelling at him. He had heard exactly how important this trip to Minneapolis was - he had heard it several times. It either hadn’t registered, or he hadn’t been listening in the first place. She could only take so much of Nick’s ‘me’ attitude.

“I just assumed you were gonna come to LA.” Nick was turning the guilt trip on her now, and that was unfair.

“Nick, I can’t!” Stacy gave up trying to remain calm. “What are you trying to do? You want me to pick either you or my career? Is that what this is? Because that’s what’s happening here!”

“No!” Nick jumped back up. “That is not what I’m doing! God, I just...”

Stacy cut him off. “If I had my way - I would go to LA with you. Don’t make me out to be the bad guy here - because I’m not, and that’s not fair to me.”

“I...” Nick started.

“You know, for once - I know you’re not used to this - but for once, everyone is not going to cater to your every little whim and abnormality. And you’re just going to have to live with that!” She felt bad as soon as she said it, but then again, maybe he needed a reality check.

“Stacy...” Nick started again. “What... why... what did I do?”

“You didn’t do anything.” Stacy retorted. “Maybe that’s part of the problem - because I can only take trying to figure out what you actually meant by something so many times! Or the fact that there’s an entire...” Her eyes fell on the book still in Nick’s hand. “An entire notebook full of stuff that you won’t tell me! Every single time - you let me get so far, and then completely cut me off! And I’m tired of it!”

Nick’s eyes widened in disbelief. “That’s what this is about? Okay - fine! You want the damn notebook!” He was screaming now. “Here! Look at the f----- notebook! I don’t care!” He flung the notebook across the bed at Stacy, it landing on the floor next to her.

Stacy gripped the hanger still in her hand tighter. What she felt like doing was reaching across the bed and slapping him as hard as she could. “I don’t care about the stupid notebook! This is not about the notebook, Nick! This goes way beyond that!”

Nick ran his hand through his hair. He didn’t look angry anymore. Now he just looked confused, a little shocked, and most of all, hurt. “You don’t get it.” He said quietly.

“I don’t get it? Why don’t you try explaining it to me for once! Because just ONCE, I would love it if I didn’t have to try and decipher what it is you’re trying to say! So what don’t I get?” She knew she was going too far. She could see the look in his eyes, she was taking the little trust he had in her and flinging it back in his face, but if she backed down now, she was going to drop everything and go to Los Angeles. That was the scariest part - right now, if he asked her again, she would quit everything and go to LA.

“Never mind.” Nick stepped back from the bed and turned towards the door, letting her have the last word.

“Never mind?” Stacy threw at his back.

“Yes, never mind!” Nick spun around in the doorway, yelling again. “It doesn’t matter! I’m not gonna do this, Stacy!” He slammed the door and a few moments later, the front door to the apartment slammed so hard the mirror above her dresser rattled.

The apartment was silent, except for the muffled sound of Matchbox Twenty in the living room. Stacy slowly let go of the hanger, letting it fall onto the bed. Her hands were shaking. Slowly, she sank down onto the bed, not sure whether to cry or scream. She had the sinking feeling she had just made one of the biggest mistakes of her life.

## Chapter Fifty

Nick reached up and shoved his hair out of his face. It had been raining steadily for most of the day, and he had left without a jacket or hat. His sneakers were squishing with each step he took along the sidewalk. Today just hadn't been a good day, first the fight with Brian in the clubhouse, then the fight with Stacy. He couldn't have done a better job of screwing up his life if he had actually been trying.

He really hadn't meant to get into a fight with Stacy, that was the last thing he wanted to do. If he had just said what he wanted to say, rather than yelling back at her - but no, he hadn't, and to top it all off, he had chickened out and left, and all he had been thinking for the last few hours while he wandered the darkened streets of Seattle was that he probably wasn't going to be able to go back either.

Without thinking about it, he had ended up at the corner of Brian's street. That wasn't an option either. The two people in the world he trusted, and he'd managed to shove both of them away in the space of six hours. He stood at the bottom of the steps leading to Brian's floor, trying to figure out another option. He didn't really have one.

Nick climbed the steps and knocked quietly on Brian's door.

"Nick?" Brian finally opened the door, squinting in the light from the street.

"Hi." Nick shoved his dripping hands into his pockets. He wasn't quite sure what to say after that. There were fifteen different options running through his head, including apologizing for telling Brian to f--- off earlier, but Nick didn't even know where to start.

"Hi to you too. It's three AM." Brian opened the door the rest of the way and waved him in. "What's up?" Trust Brian to invite him inside, as if finding a soaking wet person at his front door in the middle of the night was a regular occurrence.

"Um..." Nick stepped inside and stared down at the water dripping around his shoes. "I couldn't sleep. Did I wake you up?" He added, suddenly realizing that if it really was three in the morning, Brian had probably been sleeping.

Brian ran his hand through his hair. "Yeah. Wasn't there another insomniac around you could have hooked up with?"

Nick didn't even attempt a smile. He was too depressed and too cold. It almost seemed as if it was colder in Brian's apartment than it had been outside. "Sorry. Um, if you're not feeling good, I can just leave."

Brian shook his head firmly. "At this point, sleep isn't gonna help me any... here." Brian stepped back and dug through Mount Tide, emerging with a faded blue towel. "Y'all're soaking wet."

"Yeah, well, it's raining." Nick tried to mop himself up enough that he wasn't dripping on the floor anymore.

"I think I'm gonna make tea." Brian disappeared into the little kitchen. "If y'all want me to be your fellow insomniac, I'm gonna need something to keep me awake. You want some?" He added, sticking a cup of water in the microwave.

Nick shook his head slowly, dragging himself into the kitchen after Brian.

"Now," Brian perched himself on the counter next to the microwave, swinging his feet against the cabinet door. "What's up?"

Nick sighed. Why couldn't Brian just be telepathic? Nick didn't feel like trying to explain everything, much less answer the nine million questions Brian was sure to fire at him. "I'm sorry about what I said earlier." He started.

Brian waved his hand in dismissal. "I know that. Somehow, I have a feeling it's not the reason you're appearing at my door in the middle of the night. What else is up?"

"Stacy." He wasn't sure he could explain any of it.

The microwave beeped. Brian didn't move.

"She..." Nick stopped and tried to compose himself. He wasn't going to lose it now. He couldn't lose it now. "We kinda had a fight."

Brian sat quietly on the counter and thought.

"Well?" Nick burst out, unable to sit there in silence any longer. "C'mon, Brian! Say something!"

Brian slowly dropped down off the counter and opened the microwave door. "What about?"

The questions had started. Nick leaned back against the counter and watched Brian make his tea. "Um... she has to go to Minneapolis this weekend."

Brian finished his tea making and disappeared into the living room. "Did you start it?"

"No. Yes! No... Brian, I don't know!" Nick flopped down onto the couch, not bothering to move the stack of newspapers perched on the arm. They slid off onto the floor, fanning out across the carpet. "I wanted to know if she had to go, and she said I was making her choose between her career and me, and we started screaming at each other - and I left."

"Were you making her choose?" Brian sat cross-legged in the chair across from Nick.

"I don't know!" Nick had been saying that a lot tonight. "Maybe I did... I didn't mean to. I don't want her to do something like that. I wasn't trying to make her do anything."

"Okay." Brian nodded.

"I just wanted her to come with me. You know, with everything going on right now, and... I don't want to... I can't deal with everything by myself..."

"You're not by yourself." Brian interrupted.

"Yes, I am." Nick stared down at the laundry next to him, unable to meet Brian's eyes.

"So why didn't you tell Stacy that?" The ever present Brian question - why - raised its head once again.

"I don't know." Nick clammed up.

"You don't know, or you don't want to talk about it?"

"Yeah."

"Oooh boy. It's gonna be a long night." Brian drained half his mug of tea with one swig.

Nick sighed. "Nothing's going right, Brian. No matter how hard I try, it all just falls apart - and I'm so damn tired of it happening. Just once, I'd like things to go right."

"I'm sorry, Nick." Brian sighed. "Really, I am."

"I know." Nick still couldn't bring himself to meet Brian's eyes, picking at the fuzz on the towel instead. "I just... I don't know - I didn't tell Stacy cause... if I had, she would have come to LA, and... that's not fair to her."

Brian thought about this last statement for a moment. "So... you don't really want her to go to LA with you anyway."

"Yeah, well, no... but... I don't know." It made Nick's head hurt just thinking about it. Why couldn't something just make sense for once? "Brian? What am I going to do?"

“Get yourself a good psychiatrist.” Brian quipped.

“That’s not funny.”

“Sorry, I wasn’t thinking... seriously, Nick - if I were you, I’d go explain things. When does her flight leave?”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay, it doesn’t matter. I bet she hasn’t left yet.”

“5:50.” Nick remembered.

“Or... not.” Brian leaned over to see the clock on the wall. “Better get a move on. Y’all might be able to just catch her.”

~\*~

Stacy turned the lock on her apartment door and dropped her keys in her purse. She had been hoping - no, wishing - Nick would appear back at her door, but five hours later he hadn’t. That had been too much to hope for - this was Nick she was dealing with here. Now she had no choice - she couldn’t wait anymore.

She paused when she stepped outside the apartment building. Nick’s car was still parked outside. Now she was worried. He hadn’t left, so where was he? She hesitated, wondering if maybe she shouldn’t go after all.

Of course, he was at Brian’s - Brian lived four blocks away. Once again, it all came back to Brian. He was tangled in everyone’s life, and once he was gone - Stacy didn’t even want to think about what was going to happen. Everything was going to come apart at the seams.

She was riding to the airport with one of her co-workers, a short, dark-haired woman named Julia, also known reverently as ‘the microscope freak’. Stacy watched Julia’s dinky little blue car pull up to the curb. Stacy shoved her bag into the little space that passed as a back seat and dropped into the passenger seat, closing the door.

Brian was just going to have to take care of things until Monday.

~\*~

Nick pushed Brian’s apartment door back open, wondering as he always did WHY Brian’s never locked his door - and people accused Nick of being the clueless one. Brian was still sitting cross-legged in the chair, where Nick had left him fifteen minutes ago.

“You’re back, this isn’t good.” Brian surmised.

Nick couldn’t really say it any better than that.

## Chapter Fifty One

Brian had managed to disappear. Kevin craned his head, trying to see if his cousin was in the middle of one of the several groups clustered over the plane, but he didn't see him. He saw AJ, hanging over the back of one of the seats, his legs swinging in the air, he saw the ever-eternal game of cards that Howie and Ramos were always playing, but there was no Brian. If Brian was there, he would have been able to hear him over everyone else, Kevin reasoned.

Brian usually sat with Nick, and right now Nick was sitting by himself, curled up in his seat, one leg wedged between his seat and the one in front of him, his tongue sticking out in concentration as he worked on something in the notebook he had propped on the arm of the seat. As usual, the headphones were on his ears, the music playing loudly enough that Kevin could hear the bass and drums clearly.

Kevin reached over and tapped Nick on the shoulder, attempting to get his attention. Nick was off in his own little world, Kevin could have stood there for a good ten minutes without him ever noticing.

Nick jumped, glancing up in confusion. Kevin could see Nick's brain try to focus.

"Yeah?" Nick pulled the headphones down around his neck, the music getting louder as the ear pieces were unmuffled.

"Where's Brian?" Kevin asked.

Nick blinked a couple times, thinking. "I don't know." His brain finished processing the question and he spit out his typical answer.

"He's sitting here, right?"

Nick thought about that one for a moment too. "I think so." He said slowly. Kevin was never really sure if Nick just wasn't that bright to begin with, or if his brain was always preoccupied with something else and just made him seem like he wasn't that smart. There were brief moments when Nick would say something intelligent, Kevin had to give him credit for that. On the field, Nick had a lot more experience than his two years in the majors would lead one to believe. But then, growing up under the tutelage of Bob Carter since he was a little kid, it was to be expected that Nick knew his baseball.

"Your girlfriend coming down for the weekend?" Kevin wondered, dropping into Brian's empty seat, surprised he was attempting a polite conversation.

"Nope." Nick said shortly, scowling back down at the notebook.

Well, it had been an attempt at conversation, at least. Kevin slouched down a little lower and yanked at the tie around his neck, wondering as he always did what moron in baseball's front offices kept that rule in place. If he ran baseball, that would be the first thing to go.

"She's in Minneapolis." Nick explained, giving up on the notebook, resting the side of his head on the back of the seat and closing his eyes.

"I see."

"We got in a fight over it." Nick added quietly, staring over at Kevin uncertainly. Kevin was suddenly hit with the realization that Nick was still just a kid. Kevin had never really thought about it before, but Nick was eight years younger than he was. Why he had never realized this was a mystery to Kevin, but Nick was a year older than Kevin had been when his father died. It made Kevin see Nick in an entirely new light. He wasn't exactly sorry for the way he'd been acting towards Nick, but it was enough to make him wonder if he should rethink his attitude just a little.

“Fights before road trips are never good.” Kevin knew this from experience - two girlfriends and one wife worth of experience. By the time he came home, they had always managed to blow it up to five times the problem it had been before he left. “Take it from the voice of experience - call and apologize, even if it wasn’t your fault. Wins you major points in their book, trust me.”

“I have no idea where she’s staying.” Nick mumbled.

Kevin frowned, thinking. “Does she have a cell phone?”

Nick bolted upright, notebook, pencil, Walkman and arms flying in all directions. “Holy s---, yes!” He leaned down and rescued the CD player from the floor. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Because I am older and infinitely wiser than you.” Kevin managed to say it with a perfectly straight face.

Nick wrinkled his nose, thinking. “Well, you’re infinitely older anyway.”

“Don’t push it.” Kevin wagged his index finger at Nick.

“Why are y’all in my seat?” Brian finally appeared. “Get up!”

“So sorry.” Kevin held his hands up in surrender and moved back into the aisle.

“Cell phone.” Nick shook his head in amazement and flopped back into his seat.

“You don’t look so good.” Kevin critically inspected his cousin.

“Thank you and how are YOU today?” Brian gave Kevin a cheesy smile, reclining the seat back partway and collapsing into it sideways, his back to Nick. “I bet you had at least six hours sleep, didn’tcha? Go away and let me sleep.” He closed his eyes and proceeded to ignore Kevin.

“Why didn’t I think of that?” Nick repeated under his breath. “Cell phone...”

“Why does he keep saying that?” Brian muttered.

“Nick’s still discovering the marvels of modern technology.” Kevin explained dryly.

Nick tapped Brian on the shoulder. “Stacy has a cell phone, Brian.”

Brian rolled his eyes. “Blond...” He mouthed at Kevin before turning slightly towards Nick. “Why didn’t you think of that earlier instead of flipping out!”

“I didn’t flip out.” Nick defended, eyes widening in disbelief.

“Did too.” Brian argued.

“Okay...” Nick allowed. “But it was just normal flipping out. It wasn’t special flipping out.”

Brian snickered. “If y’all say so. Put your headphones back on and let me sleep.”

~\*~

“Bedtime, is what I think.” Kevin glowered down at his daughter.

“Oh, Daddy.” Becky protested. “We’re in LA. We shouldn’t be going to bed. We should be going to a club or something.” Everyone went to clubs in LA, even Becky knew that.

“She didn’t learn that from me!” Brian yelled, defending himself.

Kevin laughed. “Trust me, Becky, even AJ and Howie’s combined efforts couldn’t get you to pass off as twenty one. Bedtime.”

“Go to bed - we’ll ride the elevator again in the morning.” Brian added. Brian had taken Becky on a tour of the hotel in Los Angeles, including the elevator several times over.

“Y’all will not ride that elevator again.” Kevin said sharply. “This is a hotel, not a freakin’ jungle gym!”

“Kevin, have you SEEN that jacuzzi?” Karen demanded, sticking her head around the corner.

“Yeah, the first three times you brought it up!” Kevin yelled back. He shook his head at Brian. “I think she’s in shock or something. She just keeps saying that same phrase, over and over.”

Brian snickered. “She does that a lot, Kevin. Haven’t you noticed?”

“It’s cute.” Kevin defended.

“Each to his own...” Brian cocked one eyebrow skeptically. “I’m gonna go see if Nick actually called Stacy or if he chickened out again, and then I’m goin’ to bed. How about a kiss goodnight?” He added to Becky.

“Hell no!” Kevin said in disgust.

Becky laughed. Her father was an exceptionally good mood that night. He wasn’t usually this funny.

“Sweet dreams.” Brian grabbed Becky around the waist, picking her up and kissing her cheek. Becky kissed him back, and screamed as Brian dropped her onto the bed.

“And you...” Brian circled and dove down towards Kevin, lips pursed.

“Get off me, you freak!” Kevin shoved Brian, sending him pinwheeling towards the door. Brian vanished into the entryway by the door, then appeared again, bent over double laughing.

“What are you two doing?” Karen called absently from the bathroom, where she was still admiring the jacuzzi.

“Nothing!” Kevin assured her.

“G’night, Karen!” Brian shouted, as the hotel room door slammed shut behind him.

“Bed.” Kevin repeated. Becky sighed and got ready for bed.

“Wait! Where’s Gertrude?” She demanded, once she was tucked in under the blankets.

“Hang on...” Kevin started methodically pawing through suitcases and bags, finally emerging with the little doll. “Gotta have the doll, don’tcha?”

“She’s an angel, Daddy.” Becky corrected. “She protects me while I sleep.”

“She’s a doll.” Kevin stated firmly. “Go to sleep. I love you.”

“I love you too, Daddy!” Becky called at his back, hugging Gertrude up against her chest and closing her eyes. She knew Gertrude wasn’t really an angel. That was okay though, because Becky knew there were real angels everywhere. She just liked hugging Gertrude at night.

## Chapter Fifty Two

Stacy locked the door to her hotel room behind her, set her bag and notebooks on the small table next to the bathroom door and flopped onto the bed. It had been an exhausting day, and the serious stuff hadn't even begun yet. She reached for the remote and flipped the TV on, almost laughing out loud when she realized the first channel she checked was ESPN. Six months ago, she wouldn't have even thought about tuning into sports.

Inside her bag, her cell phone started ringing. She frowned, slowly dragging herself over to grab her bag and try to find it. She didn't know her cell phone even worked in Minnesota. Who knew what other features were on it she wasn't aware of. Giving up on pawing through the bag, she messily dumped the entire contents out on the bed and grabbed the phone, the shrill ringing noise getting on her nerves. "Hello?"

"Hi." Nick said hesitantly.

"Nick?"

"Yeah..." He was silent for a long moment. She could picture him sitting in his hotel room in LA; face wrinkled in concentration, trying to figure out exactly how he was going to say whatever it was he was going to say.

"So are you mad at me?" He said finally.

"No." She had never been mad at Nick, just frustrated. Now she'd cooled off, and was starting to feel just the slightest bit guilty about what she had said to him the night before - even if most of it had been true.

"You're not mad?" Nick sounded so surprised it was almost comical.

"No, I'm not mad. A little frustrated with all of this, yes, but I'm not mad."

"I..." Nick started, then fell silent again. "Um, I didn't do a very good job of explaining things last night."

"Explaining what?"

"I wasn't trying to make you choose. Okay? I didn't... um... I wanted you to go to Minneapolis."

"That wasn't what you said, Nick."

"I know that - I know it wasn't. I mean, I wanted you to come with me, but if you came, then it would mean you wouldn't go there, and so..." Nick sighed. "Never mind, it doesn't make any sense, does it?"

"No, I think I get what you're trying to say." She smiled. It was actually kind of sweet, in Nick's own weird little way.

"Really?" Nick said hopefully. "Then can you explain it to me?"

"That... would probably be a little too much to hope for." Stacy said wryly.

"How's your conference thing?" Nick sounded happier now.

"My `conference thing?'" Stacy repeated in amusement. "It's fascinating, but long."

"When do you have to get up there and talk?"

"Tomorrow." Stacy closed her eyes. "Don't remind me, please. I'd like to sleep tonight."

Nick snickered. "Just use lots of big words."

"No, Nick. These people actually know what the big words mean."

"Ohhh... ya might have a problem then." He paused. "You'll be fine." He added reassuringly.

"I hope so." Stacy really didn't want to think about tomorrow. If she started worrying about it the night before, she'd be a basket case by morning. "So what's going on for you?"

"Oh, the usual. You know, Brian and Becky running all over the hotel, Kevin screaming at them to shut up and act like civilized people... that kind of thing."

"Becky's there?" Stacy smiled. She loved that little girl. Everyone loved Becky.

"In full force." Nick confirmed. "Stacy?" His voice turned serious again. "You know what you said about how you always have to figure out what I mean?"

"Nick, I didn't mean that." Stacy started.

"No, you did... it's true, and I know it. And... I'm just so tired of doing this. I'm tired of always having everything screwed up... except it doesn't matter what I do, it ends up screwed anyway... and I hate it!"

"Nick, don't flip out." Stacy wished she was in LA, and not halfway across the country. The exact same thing Nick was getting upset over was getting in her way. If she had been looking Nick in the face, she would have known what to say, but right now, she couldn't tell.

"I'm trying not to." Nick's voice was barely audible now. "I'm really trying."

"Okay... just calm down." Talking over the phone wasn't working. Things were fast growing worse. All she wanted to do right now was wrap her arms around him make him feel better, and it was incredibly frustrating that she couldn't do it right then.

The line was quiet for a good minute. "You still there?" Stacy asked finally.

"Uh-huh." Nick said tiredly. "You know how you feel like s--- the day before you get sick?" He added.

"Mm-hmm."

"I've felt like that ever since we got off the plane today." Nick sighed. "Biggest game of my career so far, and I'm gonna be sick." He paused. Stacy could hear muffled banging noises on his end of the line.

"Geez..." He muttered. "Just kick the door in, why don'tcha? Hang on a minute." He added to her. "Let me get the door."

Stacy waited. "Howie?" She could still hear Nick's voice faintly through the receiver. "What... no... wait, what? Howie! Slow down! Now? But... what happened?"

"Stacy?" Nick said hurriedly. "I gotta go. It's... Brian. I'll call you later, okay?"

The phone clicked in her ear and Stacy was left sitting on her bed, wondering what had just happened.

## Chapter Fifty Three

"Pretty good, huh? Two hospital visits in three days - I could probably set some kind of record!" Brian greeted Nick, a proud grin on his face.

Nick gave him a fleeting smile. Brian could sit and make all the jokes he wanted - it still wasn't funny. Last night was the worst that Nick had been scared in a while.

Well, there was always Friday night when he had walked out on Stacy, but this situation with Brian was a different kind of scared. At least with Stacy, Nick still had a chance at fixing things. With Brian - there wasn't anything Nick could do. He would have preferred not to come hang out at the hospital, but it was the least he could do, especially after he had said what he had in the clubhouse before game five. "How're you doing?"

"Good." Brian nodded, tipping his head at the chair next to the hospital bed. "Have a seat. Have you seen Kevin around?"

"No." Nick sat uncomfortably in the hard plastic chair.

"Good." Brian said firmly. "He keeps popping his head in here every ten seconds. The man gets annoying after a while."

Nick had seen Karen and Becky in the hallway earlier. Nick hadn't ever talked to Karen much, but she had seemed to figure out Nick didn't really want Becky hanging around right then, and had dragged Becky off down the hallway, telling her they had to find Kevin before he interrogated every doctor in the hospital. That one little gesture by Karen had been enough to make her cool in Nick's book.

Kevin, on the other hand, he was just worried about Brian. Brian was lucky to have someone that cared that much about him, and he didn't even seem to realize it. Then again, maybe he did. Brian knew a lot more than he let on.

"Y'all okay there?" Brian was watching Nick, eyebrows raised.

"Fine." Nick didn't feel like elaborating.

"Did you call Stacy yet?" Brian wondered. "I was gonna go ask you that, but I blacked out first."

Nick stared hard at Brian. How could he say that so nonchalantly? "Yeah, I called her." That was another something Nick would prefer not to think about right now. He should just go back to the hotel and sleep before batting practice. The truth be told, he hadn't sat down all night, much less slept. Once the excitement of Brian being rushed to the emergency room had died down and the team got themselves back to their rooms, Nick had spent the rest of the night prowling his hotel suite. He had been so keyed up he couldn't even sit and watch TV.

"So is everything okay now?" Brian prompted.

"No, I don't think it is." Nick swallowed hard, trying to get rid of the lump that had suddenly appeared in his throat. "It's so stupid, Brian! What's the point? It's just gonna keep going around in this circle! She's gonna get mad at me, we get stuff worked out, but nothing ever changes. It'll just keep going around and around. It's screwed up."

"So change it." Brian said logically, leaning back and staring up at the tiled ceiling.

"I don't know how."

"Figure it out. C'mon - the first time you come up against a pitcher, you might get an out, but what about after you've seen his stuff for a while? Eventually you're gonna figure him out and start getting hits."

Nick thought about that one. It made a lot more sense when Brian put it that way. Still, experience wasn't exactly the way Nick wanted to go about his life. There had to be some way that didn't involve making mistakes and learning from them. Nick had already made enough mistakes.

"Yeah, okay, Brian, but what about when you come up against a guy like AJ, that's unhittable?"

Brian scowled. "Dammit, Nick! Why do you have to go and try to ruin my analogy?"

Nick laughed. "I was just wondering!"

"Even guys like AJ make mistakes." Brian had an explanation for everything.

"Well, he can't make any for one or two more games."

The smile appeared on Brian's face again. "We're gonna take it in six, right?"

"I don't know, Brian. I don't think we can." Nick had no idea where this had come from. Words were coming out of his mouth without him really thinking about what he was saying. "I don't... we can't win without you." He glanced up at Brian, lying on the white bed. It might have been true that Brian was the one little piece the team needed to pull out another win, but Nick didn't mean just the game. Right then, he didn't really care about the game. It was making it off the field without Brian that was freaking him out.

As he had many times before, he wished he was halfway decent with words; there had to be some way to tell Brian how much his friendship meant to Nick, but he had no clue how to say it.

Brian was shaking his head slowly. "You don't need me, Nick."

"Yes, we do." Nick said intently.

"No you don't." Brian repeated.

~\*~

Kevin stood at the top of the dugout steps, watching the palm trees along the back of Dodger Stadium. When they had been in Seattle, it had felt more like a regular season game to him. Now that he was back in LA again, the eerie "we're in the World Series" feeling was returning.

Things were looking a little different now than they had been in games one and two. Then, Kevin had been fairly confident of the Mariners chances. Now, he wasn't so sure. Brian had been a big factor in their play that postseason, and with him out - it made Kevin a little nervous.

He hadn't come this far just to give up on the last two games. They were just gonna have to buckle down and win without Brian. It hadn't been voiced in the clubhouse, but there was an unspoken feeling among the team that they were winning this series now, for Brian.

"What'cha looking at?" Nick wondered, skipping the dugout steps completely and leaping down onto the floor.

"Nothing." Kevin stared over at him for a moment. "Are you nervous about tonight?" He added.

Nick threw him an almost comical look of disdain, mixed with confusion. "No."

Kevin rolled his eyes. He should have known. Nick was a Yankee whether he wore the uniform or not. For Nick, the regular season was just something to be endured until

the postseason started. He didn't hope to be in the playoffs - he expected it. "Excuse me - not all of us have been in a major league dugout from the time we were six."

"I was eight." Nick corrected quietly.

"And I was being facetious."

"Nick!" AJ hollered from the field. "C'mere!" Sports Illustrated had been shooting photos through most of batting practice. Now AJ was hamming it up for the camera for a last few shots.

"What?" Nick climbed back up onto the field.

"Come stand over here." AJ directed, placing Nick along the sidelines, then slinging one arm across his shoulders and turning to the camera.

"What's this, guys? Scoot in!" The photographer protested, waving at AJ to close the arms length gap he had between himself and Nick.

"No, no, no!" AJ protested, his free arm waving wildly in the air.

"This space right here..." He pointed at the space between he and Nick. "...is where Brian would be standing if he was here right now. But he isn't, so he's our imaginary friend today."

The photographer, Nick and Kevin all stood stunned for a moment, taking in the significance of what AJ was saying. Finally, the photographer raised his camera and snapped the shot.

Kevin stepped back and sat down slowly on the dugout bench. AJ might have been crazy, but there were times he made more sense than anyone else on the team. Who cared who won the game? One of Kevin's best friends was in the hospital - did the World Series really even matter? Maybe Kevin needed to rethink his priorities a little.

## Chapter Fifty Four

"Two outs here in the top of the fifth inning, and that will bring Mariner third baseman Howie Dorough to the plate." Stan Morgan announced. "Dorough is 1 for 1 with a single tonight; he scored one of the two Mariner runs in the first inning."

"Dorough had an impressive Championship Series." Bob Carter pointed out.

"And his play has carried right on over into the World Series. He and Littrell were the key elements in the offense for Seattle against the Yankees, with the MVP honors going to Littrell, but that doesn't lessen what Dorough's done in the postseason. To think, last year, this man was one of the worst third basemen in the league - it's hard to believe."

"It certainly is, Bob." Stan agreed, the two announcers ignoring the play on the field below them, as Howie fouled off another pitch.

"Dorough's added a lot to this team this year - as has Littrell. Of course, our best wishes go out to him right now. For those who tuned in partway through the broadcast, Mariners second baseman Brian Littrell was admitted to the hospital last night. Details aren't being made public at this time, but the Mariners front office says that Brian's doing fine and is watching the game tonight."

The camera cut to a shot of the dugout, zooming in on the side of Carlos Ramos' hat and the #12 written on it in white. "The Mariners are all wearing #12 on their caps tonight, which of course, is Brian's number." Morgan pointed out.

Howie took the next pitch and send it flying down the left field line, the ball still rising when it landed in the bleachers, just inside the foul pole.

"Holy COW!" Bob Carter yelled in amazement. "That was a rocket. I haven't seen a ball hit that hard in some time."

"And just like that - the Mariners take the lead, 3-2." Morgan added as Howie rounded the bases, high fiving Nick at the plate. "That brings up right fielder Nick Carter."

"Looks like he caught a hanging curve and just ripped into it." Bob was inspecting the replay. "That was some home run."

"What about Nick, Bob?" Morgan wondered. "He's been playing pretty good baseball the second half of the season, he put in some great games against the Yankees in the LCS, and he's hitting just over .500 in the World Series. Right now, all he really needs is experience and he'll be one of the best hitters in baseball."

"We haven't even begun to see the tip of what Nick is capable of doing." Bob shook his head. "He's playing where he is right now without really putting any effort into it. Things that I spent YEARS perfecting - he picked them up just like that. Even as a little kid, he was like that. Nick could be ten times better than he is right now, he just has to be aggressive enough to go after it."

"Called strike three, and that ends the inning." Morgan interrupted as Nick watched the ball cut the middle of the plate and slam into the catchers mitt. "After five and a half, the Mariners lead game six, 3-2 on a solo home run by Howie Dorough."

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"Five more..." Niehaus enunciated every syllable, dragging the two words out. "Five more outs, and the Mariners take the World Series. Arton's set, here's the pitch to the

plate, and the Dodger catcher sends a solid hit through the hole - here comes Stockton from second, they're waving him towards the plate..." Niehaus' voice rose for a moment, before settling back down. "And the throw is cut off, Stockton scores, and the Mariners now lead it 4-3. The Dodgers have the tying run on first base and here comes a pinch hitter for the number nine spot in the order."

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"This is NOT happening!" Denise shrieked, jumping up from her chair and stalking towards the kitchen in frustration. "They can't do this! Take Arton out! Take him OUT!" She screamed at the TV.

"They can't." Felicia pointed out. "There isn't anyone up in the bullpen."

"Get someone up!" Denise was almost jumping up and down. "WHY are you paying my son millions of dollars to play if you don't put him in the GAME?" She picked up the first thing her hand grabbed, which happened to be a magazine, and flung it at the TV.

"Oh no! No! No!" Felicia screamed, covering her eyes so she couldn't see the TV. "Base hit!" She peeked out to see the Dodger catcher perched on third base, the pinch hitter atop first.

"Tying run on third." Denise sighed. "This cannot happen. Get Alex in the damn game right now."

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"And here comes manager Buddy Williams out of the dugout. He's taking his time, letting McLean warm up down in the bullpen." Morgan informed the TV audience. "You have admit, once McLean is in the game, things look pretty bleak for the Dodgers. He hasn't given up an earned run the entire postseason. Williams has made the call to the bullpen, here comes McLean. We'll be back after this time-out. The Mariners lead it 4-3 with one out in the bottom of the eighth. Don't go away."

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"I don't care how the hell you do it - just get out of this mess." Those were Buddy only instructions to AJ before he turned and marched back to the dugout.

Kevin rested his throwing hand on his hip and waited. There was a system here. Now was the time that AJ said something completely unrelated to the game. He knew how it worked.

"Let's keep it low and try for a ground ball." AJ shrugged, flipping the ball upward and catching it with his glove absently.

Kevin almost inhaled his wad of gum. "What? Strategy? Just like that? No questions first? You don't want to know if your a-- looks good in the road uniform? You don't want to know if your hair clashes with the S on the hat? No disgusting joke someone told you in the fifth inning?"

AJ's face didn't change expression, except for his eyes, which darkened. "I want this game, Kevin. Brian's dying - the least we can do is win the f----- game for him, okay?"

"Okay." Kevin backed off and headed towards the plate. It had taken 170 some games, but finally AJ's head was screwed on straight.

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"Here's the 1-1 pitch..." Niehaus said cautiously. "SWIIIIIIING and a miss at that forkball in the dirt." He allowed himself to grow more excited now. "And McLean is set - a check of the runners, and the pitch... SWING - and a one hopper right back at the mound, McLean has it... he spins and fires to second for one..." Now his voice climbed up into the hysteric yelling range. "And the throw to first is in time, double play and the Mariners get out of a BIG, BIG jam here in the eighth! We go to the top of the ninth, the Mariners still leading, 4-3."

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"Three more outs!" Stacy pleaded with the TV, glad she was the only person in the room. For the last three and a half hours, she had been talking to the TV, and if she hadn't been alone, she'd be feeling slightly foolish by this point.

On the TV screen across from her bed, AJ was perched on the mound, staring down at homeplate with the same goofy, eyebrows raised expression he always had when waiting for the sign.

"That was WAY outside, full count, 3 and 2." Stan Morgan didn't have to say it. Stacy could see it with her own eyes.

"Honestly, AJ." She grabbed one of the pillows behind her, hugging it. She had to hold onto something. Sitting in the stands at Safeco Field had been bad enough for her nerves - sitting halfway across the country watching on TV was ten times worse. "No!" She yelped as AJ proceeded to bounce the next pitch a foot in front of home plate and it went flying to the backstop, Kevin bolting after it. "AJ, don't do this. Don't do this..."

"And the Dodgers have the winning run at the plate in first baseman Ryan Christiansen." There was a note of glee in Stan Morgan's tone. It didn't get any better than this. Down to the bottom of the ninth, and the team's best hitter came up with no outs, a runner on first and a struggling pitcher on the mound.

"You don't have to sound so happy about it." Stacy grumbled. "Poor AJ."

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Howie found himself nodding in agreement as Kevin turned to call time and started towards the mound. AJ was off. Of all the times in the world for AJ to have an off day, he had picked today.

"Don't you dare!" AJ was hollering at Kevin, much to Howie - and Kevin's - surprise. "I mean it! Get back behind the damn plate!"

"AJ..." Kevin started, not backing down.

"I mean it!" AJ yelled, starting down the side of the mound towards Kevin.

Kevin glanced out at Howie, who shrugged in response. Let AJ handle it his own way. He had always been right before. Maybe he could still pull this one out.

"Will you just calm down?" Kevin kept trying.

"Get back there and catch the f----- ball!" AJ spun around and stalked back to the top of the mound, glaring daggers at Kevin until the catcher finally gave up and went back to home plate, shaking his head.

~\*~

"Well..." Bob Carter said in amusement, watching the scene unfolding on the field. "We don't know what McLean was saying, but some of those words were pretty clear, and I think we can safely say he's pretty worked up right now." He laughed. "It was a speech that couldn't be played on network television, that's for sure."

"Richardson's back behind the plate, and here's the pitch to Christiansen..." Morgan waited the second and a half it took the ball to reach home plate. "Strike, right down the middle. That was one of the harder fastballs McLean has thrown. 92 miles an hour..."

AJ caught the throw back from Kevin, and circled the mound once, glowering over at first base and his second walk of the postseason, who was standing on the bag, adjusting his batting gloves. "The 0-1 pitch..." Morgan started. "And that is BELTED towards right field... Carter's going back... he's to the wall... and there WILL be a game seven! The Dodgers come back to win it in the bottom of the ninth on a two run shot by Ryan Christiansen!"

~\*~

Kevin stood behind home plate, still not comprehending what had just happened. He had been hoping Nick would get to the ball, but it had just kept right on going, into the seats. Heartbreaking didn't even begin to describe it. Kevin's gaze traveled back from the outfield wall to the lone figure sitting on the mound, his face buried in his arms.

## Chapter Fifty Five

"Um... I think... we're, um, well..." Nick stammered, before shooting a pleading look at Howie.

"Disappointed." Howie interjected, looking out at the sea of reporters and television cameras at the postgame press conference. "Right now, I would have to say the clubhouse is pretty disappointed." That was an understatement. AJ was in a bat slinging, chair throwing, table kicking rage, and Buddy Williams had wisely decided reporters would be better off staying out of the clubhouse. He had then dictated to Howie and Nick they were to go field questions.

"About McLean's performance tonight..." Bob Carter started, using his most fake, most sincerely polite announcers voice. "... Earlier in the season, AJ said that he wasn't a player that cared about win loss records, or who won the game... could that have been a factor in tonight's loss?"

Howie glanced over at Nick, hoping he wanted to answer that. Nick was staring in disgust at his father.

Howie interrupted, before Nick flipped his lid. "I don't know exactly what was going through AJ's head out there on the mound, but no, I don't think that had anything to do with the game tonight. We're not going to sit and ask ourselves what happened tonight. Right now, the only thing we can do is put it behind us, move on, and come back tomorrow and beat the Dodgers."

"One more question." The PR guy told the journalists.

"Who do you feel has the upper hand in the Series right now?" A tall man in a tweed sports jacket and polo shirt - standard sports reporter attire - held his microphone up.

Nick stopped the stare-down with his father and glanced up. "I think the Dodgers got the advantage in game four."

~\*~

"Hi, Nick!" Becky yelled across the lobby, repeating it two more times for good measure.

Nick shook his head as the little girl charged across the carpet as fast as her pink shoed feet could carry her. "Hey, Becky."

"Guess what!" Becky stopped in front of him, her round little face turned up towards him. "I got to watch the game in Brian's room tonight."

"Did you?" Nick said absently. There was no doubt about it now, he was getting sick. He felt terrible, his head hurt, his neck hurt, and his right arm was still sore from when he had dove for second base during the game. Right now all he really wanted to do was go to bed.

"Yep. I did." Becky bobbed her head, making the topknot of blond curls on top bounce up and down.

"Becky, would you quit running ahead like that?" Kevin and Karen finally caught up to their daughter, Kevin shaking his head in annoyance.

Karen gave Nick a bright smile.

"I saw Nick." Becky explained, not fazed in the slightest at her father's lecturing.

"Yeah, well..." Kevin grumbled.

"How's Brian?" Nick wondered, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand and trying to make his brain focus for just a few more minutes.

Kevin glanced down at Becky, then back up at Nick, before shrugging his shoulders. Kevin's eyes were saying something completely different.

Brian wasn't doing too good.

"He's asleep now." Karen added, slipping one arm around Kevin and leaning up against his shoulder.

"Okay. That's good..." Nick stepped back, intending to head for the elevators. "I'm gonna get to bed." He didn't feel like standing there and watching the two of them. It only reminded him that he and Stacy still weren't all squared up.

"Goodnight, Nick!" Becky called after him as he headed for the elevators.

Nick waved one hand in response. He had been planning to call Stacy back after he had hung up so abruptly the night before. Now it was too late - it was almost midnight in Minneapolis. There was no way she was still awake. Stacy usually out like a light by ten, and if she wasn't, she was having serious trouble keeping her eyes open.

AJ was standing next to the elevator door, savagely punching the button every few seconds.

"S---, c'mon!" AJ shouted, smacking the buttons on the wall with the flat of his hand.

"AJ... chill!" Nick reached over and pushed the button, giving AJ a 'what's your problem' glare. The elevator doors slid open, and AJ stalked inside, ignoring Nick.

Nick leaned against the metal wall of the elevator and closed his eyes, the rising effect making his head spin. This wasn't his life - Kevin was being nice to him, and now AJ was flipping out. No wonder he felt like things were spinning out of control.

~\*~

"Hi." AJ said shortly. Right now probably wasn't the best time for him to call home - AJ was still so mad he could barely see straight - but he was used to calling when he got back to the hotel after a game, and had done it automatically.

"Oh, Alex." Felicia said quietly. He supposed there wasn't a whole lot else she could say. AJ still couldn't believe that last pitch. It had even been a fairly decent pitch, maybe a little high, but still, a good strike.

"How're you?" AJ rolled over on his back, the phone cord tangling around his neck. It would make a great headline - 'Losing pitcher strangles to death on phone cord' - he could see it now. Even so, with the way his evening seemed to be heading, it wouldn't have worked.

"How am I?" Felicia repeated. "I'm... I don't know how to describe it. I really don't. They ended the broadcast with that shot of you sitting on the mound. Your mother almost broke the TV."

AJ almost smiled. Denise had done a number on appliances before. He wouldn't have been surprised. It was yet another so called talent he had inherited from her. Thanks to his mother's genes, he had spent a good five minutes trying to get the key card to unlock his door tonight. Nick had stood and watched in disbelief, before grabbing the card out of AJ's hand and opening the door for him.

"I just can't believe it." AJ's mind went back to that last pitch he had thrown, just like it had been doing ever since the game ended. He could still see it clearly - the ball

catching the outside of the plate, Christiansen swinging - and the ball flying out towards right field.

It hadn't looked like a home run. The entire time, he had been desperately hoping Nick was going to catch that ball, but by the time it reached the wall, Nick didn't stand a chance. "Why this game, Lissie? Out of all the stupid games I've pitched in my entire life - why the one I really wanted to win?"

"I don't know." She sounded sympathetic, and right now AJ wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. It would have been better if he had still been mad. Now the anger had worn off and he was just depressed, more than a little upset and getting closer and closer to just breaking down and crying.

"Alex, how's Brian?" Felicia asked. "The media isn't really saying anything."

"What do you mean, how's Brian?" This was another subject AJ really didn't need to think about right now. "Brian's dying."

"Well, I know that." Felicia didn't use sarcasm unless she was upset. That made him feel even worse. He didn't mean to drag her into his mood. All that would happen because of that was Felicia stressing out, and ending up wiped out in bed, and that wouldn't help AJ at all.

"No, I mean..." AJ couldn't bring himself to say it. No one really could. It was pretty much assumed in the clubhouse that Brian wasn't going to be leaving the hospital anytime soon, but no one wanted to say he was dying. As long as no one said it, then it could be pushed aside.

"Have you talked to him?" Felicia interrupted his train of thought.

"No." AJ sighed. "I thought about it... I couldn't quite bring myself to go over there."

They both sat in silence for a moment.

"So what are you doing to do?" Felicia said finally.

"Well..." AJ frowned. "I figure I have three options. I could sit here and cry over all of this, I could crawl under the bed and refuse to come out, or I could crawl under the bed and cry."

"S---, I wish I was down there." Felicia muttered darkly.

AJ almost dropped the receiver. "I just saw a pig fly by my window. Did you just SWEAR?" His wife didn't swear. He wasn't sure why; there were some things that Felicia just didn't do. She didn't get mad or upset, the exception being the periods when she was sick. She didn't swear. She never left the house without lipstick.

"What? It's not like I don't swear." She defended.

"Oh, right. When was the last time - high school?"

"Maybe once or twice since then." Felicia admitted.

"I'm gonna go see Brian tomorrow." AJ hadn't really decided that until the words were out of his mouth. Now that it had been said, he was feeling a little uneasy. Hospitals weren't high on his list of favorite things to begin with, and visiting a dying friend wasn't something he really wanted to do. However, if he didn't, AJ had a feeling he would end up regretting it later.

"This is depressing." Felicia decided.

"Tell me about it." AJ yawned. "Okay... time for bed. I'll see you Monday, okay?"

"Call me tomorrow." Felicia instructed.

"Don't I always? I love you, Lissie. Don't let Mom near sharp objects for the next couple days, okay?"

She laughed. "I love you more. Go to bed, everything will look a lot better in the morning."

"It can't get any worse." AJ pointed out. "G'night, Lissie."

He unwrapped the phone cord from his neck and flopped over on his face, pulling the pillow over his head. He was right, this couldn't get any worse. He couldn't wait for this Series to be over.

## Chapter Fifty Six

Bob stared across the table in the small restaurant offside the hotel lobby, meeting the glowering looks of Nick calmly, not really paying attention. Nick had been in a mood towards both his parents for the last five years. The psychiatrists had told Bob and Jane it was just the standard rebellion period all teenagers went through, and once Nick was on his own, he'd grow out of it, but Bob didn't see that happening anytime in the near future. This wasn't just rebellion - Nick got some kind of kick out of purposely defying anything either Bob or Jane wanted. However, two could play at that game.

Kevin Richardson was sitting next to Nick. Bob hadn't ever talked to Kevin, in fact, he couldn't remember a time when he had even interviewed the veteran catcher, but Kevin had stopped by for a moment while waiting for his wife and daughter. He was leaning back in his chair, carefully observing Bob.

"What do you want?" Bob asked Nick, as the waiter approached the table.

"Nothin'." Nick mumbled, shaking his head carefully.

"Are you sure?"

"Right now, even the thought of water makes me want to hurl." Nick announced, leaning forward and pillowing his head on his arms.

The waiter looked slightly disgusted, and Kevin raised one eyebrow skeptically.

"Okay, then." Bob placed his order, then turned back to his son. "So... what is this? A hangover?"

Nick raised his head just enough to beam another glare at Bob. "No. Can we try stomach flu?"

Kevin nodded in agreement. "It's been traveling through the clubhouse this last week."

"Oh. That's all." Bob dismissed it. The flu couldn't be helped. It could, however, be played through. "Well, some of my career best games happened when I was sick."

Nick's eyebrows shot up towards his hair. "Wow, that's great to know. I'll remember that." He said flatly.

Bob glanced over at Kevin. He was still staring. Maybe Kevin did this to everyone, but it made Bob just a little uneasy. It made him feel as if Kevin was sitting there reading his mind.

"Are you gonna play?" Kevin stopped the eagle stare for a moment, and directed the question at the top of Nick's head.

"Yes." Nick's voice was muffled against the table.

"How's your girlfriend?" Bob asked, noting what Nick had just said. The war was on again. "What was her name? Susie?" Bob knew perfectly well her name was Stacy, he had learned a long time ago that Willie Mays could get away without remembering names, but most people couldn't. Bob refused to look at Kevin. He could feel him staring again.

"Stacy, Dad." Nick sighed. "She's fine. Why?"

"I was merely asking." Bob defended. "I liked her - maybe it was the accent. She was cute. And she was a hell of a lot nicer than that b---- you were dating before."

Nick's head came up again, smiling this time. "You know... that may be the one thing we ever agree on."

"Here's your coffee, sir." The waiter set the cup down in front of Bob, glancing over at Nick as if he expected him to announce an update on the current state of his nausea, and then departed as quickly as he could.

"So you're heading over to see Brian?" Bob attempted to stare Kevin down as he stirred his coffee.

Kevin didn't even flinch. "Yeah, he wasn't really feeling up to a lot last night."

"Well, it's nice he has so many friends who care about him." Bob watched Nick stiffen. It had been a shot in the dark, but it seemed to have hit home. Score: Bob - 1, Nick - 0.

"He's my family." Kevin corrected. "I thought TV announcers knew all those little trivia facts." He laughed.

"They don't actually know anything." Nick interjected. "They just read it off a little card the worker bees in the back hand them."

"Are you going to go see Brian too?" Bob could feel that stare again. If he didn't know better, he'd think Kevin knew exactly what was going on.

Nick opened his mouth, before he gave the coffee mug a look of death, shoved his chair back and bolted for the door, almost taking out a waitress in the process.

"Well, that didn't look good." Kevin craned his neck to watch Nick leave. "Oh, there's Karen... we've got to get going." He turned back, giving Bob a polite smile as he stood. "And Bob, it was interesting to finally meet you."

"Same here." Bob reached over to shake Kevin's hand. "Say hello to Brian for me."

There it was again - that hard green stare. "Of course. I'm sure he'll appreciate your concern."

Bob watched Kevin greet his wife and then try to grab his daughter as she ran madly in circles around the pillars in the lobby. The chances of the Mariners pulling out this last game were incredibly low. They were too emotionally involved now.

~\*~

"Hey, Brian?" AJ winced at the tone of his voice. He hadn't meant to sound that freaked out. Then again, he was, so why try to hide it? Hospitals were without a doubt at the bottom of his favorite things list and Brian lying there with an IV and oxygen and a couple other clear tubes AJ wasn't familiar with - it wasn't helping his slightly panicked state of mind.

"Hi, AJ!"

AJ wasn't sure if he felt like smiling back at Brian, or smacking him for being so cheerful. Right now, he could go either way. "What's up?"

Brian rolled his eyes. "I just got off the phone with my mother. Took me almost forty five minutes to convince her that she didn't have to fly all the way out here. And right now they've got me drugged up on so much medication all I can see right now is a very blurry something wearing sunglasses." He paused to take another breath. "Sit down, how are you?"

"How am I?" AJ repeated in disbelief, shoving his sunglasses up on top of his head. Brian wanted to know how he was.

"Well, yes." Brian leaned back against the raised mattress. "You. You're the one that got the loss last night."

"Yeah." AJ flopped into the plastic chair provided courtesy of the hospital. He had sat in a lot of those chairs over the last three years.

AJ had gotten the loss last night. This was the first time he could ever remember being a loser. Well, he had played for Tampa Bay, but that had been different. There, it was just a given that they lost. Now, they had been expected to win. It was a completely different feeling. "Things are kind of falling apart, here, Brian."

"No they're not." Brian argued. "He hit a good pitch."

"Who says it was a good pitch?" And who had said AJ was talking about the game?

"Bob Carter did, on national TV. They replayed it ten or fifteen times." Brian smirked. "And if Bob says it, then it must be true."

"That guy is the biggest a----- I have ever seen." AJ grumbled, before noting Brian's disapproving look. "Excuse me, but - he is."

"I know that." Brian sighed. "He's honestly one of the few people in the world that can make me mad."

There was silence for a moment, while Brian stewed over Bob, and AJ wondered if he could make it to the Mexican border before game time. Then he wouldn't have to talk to reporters, he wouldn't have to face Kevin, and best of all, there would be no possibility of him pitching in, and possibly blowing game seven.

"Well, you know what I think?" Brian said finally. The energy level that had been present when AJ first came into the room was gone now.

It wasn't that his mood had changed; now Brian just looked tired.

"No, what?"

"I think you were trying too hard."

"No s---, Sherlock!" AJ burst out.

"So you've realized that." Brian determined, laughing.

"Yeah - I had ten or so hours last night to sit and think about it." Who needed sleep anyway?

"How's Felicia?" Brian changed the subject, a little too rapidly for AJ's tiring brain.

"What?" AJ stalled while his mind played catch-up. "She's okay... I mean, as far as I know."

"You think she isn't?" Brian was struggling to keep his eyes open.

"I don't know. She says she's okay... so I guess I just have to trust her on that one."

"Trust is important." Brian agreed. His eyes closed, and for a moment AJ thought he had fallen asleep, before Brian raised his head and twisted around until he could make eye contact.

When Felicia had been in the hospital before, no matter how often she claimed that everything was okay, and that she was fine, whenever AJ had looked into her eyes, he could tell she was more scared than he was. That was what he wasn't noticing with Brian. Brian wasn't scared at all. He looked perfectly peaceful. In a strange way, it made AJ feel a little better about the last two days.

"AJ?"

"Yeah?" AJ snapped back to reality.

"Will y'all do me a favor? Keep an eye on Nick? He's worrying me a little."

"Sure." AJ agreed. He wasn't too worried about Nick. Nick was more self-sufficient than people gave him credit for. He had to be, growing up in the atmosphere that he had.

Brian shook his head as he lay back down. "It's like he goes through these cycles, and for a while he'll be perfectly fine, and then he slips back down into this really low spot, and eventually he'll snap out of it again. And right now, he's heading back down to the bottom. All this stuff with Stacy - I just don't want him doing something stupid, AJ. You know?"

"What stuff with Stacy?" AJ seized on that piece of new information.

"They got in a fight before we came down here."

AJ bit back his first reaction, before Brian got on his case about swearing again. "Who... if Nick started this, I swear, I will kick his a--! I knew he was gonna do something like this..."

"AJ, Nick's doing enough a-- kicking right now, on his own - y'all don't have to join in." Brian interrupted AJ's tirade. "I don't know if it was his fault or not... from what he told me, it sounded like it was both their faults, but I don't know. Chances are, it was Nick's fault, but he didn't mean to do it." He scowled. "He's the one person I've never been able to completely figure out. And I'm usually pretty good at reading people."

"Are you?" AJ said skeptically. "So, what am I?"

Brian didn't bat an eyelash. "You're the person that keeps everything from falling apart completely."

## Chapter Fifty Seven

"Becky, if you're gonna be up here, can you sit still?" Brian wondered.

"Okay, get down." Kevin interrupted, grabbing his daughter by the arms and lifting her off the hospital bed.

"No." Brian protested, opening his eyes, but not bothering to lift his head. "She can stay, she just has to quit... bouncing or whatever it is she's doing."

Kevin let Becky stay on the bed, but not before giving her a glare that let the little girl know in no uncertain terms that any movement other than blinking would be followed by swift punishment.

"She gets it from me." Karen smirked at Kevin. "Making beds bounce, I mean."

"Yuck..." Brian protested.

Kevin couldn't quite decide if he should be annoyed with Karen for cracking jokes like that at a time like this, or if this was something he wanted to think about a while longer. He'd think about it later, now wasn't exactly the time.

"Isn't it about time for you to be heading over to the park?" Brian squinted at the clock on the wall above the television set.

"Me too!" Becky shrieked, toppling off the bed onto the floor.

Kevin hesitated. He had been sitting for the last hour, watching the clock move closer and closer to game time, and with each passing minute, the feeling that he shouldn't play game seven. "Wait... hang on just a minute here." He turned his attention back to Becky. "Y'all are not going to the stadium tonight. You're staying here with your mother."

Becky stamped her black patent leather shoe on the floor sharply. "I want to go to the stadium! It's no fun sitting here!"

"Don't you raise your voice at me!" Kevin beamed his hardest glare in her direction. Becky didn't seem intimidated; her lip just crept out another few centimeters.

"Kevin..." Brian started.

"You stay out of this!" Kevin snapped.

"No, I won't!" Much to Kevin's surprise, Brian was shouting. "If she wants to go to the game, take her to the game, Kevin!"

There was stunned silence, Becky and Karen's mouths both hanging open slightly in shock.

Brian broke the stare-down with Kevin, glancing over at Karen. "Would you mind..." He asked.

Karen stood in confusion for a minute. "What?"

Kevin raised his eyebrows at Becky, then tipped his head at the door.

"Oh!" The light finally dawned in Karen's eyes, and she grasped a handful of Becky's shirt and firmly escorted her daughter out the door into the hallway.

"What are you thinking?" Kevin spun around to face his cousin. "She can't go to the game! She's six years old! And I don't care what you say, you're not convincing me that Karen is leaving this room, and you're certainly not convincing Karen that she's going anywhere, so what do you propose I do with Becky during the game?"

"She can sit with Kris." Brian said calmly, leaning back into his pillow.

"Who the hell is Kris?" Kevin started pacing at the end of the bed.

"Terrance's wife." Brian gave Kevin a look of amazement. Terrance Davis was the Mariners left fielder, the big power hitter of the team. "She owes me a favor anyway. I convinced Terrance not to divorce her last year."

"Oh... you expect me to send my daughter off with some woman that Terrance was gonna divorce, not to mention, she can't be that bright if she married HIM in the first place!" Kevin ranted. "Like I can play knowing Becky is being supervised by her?" He paused. "Actually, Brian... I was thinking..."

"No." Brian snapped firmly. "You are playing tonight. If I had the energy to argue with you about it, I would, but I don't. You are going to the ballpark, and you're playing the game tonight."

"Brian, what good is that gonna do when I'm not even thinking about the game?" Kevin protested.

"Kevin, this is the biggest game of your career." Brian's voice had dropped and Kevin could barely hear him. "I already feel bad enough that I don't get to play. I don't want to sit and think that you didn't get to play either, okay? Will you just play tonight - please?"

Kevin stopped pacing and shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

"Okay." He agreed reluctantly, only because Brian really did look upset over the entire situation.

"And will you please take Becky to the game?" Brian finished. "C'mon - I don't want her looking back on her childhood, and remembering how she got to go to the World Series and sit in a hospital room the entire time."

"Okay." Kevin said again, choking up a little at Brian's last statement.

He hadn't really thought about how everything looked to Becky; Kevin had been too busy worrying about Brian. "I'll take her to the game."

~\*~

Nick stepped aside to let Howie and his collection of bats over to the batting cage. What Nick felt like doing right now was just giving up on the game and going back to bed. His head hurt, he was starting to get lightheaded, and while he hadn't actually been sick yet, he probably would be before the day was over. His slightly foggy brain knew one thing for sure, he was giving up on batting practice for the day, and heading back to the clubhouse, hopefully without passing out.

"Whoa... watch it there..." Kevin held up one hand to stop Nick from walking into him. "Nick, are you okay? You really don't look good."

Usually that would have been an open door for Nick to make a smart mouth retort to Kevin regarding his looks, but Nick's brain wasn't working quickly enough to even bother.

"I'm not." He meant it too, much more so than the tone of his voice implied. He wasn't okay. He was freaked out to the point of needing a tranquilizer, he was scared about Brian, he was more scared about Stacy, and then to top it all off, his dad was there to try and mess with his head. Nick couldn't take much more of this. It had to end sometime.

"You'd better go see Rich." Kevin added, reaching over to feel Nick's forehead with the back of his hand. Nick was so shocked he couldn't even follow up on his natural

reaction, which was send a stiff uppercut to Kevin's jaw. Nick hadn't had someone do what Kevin had just done since he was ten years old.

"Maybe you shouldn't play tonight." Kevin added.

"Nah, I'm okay." Nick started for the clubhouse. He had to sit down, even just for a few minutes. Once the game started, he'd be okay. Then he could ignore everything else for the next three hours, and just pay attention to what was happening on the field. He'd been doing that for longer than he cared to remember, and he could do it for one more game. After tonight, there wouldn't be another game to distract him from reality. That was when he really wasn't going to be okay.

"Wait a minute..." Kevin kept pace with Nick, which didn't take much at the speed Nick was moving.

"Kevin, just back off!" Nick snapped. "Geez, why are you suddenly my new buddy or something?"

Kevin scrutinized Nick's face closely, much the same way he had been staring at Nick's father earlier at the hotel. "I've been kind of looking at things in a different way the last couple weeks." He said finally.

He wasn't the only one - Nick had been doing the same thing. He didn't like the way Kevin was staring at him, it gave him the unnerving feeling that Kevin knew exactly what he was thinking. Nick turned and headed for the clubhouse, moving as fast as his head would allow. Kevin didn't follow, thankfully, Nick glanced back at the tunnel opening to check, and saw Kevin still standing on the field, looking distracted as bullpen coach Jared Price stopped to speak to the catcher.

The clubhouse was deserted, all players were on the field doing something, whether it be running, fielding, hitting or more likely, just hanging out around the batting cage and making fun of the hitter.

Nick fished through his jacket pocket for his cell phone and sat down in one of the plastic chairs ringing the large table in the middle of the visitor's clubhouse. Right now he really needed to talk to Stacy, even for just a couple minutes.

She had her phone turned off. Nick cut off the recorded message that the cell phone could not be reached, stabbing the button as hard as he could with his thumb. He would have thrown the phone, but he didn't have enough energy. It was time to just give up, he couldn't deal with it.

Everything was so screwed up now that he didn't even care what happened anymore.

## Chapter Fifty Eight

"Hey, Howie. Thanks for doing this." Bob Carter shrugged into his suit jacket and sat down on the canvas chair across from Howie, talking around the crew member that was clipping his microphone in place.

"No problem, Bob." Howie carefully smoothed his hair one last time, just to make sure. He had a lot of girls watching this game tonight, and being on the preshow with his hair sticking out just wasn't a good idea.

"Nick was supposed to do this, but he was being an a-- again." Bob explained, glaring at the crew member in annoyance. "It's fine – just leave it alone!" He turned back to Howie, his weathered but still handsome face smiling again. "Now, are you ready?"

That figured. Howie was Nick's replacement. Somehow it didn't really surprise him. It was one of the defining trends of his life - Howie was always second to someone.

"First off, congratulations on your batting title this year." Bob started, as the lights flashed on and the camera started recording.

"Thank you." Howie smiled politely. Fine, that had been one thing he had been first at, but it was the only thing.

"Now, let's talk about the team for a minute. This has been a pretty wild ride, hasn't it?"

"Yeah, it has." Howie agreed. "To go from last season, when we finished in third place, to where we are right now, it's been a lot of fun."

"Why do you think this year's Mariners have played the way they have, when compared to last year's team?"

Howie thought about it for a moment, trying to think of something that wouldn't make him look moronic on national TV. It wasn't easy to explain, in fact, Howie wasn't sure if he could even pinpoint a definite reason.

"I can't really think of a reason that we've done what we have this year.

Obviously, getting Nick and AJ in the offseason helped a lot, but that's just two guys. I mean, everyone on this team has done their job and then some.

"Even so, it wasn't really until the last month of the season, when we found out Brian was sick, that we all started to realize that this team had something pretty special. I mean, that could have easily been the moment that the team kind of fell apart at the seams and stuff like that, but we didn't do that. Brian didn't really let us. He just kept charging right on ahead, and we just followed along."

Bob was nodding in agreement, although Howie could see the skepticism in his eyes. "Brian Littrell has really done a lot for the team this year, and not just with his play at second, hasn't he?"

"Yeah, he has." Howie agreed completely. "It's really terrible that something like this had to happen to him, because he doesn't deserve it at all."

"How is Brian doing?" This was the question Bob had been waiting the entire interview for, Howie knew it.

"Brian's doing fine." Howie actually had no real idea of how Brian was doing, but he was smart enough not to start something with the media. As far as the reporters and fans were concerned, Brian was fine, no matter how he really was. "Some of the guys have stopped by to see him, and he's doing good, and he'll be watching the game tonight on TV."

"Thanks for stopping by, Howie, and good luck in tonight's game." Bob turned towards the camera. "We'll be right back with game seven of the World Series, the Seattle Mariners at the Los Angeles Dodgers."

~\*~

Buddy Williams slowly surveyed his team as they prepared for the game. Everyone was telling him this was a team he should be proud of, but Buddy wasn't too sure. Apparently those people had never seen his clubhouse. Most of the team was okay, Buddy could be proud of them. However, there exceptions, the most notable being AJ McLean.

The said exception was hanging on Buddy, his skinny, tattooed arm draped around Buddy's neck. "Any words of advice for us before the big game, coach?" AJ said with a crazed smile.

Buddy stared at the pitcher for a moment, before smirking slightly. "I bet you could say it better than me, McLean."

"Damn straight I can." AJ agreed happily, climbing up onto a chair. "Okay, guys! Buddy is going to give us a little speech now!"

The rest of the clubhouse turned to look. AJ wasn't in his game uniform yet, just wearing the gray pants and socks on his feet. For those uninitiated to AJ's pregame appearance, it would have been frightening. To the other 39 guys on the team, they weren't surprised in the slightest.

"However, my friend Buddy here has realized what a great orator the Cool Guru really is, and therefore, I'll be giving the speech instead." AJ hopped back down off the chair and began slowly pacing the length of the clubhouse, his chest shoved out as far as possible and his hands shoved in the back pockets of his pants.

Buddy almost laughed, except he wasn't quite ready to give AJ the victory. Fine, he was proud of AJ too, he just wasn't about to admit it to anyone. AJ had put together an incredible year, he had pretty much pulled the bullpen together, and Buddy might as well face it - AJ was doing an uncanny impersonation of any clubhouse pep talk Buddy had ever made. Right now, the team could probably use his antics more than they could use the motivation.

"Back when I played the game..." AJ continued. "Back when baseball was played the way it was meant to be played... back in the days when pitchers didn't have tattoos, back in the days when we played with clubs and rocks and drove around in cars like Fred Flintstone..."

"We get the point!" Kevin hollered in annoyance.

AJ gave Kevin a vicious glower. "Did you have something you wanted to add, Richardson?" He captured the intonation of Buddy so perfectly that the rest of the clubhouse cracked up.

"Seriously, guys." AJ straightened up, all imitation of Buddy gone. "We've all been saying the same thing for the last two days, we've been hearing the same thing - you can't dwell on the last game, the Series isn't over yet, all that matters is this game tonight... it's one thing to say and hear it, and it's entirely another to actually do it."

AJ glanced over at Kevin again. "I know there's some of you on this team that you don't like the attitude I have about the game. I f----- up the game last night, but it wasn't because I didn't want to win. Maybe I'm the only one here with enough nerve to say

this, but even if this is game seven of the World Series, it's still just a game. Real life is a hell of a lot more important than a game and right now we're all convinced that we can't win without Brian. And tonight, I think we need to prove that we can win without Brian, not just for ourselves, but for Brian too."

His speech finished, AJ crossed back over to his locker and started pulling on his shirt.

Buddy shook his head. Both antics and motivation in the same speech. On second thought, he might be more proud of AJ than he was of anyone else on the team, with the exception of Brian. If someone asked him right this very moment, he would even admit it.

~\*~

"And Kinomoto slaps a little looper into left field for the first base hit of the ballgame." Stan Morgan narrated the action on the TV screen in Stacy's hotel room. "You can sense the tension from the Mariners, even here in the first inning. This game means a lot to all of them - third baseman Howie Dorough saying earlier that they were dedicating this game to second baseman Brian Littrell."

Stacy rolled her eyes. "And that's what? The fifth time one of you has mentioned that?"

"Dorough's up at the plate now... here's the pitch, and he sends a fly ball towards center field, Harrison puts it away easily, and Mariners right fielder Nick Carter comes up with two outs and a runner on first."

"He's a tough kid." Bob Carter joined in. "He's got the flu that's been going around the clubhouse for most of the Series and I really didn't think he'd be playing tonight."

Stacy sighed. Even though she knew she was right about choosing not to go to LA with Nick, deep down, she felt just the tiniest little bit guilty. Hearing that he was sick, and watching as he came up to the plate didn't do anything to help ease that feeling.

Bob really didn't have to say anything about Nick being sick, it was obvious just looking at him. His coloring was a little off, he was moving a little more gingerly than usual and he had a slightly fuzzy air of disorientation about him.

She had tried calling him yesterday, to see how he was holding up and to give him details about how her presentation had gone, but she hadn't been able to reach him. She had thought about calling before she had left that morning, but it was two hours earlier on the West Coast and chances were Nick would have slept right through the phone. She'd call him tonight after the game.

"Carter swings at the first pitch and sends it towards the shortstop... he throws him out easily and we go to the bottom of the first. Lineups for the Dodgers right after this. After half an inning, no score."

~\*~

Karen studied the figures moving soundlessly across the TV attached to the top of the wall in the hospital room. "And why did you make me turn the sound off again?" She wondered, glancing over at Brian. He was curled up on his side, eyes closed, the clear oxygen tube running from his nose up the side of his face. His right hand, the one with the IV, was still wrapped around Karen's.

He had fallen asleep shortly after Kevin and Becky left for the ballpark. Kevin had given Karen strict instructions that she was to call him if anything happened. So far, nothing had, even Kevin would be forced to agree with her. Brian had been awake for the first couple innings, watched the Mariners fall behind 4-1, and then he had drifted off again.

"I made you turn it off because if I heard Bob Carter say that this game was dedicated to me one more time, I was going to scream." Brian said quietly.

"They did kind of mention that one little thing twenty or thirty times." Karen agreed. This entire situation felt eerily weird to her. Never in a million years, would she expect to find herself in a situation like this, and react the way she was. Right now, Karen should be in hysterics over the possibility of anything even happening to Brian, and she wasn't. In fact, she was remarkably calm.

"I hate being a human interest story." Brian mumbled, opening his eyes to stare up at the TV for a moment. "They still losing?"

"Yeah, 4-1." Karen squeezed his hand lightly. She had a strong feeling that Brian was the only reason she was as calm as she was right now. He had that effect on people, for some strange reason. "And you're not a human interest story, Brian, okay? To all the guys on the team you're a lot more than that." Now she was getting a little emotional.

"I know that..." Brian sighed, closing his eyes again.

"How're you feeling?" Karen bent over the half railing on the bed so she could see his face.

Brian was quiet for several seconds. "My head hurts." He said finally. "And... it's like I can't focus. Everything's just really fuzzy." He fell silent again. "Karen? What's happening with the game?"

"Well..." Karen studied the screen. "Kevin's throwing the ball back to the mound. Um... now he's getting back behind the plate... he's adjusting his mask..."

Brian smiled. "Do you ever watch anyone else? Who's batting?"

"I don't know." Karen shrugged. "All that's in my line of sight are his knees and shoes. Oooh! The inning's over, and Kevin's heading back to the dugout. That was a fairly nice a-- shot." Kevin was by far the best looking guy on the field.

"You scare me a little." Brian said disjointedly.

"Brian?" Karen wondered as a commercial for a real man's truck appeared on the screen. "Seriously, who do you think's going to win tonight?"

Brian's eyes opened, staring over at her. "We are." He said firmly.

## Chapter Fifty Nine

"If the Mariners pull out a win tonight, Dorough stands a very good chance of being MVP of this World Series." Dave Niehaus pointed out. "He's standing on first with his second hit of the evening, here with one out in the top of the seventh. That brings up Mariner right fielder Nick Carter, who has the chance to bring the Mariners within one run of tying this game.

"Carter swings and misses at the first pitch. I was talking to both Nick and his father, Yankees Hall of Famer, Bob Carter, earlier today, and Nick's got a touch of that flu that's been going around the clubhouse lately, but he's still in the lineup tonight." Niehaus chuckled. "It would take a lot more than just stomach flu to keep someone from playing game seven of the World Series.

"Here's the next pitch, and Carter sends a high looping foul back into the first base seats. First baseman Jason Richards is on deck, should Carter get on base, Richards would be the tying run. The pitch to Carter... swiiiiing and a miss, and here comes Richards with two outs. Mariner fans have been praying for a miracle ever since the third inning, and now's the time for it to happen.

"The pitch to Richards... he hits it on the ground up the third baseline... foul ball. Dorough takes a small lead at first, here's the stretch, and the pitch... that ball is hit DEEP to right field and that will fly, FLY away, into the bleachers in right!" Niehaus was screaming at the top of his lungs by this point. "The Mariners get inch a little closer on the two run home run by Jason Richards here in the seventh!

"Left fielder Terrance Davis steps up to the plate... he chops the first pitch towards the hole at short... it's cut off by Hernandez, and he wheels and FIRES to first in time to get Davis. The Mariners get two back, we go to the bottom of the seventh, the Dodgers leading the Mariners 4-3. Keep hoping for that miracle."

~\*~

"Welcome back, it's the top of the ninth, the Dodgers still leading the Seattle Mariners by a score of 4-3 in this, the final game of the World Series." Stan Morgan said cheerfully. "The Dodgers now have their closer, Bert Neudorfer, in the game, after reliever Hart gave up a leadoff walk to pinch hitter Sam Harris. The Mariners will send up the top of their lineup in an attempt to get back into the game. First up is shortstop Luis Alicea."

"The Dodgers have carried the momentum through most of this game." Bob Carter joined in. "Everything has been moving in their favor, and the Mariners can't quite seem to turn it to their advantage. They tried in the second and the seventh, but it wasn't quite enough."

"Alicea fouls another pitch back into the seats behind the first base dugout..." Morgan paused. "Is there really someone up in the Mariners bullpen, Bob?"

~\*~

As Alicea fouled off his fourth straight pitch, AJ stood up, tossed his navy and silver coat on the dugout bench, and motioned to bullpen catcher John Matthews. "C'mon."

"What are you doing?" Matthew wondered.

"What the hell does it LOOK like I'm doing?" AJ retorted. "I'm warming up. Go over there and catch the ball." AJ had no idea why he was about to do this. It seemed stupid to him to start warming up when the Mariners were behind, but he had a strange feeling during the last at-bat that he should start warming up. And always having been one that listened to the voices in his head, rather than logic, AJ decided to warm up. Maybe the voice in his head would tell him to go get some coffee pretty soon.

"Why?" Matthews said hesitantly. "Buddy didn't tell you to. Besides - it doesn't look like there's gonna be a bottom of the inning anyway."

"So what!" AJ tossed the ball up in the air and caught it. "I'm pitching the bottom of this inning." There went that little voice again.

"AJ! What are you doing?" Jared Price demanded, deciding to exercise a little coaching authority.

"Warming up." AJ said slowly, enunciating each word. "Is there a problem here?"

"I guess not... let me call Buddy."

"He's not going to stop me!" AJ yelled at the coach's back. "I do whatever the voices in my head tell me to do!"

~\*~

Buddy hung the phone up in the dugout and stared out at the Mariners bullpen. Yes, it was true; AJ was warming up like he was going to pitch the bottom of the inning. Maybe it would work. It was worth a shot. If it didn't, it didn't really matter. AJ would have all winter to rest.

"Howie!" Buddy called as the third baseman strutted past on his way to the on deck circle.

"Yeah, coach?"

"There's one out, you know."

"Yeah. I saw that." Howie agreed.

"AJ seems to be thinking there's going to be a bottom of the ninth." Buddy nodded out at the bullpen.

Howie gave Buddy a rather toothy smile. "I sure hope there is! Any advice, coach?"

If Howie called him 'coach' one more time, Buddy was almost certain he'd strangle the little moron with his ponytail. "Nope. Just get on."

"Sure thing!" Howie bounced up the dugout steps and into the on deck circle, winking at two girls seated above the dugout. They both giggled and smiled back.

~\*~

Center fielder Shingo Kinomoto followed Alicea's lead and grounded out to Christiansen at first base. Howie strutted up to the plate, with two outs, something between a smirk and a sneer on his face.

~\*~

"Nick, dude, you're up."

"Huh?" Nick jumped and glanced up at the bench coach.

"On deck? You?"

"Okay." Nick pulled his hat off and ran his hand through his hair. This wasn't a good time to come up to bat. He felt terrible. Standing out in the cold in right field all night hadn't helped him any. His head hurt. His neck hurt. Okay, fine, he was sore all over. He wasn't even sure what inning it was, much less who was pitching and what he threw.

Nick pulled his batting helmet and gloves out of the cubby and crawled back up to stand in the cold. Now he was lightheaded. Maybe he could just pass out in the on deck circle and someone else could come up to bat. Nick's eyes focused for a moment on the scoreboard. Ninth inning. 1, 1, 2. Nick shook his head slightly. Did it really say two outs? Nick smacked his bat on the ground. "Don't walk, Howie." He muttered. "Don't get on base. Please... just hit a home run or end the game. All I need right now is to be the last out of game seven."

Howie swung and connected with a loud crack, watching with admiration as he hit a high looping foul into the upper deck along the left field line.

Nick glanced out at the bullpen. AJ was warming up, stopping every other pitch to studiously inspect the bullpen monitor showing the game action.

Howie dug in again, waited for the pitch and swung. This time he hit it fair.

"C'mon." Nick begged, watching the ball sail towards the left field wall.

The ball smacked into the foam covered wall, inches from the yellow line along the top, and bounced back over the left fielder's head into left center field.

Howie perched atop second base and carefully smoothed his hair, well ahead of the throw in from left field.

"WHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" Left fielder Terrance Davis could be heard clearly, as the crowd fell silent. "HOW-IE! HOW-IE!"

~\*~

Nick stepped into the batters box, scuffing the dirt around with his cleats and trying very hard not to think. Hitting didn't require thinking, hitting was just reacting. If Nick kept thinking, the only thought running through his muddled head was he was about to be the last out of the World Series. That was something his father would never, ever, let him forget. To make it worse, Howie, who was preening in the general vicinity of second, was the tying run, in scoring position.

Oh well, Nick might as well go out with a bang.

He supposed the crowd was on their feet and screaming, but he didn't hear them. All he could hear was some very loud ringing in his ears. Nick took a deep breath and tried to clear his head. It didn't work.

The pitch came towards the plate, and Nick swung instinctively, glancing around in confusion afterwards. He knew he had hit it, and Howie was running for third as fast as he could, Nick just had no idea where the ball had gone.

## Chapter Sixty

"Here's the pitch to Carter..." Niehaus started. "And that pitch is hit DEEP to left field... Reyes is going back to the track... to the WALL... he makes the leap... and..." He paused, trying to see if the Dodger left fielder had caught the ball. "And that is..." Niehaus was yelling so loudly that the rest of his sentence was unintelligible, but anyone listening knew the ball had gone over the fence, and the Mariners had taken the lead.

~\*~

AJ slowly jogged in from the bullpen, humming under his breath, and trying to decide if the fact that he had started warming up before the Mariners took the lead really played any important factor at all.

Probably not, except for the very important fact that the entire bullpen now thought he was psychic. He'd have some fun with that one before the trip home.

"Hey, AJ." The backup catcher greeted him on the mound. AJ wasn't even sure what the guy's name was. Keith or Ryan, or maybe it was Shawn.

He hadn't talked to him very much in the two weeks that he'd been with the team.

"Where's Kevin?" AJ demanded sharply. Maybe that wasn't an especially friendly greeting to the mystery catcher, but Kevin had started this game, and AJ wanted to know why Kevin wasn't on the mound.

"I don't know. He left."

"He left?" The warning bells in AJ's head started going off. "Where's Buddy?"

"In the dugout?"

AJ sighed. That was a catcher for you - sharp as a tack. "Get him out here."

"Why?"

"Just do it! Do whatever it is you catchers do!" AJ was jumping up and down now, much to the amusement of the rest of the infield as they warmed up.

Keith, or Ryan, or Shawn, sighed, then turned and waved his arm at the dugout, until Buddy stood up, and made his way out towards the mound, glowering the entire way.

"What?" He gave AJ an especially evil glare.

"Where's Kevin?"

Buddy shrugged, his hands tucked into the pockets of his jacket. "He left in the eighth."

"Why? Was it Brian?"

"I don't know. He got a phone call - I haven't heard anything else."

AJ frowned while he thought about what Buddy had just told him. Any way he looked at it, it wasn't good. The only reason Kevin would leave the game would be if something had happened to Brian.

"You okay, AJ?" Buddy wondered.

"Yeah... I'm fine." That was a flat-out lie. Now AJ had a nagging little feeling that something was wrong in the bottom of his stomach. He watched Buddy slowly wander back to the dugout, hands still shoved in his pockets, before turning to the equipment clad man in front of him. "Okay, dude, get back behind the plate, let's get this over with."

"But..." The nameless catcher started to say something.

"Don't argue with me!" AJ barked. "I'm crazy! Don't argue with crazy people!" He smirked as he watched the catcher bolt for home plate as fast as his shinguards would allow. The only thing better than alienating the rookies was alienating the coaching staff.

~\*~

"Now in the game for Seattle, AJ McLean. The Mariners ace closer throughout the regular season and most of the postseason as well, McLean had no ERA until last night's game, when in the bottom of the eighth, he gave up the game winning home run to the Dodgers Christiansen, who the Mariners hope he will not face this inning." Stan Morgan found his last comment to be particularly amusing, since Christiansen was due up sixth that inning.

"Here's the postseason stats on McLean, ERA of 2.79 after the home run last night, no wins, one loss, and five saves." Bob Carter read off the statistics displaying next to AJ on the TV screen. "He has a mediocre fastball, a fairly good change-up and one of the best forkballs I've ever seen."

"The Mariners have back-up catcher Jamie Flaherty behind the plate now." Morgan said in surprise. "We're going to go down to Larry Greene, who's been listening in on the dugout conversations for the Mariners this game."

"Hey, Stan, Bob..." Larry's voice started playing, as the TV screen showed the first Dodger hitter coming up to the plate. "No one is really sure of details right now, but Mariner catcher Kevin Richardson left the stadium at the end of the eighth inning for personal reasons. The Mariners aren't commenting, and it hasn't been confirmed that this situation has anything to do with Richardson's cousin, Brian Littrell, but one would assume it does. We'll keep you posted if we hear anything."

~\*~

Kevin had a word to describe a situation like this. AJ wasn't quite sure what the word was, but it had several syllables. Preposterous or maybe paradoxical - AJ was far from a vocabulary whiz. He was sure of one thing - as soon as he got three batters out, he could get in the clubhouse and find out what was going on. Therefore, simple logic told him, the faster the batters were put out, the faster he would be enlightened.

Four pitches and three ground outs later, AJ decided to rethink that strategy. Apparently he had forgotten to take into account the fact that they would have won Game Seven and his teammates would mob him on the mound.

"No! No - cut that out right now!" AJ swung his glove violently at Terrance Davis as Davis lifted AJ off the ground until he was sitting on one of Terrance's rather large shoulders and several other arms and shoulders. "Damn it - if you drop me..." AJ gave up and started praying he didn't end up crashing to the ground and breaking something important.

He ended up on the ground before they reached the dugout, but as usual, didn't seem to break anything. It wasn't until the team was in the clubhouse, in the midst of their fourth champagne celebration that year, when AJ remembered the two people who had wanted this the most, Brian and Kevin, were both missing.

~\*~

Larry Greene carefully picked his way through the plastic covered chaos that was now the visiting clubhouse, microphone in hand, the live camera crew following him closely. He was looking for the late inning hero of the game, the one that had given the lead back to the Mariners - the one sitting in front of his locker with a towel over his head, trying to stop his teammates from spraying him in the face with champagne.

"Hey, Nick..." Greene started, kneeling down until he was in the same camera window as Nick and holding the microphone out. "You were a little under the weather before the game today - how're you feeling now?"

"Pretty awesome, dude." Nick pulled the towel down around his neck and gave the camera one of his patented ditzzy smiles.

"What were you thinking when you came up to the plate in the ninth with two outs and a guy on?"

"Nothin', really." Nick shrugged and wiped his nose with the towel. "I was pretty out of it for most of the game - I can't really tell you a whole lot. I didn't even know I hit the ball fair until everyone started yelling at me to run."

~\*~

Nick tried to focus on the questions that Larry Greene was firing at him, but he couldn't concentrate. All he could really hope for was the answer coming out of his mouth didn't sound completely stupid. Right now, he really wanted to lay down and sleep for a couple days. His nose was plugged, his throat hurt, and if his head became anymore stuffed up, Nick was pretty sure the pressure would knock his eyeballs loose.

Through the fog his mind was in, and the bright lights shining right in his face from the live television camera, Nick thought he heard Greene say something about Brian. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I said, there's rumor going around that the reason Richardson left in the eighth was because of Brian Littrell - have you heard anything about that?" Greene repeated his question.

Nick took quick inventory of the clubhouse. Greene was right, Kevin was missing. Nick hadn't even noticed he was gone. Now he was starting to feel queasy. The lights shining in his face didn't help matters any, but there was no way Kevin would leave the game unless something was wrong.

"Nick..." AJ appeared from nowhere; reminding Nick once again that AJ really should wear a little bell so people could hear him coming. "Dude... Buddy needs to talk to you, okay?"

AJ turned to give the camera his infamous glance over the sunglasses - minus the sunglasses. "Excuse us, okay? I'm sure Mr. MVP Dorough would love to have a word with you."

"What's goin' on?" Nick weaved unsteadily after AJ, following him towards the little office in the back of the clubhouse. Buddy and team trainer Rich Ankel were both sitting in the cramped room, along with a couple front office officials that Nick didn't recognize.

"Nick..." Rich started. "You heard Kevin left, right?"

Nick nodded carefully, trying not to jar his head loose.

Rich shifted his perch on the edge of Buddy's desk. "This went out to the press just a few moments ago, and AJ and I both thought it might be easier if you found out from us. Brian passed away in the seventh."

## Chapter Sixty One

AJ hovered in the doorway of the small office, watching Nick carefully. He had to give the right fielder credit, Nick was one of the best, if not the best, AJ had ever seen at hiding his emotions. His face hadn't even changed expression when Rich had told him the news.

Nick did look pale, but AJ attributed that to the flu, and not the news about Brian.

"You okay, Nick?" Rich wondered, taking a few steps forward, concern written across his face.

Nick nodded, just barely, his head hardly moving enough to be seen, before he spun and headed for the door, neatly dodging AJ.

AJ hesitated, trying to decide whether to head after him or not.

"I've got it." Rich jogged after Nick.

That was better. Leave the nursing up to the health care professionals. AJ scowled at the painted cinder block walls of the office, wondering if he suddenly decided to head-butt one, if it would have any affect whatsoever, or just entertain Buddy and the two nicely dressed men.

The nicely dressed men had left the office, leaving just AJ and Buddy, who had dropped into the black padded chair behind the desk, tipping it back until it was dangerously close to toppling over onto the floor.

"Well, s---." Buddy said after a moment, lacing his hands together across his ample midsection.

"You can say that again." AJ agreed. Whenever AJ was told that, he said it again, but Buddy didn't bother.

"Do you feel like you won the World Series?" Buddy wondered.

"Nope." AJ shook his head.

"Me either." Buddy whipped the chair upright. "You know what the worst part is?"

"We were losing in the seventh." AJ said quietly.

"Exactly." Buddy said in surprise. "He didn't even know we won."

"Nah, I think he knew." AJ couldn't quite explain it. "I don't know how, but I think he knew we were gonna pull out of it okay."

~\*~

Kevin leaned forward and straightened the magazines on the table in front of him for the tenth time. Right now he was so upset with himself he could have cleaned Brian's entire apartment. Of all the times to be sitting in a hospital. Hospitals had nothing to clean – everything was already so clean it made his head hurt. Other than the magazines on the table and the muted TV flickering over in the corner, the waiting area was completely bare.

Karen had called him in the start of the eighth inning, semi-hysterical at that point, and in the short time it took Kevin to get to the hospital, Brian was gone. Way in the back of his mind, Kevin had been prepared for this, he just wasn't ready for it to happen so suddenly.

He knew he shouldn't have gone to the stadium, he should have put his foot down and stayed right in the hospital room, but Brian had raised such a big fuss, Kevin went along with it.

Kevin sank down onto the small couch behind him as he suddenly realized something. Brian had known. Brian had purposely made Kevin and Becky go to the stadium and he had purposely talked his parents into not coming out to Los Angeles. He didn't want them there.

His gaze traveled back over to the TV, as the local news came on, the top story, of course, the Dodgers and how they had fared in Game Seven. Kevin stood and crossed over to the ancient television, turning the volume up slightly so he could hear. "... as the Mariners staged a late inning rally, including a two run home run by right fielder Nick Carter, and defeated the Dodgers 5-4. Shortly after the game, the news broke that the Mariners second baseman, Brian Littrell..."

Kevin muted the TV again. They had won the game. "Great timing, Bri..." He muttered.

~\*~

"Thank you very much, sir." Becky said primly to the tall usher who had led her to the visiting team's clubhouse door.

"You're welcome, sweetie." He pushed the door open for her, since it was a big metal door and Becky wasn't quite strong enough to open it herself.

It was now almost two hours after the game had ended, and her father had never appeared to pick her up from the game. Becky's father didn't ever forget to do anything, so Becky was pretty sure he was still around somewhere.

The clubhouse was fairly deserted, except for the occasional Dodgers staff member appearing here and there, the players all seemed to be gone.

The room itself didn't smell very nice, but as Becky's mother had always told her, when large groups of sweating men got together, it was bound to smell.

"Hi, Nick!" Becky finally saw someone she recognized. Nick was standing in front of his locker, looking more dazed than usual.

"Hi." Nick said back listlessly, either not surprised to see Becky at all, or not paying enough attention to really realize she was there.

"Where's my Daddy?" Becky wondered. It looked like Nick was the only person left in the clubhouse. Maybe her father had gone to look for her and she had just missed him.

Nick sneezed. Becky winced, it sounded like it had hurt. "I haven't seen him." Nick finished hoarsely, shoving the black bag in front of him aside until he found the Kleenex box.

"Oh." Becky sighed. Maybe he had forgotten her. She supposed everyone was bound to make at least one mistake.

"Becky!" AJ said in shock, appearing from one of the hallways leading out of the clubhouse. "What the hell are you doing here?"

~\*~

"I didn't know you were here!" AJ knelt down in front of his battery mate's daughter, more than a little surprised to see her standing in the middle of the deserted clubhouse. Pretty much everyone had left and headed back to the hotel or in the case of Howie,

whichever club he was frequenting that night. AJ hadn't even been aware that Becky was at the game tonight.

"Where's your mother?" He asked. Karen had to be around somewhere.

"She's at the hospital." Becky shrugged.

AJ dropped down crosslegged on the floor so he could think about that one for a moment. "So, your Dad just..." he broke off, suddenly realizing that Becky didn't know what had happened. AJ wasn't about to be the one to tell her either.

"Where did he go?" Becky raised her eyebrows, making her look strikingly like an owl behind her wire rimmed glasses. "I saw him leave in the eighth inning."

AJ scowled. Becky didn't miss a trick. "He got a phone call." He hedged, hoping it would be enough to satisfy her six year old mind.

"From the hospital?" Becky was staring down at AJ in all seriousness.

AJ nodded.

"Oh." Becky scowled slightly as she thought, her hands clasped tightly around her pink vinyl purse. "Brian died." She didn't say it as a question, it was a statement.

AJ twisted around to glance up at Nick. Nick was watching both of them, that same unreadable expression on his face. "You ready?" AJ broke the silence.

"Uh-huh..." Nick sniffled, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

"Where am I supposed to go?" Becky said in alarm.

"You come with me until we find out what's up with your parents, okay?" AJ unfolded his legs and stood up, taking one last look around the clubhouse. Neither game in Los Angeles had ended very prettily. This was one city he honestly would prefer to never play in again.

Becky reached up and wrapped her little hand around AJ's, holding on tightly.

## Chapter Sixty Two

Stacy pressed redial again, listening as the phone rang once, the same automated message starting, telling her the phone wasn't in service. "Nick, turn your phone on..." She muttered, hanging up and tossing the phone on the bed next to her.

The TV was muted, the only light in the room excepting the overhead light by the main door. The game had ended two hours ago, and the post-game coverage had wrapped up long ago, Stacy just hadn't been paying enough attention to turn the TV off. She did so now, reaching over to switch on the lamp next to the bed as the TV powered down, sending the room into darkness.

What was she supposed to do now? His cell phone was off, if he was even back at the hotel, he wasn't answering the phone in his room – she had no way of contacting him.

She hadn't heard from Nick since Friday night, when he had cut their conversation short when Brian was taken to the hospital. Stacy wasn't sure if he was purposely avoiding her, or if things were just so hectic in Los Angeles right then that he wasn't thinking about checking his phone messages.

Stacy dove for the phone again, suddenly realizing there was one person in LA that wouldn't be ignoring his phone messages. AJ, being the worrywart that he was, made sure that Felicia could always reach him somehow.

~\*~

"I have got to get myself a different agent." AJ said for the fifth time, his head still swiveling around the hotel suite that Nick stayed in, as opposed to the rooms the rest of the team had. He wasn't speaking to anyone in particular, Nick had vanished into the bedroom, and while Becky was still firmly attached to AJ's hand, he had the sneaking suspicion she wasn't really listening to him.

He paused and stared down at the little girl, still wearing her Mariners cap and sweatshirt. AJ didn't have a specific recollection of when he was six years old, other than he had spent a great deal of his time terrorizing his mother's cat, but he was pretty sure he had acted nothing like Becky. "Well, what are we going to do with you?" He said finally.

Becky shrugged. "I don't know."

That made two of them. "Here – sit down, I'm gonna go check on Nick, okay?" AJ detached his hand from Becky's sticky grasp, crossing the room to stick his head in the bedroom door. Nick was curled up in a little ball on closest side of the large bed.

"Hey, how're you doing? You want anything?"

"No." Nick mumbled.

AJ hesitated, not sure whether he should press farther or not. "Okay... let me know if you do, 'kay?"

Nick didn't answer, just curled up a little tighter and closed his eyes.

"Here you go." Becky handed AJ a square post-it note as he returned to the other room.

"What the hell is this?" AJ scrunched his face up at the phone number written on it.

"It's Daddy's cell phone." Becky explained. "I have to keep it with me in case of a crisis."

AJ had to bite his lip to keep from laughing out loud. He found that comment amusing for two reasons. One, only the offspring of Kevin would have cell phone numbers in case of a “crisis” and two, this most certainly qualified as a crisis.

He found the phone and dragged it halfway across the room so he could sit down on the couch. When was the last time he had sat down? It must have been the eighth inning. That was the last time he remembered sitting.

“Hey, kiddo, would you mind keeping an eye on Nick for a minute?” He asked, dialing to get an outside line and punching in Kevin’s cell phone number.

Becky slid down off the couch, straightened her skirt and darted into the bedroom, her curls bobbing up and down. AJ relaxed slightly. It was kind of freaky, the way she would sit and stare. Of course, her father did the same thing, so it didn’t surprise AJ in the slightest, but still, he preferred not to have someone staring at every little move he made.

Kevin’s phone kept ringing – AJ was just about to hang up, when Kevin finally picked up. “Yeah?”

“Hey, Kevin, it’s AJ.” AJ said, slightly uncomfortable with the entire situation. Kevin sounded upset, and it made AJ feel as if he was intruding on something personal. “I just wanted to let you know that Becky’s with me, before you guys turned Chavez Ravine upside down looking for her.”

Kevin was quiet for several seconds. “Becky?” He said finally. “Oh my God... is she okay?”

“Yep.” AJ confirmed. “She’s in the best shape out of any of us, actually.”

“Dammit, I can’t believe I forgot my own kid!” Kevin exclaimed.

“Kevin, under the circumstances, it’s completely understandable.” AJ had to stop himself from laughing again. This wasn’t a funny situation, in spite of what his emotions seemed to be telling him. “She can just stay here with me. You’ve got enough s--- to deal with right now.”

“Tell me about it.” Kevin said tightly. He sounded as if he had been crying, or if not, he was struggling not to. “Does Becky know?”

“Yeah... she figured it out all on her own.”

“Let me talk to her for a minute.” Kevin said finally.

“Yeah, hang on.” AJ slowly pulled himself upright again, heading for the bedroom. “Becky – your dad’s on the phone.”

Becky climbed down off the bed and skipped over to take the phone. AJ leaned up against the doorjamb, only half listening to the conversation. He was tired, he wanted to go to bed – actually, what he wanted right now was to be home and going to bed, but that wasn’t going to happen. He’d have to call Felicia when things quieted down a little.

“Yes, Daddy.” Becky was saying, listening to the phone intently. “No... I’m taking care of Nick, what are you doing? No... it’s just AJ and Nick... okay... I love you too.” She handed the phone back to AJ. “He wants to speak to you again.”

“Hey, Kevin.” AJ stepped back outside, sliding down the wall until he was sitting on the floor, his back propped against the wall.

“AJ, will you do me a favor?”

“Sure.” AJ thought for a moment. “Um, what is it?” Maybe he shouldn’t rush into things too fast.

“Would you mind if Becky stayed with you for the next few days?”

“No, that’s fine!” AJ said in surprise. He could watch Becky; she was no trouble at all. It was the least he could do.

“Thanks. It’s just that... Brian was so protective of Becky with this entire thing... and it just seems like that would have all been for nothing if I take her over to Lexington.” Kevin explained quietly.

“Yeah.” AJ agreed, not quite sure what to say. “Don’t worry about it, Kevin. Between both my mother and Felicia, Becky will have more than enough to keep her entertained.

“Thank you, AJ. I really appreciate this...” Kevin paused, distracted. “Oh, I’ve got to run. I can’t thank you enough.” The phone went dead in AJ’s ear.

“Yeah, sure...” AJ leaned his head back against the wall. He really needed to go to bed. Right now he could fall asleep sitting on the floor.

Not that he was going to get the chance – as soon as he closed his eyes, something started tapping his shoulder.

AJ glanced up to see Becky carefully tapping on his shoulder. “What?”

“Excuse me.” Becky said politely. “Nick’s throwing up.”

“No.” AJ shook his head. If he just denied it, then maybe it wouldn’t happen. This was not his life. This had to be a nightmare of some sort.

Becky frowned. “Yes. He is.” She waited a few seconds. “Well, you have to do something!”

“Why?” AJ challenged.

“Because you’re the grown up!” Becky said in exasperation, her lower lip starting to tremble slightly.

“Okay, I’m coming, I’m coming...” AJ forced himself to stand up one more time. This was going to be a long night.

## Chapter Sixty Three

“Hey, it’s AJ.”

Stacy shook her head. Of course it was AJ; she could have recognized his voice anywhere. “How are you?”

“Terrible.” AJ continued on in the same matter of fact tone. “Your boyfriend owes me one nights sleep.”

“Is he okay?” Stacy seized on that piece of information. “I’ve been trying to get a hold of him for two days now.”

“Well...” AJ paused. “He’s got a pretty f----- awesome case of the flu.”

“And with Brian?” Stacy pushed on.

“I don’t know. He hasn’t said a word about it; he didn’t really react at all.”

Stacy sank down on the bed and shoved her hair back from her face. “Well, I suppose that’s good. I was worried he’d go and do something stupid.”

AJ didn’t answer her.

“Are you still there?”

“Yeah...” AJ said slowly. “Brian said that exact same thing to me yesterday. Is that... some kind of standard Nick thing?”

“Well, no...” Stacy was rattled now. Brian had been worried about Nick too. “It’s just kind of assumed that Nick doesn’t always handle things very well.”

“Yeah.” AJ said thoughtfully. “You know, I’ve always looked at Nick and the high profile lifestyle he has, and he always seemed like was really good at handling whatever came up. And the last few days, I’ve realized that he can’t handle any of it, he’s just incredibly good at hiding it.”

Stacy bit her lip. AJ had summed things up very well. Nick was entirely too good at hiding his emotions – a little too good. That had to be his single most frustrating feature.

“That, however, was not why I called you.” AJ continued. “When are you back in Seattle?”

“Later tonight. Why?”

“Just wondering when I can hand Nick over to you.”

“Okay, let me find the information.” Stacy pulled her bag over and started riffling through the large pile of assorted papers she had collected over the weekend. “God, AJ, I wish I’d gone to LA.”

“Yeah, I kind of wish you had too, but you can’t change that now, so quit knocking yourself out over it.”

~\*~

Becky sat quietly in her seat on the team flight back to Seattle. It had been a pretty long time since AJ had deposited her in the seat next to Nick, warned both of them if they dared to move he would kill them and hide the bodies, and vanished. Becky’s legs felt like moving, but she still sat quietly. It wasn’t that she thought AJ would kill her, she knew he wouldn’t, he had just been exaggerating, but still, it wasn’t a very nice thing to say.

Especially to Nick – he was sick, and even Becky knew you didn’t tell sick people you were going to kill them. She wasn’t sure Nick had even heard AJ. He had been asleep

for most of the flight so far, curled up against the back of his seat, his back to Becky and the rest of the plane.

Becky stuck her feet out in front of her and clapped her shoes together a few times. AJ might have been a pretty funny guy, but he just didn't understand that children had to be entertained. Her parents would have remembered to give her some paper and a pen.

Her parents were flying to Kentucky for Brian's funeral, but she wasn't old enough to go with them. Becky wasn't so sure about that. If she was old enough to go stay with AJ and Felicia then she was pretty sure she was old enough to go to a funeral. Still, she was glad she wasn't going. Funerals were always sad, or at least they always were in movies.

Becky carefully unfastened her seatbelt and knelt on the seat so she could peer out into the aisle. She didn't see AJ. She did see Howie and a couple other players clustered around the seats at the back of the plane. AJ might be back there. Becky sat back down and fastened her seatbelt. She had seen plane crashes on the news, so it was best to be on the safe side. Still, it worried her that she didn't see AJ. What if Nick was sick again? She would need to know where AJ was.

She turned to check on Nick again. His eyes were closed, but she didn't think he was sleeping. Whenever she had a cold or the flu, she lay on the couch and watched videos. Nick had to play a baseball game and fly across two and a half states.

Becky would have felt better if she could find an angel somewhere, but she couldn't. Maybe angels didn't fly on airplanes. That was something she had never asked Brian. There had been an angel in the hotel room last night, she was sure of that. She was pretty sure it was there because of Nick.

She stuck her lower lip out, concentrating, trying to figure out what Brian would have done.

"Nick?" She said it very softly, just in case Nick really was asleep.

"What?" Nick mumbled.

"I'm going to give you a hug." Becky announced in all earnestness.

Nick opened his eyes, squinting in confusion. "Why?"

"Because I'm your friend." Becky explained. Hugs always made her feel better; they would probably make Nick feel better too.

"Oh." Nick sighed, too wiped out to comment further.

Becky unfastened her seatbelt and climbed over onto the other side of Nick's seat so she could put her arms around his neck.

Something wasn't quite right. Becky was going to have to work on her cheering-up skills. She was pretty sure that when you tried to cheer someone up, they weren't supposed to start crying.

## Chapter Sixty Four

Nick closed his eyes, his head leaning weakly against the back of the seat. He choked back another sob, which caused his head to spin again, but he figured it was better than the alternative. If he completely lost it he'd end up passing out from the pain. His head felt like it was going to explode.

He hadn't cried since he was fifteen. He couldn't even remember the last time he had cried in front of someone, much less an entire airplane. The strangest thing about the entire situation was that Nick didn't even care. Nick shifted carefully in his seat, trying to sit up so he could breathe. Right now, he felt exactly like he had in Little League and the wind had been knocked out of him sliding into home plate. When he finally did pull in a decent breath, his head started pounding worse than before.

With a start, Nick realized that someone was sitting next to him. His brain had cleared enough that he recognized that yes, he was still on an airplane, and yes, someone was sitting next to him, holding a Kleenex box.

Nick turned his head slowly, attempting to keep his head from feeling any worse, to see AJ sitting where Becky had been before, his usual half skeptical, half 'I can't believe I'm part of this universe' look firmly in place.

"Where's Becky?" Nick couldn't even hear his own voice over the ringing in his ears, but AJ seemed to have heard.

"We landed about ten minutes ago. She's with Howie." AJ tipped his head towards the front of the plane. "He's teaching her how to play poker. Kevin'll never leave his kid with me again." He smiled at that thought, before shoving the Kleenex box over farther. "Here, you're gonna need more than one, buddy."

Nick's brain finally worked through the command of getting his hand to take the Kleenex box. He did appreciate the fact that AJ acting as if things were perfectly normal. It was pointless, but still, it had been Nick's standard mode of operation for several years now.

"You scared Becky to death." AJ added.

"Yeah, well, I kinda freaked myself out too." Nick muttered, attacking his nose with a handful of the Kleenex.

AJ didn't answer, which was to be expected. Nick supposed there wasn't a whole lot that could be said anyway.

"You ready to clear out of here?" AJ said finally.

"No!" Nick snapped his mouth shut, trying not to burst into tears again, forgetting for a moment that his nose was completely plugged up and he couldn't breathe with his mouth closed.

"Okay." AJ held his hands up in surrender. "Fine. We'll wait."

Nick forced himself to breathe before he started hyperventilating. He really wanted Stacy to be here right now. The chances of that happening were pretty slim, however.

"AJ." Nick's brain didn't have any control over what was coming out of his mouth. It was almost an out of body experience, except he was still very much so in his body, his head made no doubt of that fact. "AJ, I don't know what to do." Now he was crying - again. This had to be some kind of record.

"C'mon, Nick, chill." AJ was slouched in the seat, absently tapping his foot on the floor. "It's all under control, okay?"

"No, it's not." Nick protested.

AJ raised his eyebrows. "You're going home with me and Stacy's picking you up when she gets back tonight. What else has to be under control before you'll calm down?"

"I'm going with you?" The wall of pain between AJ and Nick's brain was making it hard for him to process.

"What, you think I'm just gonna leave you at the airport?" AJ said in disgust. "Look at yourself. No offense, but you're a mess."

"Stacy's in Minneapolis." Nick finally caught up to the last part of AJ's explanation.

"Her flight gets in tonight. I talked to her this morning - look, you don't have to worry about any of it, okay?"

Nick leaned back against the seat and closed his eyes. He wasn't used to this; to having someone actually care about what happened to him.

Brian had cared about what happened to him.

"Nick, you okay?" AJ sounded concerned.

"My head hurts." His head wasn't all that was hurting.

"Yeah, we need to get you some more drugs." AJ agreed.

Nick squinted weakly at AJ.

"What?" AJ said defensively. "Legal drugs! Why is it that whenever I say drugs, people always... do I LOOK like a drug dealer?"

Nick would have attempted a smile at the comment, but all his attention was currently focused on not passing out. His head was steadily hurting more and more.

"Yeah, don't move, I'm gonna get Rich. I'll be right back." AJ vanished to find the team trainer.

Nick opened his mouth, but AJ was too quick for him. He didn't want to be left alone, even more than he wanted the vice like grip on his head to go away. This time, he didn't even try to fight it. He honestly didn't care what happened.

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Kevin stared out the hotel window. It didn't offer much of a view, but he wasn't paying attention to the scenery to begin with. He knew he was still in a state of shock, everything had been sliding off him without making too much of an impression, including Karen's hysterics of the last ten hours, and the fact that Kevin had forgot about Becky. However, Kevin was more than aware this wasn't going to last. He had gone through all this before, and he knew all too well it was going to get much worse before things got better.

Karen was sprawled across the hotel bed, still in her jeans and sweater. It had taken a not so mild sedative, but she was now out like a light. She could have the entire bed if she wanted - Kevin had no plans on sleeping anytime in the next twenty hours anyway. He still hadn't told Karen what had happened with Becky, and if he was lucky, she wouldn't hear about it for a long time. Well, chances were, Becky would tell her, but that was okay. Karen would have calmed down by that point.

That was one of the many cool things about Karen. While she had a tendency to flip out over absurdly small things, she recovered just as quickly. She'd be perfectly fine by the end of the month. Kevin, on the other hand, operated exactly the opposite. He'd be okay eventually, he knew that from previous experience, but it would take time.

He might as well do something productive while he was waiting. Kevin turned away from the window and started sorting through suitcases. AJ had stopped by to collect Becky's stuff earlier, and at that point, Kevin hadn't been too concerned with keeping things in order.

Gertrude was buried halfway underneath Karen's cosmetics bag. Kevin picked up the little cloth doll, smiling slightly as he remembered Becky's insistence that it was an angel. Brian was the one that had given her the doll, and knowing Brian, he had in all probability planted the idea about the angels.

Brian, Becky and their angels.

## Chapter Sixty Five

Felicia stood in the entryway next to the front door, one hand resting on the end table pushed up against the wall, the other resting on her back, which hadn't been quite right for the last two months. A little less than a month until her due date, and it couldn't come quickly enough, in her opinion.

Denise was happily fussing over Nick in the living room, for what little good it seemed to be doing. Nick had curled up on the couch and pulled his arms up over his face – Felicia would have taken the hint that he wanted to be left alone, but not Denise. Both she and her son were uncontrollable mother hens, if there was someone around to fuss over, they weren't happy unless they were fussing.

AJ had deposited Nick and Becky in the living room, said hello to Denise and given Felicia his customary 'I'm glad to be home' half smile and hug before saying something about bringing in the rest of the stuff from the car and vanished back out the front door.

Becky was sitting on the stairs, holding onto the slats of the railing with both hands, peering out through them at the living room, a concerned expression on her face.

"How are you, Becky?" Felicia sat down on the steps next to the little girl. It wasn't the most comfortable position she had assumed in quite some time, but she felt sorry for Becky, sitting over there all by herself.

Becky let go of the railing and scooted across the step until she was sitting next to Felicia. "Okay, I guess." She said solemnly. "Is Nick okay?"

"Sure, he'll be fine." Felicia reassured her. "He's just kind of sick right now."

"Rich said he gave him enough drugs to kill a horse." Becky relayed.

Felicia smiled. Trainer's happiest moments were when they were handing out enough drugs to kill a horse. Rich must have been thrilled.

"He was crying." Becky added quietly.

Felicia blinked, trying to make sense of that last comment. "Nick was?"

Becky nodded, her face scrunching up. "I didn't mean to make him start crying!"

"Oh, honey, no... it's not your fault." Felicia pulled Becky up against her side and hugged her as best she could.

"I just gave him a hug!" Becky explained. "I thought it would make him feel better!"

"Aw, it did." Felicia ruffled Becky's hair, which looked as if it hadn't been brushed that morning. There were just some things guys didn't get, and little girl's hair was one of them. "Becky, he's just upset. Sometimes people react differently when they're upset, okay? It wasn't you, and he's going to be okay. Really."

Becky sighed and snuffled into her sweatshirt sleeve once. "Brian said I had to be Nick's friend." She propped her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands. "I already was his friend, but I think Brian was just checking."

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"Alex, what are you doing?" Felicia stuck her head around the back of the SUV to find her husband sitting in the cargo space, his legs swinging against the bumper.

"Contemplating." He didn't appear startled in the slightest that she had appeared from nowhere.

"Contemplating what?"

“Not a whole lot.” AJ shook his head. “I think my brain stopped working yesterday sometime.”

“I figured you’d be chain smoking by now.” Felicia sat down next to him, hugging herself in an attempt to stay warm. It wasn’t raining, per say, there was just a light mist blowing everywhere, which was almost worse than rain.

“Nah, quit that.” AJ shrugged.

“You just... quit?” Felicia snapped her fingers for emphasis.

“Yeah, pretty much.”

Felicia almost laughed. Only AJ. “So, what happened with Nick?”

“Well...” AJ leaned back against the wheel hub, pulling his knees up to his chin.

“Rich hauled him off to the hospital, and... doesn’t it worry you when doctors sit and look at something like they’ve never seen anything like it before and they’re just dying to do a medical study on it?”

Felicia did laugh this time. “Yeah, it does.”

“Yeah, so he sat there and stared in fascination at Nick’s head, and shook his head a lot, before he and Rich conferred and decided it was just a sinus infection and proceeded to give him more drugs.”

“Becky said he was crying.” Felicia corrected. While it was interesting to finally know why Nick was out like a light on the couch, it hadn’t really been what she meant. “She was kind of upset by that.”

“Is she okay?” AJ’s eyes darted over to meet hers.

“Fine. She and your mother are going to make cookies, which is good. It’ll keep both of them entertained.”

AJ looked skeptical. “Geez, I hope she doesn’t dump the flour canister over Becky’s head like she did to me.”

“Alex! Why would she do that!”

“How should I know? I think she wanted to see what I looked like covered in flour... sometimes there’s just no figuring that woman out... it’s a wonder I grew up to be the normal person that I am.”

Felicia started laughing again. And to think that she had come out here because she was worried about him.

“You find that amusing?” AJ smirked, moving over until he was sitting next to her, slinging one arm around her shoulder. “You smell good.” He added absently, resting his chin on the top of her head.

She leaned up against his shoulder and waited. Eventually AJ’s train of thought would return to the question she had asked.

Sure enough, he did. “He flipped out. It’s a little freaky when someone completely loses control, you know?”

She didn’t know. Completely losing control wasn’t something she did, and neither did AJ. He had a flair for the dramatic, that went without saying, but it was in control drama.

“Myself, I will be more than happy when Stacy gets here to deal with him and all his crap.” AJ added. “God, I’m tired.”

Of course AJ was tired; he hadn’t gone to bed in two days. He had called her at five that morning and relayed the entire events of his evening, from the end of the World Series on, and while Felicia had merely gone back to sleep when she hung up, AJ hadn’t. She thought back over the conversation, realizing that while AJ had given her the entire

complicated story of Nick and his being sick all night, and the entire story of Becky and Kevin, not to mention any other related tidbits he had happened to remember from the clubhouse, he had never mentioned how he had reacted to the news about Brian.

“You know what’s so weird about all of this?” AJ waited, more for the effect his thematic pause had than for Felicia to respond, then continued on. “I talked to him earlier that day.”

Felicia smiled. He always did that. It was a little frightening sometimes that she was on the same mental page as a man who dyed his hair blue and orange and inscribed permanent art on his body because he was bored. “I was just going to ask you about that.”

“Well, you know what they say – great minds, same circles.” AJ shrugged. “Which I guess means that we’re some kind of scientific fluke, huh?” He switched back to the previous subject. “Brian was a cool guy.”

“Yeah, he was.” Felicia agreed.

“Remember the last time you were in the hospital?” AJ wondered.

“Yeah.” Of course she remembered. She remembered every single time, a little too clearly.

“That was the first time I ever had a conversation with Brian, other than the usual clubhouse stuff over what we should put in Kevin’s locker or something. I ran into him down by the cafeteria, and I didn’t think anything of it then... but now, I realize what he was doing there.”

“I know.” Felicia reached underneath AJ’s suede jacket, rubbing his back. AJ always wore the same jacket on all plane flights, claiming it was lucky, based on the fact that he had never been in a plane that crashed while wearing it. It was twisted logic, but no one ever bothered to call him on it. “He stopped by my room that time.” She remembered.

She still remembered Brian appearing in her doorway, big smile on his face, and a gift shop teddy bear under his arm. He didn’t seem to find the situation strange in the slightest, dropping in on someone he had never seen before in his entire life. Even just watching on TV, when Brian smiled, it was impossible not to smile in return. Felicia had discovered the power of that smile was ten times stronger in person.

The other quality she had noticed, and what she would remember Brian the most for, was his ability to make someone feel completely comfortable. She hadn’t even been bothered a total stranger had appeared to visit.

“Brian visited you?” AJ repeated, slightly dumbfounded. “You never said that.”

“I never really thought about it until now.”

“I have to wonder if I would have done what he did.”

“What do you mean?”

“You were in the hospital, and I was flipping out, and he sat down...” AJ shook his head. “Now that I realize why he was at the hospital, it makes me think – what if things had been the other way around, and he was the one that was freaking out – would I have taken the time to do what he did to me?” He gave Felicia a wry smile. “It’s not a thought that makes me think very highly of myself.”

“Alex...” Felicia leaned over to wrap her arms around his shoulders. “You don’t know that...”

“Yeah...” AJ caught her chin with one finger, giving her a quick kiss. “Damn, I think too much when I’m tired.” He unwrapped himself from Felicia and stood up, straightening his shirt. “C’mon, let’s get inside. I could sleep standing right here.”

Felicia let him pull her upright, smiling to herself. The shoe was on the other foot for a change. “Now you know how I feel half the time.” She pointed out.

AJ’s head tipped to one side as he pondered that statement. “Well, then...” He said slowly. “That officially makes you the coolest person I know.”

## Chapter Sixty Six

“Oh my goodness!” Becky shrieked, bolting upright in the bed, a horrified expression on her face.

“What?” AJ jumped slightly, half expecting her to announce there was a spider crawling across her feet.

“Gertrude!” Becky said dramatically, her mouth falling open.

“Say what?”

“Gertrude.” Becky repeated it slowly, sounding strangely like her father. “She’s not here! I left Gertrude!”

“Who’s Gertrude?” AJ glanced from Becky to Felicia and back again, waiting for someone to clue him in.

“Her doll.” Felicia explained. “Where’d you leave her, Becky?”

“In LA!” Becky’s face grew more distraught. “I forgot her! Just like Daddy forgot me!”

AJ bit back a laugh. There was no possible way Kevin had ever forgotten his child before, but it certainly hadn’t scarred her in the slightest. She treated it as if it was something that happened every day. “I bet she’s stuck in with all your parents stuff, okay? And if she isn’t, the hotel will find her.”

“You don’t understand.” Becky shook her head. “She’s a very special doll! Brian gave her to me! She’s an angel!”

“Oh, she’s an angel!” AJ said, as if this explained everything. “Well, in that case, don’t worry about it.”

“Why?” Becky said hesitantly.

“Cause she’s taking care of your parents.” AJ had always wondered how his mind came up with these things, and from the look on Felicia’s face, she was wondering the same thing.

“You really think so?” Becky scrunched her face up to think about this option. “How come you know so much stuff about angels anyway?”

“Because I’m older than you, and I’ve been around longer.” AJ dismissed her. “Now, go to bed. Please.”

“Okay.” Becky said doubtfully. “But leave the door open, please.”

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Stacy rolled over onto her back, pushing her hair back from her face. Her brain was still trying to process exactly where she was and why her alarm hadn’t gone off. It didn’t feel like a weekend. She was over at Nick’s house, which was strange enough in itself. As a general rule, they ended up at her place.

Her brain cleared, everything suddenly falling into place. She had flown back into town last night, picked Nick up, and they had both crashed at his place. Well, truth be told, Nick had crashed long before that. It had taken some serious talking just to get him in the car, and back out.

The clock next to the bed said it was two in the afternoon, but Stacy knew better than to believe it. Most of the clocks in Nick’s house were incorrect. He randomly set them to a time just to make them stop flashing. Her watch said it was seven fifteen in the morning.

Nick was still asleep, which given the hour of the morning was perfectly normal. She might have been able to talk him into getting out of the car, but she hadn't talked him into changing into something other than the clothes he had flown home in. She had pulled his jacket off, with Nick giving her as much of a look of death as he could muster without actually moving his face, but the khakis and the shirt had remained.

Now he was rolled over on his side, one arm up above his head, mouth open, hair on end every which way. It would have been adorable, had Stacy not felt so sorry for him. He was sick, his best friend had just passed away, and his so called girlfriend had flat out refused to go to Los Angeles with him, even though he had asked her.

She rolled off the bed; now that she was awake she might as well get up and moving. The chances of finding something edible in Nick's kitchen were quite slim, but she could at least take a shower. Her bags were still in the back of her car, which had to be the only good thing Stacy could find about this day so far.

An hour and a half later at the kitchen table, Stacy was halfway through the novel she had shoved into her purse before she left for Minneapolis and never had a chance to read, when Nick appeared in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room.

"You're up early!" Stacy said in surprise, lying the book face down on the table. Nick's hair was even more on end, if that was possible, and he looked as standing was just about all that his head could handle right then.

"I guess." He said quietly. "How come you're here?"

Stacy winced. That hadn't been an especially warm welcome. "Well, I wasn't leaving you here alone."

Nick was shaking his head. "No... how come you're not at work?"

"I don't have to work." Stacy gave him the simple explanation. There was a lot more to it than that, but Nick didn't look as if his brain was working anyway.

He just gave her a slightly blank look and vanished back into the other room.

Stacy sat, slightly stunned at his abrupt departure for just a moment, before standing up and heading after him.

"Sorry." Nick said from the couch, curled up sideways against the back. "I'm a little dizzy and my head decided it was time to sit down."

Stacy gave up on trying to figure out if he was mad at her or not, sinking down onto the couch and pulling him into a hug. "Poor thing... how's your head today?"

"Spinning." Nick's voice was muffled against her shoulder.

Stacy bit back a smile. "It doesn't hurt like it did yesterday?"

Nick pulled back and squinted at her thoughtfully. "I guess. I don't remember yesterday very well. I was kind of out of it." He curled up against her shoulder again. "I don't remember a whole lot of the game day either. I remember the ninth and realizing if Howie didn't make an out, that I was gonna be the last out of the World Series... and then after the game... that was when stuff started falling apart." He reached over with one hand to wrap a section of Stacy's hair around his finger. "I don't think I've ever been that sick."

"Nick, I'm sorry." Stacy rubbed her hand along the ribbed material of his pullover shirt. "If I had it to do over again, I'd go to LA."

"It doesn't matter." Nick sighed.

"Yes, it does." Stacy protested.

"No, it doesn't." Nick said quietly. "It wouldn't have changed anything."

"You wouldn't have been alone."

Nick straightened, his eyes meeting Stacy's. For once, the usual mask wasn't in place. It was the first time Stacy could ever remember him looking vulnerable. "I'm used to being alone."

"You shouldn't be." Stacy swallowed hard. This day was getting more and more depressing by the minute.

"Yeah, well..." Nick stood up slowly and pushed his hair back off his forehead. "I feel like s---. I'm going back to bed."

Stacy leaned her head on her arms and watched him disappear back down the hallway. She had her work cut out for her. It was hard to tell which was more depressing, the fact that she couldn't get through to Nick, or those few seconds when she had, and realized exactly how miserable he was.

## Chapter Sixty Seven

"Well, don't we look nice." AJ said in surprise, circling around Nick slowly.

Nick frowned, wondering if AJ meant we in the royal sense, or if he really meant both of them. Knowing AJ, he meant both. "What's with the vulture thing? Quit circling." He fixed AJ with his best glare.

"What?" AJ stepped back and did his best to look innocent, more or less failing miserably. "Geez, you're in a bad mood. Go chew on someone else's head." He collapsed into one of the folding chairs set up to the side of the stage, legs flying every which way, head bobbing to the music playing over the sound system.

"Yeah, well, I've been to a few of these stupid World Series things." Nick sat down next to AJ, although without nearly as much flair. His head still wasn't quite up to that.

"Stupid World Series things?" AJ repeated, arching an eyebrow. "This is merely for the city to pay us the homage and respect which we are due, seeing as how we traveled all the way to LA and not only returned with our lives and original genders intact, but also with a rather ugly World Series trophy."

"AJ! There you are." Mariners' general manager, Joseph Wright, interrupted. "Um, since Kevin is the team spokesperson, and he isn't in town, Howie tells me that you'll be filling in?"

"That's not AJ." Nick jerked a thumb at the black clad figure next to him. "It's a walking ego in sunglasses."

Wright just looked confused. "Howie said..." He repeated.

"Yeah, dude, I'll do it." AJ said lazily. "Nick's just pissed that he has to go to another of these events, since he's been attending them since he was in diapers."

Nick zoned out, while Wright and AJ had a brief and apparently confusing discussion over exactly what AJ should be saying. AJ was right; he had been attending playoff rallies and celebrations pretty much as long as he could remember.

The Mariners had set up a makeshift stage out of scaffolding, covered with a white tent, of course, in case of rain. Various men in suits were standing on the stage, conferring with each other. Nick assumed they were the usual group of city officials and Mariners front office personnel that showed up for every playoff celebration. It struck Nick as funny that he didn't even know who the Mariners owner was, much less what he looked like. In New York, he had fought with the owner several times over the course of the season.

"There you are." Stacy said from behind him. "You found AJ, I see."

AJ twisted around to give her a fake smile. "They want me to get up on that stage with a microphone." He thought about that situation for a moment, shoving his glasses back up on his nose. "What do you suppose Wright would do to me if I started singing?"

"Trade you, hopefully." Nick grumbled. He wasn't really mad at AJ, it was just that he wasn't in an especially good mood, which wasn't helped by the fact that he really didn't want to be sitting at a team celebration when he didn't feel like there was anything to celebrate. AJ could care less if Nick picked on him or not, in fact, there was a fairly good chance that he was enjoying it.

AJ raised his eyebrows at Stacy. "Tell me, why is he so bitchy today?"

"Is he?" Stacy said innocently, wrapping her arms around Nick's shoulders. "Someone got up a little too early today."

"No s---." AJ muttered. "Okay, you know, it looks like they're finally about to get this thing started, and if I don't want to be locked out of the car, I really should go hang out with Lissie for a while." He stood up, patting Nick on top of the head. "I'll just surprise both of you with what selection I choose for my musical number, okay?"

"Do you suppose he'll really get up there and sing?" Stacy watched AJ slouch off towards the other side of the stage. Her arms were still around his chest, her chin resting on his shoulder.

"Probably." Nick sighed, leaning back slightly.

"You okay?" She hugged him tighter.

"Yeah, fine." He reached up to grab one of her hands. "Just don't go anywhere, okay?"

"I'm not."

Nick twisted around to face her, as much as he hated to break the hold she had. "I mean it. Don't go anywhere?"

"I'm not." Stacy repeated. "Okay? I promise."

"Okay." Nick repeated, trying to relax, even just a little. Was he really getting that desperate? The last four days, just the thought of being left alone was enough to bring on a panic attack. He had no idea what had brought any of it on, but he was officially freaked out about it now. Maybe he had finally gone off the deep end.

They had started the ceremonies, the sound system turned up loud enough that Nick was sure people could hear for a ten mile radius. At this rate, he was going to have a headache by the time this was over.

He didn't really pay attention to the ceremony. They had the standard bragging about the team, rehashing the highlights of the season, complete with highlight video, which Nick purposely didn't watch. He didn't want to see Brian. That would be too much to handle all at once.

When they called AJ up to the podium, Nick pulled himself back to reality just a little, mostly out of curiosity as to what AJ was going to do up there.

AJ stood for a moment, staring out at the large crowd of people. He had taken off his sunglasses, but it didn't stop him from looking as if he was still watching over the rims. "Hi." He said finally.

Nick relaxed a little. At least AJ's voice was quiet, and he had enough sense to figure out the microphone would pick up his normal voice, rather than talking loudly or almost yelling, as some of the people before him had done.

"Usually, this is something that Kevin would handle, but since he's out of town, I was delegated to talk." AJ explained. "I apologize in advance." He added wryly.

"I don't have a whole lot to say, which is a great relief, I know, but bear with me here for a minute, okay? First off, on behalf of the entire team, I have to thank all the fans for being as cool as they are..." He paused as the crowd started cheering.

"Suck up..." Stacy muttered.

"Yeah, you guys ROCK!" AJ yelled, before cutting loose with what could only be described as a maniacal cackle. "Also..." He continued, once the cheering died down. "I'd like to thank the rest of my teammates for all the great memories – I'm going to look back on this season as something special... it was a lot of fun."

He glanced over at Joseph Wright for a moment, before turning back to the microphone and the crowd. "And in closing, I want to say that... before game seven, we dedicated the game and the series to Brian. If there were more people in the world that

gave as unconditionally as he did, we'd all be in a much better place. Brian, this was for you – we love you and we miss you, buddy." He pressed his lips together in a smile, raised one hand in a small wave to the crowd, and exited off the podium.

Over the years, Nick had perfected the trick of completely withdrawing and going through life on autopilot. AJ's closing remarks had been the final straw. Either he went to pieces before a rather large crowd of rabid baseball fans, or he shut down and started auto piloting his life again.

There were still people speaking on the stage, but Nick didn't hear a word of it. When the ceremony ended and Stacy asked him something, he answered, but he had no clue what she had said, or what he had said in reply. He smiled when he was supposed to, he shook hands with more people than he could even begin to count; he even signed a few autographs. When people congratulated him on the World Series win, or said how sorry they were about Brian, he responded automatically.

He was vaguely aware that Stacy had her arm around his waist as he stood talking to a local sports reporter. Somewhere in the back of his mind, was the nagging little thought that he'd like to tell her every single problem he'd had since he was fourteen years old, but the rest of his mind threw up a big red warning flag at that thought. So, he pulled himself father behind the protective wall he had built up and shoved the thought away. He had learned his lesson the hard way this time and he wasn't going to let himself get hurt again.

## Chapter Sixty Eight

Felicia rolled over on her back, pulling her pillow over her face to shield the daylight coming in through the windows. AJ was already up, she could hear him banging around in the bathroom. It sounded as if he was throwing things into the shower, but chances where he had just knocked the shelf loose again.

She wasn't quite ready to wake up yet. Last night had been the best night's sleep she had gotten in several weeks. She'd still be sleeping if it wasn't for AJ trashing the bathroom. He was sorting through the closet now, she could hear him singing slightly off key as he wandered around the room.

If he dared to try and wake her up, she was going to kill him. Felicia had a sneaking suspicion that she weighed more than he did now. He wouldn't stand a chance. He had never stood a chance to begin with – AJ was one of the worst fighters in the entire world.

For once in his life, AJ used some common sense, and sang his way back into the bathroom without trying anything.

Everything was quiet for a moment, except for the water running in the sink at random intervals, before AJ started talking to his reflection. "When the hell was the last time you looked in a mirror?"

Felicia stifled a giggle with the pillow.

"Your hair looks like crap." AJ added.

"Your hair is perfectly fine!" Felicia called, pulling the pillow down. True, his hair was getting a little long, but he had worn it longer before. She had to speak up and say something before he decided to shave his head.

AJ appeared in the bathroom doorway, holding his toothbrush. At that moment, his hair was still wet, making him look more or less like a slightly disgruntled wet cat. "I knew you were awake." He said in a slightly hurt tone.

"No, you didn't."

"Did too."

Felicia pulled the pillow back over her head. "It's too bright in here."

"That's because it's almost noon." AJ vaulted onto the bed next to her and wrestled the pillow away, but not before "accidentally" bopping her in the face with it.

"I was tired!" Felicia defended, shoving her hair back away from her face.

AJ smirked. "Yeah, I noticed." He flopped down on his stomach on top of the pillow. "Things are kind of quiet around here with Becky gone, huh?"

Kevin and Karen had flown back home over the weekend, and Becky was now back with her parents and happily reunited with Gertrude the angel doll.

"Not for long." Felicia patted her rounded stomach.

"Yeah." AJ agreed happily, crawling off the bed, taking the pillow and most of the blankets to the floor with him. "C'mon, I'll make you breakfast."

"You will?" Felicia wondered. "What happened to your mother?"

AJ turned to give her an incredulous look. "What? Are you used to kitchen fires every morning now? I can try to start one if you enjoy them that much. She went shopping."

"And you didn't go with her?" Felicia was more than a little surprised. She had never heard of a McLean turning down a shopping trip before.

"Obviously not." AJ sat down on the edge of the bed and started pulling at Felicia's arm until she was upright. "I have a surprise." He added proudly, leaning over and pulling Felicia into a rather lengthy kiss. "Guess!"

"You taste like toothpaste." Felicia's brain hadn't quite caught up from the kiss yet. AJ wrinkled his face up. "What? No! Not even close."

"That wasn't a guess."

"Oh."

"Give me a hint?"

"Okay!" AJ bounced back to his feet. "I went... shopping! In LA." He added, striking a pose in the middle of the bedroom floor.

"In LA? Alex, that was over a week ago! And you still haven't shown me? What did you get?" Felicia shrieked. If he had found more baby clothes and hadn't shown her, she beat him into little pieces with the pillow right then. Baby clothes were even more fun than underwear, and underwear was her favorite shopping item of all time.

"Oh no..." AJ shook his head. "Breakfast first. C'mon, let's go." He vanished into the hallway, before sticking his head back around the doorjamb. "We're going to have the best dressed baby on the entire west coast."

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Kevin was standing, staring more or less in shock at the piles of junk in the kitchen when someone knocked on the door. "It's open!" He yelled, knowing it was Nick.

He hadn't seen Nick since before game seven, to be completely truthful. Kevin didn't spend much of his game time looking out at right field. Still, when he had stopped by AJ's house to pick up Becky, AJ had offhandedly mentioned that Nick hadn't handled the aftermath of game seven very well, and although Kevin wasn't still quite sure why he cared, he had called Nick that morning and asked him if he wanted to stop by Brian's apartment. He had been more than a little surprised when Nick had agreed.

"Hey..." Nick found his way back to the kitchen. "How's it going?"

"Not too bad." Kevin turned his focus away from the pile of... he wasn't sure how to categorize it. There was no method to Brian's madness. "You?"

"Cool, I guess." Nick shrugged.

Kevin's eyebrows drew together. Nick was going to play the aloof game. "I honestly didn't expect you to say you'd come over here."

Nick shrugged again. "Stacy's working late tonight. It's better than sitting around the house by myself all day."

Kevin could feel his teeth grinding. How in the world Brian had put up with Nick was beyond him. How and why Stacy put up with him was also beyond him, but he didn't really feel like analyzing that relationship. "So the two of you got things worked out, huh?"

"Yeah." Nick leaned over and picked up the several pieces of paper that had drifted loose from the front of the refrigerator. "She's been pretty cool about everything."

"Good." Kevin said absently, staring at the counter again. There was no way he was going to do something with the vast amount of junk Brian had stacked. "Have you ever seen so much junk in your entire life?" He wondered.

Nick laughed quietly. "He always defended that by saying it was his life."

Kevin had heard that phrase before, several times. Every single time he had given Brian a bad time about his housekeeping skills, Brian had flung the same retort at him, and then usually shoved something else onto the floor, just to spite him.

"So, what do you want me to do?" Nick shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

"Hell, I don't know." Kevin shrugged. "Pick a spot and dig in. I have no clue where to start and I've been here for five hours already."

Nick snickered. "Well, make sure you stay away from the shower then."

"Why?" Kevin frowned suspiciously. "He didn't have something living in there, did he?"

"F---, man! What did you do to Mount Tide!" Nick hollered from the living room.

Kevin shook his head. Kids nowadays... the language they used. "Pretty impressive, huh? There was a couch under there after all." He had spent a good two hours attempting to dig through that pile. He'd stop and drop the clothes off at the Union Gospel Mission or something on his way home.

He went back to the piles on the kitchen counter, tossing the stuff unless it struck him as something someone Brian had known might like to have.

"You want any of these newspapers out here, dude?" Nick yelled.

"No... I have no clue why he kept them." Kevin suspected he hadn't kept them for a reason at all, Brian just never bothered to get rid of them. He'd probably open in the kitchen cupboards and find more newspapers.

Things calmed down after that. Whatever Nick was doing in the living room, he was quiet, and Kevin sorted through the entire left side of the counter, discovering Anaheim Angels media guides from Brian's rookie year forward and the fact that the counter had blue Formica.

He was flipping through the media guides, curious as to who had been on the Angels back then, when he heard glass breaking in the living room.

"What'd you break?" He called. Nick didn't answer.

"Nick?" Kevin set down the media guide, and wandered around the half wall into the living room. "What happened?"

"Nothin'." Nick was sitting across from the couch, his back up against the lone chair in the living room.

"Is that what broke?" Kevin crossed over to the table at the end of the couch to pick up the pieces of the coffee mug scattered around it.

"Yeah." Nick said shortly.

"What'd you do, throw it?" Kevin wondered idly. The mug hadn't magically traveled across the room, and throwing was probably the only way the thick ceramic could have broken in the first place.

Nick didn't answer, and Kevin left him alone, taking the pieces of china back into the kitchen and tossing them in the garbage bag. Nick was going to have to make the first move; Kevin didn't really feel like reading him wrong and getting socked in the face. The mug hadn't fared too well.

Kevin was heading back in the front door after depositing his second bag of trash in the dumpster in the parking lot before he even bothered to look over at the living room again. Nick was still sitting cross-legged in front of the chair, staring down at the carpet.

"Hey, you okay?" Kevin perched himself on the edge of the now clothes free couch.

"I guess." Nick picked at the carpet with one hand, before finally glancing up at Kevin. "I'm not a whole lot of help, am I?"

"Well, in all honesty, I asked you to come over for the company, not the cleaning." Kevin admitted, the room lapsing back into silence afterwards.

"Am I the only one that finds all this really weird?" Nick wondered finally.

"Which?" Kevin leaned back against the couch. "The fact that we haven't started fighting, or the fact that Brian isn't here?"

Nick smiled slightly. "Both I guess."

Kevin stared up at the ceiling idly. He didn't have any more small talk readily available, and Nick didn't look like he was going to be moving onto anything else in the near future. He was sure there was some way of getting around Nick's attitude and pushing his buttons, but he had no clue how to do it, and he wasn't certain that he really wanted to.

Brian would have figured out what to do with Nick. Brian had a solution for everything. He had always been able to fix everything. Except this time. There wasn't a way he could fix dying.

Kevin headed back into the kitchen. He might be growing more tolerant of Nick, but he still had some pride, and he'd do just about anything rather than start crying in front of Nick Carter.

~\*~

Kevin was pondering if he really wanted to know why there was a plastic tub full of gravel in Brian's oven when Nick appeared in the kitchen again. "Kevin, I'm gonna head home before the traffic."

"Okay." Kevin pulled the tub out and set it on the cleared counter. "Nick, thanks for coming over. I wasn't really looking forward to spending the entire day here by myself."

Nick was eyeing the gravel curiously, but he didn't say anything. It would certainly do no good to question it now. "You gonna do this again tomorrow?"

"I don't know yet. I'm going to have to come over again sometime." Kevin shook his head.

"Well, give me a call when you do." Nick offered.

"I'll do that. Thanks." Kevin stood and watched Nick depart, before turning back to the tub of gravel, unsure which one had just confused him more.

## Chapter Sixty Nine

Stacy closed the front door and stepped over the equipment bag laying on the floor in the entryway. It wasn't as if Nick was pressed for time the next few months, one would think he could pick up after himself. Then again, one would also think that seven months was enough time to unpack and get settled into a house, and he still hadn't managed to do that. The video games and the clothes seemed to be the only things that were unpacked.

She had more or less been unofficially staying at Nick's house since the end of the baseball season. It made a nasty commute to work for her, but still, she wasn't too comfortable with the idea of leaving Nick alone. Maybe she was being paranoid, or maybe she was just babying him a little too much, but she still had the nagging feeling that if she didn't, he'd go off the deep end and end up doing something they'd both regret.

Nick was home, somewhere. His car was in the driveway, and his keys and sunglasses were both tossed on the end of the kitchen counter. He wasn't on the floor in front of the TV, which meant chances were, he wasn't having a good day. Lately he had been going through two moods, one where he'd disappear off by himself for hours, and the other where he practically clung to her side.

He had a small batting cage set up in his backyard, complete with pitching machine. Stacy had always wondered if it was a standard staple in the back yards of major leaguers all over the country, or if this was something strange that Nick did. She could see the cage from the kitchen window, Nick standing in the box, bat in hand, swinging away as the machine shot baseballs at him.

Stacy let herself out the French doors leading onto the back deck, pulling her jacket around her as she crossed the yard to the side of the cage. Nick remained focused on the white balls spinning in towards him, lower lip clenched between his teeth, swinging hard. Stacy wasn't sure if he knew she was there and was ignoring her, or if he was so focused on the pitches that he had no clue what else was happening around him.

"How long have you been here?" Nick didn't miss a swing, sending the pitch into the blue canvas at the other end of the cage with a loud pop.

"I just got here. How long have you been out here?" He looked as if he had been out there for quite some time.

"I don't know." Nick swung again, sending a one hopper into the canvas. "Today's been a pretty crappy day." He punctuated this statement by slamming another ball into the canvas.

Stacy flinched. Even being on the other side of the fence, it made her slightly nervous - the speed his bat was moving, and the force the balls were flying away from it. "What happened?"

Nick stopped swinging, the next couple pitches whizzing past him into the backstop. "Where do you want me to start?"

"Chronological order is always nice." Stacy offered.

She thought she saw a tiny smile flicker across his face, but she wasn't sure in the semi-light as the sun finished setting. "Okay, I woke up. Things went downhill from there." He stepped over to turn off the pitching machine and started picking up the balls scattered around the cage.

Stacy bit back a smile. He still hadn't unpacked anything in the house, but he didn't leave the batting cage without picking up everything first. "And after you woke up..." She prompted.

"Did you ever see Brian's apartment?" Nick stopped tossing balls and straightened up to meet her eyes.

"No." Stacy shook her head.

Nick shrugged. "He was kind of a pack rat. I don't think he ever threw anything away. And Kevin called me this morning, and he was trying to sort through all Brian's junk, and he wanted to know if I'd mind coming over." He quit with that explanation and finished tossing the balls into the bucket next to the pitching machine.

"And you went over there?" Stacy was more than a little surprised.

"Yeah." Nick shut the gate into the cage behind him and leaned up against the fence, taking off his hat and running his hands through his hair.

"So... was it a good thing or a bad thing?" Stacy pushed a little farther.

"I don't know. Both, I guess." Nick said in confusion, staring down at the black brim of the cap. "I mean, it wasn't as hard as I thought it would be... but still..." He trailed off, running his finger along the cap stitching.

"Well, I think that officially qualifies as a bad day." Stacy agreed. Frankly, she was more than a little surprised that he had gone to Brian's apartment. Ever since the season ended, he had carefully avoided all contact with anything that might involve Brian, excepting the team celebration last week.

"I haven't even started yet." He shrugged and started towards the house.

Stacy frowned and jogged after him. She hated it when he did that. They'd be in the middle of a discussion and Nick would just stand up and leave, without any warning or explanation. She didn't know if he did it to try and regain his composure, or if he just didn't want to talk about the subject anymore.

He waited until he was sitting at the kitchen table, head propped on his arms, before continuing on. "And I got home this afternoon... which needless to say, I was a little bummed out, ya know?"

Stacy had her head stuck halfway into the refrigerator as he was talking, trying to figure out if there was anything that looked remotely appetizing for dinner. She wasn't quite sure if she had heard things correctly. That had been a very open statement, coming from Nick.

"And then my Mom called." Nick finished.

"Ohh... not good?" Stacy pulled the crisper drawer open. "What happened?"

Nick shrugged. "She called and picked on me for all the usual s---, and I got mad, and then she asked me if I was coming for Thanksgiving, and I told her no, and she hung up on me." He straightened and eyed Stacy for a moment. "There isn't anything to eat. I need to go to the store."

"So, I see." She closed the door and sat down across from him. "Was that the end of your day?"

"Yeah, pretty much. I spent the rest of it in the batting cage."

"Beating up a little white ball makes you feel better?"

"Yep." He stared back down at the tabletop, disappearing back into his own little world.

Stacy sat and watched him for several minutes. Even just sitting, who knew what thoughts processing through his head, he couldn't actually remain still. She could hear

his foot banging against the chair leg. He raised one hand, absently running through the short hair on the back of his head.

"You know when the last time I was over at Brian's was?" He said finally, not quite making eye contact.

"No, I don't." Stacy shook her head.

"After game five... when we had that fight." He was staring directly at her now. His eyes looked darker than their usual gray; they had more of an aqua tint to them.

"Is that where you disappeared to?" She said in surprise. "God, Nick, I was worried about you! You were gone all night."

"Yeah, well... it doesn't matter now." Nick shook his head. "You're getting tired of putting up with all my crap, aren't you?"

"Well..." Stacy thought about it for a moment. She wasn't about to outright lie and say it didn't bother her at all. He could be frustrating, and more so than normal lately. "I imagine I'm not nearly as tired of it as you are."

Nick stared at her, his face a combination of unhappiness and bewilderment. "I was just thinking that. How did you know that?"

"It wasn't too hard to guess."

"Oh..." He chewed on his lower lip for a moment, frowning down at his hands. "I'm trying, Stacy. I really am. And I don't think it's making any difference."

Stacy pushed her chair back and circled around the table, impulsively giving him a hug. "I think it is. And things are going to get better. Really. I'm proud of you, Nick." She was proud of him. The longer she knew him and the more she learned about him, the more proud she became.

Nick pulled her down until she was in his lap, arms still wrapped around his neck. "When you first attacked my car, Brian's logic about the entire situation was that I got a cute redhead's phone number out of the deal."

Stacy frowned. What did that have to do with anything? And it was hardly fair calling it an attack. He made it sound as if she had deliberately tried to hit his car with a shopping cart.

"Boy, did he underestimate that one." Nick finished softly. "I got a lot more out of it than that."

## Chapter Seventy

Nick was half sitting, half lying on the living room couch, his brain not really working, perfectly happy to just sit and zone out. If his father had been around, he would have been more than furious that Nick was spending his offseason not even really thinking about baseball. True, Nick had spent several hours out in the batting cage since the end of the postseason, but other than that, he had stepped back from all things baseball related.

It was a nice change. Ever since he was eight years old, he didn't remember ever taking a break from baseball. During the season, he hung out at the ballpark, and during the offseason, things had always picked up even more. From October to February, Nick had his own personal baseball coach.

It was only November. Nick would pick things back up before spring training started. Kevin had already invited him over to the local ball yard, which seemed to be the off-season hangout for the Mariners that stayed in Seattle over the winter.

Sundays were always slow days. Stacy could easily spend the entire day looking at the newspaper. She was still happily reading, all the way to the travel section now. Nick had long since gone through the comics and the sports section, and that was all he was really interested in looking at. Even sports were boring in the off-season. He didn't really follow anything other than baseball.

Stacy was sitting cross-legged on the other end of the couch, the paper spread across her lap, leaning over it, hair falling down around her face. As she read, she kept pushing it absently behind her ear, only to have it fall loose again seconds later.

Nick was trying to decide if he should work up the energy to move across the neatly stacked newspaper and distract her when the phone rang. He jumped a good three inches up off the couch cushion. It didn't matter how relaxed he was, sudden loud noises always did that to him.

Stacy didn't even look up, she just laughed at him. "Well, don't just sit there and pout at me." She added. "Answer the phone. It's right behind you."

Nick pouted at being laughed at for just a moment longer, then grabbed the phone before the answering machine picked up. "Hello?"

"Baby girl, she's fricking adorable, you'll love her, and... whoops, I gotta go." The phone went dead in his ear.

Nick hung the receiver back up and ran that sentence through his head a few times.

"Wrong number?" Stacy wondered.

"No, it was AJ." Nick slouched back down on the couch.

"That was an awfully short conversation for AJ."

"Yeah." Nick waited a few seconds, knowing perfectly well once the next sentence was out of his mouth, Stacy was going to start hitting him with the newspaper for not saying it right away. "They have a little girl." He grinned. At least that had distracted her from the newspaper.

Stacy stared for a moment, her mouth dropping open slightly. "Seriously?"

"That's what he said." Nick shrugged.

"That's wonderful!" Stacy crawled over the stack of newspapers until she was kneeling next to him, grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him. "How big is she? Did they name her? How's Felicia?"

"I don't know!" Nick managed to get out between shakes. So much for a quiet rest of the afternoon. "Okay, okay, stop... whiplash! He didn't say! As you no doubt noticed, it wasn't a real long conversation, ya know?"

"All right, then." Stacy stopped shaking him. "I suppose she can't be very big, look at her parents. God, I was so not expecting this. She wasn't due until the end of the month!"

Nick tipped his head to one side and watched her flip out. She was the one that always gave him a bad time about being a ditz and being blond. It really wasn't fair. When Stacy was excited or happy, she was ten times the ditz Nick was.

"What's so funny?"

"You are." Nick reached over, pulling her over into a long kiss.

"I'm just happy for them." Stacy protested mildly, leaning up against his shoulder, her face tucked up against his neck. She did that after every kiss, but even so, it still sent a little chill down his spine.

"Hmmm..." He said non-committally in response.

"What, you're not?"

"No... I mean, yeah. Yeah, I'm happy for them, I guess." It never failed. Whenever something didn't quite make sense in his head, it sounded fifteen times worse when he tried to explain it.

"You guess?" Stacy sat up, watching his face now.

"Yeah... it's... um... I grew up with a Dad in the major leagues." He couldn't really think of a better way to explain it. He wasn't sure he could explain it.

"And..." Stacy prompted.

"I don't know. It's not fair to the kid." He couldn't explain it. "There's a lot of messed up big leaguer's kids out there."

"And there's a lot more that aren't." Stacy pointed out quietly. He didn't like the way she was looking at him. It made him feel defenseless in a way. She knew perfectly well that he wasn't talking generalities; he was referring to himself.

"Maybe."

"Look at Becky." She pointed out. "Do you think Becky's messed up?"

He shook his head. "No... she's a little too with it."

"Exactly. So what's the difference, here, Nick??"

"Her parents love her." Judging from the look on Stacy's face, she was just as shocked as Nick that he had just said that. He chewed on his lower lip, not quite sure if he should trust himself to say anything else. Where had that come from? Why didn't he just keep on pretending? Whenever questions about his relationship with his parents came up, it had always just been assumed that his father pushed him and Nick resented him for that. It was easier to just go along with that explanation than it was to admit the truth.

He could feel tears starting to prick at the back of his eyes. He was tired of pretending.

"Nick, that's not true." Stacy said quietly.

"Yes it is." He said it matter-of-factly, when in reality, he felt like screaming.

"No, it isn't!" She smacked her hand on the back of the couch. "Okay, you don't get along with your parents, maybe your father pushed you too much, but that doesn't mean they don't love you!"

Nick stood up, not quite sure how to react. This was completely uncharted territory. However, he had stepped too far out to stop now. "No, Stacy, this goes beyond all that. You know who the only person was that ever said they loved me?" He didn't even wait for her to guess. "Chelsea. Guess what - she f----- didn't mean it." He was amazed how rational he sounded. Inside, he had just broken into millions of little pieces, and he still sounded like he was discussing pitching match-ups for a road trip.

"You know how many people have said they were proud of me? If you don't count my Little League coach, you're the only one, okay? So don't sit there and tell me I'm wrong."

She opened her mouth again, but Nick didn't wait around to hear what she was going to say. He just wanted to get away before he fell apart. It was one thing to realize something and more or less not do anything about it. It was entirely another to say it out loud. He spun around and headed down the hallway, shutting the bedroom door behind him and leaning up against it. Right now he really needed to cry, and he couldn't.

~\*~

Stacy heard the door slam as Nick disappeared down the hallway. How had that happened? One minute things had been perfectly fine, and the next he looked like he was about to burst into tears, telling her his parents didn't love him. She absolutely refused to believe that, no matter how realistic he sounded about it. Still, she felt horrible about challenging him on the subject. He believed it, and fighting with him over it wasn't going to solve anything.

Nick had changed so much in the last month and a half. But when she thought about it, it wasn't Nick that had really changed. He was still exactly the same, it was just everything around him that had fallen apart. In a way, she missed the Nick she had first known, the happy Nick, whose biggest problem in life was there was a scratch on his car from a shopping cart. But then again, most of what he seemed to be trying to deal with wasn't recent; it was problems he had been living with since he was a teenager. He just wouldn't let anyone see the other side of everything.

She wasn't going to just leave him alone this time either. That was a method that had been used too many times in the last month. Her plan was momentarily stalled when she discovered he had locked the bedroom door behind him.

"Nick, let me in." She rattled the doorknob once, then knocked quietly on the door. There was a long moment where she thought he wasn't going to respond, then she heard the knob unlatch.

The blinds were still pulled across the window, the room dark except for the murky light shining around the edges of the window. Nick was sitting on the floor next to the door, back against the wall, knees pulled up to his chin.

"Nick, I'm sorry." Stacy closed the door and dropped down next to him, reaching over to pull him up against her. He didn't protest or try to move away, which was a positive sign. He snuggled up against her chest, and she kept one arm around him, letting the other run through his hair.

"When was the last time you cried?" His voice was muffled against her sweater.

"What?" Hands down, that was the strangest question she had ever been asked.

"When was the last time you cried?" He repeated it, a little shakier this time.

Stacy had to think about it for a moment. Crying wasn't something she marked on the calendar. "The post-game show for game seven." She said finally. "Why?"

"Just wondered." Nick's voice was steadily losing volume. "I think there's something wrong with me."

No kidding was what Stacy felt like saying, but she bit her tongue. "Why, Nick?"

"I can't cry." He twisted around until his face was completely buried in her sweater. "God, I'm f----- up, Stacy."

She could feel him shaking and she paused, not sure if she really wanted to know the answer to her next question. "When was the last time you cried?"

He took his time about answering. "The plane home from LA."

"Well, you've got me beat." She pointed out quietly.

"Yeah, but do you know how many times there've been after that where I wanted to?"

Stacy bit her lip, hard. If this kept up much longer, she was going to start crying.

"I don't know what to do anymore." He whispered.

Stacy didn't know anymore either. This was something way beyond what she should handle. "We'll figure something out, okay? I promise."

"Okay." Nick repeated.

She pressed her face up against the top of his head, smelling the pina colada smell of his shampoo. "I love you, Nick," That was something she was going to have to start saying more often.

~\*~

"Look what I found!" Becky pin wheeled into the living room, her socks skidding on the hardwood floor of the hallway.

"What?" Kevin craned his head around to look. If she had dared to bring another worm into the house, he'd have her head, right after he chased her into her room and made her stay there for several hours.

Becky was clutching something in her slightly sticky fist. "See?" She opened her hand, palm flat, allowing Kevin to inspect the small object. It looked somewhat like a butterfly, but not quite, with almost translucent fabric stretched across a thin wire outline.

"And what is that?" Kevin squinted.

Becky took a deep breath. "Wings."

"Really?" Kevin picked them up, turning them over in his hand. He supposed they were wings. "Where'd you find them?"

"In that box of stuff you had from Brian's apartment." Becky clambered up onto the couch next to him. "I gave them to him for Christmas last year, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember." He remembered that Becky and Brian had both been ecstatic over them, while Kevin had been more than a little clueless about what was going on, and at the time, didn't really care.

"I think I'll give it to someone else for Christmas." Becky sat down, sticking her legs straight out in front of her.

"It's not even mid November yet! Chill, Becky!" Kevin laughed.

"Brian doesn't need them anymore." She added thoughtfully, running her finger along the gauzy fabric.

Kevin bit his lip. She was so blunt about it.

"Do you suppose angels get wings in heaven, or does it not matter there?" Becky wondered.

"You think Brian's an angel now?" Kevin suddenly realized what Becky had meant by not needing the wings anymore.

Becky shook her head. "No, Daddy. You don't get it. He always was."

## Chapter Seventy One

Stacy was having the worst day in... well, she actually couldn't remember having absolutely everything go wrong before. It had all started when Nick, with his usual restless sleeping, had smacked her across the face with his hand forty five minutes before her alarm went off. Things had just gone downhill from there. She had been late to work, and then as the ultimate horrible moment of the day, she had lost the drawing regarding who was to lead the field trip tour of the day, and ended up spending most of her day showing a group of fifth and sixth graders exactly what it was she did for a living.

After today, she wasn't so sure she liked children anymore. Maybe one at a time, but in large groups, they were too frustrating. It hadn't helped that the chaperones had more or less ignored their antics and the havoc they were wreaking the entire time. She now had a headache, her feet hurt, and she had to drive home in rush hour traffic to a boyfriend that could be in one of many moods, none of which had been easy or fun to deal with as of late.

She swiped her ID tag through the latch, waiting for the door to open. Of course it didn't work, what else should she had been expecting. If she could manage to get out of the building, she was going home, and she was going to bed. Nick was on his own for tonight. He was an adult, in spite of his attitude of late, and he was just going to have to figure something out on his own.

The door opened on her third swipe of the key, and she safely made it into the lobby, almost catching the fabric of her skirt in the door as it closed. The skirt had added to the feeling of the day. Stacy would have preferred to wear her khakis and sweater, but she had ended up spending Sunday afternoon with Nick rather than with the laundry basket, as planned, and she had been left with the choice of a skirt or pajamas. She had almost tripped on the hem twice, and earlier she had closed it in a door.

Stacy almost made it safely out of the building, but not quite. She managed to catch her bag on the handle to the door, effectively stopping her in her tracks and yanking her backwards. Turning around, she yanked at the strap in frustration, trying to unhook it.

"Here, I got it." A familiar voice said from behind her, sounding slightly amused. "How did you manage to get it hooked around like that?"

"What are you doing here?" Stacy said in surprise, once her heart climbed back down into the general vicinity of her chest.

Nick glanced away from the door and raised one eyebrow, not missing the indifferent way she had addressed that question. "Surprise." He flashed a quick smile and finished unhooking the bag.

"What are you doing down here?" Stacy repeated again, with a little more enthusiasm this time, her brain finally starting to clear. She couldn't even remember the last time Nick had shown up to meet her either for lunch or after work. It had been before the pennant race, so chances were it had been towards the end of August. Not to mention, she couldn't remember him ever showing up wearing dress pants and a button down shirt. The jacket and tie were missing, but even so, he couldn't have managed to look much more attractive if he had been trying.

Nick shrugged. "I had to come down to the front offices today anyway, so I thought I'd come over and meet you." He reached one long arm around her, pulling her up against him. "You got plans tonight?"

"Sleeping." Stacy let herself lean up against his gray dress shirt, not really caring what the pedestrians walking past were thinking. Nick smelled and felt entirely too good to let go of right then.

"Aw, bad day?" He said it sympathetically, but still, he was in a good mood and Stacy wasn't, and he grated on her nerves slightly. How could he be so cheerful when just yesterday afternoon he had been wondering why he couldn't cry?

"Yes, bad day." She left it at that, not really wanting to go through the details.

"Sorry." His hand rubbed her arm through the sleeve of her cardigan, not saying anything else until they reached his car in the pay lot across the street. "Stacy?" He pulled her around until she was facing him, holding onto her shoulders lightly with his hands. "I know I haven't been easy to put up with lately."

"Nick, don't start apologizing again." Stacy interrupted him.

"No, I mean it." Nick shook his head. "I don't deserve the way you've been treating me, and... I just want you to know that... it's not that I haven't noticed. Okay?" He finished his speech, as short as it was, giving her a slightly uncertain smile.

Stacy couldn't help herself. Between the way he looked in that shirt, and the unsure way he was standing there, she had to hug him, again. This time he wrapped both arms around her, resting his chin on the top of her head. "You know what I miss?" He said finally.

"No." She leaned up against his chest, closing her eyes. Standing there with his arms around her, she could easily forget all the previous events of the day.

"We used to do fun stuff. How come we never do fun stuff anymore?" He sounded thoughtful.

Stacy pulled back reluctantly, looking up at his face. "I don't know. Things changed, I guess."

Nick wrinkled his nose. "I don't like it."

"So do something about it."

"Exactly!" He almost jumped up and down, but not quite. "I figured we'd go and see Baby McLean, whose name, I hear, is Natalie, and then we'd get something to eat. And after that... well... we can be spontaneous."

"Oh, good idea!" Stacy was the one jumping up and down now. She had been hoping to see Felicia sometime that week, but it was better unplanned like this.

"Ow!" Nick yelped. "Okay, stand still!" He grabbed her around the waist, pulling her up against him and forcing her to stop jumping. He was smiling now, not the little half smiles she had been seeing lately, but a full blown smile, complete with dimples.

"You're that hungry, huh?"

Even if it was immature, she had to do it. She stuck her tongue out at him and ducked down into the car.

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"Stacy! Nick!" AJ slammed into both of them with the force of a small cannonball. Nick winced and rubbed his ribcage. Was AJ wearing metal plates underneath his sweater? Nick was almost positive he was going to be bruised from that attack.

"What? The two of you got some kind of a big date tonight or something?" AJ stepped back to inspect clothing. Nick was surprised AJ hadn't brought up the clothing first.

"Nah, I had contract s--- to do today." Nick collapsed into one of the hospital chairs near the window and gave Felicia one of his best "I'm irresistible" smiles. He'd seen the look on her face when he first came into the room. Frankly, he had forgotten exactly how much fun – and how much of an ego builder it was – to turn women's heads. This was something he'd have to do more often in the future.

"They're trying to get you to sign a contract?" AJ grabbed the chair next to Nick, since Stacy was sitting on the end of the bed, both women giggling over something.

"Yep." Nick shrugged. He wasn't too sure of the details, because he hadn't really paid attention during the meeting. He had no intentions of signing any kind of long term contract to begin with, so why bother?

AJ left the contract subject at that, apparently he wasn't one for legalities either. "So I haven't seen you since we got back. How's life?"

"Pretty good right now." It was the truth, and he wasn't going to go into details anyway. AJ didn't really want details. He was just making small talk since his other option was to run madly around the room. Even now, AJ was barely sitting in the chair, both feet tapping on the floor.

"Alex, you could go find the nurse." Felicia pointed out. "As much as we'd all like to believe it, I doubt that they came to see you."

"That's what you think!" AJ shot back, before obligingly charging out into the hallway.

"It makes me dizzy just watching him." Felicia sighed. "I swear - that was the first time he sat down in the last two days." She smiled at Nick. "Well, don't I get a hug or anything?"

Nick frowned, slightly confused. Stacy didn't appear to be too surprised, so he figured he might as well. Maybe it was some kind of girl thing. Nick wasn't a hugs kind of person, unless it was someone he knew really well. He stood up and gave her a quick hug.

"You're right." Felicia informed Stacy solemnly, before both of them burst into giggles.

Nick sighed. "What's so funny?"

"Absolutely nothing at all." Stacy said quickly, the smile on her face contradicting her statement.

"Yeah, why does everyone have to pick on Nick?" Nick pouted.

"It's a secret." Stacy said saucily.

"I'll make you tell me." Nick threatened, grabbing her hair and pulling.

"You will not." Stacy ducked her head and tugged her hair out of his hand.

Nick let go, glancing over at Felicia again. "How're you feeling?" He wasn't quite sure why he had asked that. Something had prompted the question, and he wasn't sure what. It was something he could see in her eyes, it looked familiar, but at the same time, he couldn't quite place it.

"I'm fine." Felicia nodded. "Tired, I suppose, but very happy."

AJ interrupted before Nick could say anything else, nurse and baby in tow. "Look! Isn't she cute?"

Nick stepped back and let AJ and Stacy take over in the cooing and giggling department.

Stacy was sitting cross-legged on the end of the bed, the black material of her skirt draped around her, hair falling down around her face as she fussed over the baby in her arms.

Nick slouched back down in the chair, chewing on his lower lip, watching AJ hover over Natalie. Right now, he was experiencing the same feeling he had felt watching the other players and their kids at Family Day at Yankee Stadium when he was little.

This sucked. He was jealous of a two day old baby.

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AJ frowned at the closed and locked door, before reaching over and pushing the doorbell again. Nick was home - his car was parked in the driveway. He gave up on the doorbell and banged on the door with his fist.

"What?" Nick jerked the door open. He would have been glaring, had it not been for the fact that his eyes were more or less still shut.

"What's up?" AJ pushed the door open far enough so he could step inside, checking his watch. Nick had to have just rolled out of bed. It was almost noon. AJ shook his head in mock sadness. Ah, the life of a superstar athlete.

"I am... now." Nick mumbled, rubbing his hand over his head and disappearing into the living room.

"Yeah, well, it was either show up here or get more permanent art inscribed on my body, and let's face it, I'm running out of room." AJ retorted, flinging himself into one of the leather chairs across from the couch and yanking his shirt up towards his chin. "I was thinking a ship across my chest... Nick? You with me here?"

Nick flopped over sideways on the couch and pulled one of the throw pillows over his head.

"Did I wake you up?" AJ figured he might as well ask.

"Uh-huh." Nick said from underneath the pillow.

"Well, damn, I'm sorry." He said sarcastically. "You'll have to miss out on your early afternoon sleep today, I guess."

Nick threw the pillow at him. Even with his eyes shut, he was a pretty good shot. AJ attributed that to all the relay throws he made from the outfield. He also attributed the fact that he missed catching the pillow to his defensive abilities as a pitcher. He was paid to throw a ball, not catch them.

"What are you doing here?" Nick wondered, sitting up and at least attempting to look alert. He failed and ended up looking half asleep and confused, with a serious case of bed head.

"I figured I'd make myself scarce for a few hours." AJ shrugged, flipping the footrest of the recliner up and making himself comfortable. "Lissie's kind of been tired the last couple weeks, and you didn't hear this from me, but she gets a little bitchy when she's tired. So she gets some space today, and I get to run errands." He tossed a manila folder at Nick, scowling when he one handed it before it smacked him in the nose. Then again, Nick was paid to catch balls, not throw them. Oh well.

"What is that?" Nick stared at it for a long moment. AJ was almost certain he saw Nick's eyes cross.

"You know Chuck Hale?"

"Yeah, the photographer?" Nick was slowly waking up.

"From Sports Illustrated." AJ finished. "I ran into him yesterday. I guess he was here to shoot for the football team or something? Does Seattle have a football team?" AJ was hardly the person to know.

Nick snickered. "Yeah, they have a football team. Geez, AJ, you have to be the only sports clueless athlete I have ever met."

"I'm not an athlete, I'm a baseball player." AJ corrected mildly. That had been said that before, he was outright plagiarizing someone, but he couldn't remember who.

"I bet you can't even name half the teams in the National League." Nick sighed.

"Dodgers, Reds, Braves. Who else matters?" AJ shrugged, watching Nick's jaw drop. Poor Nick, he had been raised with entirely too much baseball around him. He could probably name lineups for every single major league team. That thought frightened AJ a little. He wasn't sure if he could even name the lineup for the Mariners.

"What is this?" Nick waved the manila envelope in the air.

"Well, I know one is the shot from before game... six, I think." AJ shrugged. "As for the rest, I don't know. You request prints from him or something?" Chuck was usually quite good about handing out copies of photographs to players. The one picture AJ knew Nick was getting was the now infamous shot of he and Nick standing with their arms around an imaginary Brian. The picture had run on the front page of the local newspapers the day after the Series ended, and had almost made the cover shot of Sports Illustrated, before they decided to run with the usual team celebrating on the field photo, and moved the imaginary Brian shot to the inside. AJ had been impulsively fooling around during the photo shoot – he had no idea that picture would end up meaning as much as it did now.

"No prints that I remember." Nick frowned and opened the envelope. "You mean you didn't look and see?"

"Well, it was sealed." AJ excused himself. "Otherwise I would have." He couldn't help it, he was just a naturally curious person.

Nick stared at the one print silently, before setting it on the cushion next to him and slowly opening the other packet from the folder. He flipped through the photos inside, chewing on his lower lip in concentration. "S---." He said finally, tossing the pictures onto the coffee table in front of him.

"What?" AJ flipped the footrest in and leaned forward, his curiosity getting the better of him. There had to be a dozen shots or so, mostly of Brian and Nick doing what they did best, which was horse around on the field before the game, but a few of just Brian. There was one in particular that smacked AJ in the chest a little more than the rest, Brian sitting in the dugout, staring up at the action on the field. He wasn't sure why, it was the look in his eyes or something. Chuck was very, very good at what he did.

"Damn, he's good." AJ said it out loud, setting the pictures back down.

"I miss him." Nick said quietly.

"Yeah." AJ figured Nick wasn't talking about Chuck. He managed to sit still for a moment, before deciding the mood in the room was getting just a little too heavy for his taste. "Okay, that does it. Let's go."

"Where?" Nick wondered.

"Three weeks until Christmas, my friend." AJ nodded sagely. "Let's go shopping." There was nothing like spending a little money to make you feel better, and Nick had more than enough money to spend. "You might as well spend some of that Nike endorsement you just landed, right?"

"I guess?" Nick said blankly. "What are you doing for Christmas, AJ?"

"Tampa." AJ shrugged. "But you can't tell anyone, cause I'm surprising Lissie, and I'm not telling her for another couple weeks." He gave Nick his best threatening glare, which even he knew wasn't much. "Can you keep a secret?"

Nick gave him a half smile. "Trust me, I'm entirely too good at keeping secrets."

## Chapter Seventy Two

Felicia was now in that floating area where she was so tired she had long since tuned out everything going on around her, but at the same time was too tired to actually fall asleep. The couch wasn't the most comfortable place to lie, but she was too tired to climb up the steps and go to bed.

Somewhere, back in the one corner of her mind that was still aware of the real world, she could hear Natalie crying. Natalie was a very quiet, complacent baby, except almost on cue, every few hours, she'd start crying.

"I got her." AJ announced happily, patting Felicia's leg on his way past the couch.

Felicia didn't even open her eyes. Of course he did. AJ handled everything. He was good at that. She wasn't. Right now, she wasn't even capable of going upstairs and crawling into bed.

"Okay, you want to go to bed, or just sleep there tonight?" It seemed as if he was back awfully quickly, but she didn't have an especially good grasp on time at the moment, so maybe not.

"Bed." She said finally, letting him pull her up. A theory had been raised that chronic fatigue was caused by the patient's muscles being unable to relax completely, and Felicia could believe it. It was her joints that ended up hurting the most, and the only thing she had found that helped was the prescription muscle relaxer she'd been on for the last year or so. The downside was they gave her a horrible headache, but sometimes you just had to choose the lesser of the two evils. Right now, she really wanted to sleep.

"And we hit that rut in the marriage where husband takes off wife's shirt, and wife doesn't even care." AJ announced with a flourish, tugging her shirt off over her head and sending it onto the carpet next to her skirt. "Good thing I still care, huh?" He added, the grin on his face growing wider.

"It's not fair hitting on me when I'm tired." Felicia protested automatically.

"Hell yeah, it is." AJ argued. "I can say whatever I want and be assured you won't slap me for it." He vanished into the bathroom, still babbling. That was one of the nice things about AJ. You never had to worry about making conversation. "I think it's a great setup!" He yelled, banging the medicine cabinet door. "Here." He appeared again a few moments later, pulling a t-shirt over her head and handing her a small pinkish colored pill.

Felicia sighed. AJ wouldn't be analytical enough to think a glass of water might help, so she swallowed it dry, too tired to even try and figure out what the medication was. There were too many different pills, all different colors that did different things. Her mind couldn't keep it all straight.

AJ, in his many shopping trips around the major leagues, was always bring home assorted t-shirts with strange sayings. If they were big enough, Felicia ended up wearing them to bed. Tonight, the shirt said 'I am woman, see me shop'. AJ had found it in Detroit last year, and he was rather proud of himself because of it. Felicia half crawled, half fell over underneath the blankets, not really caring if there was a pillow there or not.

"You okay?" AJ asked quietly.

Felicia nodded, rolling over away from him, half wishing he would just go away and let her sleep. "I'll be fine in the morning."

She could feel AJ crawling over her legs onto the other side of the bed. "Hey." He knelt on the bed next to her, elbows resting on his knees. "I thought we weren't going to do this anymore?"

"Do what?" She wasn't sure if he wasn't making sense because he was AJ, or because her head was so fuzzy.

"You promised me you'd back off." He didn't say it in an accusatory tone; he was merely stating a fact.

They went through this every single time. AJ was upset because she was doing too much. Felicia was upset because she couldn't do anything. This time was different, however. Usually, she couldn't stand the fact she had no energy. This time, she didn't care. Right now, she'd happily stay in bed for days. "Okay, I am." She said quietly, closing her eyes.

He laid down next to her and pulled her up against him, but this time, it didn't make her feel any better. She still had a feeling that things weren't going to be okay.

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"Hi, Nick!" Becky was skipping across the cement floor of the ball yard, coming to a stop next to Nick. She was wearing jingle bells on the laces of her shoes. She didn't even need the reindeer, she sounded like a sleigh all on her own.

"Hey." Nick smiled at her and kept packing his bats, gloves and other random baseball equipment into his bag. He had finally grown bored of doing nothing while Stacy was at work, and had taken Kevin up on the offer of hanging out at the ball yard during the day. This was the official hanging spot for any major leaguers that spent the off-season in Seattle. AJ even spent a good part of his time there, and he didn't even hit. He just sat and talked and made fun of everyone else. AJ wasn't there that day, since Felicia hadn't been feeling well. It had been a fairly quiet day without him, so far.

Becky hopped up onto the bench next to Nick and stuck her feet out, making the bells jingle again. "See?" She said happily, holding her feet up for inspection. "They're my Christmas spirit shoes."

"Very cool." Nick nodded. Christmas spirit shoes – Becky was as excited about Christmas as AJ was. That was a scary thought.

"I have all my Christmas presents wrapped too." Becky added proudly. "Daddy showed me how to wrap them so the corners don't bunch all up, like when Mommy does it. What did you get Stacy for Christmas?"

"I still have two weeks!" Nick stalled, wincing. He hadn't even thought about that.

"What are you going to get her?" Becky didn't back down.

"I don't know." Nick admitted. "What do you think I should get her?"

Becky thought for a while, weighing the possibilities. "A ring." She said finally.

Nick choked and started coughing, almost toppling off the bench. WHAT had she just said? "No..." He gasped finally, his arms waving in the air. "No no no no no no... not a good idea."

"Why not?" Becky shoved her lower lip out, pouting slightly at being rejected.

"Cause... it's just not." Nick pulled himself back together, tucking his legs up Indian style on the bench. "You don't do that unless you've known someone for a long time. You got any other ideas? Lingerie is out of the question too, okay?" He might as well make that clear from the start. That sounded like a Christmas present Howie would give

his girlfriend. All of them. For just a moment, Nick wondered exactly how Howie managed to juggle all those girls.

"La-what?" Becky scrunched her face up.

"Never mind." Nick wasn't going to be the one to explain that to Kevin's kid. If he did, it'd be the last thing Nick ever did.

"Well then..." Becky let the subject of lingerie drop. "Give her an angel."

Nick wrinkled his nose. "How do you give someone an angel?"

"Not a real one, silly!" Becky chortled.

Nick frowned. That was the first time a six year old had ever made him feel stupid. "So a not real angel?"

"Yep." Becky swung her legs, making the bells on her shoes jingle. "You can't give people real angels."

"You believe all that stuff like Brian did, right?" Nick wondered. Brian had always been going on about angels and everything happening for a reason. The angels, Nick could go along with. The rest, now more than ever, he was convinced Brian was wrong on that one.

"What stuff?" Becky frowned, her legs no longer moving. "About angels?"

"Yeah. You can see them?"

Becky nodded solemnly. "Well, you can't really see them, 'cause angels look just like everybody else. They don't have wings like the pictures. But you can tell when they're there, because angels are more of a feeling that everything is going to be okay and they're going to help you fix things." She smiled at him. "Brian explained it a lot better than I can. It's because he was older and knew bigger words than me."

"Peaceful?" Nick offered.

"Yes." Becky nodded. "And safe, and happy."

"Do you think bad stuff can happen to angels?"

"Yes." Becky said instantly.

Nick flinched slightly. That had been a quick response.

"Angels aren't perfect." Becky explained, her feet swinging and jingling again.

"Angels have problems and they make mistakes. And sometimes angels need help too."

He filed that information away for future reference. That wasn't something Brian had ever said anything about. Still, it all added up. "So, Becky? Do you think Brian was an angel?"

## Chapter Seventy Three

Nick's driving had always been a little too aggressive and testosterone influenced for Stacy's liking. She didn't have to actually grab the dashboard, but still, riding in a car with Nick made her slightly nervous. It was a little like riding a roller coaster, she knew it was perfectly safe, but still, there were moments of terror.

"Damn it, come on!" Nick yelled at the red stoplight in front of him.

Stacy bit her lip to keep from telling him to calm down, knowing that wouldn't do any good at all. She was just as worried as he was.

"What did he say?" Stacy asked again. "What happened?" All she had managed to get out of Nick as he bolted for the door was that it had been AJ on the phone and Felicia was in the hospital again.

Nick shook his head as the light changed, and he pulled into the parking garage of the hospital.

"Nick?" She tried again, as he parked the car.

"I don't know!" Nick snapped, before leaning his forehead against his hands on the steering wheel and taking a deep breath. "I don't know." He repeated it in a quieter tone this time. "He wasn't exactly making sense, ya know? I just know it's not good, he can't get a hold of Denise... he was pretty upset." He unsnapped his seatbelt and got out of the car, carefully closing the door behind him.

"Hey, you okay?" He added as she caught up to him next to the elevator.

"Yeah, I think." Stacy was fine, other than she was more than a little worried about Felicia, and AJ for that matter. "I just hope this isn't a repeat of the last time she was in the emergency room."

Nick nodded, leaning against the wall off the elevator as it rose up to the main floor of the hospital. "Okay, this way." He took stock of the blue signs on the wall as the door opened, and set off down the hallway.

Stacy raised her eyebrows in surprise and hurried after him. The take charge attitude was a new one for Nick. She had seen a semblance of it on the field, especially when he was dealing with the media, but off the field, Nick had never been the one to take initiative.

"AJ!" Nick spotted the pitcher in the waiting area at the end of the hallway, slouched in his chair, not particularly paying attention to the fussing baby in his arms.

"Dude, what happened?" Nick dropped sideways into the chair next to AJ, completely oblivious to the annoyed glance the woman in the next chair gave him.

"Hey, Nick." AJ sighed.

"Here, hand her over." Nick reached over and took Natalie, correctly judging that she was about to start a first rate baby screaming fit. "AJ, what's going on?"

"They're pumping her stomach, okay?" AJ said shortly, folding his arms across his chest.

"Oh God, no." Nick's mouth fell open as Natalie latched her tiny hand onto one of the pull strings to his sweatshirt hood. "Please tell me she didn't..." He broke off, chewing on his lower lip while Natalie happily gummed the blue string.

"That's what they're telling me." AJ's voice was barely audible now. "S---, I don't believe this is happening."

"Did you get a hold of your mom?" Nick wondered.

AJ stared at him blankly for a moment. "Yeah... about ten minutes ago. Nick, what am I going to do?"

"I'm not sure." Nick stared down at Natalie's dark head, resting against his sweatshirt.

"Mr. McLean?" Nick was interrupted by a man in the standard hospital garb of blue scrubs and clipboard. "Would you mind coming with me?"

"Yeah, I'm coming." AJ ran his hands through his hair and stood up slowly, following the doctor back down the hallway.

"Nick?" Stacy slipped into the chair AJ had vacated. "I missed most of that. What happened?"

"They're pumping her stomach." Nick repeated.

"Yes, I heard. I missed why they're doing that."

Nick arched one eyebrow slightly. "Because she OD'd." He said it perfectly calmly, as if it was completely normal and nothing to be worried about.

"What?" Stacy finally spit out, after her mouth refused to cooperate with her vocal cords for several seconds. "Nick, are you insane?"

"Not right now." Nick shook his head. "Stacy, she tried to kill herself. You can't say it much clearer than that."

"But... why?" Stacy leaned against the back of the poorly padded chair and tried to make some sense of what she had just been told.

"Cause she's screwed up." Nick said evenly.

"Nick!"

"She is." He interrupted firmly. "You don't try to kill yourself unless you're screwed up. Trust me on that one."

Stacy stared at him again, realizing yet again exactly how little she really knew about him. "Nick..."

"Not now." He shook his head firmly.

"Okay." She left that subject alone. "This is one of my best friends."

"I know." Nick said in a softer tone than before. "I'm sorry, Stacy. Come here." He added, reaching over with his free arm to pull her over towards him.

She scooted over to the far side of the chair and leaned up against him, ignoring the wooden chair arm digging into her side, watching Natalie fall asleep.

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Denise hurried down the hallway, back towards the waiting area. Of all days for something like this to happen, why had it happened on the day she was wearing pantyhose? She could deal with things so much easier if there wasn't a tube of spandex and nylon constricting her lower body. She would have taken them off, but walking around barefoot wasn't exactly a thrilling idea either.

She could see Nick and Stacy sitting in the fairly deserted waiting area, Stacy leaning up against Nick's arm, and Natalie sprawled across his other arm, dead to the world. Sleeping wasn't a trait Natalie had inherited from AJ. As a baby, AJ had rarely slept, and never in a public place. Even then, he had been too busy charming people.

Stacy was the first to notice Denise, straightening up and pushing her hair back behind her ears. Denise bent over and gave her a hug. She would have hugged Nick, but

Denise hadn't been thirty five and holding for several years for nothing. She could read body language quite well and there was going to be no hug for Nick.

"Your arm must be tired." She sat down in the chair across from them, and nodded at the limp, yellow clad figure in his arms.

Nick shrugged his other shoulder, smiling slightly. "Can't really feel my arm anymore, so I'm not sure. Has she come around yet?"

"Felicia? Not quite."

"Here, let me take her." Stacy interjected, reaching over to shift Natalie into her arms.

"Is AJ staying with her?" Nick asked quietly, handing Natalie over.

"Yeah." Denise nodded.

"Good." Nick bent his arm a few times. "Yeah, okay, now it hurts." He added.

"Are you going to stay here?" Stacy asked, ignoring Nick and his arm.

"I think it would probably be a good idea."

"What about Natalie?"

"We can watch her." Nick pointed out calmly.

"Oh no." Denise shook her head. "That's okay." She could handle both a baby and AJ. AJ didn't need much looking after anyway; he had always been fairly self resilient. At least, he had been before.

"Nah, you're gonna have your hands full here." Nick protested. "Really."

Denise frowned. She should pick up some tips from Nick on how not to be argued with. "Okay, fine." She gave in and started fishing in her skirt pocket for her car keys. "Contrary to what Alex would have you believe, I'm not that scatterbrained. I've got a bag of her stuff in the car."

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"Yeah, as much as I love my car, it wasn't designed for kids." Nick shook his head and glared at the car seat in his hand. "You'll get the backseat all to yourself though." He added, with a grin, trying to wrestle it into the passenger seat of the car.

"Here." Stacy passed Natalie over and took over buckling the seat in. If they waited for Nick to figure out something even remotely mechanical, they could still be there when Felicia left. Stacy bit her lip, wondering exactly how long they were going to keep Felicia there. "There." She finished threading the seatbelt through and fastened it.

"You alright?" Nick tipped his head to one side.

"Fine."

"Okay then." He leaned over for a quick kiss, and handed a now squirming Natalie back. "I'm gonna go give Denise her key back. I'll be right back."

"You do that." Stacy watched him jog back towards the elevator. What was up with him? He had just gotten out of bed that morning and decided to suddenly have his act together?

She buckled Natalie into the car seat, and started fishing through the so called diaper bag, looking for a pacifier. Diaper bags were supposed to be pink gingham, or blue with little yellow duckies on them, but not for the McLean's. It was black, and therefore coordinated with everything while looking chic at the same time.

Natalie accepted the pacifier, happily curled her hands up inside her yellow pajamas and stopped squirming. Stacy leaned against the side of the car, waiting for Nick to come back, and tried to make some sense in her head of the last couple hours.

She couldn't even begin to understand what had possessed Felicia to do something like this. She had a perfect little baby girl, she had a husband who practically worshiped the ground she walked on, what could have possibly been so horrible that she would have just given up on all of that? She hadn't been feeling very good the last week or so, Stacy unexpectedly recalled, but still, Felicia had been sick before.

What bothered her most was she hadn't even seen it coming. No one had, and if anyone would have figured it out, it would have been AJ.

"Hey, you ready to go?" Nick's arms surrounded her from behind, hugging her back against him.

Stacy nodded, suddenly not trusting her voice.

Nick turned her around, before slowly reaching up to brush at her face. "Come on, don't cry." He whispered. "It's okay."

She shook her head, before swiping at her eyes. She hadn't even realized she was crying. Nick pulled her up against him again and let her cry.

~\*~

"Come on, Nick, she's screaming!"

Nick frowned at the red faced baby Stacy was holding, before turning his attention back to the writing on the formula can. "Yeah, I can see that. Where are the damn instructions on this thing?"

"Right there." Stacy pointed at the can. "Open the canister."

Nick did as ordered and pulled the top off, watching blankly as Stacy fixed the bottle with one hand and stuck it in the microwave. It had been a very long day. Just when things had finally started to get worked out, and Nick felt like his life was back on track, this happened. Now he was being hit with feelings and emotions that he hadn't thought about in years.

"How do you know all this stuff?" He demanded, as Stacy pulled the bottle out of the microwave and headed back for the living room.

"I have no idea." Stacy shrugged, shaking the bottle.

"Why are you doing that?" Couldn't she just stick the bottle in Natalie's mouth and stop the screaming?

"Because it doesn't heat evenly."

"Oh." He sank down on the couch next to her, resting his head against the back cushion. This wasn't fair; he didn't want to go through all this again. Still, he couldn't back off now, he was pretty sure Stacy had figured out what was going on, and the least he could do was explain everything.

"What're you thinking about?" Stacy nudged him with her knee. Natalie had stopped screaming, and was greedily sucking on the bottle.

Nick took a deep breath. This was going to take a while. "Stacy, I need to tell you something."

## Chapter Seventy Four

"When I was fifteen, I OD'd on my Dad's painkiller. That was his second to last season in the majors, and he was having back problems, so needless to say, they weren't any wimpy little pills either. Anyway, my parents were in New York, and the housekeeper ended up being the one that had to call the paramedics. So they hauled me into the emergency room, pumped my stomach, and... I don't remember if they knocked me out, or if I just passed out, but I came to and... I don't think I've ever been that scared my entire life." Nick was sitting in the chair next to the bed, knees hugged up to his chin.

Felicia stared at him, completely speechless. It wasn't that speechlessness was something she wasn't used to; in fact she had spent a great deal of her life in that very state. That had to be one of the last things she had ever expected Nick Carter to say.

"Why?" She said finally, ducking her head down to fuss with Natalie's pale green plaid blanket. She was still confused – and as Nick had said, scared – about the last two days, and it was making her feel defenseless.

Nick wrinkled his nose. "I'm not sure. Either, I really wanted to die, or it was my last attempt at getting my parents attention. I was in therapy for three years and I never really figured it out."

"That's very comforting." She said dryly, watching Natalie's perfect little fist grab hold of her index finger. It took so little to keep Natalie happy. All she needed was her blanket, pacifier and someone to hold her. Why couldn't it be that simple all the time? "So, did it work?"

"Huh?" Nick said it rather eloquently.

"To get your parents attention, I mean."

"Oh. No, it didn't." He shrugged. "However, it did make me realize in no uncertain terms that they didn't care. They finally showed up at the hospital, and I got five or six different lectures, what the hell was wrong with me, how could I scare my mother like that, so on and so forth... but it never occurred to either of them to bother asking WHY I did any of that. And I spent the next four years of my life more than a little screwed up."

"Did you ever do it again?" Felicia had to ask. That thought had been what was worrying her the most about what she had done. Everything had happened so unexpectedly, what if she tried something like that again?

"Yeah." Nick pushed up the black sleeve of his shirt. In the back of her mind, Felicia noted how baseball players always had great tans, at least on their arms. Nick ran his finger along the hardly visible scar on his forearm. "That was nineteen, in the minors at Columbus, after a nice little three error game that my father called me and chewed me out over." He pulled his sleeve back down and leaned back in the chair. "And then last April, I was that close..." he held his fingers up to demonstrate, "... but Brian kind of interrupted things."

"That worries me a little." Felicia admitted.

"What does? Attempting something like that again?" Nick shook his head. "I don't think you will. I don't think you're going to screw your life up like I did."

"Oh, and what makes you think that?"

"Because, I didn't have anybody until about ten months ago, but you... you have AJ."

"Oh really? How do you know this isn't going to mess up our entire relationship, and he'll never trust me again?" Felicia retorted. So much for speechless, where had that

come from? It was true, however. If she was AJ, she certainly wouldn't trust herself. Actually, she didn't trust herself very much anymore either.

"Did he say that?" Nick said slowly.

"No. We haven't done a whole lot of talking the last couple days." Of course, it hadn't taken AJ a lot of talking to get his point across. 'Do you think I want to raise a kid all by myself?' had gotten his point across in very few words. She wasn't sure what to do about AJ right now, either.

She pulled Natalie closer, wrapping the blanket tighter. At least there was one part of her life that wasn't falling apart.

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Nick stared down at his hands, surprised to see they weren't shaking. He felt like he should be. Telling that entire story hadn't been any easier the second time around. He hadn't explained things as much to Felicia, partly because she already knew, but mostly because he wasn't comfortable taking everything to that level with someone he barely knew.

More and more, the fact that he was taking things to that level with Stacy was fast becoming his favorite part of their relationship. Yeah, she was pretty, and he wouldn't deny that he enjoyed the physical side of everything, but he loved the fact that he could trust Stacy with anything. He loved the way that she didn't just assume answers about him.

AJ was slouched next to Nick, arms folded across his chest, staring fixedly at the wall. He had greeted Nick when he and Natalie had first arrived, talked baby talk to his daughter for a couple minutes, and then left them alone. Nick couldn't tell if AJ was mad or just upset. Either way, he didn't really feel like prodding him.

"Look what I found in the gift shop downstairs!" Denise announced happily when she got off the elevator, waving a Harlequin Romance in their face.

"Yep, look at that. You found yourself a half naked woman being attacked by a strategically covered man. Nice job." AJ glanced upwards, arms remaining folded.

Nick wrinkled his nose at the picture. The couple featured on the front reminded him strangely of Chelsea Powers and Howie. That was a mental image he would prefer to never think of again.

"Shut up, now." Denise smacked her son on the head with the book. "This is better than those dumb mysteries with the cat solving murders that I was reading. I mean, how realistic is THAT?"

AJ frowned. "Shall I just refrain from answering?"

Denise raised the book again.

"Nick and I are going to head out for a while. We'll be back in a while, okay? Natalie's with Lissie." AJ grabbed Nick by the arm and started for the elevator, leaving Denise with her paperback.

"Um, where are we going?" Nick wondered, once the elevator was heading towards the lobby. This was news to him. He rubbed his arm gingerly, quite certain that AJ had bruised something dragging him towards the elevator.

"I have no idea. I just want out. She's driving me nuts." AJ tapped his foot nervously on the floor. "God, I wish I still smoked."

Nick was rather glad that AJ didn't smoke, the thought of him with any form of fire was entirely too frightening.

"So, what did she say?" AJ prodded, as the elevator doors opened to the lobby.

"What do you mean?" Nick was confused.

"I mean right now Felicia is refusing to acknowledge my presence in the room, so I was curious exactly what she said." AJ repeated testily.

"She's ignoring you?" Nick hadn't realized that. Shutting AJ out wasn't going to solve anything for her, Nick was more than aware of that fact. True, he had just figured that out recently, but if he had just known to begin with, he had to wonder how differently his life would have turned out.

"You know what, I don't really want to talk about it right now." AJ's voice caught in the back of his throat.

"Okay." Nick wasn't going to push it. Emotional outbursts weren't something he had ever been good dealing with, either with himself or others. "That way." He pointed AJ in the direction of the elevator to the parking garage. By the time they reached Nick's car, AJ had his sunglasses out and firmly in place. Nick flung the car seat in the trunk, slightly harder than necessary. He knew that trick – don't let the rest of the world in. Nick just had it perfected where he didn't need sunglasses.

"She thinks you don't trust her anymore." Nick said finally, starting the car and quickly flipping off the CD player, which was still playing at freeway level decibels. He wasn't sure which side to take. Felicia had never explicitly said not to tell AJ that, but he knew she wouldn't have said it had AJ been there, and at the same time, AJ needed to know what was going on.

"Would you?" AJ said finally.

"AJ, I don't know." He honestly didn't. If he was in AJ's shoes, he had absolutely no idea what he would do.

AJ sat quietly for several minutes, thinking. "I think I still do. What makes me wonder is exactly how much she trusted me."

Nick put the car in gear. He didn't really care where he was going, he just needed something to do. Stacy would have had an answer for AJ. Nick didn't. He couldn't remember ever having an answer when someone needed it. Some friend he was.

"She scared the hell out of me." AJ said after several city blocks.

"She scared herself just as much, if not more." Nick corrected softly.

"What am I going to do?" AJ sighed.

"Well, you either give up, or as a friend of mine who claims to be wise once said, you pick up the pieces and move on."

"When did I say that?"

"How did you know I was talking about you?" Nick countered. "You said it in New York when I wanted to know what happens when everything backfires in your face." It was funny how his mind kept going back to that day. "When I said I was in love with Stacy."

The corner of AJ's mouth tipped up in a tiny smile. "Did you ever tell her that?"

"We're not talking about that right now, AJ, we're talking about Felicia." Nick said firmly.

"Do you believe in soul mates?" AJ turned his attention back to the buildings passing by the car window.

"What do you mean?"

"One perfect person for everyone. 'Cause I do. I can't imagine my life without Felicia. I honestly can't." AJ eyed Nick over his glasses. "You know exactly what I'm talking about, don't you?"

Nick ran his hand through his hair. He wasn't sure. He didn't know if he could imagine living without Stacy or not. He didn't really want to know. What if he couldn't? Why couldn't his life just make sense to him for once?

"It changes things a little, doesn't it?" AJ pulled his sunglasses off and tossed them up on the dashboard.

"Yeah." Nick admitted. "It does. The last couple weeks, things have been different... it's... it feels more real now." Now he was making absolutely no sense whatsoever.

AJ bolted upright, clawing at the shoulder strap of the seatbelt when it tried to decapitate him. "You're a genius! Okay... while you're driving aimlessly here, go by my place. I need to get something."

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"You made me drive all the way over here for that?" Nick eyed the object in AJ's hand. "It's a stuffed bunny." He added disbelievingly.

"No." AJ corrected. "It's a rabbit. There's a big difference there, my friend."

"How?"

"Let's go. I'll explain to you on the way back."

## Chapter Seventy Five

The sun was in the process of setting behind the mountains, casting Felicia's room into semi-darkness. She could have turned the lights on, but she liked the twilight. It blurred the edges of everything just enough that she didn't feel as if she had to really pay attention to anything going on around her.

Natalie had left with Nick a little over an hour ago, leaving Felicia by herself in the room yet again. AJ was no where to be found. Right now, that might have been a good thing, given the way he had reacted to everything. AJ always flipped out at first, then he pulled things together - she just wished he would hurry up. She wished he would show up. AJ had a way of making her feel safe.

Felicia wasn't sure that being left alone was such a great idea. Denise would sit with her, but Felicia could only take so much cheerfulness in one day. Still, being alone let her think too much. The longer she thought, the more she realized, as a parent, she sucked, no way around it. How was she supposed to take care of a little baby when she couldn't even get her own life straightened out?

"Hey there." AJ's head craned around the door. "You want company?"

She shrugged in response, mentally smacking herself upside the head for that one. Yes, she wanted company, why didn't she just say that?

AJ perched cross-legged next to her on the bed, resting his elbows on his knees and staring contemplatively at her for a long moment, resembling an owl - if owls had blue streaks in their hair that is. "Look." He said finally. "I'm sorry I blew up at you the other day."

That was all fine and well, but Felicia wasn't just going to accept his apology like that. She had ended up crying for close to an hour after that fight Sunday. It hadn't really been a fight. She considered a fight to be two sided, and AJ had done all the dramatics. The fact that she had no response had been a good portion of why she ended up so upset over everything. He wanted to know what she had been thinking to try something like that, she didn't know. She hadn't thought about Natalie right then, or AJ for that matter.

"I brought you a friend." AJ added, interrupting her mental rationalization.

She couldn't help herself, female curiosity got the better of her. He was holding the now slightly threadbare rabbit used as a visual aid when he proposed. According to her calculations, that had been over three years ago. She reached over to take the rabbit, running her finger over the black ceramic eyes.

AJ had graduated high school and spent the next two and a half months playing Rookie ball for Tampa Bay in West Virginia. He had proposed when he got back in August and Felicia's father took one look at AJ, who at the time only had three tattoos, announced he was a loser and if she married him, he would refuse to speak to her ever again.

Felicia married AJ anyway, since her father was all bark and no bite, and they spent the next season living in a tiny little apartment in South Carolina while AJ worked his way through the minor league system. Her father called every few days, just to check up on things, and partly to see if his worthless son-in-law was still around.

It had been while they were living in Charleston that she had started getting sick. Between her working two jobs, AJ's minor league paycheck and the additional money coming in from a rookie shortstop named Raul who slept on the couch in the living

room and picked up part of the rent, they could barely scrape by. The first time she had ended up in the hospital, her father announced AJ would skip out as fast as he could.

AJ didn't. He had been putting up with everything for two and a half years, just as she had, and he hadn't even come close to skipping out. He'd gone out of his way in the opposite direction. AJ always had a mother hen tendency, but it wasn't until that first year in the minors that he really kicked into high gear. That February, he went into spring training and landed on the AAA team, which for the Devil Rays, was basically the same as the majors, they made so many roster changes. By mid May he was in the Tampa bullpen, working on the beginnings of an impressive major league record. When he set his mind to something, the results could be remarkable.

She tried to smooth down the fuzzy hair on the rabbit's side, watching AJ thoughtfully. "Why are you so perfect?" She said finally.

AJ laughed. "What kind of hallucinogenic do they have you on?"

Felicia meant it. AJ was the one that handled everything; AJ was the one that took care of reality so Felicia didn't have to. He was always the first one to apologize. "You're always the one that apologizes or backs down first."

"Oh, that." AJ shrugged, twisting around until he was lying on the bed next to her. "I just give up easier than you do."

"No, you don't." Felicia protested.

"Yeah, I do." He reached over to tip her face towards him with two fingers. "You don't give up."

"I'm scared." It was then that she started crying again, for what had to be the third or fourth time in the last two days, barely noticing when AJ reached over to hold her.

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AJ snapped the lights in the hallway on. If he didn't, chances are he would find the one obstacle in the dark and injure himself. Accident prone people could never be too careful. As he had suspected, Felicia was still in Natalie's darkened room, standing at the side of the crib.

"What are you doing?" AJ wondered from the doorway, whispering so Natalie wouldn't wake up.

"Nothing." Felicia mouthed back. "Did you come to check up on me?" She added, half jokingly, half seriously. Today had been the first day she had bothered doing her hair and applying makeup. AJ was taking eyeliner as a sign that just maybe, their life was going to return to at least a semblance of normal.

"No..." AJ denied. "I just missed you, is that okay?" He supposed he had been checking up on her in a way, but it wasn't something new. He had always been checking up on her in a way. There was something about Felicia that knocked him into a higher level of protectiveness.

"I don't mind if you are." She pointed out.

AJ scowled. That wasn't right. Felicia minded. Felicia told him to back off when he started hovering too close. Ever since she had come home from the hospital, not quite a week before, the only time AJ was out of her sight was if she was with Natalie. Physically, she seemed to be okay again; she wasn't tired, she was sleeping at night, but emotionally, she was scaring AJ a little.

He stepped over behind her, wrapping his arms around hers and resting his chin on top of her head. She was so little. He almost felt as if he could wrap his arms around her twice.

"Isn't she perfect?" She leaned forward and adjusted the blankets around the sleeping baby one last time.

"She looks like you." AJ decided.

Felicia shook her head. "How can you tell? Dark hair and eyes - she could just as easily look like you."

"Well, I figure if she took after me, her hair would be orange or green by now." AJ smirked, reaching over and unsnapping the barrette that held Felicia's hair back from her face. This was an unspoken challenge. If he managed to unfasten the clip before she moved away or, more likely, she smacked him one, then he was the victor. Tonight, he won, but Felicia didn't put up much of a challenge.

"Doesn't she look peaceful?" She was paying absolutely no attention to the barrette or even to AJ, for that matter.

AJ turned his attention to the sleeping bundle in the crib, tiny little first curled up around the green blanket, dark eyelashes resting against her cheek, her mouth hanging open slightly as she breathed. She did look peaceful. Babies had it simple in life.

"She depends on me." Felicia's voice was barely audible. She leaned back against AJ, her head fitting perfectly against his chest. "I've always been the one that depended on someone; I've never actually had someone that depended on me before."

It was with that statement, that AJ was finally certain that Felicia was going to fight her way back. That realization over with, he decided to proceed with what he had really found Felicia for. In spite of everything that had happened, AJ was still thinking going to Tampa for Christmas was a good idea, in fact, it might even be a better idea now.

"You know, this is really weird, but I keep thinking about Brian." Felicia started, as AJ led her over to the rocking chair in the corner, pulling her down onto his lap.

"Brian?" AJ must have missed a thread of the conversation.

"Yeah." She shifted sideways, leaning her head against his shoulder and slipping one arm behind him. "Which is very strange, because I didn't even know him that well. But, Brian was the kind of person that people were always depending on - and then the other day I started thinking about it, and with everything he was going through, I wonder if it wasn't really the other way around."

"I think Brian was the kind of person that depends on people depending on him." AJ was rather proud of that observation. That had almost been, well, deep in a way.

Felicia paused. "What do you mean?" She said finally.

"Never mind." AJ didn't want to try and explain. "I have something for you." He shifted in his seat and dug the envelope out of his pocket.

"Christmas isn't until next week." Felicia reached to take the envelope, her wedding ring catching the light from the hallway.

"Well, it would be pointless to give it to you then." He leaned back, rocking the chair slightly as he watched her open the envelope and try to decipher the paper inside, holding it so the light from the hallway fell across the words.

"Shhh!" He jumped and clapped one hand across her mouth before she could scream, or shriek, or whatever loud noise had been ready to make itself known. "You'll wake her up."

"Sorry." Felicia whispered, giggling. "We're really going to Tampa?"

AJ raised one eyebrow. "What, you think I print fake airline tickets for the heck of it? Yeah, we're going to Tampa." He pulled her back up against him. "It'll be fun. Your father will insult me because I'm not a Brave, maybe if I'm lucky he'll chase me with his little foam tomahawk again." AJ had to laugh as he said that. Felicia's father was a diehard Atlanta Braves fan. He loved giving AJ a bad time about playing in the American League. AJ was planning on giving him his money's worth about the World Series this time. The Braves hadn't even made the League Championship Series.

"Oh, he really likes you." Felicia protested.

"Hell yeah he does." AJ agreed. "He wouldn't put that much effort into insulting me if he didn't."

"It's a wonderful present." Felicia smiled, for the first time AJ could remember in... well, it had to have been a couple weeks.

"Present?" He questioned. "That wasn't a present. It's not a present unless I spend hours shopping for it. That was merely a whim. Present - you ain't seen nothing yet."

## Chapter Seventy Six

Becky sat crossed legged on the couch, her hand absently rubbing at the black crushed velvet material of her pants. They didn't exactly go with her white tennis shoes, but this was Christmas Eve and what better time to wear Christmas Spirit shoes than on Christmas Eve?

She stared over at the Christmas tree in the corner. Her father had spent an hour and a half winding the blinking strands of lights so that the tree would flash evenly. Becky inspected the flashing lights critically. As near as she could tell, they looked pretty even.

Christmas had gone smoothly for Kevin this year. Usually, Brian was there to generally wreak havoc, perhaps knock the tree over, wrap lights around his neck, drape tinsel on everything, including Kevin's head, but this year, things had gone quite smoothly.

Becky had still climbed up on the couch and thrown tinsel on her father's head, and he had still chased her around the room, but it just hadn't been the same. Chasing wasn't any fun unless her father was really mad.

Right now, her parents were in the kitchen, arguing over alcohol. It was something of a tradition in the Richardson household. Becky had hot chocolate with a candy cane. She left the adult drinks alone. This year, it sounded like her mother was winning; no matter how many times Kevin stressed "that the recipe SAYS..." Elvis was singing Christmas Carols on the stereo, and Becky was watching the Christmas tree blink.

Another Richardson family tradition was that Kevin would do at least one thing that completely shocked his family, usually while sober, although that rule was subject to change. This year, he had invited Nick Carter over for Christmas Eve, and he had done it while sober. Karen had almost been shocked speechless, but not quite. Becky had been thrilled. Nick was still one of her favorite people, especially since he had shown her what he was giving Stacy for Christmas. It was a very good present, Becky thought, but she was excellent at keeping secrets and wasn't about to tell anyone what it was.

The doorbell rang and Becky bolted for the entryway, her shoes jingling merrily.

"Becky!" Kevin yelled from the kitchen. "Don't you dare answer that door! For all you know, there could be a... Neanderthal standing there." He finished, as he rounded the corner and saw the door already open and Becky jumping happily on Nick's feet.

"Daddy, don't be silly!" Becky giggled. "Neanderthals don't stand at doors on Christmas Eve!"

"Oh, really?" Kevin raised one eyebrow. "Are there other holidays that they take off as well?" He smiled and started greeting Nick and Stacy while Becky stepped back. Of course there were other holidays they took off - Christmas Day, Easter and the 4th of July. Becky could have told him that, but she would have been interrupting, and her father had raised her not to interrupt.

"And how are you, Becky?" Stacy asked, as she pulled her coat off. "I like your shoes."

Becky held one foot up so both she and Stacy could see them better. "They're Christmas Spirit shoes! They jingle." She added, just in case Stacy couldn't figure that out from the bells. She probably could - Stacy was smart. Kevin had said so.

One of the more entertaining events of Christmas Eve was what had become known as "the present game". It was a relay race of sorts, with two teams getting a certain

amount of time to unwrap a large box-inside-a-box-inside-a-box present. The catch - all unwrapping had to be done while wearing oven mitts. Usually, by the time it was over, Becky had been trampled at least once, usually by her mother or Brian, Kevin and Brian would end up in a wrestling match on the floor - while still wearing the oven mitts, and Brian always won.

This year, true to form, Kevin tackled Nick and wrestled him to the ground. Nick, however, was a considerably more aggressive fighter than Brian had been, even with oven mitts, and to Becky's great delight, it ended with Stacy and Karen dragging their respective men apart and lecturing them on acting their age.

Becky won this year. She unwrapped the smallest box, which of course, contained a Christmas ornament, this year a little glittery snowman. Kevin always put an ornament in the smallest box.

"Hey, Becky, c'mere." Nick was sprawled across the couch, hair now frizzy on top, thanks to his bout on the carpet with Kevin.

Becky narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Are you going to whap me on the head with that oven mitt?"

Nick's eyes widened. "What? No! I have something for you." He twisted and tucked the oven mitt until it formed some semblance of a ball, and tossed it at the back of Kevin's head, grinning when Kevin turned and gave him a perturbed glance.

"A present!" Becky squealed at the little package in red Santa wrapping paper.

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"Hey, Nick." Kevin cornered Nick in the little walkway between the dining room and kitchen.

"Yeah?" This entire evening had confused Nick slightly. Since when had Kevin lightened up this much? He was practically giddy. Maybe it was the alcohol creating Kevin's mood - or confusing Nick. He didn't drink very often, but it sure knocked him out when he did.

"I, um, just wanted to thank you for what you did with Becky - giving her the angel." Kevin folded his arms, looking slightly uncomfortable. "Brian always gave her an angel."

"Yeah, I know." Becky had told Nick that a few weeks back at the batting cage, that every Christmas Brian had given her an angel. Gertrude had been last Christmas' gift. A few days later, on an impulse, Nick had bought the little angel Becky was now clutching in her sticky hand.

"Excuse me, guys." Karen pushed her way through, bent over to carefully inspect the floor.

"What... are you doing?" Kevin wondered.

Karen held one finger up for silence. "Retracing my steps. Somewhere along the way, I managed to lose one of the buttons off my shirt." She pulled her shirt away from her chest and inspected the loose green threads. "And since it's kind of the important button for holding things together there, I figured I should probably try to find it."

Nick shrugged. That made sense to him. Kevin just looked confused. Chances were, he had never lost a button from a shirt, and couldn't understand having to look for one. Come to think of it, Nick couldn't remember ever losing a button off his shirt either, but he was quite sure that wasn't his point. He wasn't too sure what his point was anymore. Just standing in the same room as Kevin was confusing him. It had to be the alcohol.

He was ready to go to bed. Stacy would be driving home, Nick's brain had given up coherent thought for the night.

He followed Kevin back into the living room, collapsing next to Stacy on the couch and pulling her up against him. She was making small talk with Kevin, something about what holidays were celebrated in India, Kevin intently paying attention, as if she was giving him life and death information.

He could have been standing in the middle of one of those "find six things wrong with this picture" comics. One, he was actually spending a Christmas Eve in what would be considered a traditional setting, rather than the carefully orchestrated parade of parties his parents went through every holiday season.

Two, Kevin was being nice, no, Kevin was being downright friendly towards Nick, and had been ever since the World Series. That was most definitely wrong.

Three, Becky was lying on the floor in front of the Christmas tree, staring up at the lights flashing on the ceiling, still holding the little angel Nick had given her earlier. Brian should have given her the angel.

Four, Brian wasn't there. Five and six, Brian wasn't there.

"Hey." Becky appeared at his elbow, leaning on the arm of the couch. "Want to watch The Toy That Saved Christmas with me?"

"What?" Nick wrinkled his nose in confusion.

"Veggie Tales." Kevin had to throw in his two cents worth. "Don't worry, Nick, they're right up your intellectual alley."

That was more like it. Now there were only five things wrong with the picture.

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"Well, good morning." Stacy greeted Nick Christmas morning, as he stumbled into the kitchen, holding his head.

"What time is... ow." Nick collapsed at the table, and deciding that sitting was too much effort, sprawled across the top of the table.

"Close to ten." Stacy ran her hand through his hair, half of which was on end, the other half smashed flat from the pillow. "Is someone hungover?"

Nick raised his head, squinting at her. "Did Kevin try to get me drunk?" He asked slowly.

"No... if I remember correctly, he gave a little speech about your age. Karen, however, was quite determined to intoxicate you."

"I'm beginning to think I have a very low tolerance level." Nick's head flopped back down on his arms. "It's probably the same for drugs."

"Probably?" Stacy raised one eyebrow. Even she had gotten high once. However, unlike the figure draped across the table, alcohol didn't seem to have much of an effect on her. Nick had been out like a light by 9:30 that night, falling asleep with Becky in the family room in the middle of their third screening of the Veggie Tales video. "You've never been high?"

"Nope." Nick's voice was muffled. "I always found overdosing to be a lot more fun." He sat back up, pushing his hair back off his forehead. "Do we have any painkiller?"

That couldn't have been intentional. It was amazing enough that he'd make a crack about overdosing, but to follow it up like that - it had to be a lack of working brain cells. "Okay..." She said slowly. "But I'm only giving you two."

Nick's face scrunched in confusion, before realization dawned. "Oh! I didn't... that wasn't on purpose." He beamed a ditzzy smile in her direction. "I have a headache." He explained.

"You know..." She handed him his Advil and patted his cheek. "It's a good thing you're cute, Nick, or you'd never survive."

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"You're going to clean this up, right?" Stacy sounded skeptical, observing the shredded wrapping paper on the floor of the living room.

"Dude, ripping up the paper is the best part." Nick protested mildly, not really paying attention. Stacy was snuggled up against his shoulder, legs tucked up underneath her. Her hair was still damp, giving off the scent of her shampoo. As far as Nick was concerned, he wasn't moving anytime soon to pick up wrapping paper, and neither was she. Besides, his head was still fuzzy, and he didn't feel like moving - they could stay on the couch like that all day, and he'd be perfectly happy.

"So, I can open this one now?" Stacy was waving the last one in front of his face.

"Yeah, sure." Nick tightened his arms around her and rested his chin on top of her head. Stacy didn't believe in ripping wrapping paper. She slit the tape and took the paper off all in one piece. Where was the fun in that?

"Oh... how beautiful." Stacy said quietly, lifting the necklace out of the box and draping it across her hand. It was a small silver angel, not quite half an inch tall, hanging on the end of a thin chain. "You were on an angel kick while shopping?" She added, half amused.

"No... I mean, yeah, well..." Nick stopped, running his hand through his hair, his headache completely forgotten. For once in his life, he was going to make the words come out in the right order. This was ridiculous. "Becky and I were talking about angels few weeks ago at the batting cage, and she was talking about angels and how they help people and... they make everything okay, and while she was telling me all this, it kept reminding me of you."

Stacy had pulled away, turning so she could face him as he tried to explain the reasoning behind the necklace, her gray eyes staring at him intently.

He shrugged slightly when she didn't say anything. "So..." he finished softly. "You're my angel."

She smiled shakily, reaching up to wrap her arms around his neck, burying her face in the crook of his neck.

Nick's next words didn't catch in the back of his throat, like they usually did. In fact, he said them without really thinking about it. "I love you."

## Chapter Seventy Seven

"So where's Nick?" AJ blew into the living room, interrupting Stacy and Felicia's catching up of the last two and a half weeks. Stacy had finished relaying the events of Christmas, including a full explanation of the angel necklace, which was followed by aww's and assorted gushing by both parties.

"Chicago." Stacy shrugged. "He's shooting stuff for Nike until Saturday." Four days in Chicago for him, another few million in the bank. Nick had told her once that the only money he had spent since he turned eighteen had been his signing bonus; his major league salary and endorsement money hadn't ever been touched.

"Nike..." AJ repeated in awe. "He got lots of money for that one, huh?"

"I didn't ask." Stacy straightened in her seat, fixing AJ with her best I'm polite and you're obviously not look.

"He got lots of money for that one." AJ said to himself, turning his attention to Natalie, lying on the blanket spread on the living room floor. Natalie was a perfect outlet for AJ. He could talk all he wanted, and neither of the people capable of carrying on intelligent conversation had to bother listening to him.

Felicia rolled her eyes slightly at her husband and returned to her story. They had been back in town for close to two weeks, but Stacy hadn't actually stopped by for full details. Stacy had three days worth of time for details now. It sounded as if the trip had been a success; Felicia looked wonderful. She had always been pretty, but she looked happier now. As for AJ... well, AJ was bouncing off the walls, but that was nothing new.

"You have to see my Christmas present!" AJ announced, leaping up from the floor and bolting for the stairs.

"Do I want to?" Stacy wondered.

"Do you have a choice?" Felicia countered, laughing. "You're going to the sports banquet dinner next week, right?" She added.

Stacy nodded reluctantly. A black tie optional banquet - something right up her alley. Every January, one of the local newspapers selected ten athletes from the previous year as their sports stars, and held a banquet at the end of the month, the proceeds going to charity, and the people attending voting one male and one female athlete sports star of the year.

"You have to go and vote for me, AJ McLean, Seattle Mariners pitcher." AJ added, taking the steps three at a time, one hand held behind his back. "You ready?"

"Show her already, Alex." Felicia sighed.

"Ta-da!" AJ held up a huge red foam rubber hand, the Atlanta Braves logo screened onto one side. "Is this not the most hideously tacky thing you have EVER seen? I'm going to start wearing it, kind of like Michael Jackson and his white glove." He shoved the foam onto his hand and bopped Felicia on the head with it. "I wanted the tomahawk too, you know, so I'd have the entire ensemble, but her father wasn't about to give that up. I offered to fight him for it, but he doesn't fight fair. He tripped me and beat me up with the freakin' thing."

"He did." Felicia nodded. "And Alex screamed like a girl."

AJ pointed the foam finger at her. "Hey - he poked me in the eye with that stupid thing, what was I supposed to do? I could have been seriously injured." He added, turning to Stacy. "He used to play football."

"Not professionally! Besides, he's fifty five..." She stopped as AJ gave Natalie the foam hand. "Alex, don't give her that filthy thing!"

AJ shrugged. "It's fine. The chemicals they used to make it will kill any germs." He perched on the arm of the couch next to Felicia. "So, Stacy, whatcha wearing on the 31st?"

"I have no idea." Stacy pulled her knees up to her chin. "I don't want to talk about it either." Dressing up was not something Stacy did. She had seen Felicia's closet, and knew she, and for that matter AJ too, would have no trouble coming up with clothing for any occasion. Nick always managed to end up wearing the right outfit, although Stacy had never been able to figure out if he gave it conscious thought or if it was just part of his celebrity aura. Stacy, on the other hand, could have shown up for work in her pajamas and no one would have minded. Clothing was not something she gave great thought to.

"A little black dress." Felicia shrugged. "It's not that hard."

"A what?" Stacy peeked over her knees. She was almost certain that she didn't own a dress. A couple skirts, yes, but a dress? She didn't need a dress.

AJ's jaw slowly unhinged. "Please tell me you have a black dress." He took her blank look as a no. "Stacy, even I have a little black dress."

Felicia's head swiveled around to stare at him. "You do?"

AJ waved his hand in dismissal. "Shh. I'm making a point here."

"We can go shopping!" Felicia decided, bouncing up and down on the couch. "I haven't done something like this in such a long time! It'll be fun!"

Stacy sighed. It would not be fun. Shopping was not a fun activity, but... Felicia was ecstatic over the entire idea, and for that reason alone, Stacy would go along with it.

"Well, wait a minute here." AJ scowled slightly. "I want to come too!"

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Kevin handed his menu to the waitress and turned to the other two people sitting at the table. Becky was back in school now, but she still came along with her father to the ball yard on Saturday morning, which was always followed by going out to lunch. AJ had more or less invited himself along that morning.

"Chicken strips." Becky and AJ said at the same time.

"Two?" The waitress wondered.

"Yes, please." AJ nodded. "Because I have a feeling you would eat all the French fries." He mock glared at Becky, who giggled in response.

Kevin forced his hands to unclench. He might as well relax - he was eating lunch with a six year old and a six year old trapped in a twenty-three-year-old's body. Things would only get worse. If AJ started a food fight, Kevin was leaving.

"Good choice." AJ informed Becky, holding his hand up for a high five across the table. Kevin scrambled for Becky's water glass before her elbow sent it flying.

"So you went to Florida for Christmas?" Kevin tried to engage AJ in adult conversation. If he could do that, maybe, just maybe, he and Becky wouldn't play paper, rock, scissors.

"Yep." AJ leaned back in the booth, before his mouth dropped open in surprise. "Hey!"

"You kicked me!" AJ said in shock to Becky.

Something kicked Kevin's leg.

"And you kicked me." Kevin finished. "Becky, you really should know better." He added mildly.

"Cause I sure as hell don't." AJ grinned.

"Don't swear." Becky said it before Kevin could.

"Sorry." AJ spun the straw in his Pepsi glass. "But, Tampa was cool. Sunny, seventy - and I got poked in the eye with a foam tomahawk."

Kevin frowned. "You guys go to Disney World or something?"

AJ raised his eyebrows skeptically. "Do I look like I have a death wish? It wasn't my fault, it wasn't a fair fight. Seriously though - Lissie had fun, and that was the point of going."

"Does she feel better now?" Becky inquired politely.

"Yeah, she's doing great." AJ gave Becky a thumbs up.

"Oh, I forgot!" Becky opened her pink vinyl purse and pulled out a tiny box wrapped in green paper. "I have your Christmas present, AJ!"

Kevin rubbed his head. Becky was at that stage where she found presents for everyone, including the neighbor's dog. Hopefully, she would outgrow it. On the other hand, Karen hadn't, the dog had received a present from her as well.

"Cool!" AJ said in delight. "I don't have one for you though, I'm afraid."

"That doesn't matter." Becky pulled her legs up underneath her, kneeling on the seat so she could see. "They're angel wings." She added, as AJ pulled the translucent figure out of the box.

"Really." AJ turned them over slowly in his hand. "So, why'd you give them to me?"

"Do you believe in angels?" Becky asked.

Kevin sighed quietly. This debate again. Every single time she brought it up, he was reminded of Brian. This was another something Becky needed to outgrow.

"I think..." AJ leaned back off the table as the waitress appeared with their food.

"Thanks, babe." She gave him a look of barely concealed disgust, and Kevin bit back a smile.

"I think..." AJ started again. "I'm not too sure about the entire heavenly being idea, but I know I believe in certain people that we refer to as angels, and it differs from person to person. Someone might be an angel to one person, but not to another, you know? Does that answer your question?"

Becky's head bobbed up and down happily. "Yes, I think so." She carefully spread her paper napkin in her lap. "And I gave them to you because you were so nice to Nick and me after the World Series."

Kevin had never seen AJ speechless before. In fact, if someone told him AJ could ever be at a loss for words, Kevin would have laughed. However, AJ was sitting across the table from him, mouth hanging open slightly as he stared at Becky, forgotten chicken strip still in his hand. "Wow. Thank you." He said finally, and returned his attention to his chicken.

Becky was carefully tearing her chicken strips up into bite sized pieces, her lower lip thrust out in concentration. Kevin frowned, how many times did he have to tell her not to play with her food? He wasn't going to nag, however. "So, AJ, what you were saying earlier - you're saying that I might look at one person as an angel, but, someone else might look at me as an angel?" That was a hypothetical example; there was no way anyone would look at Kevin as an angel.

AJ's eyes darted from his French fry to Kevin and back again. "Exactly that." He jabbed the potato slice at Kevin. "It's about... perception, and how people perceive other people and events differently." The French fry vanished into his mouth and AJ grinned happily around it. "Man, I'm good. That even made sense to me!"

Kevin had to admit, AJ was good. This was a concept that maybe, just maybe, he could buy into.

"Whoa... I gotta go." AJ shoved three more fries into his mouth, standing and fishing in his pocket for his wallet. "Got a shopping date." He explained, handing Kevin a ten dollar bill. "There's my lunch, it's been wonderful hanging with y'all, but the dress racks are calling."

He had said dress racks, Kevin was certain of it. Oh well, AJ's personal life wasn't any of his business.

"Wipe that look off your face, Richardson." AJ smirked. "I'm merely going along as an advisor, I'm not wearing them." He waved at Becky. "Thanks for the present, see you guys later."

Kevin rested his elbows on the table. Why was it AJ created a mental fog in Kevin's mind? Was it something he did intentionally, like a pitcher psyching out a hitter, or was it just his natural eccentricity that caused it?

Becky picked up one of her miniscule pieces of chicken, inspecting it slowly. "Daddy?" She said finally. "Who do you suppose Brian's angel was?"

## Chapter Seventy Eight

Stacy checked her watch, barely compressing an audible groan upon seeing that the hands had only moved forward another eleven minutes. Nick's flight had landed and he was on his way home. At this rate, she wasn't going to be back until the mall closed. As near as she could tell, neither AJ or Felicia had found anything they liked, and since Stacy wasn't really looking, the search went on.

AJ was happily wandering through the clothing racks, sunglasses shoved up on top of his head, Natalie encased in a Snugli against his chest, his head bobbing to the music playing over the store PA system. So far, he had elicited several looks of concern from the sales staff, and most followed up with an inquiry as to whether he needed help finding anything. If Felicia was standing there, AJ politely declined. If she wasn't, he had more than just a little fun leading the salesperson into believing he was shopping for himself.

"You lost your short little friend." AJ pointed out as Stacy joined him.

"Yes... she was distracted by underwear." Stacy nodded. The land of satin panties and push up bras was not one that Stacy had any desire to get involved with, so she had left Felicia sorting through clothing racks and found AJ.

"Oh..." AJ raised his eyebrows. "Felicia is to lingerie what I am to sunglasses." He tapped the glasses on top of his head to illustrate. It may have been forty degrees outside and raining, without a hint of sunshine in sight, but the sunglasses were still there.

"That's... nice to know." Stacy leaned against one of the clothing racks, the hangers catching on her sweater. "How much longer? Nick's almost home now." Was she really whining? That had to be Nick's influence.

"How much longer?" AJ repeated incredulously. "Felicia's looking at bras and you ask me how much longer?" He shook his head in amusement as he inspected the next clothes rack. "You poor thing..." He paused and glanced from the rack to Stacy and back again. "Nope, yellow is NOT your color. But, to finish my sentence, you're a shopping wimp."

"And that makes you a what?"

"A... connoisseur, perhaps an aficionado. Either way, it sounds a hell of a lot better than a wimp." Satisfied with this retort, AJ turned his back and moved on.

"AJ..." Stacy followed after him. "How's Felicia... is she really okay?" It was something that Stacy had been wondering ever since Felicia and AJ had come back home. Felicia seemed fine, but then again, she had seemed fine to Stacy before. Maybe she wasn't one to judge.

"I think she's okay." AJ said slowly, after standing quietly for a moment.

"Things are back to normal?"

"Hell, no." AJ laughed at the thought. "Well, okay - but different, you know? There's a bunch of weird little stuff that's different now. Lissie was always very... independent in a way. She'd get pissed off at me if I worried over her too much... and now, she's almost clingy, in a way. It's kinda weird. But, we're cool so far."

Stacy couldn't quite grasp how AJ just kept marching through life without anything really seeming to faze him. She supposed it was an advantage on the field, when he was standing on the mound with the game on the line, but it carried on off the field as well.

So far, she hadn't seen anything that he didn't handle with that same slightly neurotic logic that only he could pull off.

"Oh, look." He interrupted her train of thought, to pull a black dress from the rack and hand the hanger over. "Hot damn, I am SO good. There it is, buy it."

"What? No!" Stacy's mouth dropped open. "Do you think I have money to burn?"

"Fine." AJ shrugged. "Try it on first."

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It had been dark for a couple hours by the time Stacy made it across Lake Washington and home. Nick's car was there, but when she stepped in the front door the house was completely dark. There was no way he could be in bed already, even Stacy didn't go to bed this early.

She was heading over to flip on the lights when she saw him sitting curled up in the corner of the couch. "Nick?"

"Hey." His response was barely audible.

"Are you okay?" She gave up on the lights and circled around to sit down next to him.

Nick didn't answer, he just stared at her.

Stacy found herself biting her lower lip. He wasn't okay. "What happened?"

He shook his head, staring down at his hands. "Look, I'm shaking." He said absently, holding up one hand, fingers outstretched. "You think I'm having some kind of breakdown?"

"No." Stacy said patiently. "What happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Why?" She reached over for his hand, trying to calm him down, even a little.

"Cause I don't want to fall apart." Nick was staring fixedly at a spot behind her head.

"And what if you did? What would be so wrong about that?"

"I think it'd send me off the deep end."

"And maybe it wouldn't." She countered. "I don't think it would. Sometimes it helps if you tell someone else, Nick."

He pulled his hand back, thinking about what she had just said. "You know the Make-a-Wish foundation?" He said finally.

"I've heard of it, yes." Stacy hadn't been aware she was holding her breath.

"There was this little girl in Chicago, she's like nine, and she's dying from cancer, and she wanted to meet me. So, when all the Nike stuff was done yesterday, I spent the afternoon with her, and it turned out she wanted to meet me cause ever since it broke that Brian was dying, she'd been following that entire story, and she wanted to meet me cause I was his friend."

Stacy didn't say anything. There had to be more to the story than that, and if she said something, she was afraid he'd clam up on her.

Nick ran his hand through his hair. "This is so wrong... it's not fair. He meant so much to so many different people... it's not right!"

She didn't really have an answer for that one.

"You know..." He continued quietly. "I felt like this right after Brian died, and then after a couple weeks, I just... stopped."

She remembered that. Everything had seemed to come to a head all at once, and Brian had more or less been left behind with everything about his parents.

"I mean, I still thought about it, but it didn't mean anything. It didn't hurt. And then today on the plane, it's like everything just started up again and I picked up right where I left off." He unfolded his legs so he could move over next to Stacy, resting his head on her shoulder. "Why now?"

"Maybe you're ready to deal with it now?"

The noise that came out of Nick's mouth could have passed for a laugh. "Do I look like I'm ready to deal with anything?"

Stacy pulled him in tighter. "Nick, maybe it's time to let go."

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"Betcha I see tennis shoes before you do." AJ said cheerfully as he and Felicia entered the Sheraton hotel. It was a standard bet any event requiring athletes to dress up. There was always one guy, somewhere, still wearing his Nikes.

"I bet you do too." Felicia retorted. She always lost. AJ couldn't help it. He just had a knack for seeking out the athletic shoes in the room. It was one of his many varied talents.

"You okay?" He added before they entered the room.

"Fine." She tipped her head, making her hair swing, and smiled at him. "Why?"

"You're kind of quiet. You're usually more into parties."

Felicia rolled her eyes. "No, that's YOU. I'm fine. Really."

"Okay." He slipped his arm around her waist. "Hey, there's Nick." He pointed over at the left side of the room, where Nick was talking to one of the college head coaches, his best PR smile firmly in place, holding onto Stacy's hand firmly.

"I think we can count Stacy as a success." Felicia added happily.

"We?" AJ choked. "Lissie, you weren't even THERE!" He paused at the look she gave him. "Hell yeah, we did a great job."

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"At this time we'd like to present this years Hutch Award winner." The man at the podium looked vaguely familiar to Stacy, but she had no idea who he was. "The Hutch Award is presented by the Fred Hutchison Cancer Research Center, and is given annually to a baseball player who has shown great courage and integrity in overcoming adversity. Previous winners have included Mickey Mantle, Al Kaline and Eric Davis. This years award goes to Seattle Mariners second baseman Brian Littrell."

## Chapter Seventy Nine

Kevin slowly made his way up to the podium, stopping to shake hands with the presenter. "Hey, y'all..." He said into the microphone finally. "As most of you know, I'm Brian's cousin, Kevin Richardson, and as most of you know, Brian passed away in October. Ever since he started playing here in Seattle, he's been very involved with Children's Hospital, and not just the fundraising, celebrity appearance side of it, he was right there in the middle of it; he knew a lot of the kids there by name..." Kevin paused and stared pensively at the ceiling for a moment. "As any of you who ever met Brian know, there isn't really anything I can say that could even begin to convey the kind of person that Brian was. We have an interview that Brian did with Mariners announce Charlie Chasez before Game Four of the World Series in October. That was the last game Brian ever played, and he passed away five days later. I watched it yesterday, and I think we're gonna let Brian say all this in his own words."

The room darkened as the video began rolling on the screen behind the podium, Brian's smiling but tired looking face appearing against a navy cloth backdrop.

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"We're here today with Mariner second baseman Brian Littrell." Charlie's voice said off camera. "Nice of you to join us, Brian, you're looking good."

"Thank you; glad to be here, Chuck!" Brian chirped cheerfully, giving the camera, and Charlie, a big smile.

"You're up against the Dodgers again today, but before we discuss the Series, let's turn back the clock a little. You were diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor back in August."

"Well, it became public knowledge in August." Brian corrected, still smiling. "I was actually diagnosed in January of this year."

"Now, in spite of this, you chose to just keep on playing." Charlie, staying true to his reporter form, ignored the correction.

"If I can still play, then I want to play." Brian lifted his shoulders, shrugging slightly. "If it comes to a time when I'm not helping the team, then I'll take myself out of the lineup."

"Is it getting harder for you to play?"

Brian rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, I'm not gonna lie, some days are worse than others. It hasn't really been that big of a deal so far."

"You were diagnosed in January..." Charlie repeated the corrected information, as if he had said it first. "How much more time did the doctors give you?"

"Let's just say, according to their estimate, I'm on borrowed time right now." Brian didn't elaborate anymore than that.

"Do you think when the news first broke that it helped or hindered the team?"

Brian bit his lower lip thoughtfully. "It didn't go over real well at first. I hadn't told anyone, even my family yet, and then to have it just suddenly appear in the paper and on ESPN, it could have been handled a lot differently." He held up one hand towards Charlie. "I'm not, you know, blaming the media, I'm just saying that... if I had it to do over again, I would have said something when I first found out, 'cause the way it all happened... I ended up hurting a lot of people, and I totally did not intend to do that."

"One would think that people would understand the situation."

"You'd be surprised." Brian pressed his lips together. "Dying's a big one. People kind of flip out over that."

"So you don't think the team was spurred on by the situation, and they weren't 'winning it for Brian'?"

Brian laughed. "No, no, I don't think they did. The dynamic of the team didn't really change afterwards. I know people are looking for reasons as to why we had the year that we did, and the only explanation they're gonna come up with is we had a couple guys having career years, we added a couple really good young players in spring training, and I think as a team, we've executed very well. It's been a great run so far."

"Of course, the addition of AJ McLean in the bullpen and Nick Carter in right field. You and Nick are good friends..." Charlie left the sentence hanging.

"I would say Nick is my best friend." Brian's smile grew wider. "As cheesy as that may sound. We haven't known each that long, but we really hit it off. I have a great deal of respect for Nick, he's only twenty, and he's had to deal with some pretty tough stuff, and... I'm kind of amazed that he turned out to be the person that he did. I wish that I'd get to know him better. Nick is probably the only person who hasn't questioned why I didn't say anything about all this back in January. I know it's had to crossed his mind, but he hasn't brought it up, and I appreciate that. It's nice to have an ally somewhere." Brian gave the camera a slightly sheepish glance, as if he knew he was getting too corny. "There you go - something about Nick Carter you're not going to ever see on the field."

"But, he's not a bad outfielder either." Charlie pointed out dryly.

Brian laughed again. "I have a strong feeling that Nick's gonna be knocking some socks off in the near future."

"What's your favorite moment of the season so far? Do you have one? Can you pick just one?"

"Oh, wow..." Brian leaned back in his chair to think, shaking his head slightly. "You're right, there's no way I could ever pick just one... I would have to say I've loved every minute of it since Spring Training on. AJ and his ghosts in the bullpen all the way to winning the LCS. And ultimately, I'd like to top it off with a World Series win in two more games here, but more importantly than all that, I want to be able to look back and say that I made a difference in someone's life. 'Cause that's what it's really all about. If I made a difference in someone's life, then it's all been worth it."

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The lights came back up, as the entire room sat in silence. Even AJ was quiet for once, still staring up at the screen behind the podium.

"Where's he going? Is he okay?" Felicia gestured towards the doorway. Stacy turned just in time to see Nick disappear. She hadn't even realized he had left.

Stacy sighed. "I'll be right back." She pushed her chair back and started after him, making a mental note NEVER to wear heels again, no matter what Felicia told her. Felicia was solely to blame if Stacy ended up breaking her ankle.

"Nick, are you okay?" She caught up with him halfway down the hallway outside the banquet room, catching a hold of his elbow.

"Don't." He pulled his arm back, before leaning against the wall. The hallway wasn't crowded, but it was still far from deserted, staff and reporters hurrying back and forth.

"Are you going to be okay, or do you want to leave?" She was worried now. The video must have hit him fairly hard.

Nick chewed on his lower lip for a moment; his hands balled up and shoved into the pockets of his black dress pants. "I want to leave." He said finally.

"Okay." She patted his arm, in spite of his pulling away earlier. "I'm going to get my stuff, I'll be right back. Okay? Wait here."

"What's going on?" AJ demanded when she arrived back at the table to grab her bag. The room had more or less come back to life, and he had to speak up to be heard over the din of conversation in the background.

"I'm taking Nick home." Stacy caught herself before she toppled to the floor. What she wouldn't give right now for a pair of flat shoes.

"Bummer." AJ commented as she headed for the door again. "I'll cover for you!" He added.

"Don't run off on me like that." Nick's voice was climbing with every word.

"Sorry." She hadn't ran off, but then again, he was flipping out, so she just let it slide. "Come on, let's go."

"You drive." He announced when the car appeared, climbing in the passenger side and shutting the door firmly.

That was weird enough in itself. Stacy could count the number of times she had driven with Nick in the car on one hand. He always drove. She slipped her shoes off and threw them in the back seat. Driving was another thing added to the list of things she couldn't do while in heels.

Things were fairly quiet for most of the ride. Stacy concentrated on the road, and Nick remained curled up against the side of the door, his arm pulled up over his face. They were less than ten minutes from home when he started crying.

## Chapter Eighty

"And the male sports star of the year - AJ McLean of the Seattle Mariners." The reporter presenting the award stepped back from the podium, clapping along with the crowd as AJ bounced his way up the steps.

"Cool." AJ accepted the award and stood for a moment staring at it over his wire-rimmed glasses. "Oh, um..." He turned to the microphone. "This is like the first thing I've ever won all by myself. You know, I play a team sport, so I gotta share everything with 24 other guys. But, I'll take it, and I gotta thank the rest of the team, because obviously, I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for them. And you know, in spite of the fact that my wife voted for the 'cute swimmer'..." AJ held his hands up in quotes and jerked at thumb at the young Olympic swimmer that had been one of the nominees. "I still love you anyway, honey!" He sat back down to a mild glare from Felicia and laughter from the rest of the room.

"Okay, you two..." The presenter for the female star award teased as he took the podium. "How about a little kiss and makeup? Just to show there's no hard feelings?"

"Gladly!" AJ called, and grabbed Felicia before she could block him.

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Nick slumped down lower in the recliner, holding his face in his hands; half wishing he was dead at that very moment. He hated losing control like this. One minute he had been perfectly fine, and the next he was in serious danger of putting on a floor show that would have upstaged anything AJ would ever do without even trying. He could see the reporters having a field day with that one right now.

"Okay?" Stacy was sitting next to him on the chair arm, one hand slowly rubbing his shoulder.

"No, not okay." Wasn't that obvious?

"What happened?"

"I don't..." Nick broke off, swiping his hand across his eyes again. "Everything." He finished. "I mean, you heard what he said."

"Which part?" Stacy wasn't giving up.

"What he said about me." He took a deep breath, trying to calm down, even just a little. There was a small, small chance he could still pull this off. He might have been hanging from the metaphorical cliff by his fingernails, but at least he was still holding on.

"That was very sweet of him." Stacy said quietly.

"Yeah, except it f----- wasn't true!" Nick flung himself out of the chair and spun around to face her. Anger worked. He felt better already.

"What do you mean?" Stacy didn't move, still perched on the chair arm, wearing her coat and no shoes.

"They did that interview before Game Four." Nick explained; surprised at how calm he sounded. "Which was the game that Brian got knocked out in, remember?" She nodded, so he continued. "And then, the next day before the game, we got in this huge fight. Over exactly what he was talking about there - I kind of flipped out on him and wanted to know why he didn't tell me he was dying earlier." Nick shoved his hands into his pockets. He didn't want to think about that day.

"And what did he say?" Stacy prompted softly.

"He asked me if it would have made any difference if he had told."

"Would it have?"

"Yes! Yes, it would have!" So much for calm, he was practically screaming now.

"God, of course it would have made a difference! You think I'm going to purposely put myself in a situation where I'm going to end up getting hurt?"

"You told him that?" Stacy said hesitantly.

"Hell yeah, I told him! And then I told him to f--- off." He saw the look of shock on Stacy's face, and waved it away with one hand. "That doesn't matter, I apologized for everything I said, it's not that... it's... if I had known, I wouldn't... I wouldn't have been friends with him... I would have opened myself up like that."

"So you're upset because you got hurt."

"Yeah... no! I mean, what gets me is if it was switched around and I was the one that was sick, and it was Brian's choice, he wouldn't have changed a thing. In spite of the fact that he would have known what was going to happen, he would have done it anyway." Nick sank down onto the couch, that stupid lump rising back up in his throat. "And I wouldn't have, 'cause I'm too scared to."

Nick could feel everything he'd been ignoring and shoving back flooding out. He could see it coming. Stacy moved over to the couch, pulling him up against her and wrapping her arms around him tightly, right before he started crying again, and crying hard this time.

He had lost one of his best friends. Spring training was starting in less than a month, and this time, he wouldn't be standing on the golf course while Brian laughed hysterically at Nick's inane golf skills. Brian wasn't ever going to tease him in the dugout about striking out or misplaying a ball. Nick would never have the chance to tell Brian how much he had meant to him. No one would. They had just taken Brian for granted, until it was too late.

"It wasn't fair to him." Nick whispered finally. His throat hurt - so did his stomach for that matter. "I was always on the receiving end. He was always the one putting out; he never got anything."

"That's not true." Stacy shook him slightly. "Look at it from his point of view for once. Brian loved helping people. He needed that. He needed to be able to focus on someone other than himself. Brian was one of those people that depending on others needing him. Okay? He said it himself at the end - he wanted to make a difference in someone's life."

~\*~

AJ propped his chin on his hand, staring at Felicia. This was a test. She wouldn't put up with this for long, before turning and demanding to know what he was doing. The party was still in full swing, the awards given out, and the dinner finished, but the music had started back up and alcohol was still available. It wasn't the coolest party AJ had ever been to, but when a third of the crowd consisted of sports reporters, it was to be expected.

"What are you doing?" Felicia glared at him, not really mad.

"Why is it that you get more beautiful the longer I know you?" He wondered.

Felicia stared for a full eight seconds, her mouth dropping open slightly. "Are you drunk, Alex?"

"No!" AJ leaned back in his chair. It hadn't really been a question, it was more of a statement. "I meant it."

She just shook her head, smiling. "Thank you, then."

"No problem." He turned his attention to the milling group of people in the middle of the room for a minute. "Damn, I bet I'd be fun drunk."

"Hello, you two!" Kevin, and a rather inebriated Kevin at that, placed himself firmly in the chair on the opposite side of the table. "Wassup?"

AJ smiled. On second thought, a drunk Kevin was always fun too. "Nothing exciting."

"Where's Nick?" Kevin tilted to the side, for a brief moment AJ thought Kevin was planning on checking underneath the table.

"They left." AJ stole a quick glance over at Felicia. She had just reached over to grab his hand under the table. "Apparently didn't feel good."

Kevin straightened in his chair, weaving back and forth slightly, before carefully resting his elbows on the table and leaning forward. "Both of 'em?"

"Uh, no."

"Good." Kevin wagged one finger at the couple across from him. "'Cause if both weren't feelin' well, then you know it's just an excuse 'cause they left to go have sex." He nodded, convinced of his logic.

Felicia stifled a laugh and AJ debated if he really wanted to pursue that topic or not. He didn't. "So, Kevin, that was a excellent presentation for the Hutch Award, with the interview and everything."

Kevin stared blankly. "What interview?"

"Brian."

"Oh yes, my cousin Brian... the angel." Kevin was now smoothing out imaginary wrinkles in the tablecloth. He sighed and shoved his hair away from his face. "This would have meant a lot to him tonight."

~\*~

"Come on, lay down. You look like you're about ready to collapse." Stacy patted Nick's pillow with her hand.

Nick hadn't said a word for the last hour. He didn't seem particularly upset anymore, just tired, so Stacy wasn't too worried about him, to be truthful, she was very proud of him for what had happened earlier that night. The events of the evening had been a long time in coming. Nick had just taken a big step. It might take him a while, but he was on his way.

"You okay?" She reached over to run her finger along his jaw line as he finally unfolded his legs and lay down next to her.

"Mmm-hmm." He rolled over next to her, draping one arm across her and nestling his head against her shoulder, his hair tickling her chin.

"Good. I love you."

"Why?" Nick's voice was muffled against her shoulder.

Stacy sighed. "Because I do. Go to bed."

He was quiet for a while, but she could tell he wasn't sleeping. She could feel his hand still playing with her hair.

The phone on the bedside table rang cheerfully. Nick jumped halfway across the bed, taking most of the blankets with him.

Stacy bit her tongue as she reached for the phone. She wasn't going to laugh, no matter how disgusted he looked. "Hello?"

"Hi! You're speaking to this year's PI Sports Star!" AJ said cheerfully.

"Congratulations. I knew it was you. You're the only person stupid enough to call this late."

"Aww, did I wake someone up?" AJ's voice was dripping with fake sympathy. "Just calling to see if everything's okay."

"No, you didn't, and everything's fine."

"Nick's okay?"

"He's fine." Stacy glanced over at him; still glowering at the receiver, his lower lip sticking out like he was six years old. "Why are you still awake?"

"Oh, we just got back." AJ explained. "Kevin and Karen seem to have intoxication down to an art form, so I was designated driver." He paused. "Do you think I'd be fun drunk?"

Stacy rolled her eyes. "AJ, I'm not talking to you anymore tonight. Bye." She hung up the phone and flipped it over to turn off the ringer. "If you're going to sit and glare at the phone all night, will you at least give the blankets back?" She added.

One side of Nick's mouth quirked upwards. "Well, what'll you give me?"

"You're going to bargain?" Stacy raised her eyebrows.

Nick yawned and shook his head. "No... I changed my mind. I'm too tired to talk." He rolled back over, wrapped one arm around her waist and rested his head on her chest. "You're my pillow tonight, kay?"

"Okay." She smiled, hugging him with the one arm she could reach him with.

"Night." Nick added sleepily. "Love you."

## Chapter Eighty One

Daylight was just beginning to shine around the edge of the window blinds when Nick opened his eyes the next morning. He rolled over, away from the window, not ready to wake up yet, stopping just short of crushing Stacy. He really must have woken up early, he couldn't remember ever waking up before she did. His pillow had vanished, Nick had never figured out exactly how he managed to wake up to find it on the floor, and right now retrieving it required too much effort.

He tucked his arm up underneath his head as a substitute, moving over closer to Stacy, unable to stop his smile or the warm fuzzy feeling that started in his chest and rapidly spread, as she snuggled up against him, her arm slipping around his waist.

Nick lay quietly for a minute, not really thinking consciously, but still aware of Stacy breathing next to him. For the first time he could ever remember, in his entire life, Nick had woken up and had the feeling that he was actually going to be okay. It was a feeling he had felt for brief moments before, usually with Brian or Stacy, but this was the first time he looked ahead at his life, at the upcoming baseball season, at spring training starting in just two weeks, and realized that he was going to be okay, that he was going to pull through. He almost felt like waking Stacy up and telling her, but he didn't. He had a feeling that doing so would in some strange way ruin the moment.

Stacy shifted slightly, and the slight glimmer of the thin chain around her neck caught Nick's eye. Caught somewhere on that chain was the tiny little angel he had given her just a month ago.

Ever since Nick had met with that little girl in Chicago, the idea of someone making a difference or impact in someone else's life had been toying around in the back of his mind. It was hard for him to grasp how much one person could change someone's life, but Brian had.

What truly amazed Nick was that it wasn't just his life Brian had changed; there were so many different people that Brian had touched. From the rest of the guys on the team to Brian's family, to the children he visited at the hospitals, even to the fans that had never met him, and only looked at him as someone to emulate.

The more Nick thought about it, the more he decided that Becky had been right all along. Brian was an angel. He always had been.

"Are you actually awake, or have you taken to sleeping with your eyes open?" Stacy twisted until she was on her stomach, propping her chin on her hand.

Nick stared in confusion for a moment, trying to figure out if this was a hypothetical question, or if he was really supposed to answer it somehow. "Huh?" He said finally.

She laughed at him. "How come you're up so early?"

"I have no idea." Nick admitted.

"You look happy." Stacy pointed out, reaching over and pushing his hair back off his forehead.

"It shows, huh?"

~\*~

Kevin was one of just a few players in the deserted clubhouse in Peoria, sitting in front of his locker, weighing his bats and carefully writing the result on the end of the handle. He, for one, was glad spring training had started. Kevin needed his structure

and schedules and rules. After the last two weeks of catchers and pitchers in camp, he was feeling more relaxed than he had since September. Yelling at people, especially people like AJ, who honestly didn't care, had a soothing effect.

Today, however, would bring on an entirely new realm of yelling and ordering. Today was the last day for position players to report to spring training. So far, everyone had shown up, except for Nick. Just that thought gave Kevin's mood another boost. So what if Nick still had another four hours before he was required to be there - he was still the last one, and that made Kevin happy.

"Why the hell is that evil smile on your face?" AJ demanded, as he skipped down the clubhouse aisle, neatly avoiding the piles of junk in front of various lockers.

"There was nothing evil about it." Kevin corrected, not looking directly at AJ, to try and save his eyes. During the off season, AJ had looked almost normal. His hair, for the majority of the time, had been his natural color, or at least a natural color, and then February 14th, AJ appeared in the clubhouse with his hair colored shocking neon green. It hurt to look at his head without a hat, especially in bright light.

"There's something very evil about it." AJ corrected. "I don't know what disgusting little evil thoughts your catcher's brain is plotting right now, but it's not going to work!" He let loose with a demented cackle. "It's one of you against all of us in the bullpen, my friend."

"I'd say it's a pretty fair fight then." Nick was standing in the doorway of the clubhouse, bag slung over his shoulder, arms folded as he watched the two men in front of him. "Maybe Kevin has a slight advantage. AJ, what the hell did you do to your hair?"

Nick could look straight on at AJ, he was wearing sunglasses, Kevin reasoned.

"There was a nuclear accident." AJ deadpanned.

"Is Felicia speaking to you now?" Nick added.

"Speaking, yes. Physical contact... not unless I'm wearing a hat."

"Kevin?" Nick tipped his head to one side and watched him weigh another bat. "Um, you know the manufacturer tells ya how much they weigh?"

"They're wrong half the time." Kevin said stubbornly.

"And Kevin's anal..." AJ added in a singsong tone.

"Don't you have something to do?" Kevin snapped back. "I thought you had an entire list this spring. Brainwashing the coaching staff? Painting the bullpen benches pink? Talking to the grounds crew about rolling the grass in a friendly message to aliens? Will you go do one of those and leave me alone?"

"Dude, if you say so..." AJ jumped backwards as Kevin brandished a bat at him; in spite of the fact he was already a good four feet out of range. "Hey, Buddy!" He latched himself onto the arm of the manager, as Buddy tried to sneak past into his office. "And how are you doing today?"

Nick laughed. "Poor Buddy."

Kevin wrinkled his nose in the direction of Buddy's office, where Buddy was trying to block AJ from entering. "Buddy will just have to deal with it, like the rest of us."

"Kevin," Nick bent over and stared at him. "Why the evil smile?"

~\*~

Supporting Article in ESPN Magazine - March 15th

*Just one year ago, the American League rookie of the year, much to the chagrin of Yankees fans the world over, was shipped out of town, to Seattle no less, a town that may be known for their coffee, but not baseball. Talk raged for months afterwards as to why Nick Carter had left New York, and the Yankees organization, an organization he had grown up in, where his father played virtually his entire career, and was inducted into the Hall of Fame.*

*We caught up with Nick Carter this year in spring training, with the intention of finding some answers. Why did he leave New York in the first place, and how did playing on a World Championship team change his outlook on baseball?*

*"Well, I was a brat." The twenty one year old Carter says with a wide grin, when asked about the situation in New York. "That's the short version, I wanted out, I threw a fit; they got rid of me. I don't really blame them."*

*When pressed for a more detailed, less flippant explanation, he leans back in his chair and looks serious for once. "I think it just got to a point where I needed to get out of there, and I needed to be on my own, figure stuff out for myself rather than having it dictated to me, and grow up a little."*

*He may have done just that. Not only does he look older, sporting a couple days worth of stubble instead of his usual clean cut, pinup look, but his attitude, both on the field, and in front of the camera, is more relaxed than the previous season.*

*"Yeah, I probably did mature." He agrees, when the subject is brought up, before adding quietly. "I don't think I had much of a choice."*

*When asked about his father, a look of mild annoyance flickers across his face, before he leans forward, elbows on knees. "You know, this is something that comes up every single interview I do, and I'm really tired of talking about it. I'm tired of being 'Bob Carter's son', and starting this season, I'm not going to talk about it anymore, 'cause I think... I need to move on. My father is someone that I respect... for his playing ability, and for his knowledge of baseball, and that's where it ends."*

*He wouldn't elaborate further, merely shaking his head when asked about the rumor that he and his father weren't on speaking terms, or how long the situation had gone on.*

*The smile that has been readily apparent in spring training this year appears again when talk shifts back to the current season, and the team's chances. "I don't know if we'll ever have a season like last year; that was something... there was something magical in a way about it. I don't think I'll ever play for a team quite like that ever again, you know, even in spite of what happened - everything with Brian - and the fact that we still went all the way... I just don't see something like that happening again. It was kind of a once in a lifetime experience."*

*"Brian... I really don't even know where to start. I give him credit for screwing my head on straight. He was an amazing person. He touched so many different people's lives in so many ways, and in such a short time. You can ask any other guy on this team, and they'll tell you the exact same thing."*

*As for his changed outlook, "Yeah, I think I do look at life differently now, I... have a sense of stability that I've never had before. I learned that sometimes, you gotta let go, and... you can't control everything. And most of all, I think I realized that... it's the tiniest little things that end up changing your life the most." He leans back in his chair again, laughing at the thought. "The little plays win the game, ya know?"*

~\*~

Nick propped his chin on his fist and glowered at the couple sitting across the table from him. AJ was bad enough on his own, but pair him up with Felicia and the cheerful level of the room tripled. Add in Natalie, and it was enough to give Nick a headache. Usually, it didn't bother him, in fact the mood was contagious, Kevin had even been pulled into fussing over Natalie last week. He would have denied the fact had anyone asked him, but Nick had seen it.

Tonight, however, they were grating on Nick's nerves. He was tired, he missed Stacy, and ever since batting practice that morning, he had been thinking about Brian. He had been watching the Mariners new second baseman, a Dominican Republic native that had come up through the Mariners farm system, and it bothered him that Brian was replaced that easily.

"Guys..." Nick started, not bothering to finish his sentence until he had their attention. AJ was teasing Felicia about something, Nick hadn't been paying enough attention to follow the conversation. She was laughing at him, and neither of them were paying any mind to Nick.

"AJ!" He said it sharply this time, continuing when AJ glanced at him distractedly. "I'm calling it a night, I'll see you guys tomorrow."

AJ raised one eyebrow. "So soon? We haven't even gotten Kevin drunk yet!"

"It's okay. I'll catch the hangover in the morning." Nick shrugged. "That's just as much fun."

"Are you okay, Nick?" Felicia leaned forward so she could see around AJ.

She would be the one that noticed and asked. Nick ran his hand through his hair and tried to smile, even though he didn't really feel like it. "Yeah, I'm fine. I'm gonna go call Stacy. 'Night." He ignored the kissing noises that AJ made at his back, and headed for the elevators.

It bothered him that with only one roster move, the team suddenly had a starting second baseman again, and the only record of Brian was a few lines of statistics and a League Championship MVP trophy.

He dialed home and shut the blinds to the windows of his room. They faced west, and while the sunset was pretty, it was also blinding. The answering machine picked up.

"Hey, I figured you'd be home by now... I guess you're working late tonight, call me when you get in... I..." He paused, chewing on his lower lip. "Um, never mind, I'll talk to you when you get home. Miss you." Nick hung the phone up and flopped across the bed, just as bummed out as he had been sitting downstairs.

He rolled over, hanging down off the foot of the bed and rummaging through his bag, looking for his Walkman and CD case, when his fingers felt the spiral binding of a notebook. He frowned, he hadn't packed a notebook that he remembered. The wire was caught on the inside of the bag, and he pulled the bag up onto the bed with him, carefully unhooking the book.

It was the notebook he'd taken with him pretty much every road trip last season, the same one he'd thrown at Stacy the night before they went back to LA to finish the World Series. He had taken it with him on the flight, in fact, he vaguely remembered it on the way down, and hadn't thought about it since.

He flopped back onto the bed, paging through the notebook, the various sketches of the last year. The notebook was over three quarters full; he'd have to find another one before the first road trip of the season. He was almost ready to toss the book back towards his bag when writing on one of the last pages caught his eye. He hadn't written there, plus it was written in blue pen, and Nick always used black, even if it meant searching for ten minutes until he found the right color.

The words were written almost diagonally across the page, starting up in the left corner.

*Nick,*

*I can think of so many things that I should have told you, or want to tell you, but I won't get to. This notebook isn't long enough to list all of them, but I feel like I need to say something.*

*Most of all, I want to say thank you for your friendship the last eight months. I can't even begin to put into words how much you've meant to me. You were one of many people who didn't let me down, in spite of the fact that I expected them to, and out of everyone that I've known, I consider you to be my best friend. So, thank you, in case I never get a chance to say it later.*

*In spite of how it may seem, I'm being remembered through you, through Becky, AJ, even Kevin, although he'll be stubborn until the very end and deny it. Just remember, sometimes it's the smallest things that can change someone's life.*

*Brian*

## Epilogue

The Seattle Mariners turned in another respectable season, winning their division, but were eliminated in the first round of the playoffs.

Howie Dorough never won another batting title. His numbers the next two seasons reflected his career, and he retired soon after that, moving to Orlando and starting a real estate company - with several female co-workers.

Kevin Richardson played another two years in the majors, then retired and coached for the San Diego Padres, before accepting the manager's position with the Kansas City Royals, where he stayed for eight years, bossing everyone to his hearts content, and winning two AL Central titles and one League Championship Series in the process.

Becky Richardson never outgrew her fascination with angels, in spite of what her father hoped. She spent most of her middle school years debating whether to become a geneticist or a doctor, and eventually chose a career as a pediatrician.

AJ McLean remained one of the top relievers in the major leagues for several years to come, playing for the Mariners, the New York Mets, the Cleveland Indians, the Arizona Diamondbacks and finally, much to his father in law's delight, the Atlanta Braves, retiring with the lowest postseason ERA in major league history. He was inducted into the Hall of Fame, and insisted that his lucky socks be put on display along with his jersey.

After his retirement from baseball, AJ worked as a color commentator for Fox Sports. He and Felicia had one more child after Natalie, another girl, Cassandra. As expected, both girls grew up to have impeccable taste in clothing, and much to their mother's chagrin, a strange fascination with hair dye.

Bob Carter worked less and less for ESPN and Fox as the years went by, but published several books on baseball, including one co-written with his wife Jane, on raising a superstar baseball player. Their son never commented on the book, other than to roll his eyes when he first heard it was being published.

Nick Carter, as the baseball experts had predicted, hadn't even begun to play at his full potential. He eventually signed a contract with the Mariners, and in the next six years won a batting title, two gold gloves, an MVP award and came within kissing distance of the triple crown of baseball, an occurrence that hadn't happened since 1967. He finished his career as a Yankee, and won his third World Series in Yankee Stadium. Nick was inducted into the Hall of Fame five years after his retirement, as a Yankee.

As Becky had suggested the year before, Nick ended up giving Stacy a ring next Christmas. She stayed in Seattle working for Immunex until Nick signed with the Yankees, when she transferred to another research company based outside New York City. They had two twin boys, Danny and Anthony, both of whom grew up to play professional baseball.